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# "Our Marketing Is Our Goodness": Earnest marketing in dissenting organizations

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## Abstract

In times of erosion and dissolution of social structures and institutions, described by Zygmunt Bauman (2012) as the interregnum, there arises both a need and a possibility of developing alternative approaches to the most fundamental organizational practices. Marketing, a simultaneously tremendously successful and much criticized subdiscipline and practice, is a prime candidate for such a redefinition. Potential prefigurations of future processes of organizing and institutionalizing can be found within dissenting organizations (Daskalaki, 2018), the alternative organizations built at the fringes of, and in opposition to, the mainstream businesses (Parker, Cheney, Fournier and Land, 2014). In this paper, we present an exploration of the alternative yet already enacted practice we call earnest marketing. Drawing on an ethnographic study of a number of dissenting organizations in the United Kingdom and Poland, we focus on the radical reconstitution of marketing evidenced in their practice, defined by an attitude of earnestness and dedication to the dissemination and demonstration of their self-defined goodness: ideas and values. As organizations engage in earnest marketing, they also become receptive to reciprocal messages from their environments. We conclude by reflecting on the possibilities of a dissenting management model developing the principles of earnest marketing beyond disciplinary confines.

## Keywords

modest marketing, earnest marketing, dissenting organizations, alternative organizations, goodness

## Introduction

Our times are characterized by a continuing and definitive erosion and dissolution of social structures and institutions, which, using the metaphor coined by Antonio Gramsci, can be described as the interregnum, a time on the edge in between working systems:

The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear (Gramsci, 2005, p. 276).

Zygmunt Bauman, who reintroduced the metaphor to describe our current situation, argued that the notion encompasses ever more aspects of contemporary lives, as we find ourselves in an increasingly indeterminate setting for

a time-span of yet unknown length, stretching between a social setting which has run its course and another, as yet under-defined and most certainly under-determined, which we expect or suspect to replace it (Zygmunt Bauman in Bauman, Bauman, Kociatkiewicz and Kostera, 2015, p. 17).

For Bauman, this period, though transitory, combines with the concentration of power and wealth, and with the lethal and uncontrollable dynamics of the late capitalist society to pose a real and unprecedented threat to the survival of humanity and the whole planet. Old social institutions have ceased to function in the taken for granted fashion that defines them, and no new ones have replaced them yet; it is a state of “multi-morbidity” and a prolonged social entropy, in Wolfgang Streeck’s (2016a) words. He describes the interregnum as the

breakdown of macro-level system integration, depriving individuals at the micro-level of institutional structuring and collective support and shifting the burden of ordering social life, of providing it with a modicum of security and stability, to individual actors and such social arrangements as they can improvise on their own (Streeck, 2016b, p. 69).

The de-institutionalised or under-institutionalised society that results is “essentially ungovernable” (ibid.). This is not to say that all previous modes of activity, or indeed of organizing, have suddenly lost all power, but they have, gradually rather than suddenly, lost their justification, leaving societies with no mode of social integration stronger than the instrumental rationality of individualized and uncooperative social

actors. Consequently, we find ourselves in a global society enacting what Chris Harman (2009) described as zombie capitalism: a global system that still carries force and momentum, and thus continues to affect individuals, organizations, and their relations, but which has lost most of its rationale or appeal.

As a result, we live in a culture distinctly suffused with an aura of uncertainty, insecurity, fear and hopelessness, coupled with a widespread cynicism “ruling out a recovery of normative legitimacy for capitalism as a just society” (Streeck, 2016b, p. 70). On the organizational scale, burnt-out and alienated dead men working (Cederström & Fleming, 2012) undertake unpleasant and pointless bullshit jobs (Graeber, 2018) under increasingly precarious conditions (Standing, 2011).

Such hopelessness leads to desperate search for quick solutions, and fuels nostalgia for an imagined, orderly and institutional past. Bauman (2017) calls this tendency the retrotopia, a utopia without a vision for the future. But the clock cannot be turned back and the imagined past had never existed. It is a false hope that promises a deceptive and never fulfilled sense of safety and meaning. Meanwhile, as time and resources are being devoted to retrotopian gestures, structural problems and sources of discontent remain unaddressed: inequality continues to grow, large parts of human population languish in poverty, and the systemic destruction of the biosphere proceeds unabated.

Yet there are other possibilities, and this text is an attempt to find them. Through a longitudinal, ethnographic study of dissenting organizations, that is organizations consciously aiming to create an alternative to the dominant liquid modern forms of organizing, we look for practices which might be helpful in creating sustainable sites of disalienation. In this text, we focus on ways of redefining, through practice, probably the most visible aspect of contemporary management: that of marketing. The task of building alternatives is not an easy one. The global dynamics are strongly dissipative and, argues Wolfgang Streeck (2016a), are bound to bring the end of capitalism without the need for any revolutionary action on the side of its opponents. However, the social, political, ecological and also economic cost of this process is gigantic and may even turn out to be lethal for the majority of human and nonhuman population of the planet (Klein, 2014).

No actions or remedies devised and undertaken within the dominant system are able to address the problems we face, only to exacerbate the crisis with partial and misguided solutions. Yet there is no new non-capitalist system waiting to replace it, or emerging steadily on its margins (Streeck, 2016a).

## Dissenting organizing, dissenting management?

This is the basis for what we see as the necessity of dissent, understood as an active search for discourses and practices that might constitute a counterweight to the prevailing systemic nihilism, by means of consciousness and critical awareness, is absolutely crucial. We agree with Streeck that, in an interregnum, there are no guarantees that anything constructive will crystallize, but that it is nonetheless vital to deflect the "there is no alternative" rhetoric of the failing system, to experiment with new ideas, to try them out and, most importantly of all, to stay alert. The direction applies to all aspects of social life, but perhaps most importantly to business and management activities, given their prominence in the contemporary world. By alertness we mean not just a state of mind or a reflexive intellectual discourse, but a questioning and inquisitive organizing principle, to be adopted in the search for new radical approaches to management in all its aspects, including marketing.

