



ARTICLE

Putting Consumers to Work

'Co-creation' and new marketing govern-mentality

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Abstract

Co-creation is a new paradigm that has captured the imagination of marketing and management professionals and scholars. Drawing on Foucault's notion of government and neo-Marxist theories of labor and value, we critically interrogate the cultural, social, and economic politics of this new management technique. We suggest that co-creation represents a political form of power aimed at generating particular forms of consumer life at once free and controllable, creative and docile. We argue that the discourse of value co-creation stands for a notion of modern corporate power that is no longer aimed at disciplining consumers and shaping actions according to a given norm, but at working with and through the freedom of the consumer. In short, administering consumption in ways that allow for the continuous emergence and exploitation of creative and valuable forms of consumer labor is the true meaning of the concept of co-creation.

Key words

affect • co-production • customer • exploitation • customer relationship • free labor • governmentality • management technique • marketing control • Prahalad

Today the customer is in charge and whoever is best at putting the customer in charge makes all the money.

(Stephen F. Quinn, Senior Vice President for Marketing, Wal-Mart quoted in Elliott, 2006)

Consumers wrest control away from brand management control freaks . . . get over it. Turning your brand over to the consumer is taking control – and in fact, if you do, they'll return it to you in better shape.

(Russ Klein, President for global marketing, innovation and strategy, Burger King, quoted in Elliott, 2006)

A SPECTER IS haunting contemporary marketers – the specter of the 'Free Consumer'. All the marketing powers, business academics, advertising agents, marketing executives, and journalists have entered into a holy alliance to (no, not exorcise!) understand, celebrate, and ultimately harness this specter. The image in the epigraphs, of a brave new world where nonplussed marketers have lost control over the management of their 'core assets' such as brands and customers, has diffused quickly through the halls of business schools and corporations (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2000; Tapscott and Williams, 2006). Interestingly, wistful longing for a time past is absent in the plethora of articles, books, and commentaries offered on the topic by today's marketing thought leaders. Rather, we see a collective embrace of the idea of a newly empowered, entrepreneurial, and liberated consumer subject, presumably because of the promise such a consumer presents in creating 'competitive advantage' and market opportunities for the discerning 'New Marketer' (Moor, 2003). Consequently, the increasingly popular proclamations of the demise of *old* marketing, characterized by control over brand and demand, is superseded by almost activist-style declarations that *new* marketing in the 21st century requires the fundamental realization that *customers are in charge* (e.g. Kelly, 1998; Pine and Gilmore, 1999; Schmitt, 1999; Levine, 2000).

In this article, we explore the ideological aspects of this latest business buzz that urges marketing managers to use customers as a source of competence and put them to work (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2000: 81). We are not interested in examining whether or not consumers are in fact in charge, or even what 'being in charge' would mean exactly. Rather, we focus our critique on the larger marketing project currently underway that reconfigures the production of use and exchange value – previously considered internal to, as well as the sole purvey and 'competitive advantage' of the firm – as increasingly dependent upon the active participation

of formerly passive(ied) consumers (Lagace, 2004). Toward this end, we assess two new popular management and marketing techniques, 'value co-creation' and the 'service-dominant logic of marketing', that promote the inevitability of a world of close, productive, and mutually beneficial company–customer relationships, paying particular attention to the ways in which the new consumer subject 'works' through the concept of 'customer relationship' to update strategies of marketing control and consumer exploitation. We suggest that companies' latest redesigning of customer management strategies uses what Foucault (1991) termed government. Unlike the more top-down approach of disciplinary power, which is aimed at shaping the actions of individuals through the imposition of orders, rules, and norms, government works from the bottom up and represents a form of power that 'acts through practices that 'make up subjects' as free persons' (Rose, 1999: 95). It is, hence, a political form of power that aims at generating particular forms of life (Rose, 1999; Rose, 2001), which in the context of new strategies of customer management means 'the provision of particular ambiances that frame and partially anticipates the agency of consumers' (Arvidsson, 2006: 74).

Labels employed to capture this new business philosophy include 'value co-creation', a term coined by professors and global management gurus C.K. Prahalad¹ and Venkat Ramaswamy (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2000; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2002; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004a; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004b), and the somewhat odd-sounding 'service-dominant logic of marketing', put forth by marketing professors Stephen Vargo and Robert Lusch (Vargo and Lusch, 2004; Lusch and Vargo, 2006). Both of these labels contain as their central idea that control over consumers and markets can best be achieved by providing managed and dynamic *platforms for consumer practice* (cf. Lury, 2004), which on the one hand free the creativity and know-how of consumers, and on the other channel these consumer activities in ways desired by the marketers. Customer management, then, as the exertion of political power to produce particular forms of life, clearly does not mean domination because marketers presuppose, and in fact expect, the consumer subject to act, innovate, tinker and run free. The marketing challenge posed by the co-creation model rests, of course, with establishing ambiances that program consumer freedom to evolve in ways that permit the harnessing of consumers' newly liberated, productive capabilities.

As a result of this strategic reconfiguration of customer government, the production of use and exchange value of a product or service increasingly depends on generating and capturing iterative social communication

and cooperation between corporations and consumers as well as between consumers themselves (Sheth et al., 2000; Joshi and Sharma, 2004; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004b; Vargo and Lusch, 2004). Put differently, use value as economic value is understood as being created jointly by customers and producers and has been re-christened, rather curiously, as 'value-in-use' (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). Seen from this vantage point, co-creation principles represent part of a larger reconfiguration of labor and power characteristic of contemporary, knowledge-based capitalism (Terranova, 2004).

