

On criticality, agency, Consumer Culture Theory and the unpredictable ways one may find oneself in Finland

– A conversation with Eric J. Arnould

Joel Hietanen and Eric J. Arnould

Introduction

Eric J. Arnould is Visiting Professor of Marketing at the Aalto University Business School. He briefly held a social science Chair in the Danish Institute for Advanced Studies (DIAS) at University of Southern Denmark. He has pursued a career in applied social science since 1973, receiving a PhD in anthropology from the University of Arizona in 1982. Aalto University awarded him an honorary doctorate in 2016 that recognized his work in codifying the field of consumer culture theory and in bringing ethnography work into academic marketing research. Early ethnographic research in Benin in 1970 and in Niger in 1977-1980 inspired his approach to contemporary market mediated society. Eric's research on consumer culture, cultural marketing strategy, services marketing and marketing and development appears in over 90 articles and chapters in major social science and managerial periodicals and books. Current interests include sustainable business practice both in east Africa and Europe, sustainable consumption, collective consumer creativity, human branding, visual representations, and digital mobility. With Craig Thompson, he recently co-edited a text for Sage Publications, Consumer Culture Theory.



Photograph: Joel Hietanen

Joel Hietanen: You were one of the founders of what became known as the CCT field in marketing and consumer research. How do you feel about this 'academic project' today? What are the biggest challenges of our field theoretically and politically?

Eric J. Arnould: As I have said before with my friend and colleague Craig Thompson, the original project (see Arnould and Thompson, 2005, 2007) had specific goals. Those goals have been partly met, but also some of them have met defeat. The goal of trying to legitimate non-economistic and to supersede psychologist thinking about consumption phenomena, and trying to gravitate toward a program of diverse theoretical and methodological inquiry within the dominant episteme of the day that is not the domain of business studies but of social science – that project was relatively successful. The institutional project to create a beachhead in particular in the North American context for this kind of theoretical and methodological eclecticism and bringing in a critical component has been far less successful due to the political and economic realities of business schools in the US. This was not necessarily the project that was required in the Europe at the time we initiated it. In a kind of ironic way, as we see neoliberalism becoming more prominent in academia in Europe, perhaps that critical project is more pertinent. Now, in terms of the theoretical and political issues, well the biggest challenge is to avoid theoretical hegemony and stasis and insist on the importance of continuing theoretical conversations, to avoid theoretical stultification, especially in the reality of how capitalism works is to eat everything and turn it into a profit center. So, it's kind of this Cartesian maneuvering to escape being institutionalized and domesticated. Politically, I think, consumer culture theory would do well to find ways to intervene more directly in political discourse.

JH: How on earth did you end up here in Helsinki? Any thoughts on your role in Finland and the Finnish consumption context in general?

EA: Throughout my professional life I've been a bit of a global nomad. As cultural anthropologists we are trained to be culturally omnivorous, and indeed this omnivorousness is what drives inductive theorization both within and across particular cultural contexts. So, I started working in West Africa and then North America, and subsequently I worked in Europe. Most recently I was working in Denmark on producing an educational program in marketing and management of anthropology in the University of Southern Denmark. We did that for three years and got as far as we could get with that project. I started looking out for other opportunities. Serendipitously, I was invited to give a talk at Aalto University School of Business, and then, a year later, I was incredibly honored with an honorary doctorate from there, and then of course we had the CCT conference in Helsinki. It became increasingly interesting for me to see what's going on in Finland. Since I had no particular ties 'or why not to', I just said, 'let me go see there what it is', which is something I've tended to do during the course of my life. Aalto has proven to be an excellent university with great colleagues and an excellent vantage point in Finnish society. The things that are particularly

interesting in Finnish culture, for example, are the intensity of the commitment to experiences of nature for people. Like having a summer house in the countryside with a sauna at the lakeshore if possible, and the deliberate form of consumption practices around that is what is interesting to me because it is not very similar in Denmark or Sweden. Consumer rituals are distinctive in Finland. People take birthday parties seriously, they dress up, they give speeches. I was also struck by the seriousness of the formality of many such occasions. I was shocked by them. There are dress shops around Helsinki filled with formal gowns for people wearing them in certain kinds of formal dances, and tail coats are also used in various formal occasions. This preservation of a certain type of formal consumption practice, and also other calendrical rituals that were not familiar to me, all sorts of ritualized activities I was not aware of are strongly marked in Finnish culture, that's interesting to me.

JH: Agency and the possibility of resistance, individual and collective, has been a staple of CCT theorizing. What has your role been in developing these notions? What is your current outlook on them?