Our interest in organizations expressing and embodying dissent with neoliberal capitalism is part of a currently growing attention among scholars about alternative organizations, looking for positive propositions that go beyond criticising the status quo. Parker et al. (2007) point out that while organizing/organization refers to broader patterns of activity and institutionalisation, "open to decisions and choices" (p. x), the focus of the current mainstream business studies tends to be very narrow, almost identifying the term as business corporation. The authors suggest that this narrowing down of the scope of study is due to ideological, rather than epistemological, reasons, and propose to actively use alternative examples to extend our knowledge and practical possibilities to organize ourselves. Wright (2010) proposes the idea of real utopias: workable and actively existing modes of organizing alternative to capitalism, from social capitalism to direct empowered worker participation. Parker's (2011) Alternative

Business considers reports of organizations both historical and legendary that embody (often violent) dissent, and offers them as inspirations for theorizing and organizational practice which steps outside of the current limited mainstream; his book examines a wide variety of such sources ranging from pirates to the legend of Robin Hood to characters from the Wild West. Parker et al. (2014) also present a number of perspectives, ideas, frameworks, examples and resources, alternative to the dominant orthodoxy of economic growth, capitalism, and marketization, while Gibson-Graham et al. (2013) offer a guide for reframing the economy by means of alternative organizations: business, market, property, and finance. Reedy et al. (2016) argue that alternative organizing may broaden the understanding of organizing and help to acquire a new way of social life. Bauman et al. (2015) maintain that these currently marginal organizations have a radical potential of paving the way towards a new working system of social institutions beyond capitalism.

## Marketing as a site for dissensus

Marketing as a discipline is flourishing: it is one of the most popular study topics in business schools and management departments, themselves the biggest units in many, if not most, contemporary universities. It has established itself firmly as a significant area of organizational activity and as a respectable academic discipline, and marketing education flourishes globally. New books and articles are being published both in academic and popular press, and marketing departments are seen as indispensable units within any developed organizational structure.

At the same time, social perception of the utility of marketing remains quite low and, within academia, marketing (as both a body of knowledge and as practice) has been criticized as failing to produce any useful knowledge (Grønhaug, 2002) while contributing to overconsumption (Abela, 2006; Biehl-Missal and Saren, 2012). The very issue of marketing ethics has been branded as contentious (Gaski, 1999; Smith, 2001), while a burgeoning field of critical marketing studies has developed examining the interplay between marketing knowledge, practice, and the wider society (Saren et al., 2007; Tadajewski and Brownlie, 2008). The worldwide public largely perceives marketing

(and marketers) as useless at best and duplicitous at worst, and critical evaluations of the societal role of marketing practices (and, more generally, consumption-orientation of contemporary societies) abound not only in academic literature but also in popular publications (Boorman, 2007; Klein, 1999). The attempts by marketing evangelists to propagate wider appreciation of the contribution the discipline makes to society (e.g. Chevalier and Mazzalovo, 2004) have met with limited success at best.

One proposed explanation is that marketing should be as both a set of contextually effective social practices and as an ideology advocating the deployment of such practices. It is, thus, a toolset that has proven successful, but only within a narrowly defined set of goals that seem increasingly divorced from the wellbeing of the society (Fineman, 1999). Such goals comprise of competitive engagement of consumer attention and desires that culminate in what is perceived as market exchange (ranging from purchase of a product to charitable donation to adoption of political ideology). They disregard questions of wider social desirability of fostering such engagement and the simplification necessary to (mis)represent social interaction as market engagements. In that regard, “marketing is revealed as profoundly value laden and, if we are to take the critiques seriously, morally twisted” (Fineman, 1999, p. 183). At the same time, it is possible to take a much wider, and potentially much more favourable, view of marketing: as an alluring activity whose allure can neither be traced to, nor confused with, its efficacy in stoking consumer activity. Whether we follow Franck Cochoy (2016) in his explorations of marketing as anchored in curiosity, or Deleuze and Guattari (2004) in their positing of desire as a primal productive force of human society, we are bound to agree that impulses and practices involved in and constitutive of, even if not necessarily confined to marketing activities are deeply intertwined with social life and the human condition.

Many of these practices coming under the general umbrella of marketing have been, over the past two decades, the subject of a significant number of ethnographic investigations. Most of such studies have been focused on consumption and consumer research (Rocha and Barros, 2006; Valtonen et al., 2010), and have contributed a rich body of understanding phenomena ranging from brand communities (Schembri, 2009) to everyday shopping practices

(Miller, 1998) to experiences of automobile insurance (Israel, 2005). Significantly less attention has been given to ethnographic studies of the work of marketers (Zwick and Bradshaw, 2016, explain the dominant focus by the still very strong link between academic work in the discipline of marketing and commercial interests of business practitioners), though several notable ethnographic studies reported on the practices of advertising agencies (Jacobi et al., 2014; Mazzarella, 2003) and marketing professionals (Nilsson, 2015). The few notable ethnographies exploring marketing as an organizational function include the slightly dated but wide-ranging study of marketing departments in various businesses by Prus (1989) and Lien’s (1997) research covering the changing context of marketing in a large food manufacturing corporation. Ellis and Ybema (2010) have explored marketers’ self-identities in an interview-based study that carries many hallmarks of ethnographic approach. Our study, however, offers an examination of a different kind of marketing: we study how it is practiced in organizations whose active engagement in building and implementing management practices sets them apart from the mainstream capitalist model; we call them dissenting organizations.

We are aware that we have so far not defined our understanding of the term marketing. This is driven not just by our realization that “it is far less simple to define marketing practice than many of marketing’s stakeholders would have us believe” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 109). We also believe that, as with any changing complex social activity, any attempts to provide an etic definition are bound to end up restrictive and run counter to the exploratory research aims. Thus, throughout the field study, the term marketing was never introduced by us, but always discussed only in response to its introduction by the interviewee(s). It is a testament to the prevalence of business terminology in describing organizational activities that study participants referred to their activities as marketing sufficiently often to prompt us to write this paper.

