

Victor Lebow: an unknown critical marketer

Unknown
critical
marketer

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to draw attention to Victor Lebow, an unknown contributor to critical marketing studies. The paper also contributes to the literature on marketing amnesia. A brief biography of Lebow is presented in which it is established that he was a marketing professional. The paper then discusses his unacknowledged contribution to critical thought by exploring his only book.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper is based on a close reading of Lebow's only book, contextualizing it by placing it in historical context. The paper uses a traditional historical narrative approach to present the results.

Findings – It is pointed out that the business system, including marketing, is riven with power relations that are largely unappreciated or ignored. Woven into Lebow's account is an attempt to rethink aspects of theory, practice and especially institutions that had and have assumed a taken-for-granted status. It is established that Lebow's thought, as a marketing professional, went well beyond typical marketing. He presents an interesting and innovative program for converting private enterprise into a socially responsible structure without resulting to any form of socialism.

Originality/value – No such review or evaluation of Victor Lebow has been published. One 1955 article has been frequently cited. His wider thought has been ignored.

Keywords History of marketing thought, Critical marketing studies, Intellectual amnesia, Macromarketing, Marketing amnesia, Victor Lebow

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Introduction

This paper first briefly introduces Victor Lebow to establish that he was a marketer, a specialist in retailing and sales management. It then suggests that he was a pioneer in critical marketing before explaining what is meant by *critical marketing*. Finally, the paper returns to Lebow and his contribution to critical marketing studies.

As reported below, Lebow looked out on the socio-economic landscape and saw many problems. He doubted that then current institutions could solve those problems and he considered the call for business to adopt a *social responsibility* to be a misplaced option. Instead, the question was how to modify the business system such that enhanced social responsibilities would be incorporated in the very form and function of business enterprise. He did not suggest that the business system, the profit system, be abolished. He equally did not argue that minor accommodations could satisfy the needs of the times. He asked if “a democratic republic sworn to the Bill of Rights, [can] exist and flourish under some alternative form of economic control” (Lebow, 1972, p. 11), and he felt it could, and could flourish. Lest the reader misunderstand, Lebow was *not* advocating *any* form of socialism; he was advocating a different institutionalization of business enterprise, especially corporate business.



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Victor Lebow

Lebow is sometimes referred to as an economist. For example, [Jensen \(2015\)](#) refers to him as an economist and retail analyst and [Assadourian \(2010\)](#) simply as an economist. Given that he was born in 1902, his highest degree (whether that be a bachelor's, master's or a PhD) was likely in economics. His obituary in the *New York Times* (1980) is headlined "Victor Lebow, Marketing Official and Activist in Civil Rights [. . .]" and identified him as a former vice president of the Kayser-Roth Corporation (a hosiery and lingerie manufacturer and marketer formed in 1958 when Julius Kayser and Co. combined with the Chester H. Roth Company) and as a former director of Fabergé.

[Lebow's \(1944, 1948\)](#) academic publications were in retail and distribution. He published at least two articles in the *Journal of Marketing*. The first was titled "The Nature of Postwar Retail Competition" wherein he was identified as Sales Manager of the Chester H. Roth Company. The second was titled "Our Changing Channels of Distribution," in which he was simply associated with the Chester H. Roth Company. [Lebow \(1949\)](#) contributed at least once to the *Journal of Business*, a piece entitled "New Outlooks for Marketing." A footnote to this article identified him as the Vice President and General Sales Manager of the Chester H. Roth Co., Inc. [Lebow \(1953, 1954, 1955, 1955/1956, 1957, 1957/1958, 1958/1959\)](#) frequently contributed to the *Journal of Retailing*. His most famous *Journal of Retailing* article was "Price Competition in 1955" wherein he was identified as "Marketing Consultant, President, Victor Lebow, Inc." ([Lebow, 1955](#)).

Lebow frequently contributed book reviews to *The Progressive*, *Challenge Magazine*, and *The Nation*. He contributed at least once to *Harper's Magazine* (1945) and is reported to have contributed to *Printers' Ink*, *Business Week*, *Advertising Age* and others. He published one book, *Free Enterprise: The Opium of the American People* (1972). The book's by-line reports that he was co-chairman of the University Seminar on the Economics of Distribution at Columbia University.

As a businessman, educator, consultant and author Victor Lebow was a *marketer*, perhaps a marketer with an economic outlook but a marketer, nonetheless. He was a marketer few today have heard of. A cursory search in the *Journal of Historical Research in Marketing*, *Marketing Theory*, and the *Journal of Marketing Management* finds no references to Lebow. The *Journal of Macromarketing* has only passing reference to him ([Assadourian, 2010](#); [Geroulis and Benton, 2016](#); [Benton, 2011](#)). The *Journal of Marketing* has no references other than the two articles he, himself, published in the journal ([Lebow, 1944, 1948](#)). Articles on marketing history or the history of marketing thought similarly have no references to Victor Lebow ([Jones and Shaw, 2002](#); [Marion, 2006](#); [Shapiro et al., 2009](#); [Shaw and Jones, 2005](#); [Shaw, 2009](#); [Tadajewski, 2010b, 2012](#); [Tadajewski et al., 2014](#)). In the case of [Tadajewski and Jones \(2008\)](#), there is no listing for him in the tables of contents.

If one has heard of [Lebow \(1955, pp. 7-8\)](#) it is probably through an encounter with this often-quoted passage from the 1955 *Journal of Retailing* article:

Our enormously productive economy demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfactions, our ego satisfactions, in consumption [. . .] We need things consumed, burned up, worn out, replaced, and discarded at an ever increasing pace.

(The complete passage, including eclipsed content, is in the Appendix of this paper.)