EA: This is a complicated question because I think the answer is very contextually conditioned. At one level, the initial idea of the CCT project was to assert an agency of consumers relative to two discourses. The first was the behaviorist discourse in consumer psychology, which says that if you stimulate consumers with this and that and the other thing, then you can predict and control their behavior, which was clearly the aim of mid-century business practice. The second was the critical theory discourse coming from the Frankfurt School, which says that consumers are dupes living in a degraded culture imposed by commercial forces. So, the initial attempt was to say, hang on a second, people do a lot of interesting stuff, they are neither so easily manipulated, nor so uncreative in their consumption practices, to make sense of self, to make sense of others and so forth. Then of course if we take this to a more sophisticated theoretical level, now we're dealing with things like the structure/agency debate in social theory, and there I've come to a couple of conclusions: first a naïve view of agency which equates it with some sort of Nietzschean super-human freedom is an impoverished and a-social view of human beings, and not just humans but all agents, all active agents that are qualified by their circumstances. To have agency means to be socially qualified to have agency, so you can't escape that, I don't believe. Now, then again, it may well be the case that the structures of the capitalist enterprise are such that whatever agency we have is reduced to making decision between various consumer goods, so what kind of agency is that, the freedom not to choose, to not be a consumer is just not on the cards. So, you could say we are indeed all just dupes of the system, but I'm also inspired by De Certeau, by Marx and our friends Deleuze and Guattari, and I would say that systems are never totalizing and that there is always room to maneuver. It's not room to maneuver any which way, and Marx's notion of people making their own history, just not in the terms they would like is apropos here. I do think there are spaces of agentic action, there are times when systems are deterritorialized and through desire they can be reconfigured,

but that does not diminish, on yet another level, that all of those activities do not seem to have had any effect on the globalization and intensification of capitalism as a practice.

JH: Recently, notions of 'liquidity' of various kinds have recently been gaining ground in CCT. While these ideas emanate from a range of theorizations, they all seem to point towards impermanence and ephemerality of social ties and relations in technocapitalist markets. Yet, at the same time, work on communities is soldering on. Is there a contradiction here, or perhaps, is it even possible to talk about communities at all, as Zwick and Bradshaw (2016) recently suggested in the context of online sociality?

EA: Well, I think the term 'liquidity' is a really poor slogan for precarity. What I think could be said to characterize the ambient situation is one of precariousness, one where fixity is constantly threatened, and the liquidity argument seems to be, from my reading – seems to be a bit 'jolly'. I think precarity is a more correct characterization of what it is that towards which capitalism is tending, which is to render all relations temporary, that is to extract value and then move on. Relations have value in capitalism only to the extent that exchange-value can be realized. Once exchange-value can no longer be realized, you throw it away like an empty melon husk, and I think that is what the issue really is. And as examples you can see it in things like the gig economy or outsourcing. These are just ways of intensifying accumulation, and I tell you what's not liquifying, which are the centers of global finance capital, quite the contrary.

JH: The axiom of capital itself?

EA: Indeed, the axiom of capital itself. So, at the margins I'm sure there are people who enjoy this or that kind of liquidity, but if we think of the vast numbers of people who are forced to move by climate change or the lack of economic opportunity or economically-based warfare. That's liquidity, but it certainly isn't this 'jolly' form of liquidity, in fact it's precarity. So, on the other hand the issue of community, there's two sides to that. On one side I think there is a kind of optimistic notion that this or that brings people together and affords people the opportunity to connect to one another. And since human beings, I think, are genetically speaking social beings predisposed to cooperation, it's not surprising that forms of relationality pop up all over the place. So, call it what you like, I think relationality is hard to escape, but I do take Zwick and Bradshaw's point that market capitalism is happy to embrace anything where there is an opportunity to extract surplus value. So, if we have gardening communities, Nutella brand communities, Twitter communities on Louis Vuitton or whatever – for capitalism it's great as long as there is economic value there.

JH: I think one of Zwick and Bradshaw's core points is that there is almost a desperate managerial need to construct the notion of the community in the online spheres. It's a need to believe they are there to solve the contradiction in their

practice, which is that they can only properly market if they exploit and a community 'in the wilderness' can only exist if it is not exploited by marketing efforts.

EA: I like that just fine, and I've written similarly on the idea of the consumer as something managers desperately need to believe in and this is the whole purpose of large sections of the market research world, which is to create convenient fictions that are reassuring to management.

JH: Some time ago, I addressed the CCT crowd in a panel on non-representational thinking from a Deleuzoguattarian perspective. A long-time member of the field commented from the audience that CCT has been fighting for humanism since its inception – putting the meaning-makings and experiences of the consumer first rather than subjecting them to quantified approaches. From this perspective he found my 'non-humanist' desire approach objectionable (see Hietanen and Andéhn, 2017; Hietanen et al., 2019). Yet, CCT has also been equally criticized for its overtly human-centered focus, including its tendency for methodological individualism and its belief in the agency and cognitive sense-making powers of the consumer (e.g., Askegaard and Linnet, 2011; Thompson et al., 2013). How do you see the tension between these approaches?

