



Forgotten classics: E.T. Grether's (1966) *Marketing and Public Policy*

Ronald Savitt

*Professor Emeritus of Business Administration, The University of
Vermont, Burlington, Vermont, USA*

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this article is to revisit a forgotten classic in the marketing literature to provide a historical review of ET Grether's 1966 book, *Marketing and Public Policy*.

Design/methodology/approach – The approach combines a literature review with historical reflection by placing Grether's work in historical context.

Findings – *Marketing and Public Policy* offered a framework for examining and evaluating marketing practices and public policy responses based on Grether's mastery of a number of disciplines and his extensive research into public policy issues. His ideas are relevant to today's world, especially in light of technological developments and shifts in our moral compass since the 1960s.

Originality/value – ET Grether was a two-time recipient of the American Marketing Association's Paul D. Converse Award, Editor of the *Journal of Marketing*, President of the American Marketing Association and author of more than 100 articles and books. This is the first attempt to review what is arguably one of his most important publications, *Marketing and Public Policy*.

Keywords Biography, History of marketing thought, Marketing regulation history

Paper type General review

Introduction

Marketing and Public Policy (MPP) is a concise, well-argued systematic analysis of the interrelationships between marketing and public policy. It was published as part of a 15-volume set, *Foundations of Marketing*, intended to provide the most recent research and thinking of leading marketing scholars. Grether's contribution, however, went further than contemporary research, reaching back to develop a synthesis of ideas he began to formulate in the 1930s. Then and now, his approach to both marketing and public policy differed from that of contemporary scholarship. He regarded marketing as a social institution that carried out basic economic functions involving the efficient and effective allocation of resources, an institution, therefore, which should be evaluated using the tools of economic analysis, primarily those based on structural principles. He viewed public policy as including the entire set of actions by governments at all levels – federal, state and municipal – that affected competition in markets. It was this broad swath of laws, regulations and public programs that supported “the rule of competition”. Although *MPP* focuses on antitrust legislation, the Sherman and Clayton Acts and the Federal Trade Commission, Grether also considers economic development, fiscal and tax policies, labor and anti-poverty legislation and the developing areas of consumer and environmental protection. The book is a classic example of political economy in the spirit of Keynes, drawing as it does on a varied set of disciplines,



establishing fundamental principles and applying them to ongoing situations (Keynes, 1936). The text is challenging even for those well schooled in economic and political thought. It demands a comprehensive understanding of economic theory, of the history of economic thought, of marketing and, as well, of Grether's previous contributions.

Even with a strong background and interest in marketing and public policy, this was a difficult book to assign to students, although Grether's ideas were a rich source of materials for class discussion. I dared not use it with undergraduates, toyed with its use with MBAs and even avoided doctoral students. Rightly or wrongly, I assumed each group would have rebelled from the challenges. Over the years, I have read and reread the book, each time finding more insights and coming to understand why it received limited attention and far less recognition than it deserved. There are only a few perfunctory citations of it in the marketing literature and, interestingly, not a single book review. I did rediscover comments for which I am partially responsible:

Grether has limited his analysis of public policy in marketing to the issues pertaining to maintaining competition and maintaining a viable and responsive marketing system. The author, a long-time student of marketing and antitrust, provides in this short book many thoughtful considerations (Narver and Savitt, 1971, pp. 368-369).

(For transparency, I was a student of Grether's and we maintained an active exchange of ideas up to the time of his death in 1994.) Interestingly, he extended and restated his positions in *MPP* in 1975 at the P. D. Converse Symposium at the University of Illinois at which time he received the second of two Converse awards (Grether, 1975). A brief summary of these remarks is found at the end of this review; they serve as his "review" of *MPP*.

MPP is a particularly difficult book to review because of its brevity and passing references to many key works whose ideas are not fully developed in the text; many of these are not found in the marketing literature. Some are cited, others are in the Selected Readings Grether provides, and still others can be found in a recent essay (Savitt, 2011). I have taken liberties in adding several sources that I urge the reader to pursue. Grether's contributions to marketing and public policy have not gone unnoticed; two festschrifts with this theme celebrated his work in 1978 and 1981 (Cady, 1978; Balderston et al. 1981). However, the core contributions of *MPP* are unfamiliar to many scholars in marketing and public policy.