I first encountered this passage while reading [Ewen's \(1976\) Captains of Consciousness](#). Most recently I saw it in Father [Jensen's \(2015\) "The Consumer Conundrum."](#) The passage is a staple of the anti-consumption and sustainability communities. It was quoted by [Durning \(1992\)](#) in *How Much is Enough*. It appears in [Leonard's \(2007, 2010\)](#) animated documentary

about the life cycle of material goods, *The Story of Stuff* and was quoted by Peter Wenz in his environmental ethics textbook, *Environmental Ethics Today* (Wenz, 2001, p. 240). There is at least one internet blog post featuring Victor Lebow (Steve, 2007).

There is uncertainty as to whether Lebow was, in this passage, simply describing the prevalence of increased and increasing consumption, prescribing and thereby encouraging increased and increasing consumption or acknowledging and critiquing it as a sad characteristic of the American economy. Wenz took Lebow's words to be prescriptive, "as a project of increasing consumption" (Wenz, 2001, p. 240). Jensen (2015) was uncertain. Most others take it as descriptive. In my view, the passage was present-centered (descriptive) but by no means celebratory (prescriptive). It was an indictment of the post-Second World War high-mass consumption society, critical because we had so much that we did not need, to get it we had to waste so much, yet as a society we did not have a lot of what we *did* need.

Lebow was not alone in his line of criticism. Former advertising professional James Rorty, father of the better known philosopher Richard Rorty, in *His Master's Voice: Advertising* (1934), economist Galbraith (1958), in *The Affluent Society* and science fiction author Pohl (1957), in his short story "The Midas Plague", were each similarly critical of the high-mass consumption society, and for similar reasons.

It remains a question (not to be explored here) as to why the corpus of Lebow's work, especially his contributions to the *Journal of Retailing*, did not make more of an impact than it did. That Lebow's only book, "*Free Enterprise*": *The Opium of the American People* (1972), did not receive much recognition is indicated by it having had but two published book reviews, one in *Library Journal* and one in *The Nation*, a magazine to which Lebow, himself, contributed (Charney, 1972; Nathan, 1972). Why *that* may be the case can, perhaps, be discerned from its subtitle.

Lebow's failure to be recognized in his own time is not sufficient reason to ignore him now. McLean and Jones (2007) wrote about Edward Sherwood Mead, "a pioneer in finance education" (from their title). They noted that he received little academic recognition during his life and earned little fame and little reputation. Yet he was still worth considering, and not only because he was the father of the better-known anthropologist, Margaret Mead.

What is meant by critical marketing?

Lebow is here positioned as a pioneer in critical marketing. This raises the question, "What is meant by a *critical approach*" to marketing. That is easiest to understand by appreciating what is meant by its opposite, a *traditional approach*. The following draws heavily from Benton (1985a, pp. 201-202), Benton (1985b) and is consistent with other expressions in the marketing literature of what critical marketing is (Murray and Ozanne, 1991), including marketing history (Tadajewski, 2012).

The traditional sciences of man and of society have attempted to follow the lead of the natural sciences (Poirier, 2011). There is little doubt that the various schools of economics, sociology, psychology, social psychology, political science and marketing have a similar if not identical conception of theory. It is the same conception of theory as in the natural sciences. This has been remarked upon often, but seldom as clearly and as straight forward as by anthropologist Leslie White (1949, p. 6). He wrote,

[...] the basic assumptions and techniques which comprise the scientific way of interpreting reality are applicable equally to all of its phases, to the human-social, or cultural, as well as to the biological and the physical.

One of the basic assumptions underlying "the scientific way of interpreting reality" was expressed by Albert Einstein. He wrote, "The belief in an external world independent of the

perceiving subject is the basis of all natural science" (Einstein, 1934, p. 60). Leon Eisenberg (1972, pp. 123-124) noted the difficulty with adopting the natural science perspective in the social field:

The planets will move as they always have, whether we adopt a geocentric or a heliocentric view of the heavens. [...] [T]he motions of the planets are sublimely indifferent to our earthbound astronomy. But the behavior of men is not independent of the theories of human behavior that men adopt. [...] What we choose to believe about the nature of man has social consequences.

A critical approach emerges from recognizing that in the clothing and the outward appearances, as well as in emotional forms and cognitive structures, people are the products of their history. The way people see and hear and feel and act is inseparable from the social life process. As far as any one individual is concerned, the basic conditions of existence are accepted as given; he/she simply strives to fulfill them. Most people, most of the time, find their satisfaction and praise in accomplishing, as well as they can, the tasks connected with their place in society and in courageously doing their duty, despite whatever criticism they may levy in particular matters and circumstances – despite, that is, all the moaning and groaning that they may, on occasion, do. This is true of the production line worker, the corporate executive, the housewife, the physicist, the behavioral scientist, the consumer researcher, the macromarketer and the marketing historian. To quote another anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, those that fail to go along with the moral-aesthetic norms of their society, those “who follow an incongruent style of life, are regarded not so much as evil as stupid, insensitive, unlearned or mad” (Geertz, 1973, p. 129). It is very hard to make life-choices, and to live those life-choices when they go against the society and the social norms around you. This is as true of the Navaho or the Hopi as it is of the American.

How does a critical approach apply to or connect with marketing, especially macromarketing, that school of marketing interested in examining the varied interactions among markets, marketing and society? Firat and Tadajewski (2009, pp. 132-133) attempted an answer by pointing out that, according to the commentary at the time, even

[...] macromarketing scholars take a more managerial perspective than those working from a critical marketing position, wanting to transform business practice for the better, or at least modify it in the face of social concern and legal criticism... For most macromarketers, the capitalist system and the economic doctrine of neoliberalism are largely accepted as improving the standard of living of most consumers in the world, without much criticism.

