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Teaching in and for the hinterlands: a commentary

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I returned to the conference circuit in the wake of the COVID pandemic and its attendant restrictions with a visit to the summer iteration of the American Marketing Association in 2022 and the Consumer Culture Theory Conference in 2023. The former was a typically tedious bit of recruiting business while the latter was a genuinely refreshing return to what I consider – whether they would choose to have me or not – to be “my people” and in both cases conversations invariably involved the sort of career niceties with which any veteran conference attendee is familiar. In discussing my recent tenure and promotion at Idaho State University and my intention to remain at the post in the forgotten-even-by-Americans state of Idaho, I often received one or both of the following questions.

First, and to my latent professional insecurity at least a tacit nod to my mediocre research record, was an inquiry into how I managed to stay sane in a job that is primarily teaching focused. For those unfamiliar with this sort of mid-sized regional American school, we carry a 3/3 teaching load on a semester schedule and I taught 9 different course preparations pre-tenure. Second, if the speaker either had some dim idea of what Idaho was like or after a few wine-infused follow-up questions about the area, was a certain incredulity that I intended to remain in a deeply reactionary political environment. Idaho, if it is known at all, has a reputation for militant right-wing militia groups and a state government that has historically carried the veneer of frontier libertarianism but has of late fused that with Trumpism and Evangelicalism as it has joined the internet-mediated American right-wing monoculture. It’s a textbook example of a place liberals are loath to live and an environment generally perceived to be hostile to academia. The answer to both questions is of course that I am not a liberal and that I have found significant meaning in teaching in a business school in a right-wing environment. It is on this subject that I would like to share this brief commentary.

At both conferences, the tenor was one of anxiety. At AMA this is almost always at least tacitly true. The recruiting function has diminished as universities realize that Zoom and other telecommunications technologies can obviate the significant cost of sending faculty (and candidates) to a major metro to have awkward conversations in a hotel room or, at best and minimizing the chance of truly distasteful social circumstances involving faculty wearing towels, slurring their words through severe inebriation and the usual fodder for market horror stories, the hotel lobby. But the malaise of job insecurity driven by nervous candidates still pervaded the Marriott in Chicago. Beyond that though and despite the business-as-usual, infinite-growth, Pax Americana veneer over the type of work that is typically brought to AMA conferences, there was a deeper tacit anxiety. This is perhaps best exemplified by the very title of the conference theme: Light in the Darkness. One may well commend the admission of darkness in such a setting. At CCT, the anxiety was even more explicit: Utopia and Dystopia left a similar space for optimism, but the best attended session to my recollection was on Terminal Marketing.

I don’t think I’m telling you anything you don’t know by interpreting this as a general sense that things are bad and that even with the oft-invoked panacea of time, conditions somehow manage

both not to change and still to get worse. As academics, there seems to be a sense that we can do something about this. Maybe that makes us some sort of Lacanian perverts denying our castration, but we at the least operate on the belief that we ought to do something about it. Eric Arnould implored us to engage with real consumer resistance movements. Jack Coffin maintains his steadfast commitment to working on behalf of non-human actors who share our world. We heard some competing commentary on utopia and dystopia at the keynote. I admire these perspectives (though I admit I was lost at times in the latter case) but I have found a complete inability to do research that seems to accomplish anything besides occupying a line on my CV. That is of course what could colloquially be called a “me problem,” but it is directly relevant to the point I’m making here, which is that teaching can be another outlet for at least assuaging this anxiety. I hesitate to say it’s a space in which one can make a difference because it begins to sound like an advertising pamphlet for a university, but faced with what I believe is an existential threat in twenty-first-century techno-financial capitalism, it’s nice to feel like one can do something.