We understand marketing as both a morally questionable, if microeconomically successful toolkit of business or businesslike concepts and practices (Ellis et al., 2011), and as a label focusing a wider set of human activities escaping single moral evaluation. Yet to engage with the latter while avoiding the colonizing logic of the business school discourse of mainstream marketing presents a challenge, one requiring the establishment of

both dissenting practices and dissenting discourse: new ways of doing marketing, and a redefinition of marketing that translates established practices of contemporary capitalism of the interregnum into a repertoire available for appropriation in alternative forms of organizing.

Aware of the problem, numerous researchers (Brownlie, 1997; Brown, 2005) explored ways of writing marketing (and writing about marketing) in forms that avoid the ethically dubious underpinning of marketing-considered-as-a-toolset. Their answers, in line with parallel investigations of management research as a textual practice (Kociatkiewicz and Kostera, 2016; Rhodes, 2019), tend to point towards the need for greater awareness towards invoked genres, and to the possibilities of harnessing other extant plots and genres for emancipatory and participatory reformulations of marketing. Our investigation, however, is empirical rather than conceptual: through studying marketing in dissenting organizations we seek tentative answers to the question of how marketing practices and ideas can work for organizations that focus on building relationships with their environment, on sustainability, and responsibility rather than financial gain or market growth? On the basis of these investigations, we aim to build a tentative model of a morally palatable marketing practice.

## Method

The fieldwork core of this text reports on an ongoing ethnographic field study, conducted by one of the authors since 2012 in Poland and the United Kingdom. The study focuses on dissenting organizations, ones where shared values are professed by participants as the main drivers for creating, participating in, and shaping the organizations (Bornstein, 2004). They encompass a variety of organizational and ownership types (informal, social, cooperative, and privately run) as well as different fields of operations, from kindergarten to meetings venue to retail store to restaurant. Despite their heterogeneity, these organizations share a significant commonality: their members consciously try to build an alternative to the dominant model of business management, one which is disalienating, sustainable, and moral. While the field study encompasses all aspects of these organizations' existence, in this article we focus on marketing as perceived and practiced by their members. While the term marketing is commonly used

in many of the studied organizations, the translation, understanding, and expression of this concept is, in our reading, sufficiently dissenting from the mainstream status quo to justify our interest and to constitute a worthwhile contribution to knowledge in the field of organizational dissensus.

Our research follows the ethnographic tradition of studying organizing and organizations (Czarniawska, 2014; Van Maanen, 1988; Watson, 2011), and we adopt a narrative and interpretive perspective (Czarniawska, 2004) in order to gain an understanding of social processes in their cultural context (Kostera, 2007; Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012). We focus on local knowledge and how it is constructed, rather than on seeking general definitions (Yanow, 2000; Watson, 1997). We are using ethnography as a rigorous methodology focusing on processes of organizing (Gaggiotti et al., 2017; Watson, 2011), based on prolonged and intensive immersion in the field (Rosen, 2000).

For ethnography, as the etymology of its label suggests, writing is a central concern: any study report represents an interpretation and a translation, as well as an active and rhetorical choice of style framing the studied field (Behar, 1996; Wolf, 1992). Timothy Pachirat (2018) presents an approach to ethnography which is unapologetically dissenting with the current canons of how to do and write social science. He builds on the drama inherent in his study to present it in the form of a seven act play. While apparently radical, his approach follows the traditions and customs of ethnographers throughout the last century, as well as Bent Flyvbjerg's (2001) call for a social science that matters, one which does not seek to emulate natural sciences but instead focuses on what is important for us humans and our societies (and organizations).

It is thus our conscious choice to mirror the object of our study in our approach and use of methods and of writing: they are a deliberate expression of our own dissent toward what we perceive as some of the morbid symptoms of the interregnum in academia. For we agree with Mats Alvesson, Yiannis Gabriel and Roland Paulsen (2017) that much contemporary social science writing is devoid of meaning, stylistically formulaic and intellectually sterile. To us this is yet another one of the morbid symptoms of the dying system. We believe that

choice of the writing style also can serve as an act of dissent.

Ethnography depends on serendipity and wonder; it is a method that requires an ability to respect ambiguity and is able to bring forward research that in itself is ambiguous, complex, and elusive. As a methodology and an academic genre it thrives only when its practitioners are able to resist linearity and the mind-frame focused on simplified procedures and prescriptions. Uncertainty and reflexivity are part and parcel of ethnographic method and need to be cherished, as they help to produce studies of the social world that are rich with context and meaning. The ethnographer, as personal and as messy as she or he is, human and embodied, is a necessary part of the method. No ethnographic research without his or her presence makes sense. The messiness, vagueness and elusiveness are not side effects of ethnography, but its living soul. Ethnography is either personal or dead.

The research project comprises two stages, of which the second is still ongoing. During the first, extensive observations and interviews were done in Polish alternative work organizations, including various organizational types, from informal, via social, cooperative to privately run business, and engaged in different kinds of operations, from hostel, via kindergarten, games workshop to running a bar or restaurant. During the second stage similar organizations located in the North of England were added. All of the organizations were selected based on a snowball technique: during the research process key actors were identified and recommended from within the field (Kostera, 2007). Currently the number of studied organizations is 35: 18 based in the United Kingdom and 16 in Poland, of which 12 were selected for intensive and ongoing ethnographic contact. While choice of the two countries was dictated largely by the ease of access, they represent settings sufficiently different to allow for about as much organizational heterogeneity as one could hope to cover in a single research project.