A critical approach is not concerned with managerial perspectives and orientations. It is not concerned with assisting those in control to better perform or even to transform their practice (Firat and Tadajewski, 2009; Tadajewski, 2010a, 2010b).

A critical stance focuses not only on the goals and rules of conduct imposed by existing ways of life but also as well on people and their potentialities. The aim of critical theory is the emancipation of people from their chains of illusion, from their self-imposed slavery. The concepts which emerge under the influence of the critical mind are critical of the present and tend toward a certain philosophical and futuristic character because they are always mindful of alternative possibilities.

Critical undertakings receive little, if any, sanction from so-called healthy human understanding. Having no established custom on their side, critical thinkers do not expect and generally do not receive, a warm reception. Among the vast majority, there will be an unconscious fear that critical thought might show their painfully won adaptation to social reality to be perverse and unnecessary. Among those who profit from the status quo, there is a general suspicion of *any* intellectual independence (Hofstadter, 1966; Jacoby, 2008). People

who think “too much” are always regarded as dangerous. The paradigmatic example is, of course, Socrates.

Returning to Victor Lebow

“*Free Enterprise*”: *The Opium of the American People* is Lebow (1972) only book. It is comprised of two parts: a description of The Business System *as a system* and his recommendations for correcting the manifest flaws.

That “Free Enterprise” is in quotes suggests that Lebow is writing about *so-called* free enterprise. At about the time Lebow was writing the once distinct terms, *capitalism* and *free enterprise* merged such that many now consider them synonymous. As DeMille writes, “During the Cold War, people came to equate the three ideas of democracy, capitalism and free enterprise” (DeMille, 2011). *Capitalism* fell out of favor and expressions such as *free enterprise*, *the market system* and others were substituted. Lebow noted as much:

The fact that the system is rarely referred to as Capitalism is, one might suggest, an unconscious recognition of the caveat that this is vulnerable territory. It is one thing to talk about the “system of private enterprise” or “the profit system,” because these abstractions are admissible for their “private” and their “profit.” But Capitalism is the system itself, recalling a hundred years of Socialist and Communist critiques, accusations, imputations of guilt, red banners, the “international” Bolsheviks, Red Chinese, Lenin, Stalin, Mao Tse Tung, Castro, *et al.*

Others had taken note of this linguistic turn as well (DeMille, 2011; Galbraith, 1999; Heilbroner, 1983). Lebow used the term *capitalism* but only incidentally, opting instead for *Private Enterprise*, *The Profit System*, *The Business System* or simply *The System*.

Lebow’s audience for “Free Enterprise” was the college student of the 1960s and 1970s “upon whom will fall the responsibility for transforming the country by the year 2000” (from the dedication). It was a period of great hope for some and great fear for others. Lebow held out reserved hope. For that hope to be realized, he argued, college students had to develop a much better understanding of how the American business system *really* worked. Much is concealed by the rhetoric of *free enterprise*, by the rhetoric of *the market*, *market system* and *of marketing* (Benton, 1987, 2011). Hence, his subtitle, “The Opium of the American People.”

In my plenary comments at the Macromarketing Conference in 2011 (Benton, 2011). I drew on C.S. Lewis. The last sentence in Lewis (1962) essay, “Is Theology Poetry”, reads:

I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen. Not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.

I drew on this passage so that I could substitute the word *economics* for the word Christianity. This gave me the following:

I believe in **economics** as I believe that the sun has risen. Not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.

My point was that every student in every class in the nation’s schools of business sees *economics* everywhere and by it they see everything else. (Indeed, we do not need to limit it to our nation’s schools of business or even those in a school of business.) In short, *economics* is a *cultural system* (Benton, 1982, 1986, 1990), “an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols” by means of which we “communicate, perpetuate and develop [our] knowledge about and attitudes toward life” (Geertz, 1973, p. 89). Economics is a *context* in which we live out and give meaning to our lives. It is **one** system of symbols (the material vehicles of thought – words (spoken and written), gestures, drawings, rituals, tools, sounds, markings and images) and meanings (ideas, concepts, values and expressive

forms) in terms of which we define our world, interpret our experiences, express our feelings, make our judgments and guide our actions.

Meanings can only be stored in and transmitted by symbols: “a cross, a crescent or a feathered serpent” (Geertz, 1973, p. 127). To get directly to my point, the cross can be a Latin Cross, a Maltese Cross or a Marshallian Cross [1] (Figure 1).

There are many symbols involved, metaphors if you will.

One is the word *market*, itself. The *market* is a *metaphor* for a host of values, beliefs, institutions, psychological assumptions and political orientations. When marketers, even marketing historians and macromarketers, use the term they let those values, beliefs, institutions, psychological assumptions and political orientations creep into their analysis and their discourse, whether they intend to do so or not. By constantly using the term *market*, whether alone or imbedded in other terms (marketing, marketing system, macromarketing) they unwittingly (unwittingly because as a metaphor *the market* is largely a dead metaphor) give the high ground to marketing-of-the-micro-variety and to mainstream, neoclassical, neoliberal economics. For example, Layton (2007) suggested that *marketing systems* is a core macromarketing concept, defining *marketing systems* as “the networked structures and the assortments generated that emerge from voluntary exchanges between sellers and buyers” (Layton, 2009, p. 415). As such Layton takes a page from the mainstream, neoclassical and neoliberal playbook. It is to those traditions that *the market* as a metaphor, and its variations, is grounded. It is to this that Firat and Tadajewski (2009, p. 140) drew our attention when they wrote, “Marketing [. . .] is founded on the existence and workings of *the market*; its name betrays it”.