The idea of putting customers to work is not entirely new. For instance, Ritzer (2004) observed the increasing rationalization processes of companies in a McDonaldizing world that have long relied on the appropriation of customer work. McDonald's restaurants turn customers into waiters and cleaning personnel for example, while the automated teller machine (ATM) 'allows everyone to work, for at least a few moments, as an unpaid bank teller' (Ritzer, 2004: 63) and with the internet becoming a staple of everyday consumer lives, companies find ever more innovative ways to extract free labor from the consumer (Terranova, 2000; Reed, 2005). What we want to show in this article is that the concept of co-creation signifies the transfer of the McDonaldization logic of customer work from the sphere of production and process efficiency (see Ritzer, 2004) to that of new product development and innovation. In other words, we see a co-creation economy as driven by the need of capital to set up processes that enable the liberation and capture of large repositories of technical, social, and cultural competence in places previously considered outside the production of monetary value. In short, the co-creation economy is about experimenting with new possibilities for value creation that are based on the expropriation of free cultural, technological, social, and affective labor of the consumer masses.

Based on the cooperation with and among consumers, co-creation represents a dialogical model that no longer privileges the company's vision of production and thus what constitutes, in the jargon of the marketing profession, 'customer value'. Therefore, rather than putting customers to work as more or less unskilled workers to further rationalize (Fordist) production processes and their focus on predictability, calculability, and efficiency, co-creation instead aspires to build ambiances that foster contingency, experimentation, and playfulness among consumers. From this perspective, customers are configured as uniquely skilled workers who, for the production of value-in-use to occur, must be given full rein to articulate their inimitable requirements and share their knowledge (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004b) as inputs to the manufacturing process. The

management of what may more aptly be described as post-Fordist customer workers – because it is now based less on performing routine acts of production and more on consumer affect, knowledge, and social communication (Lazzarato, 1996; Arvidsson, 2005) – requires a new understanding of the role of the company in the production process. Hence, co-creation marketers are beginning to reconfigure their own role as one where the company assumes the seemingly humble task of providing technological *resources* in the hope of fostering the creation of specific innovative and profitable forms of customer participation, or what Arvidsson (2007: 21) calls ‘valuable new forms of life’.

Hence, marketing executives (such as Quinn and Klein quoted in the epigraphs, speaking not least from the perspective of ‘old economy’ companies Wal-Mart and Burger King) like to allude not only to the inevitability of rising consumer power but also to the strategic imperative of voluntarily handing over control to consumers in order to ensure future profitability. Behind this ‘surrender’ is advertising and marketing professionals’ increasingly widespread belief that the consumer masses have become unfortunately unmanageable (see also Gabriel and Lang, 1995) but also, rather fortunately, now provide a stock of almost unimaginable creative and innovative talent that awaits ‘leveraging’ by smart companies (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2000; von Hippel, 2005). A quickly growing literature in academic and trade journals has sprung up to spread the gospel of the consumer’s charmed transformation from a passive recipient of messages and commodities to an active interpreter and maker of both, a transformation often expressed by the neologism *prosumer*² (e.g. Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004b; Jenkins, 2006; Tapscott and Williams, 2006; von Hippel, 2005).³

Our primary pursuit in this article is to excavate the ideological underpinnings on which this latest innovation in the field of popular marketing and management techniques rests (see, e.g. Thrift, 2005).⁴ Specifically, we provide a critique of what are certainly distinct but nevertheless conceptually related discussions on ‘value co-creation’ and the new ‘service-dominant logic of marketing’. We propose that what is being discursively constructed under these two headings has more to do with a need to reconfigure marketing as a technology of consumer exploitation and control suitable for the complex machinations of global information capitalism than with a concern for increasing ‘customer value’. From this perspective, the idea of the ‘free consumer’ never really threatened the control needs of corporations. On the contrary, free consumers are the result of strategic corporate practices of consumer government that now operate ‘in an

expanded range of everyday spaces' (Moor, 2003: 39). In short, continued corporate control and sustained competitiveness require a free consumer subject.

We consider these latest management and marketing schemes as part of a larger, ongoing exercise by producers to reduce the distance between production and consumption (Negus, 2002; Thrift, 2005). Marketing's desire to produce cultural conditions that allow for more subtle ways to insert brands and products deeply into the fabric of consumer lifeworlds has resulted in a style of marketing practice that now aims at completely drawing consumers into the production and, more importantly, *innovation* process itself. This practice, rather fortuitously, invites those consumers into the fold that tend to mount the most stubborn resistance to corporate power, including political and counter-cultural activists, as well as open-source innovators (see Frank, 1999; Arvidsson, 2001; Heath and Potter, 2004; von Hippel, 2005; Holt, 2006). We argue that by constructing consumers as partners in mutually beneficial innovation and production processes, companies are not only exploiting consumer labor but are also reducing the risk of consumer behavior evolving in ways other than prescribed by the company (De Certeau, 1984; Lury, 2004).

