



Meridian thinking in marketing? A comment on Cova

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I have often enjoyed and appreciated interventions by Cova, because he tends to discuss what, to me, are important issues, and the article 'Thinking of Marketing in Meridian Terms' is another example. As we all know, yet only infrequently admit, the marketing discipline, in its mainstream as well as in some of its ancillary literatures, has 'gone off the deep end', as they say, to become a highly technical, application-oriented, and solely useful to business type of discipline. Cova's intervention reminds us, once again, that marketing is – and therefore ought to be considered by marketing academics – a socially embedded and culturally very influential phenomenon; therefore, more than just a discipline interested in business efficiency. We need to move beyond simply giving lip-service to this aspect, and seriously and carefully put mental energy into providing insights. I hope that this exchange among colleagues will contribute towards this end.

I have not yet had a chance to read Cassano's book discussed in Cova's essay, but definitely plan to after reading Cova. My comments on Cova's thoughts come with this caveat.

Let me say that I agree with Cova's, and, as far as I can gather from his article, Cassano's concerns. There does indeed seem to be a loss of control of the movement of events and of our lives. This may indeed be, at least partially, due to the economic, social and political systems we have created and the resulting speed of events; and to the desires of certain people and corporations for speed (in order to live 'fast and hard') who seem to have the visibility and the power to influence popular attitudes aided by technological developments. There does seem to be the need to build contemplation into the 'machine'. I am just not certain that the suggestions by Cassano and, derivatively, Cova, while well-intentioned, are either viable given a careful analysis of our times or desirable from the point of view of what corrections are sought.

I have been myself arguing that we are at this time in human history experi-



encing transformations that signal an epochal change, not merely changes in ways of living due to technological developments such as the automobile, airplane, television, cellular telephone, the computer, the Internet, and the like. Yes, these and other similar developments indeed introduce greater speed into our lives, and fill more and more moments of our lives with activities, leaving less time to ponder on these activities and their consequences. Yet, the desire to increase speed and make life 'full' with activities that would enable us to reach a grand future for humanity as soon as possible was inscribed in the modern project from its very beginning, when humans imagined that they could take control of their own destinies. Motion and speed were the ingrained *means* for reaching this *end*, and the belief in modernism was/is to keep improving both motion and speed to reach the goal better and faster. Consequently, changes that introduce more motion (activities) and/or speed in our lives do not constitute a transformation away from modernity, but its reinforcement.

The epochal transformation is happening, I think, because the overall cultural outlook of humanity is changing. In regards to the above, for example, there is a reversal of sensibility, where speed and motion are no longer means towards an end, but are becoming or have become ends in themselves. As many have articulated, there is no commitment to a consensual goal for humanity any longer, and the focus of human interest has changed from being on the future (to be created as a project) to a focus on the present. The focus is to find the meanings and substance in the present moments lived rather than postpone such to an imagined or promised grand future. There is no goal to be reached, consequently, no sense in having speed and motion as the means to reach it. Now, continual motion within and in between moments of different experiences, with speed as one moves from one to the next, is the end. Such reversal is a radical one, changing the direction of cultural purpose for humanity, in effect, the meaning of humanity.

One very significant outcome of this radical change in humanity's sensibility, and the focus on the present, has been the tacit abandonment of the idea that we can discover an order that will contain all the positive, valued elements agreed upon by all. Modern ideologies competed for this ideal; that *an* order could be constituted that would best integrate all the highest purposes of humanity and enable all the respected principles to be upheld. Freedom, democracy, equality, self-determination, rights to decent human lives would all be practiced to their utmost as the dreams for the good life and happiness would be realized by all to the fullest in and through this order. In the new growing sensibility there seems to be a recognition of the impossibility of such an order, and the idea that one order can provide all the substance that humanity seeks is given up.

The consequence of this abandonment of a project for the future as well as the quest for *an* order to realize this project, together with the focus on finding meaning and substance in the present moments lived, is a growing mentality that requires and seeks a multiplicity of life modes to be experienced. That is why I think that Cova's assessment of contemporary (western) culture, in terms of the unilateral trends he observes as overtaking and dominating contemporary lives may be omitting the moderation he seeks along with Cassano. Yes, there are



trends and movements in the direction of speeding life up, but as indicated by the 'slowing' movement he appreciates, there are growing trends in different directions as well. Yes, it seems fast food is growing and in its different forms becoming global and seemingly the way almost everyone eats, but there is also a global slow food movement.