To extend Lebow’s metaphor, opiates fail to fix the ills for which they are prescribed. They let one forget the pain and suffering rather than work to change the circumstances causing the pain and suffering. Worse still, the drug is administered by the oppressors, those responsible for the pain and suffering. Lebow would have agreed with Nancy MacLean (2017, p. 28) when she wrote (in an entirely different context),

Americans have been told for so long, from so many quarters, that political debate can be broken down into conservative versus liberal, pro-market versus pro-government, Republican versus Democrat, that it is hard to recognize that something more confounding is afoot, [something that is] blocked from our sight by these stale classifications.

Lebow would have said that we have told ourselves for so long that our choice is either free enterprise (markets) or government control (socialism) that it is hard to recognize that something more confounding is afoot. Our continued reliance on the rhetoric of *free enterprise* and of *the market* (and associated expressions involving *the market* – such as Eric

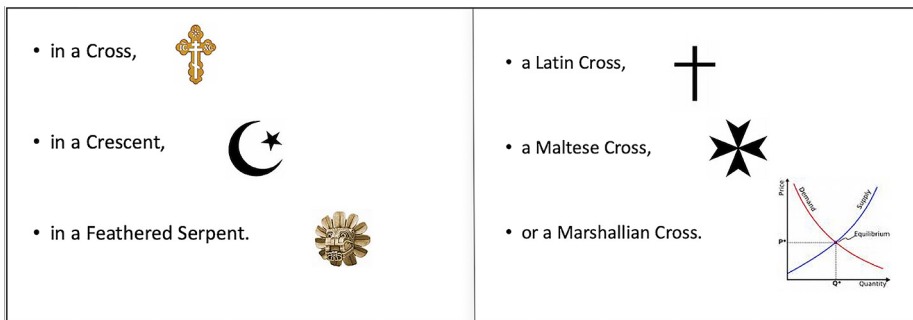


Figure 1.
Symbolic
Representations that
embody meanings

Shaw's (2011, emphasis added) "free marketing economy" – blocks the "something more confounding" from our view. Lebow would also have agreed with MacLean (2017, p. 31), "we have an urgent need for more open and probing discussion, not silencing".

Lebow wrote "Free Enterprise" to pull back the curtains and to expose a more accurate depiction of the American business system than the image conjured by symbolic expressions such as *free enterprise*, the *free market economy*, the *free marketing economy*, the *market*; *marketing*, *macromarketing* or even *marketing history*. The first seven chapters are descriptions of how the system works; the last four are his proposals for the future.

Problems in the macromarketing system

Lebow saw and was concerned about injustice, poverty and lack of health care. He enumerates, in several places, where he feels the macromarketing system fails us. Millions go hungry in this rich land and we rank 23rd in infant mortality among the industrialized nations. We contribute more waste and pollution to the earth than countries with many millions more in population. We need more and better housing, more and better schools, more and better health care. We have high and increasing disparities in wealth and income. We lack efficient mass transportation but get more highways, and more jet ports, while mile after mile of railroad right-of-way is demolished (Lebow, 1972, pp. 6, 9-10, 126, 128, 129-130, *passim*).

He recognized that we receive benefits from the system as it is. "Only the ignorant and the dogmatists" would deny private enterprises' role in the building of the USA.

The enterprise, the risk taking, the managerial ability, the imagination, the feel for the main chance, [...] have animated American business for almost two centuries [and] are, by any fair judgement, positive assets on the balance sheet of America (Lebow, 1972, p. 13).

He later added, "Opera, ballet and symphony orchestras simply couldn't exist on today's scale without subsidies from business" (Lebow, 1972, p. 113).

The benefits we enjoy are always attributed to The Business System, to the market, to free enterprise or the profit system; the deficiencies are not. Deficiencies are attributed to "foreigners, Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, Republicans, Democrats, labor unions, professors, agitators, subversives" (Lebow, 1972, p. 17). Deficiencies are sometimes also attributed to "state administrations, [...] the Congress or the incumbent national government" (Lebow, 1972, p. 111). Business as an institution, as a system, "has been a sacred cow, exempt from criticism and even from objective study" (Lebow, 1972, p. 111), while enjoying "all the benefits of socialism" (Lebow, 1972, p. 2).

Lebow was in no mood to accept that all our lingering problems are due to the sources he listed; neither was he willing to assume that all the problems can be solved by business, even by business that professed a social responsibility. And he was not in favor of any form of socialist (government) control. "The sanctity of private property is well established in the constitution," he wrote, and it has been "reaffirmed by the supreme court" (Lebow, 1972, p. 129). He had no intention and expressed no desire to challenge that.

Understanding the American business system: Its power, influence and ubiquitousness. However, we must come to see and to understand how, and to what degree, society is dominated, formed and shaped by Business. The USA is the only nation in history founded by corporations, the British colonies in North America having been originally conceived as commercial ventures (Lebow, 1972, p. 29). The corporation is the dominant, most powerful and most pervasive institution in the whole system (Lebow, 1972, p. 30). "It is the empire which actually rules this country and most of the non-communist world" (Lebow, 1972, p. 31).

It is not easy to grasp the pervasiveness of business. Most Americans are unaware of the extent to which business, as an institution, totally envelops them “as the air in which [they] move and breath” (Lebow, 1972, p. 16). The closest analogy to this “ubiquity of business today would be the presence, power and persuasion of the Roman Catholic Church during the medieval age in Europe” (Lebow, 1972, p. 16).

Our values, goals, priorities and ethics mirror those of business. The accomplishments and benefits are well-publicized and credited to The System (Lebow’s capitalization, p. 17). It is The System that gives us what we have. Yet problems continue to plague us; not a week passes that some businessman or corporation is not cited, indicted or convicted of one chicanery or another. For the evil that is done or the problems that remain, the finger of guilt is pointed to *the specific individual* indicted or convicted or to one of the scapegoats. The one institution “exempt from criticism or blame is the profit system, business, itself” (Lebow, 1972, p. 17).