EA: I think this goes back to the success of the project in the sense that there is space for conflicting ideologies. For me, if there is an audience that denounces the speakers on a platform, I think that is great because that's exactly what we want. We want, or at least I want critical self-reflexivity. It's the only way to avoid complacency and stagnation. 'The same, same, always the same', as Luce Irigaray says. If you're trying to rescue humanity from behaviorism or economic determinism, or these days genetic determinisms such as neuroscience – then 'right on' for the critique from the audience. But, if you're trying to defend a human-centric ontology, then I'm like 'you better sit down', because our ecological crisis tells us that we need to perhaps rethink our inclinations to these human-centered ontologies. We need to think that there are other selves and other subjects out there acting in the world, and who gave us the right to dominate the platform. I think these posthumanist ontologies and epistemologies are salutary and positive efforts to break with practically the entire history of Western philosophy. And here again, we find weird connections to Eastern philosophical positions, and I think this is a positive tendency. We need to bring in all the 'madness' we can in order to ultimately make some sense, paradoxically, but of course not with any sort of finality, rather some sort of contingent sensemaking. I guess you will always find these human-centered tendencies, for example on the commercial side in social marketing and social entrepreneurship that attempt to marry pro-sociality with capitalist logics which is problematic to say the least. And, in CCT, you see some of it in the macromarketing group and certainly in the transformative consumer research group, where we have people who are really committed to a humanist notion. As you said, it is important to recognize these are ideological positions that are linked to ontologies and epistemologies. We can see

how people get committed to these things and some people have the need for more ontological certainty than others, inhabiting a position of ontological ambiguity and doubt is not for everybody.

JH: Lately I've been thinking a lot about various 'silences' in our field. It occurred to me that the work of various critical French scholars has not seen a great deal of interest in CCT. For example, Baudrillard has created an entire critical paradigm of assessing the excesses of consumption. Why do you think he of all people has been generally neglected in the field to a great extent?

EA: I think Baudrillard comes represented, when he does, as someone who understood that products have meaning and meanings circulate, and that the system of objects is the system of object meanings, which is his PhD dissertation and one other book. The rest of his corpus has been ignored. Of course, the part you are mostly referencing to, 'seduction, desire, waste', links him to Bataille, another ignored critical scholar, and his theory about how waste is the driving force of the economy.

JH: Like Baudrillard's somewhat controversial idea that 'there has never been a society of scarcity'?

EA: Right, there never was a society of scarcity, that's exactly right. We live in a society of scarcity only because that is the condition of the reproduction of capitalism, the idea to produce scarcity. Anyway, I was going to bring up De Sade here, because we just had a very well received paper in our major journal on 'Tough Mudder' and the consumption of pain (see Scott, Cayla and Cova, 2017), and I pretty much guarantee you that that article makes no use of Marquis De Sade, and if there was anyone who was sort of a founder of thinking about pain as desire it was him. So how did that happen? Well, I think that as an example, 'seduction' is a very threatening topic, because it threatens the priority of the human agent. 'Waste' is threatening because it interrupts our notions about, well here in the Nordics a kind of Lutheran tidiness problem. Again, whether we are talking about Adam Smith, the mercantilists, Karl Marx or the neoliberalists, production and productivity are fetishized notions in our field as well. Talking about 'waste' is a kind of notion where people go, 'surely you can't be serious', it's not imaginable. So, I think you're bringing up people whose ideas are just too problematic, but we could also mention Lacan, who has had plenty of play in the humanities but are almost absent in our field (see Gabriel, 2015; Lambert, 2018, for notable exceptions).

JH: The reason I bring up the 'there has never been a society of scarcity' notion is that I uttered it some time ago in a room full of consumer researcher scholars and I felt like they all looked at me in disgust, immediately thinking that what I meant was connected to not caring about unprivileged or precarious people.

EA: Oh, I see. Well I mean that Baudrillard was absolutely right. Scarcity is an

economic and social construction. If we look at societies of the past, and elsewhere, they may have been technologically different and materially less well provisioned, but it would not be correct to say they lived in a situation of scarcity or even of poverty which are socially constructed phenomena. And there are many other examples. We are only beginning to see attention to postcolonial scholarship and that again is going to discomfort some people but will add to the richness of the conversation in our field.

JH: Even more so, culturally-oriented consumer research has been called out for its implicit neoliberalism and its general lack of criticality (see Askegaard and Linnet, 2011; Fitchett et al., 2014; Thompson et al., 2013). How do you see this now?