E. T. Grether's perspective

In examining his work, it is important to keep in mind that Grether was an economist first, foremost and always. His PhD from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1924 was in economics, and his dissertation was entitled "The Economics of John A. Hobson: A Study in Welfare Economics" (Grether, 1993). In *Marketing in the American Economy*, he [the authors] (the attribution of authorship to specific sections is difficult to determine) states as tasks of marketing:

[...] to direct the use of resources and allocate scarce supplies in conformity with existing demand, and (2) to aid in making consumption dynamic in conformity with changes in our ability to cater to human wants (Vaile et al. 1952, p. 24: a review of that book appears elsewhere in this *JHRM* issue).

Marketing is narrowly defined, and it takes place only when there is the transfer of ownership or ownership rights. Marketing is a coordinating process "conducted within

a legal framework” and hence “an appreciation of the possibilities and limitations for the control of business through markets is essential to the planning of any system of political economy” (Vaile *et al.* 1952, p. 52). This perspective has its origin in Marshall’s *Industry and Trade* (Marshall, 1919).

Elegance and discipline dominate Grether’s writing as he searches for ways to make the complex understandable. A fitting example is his description of a conversation he and his wife overheard in a small Utah community: “Competition may be a fine thing in a big place, but not in a small town” (Grether, 1966, p. 97). The book reflected the reawakening of interest in public policy in the early 1960s and anticipated the subsequent focus on consumer and environmental protection. Aware of the past, concerned with the present, Grether had his eyes on the future. “We may, in fact, be in the throes of readjustments as fundamental as those that produced our market society with its private enterprise base”, a fitting statement for contemporary times (Grether, 1966, pp. 110-111).

Grether had a deep belief in the value of competition in a market society which he traces from its most philosophical origins through to contemporary economic systems. From first to last, he is concerned with that society’s effect on consumers and enterprises. To appreciate *MPP*, the reader must accept Grether’s use of classical definitions. He was an empiricist in the tradition of Locke and was not afraid of complexity, indeed believing that knowledge would not be meaningful with anything less (Locke, 1997). Gathering and evaluating vast amounts of information might be a distraction for those using well-honed hypotheses, but for him, it was the only way to understand the nature of markets and competitive processes. This is best seen in his extensive research on price control; while the policy issues may no longer be relevant, his approach to research, analysis and synthesis are worthy of consideration in contemporary marketing (Grether, 1935, 1939). This approach has roots in Marshall and “his unwillingness to draw hard and fast lines when there were none in nature” (Vaile *et al.* 1952, p. 364). Grether believed in the market system, with markets as free as possible, but also recognized that these should operate under natural conditions, not artificial ones. When markets fail, the corrective policies introduced must be fashioned with an understanding of the complexity of those markets, especially of the structural roots that go beyond the enterprise itself.

The rule of competition

Grether’s principle for the development and administration of public policy is “the rule of competition”. This can be traced back to a nineteenth century discussion of the roles of public and private enterprise when it was referred to as “the plane of competition”. Its purpose was to establish “the high moral plane” that defined how economic activity should take place and is analogous to the “rule of law” (Grether, 1940). It takes the form of a Kantian imperative to be used in the evaluation of both micro (marketing) and macro (marketing) organizations (Wood, 2001). As such, it defines the goals both for enterprise behavior and for public policy in achieving competitive outcomes. After years of contemplation, he redefined it as “the rule of competition”.

MPP argues for:

- (a) a strong widespread and varied private enterprise base along with (b) free buyer, especially consumer choices among genuine alternatives and (c) ‘the rule of competition’ in some acceptable degree (1966, p.99).

This requires a marketing system which is able to respond to the free choice of buyers and to interact both with environmental influences and with the internal elements of the system, all this resulting in the efficient use of resources (Grether, 1966, p. 99).

The rule of competition in real life will rarely, if ever, express itself in the ideal posited by perfect competition, but we should not conclude that the actual expression is not more acceptable in a democracy than other possibilities, nor should we say that the rule of competition cannot be made more effective by appropriate governmental oversight and regulation (Grether, 1966, p. 21).

Marketing organizations

Grether draws on the economic theory's dichotomy of micro and macro to evaluate marketing and public policy. Micromarketing organizations include the set of individual enterprises in the economy, and Grether's analysis parallels the traditional theory of the firm, although greatly amended with advancements in economics and from other disciplines (Grether, 1983). His macromarketing organization is the marketing system. Here, there may be confusion for the contemporary reader because he uses "macro" in the economic sense rather than in the contemporary marketing sense. This is a perspective he attempted to rectify in 1988 without success when he used the early institutional writings in marketing to describe his view of "macro" in marketing (Grether, 1988). He might well have preferred to describe what we know as macromarketing as welfare economics, which is a theme in his discussion of public policy in his oral history (Grether, 1993).