How things are different today (today being the early 1970s) is in the nature of the system and the extent of its power. It is, today, a “system of power” (Lebow, 1972, p. 4, citing Brady, 1943). It is a system of power “entrenched behind concentric fortifications of special interests, political parties” and unquestioning faith of Americans “in the superiority of our way of life” (Lebow, 1972, p. 4).

The Establishment, the Bureaucracy, the Politicians, the Power Structures, the Pressure Groups, are all satellites whose existence and strength depend upon the heartland of “The System,” the institution which is variously called Private Enterprise, or The Profit System, or Capitalism—in short, Business (Lebow, 1972, pp. 4-5).

Without reference, Lebow gives expression to the thesis put forth by Averitt (1968, 1987; Bowring, 1986; Munkirs and Knoedler, 1987) in *The Dual Economy* [2] and by Galbraith (1967) in *The New Industrial State*: “there are two business systems in the USA,” Lebow (1972, p. 23) wrote, one made up of “corporations with national or international operations” and the other “populated with comparatively small enterprises, most of them local.” This duality is present in other countries, too. Writing at the time that the Japanese management system was considered a miracle, Bunge and Whitaker (1983, p. 149) observed,

The consequences of Japan’s economic growth have not always been positive. Large-scale and modern industrial enterprises exist side by side with the smaller and technologically less developed firms, creating a condition of economic dualism.

Similarly, writing about the time that Lebow was writing, Bieda (1970, p. 202), suggested

It is probably that there are very few countries that would not show features of dualism as Japan does. The main reason why most countries do not claim a dual structure is that they do not have nearly as much statistical data about their economies as Japan.

Lebow would contend that this duality needs to be understood, to be fully appreciated, and not brushed aside. It needs to be incorporated into our marketing models, especially our macromarketing models, but generally isn’t.

Understanding the American business system: Its impact upon society. The impact of business on society has taken two forms. “The first,” Lebow asserts, “is the virtual monopolization of science and technology by private enterprise. The second is the special character and volume of its propaganda” (Lebow, 1972, p. 5). The first derives from businesses passion for innovation which loosens upon the public “a flood of new products and services.” This is supported “by an overwhelming use of propaganda to induce acceptance” of the flood of new products and services (Lebow, 1972, p. 5). In a discussion reminiscent of Galbraith (1958, 1967) and others (Packard, 1957; Potter, 1954; Rorty, 1934),

Lebow notes, “The new and improved uses of propaganda take the form of direct manipulation of the desires, opinions, values, goals and ideas of Americans through the techniques of publicity, public relations and advertising” (Lebow, 1972, p. 6). The end result, he suggests, is that “Americans have been conditioned for gullibility” (Lebow, 1972, p. 6).

One of the significant accomplishments of the public relations fraternity has been to implant into American heads the slogan of “Free Enterprise.” Lebow suggests the phrase is “the fraudulent marriage” of two terms used in economics. The first is “free competition” – of which there has never been much, and now is practically none of consequence. The second is the definition of this economic system as “private enterprise” (Lebow, 1972, p. 68). Similarly, and worth noting, is the a rhetorical transition that occurred away from using the term *capitalism*, with its recognition that “the owners of capital or their attendants” are in control, toward a preference for the term *market system*, in which the “admirably impersonal role of market forces” are in control (Galbraith, 1999, p. 54). (Marketing, too, has become awash in this power neutral vocabulary and rhetoric as well). In this context, the more recent work by Fones-Wolf (1994) and by Stole (2016) is important. Worth noting, too, is that the 1977 Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) included either a panel or a session on “Marketing Free Enterprise” (Parker, 2015, p. 226).

What the American people experience is propaganda so pervasive, so persistent, so enduring from cradle-to-grave, that it is not only total but totalitarian. For in its working it shapes the desires, forms the values, sets the goals, of the citizen-consumer. (Lebow, 1972, p. 69)

Comparing the amount spent in the USA on advertising (in 1951) to the amount spent for primary and secondary education (in 1949), Potter (1954, p. 178) had pointed out, “Our national outlay for education of citizens amounted to substantially less than our expenditures for the education of consumers.” And what is the impact of the efforts to educate consumers?

Considered objectively, one must credit the propaganda of our private enterprise system with three imposing achievements: *First*, [it has] transformed the American citizen into a compulsive consumer whereby Consumption has become synonymous with democracy. *Second*, [it] has persuaded Americans that business is the living heart of democracy [. . .] *Third*, [it has] succeeded in making Americans believe that politicians are independent of business [. . .] (Lebow, 1972, pp. 81-83).

Understanding the American business system: The impossibility of social responsibility of business. Lebow notes that the “middle class intellectual,” faced with the dissent, the despair and the violence of the day, “is calling for the assumption by private enterprise of social responsibility” (Lebow, 1972, pp. 6-7). The plain fact is that “any business decision made *solely* in consideration of the common good is, *per se*, a bad business decision.” It is bad “because it reduces profits” and “any benefit to society from a ‘good’ business decision must be merely a by-product” (Lebow, 1972, p. 8). Every businessman knows this; no businessman needed “the imprimatur of Professor Milton Friedman” (Lebow, 1972, p. 8). Here Lebow was expressing what Fred C. Hanley, president of Fred Hanley Poultry Farms, Inc., reportedly said (printed on the January 1974 cover of *Poultry Tribune*), “The object of producing eggs is to make money. When we forget this objective, we have forgotten what it is all about”.

Because Lebow brought up Milton Friedman, I feel it necessary to interject a comment regarding what Friedman actually said. In *Capitalism and Freedom* (1962), in the context of stating that there is “one and only one” social responsibility of business, the infamous “increase its profits” passage, Friedman (1962) went on to say that “the “social

responsibility” of labor leaders” is to serve the interests of their members. He continued (1962, p. 133, emphasis added; note the exclusionary phrasing),

It is the responsibility *of the rest of us* to establish a framework of law such that an individual in pursuing his own interest is, to quote Adam Smith again, “led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention. . .”