The study employs the full range of ethnographic methods, mainly in-depth recurrent interviews (Czarniawska, 2014; Kostera, 2007) with a limited number of contact persons from each organization, formalized during the first years and currently

increasingly including informal and with a larger number of participants. The second key method as observation, initially mainly direct, i.e. observing the participants at work for prolonged periods of time (Rosen, 2000), and as the study progressed including also intensive shadowing (Czarniawska, 2008) and participant observation (Kostera, 2007). To date, 110 formal transcribed interviews have been carried out, a large number of informal (unrecorded) interviews and conversations, as well as 131 longer immersive observations and 50 shorter observations. Among the themes we identified in the initial coding of the collected material, marketing drew our particular attention: the term's context tended to diverge from textbook renditions of marketing practice.<sup>1</sup> This led to raising the subject in some of the subsequent interviews, and to re-analysing of the material specifically in regards to the notion of marketing; this analysis forms the empirical basis of our text. Both authors took active part in the reading and interpretation of the field material. As in all reporting of research, the totality of our understanding of the studied organizations informs our writing, but for presentation in this article, we have selected the quotes most succinctly describing the idiosyncratic approaches to marketing observed and reported in the studied dissenting organizations. The method of selection was similar to what Yiannis Gabriel (2014) calls the "beachcombing" approach to ethnographic material, selecting pertinent, rather than exhaustive, evidence. This allows us to present thicker, more contextualized descriptions of the topic of interest, while decreasing the amount of presented material.

Our text, like ethnography, is personal. It is also co-authored, which creates some distance which we find helpful in practicing ethnography as a reflective approach. One of us conducted the entire fieldwork, but throughout the duration of the study we continually discussed observations, transcripts, and impressions. In writing up the experiences, we do not challenge any grand generic conventions, but we insist on ethnography understood as involving both presence and reflection. In this text we mesh the perspectives of two different authors in different relations to the field. Yet, through sharing experiences, discussing interpretations, writing and rewriting the text, we have come to the point where these two perspectives merge into the authorial 'we' which we use throughout the article.

Writing about it is messy, embodied, leaky and dirty process, and the resulting texts as harmed by overemphasis on cleanliness and rigid rules of style (Pullen, 2018) and dissent, in order to be valid for others, needs to be personal (see e.g. Höpfl, 2000). Like Heather Höpfl, we believe in academic writing on ethnographic and experiential research depends on the ability to respect vagueness and ambiguity. Celebrating difference, idiosyncrasy, originality, and experience is crucial for fostering meaningful exploration of complex and difficult topics.

In our analysis, we consistently maintain an emic perspective: we wish to understand the translations and adaptations of the marketing language as it is used within the studied organizations. But language can remain meaningful only when considered within its context (Steiner, 1975), and thus our presentation of the fieldwork remains suffused with interpretations and value judgements carried out from the field, and not necessarily shared by us in other contexts. This is, of course, an inherent issue for any ethnographic study straying from the default perspective of a researcher's institutional background (Behar, 1993), and as no obvious solutions have proven satisfactory, we have decided to leave it to the readers to confront and interpellate the assumptions present in the language we have incorporated from our field study setting. This is a political as well as a scholarly decision: we are certainly familiar with the literature questioning labels (and their negative evaluations) grouping disparate academic texts as mainstream (Visser, 2010) or equating traditional marketing with trickery (Chevalier & Mazzalovo, 2004). We are also confident that most of the business and management literature printed or disseminated online today, as well as most of the courses being taught at universities across the globe, promote marketing as, to quote a relatively recent textbook, "[t]he achievement of corporate goals through meeting and exceeding customer needs and expectations better than the competition" (Fahy and Jobber, 2015, p. 4).

In the following section we focus on marketing as the emic description of dissenting practices in the studied organizations. We believe that its framing and understanding is far enough removed from most marketing and management literature to warrant further reflection, and to provide a possible starting point for theorizing marketing as a non-predatory practice that

can be aligned with sustainable, value-driven forms of organizing.

## Marketing is goodness

"Our marketing... is our goodness. We do good things" (Ania, Green City).

Green City is a vegan restaurant in the centre of Warsaw, much loved by the public and defining itself, in the words of its owners, Roman and Kasia, as reaching out to the hearts of the people by the way of their stomachs. On almost all occasions the owners emphasize how veganism is part of their life and how it is their mission to share the joy it brings them with others. Cooking good food is the best argument, they explained in an interview, much better than lecturing or arguing with people. This dedication was indeed visible throughout the many hours of observation that the ethnographer spent in the place. People seemed to genuinely care about the food and lots of effort was put into building of relationships with customers based on vegan themes. The opening quote of this section comes from an interview with one of the employees, a young and very busy woman, by the way familiar with mainstream notions of marketing. In an interview, the owners expressed a similar view, explaining how doing the right thing and being sincere is their only "marketing strategy"; people, they claimed, see if you are a hypocrite or if you really believe in what you are doing, because food is a kind of truth, you can always tell if it is offered from the heart or not. Interviews with some of Green City's customers confirmed this claim, people emphasized that this was indeed the reason why they enjoyed eating there. One of the interlocutors even claimed that he could tell, on one occasion when Roman was away, that the chef in charge of the kitchen was not "really into this". There had, indeed, been a temporary chef employed for a short period of time, who did not last long in the organization.

The cooperative eco-hostel Rosa has exactly the same approach, as described by Mateusz, one of its employee-owners:

For us it [ecology] is not just a marketing trick, it's marketing alright but it's about something deeper. We live this way; the reason why we got involved was that we wanted to be able to be truthful to stuff that's important for us (Mateusz).



Most prominently, all the studied value-driven organizations rely on word of mouth. Leah, the owner of EcoArt, based in Sri Lanka, speaks for most of the value-driven organizers when she points out that mainstream marketing is too expensive:

Marketing, above all, when I started to sell, that is a word of mouth marketing, because I don't have that kind of money and from the very beginning, I didn't have the money to invest in big marketing like Vogue [...] I don't know if you are aware of it but a sponsored text in [one of such magazines], it's the cost of a small car [...] No, I don't stand a chance [with mainstream marketing]. But I have customers thanks to the quality of what I do and of the service, and they see it's good stuff. It is kind of being passed on. Someone bought my earrings; someone saw my earrings worn by someone else: "please give me the phone number [of the producer]," et cetera. And I go to trade fairs. But that is how it really started – my friends, word of mouth (Leah).