Clearly, then, Fordist technologies of control such as McDonalidization (Ritzer, 2004) are hardly rendered obsolete, as they still offer companies effective ways to ensure efficient and predictable customer performance in highly rationalized production processes. Nevertheless, co-creation expands upon Fordist modes of control by transforming resistance and opposition to marketing power into a source of economic value and by actively *encouraging* consumer experimentation and innovation, even if resistive in nature. To be sure, co-creation is not about the end of efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control because in the final analysis, it represents an effort to *re-rationalize* key drivers of economic growth, innovation and new product development, by bringing within the confines of the company walls an autonomous, unpaid, and creative consumer workforce.

We begin our discussion with a brief history of the notion of 'customer relationship' in marketing in an effort to accentuate its unique articulation within the emerging mode of customer government. The evolution of the concept of customer relationship provides a foundational avenue for marketers to legitimize the core tenets of value co-creation and service-dominant marketing. Marketers typically consider having relationships with customers as something to which corporations should aspire, because good relationships translate into higher profits (Price and Arnould, 1999). The ideology of the customer relationship, reproduced *ad nauseam*

in business school classrooms and corporate workshops, is now so deeply entrenched in the contemporary marketing discourse that its cultural politics are rarely, if ever, questioned. The genealogy of the concept we present in this article admittedly falls short of the comprehensive theoretical treatment it deserves. However, we do hope to demonstrate that marketing's arrival at a point where exploitative market dependencies and unequal exchange relations are posited as 'relationships' is a recent event that answers to the economic needs of capital.

THE INVENTION OF 'CUSTOMER RELATIONS' IN MARKETING THOUGHT

Fordism was the cutting-edge management and production format in early 20th-century America (see Gramsci, 1971; Hardt and Negri, 2000: 219–350). The profession of marketing management emerged out of this environment and initially assumed a pragmatic emphasis on production and distribution efficiencies (Bartels, 1988; Venkatesh and Penalzoza, 2006). The recent marketing focus on the consumer as a psychosocially complex collection of needs, wants and desires did not emerge until the 1940s (Miller and Rose, 1997; Rose, 1997). The resulting mobilization of consumer needs as inputs for marketing theory and practice had its unique challenges. For one, it was the first time in the industrial age that firms faced the challenge of aligning an inflexible mode of production with what seemed to be a complex and fragmented market. An initial solution to this problem involved market research activities that supported the construction of the consumer as a relatively stable, homogeneous, and immobile target who could be managed with advertising and other units of the marketer's arsenal (Beniger, 1986). Thus, the technology and language of early market research (or 'commercial research' as it was then called (see Elmer, 2004)) emerged not as a means of seeking consumer input, but as a social process for managing consumers, reducing marketing complexities, and improving production efficiencies (Arvidsson, 2004).

Venkatesh and Penalzoza (2006) note that the notion of the consumer as a physical and psychological itinerant whose needs and wants vary on spatial and temporal context was born primarily out of the work undertaken by psychologically inclined market researcher Sidney Levy and management theorist Peter Drucker throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Drucker and Levy posited that the primary challenge of the firm lay in identifying and responding to consumers' changing needs and wants in the market (see e.g. Drucker, 1950; Drucker, 1954; Levy, 1959). Of course, these needs and wants were not independent of the marketing environment in which the consumer resided. Through the management of a

quickly transforming media landscape, advertising and marketing professionals provided relevant cues that aimed at fashioning consumer needs, wants, and behavior in the market. The production process was ostensibly geared toward satisfying consumers' needs and wants rather than simply maximizing output. This feedback mechanism begot and sustained the focus on the consumer that pervades contemporary marketing discourse.

These developments coincided with the rise of contemporary marketing icon Philip Kotler, who promoted practical marketing guidelines such as the 'marketing mix' (Culliton, 1948; Borden, 1964) and the 'marketing concept' (Keith, 1960) to business students around the world. Kotler⁵ declared that achieving 'customer satisfaction' required the channeling of all efforts of the firm into identifying and meeting customer needs in specific times and spaces. For Kotler, marketing had taken on the character of an 'applied behavioral science' (Kotler, 1972: 46). His promise to the emerging legion of professional marketers was that a concern with production efficiencies should be subordinate to discovering what customers wanted. He argued that such acquiescence would ultimately prove to be a superior firm strategy for securing market share and maximizing profits relative to a production-driven model that assesses opportunities based on a firm's manufacturing efficiencies (see e.g. Kotler and Levy, 1969; Kotler, 1972).

The 'applied behavioral science' revolution started a trend in academic and corporate marketing departments toward conceptualizing the consumer as a complex entity whose desire to consume may be boundless (as maintained by the economic branch) but whose motivations to consume (the *what* and more importantly *why* of consumption) are not well understood. To address this lacuna, marketing theorists used the discipline's premier academic outlets to supply the next generation of marketers with theoretical knowledge and conceptual tools such as relationship marketing (Morgan and Hunt, 1994), market orientation (Kohli and Jaworski, 1990; Narver and Slater, 1990; Kennedy et al., 2003), and customer relationship management (Payne and Frow, 2005; Ryals, 2005), all of which propagate the view that consumers are difficult to manage and control but are nevertheless responsive to available marketing and management techniques. This newer framing of the consumer formed the foundation for preparing marketing managers for the increasingly complicated rules of engagement with a consumer subject who is demonstrably harder to please and persuade.⁶ Moreover, the task of satisfying and retaining customers – *customer retention* represents the holy grail of modern marketing – appears to be an uphill battle given a consumer's changing needs and wants.