Business has *its* responsibility, labor leaders have *theirs*, and the invisible hand is not that of the market (despite what we have been taught in our economics classes) but the framework of law which business and labor have no hand in formulating because that is the responsibility *of the rest of us*[3].

The relationship was more directly stated by Friedman’s English contemporary, Lionel Robbins. In the *Theory of Economic Policy in English Classical Political Economy* Robbins (1952) wrote (pp. 56, 190, emphasis in the original):

The invisible hand which guides men to promote ends which were no part of their intention, is not the hand of some god or some natural agency independent of human effort; it is the hand of the law giver, the hand which withdraws from the sphere of the pursuit of self-interest those possibilities which do not harmonize with the public good [. . .] [W]e must regard the provision of such a framework as *prior* to the recommendation of economic freedom.

Yet we *need* business to have a social responsibility, something recently recognized by no less than The Business Roundtable (Gelles and Yaffe-Bellany, 2019; Murray and Meyer, 2019). The roundtable’s official position has been, since 1997, that the primary role of business is to increase shareholder value (Business Roundtable, 1997). Prior to 1997, the roundtable’s position supported CEO primacy, a *de facto* development known today as the “dictatorship of the CEO” (Ramirez, 2007). Lebow, as indicated, was very skeptical of business taking on social responsibility itself. What was needed, he argued, was a restructuring of business without abandoning the profit system. He argued for restructuring the business system such that the social responsibility of business “will be incorporated in its very form and function” (Lebow, 1972, p. 13). To this, he returns in the final chapter.

Lebow argues that the changes our country must undergo, to flourish in a peaceful world, cannot be achieved without a radical restructuring of that system of power which is business. In an expression similar to what one hears today, Lebow wrote, “Change is on the order of the day, all over the world [. . .] But change in what direction? There are powerful forces [. . .] which would look with favor upon a transition to a more [. . .] authoritarian government,” and among them “are many businessmen” (Lebow, 1972, p. 12). No matter how altered, how changed, “that system must retain the energy and the capabilities of American private enterprise” (Lebow, 1972, p. 13).

Understanding the American business system: the satellites and surrogates. In his effort to expose The Business System as it *is*, Lebow more fully develops the structure of The System by discussing how the various and numerous bureaucracies serve The System (Chapter 6). He does not stop at pointing out that big, corporate business is not simply small, domestic, owner-managed enterprises *writ* large. They are not; they are beasts of a different nature, ones in which we are all, one way or another, entwined. However, the Business System is more than an accumulation of corporate enterprises. It is, as well, a system comprised of corporate enterprises buttressed by an array of bureaucracies, and we must (but do not) fully understand the nature, purpose and functioning of these bureaucracies. No matter what their ostensible reason for being, these bureaucracies serve private enterprise, especially corporate enterprise; “their function is to protect it and defend it against all enemies foreign and domestic” (Lebow, 1972, p. 85).

This “array of bureaucracies” exist as satellite systems, revolving about the dominant and most powerful system of all: corporate business. Taken together, the giant corporations and their satellites “determine the character, values, goals and priorities of this society” (Lebow, 1972, p. 85). Examples of these satellite systems include the American Medical Association, the National Rifle Association and the American Farm Bureau Federation. This last is an organization that “has proclaimed itself the voice of the farmer, but in fact it represents the largest, wealthiest and most influential farm operators, bankers, machinery and agricultural supply manufacturers” (Lebow, 1972, p. 87). Add to that its stranglehold on “the Department of Agriculture, its influence with county agents, its cozy partnership with all the forces which help keep [the poor farmer] in penury” (Lebow, 1972, p. 87).

To these and others like them, he adds the various trade organizations, most labor organizations, the US Chamber of Commerce, the National Association of Manufacturers, and hundreds of others (the American Legion, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the Navy League, the Air Force Association, the Daughters of the American Revolution, the Minutemen, the John Birch Society). “All of these,” Lebow writes, “are satellites of business because they are committed to the private enterprise economy, to the profit system, and because their existence and power are predicated upon the continued dominion of business in our society” (Lebow, 1972, p. 88). A typical satellite system “combines organization, wealth, propaganda, the power to benefit its constituents and to punish its opponents, and often the ability to impose discipline and penalties upon the recalcitrant” (Lebow, 1972, p. 86).

To really understand the macromarketing system, one must also understand *and model* these satellite systems whose:

[. . .] lobbyists constitute a “shadow” Congress, providing advice, guidance, largesse, junkets, and importunity for the elected members of the House and Senate, as well as those in the State legislatures and administrations, and reaching the ears of strategically placed officials in the executive branch (Lebow, 1972, p. 87).

The proposed solutions

Solutions: Take up a career in business. Lebow observes that his audience, “the dissident young people, particularly those in the colleges and universities,” are rejecting The System. One form this rejection takes is the repudiation of business as a career (Lebow, 1972, p. 111). He encourages them to seriously consider a career in business:

[. . .] for the healthy development of the economy and of the society as a whole, it is important that some of these brilliant and idealistic rebels seek out careers in private enterprise (Lebow, 1972, p. 111).

They may, after all, “play a role in the transformation that is bound to come” (Lebow, 1972, p. 112).

[. . .] a business career is probably the most important vocation on which a college man or woman can embark. Their role in the decades ahead may do as much to decide the future of the world as government officials, university professors, scientists, or the military.