The student body at my institution is disproportionately comprised of non-traditional and first-generation students. They come from a rural state, the economy of which is dominated by agriculture and energy, with historical ties to extractive industries, and the invariable American powerhouse of real estate. The public education system typically ranks in the 30s of the 50 states in the US, though last in per pupil spending, perhaps tipping the reader to the way in which charter and private schools have influenced the general efficacy of primary education in the area. In a typical semester, nearly every student I teach works; about half of them have full-time jobs; close to that proportion are married; and a solid quarter have children. The median age this semester is 26. Many are skeptical of college, fearing the ambient liberal sensibility and feeling extorted to attend in order to compete in the job market.

I have found them immensely receptive to CCT-oriented content, even that with an explicitly left-wing axiology. First, and most practically, these are not the children of upper- and upper-middle-class professionals who will have lucrative careers ahead of them by virtue of networking and default academic performance. Stakes are real for them: poverty in the dying towns of rural America, or a chance at a career with a retirement plan and healthcare package. The education they receive really will make them more competitive on the labor market, and with a spiraling rate of inequality in the US, that matters. When I taught Principles of Marketing, I spent time on the labor theory of value when discussing Pricing. In my Globalized Markets course, we talk about the principle of exclusion and downward pressure on wages. To lower- and lower-middle-class students, this isn’t an abstract concept of fairness; it’s a ruthless competition for scarce resources. Thus, they are fundamentally amenable to a materialist analysis of markets. This in and of itself distinguishes them from the higher cultural- and economic-capital, typically liberal students I taught at flagship state schools like University of South Carolina and University of Arkansas, where sensibility rather than scarcity drove much of their worldview.

These students have the general sense that college is a place where liberals, insulated from the vicissitudes of economic precarity and thus from reality, scold people professionally to make themselves feel morally superior. After 19 years in the American higher education system, I believe they have a point. The neoliberal university is always engineering new initiatives for labor discipline like training faculty how to use the proper terminology for the online-left issue of the day with virtually no regard for the material conditions that underwrite these issues. Take for instance the notion of “social justice” for our local population of American Indians, the Shoshone-Bannock tribes. Like most of the US, ISU exists on land which was promised by treaty to be left to a tribe. It was ceded to the Shoshone-Bannock people by a treaty in perpetuity. Naturally, once some settlers realized that this particular valley was insulated from the worst weather of the Snake River Plain and had a year-long water supply in it, they took it and pushed the natives further up into the frankly inhospitable Fort Hall Reservation.

A few years back, our faculty senate, predictably led by some faculty in the College of Arts and Letters, set out to rectify this issue. Their solution was a bit of language to be posted to the university

website and, bafflingly, read at sporting events. You know how Americans love their pre-game pageantry. We'll play the national anthem and have someone read a land acknowledgement. No one has any idea what to say to this, so they just stare politely. This land acknowledgement is similarly expected to be added to our email signatures. When I brought this up in my Branding course, conservative students nodded along at the notion of performative social inclusivity and virtue signaling. After all, that's what they were warned would be afoot on college campuses by right-wing media personalities and angry uncles. When I said that any real effort at justice for these people should include at minimum things like zero-cost access to Idaho State's programs, they continued nodding. The tribes do get some discounts, but it requires the usual Byzantine procedure of forms and humiliating bureaucratic interactions, and does nothing for the waiver-proof cost of entry in fees and books and so on. Rural students understand the ways in which these programs deter use, and why. The optimist in me might even call it a glimmer of class consciousness.

When teaching courses like Consumer Behavior, I make a point to provide toolkits for the critical analysis of markets from our literature. I emphasize the extent to which the American liberal worldview overlays a structure which makes those people complicit in and allows them to profit from the actual immoral violence of historical colonialism, primitive accumulation, and modern capitalism while maintaining a smug, condescending demeanor toward the "fly-over states" with their backwards ways. When we discuss things like consumer resistance and emancipation, they justifiably have the right-wing discursive knee-jerk reaction to such things: this isn't my fault, and I shouldn't have to feel bad for things like driving a pickup truck or eating beef. This state is 84,000 square miles (217,000 km squared). Most of them grow up on rural property. Not having a car or driving a Prius is simply not practical, and it's incredibly frustrating for some Columbia-educated pundit to tell them they're bad people who don't care about the future because of the fact. Many of them grew up on or around cattle farms; of course they eat beef. When we discuss clear-cutting the Borneo rainforest to plant soy farms so Americans can eat "ethical" food, they understand the hypocrisy.