Therefore, building relationships with customers becomes at once more important for ensuring continued profits, yet less likely to occur. To further complicate matters, the 1990s brought about what some commentators have described as the heady days of hyper-competition (see e.g. D'Aveni and Gunther, 1994), a condition characterized by excess capacities of progressively more, and more alike, brands and products vying for the same consumer dollar (see also Barber, 2007). Under such circumstances, today's marketers do not consider merely satisfying consumers to be a sufficient barrier of resistance to prevent customer defection (Haughton, 2005). Rather, securing future business from capricious, unfaithful, and demanding buyers now requires nothing less than customer *delight* (Pardee, 1996; Keiningham and Vavra, 2001; Seth and Seth, 2005). The increasing difficulty in delighting and retaining customers, however, has not changed the primary ground rule of firm–customer engagements: the relationship is still one dominated by the firm, but with a need for an increasingly intimate involvement with the customer (Vandermerwe, 2004).

Recently, marketers have developed new systems of representation whereby consumer identities are configured as a mutable, mobile, and ever-shifting terrain. The gainful navigation of this terrain requires marketing professionals to continuously improve modes of *knowing* and *relating* to consumers⁷ (Peppers and Rogers, 1993). This has become more difficult in the era of postmodern markets (Holt, 2000) characterized by an unmanageable and fickle consumer sphinx (Gabriel and Lang, 1995; Firat and Dholakia, 1998). Advertising agencies and 'trend scouts' provide us with ample evidence that consistently confirms the postmodern consumer's growing weariness and increasingly cynical attitude toward all forms of overt marketing and advertising assaults (Frank, 1999; 2000). This consumer is deemed impervious to most forms of marketing control, and delights in the playful and ingenious subversion of corporate marketing communication and dominant meanings to suit their own individual and collective political projects (Frank, 1999; Holt, 2006).⁸ Consequently, the most recent models posit a market populated by consumers whose tastes and patterns are increasingly fluid, fragmented, heterogeneous, and less amenable to categorization, management, and direction (Firat and Dholakia, 1998; Thompson and Troester, 2002).

Marketing thought leaders understand that trying to manage and control a mass of protean and agentic consumers cannot be undertaken with the same rudimentary tools that may have worked when consumers were still imagined as more or less passive participants with homogeneous needs and wants (Tapscott, 1999; Tapscott et al., 2000; Prahalad and

Ramaswamy, 2004b). Sales-through-domination, as Thomas Frank (2000) points out, no longer holds the cachet it once did. Instead, marketers have refashioned themselves as 'marketplace partners' for consumers who are presumably looking for mutually beneficial relationships with corporations (see, e.g. Price and Arnould, 1999). Hence, the emergence of the co-creation model with its emphasis on social communication and cooperation cannot be fully grasped without proper placement in the larger historical context of the evolution of the consumer subject in marketing management.

VALUE CO-CREATION

Value co-creation is the latest of what seems to be a reliable flow of popular management techniques (Ritzer, 2004; Thrift, 2005). Developed by professors and global management gurus C.K. Prahalad and Venkat Ramaswamy, co-creation represents a radicalization of the customer-centricity that is a cornerstone of the 'Kotlerite' doctrine of marketing thought (see, e.g. Kotler, 1972; Kotler and Levy, 1969) and its descendant philosophies (e.g. Kohli and Jaworski, 1990; Narver and Slater, 1990; Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Kennedy et al., 2003; Payne and Frow, 2005). Central to Prahalad and Ramaswamy's argument is their re-conceptualization of the market from a mundane site of exchange to a buzzing and vibrant 'communication hive' (Tapscott and Williams, 2006) where consumers and producers jointly create innovative products and experiences. In many ways these theorists echo discussions prevalent in the 1980s and 90s about how to manage workers in the knowledge economy because the co-creation paradigm deliberately posits consumers as knowledge workers.

For Prahalad and Ramaswamy and others (see Tapscott and Williams, 2006) consumers have specialized competencies and skills that companies are unable to match or even understand. This suggests two special challenges for managers: first, to attract and retain these consumers, and second, to provide a creative and open communications environment where such consumers *qua workers* can effectively apply and enhance their knowledge for the benefit of everyone (see Tapscott, 1995: 35; Thrift, 2005). The market thus becomes a platform for participation in a culture of exchange, where companies offer consumers resources to create, and where consumers offer to companies 'a contact with the fast-moving world of knowledge in general' (Terranova, 2000: 37). The market, in the view of the co-creationists, has been transformed into a channel through which 'human intelligence' renews its capacity to produce (Terranova, 2000: 37).

A parallel to Prahalad and Ramaswamy's concept of co-creation in the marketing domain is offered by scholars Stephen Vargo and Robert Lusch (2004). Vargo and Lusch suggest that marketing has progressed from its Fordist roots and concern with the efficient production and distribution of goods to what they believe to be a necessary preoccupation with devising, marketing, and delivering services. These scholars argue that today's economy is 'service-dominant' (S-D) as opposed to being 'goods-dominant' (G-D). They note that the emphasis on the efficient production and distribution of goods in the G-D logic supports tendencies toward standardized goods produced 'away from the market' that are then inventoried until demanded. However, a major problem that Vargo and Lusch identify with the G-D logic is that goods do not really represent the end-products that companies exchange with consumers. Rather, goods are only 'intermediate products' that consumers use as 'appliances in value-creation processes' (Vargo and Lusch, 2004: 7).