Solutions: full-scale interdisciplinary study. While no one can deny the primacy of business in American life, it is important to realize that “no university has made the private enterprise system the subject of a full-scale interdisciplinary project” (Lebow, 1972, p. 119). As “practically every student in the university is going to spend his adult life either immersed in business or encircled by it” (Lebow, 1972, p. 119), it only makes sense that such a full-scale interdisciplinary research and teaching effort would take place and be of interest. Such an

interdisciplinary activity would include History, Government, Philosophy, Economics, Social Anthropology, Sociology, Ethics, International Relations, Education, Science, Ecology and Social Science. His suggestions for what each of these disciplines might investigate (pp. 119-124, all of Chapter IX: The Sacred Cow on Campus) leads to the following (Lebow, 1972, p. 122):

[S]chools of business do not begin to teach their students what business is. They are vocational schools. They have fancied up courses in techniques and practice to masquerade as kissing cousins to the academic curriculum.

This, too, will sound vaguely familiar to those that have read Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* (Bloom, 1987). Lebow then lists a few more: Psychology, English Literature, Creative Writing and Social Problems. He then concludes (Lebow, 1972, p. 123):

Calvin Coolidge once put it bluntly: "The business of America is Business." All the more reason why every student in our colleges and universities should learn all there is to know about private enterprise.

By that Lebow intends they should learn all there is to know about private enterprise as it really is and not as myth would have it.

Solutions: the form of the firm[4]. The penultimate chapter is devoted to a discussion of the social costs of business – costs which are enormous and which, he writes, few scholars have attempted to assess (he cites Kapp's, 1950, *The Social Costs of Private Enterprise* as a possible exception). The point of this discussion is to provide the background and vocabulary for the final chapter.

The System of private enterprise "has imposed a huge withholding tax on the American people. That tax is the social cost of business, the contribution of society to the success of private enterprise. That contribution is an unpaid debt" (Lebow, 1972, pp. 130-131).

It is time that the system of private enterprise begins to repay that debt. It is not necessary to destroy the system, nor to expropriate its holdings, for business to restore to society what it has taken without compensation. Further, society should insist upon encouraging and retaining the managerial skills, the creative abilities which make American business so successful and so powerful. But the time has also come to make the control of private enterprise more democratic, more responsible to the needs of the American people. (Lebow, 1972, p. 131)

This can only be accomplished "under a new and different system of direction, priorities and controls than is possible under the system of private direction" (Lebow, 1972, p. 131). Most of the concerns today are negative externalities, "with us in large measure because it has not been anybody's explicit business to foresee and anticipate them" (Lebow, 1972, p. 132). These negative externalities are not due to some "mystical autonomy presumed to lie in technology," but more to the autonomy that our economic and political institutions grant to individual decision making" (Lebow, 1972, p. 133).

The ingredients for a solution. Lebow suggested that in the USA, we have successfully created one form of corporation well suited to undertake the functions of a business enterprise yet differs from traditional corporate private enterprise in that its social responsibility is the essence of its charter. That is, its social responsibility is built into its structure. Lebow is referring to "the public authority," of which the Tennessee Valley Authority is but one well-known example. There are others.

There are authorities which build speedways and parks, bridges and housing, mass transportation facilities, and others which operate resorts, and such unique functions as those of the Saratoga Springs Authority, of New York State, with its hotel, spa, and a going business in the bottling and sale of its mineral waters (Lebow, 1972, p. 136).

Lebow's proposition is that the public authority form of corporation "may well be the device by which the transformation of the private enterprise system can be achieved" (Lebow, 1972, p. 136). Change can be gradual, but the motivation is clear: a special levy on all business to repay to the people the contributions which this society has made to every private enterprise operating under charter or license from any city, state or the Federal Government. That levy should take the form of a Social Dividend, paid annually.

Tying his proposal to Tax Day (April 15 in the USA), Lebow proposed that every corporation shall issue a special Social Dividend (he proposes three percent) of all its outstanding common stock and its residual securities (securities that can be converted into common stock). This special Social Dividend shall be delivered, by each corporation, to a specific public authority, possibly one authority assigned to each industry. In a point of irony, Lebow suggests each industry could pay its Social Dividend to an authority dedicated to the project which that industry has lobbied against. For example, a public authority devoted to the extension and improvement of mass transportation would receive its share of the total Social Dividend from the automobile manufacturers, truck manufacturers, trucking companies, cement makers and highway builders.

Lebow suggested that well before the end of the century (within thirty years of his writing) public authorities will have achieved a controlling voice in every corporation. The public authorities would use their share of the cash dividends paid on the stocks they receive as Social Dividends for planned and socially useful purposes. These would include all the areas in which we are remiss, lagging or ineffectual today. In addition, there would be authorities to build, staff and operate research and development laboratories. Each public authority will have and will exercise its rights to nominate and vote for directors, express its opinions regarding the operations of the corporation, and pay particular attention to the propaganda activities of the company.

There is evidence, Lebow admits, that some public authorities can and have become so completely autonomous as to disregard the needs of the public they were designed to service. This can be avoided by establishing a proportion of public members in each authority whose function it would be to keep its operation on the plan for which it was designated.

Conclusions

Lebow, the marketing professional, consultant, business executive, officer and director of corporations argued that the American corporation is unable to deal with the social problems it has created and that it is foolish to propose, as a fix, that those corporations adopt a "social responsibility." Those corporations owe an enormous debt to society; the repayment of that debt, by funding Public Authorities, *may be* a way forward (Lebow's words, p. 136, italics added).

How is this a matter for marketers? If the gradual move away from the corporation as we know it were to take place, in the direction that Lebow envisions, changes in the macromarketing system would unquestionably result, as might changes in the practice of marketing in the micro sense. Marketers ought not be thinking only of the marketing system as it is, much less as myth would have it, but as the marketing system might be, as it could be.