We seem to see the trends we fear to be overwhelming and overtaking all else. This is an extension of a modernist attitude of believing that there is 'a best and the rest' to everything, then thinking in terms of either/or frameworks. We are either going to have a rational way or be irrational. It is either fast or slow. This sensibility may be what is exactly being left behind. The new sensibility guiding human lives is not an 'either this or that', but a 'this *and* that' approach. So, while with the rising tide of consumerism and economic market expansion around the world, the activities of the fast and the furious are increasing, the same people are also exhibiting interest in other modes of living and being. Because people are increasingly eating out, and eating a large amount of fast food, does not mean, as it may have in the heyday of modernity in the USA, for example, that people will give up eating and cooking at home. In fact, today, both are growing trends. I would argue, contrary to Cova's contention that people looking for 'the slowing of time' '... are moving away from everything that is fast ...' (p. 210), that only very few of these trend-setters will be keen on having it slow only. Most of them can be found also doing the fast things. People today, in growing numbers, are 'testing the waters' in different modes of living and consuming, not willing to be stuck in a single one.

Does this mean people have more choices today, or that they exhibit greater control over their lives or the symbols in the cultures they inhabit? Cova argues that consumers '... are manifesting a wonderful ability to divert each symbol to their own benefit, to circumvent customary rules, to invent meanings and functions that producers and the market-based system have not foreseen'. As much as I would like to agree with Cova, my observation of contemporary consumers is different. I see the very large majority of consumers' symbols and meanings to be guided by market(ing) forces. Who are those consumers who can play with symbols and meanings in the culture except a few who are, in fact, cultural producers, such as certain music icons, certain artists and celebrities, behind whom usually lurk major corporate marketing efforts? Few and far between are examples of some consumption collectives (also called by others, communities or neo-tribes) where indeed novel meanings and symbols have been generated.

I do not see the epochal transformation I discussed above as currently taking place – because by no means is this transformation complete – to have yet made any substantial difference in terms of consumer choice or control of symbols. There are not necessarily substantively more choices today, but people do not limit themselves as much to a single choice. They don't just choose Mexican food, or just going to the movies, or taking vacations only in national parks. There is less and less a ruling out of alternatives and it is more an issue of allocating different times and/or contexts for even seemingly contradictory alternatives. The alternatives to choose from, however, still remain to be largely determined by a system of



corporate evaluations of profitable market possibilities, which in turn are largely guided by corporate technology choices, corporate media programming, and actions of certain powerful and highly visible consumer units. Any development of alternatives outside of this cycle is indeed minimal.

I think that the implications of these developments are such that we can have hope, along with Cova, for a humanity that will find moderation. However, according to my observations of contemporary conditions, the road to this potential will not be through reversing some trends in favor of others. It will be through a multiplication of trends that offer life modes that allow humans to have seemingly contradictory experiences (for example, fast and slow, extreme and contemplative), as well as some systematic infusion of reflection into speed – a tough but, I think, unavoidable task for humanity. In this multiplicity of evolving trends and life modes lie also the seeds of potential empowerment of people and decorporatization of social choices.

Marketing will have to respond to these developments and here Cova provides good insights. I agree wholeheartedly with the characterization of (Meridian) marketing as having to be less aggressive and less utilitarian. I disagree with the characterization of postmodern marketing because this characterization is based on contemporary practices of modern marketing to cope with some developing postmodern conditions rather than on marketing practices that are indeed post-modern. Postmodern marketing – if it will still be known as marketing – does not yet exist. We can imagine some of its tendencies, but its exact principles are yet to be discovered. Among these tendencies one can mention the growing importance of expertise in designing processes that allow consumers to participate in the construction or production of experiences as well as products that enable these experiences, corresponding to a waning of the importance of delivering products. Another related tendency is marketing's role as a facilitator of consumer action rather than a provider of goods and services. However, this is probably a topic for another article.

I applaud Cova for his article, because it provides the opportunity to discuss significant issues, air different observations and analyses toward richer insights into the human condition and our discipline's role in it. I think that he is one of the most thoughtful contributors in this respect. I am hoping that this discussion will go on and broaden.

I want to end my comments by cautioning against a tendency that could be dangerous for our quest toward more meaningful and substantive human lives. I do not think, despite coming from a Mediterranean background myself, that moderate, proportionate Meridian thinking can be claimed by the Mediterraneans; as, I think, no way of thinking can be claimed by any specific region of the world. That certain ideologies or ways of thinking may gain dominance in different parts of the world at certain times ought not to be a cause for ownership of them. Such an attitude often leads to ethnocentric myths of superiority or inferiority when, historically, we can never establish that a certain way of thinking that found roots in one region did not have proponents or even originators elsewhere. Ideas have been the most freely transported goods across human history,



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and they should be argued for or against on the basis of their qualities, not their regional or personal affinities.

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