EA: I think this critique reflects on the increase in communication among a global community of scholars who feel there is a discussion worth having. I think in North America it's quite true that what the British scholars like to call the critical perspective, or the more overtly Marxist perspective, which is a distinct feature of the UK academic landscape, is not a distinctive feature of the North American landscape. If they say you have not been critical enough, yes, there's no doubt about it. It is not the same institutional context. But then when they say that CCT is not critical enough or is too neoliberal, I say 'bring on the critique', lets identify the neoliberal biases in our theorizing, or the cultural biases as well. North Americans tend to be more pragmatic perhaps, and as our friends Bernard and Veronique Cova has brought to our attention, a strong individual subjectivity is not the way Latins think about things (see Cova and Cova, 2002). And, of course, here in the Nordic countries where we have strong social democracies and a very powerful role of the state – clearly North American CCT has completely neglected the state as an arbiter of consumption. This is why we need the Nordic CCT group to look at this. So, yes, the critique is valid and there are reasons for the problem, and it's good to have these debates.

JH: Then again, I have been recently thinking about writing a sort of 'state of the field' article on a recent explosion of deeply critical articles that go far further than the original notion of 'Critical Marketing' with much more primordial ontological negativity or a sort of primordial pessimism that I think Ray Brassier (2010) was alluding to when he called for more 'powers of the negative' in the way we do critique. This of course probably has a lot to do with the general atmosphere of late capitalism where its utopian promises are increasingly becoming under suspicion even in the popular press.

EA: What I like about that comment is that it reminds me of the book in the 90's by Firat, Dholakia and Bagozzi (1987) on critical and philosophical reflections in marketing, which directly ties to this. So, there is a tendency where critical moments have been happening in both marketing and culturally oriented consumer research, which tend to get lost precisely due to the logics of capitalist institutions. These things sort of appear and then get marginalized. Why aren't these guys receiving awards from the American Marketing Association, well there is a good

reason for that.

JH: It is also sometimes muttered that CCT has become strongly around a few individuals and their work. Does the field have an inclination towards 'hero-worship'? Do you see a problem here?

EA: My response to that is that this is a sociological phenomenon of the present. It's part of the cult of celebritization, a part of the cult of fame. It's one of the ways in which society works, that is people expect there to be celebrities in particular fields and they follow and affiliate or disfollow and disaffiliate from them. You see it in every damn field of activity out there. We have celebrity CEOs, how and when did that start happening? They used to be faceless bureaucrats. The fashion model that was a 'blank slate' has changed to an influencer with millions of Facebook followers. So, I say, if there is a tendency in CCT to celebritize certain people, show me a field where this is not the case. It is not a critique of CCT but a more general societal critique. What is that linked to? It's linked again to the logic of capitalism, which is 'how do you get promoted', 'how do you get more rewards', 'how many publications do you have in top-rated journals', whatever it is. You have to become an entrepreneur, and so that is what is incentivized. It's absurd and grotesque, but it is not just a CCT problem. What I'm sorry about is that CCT has become institutionalized to the point where we are a field where this can manifest itself, because that is not my interest.

JH: If you could change one thing in the field, what would it be?

EA: I guess if I could wave a magic wand, what I would most like would be that policy makers and people in the industry would take culture seriously, that they would build culture into decision-making. We need cultural artificial intelligence [laughs]. If we want to solve problems facing humanity at a global scale, we need a cultural understanding of these problems, we need a posthuman anthropology. That would be what I'd like to see.

JH: Where are you going next, what do you find most promising?

EA: I've been an applied social scientist since 1973, and my first job since I graduated from the university was to be an applied social scientist and I've been doing it ever since. I think one super interesting problem, which also has reverberations in Finland, is issues that have to do with human mobility. How do we deal with immigration – it's not going away. How do we deal with tourism – it's not going away. Another thing is how do we deal with inequality of aspiration without completely destroying human civilization. People should not live in misery, and it is the economy of scarcity that we have produced that is an abomination. We need entirely different models of the economy, we need circular economic models. We need to figure out how to live as if we were a tropical rainforest or a coral reef where there is no waste, there are no new resources, and everything is recycled, reused and repurposed. Otherwise we are basically screwed as human beings.

That's ok too, it does not matter to the planet, but as human beings those are issues that are interesting to work on. Of course, we need to also deal with all fantastical and utopian ideas about digital technology. Personally, I think we need a neo-animist ontology which also entails a neo-animist relationality and collectivity. My view is that that's something well worth working on as an intellectual project.

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Author information

Joel Hietanen is Associate Professor at Centre for Consumer Society Research, University of Helsinki. His interests include the seduction of authenticity, the dark side of desire in consumption and videography as a research method from the perspective of Deleuze+Guattari and French poststructuralism in general. Email joel.hietanen@helsinki.fi

Eric J. Arnould, Professor, Department of Marketing, Aalto University School of Business, Espoo, Finland, Email eric.arnould@aalto.fi