This commodity-as-resource perspective echoes Prahalad and Ramaswamy's notion of the commodity as a value proposition. The significance of this reframing of commodities as service components lies in its implicit recognition of an active role for consumer participation in the successful production and commodification of all goods and services. If everything – *including* goods – becomes a service as suggested by the S-D logic, then the consumer becomes enlisted as a permanent member of the company's production and marketing project,⁹ and as such they need to be governed in ways that make sense for the corporation. To this end, companies reconfigure consumers' potentially threatening unruliness in ways that make them more amenable to further rationalization, rapid innovation (even if 'merely' on the symbolic level such as changing a color scheme or brand messages¹⁰), and operational predictability at every level of the production process.

Theorizing consumers as free subjects who are capable of continuous self-transformation and are full of desire to make their lives the objects of practices of self-shaping (see Rose, 1999: 95), marketers have come to think of consumers as a source of permanently reproduced and updated cultural and social knowledge (see, e.g. Tapscott and Williams, 2006). From a marketing theoretical perspective, then, co-creation strategies are no longer designed to control demand in the traditional way by first scrutinizing and then satisfying customer needs. Rather, the idea is for marketing to position itself as a mere facilitator and partner of consumer ingenuity and agency. Proponents of this updated view argue that since use value is now determined by the customer (the 'value-in-use' notion) and commodities

represent mere resources for further appropriation by these entrepreneurial consumers, all marketing can do is offer 'value propositions', or suggestions, to consumers (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). In short, to be successful the modern marketer is encouraged to adopt the role of a facilitator of social communication and cooperation.

It is difficult not to be struck by the disconnection between the language of relationship, satisfaction, and freedom pervading academic and professional discourses on co-creation, on the one hand, and the reality of increasingly rationalized systems of service production and distribution that continuously streamline and dehumanize exchange relations between customers and companies, on the other (Ritzer, 2004). If we were to analyze our average day as consumers for instance, we would be hard pressed to find many examples that suggest that marketers are looking at us as valuable reservoirs of human intelligence. The vast majority of market interactions in our contemporary consumer culture (including, as Ritzer (2004) points out, schools, hospitals, and other public institutions) are governed by McDonaldized systems aimed at cost efficiencies, strict consumer population control, and predictability.

Still, while on the one hand advanced corporate capitalism purposefully eliminates authentic spaces for deviant and creative forms of consumption activities and offers rationalized simulations at best (see Gottdiener, 1997; Ritzer, 1999), companies have begun to realize the benefit of providing individuals with places for playful production of their own consumption experiences, a fact demonstrated by the popularity of numerous massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMOGs), open-source and hacker cultures, and fan communities (e.g. Jenkins, 1992; Kozinets, 2001; Thomas, 2002; Kline et al., 2003; Hellekson and Busse, 2006). It is this productive fervor of the *common*, to use Hardt and Negri's (2000) term, that creates meanings, commodities, and experiences that corporations are unable to (re)produce within their own rationalized systems of production. Always on the lookout for new ideas, products, and services to market, managers are seeking ways to appropriate, control, and valorize the creativity of the common.

The new dominant logic of marketing and the entire co-creation program can thus be seen from the perspective of the corporation as an attempt to imagine a fundamentally altered relationship between marketers and consumers. The concept provides a re-theorization of the production of use value by suggesting that this aspect of the company's operations should no longer be confined to the firm but relies, at least in part, on the labor power of the consumer to continuously co-create – indeed

co-innovate – value. Arvidsson (2005, 2006) makes a related point in stating that the contemporary mode of valorization of brands has increasingly come to depend on the immaterial labor of consumers to manufacture trust, affect, and shared meanings (see also Lury, 2004). The co-creation concept, however, goes beyond the idea of symbolic, immaterial co-production of brand value by situating the consumer squarely within the process of ongoing *product* and *service* co-creation. After all, co-creation means that consumers receive little more than ‘propositional value’, whereas the realization of actual use value is dependent upon consumers’ added labor input.

THEORIZING CO-CREATION: GOVERNMENTALITY AND EXPLOITATION

Following Arvidsson’s (2005, 2006) eloquent theorizing of consumer-produced brand value, we place the concept of co-creation within the general logic of production in late capitalist information economies (see also Terranova, 2000; Terranova, 2004). Central to Arvidsson’s argument is the observation that postmodern information economies configure all communication, even ‘looking’, as part of the productive labor process (see also Jhally and Livant, 1986; Beller, 1998). This is so because communication produces information, which makes up the core resource of the information economy. Thus, similar to the conclusion of our earlier discussion, Arvidsson suggests that rather than maintaining the traditional separation of production (by corporations) and consumption (by consumers), we need to complicate this relationship once the circulation of information can be posited as production. Brand valuations, for example, are therefore increasingly dependent on the affective and immaterial labor of consumers (Arvidsson, 2006). Similarly, Terranova (2004: 73) emphasizes that the continuous value production in the digital economy of the information age is fueled by what she calls the ‘free labor’ of consumers as producers, which is ‘simultaneously voluntarily given and unwaged, enjoyed and exploited’.