In Part One, the argument begins with a classical "let us assume" that we are starting with a fully integrated enterprise, from raw material extraction through production to distribution to buyers. This framework provides the core decisions of such an enterprise, namely, the nature and degree of integration—horizontal, formal vertical and contractual. He also introduces the how-and-where elements that allow the enterprise to be open to the dynamics of markets; these become the focal points where public policy may affect decision making. Grether states that all enterprises have three basic issues to resolve:

(1) how to obtain and maintain effective access to the materials and supplies, capital, labor, etc., essential for the operation of the enterprise; (2) how to gain and maintain access to the customers whom it supplies; and (3) which of the complex relationships essential to its purposes should it bring within direct control and operation of the enterprise itself, and which it should leave for the spontaneous process of the market (Grether, 1966, p. 80).

From the general framework of Part One, the discussion in Part Two moves to a comprehensive examination of the enterprise "under the dual constraints of governmental regulation and competitive market discipline" (Grether, 1966, p. 31). The analysis is based on the distinction between commodity competition and enterprise competition: the former relates to non-differentiated firms and products; the latter is built on marketing decisions that are the bases of enterprise differentiation. Grether begins by establishing the assumptions for competitive behavior under each of these conditions. Effective competitive markets require an adequate, honest and truthful communication system, one where "the requirements for advertising, selling and the use of promotional instruments in their varied forms are entirely clear" (Grether, 1966, p. 50). Much of this stems from his view that there are behaviors that should not take place, but he holds to the view that corrective actions of public policy should focus on competition

based on elements of market structure. The discussion of his philosophy completed, Grether next takes the reader into the complexity of prices and pricing in two rather dense chapters, "Pricing Policies and Practices" (prices and pricing, he maintains are the "the holy of holies" of both antitrust enforcement and commodity pricing) and "Geographical Pricing and Retail Price Maintenance". These represent the greatest confusion for both enterprises and government regulators because, except for very simple situations, the analytical framework is based on neo-classical economic theory which inherently obscures the realities of how price-making takes place in markets. Grether illustrates this fact by noting that, as he was writing the section, he was waiting for the local Montana auction prices for beef to be broadcast on the radio and speculates about all of factors that go into setting the price of cattle on the hoof. Price is more complex than a numerical value, something we recognize, but then go on to accept on an off-handed basis.

He then moves on to the analysis of various public policies relating to pricing such as "unfair price cutting". Here, he shows the simplistic assumptions of public policy do not adequately reflect the complexity of pricing; the point here and elsewhere is that politicians move toward simplicity and create public policies that are difficult to implement. Grether evaluates enterprise differentiation methods to indicate how public policies are inadequate to deal with the complexities of markets. This is based on his belief that enterprise differentiation is a better model than pure and perfect competition. The specifics are beyond this review; however, I recommend two discussions to the interested reader "Standardization, Differentiation and Nonprice Competition", Chapter 18 in *Marketing in the American Economy*, as well as his later discussion of enterprise differentiation (Vaile *et al.* 1952, pp. 352-374; Grether 1956).

Grether argues that government regulation involves a contradictory set of interrelationships between market participants desirous of lowering prices through competitive actions and the regulatory process with its emphasis on antitrust enforcement focusing either on industry structure or strict behavioral guidelines. Based on extensive research and consulting evidence, he asserts it is difficult to know when or how price decisions arise let alone predict their competitive effects without comprehensive study and flexible standards to judge such decisions. The *per se* approach in the enforcement of pricing matters troubles him because it is too often linked to reactionary legislation passed in response to short-run political pressures. The resulting actions do not support the rule of competition and can be contrary to it. Among the laws he questions are price support legislation, small business protection regulations and others that negate basic elements of the rule of competition. His extensive price control research, including that from World War II, suggests that such legislation neither supports competition nor does it provide for the consumers' best interest. If anything, policies and enforcement activities have created problems for manufacturers and distributors without any valuable results for consumers (Grether, 1943).