In many cases, these students have never been exposed to basic issues in US, much less global, history. Their primary school curricula often look like a parody of Soviet propaganda. In having informal conversations with one former student, I learned that his school never covered the first World War except in brief as a prelude to the Second. When we covered Germany's role in the EU in my Globalized Markets class, another admitted that they had never heard anything about the nation whatsoever aside from the fact that they had Nazis and that we, the US, defeated them. Given this, I couch much of my teaching in historical context. The aforementioned Globalized Markets course covers a workbench topic like foreign market entry contextualized into a particular country. In the case of market entry, we discuss Korea, including its time under Japanese occupation; its artificial division by the US; its stymied civil war; the crashing of the Republic of Korea's market in the 90s by tidal waves in and out of hot money in the form of direct foreign investment; and so on. They are flabbergasted to learn that the US would prop up a military dictatorship, forbidding a conclusion to a domestic conflict in a country with 3000 years of continuous cultural history. Very few embrace this role, leaning instead on the now-often-parodied American libertarian attitude: they should be free to do what they like. Even if that's to have a leftist government. Maybe I'm too immersed in the intense ideology of the American Project. But my family has been here for nearly 400 years. I can't visit Ireland or Denmark on holiday and credibly claim some sort of homecoming as so many of my compatriots are wont to do. This is all I have, and I do maintain a belief in the possibility of the dialectic of American mythology and American imperialism arcing toward something positive, a fidelity to the Modernist ideals we have so routinely betrayed.

If I have any hope of making a difference in the world now, it's in communicating the dangers of adopting the liberal attitude toward political economy, emphasizing material analysis of the same, and fostering at least a functional awareness of broad strokes of history. I have found this much easier with conservative students. They understand themselves and their situations in a way that my liberal students did not. The ideology of consumer choice as freedom is too familiar and

sweet to those who grew up with an immensely positive consumer lifestyle. The notion that they have more in common with an “unskilled” immigrant laborer is anathema to those who have convinced themselves that their taste for Old World wine puts them in a cultural category with the celebrities they emulate. When someone spent their youth traveling the American West in an \$80,000 Airstream travel trailer buying “authentic” Navajo rugs between photo sessions at the Grand Canyon and Yellowstone, it’s hard to believe that their purchase of that rug is not doing anything to rectify the human and cultural genocide waged against those vendors’ great-grandparents.

That isn’t to say it’s all roses here in the hinterlands. The state has a keen taste for austerity, as one would expect from a right-wing legislature. They are outright hostile to us as an institution at times. I do have to organize my lectures carefully to not be seen to be pushing an agenda or doing some sort of indoctrination to my students. But I have found that teaching in a business school provides a sensible starting point for all of these conversations, even in the eyes of the legislature. Our enrollments are up, and to those officials that signals that we are doing a good job. Customer satisfaction and all that. And when the business students go home and report to their nervous parents who have never stepped foot on a college campus, but have heard much negative press, that they aren’t being taught that they are personally responsible for injustice or that their car is somehow responsible for climate change, there is genuine relief. I know; I’ve met some of them. And when their students graduate and can get jobs that afford them the chance to get sick, or retire before their bodies are broken, there is something like hope, which as we know as well as anyone is a scarce commodity these days.

I would never presume to tell any of you, my peers and outright superiors, what you ought to make of any of this, much less do. But, perhaps spare a thought for the right wingers, or the first-generation students from any political background, when advising your students or planning your own moves. There is real, meaningful work to be done in the deep, dark recesses of empire. Or so I tell myself.

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Notes on contributor

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