The idea of the collapse of communication into production opens up a theoretical space for understanding the effectiveness of co-creation as a tool for consumer exploitation. Value within this model is the result of *social* communication that occurs at the point of product use, thus continuously augmenting or altering the shape, content, and nature of the product through often (although not always) collective re-elaboration with every interaction. As consumers accept the marketer’s value proposition and complement and elaborate on its meaning, effectiveness, and functionality, their activities are transformed into acts of production. From this

perspective, the consumption of the proposition is also the production of the proposition. Yet, our claim to conceptualize this new customer management technique as premised on the instantiation and subsumption of new forms of labor should not be seen as an easy dismissal of it 'as an innovative development of the familiar logic of capitalist exploitation' (Terranova, 2004: 73). Rather, we argue that the co-creation paradigm represents an attempt to establish a specific form of government, in the sense proposed by Michel Foucault (1991), to bring about particular forms of life in which consumers voluntarily provide unwaged and exploited, yet enjoyed labor.

We suggest that by inserting potentially the entire universe of commodity production in all spheres of life, market structures are effectuated to demand and capture more and more of consumers' attention, knowledge, and affect, or what Arvidsson (2005: 237) calls 'ethical surplus', for the creation of economic value. Therefore, co-creation as structured by the desire of capital to find novel frontiers of productivity (rather than by the desire of at least some consumers to remove – as arguably suggested in the IKEA model of self-assembly of goods – one level of dependence in the system of production and exploitation (Hartman, 2007)) attempts to alter existing relations between labor and capital by establishing the 'social factory' that describes an avenue where 'work processes have shifted from the factory to society, thereby setting in motion a truly complex machine' (Negri, 1989; cited in Terranova, 2000: 33).

The co-creation paradigm as a form of value production and customer management, similar to the production and management of the brand, thus represents an important example of consumption as the fusion of *social* communication and *social* production. From this theoretical position, the emergence of co-creation marks less an effort by marketers to support consumers in their individual(ist) and individualizing articulations of consumption as the pursuit of distinction and difference (Bourdieu, 1984). Rather, it allows companies to manage intensifying uncertainties about market demand by embedding consumption itself (now captured in the metaphor of the social factory as an expression of social productivity) deep with production, innovation, and marketing processes. In short, corporations now aim to secure the knowledge work of the collective consumer class as the repository for creative ideas and the driver of accelerated innovation so central to producing future profits under conditions of global competitive capitalism.

Despite popular accounts of the active and 'take-charge customer', marketers continue to strive for control over consumption practices and

processes, and persistently redefine strategic actions toward this end (Ritzer, 1999; Moor, 2003; Ritzer, 2004). Seductive (if not exploitative (Ritzer, 1999)) retail environments, for example, are designed 'to set free [consumers] in a controlled environment to engage in an act of co-creation' (Arvidsson, 2006: 80). Accordingly, we suggest that the latest turn toward co-creation represents one of the most advanced strategies for capitalist accumulation and consumer control because of its reconfiguring of marketing into a supply function for free, unpaid, and more or less autonomous consumer labor processes. It is a form of government of consumers that gives birth to an active consumer whose independent, creative, and voluntary activities can now effectively be channeled into raw material for the firm's commodity production. At this particular moment, consumers' labor is expropriated as surplus labor because it is unpaid labor that does not necessarily contribute to the consumer's ability to buy more goods. It is in this sense that we suggest, following Roemer's (1982) exceptional analysis of Marxian exploitation, that co-creation attempts to exploit consumers.

CONSUMER GOVERNMENT AND MASS INTELLECTUALITY

Contemporary marketing is driven by the pursuit of developing management techniques that bring about a consumer population suitable for the demands of 21st-century global capitalism now 'operating with unprecedented geographical reach, speed, dominion, and nomadism' (Dyer-Witthford, 2003). In its current incarnation, this pursuit involves the mobilization and expropriation of knowledge, creativity, and communication of consumers as the direct basis for economic value. Managers, therefore, seek to identify modes of *social cooperation* with consumers – what Arvidsson (2006: 74) calls 'platforms for action' – that intensify the demands on consumers to become active participants in the creation of economic value. The rise of such forms of productive social relations and their importance for capitalist expansion has been theorized already by Karl Marx in *The Grundrisse* (see also Virno, 2004: 62). Marx (1973: 702) noted how advances in industrial production towards automation transformed the structural organization of wage labor in that the worker 'no longer appeared so much to be included within the production process; rather, the human being comes to relate more as watchman and regulator to the production process itself'. Therefore, capitalist production under conditions of machine automation increasingly came to rely on the ability of workers to communicate with each other.

In other words, the organization of increasingly complex production systems around technology and machinery mediates social interaction in

such a way that the workers' cognitive, social, and affective competences become integral to the labor process. Under conditions of capitalism mediated by 'machinery' in the wider sense of the term, 'it is, in a word, the development of the *social individual* which appears as the great foundation-stone of production and of wealth' (Marx, 1973: 702). What the social individual produces is in effect social cooperation. To be sure, social cooperation does not always constitute wage labor. To the contrary, social cooperation is much more likely to be appropriated as 'free', unpaid labor (Dyer-Witheford, 1999; Terranova, 2000; Arvidsson, 2006). However, the fact that older forms of sociality¹¹ have been transformed by capital in ways immanent to it signifies that cooperation presents itself as always and already available for appropriation and commodification.