Grether warns us about the unexpected consequences which can arise from the lack of an understanding of market competition. Drawing on industrial organization and organizational theory, he writes that internally enterprises exhibit authoritarian, control-oriented behaviors which must be applied to develop competitive behaviors in the market (Grether, 1983). Understanding how they go about making decisions is necessary if effective public policy is to develop. "Unfortunately, much of traditional economic analysis and also public regulation has addressed itself too narrowly to

so-called horizontal relations and organization” rather than the complexity of spatial, temporal and vertical relationships (Grether, 1966, p. 81). Optimistically, he hopes the market system will regulate markets:

[...] in the sense of placing the participants under strong *competitive* [in original] compulsions for both (a) the efficient use of resources in production and in marketing and (b) the effective fulfillment of the economic wants and desires of the members of society (Grether, 1966, p. 101).

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Macromarketing organizations and the rule of competition

The analysis of macromarketing organizations and the role of competition is found in the last chapter where Grether reiterates that there is no such thing as a purely competitive economy and any attempt to use that premise will not sustain the rule of law in market systems. Full-command economies have some degree of market activity, and full-market economies have some degree of command activity. The residuals are important because they reflect possibilities for change. Over time, command economies may move more toward a market orientation and market economies may incorporate command features. He clearly prefers a competitive market system, but worries about the degree to which command forces appear through direct government intervention, indirect actions and the actions in response to selfish private interests.

Unlike much of the current political rhetoric in the USA, Grether does not invoke a doctrinaire position. “It is a mistake to conceptualize the market system or even market economy as synonymous with capitalism” (Grether, 1966, pp. 98-99). Ownership of the capital in the private sector may not be either a precursor or a result of a free market. What the market system, the macromarketing organization, brings is internal discipline through competition in and between enterprises and consumers. Thus:

[...] if there is an official, national policy of maintaining the rule of competition, as in the USA, then it is mandatory to maintain a *competitive* market system, both as a means of coordination and organization and as a means of the enforcement of market discipline as the alternative to direct regulation by government or private cartel regulation (Grether, 1966, p. 98).

Not a “free marketer” in common parlance, Grether believed in the rule of competition, a rule based on the vitality of micromarketing enterprises that maintain the rule of competition within the macromarketing system. However, in no way does he discard the potential for market participants to diminish the viability of competition among themselves in that macromarketing context.

Grether points to what he saw as continuous and increasing governmental policies and programs in which the market system is “regulated” or is “being regulated”. Not all of this is necessarily inappropriate because there are positive dimensions to government intervention. While economic development and growth policies affect competition by encouraging innovation and market expansion, Grether cautions us about “knee jerk” reactions stemming from short-term political pressures to use non-market means to stimulate them.

The continuing piecemeal interventions into the system must be distinguished, however, from major social and economic legislation that clearly represents a general mandate in a representative democracy, even at the expense of decreasing the effectiveness of the market system or ultimately destroying it. Though the competitive system could be destroyed, the will

of the people would be expressing itself; as it should in a democracy, politics take supremacy over economics (Grether, 1966, p. 102).

In contrast, the restrictions on private decision making in markets stemming from the continuing stream of governmental interventions for the benefit of special interest groups worried him whether these took the form of a total or a partial exception from the rule of competition. He was not enamored of special differential treatments for industries and geographic regions that adulterated competition. "Subsidies and subsidy-like differential treatment as, say in tax policies are becoming a way of life affecting business and governmental decisions and programs throughout many sectors of the economy" (Grether, 1966, p. 109).

Grether's faith in both the ability and the desirability of enterprises following the rule of competition without artificial intervention defines him as a "free market economist". As with all "golden rules", the free market's value is in its acceptance by all those involved; this becomes a moral issue for which fully developed standards are not indicated. As with all philosophical directives, it has much to offer so long as it is generally followed and so long as there are methods to remediate its failures. In reality, this is difficult to attain, and Grether's hope that both enterprises and public policy makers will follow the principles of the rule of law are idealistic. In an optimistic vein, he wrote:

Given the democratic will and political wisdom, it may be even more feasible than it was in the past to maintain a private enterprise base and an effective rule of competition (Grether, 1966, p. 111).