There are complex debates currently taking place about the corporation, the form of the firm, and whether or not profit maximization *for shareholders* is really the end-goal (Gelles and Yaffe-Bellany, 2019; Green, 2018; Macey, 2008; Rhee, 2018; Stout, 2008, 2012, 2013). Dholakia (2011, 2012) has pointed out how seemingly autonomous consumer *and marketer* behaviors may be guided by and conform to the dictates of financial capital. That is, the

consumer may not be the powerful actor, and the marketer may not be the loyal servant, that marketing theory and consumer research often assume. That the consumer is subject to the market-shaping activities of corporate capitalism has been long argued. That the form the firm takes has potential market-shaping impacts is underappreciated in marketing and under-, indeed un-explored in the marketing literature.

Lebow proposed that the marketing system is shaped in complex ways that we still do not appreciate and that we do not explore, focused as we are on the consumer and on markets as somehow neutral institutional structures. The focus and concern on the values of consumers, without paying attention to how the marketing system has developed and evolved is misguided. So, too, is it misguided to focus on the values and lifestyles of consumers without paying attention to *the form of the firm* that influences those values and lifestyles.

In an entirely different context C.S. Lewis (1993, pp. 4–5) made the following suggestion:

It is a good rule, after reading a new book, never to allow yourself another new one till you have read an old one in between [...] Every age [...] is specially good at seeing certain truths and specially liable to make certain mistakes. We all, therefore, need the books that will correct the characteristic mistakes of our own period. And that means the old books.

Victor Lebow's "*Free Enterprise*": *The Opium of the American People* is one of those old books which we should read in between the new books we do read.

Possible directions for future research

There are a number of research topics lying in wait for those that take up C.S. Lewis' advice. In Macromarketing, specifically, work that attempts to apply systems analysis can be extended to include the array of bureaucracies that serve corporate enterprise, the satellite systems of which Lebow writes. The systems approach could also include integrating the reality of the dual economy rather than camouflaging it behind supposed "networked structures" that, again, supposedly emerge from "voluntary exchanges between sellers and buyers."

While it might appear remote from a typical marketing concern, there is also the possibility to explore the parallels between public authorities and the benefit corporation, a new legal tool that has emerged in the USA as Lebow wrote. The Benefit Corporation allows for-profit corporations to pursue social and environmental missions co-equal with profit maximization, without fear of shareholder litigation over the failure to single-mindedly pursue profit maximization (Hiller and Shackelford, 2018; Raskin, 2011, 2012; Wikipedia, 2019). What is not remote from typical marketing concerns is the exploration of how the form the firm takes impacts marketing and the macromarketing system, and how Lebow's proposal might impact the future macromarketing system (Shultz, 2017). This could include exploring how the monopolization of science and technology by private enterprise gives us what we presently have and forecloses on other possibilities for the public good (Kravets, 2017). The curious could also explore how the public authority (as well as the benefit corporation) might integrate with issues of sustainability (see Lebow's comments on page 132 regarding the environmental crisis) and the search for alternative economies (Campana et al., 2017).

Finally, marketers, especially those with a critical bent, can develop a marketing curriculum that strives to understand and present the system as it is, as per Lebow's criticism that our schools of business, being vocational schools, do not even begin teach our students what business and the business system really is. Lebow's many ideas, presented in Chapter IX: The Sacred Cow on Campus, provide a road map as to where to begin.

Notes

1. Alfred Marshall was the 19th century British economist that brought the separate ideas of a Law of Supply and a Law of Demand together, illustrating it with the now familiar graph depicting a downward sloping demand curve and an upward sloping supply curve. Being the first to so illustrate these two economic laws, this standard illustration of the intersection of supply and demand is today known as the *Marshallian Cross*. The religious symbolism should not escape us.
2. Not to be confused with the theories of economic development emanating from Lewis (1954). See, for example, Temin (2016).
3. This notion that *the framework of law is the invisible hand*, not the market, and that it is *the responsibility of the rest of us* to establish that framework, is not found in Friedman's 1970's *New York Times Magazine* article.
4. This expression, *the form of the firm*, is borrowed from Abraham Singer (2018), *The Form of the Firm: A Normative Political Theory of the Corporation*.

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Appendix

The following presents Victor Lebow's most famous words from the 1955 *Journal of Retailing* article (Lebow, 1955). The boldface portions indicate what is most often quoted and what was quoted in the body of this paper.

Our enormously productive economy demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfactions, our ego satisfactions, in consumption. The measure of social status, of social acceptance, of prestige, is now to be found in our consumption patterns. The very meaning and significance of our lives is today expressed in consumption terms. The greater the pressures upon the individual to conform to safe and accepted social standards, the more does he tend to express his aspirations and his individuality in terms of what he wears, drives eats—his home, his car, his patterns of food serving, his hobbies.

These commodities and services must be offered to the consumer with a special urgency. We require not only "forced draft" consumption, but "expensive" consumption as well. **We need things consumed, burned up, worn out, replaced, and discarded at an ever increasing pace.** We need to have people eat, drink, dress, ride, live, with ever more complicated and, therefore constantly more expensive consumption. The home power tools and the whole "do-it-yourself" movement are excellent examples of "expensive" consumption.

About the author

Before his retirement in 2015, Raymond Benton, Jr was a Professor of Marketing and Chair of the Department of Marketing at Loyola University Chicago's Quinlan School of Business. He received his PhD (doctorate) (Doctor of Philosophy) in economics from Colorado State University (1983), his MA (master's degree) Master of Arts in anthropology from Colorado State University (1976) and his BS (bachelor's degree) (Bachelor of Science) in Business Administration from the University of Arizona (1967). His primary interest is in the study of economics and marketing as symbolic systems, the interaction between the two and the differential impact each has on social reality. Raymond Benton, Jr can be contacted at: rbenton@luc.edu

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