The concept of social cooperation as a mode of capitalist production, as Virno points out, is most clearly perceptible when a 'conspicuous portion of individual work consists of developing, refining, and intensifying cooperation itself' (2004: 62). Under such conditions, companies require workers to develop and share their know-how to improve efficiencies of production and the organization of labor more generally. Labor then becomes increasingly cast in a linguistic-communicative light where the presence and indeed performance of other workers matters to the overall productivity of the team of workers and to the company as a whole. 'The monological feature of labor dies away: the *relationship* with others is a driving basic element, not something accessory' (Virno, 2004: 63, emphasis added). Virno employs Marx's concept of the *general intellect* to express this transformation of life itself – the social communication of living subjects, the dialogical performances, and the communicative competence of individuals – into living labor.

General intellect then refers to a set of competencies (increasingly centered around cognitive, cultural, linguistic, and affective capabilities) that are freely available to any social individual who is a member of the specific form of sociality constituted by capital (whether a firm or the global open-source community of Linux (see Ratto, 2005)). This includes the expertise of how to use mechanical or electronic machines, how to function within a specific productive context, and how to build, share, and reproduce the right motivational and affective structure that governs the particular socially cooperative space. From this perspective, contemporary (Virno calls it Post-Fordist) capitalism posits any interaction and all communicative action as, potentially, a form of labor (employed, surplus-value producing labor), and therefore inserts social cooperation squarely into the sphere of the material production of life.

Under current conditions of networked communication caused by the diffusion and adoption of information and communication technologies, capitalist mediation of social relations, that is, social cooperation and its production of innovative, experimental, and authentic forms of life now takes place mostly outside the traditional confines of the company and increasingly within the autonomous networks of communication and interaction of the public (see Arvidsson, 2007). From this vantage point, the general intellect refers to an indirect and heavily mediated form of social labor (often referred to as immaterial labor by Negri, Lazzarato and others) based on the cooperation of a plural, multiform constantly mutating intelligence (Dyer-Witheford, 2003). This 'rootedness' of the general intellect in the linguistic, ethical, and affective spheres of human production makes it an immanent feature of all social life, rather than limiting it to the spatial and temporal boundaries of life lived within the factory gates. It is this extension of the general intellect into all spheres of life that Virno labels 'mass intellectuality'.

The question we are concerned with here is how capital is trying to embed mass intellectuality into the structures of the market. Specifically, how do managers capture the intellectuality of the *consumer* masses, including Arvidsson's (2007) 'creative underground', as a voluntary, motivated, yet unpaid and potentially exploited workforce?¹² From this perspective, the idea of co-creation, which proffers the notion of corporations' relationships with customers as being a form of mutually beneficial social cooperation through which the joint production of value occurs, represents an attempt to mobilize and appropriate the general intellect of consumers. The question then becomes: how do autonomous consumers generate value that marketers can appropriate and subsume under capital?

EXPROPRIATING FREE CONSUMER LABOR

Marx (1973: 286) observed that the transformation of capital into money is a condition for the realization of capital through production, and hence for the exploitation of labor by capital (see also Roemer, 1982). Put differently, as money is generated through the productive use of capital, more money is generated, which according to the Marxian labor-theory-of-value definition, represents the surplus value of labor. Surplus value, then, corresponds to the money generated through the appropriation and commodification of labor minus the cost of production. Enlisting unpaid customers to co-produce the products and services, which are converted to money in the market often by selling to the same people whose labor helped to produce them, corresponds to the expropriation of surplus value from

consumer labor. From a Marxist perspective, therefore, co-creation also signifies the exploitation of consumers even if co-productive activities are engaged in voluntarily and, at times, with a significant degree of enjoyment. This is partly because the amount of 'dead labor' the consumer can receive (through purchasing commodities in the market) with the income earned for the amount of labor expended in production is less than the value produced through his or her work (Roemer, 1982).

The exploitation of customers under the rubric of value co-creation takes place on two related but different planes. First, consumers are not generally paid for the know-how, enthusiasm, and social cooperation (what Marx called workers' entire life) that they contribute to the manufacturing process of marketable commodities. Second, customers typically pay what the marketing profession calls a 'price premium' for the fruits of their own labor as the use value provided by co-created commodities is said to be higher¹³ than that which can be accomplished through rationalized systems of standardized production. In other words, the work undertaken by customers to customize their own commodities – for example, a girl navigating a more or less complex menu to determine the exact look, shape, and personality of her new Teddy Bear – ends up increasing the price she has to pay for her creation.

Some of the most visible illustrations of co-creation are to be found in any of the rapidly proliferating user-generated websites such as YouTube, Facebook, MySpace, Flickr and Second Life. Economic value creation in each is almost exclusively based on the ability to make the audience work, thereby effectively eradicating the distance between production and consumption (see Negus, 2002; Moor, 2003). YouTube, sold to Google Inc. for \$1.65 billion within two years of the site's launch, relies for its attraction and economic success on the willingness and ingenuity of the masses to produce their lives (and those of others) as videos for mass consumption. Facebook, MySpace, and Second Life (SL) similarly expropriate the cultural labor of the masses and convert it into monetary value: each in their own specific way, but all according to the same general logic. SL in particular captures the essence of the prevailing co-creation discourses.¹⁴

The SL experience takes place in a virtual world created almost entirely by its users who have adopted the SL platform as a space for creativity, virtual construction, socialization, and economic exchange (Rymaszewski et al., 2006). In its advertising, the company deliberately positions SL as a popular grassroots opposition to the proprietary, highly controlled, and hence confining (in the widest sense of the word) world of traditional forms of capital,¹⁵ offering instead the utopian possibility of a world

'imagined and created by its residents'¹⁶ (Second Life, 2007a). The company purposefully refrains from scripting the user experience and instead relies on the work of each user for the creation of culturally and economically relevant new forms. If users perceive Second Life as lacking in any way they are encouraged, and in fact expected, to improve on the status quo.