Summary and evaluation

Marketing and Public Policy offers a framework for examining and evaluating marketing practices and public-policy responses. It is based on Grether's mastery of a number of disciplines and his extensive research in public-policy issues, most importantly pricing. There is challenge for someone not well familiar with the bases from which his arguments originate. He provides a systemic model of political economy that focuses on the complex interactions between marketing and public policy, a model comparable to large-scale social theories in law, political science and sociology. This book is unique in marketing because of its transcendental approach. Some elements are not fully explained, mostly likely reflecting an assumption that the reader would already understand the underlying principles and research. It is difficult to speculate how Grether might have dealt otherwise with the series' apparent page limit. A longer, more comprehensive volume certainly would have been an important contribution. However, I doubt that he would have been moved to back away from the necessary complexity.

His ideas are relevant to today's world and, despite running the risk of engaging in counterfactual analysis, let me speculate how Grether might regard our times. He had no fear of technology and welcomed it as a way of enhancing the rule of competition. While technology is now probably more complex and pervasive than he could have imagined, he would see it as an important and positive factor. On the other hand, Grether probably would be greatly disappointed in shifts in the moral compass of both enterprises and consumers. Profit maximization at all costs, the exploitation of market weaknesses and greed would not have been well received. His values came from a family

where ethical and moral behavior were enduring principles. Diversion from these values were described as “status and drift”. He continually worried about drift and he probably would worry that what has taken place since the 1960s was not quite what he expected. Whether it would change his views requires extensive speculation. His underlying belief was that people in a democracy would continue to make the correct choices. Much of his focus after the publication of this book promoted the social responsibility of business where he urged business, rather than becoming subject to the vagaries of public policy, to take charge of events by making a moral commitment to ensure the continued rule of competition (Grether, 1969).

And now a post script – Grether reviews Grether

Grether's 1975 Converse Award paper is less a review of *MPP* than it is a reassertion of basic ideas based on a reexamination of the principles that he established in 1966, namely, that non-market alternatives to an acceptable level of market competition either in general or in specific cases should not be encouraged. Noting that he still holds that view, there is one exception “for the solution of some conservationist-ecological problems, which will require some expansion of governmental programs and regulations” (Grether, 1975, p. 11). His plea is at variance with other views.

One of the most basic social issues of our times is the maintenance of access to nature's bounty in land, water and air together with the opportunities for the exercise of creative talents in business, professional artistic or other pursuits (Grether, 1975, p. 10).

He does expand with more clarity than in *MPP* on “positive regulation”. Grether argues public policy enforcement should be aimed at preserving and restoring competition, instead of requiring specific affirmative activities originating from economic and social performance. This arises from the complexity and implied weaknesses in the adversarial processes that stem from what he refers to as the “widespread distrust of great bureaucracies”. His directive is that “the maintenance of competition would be largely in terms of “Thou shalt nots” instead of the “Thou shalt.” It is much simpler and clearer to enforce ‘Thou shalt not steal’ than ‘Honor thy father and mother’” (Grether, 1975, p. 12). Hence, his “review” begins where *MPP* left off by suggesting there is little need for revision.

Biographical sketch of ET Grether

Ewald Theopolis Grether (1899-1994), PhD Economics, University of California, Berkeley; Professor Emeritus, University of California, Berkeley; Flood Professor of Economics; Dean, Schools of Business Administration (1941-1961); Editor, *Journal of Marketing*; President, American Marketing Association; President, American Academy of Colleges and Schools of Business Administration; two time recipient of the Paul D. Converse Award, in 1955 and 1975; Member of the Attorney General of the USA to the National Committee to Study the Antitrust Laws 1955; and author of over 100 academic articles in economics, law, marketing and political science. When asked how he viewed himself he replied “Always a teacher”.

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About the author

Ron Savitt is Professor Emeritus of Business Administration at The University of Vermont and a Life Member of Clare Hall, University of Cambridge. His doctorate in Economics is from the University of Pennsylvania and his MBA and BA are from the University of California, Berkeley. He held positions at Michigan State University, University of Alberta and Boston University; he

was also a Fulbright scholar in Hungary and Turkey. Much of his published work has been in marketing history, the history of marketing thought and institutional change in marketing starting with a 1980 article in the *Journal of Marketing*. In the past decade, he published four pieces on polar exploration in the *Polar Record*. A personal statement on teaching marketing history was published in the *Journal of Historical Research in Marketing* in 2009, and the most recent work "On Biography in Marketing" appeared in the *Journal of Historical Research in Marketing*. He recently completed "Structure, Strategy and the Conquest of the Pole" for a centenary volume on the exploits of Robert F. Scott and Ronald Amundsen. Ronald Savitt, can be contacted at: rsavitt@comcast.net

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