Additionally, the money spent on traditional expensive marketing is not seen as contributing to any good cause, because, as Mateusz from Rosa Hostel explicitly pointed out, and many other interviewees implied, corporations use this kind of promotion to project a false aura, to seduce people into buying things they would not otherwise be interested in. Dissent means, for the alternative organizers, to renounce all guises of falsity and dishonesty and do not wish to be associated with or contribute to deceptive practices. Adam from the Horizon Cooperative explained this through redefining the notion of profit: their key idea of profit is not financial gain but the building of relationships, and true relationships can only be built on honesty and trust. A self-described loyal customer of Green City summed it up succinctly: "This is not just a business, it's how they live" and added: "I trust them, they have never cheated me" (Customer 1). The bar might be set low, but it underlies the widespread distrust towards mainstream business practice.

All the studied organizations use social media extensively, most commonly Facebook but also Twitter and Instagram. Green City maintain a modest Facebook page in addition to handing out flyers at cultural events. They, and other organizers, see social media presence as an extension of word of mouth approach to marketing; studied organizations depend on people telling friends and relations about them. Maria and Ewa of the

ecological marketplace Eco Bazaar describe their social media activities in similar terms:

We have of course Facebook which we see as a platform for communication. Each day we get several questions, comments [from our customers]. And our farmers have the most contact with the customers, and this is most important [...], like the people from Good Ecofarm. They began selling with us last year and they have adapted everything: their farm, their cultivations, to what their customers said. When [the customers] said they wanted a particular kind of lettuce, they set up a greenhouse. Some of the things they are selling, they didn't even know existed before. [...] Also, we adapt what we do to what our customers say, what people say on Facebook and face to face (Maria).

The independent magazine *Liberartem* based in the North of England also relies on relationships meticulously built and maintained, and on social media and flyers as tools for facilitating the building of relationships. A part of their mission is to promote local and independent businesses, so marketing involves simultaneously promoting their customers and themselves:

In terms of marketing advertising services – that's mostly researching businesses and cold calling them or face to face at networking events, although we also have an "advertise here" bit in the mag and do a few posts on Facebook and Twitter asking if people want space. In terms of marketing the magazine as a brand, to the public rather than clients, we mainly use social media. Facebook and Twitter are our biggest ones and we do this through sharing content from the magazine and also from other sources but along the same lines to try and curate an audience that have engaged and interested in art, culture and politics. We've just started an Instagram account as well. We have paid for Facebook promoted posts in the past but only a couple of times as we don't really have a marketing budget. Our marketing expenditure is in my wages really as it's just my time spent on social media and networking (Clara).

Facebook is well liked because of how cheap it is to use, as noted by John of Steel Café, an art and music venue in Northern England:

[I]f we would pay for advertising now that, we had in the past, that is really expensive stuff. You know and that is our target audience. And we still have to think whether it is value for money. Whereas Facebook –

you can reach a lot of people very quickly with only 5 minutes really (John).

Other marketing ideas that are used by these organizations relate directly to their mission, showcasing their value-driven ethos. For example, Eco Bazaar distribute eco-friendly shopping bags among their loyal customers. Every year, before Christmas, they offer their customers an opportunity to exchange electronic waste for an eco-friendly Christmas tree. Eco Bazaar also engage in more traditional promotion campaigns, such as short ads playing in art cinemas, directed at a broader (but potentially interested) public. Finally, they rely on good contacts with the media, where they never pay for advertisements, but hope for "good press", which they, indeed, occasionally receive in the local print and broadcast media. They attend festivals and events in order to build recognition. These include events related to farming and ecology, but also film festivals simply because organization's members like film, and because the idea of starting Eco Bazaar came to them at a film festival several years ago. Inspiration does not have to be topical (and often is not) to exert long-term influence on an organization.

Marketing by the studied dissenting organizations is not limited to promoting their products or brand, but often consists of much broader social communication. The Good Cooperative, running a local store with fresh and cheap vegetables and fruit in the centre of Warsaw, prints its own newsletter in addition to social media and event participation. They distribute the newsletter among members and customers. Apart from information about the products producers, and promotions, it contains invitations to various events, stories about cooperatives, social life and much more. Similarly, Leah from Eco Art explained that she usually posts updates about ecology and social justice instead of promoting her products, because it is much more important. Horizon Cooperative, running a catering service and a bar with cheap vegan slow food in Warsaw city centre, uses all the usual social media and word of mouth marketing techniques, but has also adopted a radical art strategy, using street art as a way of promoting not just their food but vegan and cooperative consciousness. There are obvious similarities to the mainstream conceptualizations of content marketing, yet the motivation is different: in organizations with dissenting marketing practice, promotion of shared

values is seen as a much more important goal than any possible benefit to the organization.

Dissenting marketing can lead to the emergence of more specialized media and organizations explicitly created for that purpose. The collective of anarchist activists, inhabitants of the Squat Federica, organize regular musical and art events and educational workshops (on topic such as IT, sewing, history and practice of anarchism), relying predominantly on word of mouth but also posting notices on various anarchist and independent websites. Jerzy from Federica referred to these information campaigns as the collective's marketing practices. One of the studied organizations, based in the UK, runs just such a website, helping to "publicise DIY alternatives to global capitalism; radical, co-operative, not-for-profit, social and ethical organisations, groups and events with a political focus" (Alt-web).

The following statement by Marianne from Creative Workshop, a collective of young people running a business developing educational games for organizations, sums up the philosophy behind many of the dissenting organizations' approach to marketing:

Marketing is, for me, a story, a bit of a narcissistic story, about ourselves, and the way we develop relationships and collectives of people who play our games. It's, I think, a way to communicate with the world and saying: we are here and we know how to make cooperation happen in a group of people. It is also [...] a story about a tool that they really believe in: games and simulations that change people's minds and how they see themselves in the world and how they see other people. [...] We feel we are the Messiahs of cooperation and [we want to] share the delight we feel. In other words, marketing is, for me, a way to depict the world, also an ego story to a certain degree, a kind of propaganda for one's beliefs, so that someone will be persuaded to believe in them, too (Marianne).

Honesty, belief, relationships coupled with low (or no) financial engagement are the key, so all of the dissenting organizations in our study agree. In the words of Jack, an activist and organizer of musical events from Northern England, whose work included both large and internationally recognized festivals as well as small and local concerts: "because it's best if money is not involved; if it is, then everyone is just looking after money; and, besides, it always gets wasted".

What is truly striking is how the studied organizations, with the possible exception of Eco Bazaar, are almost absent from the mainstream media and discourse, and how utterly marginalized or even non-existent this approach is in management education (for a current critical overview of these discourses, see e.g. Alvesson, 2012; Alvesson and Gabriel, 2016). This is particularly striking when one considers their vitality, vibrancy, and the strong attraction they seem to exert on their customers (this is particularly true of the Polish organizations). Large numbers of customers were present in the retail-oriented organizations during our observations, almost irrespective of the time of day or day of the week. The Polish interviewees declared that their organizations did not have any financial problems. Any additional funds were seen as a means, however, and not an end in itself. They were generally used to safeguard the continued existence of the organization. While some of the UK organizations were struggling a bit more, they were not endangered by closures or cuts; this in itself can, arguably, be regarded as a feat in the current economic climate. So how do people know that these organizations exist and why are they interested? Word of mouth (electronic or otherwise) is certainly a factor. Ania from Green City summed it up as just doing “good”, in their own eyes and in the eyes of the customers. What are these organizations good for?

Challenging the underlying assumptions of harmonious market relationships, goal alignment, and sources of value is necessary for confronting exploitative and predatory structure of contemporary capitalism. But to do so, we need to not only provide opposing, or refuting, argumentation (cf. Parker, 2018, for a suitable overview of the available criticism), but to “act as if change had already taken place” (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1993, p. 20). The people of the alternative organizations we present in this paper engage in such acting. They are not the “unbelievers” of management or, as we show here, specifically of marketing, rather, they are dissenters, in a sense similar to the religious understanding of the term. For example, William Blake was, likewise, as a profoundly spiritual religious dissenter, as well as a revolutionary visionary (Cox, 2002). He came from a dissenting family of London traders, brought up not to show deference to earthly authority. Instead, he was taught to be sincere and earnest in his faith in spiritual values. Blake lived a life which was not dedicated to the pursuits popular in the world of his times: he did not

gain applause for his magnificent art and spent most of his life in poverty, not part of any of the big trends of his times in art, politics or social aspirations. He lived in a way he believed in and was described by people who knew him as something of a saint, blessed by goodness and truth (Raine, 1971).

The organizers we study are neither saints nor geniuses, but they share a sincerity and earnestness that is apparent in the many everyday conversations and actions we have observed, as well as in the proclamations during interviews. In a recent interview, one of the organizers, Gaia from a Warsaw based cooperative grocery shop said the following:

Never, not even for a moment, adopt the point of view of Babylon (Gaia).

She explained that one should not adopt the standards, the rules, but most of all, the values of the hostile outside world, ruled by neoliberal capitalism. Instead, it is of utmost importance to try to understand each other in the organization, see the world from the Other’s point of view.

Creating alternative organizations, creating a kind of a higher common good demands dedication. But it gives pleasure, the practical work, doing things out of real materials is so pleasant (Gaia).

What these organizational dissenters are engaging in in their day to day work is very much like what James G. March described as organizational strategic vision. In his words, “revolutions require tenacity more than awareness” (March, 1995, p. 435), a living in the future:

Imaginations of the future are stronger and more lasting than the blurred realm of the flesh and blood creatures around us, and that power protects exploration from its enemies (March, 1995, p. 437).

Visionary strategy does not equal dissent in the way we use the word here. There are other kinds of visionary organizations which share a similarly quixotic approach to outside reality as the ones described by us, but minus the earnestness and camaraderie. A famous example is Enron. Linsley and Shrivs (2009) describe it as an extremely individualistic visionary project. The vision belonged to the top managers and owners, while others were expected to comply. The main and only real focus was to gain as much money as possible. All means to that end were not only allowed but prescribed: the company rewarded the most productive employees and

punished severely those whose performance was weaker. This resulted in rivalry, enmity and petty frauds such as giving incorrect prices by one of the department in order to increase income. Such games are not unusual in corporate life. Enron was special because this kind of culture became the base and definition for the organization's morality. This resulted in a very high organizational cohesion and dedication – not unlike the dissenting organizations we are studying. However, Enron was cynical through and through: unethical behaviours became the norm at all levels; political connections were used to negotiate lucrative contracts, the organization manipulated the market to profit from the energy crisis in California, employees played games against one another, including to the disadvantage of the company. Enron met its end when the scandal hit the media and its accounting fraud became public knowledge. Enron's management lived by their vision: never showing interest in the feelings of others, nor in social norms or the law. However, the lack of earnestness makes them, and other organizations operating in a similar way, visionary predators rather than dissenters.

Furthermore, dissent is dedication to and earnestness about the vision, but not necessarily otherworldliness. For example, Blake's dissent did not mean detachment or immateriality:

He [was] undoubtedly a visionary, but he combine[d] mysticism with social radicalism and common sense. He valued above all bread, music and the laughter of children. He asked for a fair price for the depiction of ideal beauty. Like the Brethren of the Free Spirit and the Ranters before him, like Godwin in his own day, and Kropotkin later, his vision is of a free society which transcends conventional politics and the struggle for power and which ensures that every individual is "King & Priest in his own House" (Marshall, 1988, p. 64, our emphasis).

The author explains that Blake believed – and acted for – a society based on mutuality, understanding, cooperation and autonomy. This did not stop him from engaging with other people, not even for the asking of a fair price for his sublime artwork. In our field study, dealing with the market does not have to be cynical or crudely materialistic. We suggest that the studied organizations are "market dissenters" rather "market unbelievers": they clearly find it useful and worthwhile, as well as they value and practice marketing. However, they do it in a way that suits them and their beliefs.

Asked explicitly about the possibility of socialist marketing, one of the organizers (Magda from the Good Cooperative) answered that there is, of course, both a need and a possibility for such a management function under socialism, but that it then should be "truthful and informative" rather than enticing people to consume. She also claimed that it should be "beautiful". It should be added that in a study of Polish marketing under state socialism, it has been described as fulfilling a dual role, of information and of decoration (Kostrzewa, 1998).

There are, of course, dark sides of earnestness, as there as of being visionary. One which is visible in some of the organizations we are studying is fanaticism, being driven. There are characters among the organizers who occasionally speak and behave in ways that remind us of the obsessed conquistador Lope de Aguirre in Werner Herzog's film *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* (1972). There are conflicts and communication problems. One such person, Andrew, was presented to me as "a guy starts talking and doesn't stop for one and a half hours". Indeed, he always spoke with intensity and extreme engagement, which was captivating but also exhausting for many listeners. The relationships he had with the others were ambiguous. On the one hand, he was both respected and liked, and, on the other, he seemed to be too much for them and when he decided to leave, people were perhaps more relieved than sorry to see him go. There are several other characters of this kind still active, at the same time valued for their dedication and lack of tolerance for cynicism, but also often talked about as single-minded and obsessed. The ethnographer heard stories about a woman who often interrupted others talking in meetings, questioning the truthfulness of what they were saying or the sincerity of their intentions. She was usually described as problematic, paranoid and uncooperative, but also as a wake-up call for the organizers who would have otherwise turned into a "circle of mutual admiration". She was also rarely described as a very likeable person. So far, she has consistently avoided the ethnographer and did not agree to meeting or talking with her.

We chose the label of earnestness specifically because it has not yet been commonly used to describe approaches to marketing or, wider, management. While this distances our descriptions from established theoretical frameworks for marketing, it is not a magic wand allowing us to sidestep the many issues raised in regards

to semantically related concepts, most importantly that of authenticity. Authenticity has been proposed as a general solution to contemporary marketing and organizational problems (Pine and Gilmore, 2007) or, more instrumentally, as a communication strategy for building positive perception of CSR (McShane and Cunningham, 2012) and as a tool for overcoming consumer resistance (Marks and Prinsloo, 2015). It has also been criticized as a deceptive instrument for exploitation (Wilson, 2011) and intensifying employees' and customers' emotional labour (Fisher, 2012). Closer to our understanding of earnestness, Freeman and Auster conceptualize authenticity as a "process of starting with where the organizational values are thought to be" (Freeman and Auster, 2011, p. 22), and advocate striving for the creation of "poetic organizations" (their term) as the only possibility for building organizations seriously devoted to the common good. In the organizations we studied, signs of outside admiration and status could be seen as suspicious (this was, however, not a rule). The reception of awards, media presence and political engagement was often seen as "dealing with the façade," an activity that the organizers tend to look down upon. It is much more important to "really do" things, rather than "fix up the façade". Celebrities and popular media are not cherished by many of the organizers, and one of the organizations specifically bore a sign at the entrance prohibiting journalists and politicians from entering. However, Karolina, a dedicated Greenpeace activist, famous for her devotion to her cause, was treated with respect bordering on reverence and spoken of with love by many of the organizers. In fact, it was thanks to our acquaintance with Karolina that the ethnographer got access into several of the studied organizations, otherwise not too happy to let "the outside in". But even good connections might not be enough to secure access: on one occasion the ethnographer was told, in a private conversation with an organizer, that she would never have been accepted into this organization, regardless of her friendship with Karolina, had she not been a vegetarian and, more generally, a person trying to live according to green values. This was an extreme case, but sincerity (again, the semantic cousin to authenticity) was highly valued in all of the studied organizations. ▸

## Towards earnest marketing

Our findings, as summarized in the preceding section, show marketing in studied organizations as an earnest practice. All our interlocutors, who mention marketing, construe it as an activity focused on communication with the environment (or the Other, in more anthropological terms): customers, partners, or media. The workers feel that they have something they wish to communicate, which is their unique goodness, something good that they do which may be useful or beautiful to these others: a capital of virtues and/or the pursuit of important values. Marketing is an activity they undertake to demonstrate this goodness, to offer it up for others to behold and, hopefully, appreciate. If successful, this creates an understanding of their specific goodness in the environment, which leads to the possibility of attraction. There is no expectation that attraction follows automatically from understanding, it is up to other interested actors to engage, as there is, somewhere between the act of demonstration and understanding, a moment when agency is passed on to the others. Members of the studied organizations do not want to "change people's minds" or to act as propagandists of their chosen causes. Their aim is only to demonstrate their activity, and their sincere engagement driven by espoused values (i.e. the organizational goodness). It is the outside actors who then need to decide whether the issue (and activity) appears interesting or convincing. They can then decide to engage: buy goods or services, co-operate, or simply wish to learn more. Through repeated engagement a relationship can develop, based on common values, appreciation, and developing trust. This trust links organization and its environment, and, in its turn, helps strengthen the goodness of the organization: its members' commitment to and practice of organizational virtues and values. The reliance on trust and commitment to values (rather than on mutual gain) distinguishes earnest marketing from either the practice or theory of relationship marketing (Bennett, 1996; O'Malley et al., 1997). Similarly, the heavy use of social media we found in the studied field similarly does not follow the widely touted tenets of mainstream social media marketing, such as the drive to attract-convert-transform the audience (Kabani, 2010) or the wish to base marketing efforts around "strong, defensible claims" (Funk, 2015, p. 16) about customer benefits. The aim of the dissenting organizations' involvement in social media is not to promote a façade



(even a strong, defensible one) but, rather, to establish a trust-based relationship. A relationship is by definition mutual, and in the case of the studied organizations, it consciously places agency on both sides of the process. Significantly, such relationships are not treated as means to organizational success; they are themselves the measure of success (and financial sustainability is a means to helping achieve such success).

The whole process is a virtuous circle: the more it is successfully repeated, the more it perseveres and becomes a self-enforcing pattern. A customer of the Good Cooperative we have spoken to expressed it rather pertinently, saying that his first decision to shop at the cooperative was the most difficult one to make; every time he returns there he gets ever more closely drawn into it and it has become his “good addiction.” He contends that knows what to expect: fresh, healthy produce and that his expectations are routinely met; the cooperative has not let him down once.

Members of Liberartem, one of the studied organizations, have pointed out one additional common aspect of earnest marketing that might not necessarily be captured by the schema presented above: the interconnectedness of the actors which we have witnessed in many of the studied organizations. As

organizations engage in earnest marketing, they also become receptive to reciprocal messages from their environments, forming what Czarniawska-Joerges (1992) termed nets of collective action that are not readily confined within any formal organizational boundaries. Interlocked communications loops where the main moment of linkage is based on trust may help participants retain a sense of being rooted, possible even if developed to a greater scale than our rather small and local organizations in the studied field.

We are aware that our reading of the studied organizations is a sympathetic one, and therefore does not dwell on exploring possible failure points and negative side effects of adopting the earnest marketing approach. This is a deliberate choice of focus, as we are interested in exploring dissenting organizations as sources for alternative marketing practices, currently operating viably, but only in small scale implementations. These practices and approaches, even if promising, will require development, adaptation, and, indeed, robust critique before they can acquire widespread acceptance. We hope to have demonstrated that the approach we have named earnest marketing carries that potential.

## Coda

Throughout most of our research project, the label we used for describing the field was ‘alternative organizations,’ adopted from the extant studies analysing possibilities emerging on the fringes of, or in opposition to, the dominant capitalist discourse. The organizations we studied had been formed as a response to dominant models of business practice, and so we proposed another label: that of dissenting organizations. It certainly met with a warm reception from some of the organizers, though not an unanimously positive one: some of our interlocutors felt that it created an overly divisive picture of what they were trying to achieve, and indeed, the notion of dissent and goodness stand in tension if not necessarily in opposition. Perhaps it would make more sense to speak of a dissenting management model, including the model of marketing they develop.

Whether these organizations provide a blueprint ready for wider adoption is by no means certain, and our inclination would be to expect significant difficulties to arise in any attempts to translate their modes of practice into different markets and larger organizations. Yet, as our interest arises precisely from the already encountered significant difficulties (for society as well as organizations’ participants) arising from the dominant models, there is little reason to avoid at least considering the possible inspirations provided by the demonstrably successful practices of value-driven organizations. These practices clearly include marketing, but marketing reconfigured as a form of respectful communication.

It should be noted that none of the notions that appear in our virtuous circle of earnest marketing are entirely novel, all have their precedents in established marketing practice. More importantly, all of them have been, to a lesser or greater degree, implicated in organizations and activities that have nothing to do with earnestness, or with building sustainable forms of organizing. When the energy-trading company Enron went bankrupt amid corruption and fraud scandals, Jeffrey Skilling, its CEO

famously protested: “We were changing the world. We were doing God’s work” (McLean and Elkind, 2003, p. xxv). There might be good reasons why the concept of goodness is not only avoided in most management literature, but also deeply problematic whenever it appears (Kociatkiewicz and Kostera, 2012). Similarly, trust has frequently featured in management and marketing research as a facilitator for abusing employees and customers (Patwardhan, Noble and Nishihara, 2009; Punch, 1996). Clearly, even if earnest marketing can form the basis of sustainable marketing practice, it would do so as inspiration rather than as a recipe; any successful application would require translation into the local context, reflexivity regarding possible missteps and, particularly, continued commitment to values appreciated by the environment as well as organizational members. But it is here that the notion of dissensus becomes relevant: practices exist only within a social context, and only through critical reaction to the dominant discourses can virtuous change be implemented. Earnest marketing attempts to do just that.

We are well aware that it is a provisional model, and certainly not a readymade toolkit ‘solution’ for immediate implementation so favoured by management and marketing impact-oriented literature. However, it may have consequences beyond its provisionality. Maria Daskalaki (2018) carried out extensive ethnographic research in the Greek context of acute socio-economic crisis, where there emerged a plethora of alternative organizations. She draws attention to the meaningful occurrence of instances of what she describes as prefigurative organizing. For the dissenting organizations she describes, being born as “emergent learning platforms, affected by the interrelationships with complex social systems, encouraged the participation in collective practices of civic organizing” (p. 163). We regard the practices we have observed and identified in our field as also carrying this kind of potential. Times of interregnum are characterized by a dissipative global dynamics (Streck, 2016a),

underinstitutionalized, ungovernable and undefined systemically (Bauman, 2012; Streeck, 2016b). The main tendencies of the dying system point towards a morbid retrotopian thrust back into a (non-existent) past (Bauman, 2017). There is no ready-made better system waiting to replace neoliberal capitalism. In such conditions, any successful attempts at structuring and development of viable management models that take into consideration human and planetary sustainability, even the marginal ones, are of immense value. Visionary dissent can turn out to be not just beneficial but salutary. We believe it is of particular importance to examine how alternative organizations are managed in order to provide examples of genuinely good practices for others to follow. In the case of dissenting marketing models the task can be regarded as even more timely: marketing is, after all, the means of communication between organizations and their environment. Given that the organizations we study are communicating not only their desire to sell products or services, but a viable future after capitalism, it is a message worth listening to and, perhaps, engaging with.

## Endnotes

1. While a closer study of textbooks could discover some national or regional differences in presentation of marketing concepts, the dominant model is homogeneous enough that our comments hold equally well for all mainstream marketing literature we are familiar with.

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