While user-generated websites present arguably some of the 'purest' examples of consumer government through co-creation, the same principle operates successfully in industries and businesses as diverse as John Deere's DeereTrax farm machinery management system, Somerset Houseboats' dialogical method of bespoke houseboat production, LEGO Group's Mindstorms and LEGO Factory applications, and Build-a-Bear Workshop's consumer-operated production process (see Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004b). In most cases, companies had to reengineer established innovation and production processes in order to capture the affective and creative resources of consumers. LEGO, for example, as part of a seven-year corporate restructuring program, has put in place the 'Community, Education and Direct' (CED) initiative charged with finding avenues to mobilize consumers as part of the design, innovation, and production 'team'.

Closely echoing what the Italian autonomists have called the social factory, the central element of the CED initiative has been the erection of the 'LEGO factory' (LEGO Factory, 2007), where users are invited to download LEGO's Digital Designer software and to begin designing and building with virtual LEGO bricks. The virtual model can then be submitted to LEGO via the website and in return LEGO quotes the designer a price for the manufactured version and offers the option to order it directly from the website. In addition, the virtual model can be shared with other members of the community of LEGO factory 'workers',¹⁷ who are free to copy or comment on it, propose changes, and create adaptations. Many of the better-designed products uploaded by consumers are in fact appropriated by LEGO for general production and sale, with design recognition (but no financial recognition) granted to the creator. In this way, LEGO taps into the mass intellectuality of a globally networked community of consumers to speed up innovation and market response rates.¹⁸

Speaking to the power of the co-creation model is its ability to commodify the *experience* of producing. Build-a-Bear Workshop, for example, has purposively created a 'consumption experience' centered on a child constructing a personalized stuffed animal. Build-a-Bear Workshop simply provides what is referred to as a uniform experience platform (Pine and Gilmore, 1999) on which the consumer is granted autonomy to 'play'

and 'create' (Build-a-Bear Workshop, 2007a). The child is invited to choose a basic bear type and subsequently asked to 'give it life' by creating its voice, giving it 'a heart filled with their special wishes', and stuffing, stitching, fluffing, naming (with personalized birth certificate) and accessorizing the bear as they desire so that 'each guest goes home with a smile and a new best friend' (Build-a-Bear Workshop, 2007b). From a labor theory of value perspective, the unpaid labor the child invests in designing and producing the commodity obviously increases its value, establishing expropriation of surplus labor. The exploitative nature of this mode of production, however, is less obvious because of the successful recoding of the child's labor into an enjoyable consumption experience. From the standpoint of the firm, it offers lower costs, higher profit margins, reproduction of demand, and constant access to consumer feedback and ideas (Prahalad, 2007). Build-a-Bear's stellar growth and financial performance suggest that the business model is working. The website shows off a list of almost 50 awards, including a 'Retail Innovator of the Year' award for the company's 'singular, innovative approach to the retail trade'. Moreover, since opening the doors to its first store in 1997, Build-a-Bear has now expanded to 309 company-owned and 46 franchised locations in more than 20 countries (as of June 2007), with 2006 revenues in excess of \$437 million (Build-a-Bear Workshop, 2007c). Clearly, consumers' work pays off!

As these examples demonstrate, the notion of co-creation represents a sophisticated technology of government of consumers where the surplus value generated is based on the appropriation of the creative work of often networked and socially cooperative customers. By exploiting the productive value of social cooperation, communication, and affect of consumers, the co-creation technique represents a closing of the economic and ontological gap between consumption and production, which constitutes one of the most vexing barriers toward increasing control over markets. Improved market knowledge and progressively fine-tuned strategies allow companies to act on the now 'dividualized' customer target (Deleuze, 1992; Gandy, 1993; Lyon, 2001). More than any other prior management technique, the co-creation paradigm rests on the notion of customer control through increasingly *individualized modes of relating*. As Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004b: 11) state: '[W]ithin this framework, the ultimate concept in customer segmentation is one-to-one marketing.' In a one-to-one marketing situation, promulgated as the pinnacle of 'customer-centricity' (Peppers and Rogers, 1993), the firm is able to more intensely modulate each relationship and more successfully channel consumer activities in specific, desirable directions. Indeed, as we can see in all co-creation

examples, *enacting* the relationship (as experience) becomes a commodity form in and of itself. The notion of customization represents this modular mode of relating as it operates through flexible pricing and promotions, selective distribution, and immanent obsolescence of just acquired products. From this point of view, co-creation emerges as marketing's most advanced version of a technology of consumer subjectification (Denegri-Knott et al., 2006).

As noted above, we detect in the mode of relating promoted by co-creation a subtle but significant difference to the Foucauldian model of disciplinary spaces structuring the mode and means of consumption in the age of McDonaldization. As Dreyfus and Rabinow (1982: 134–5) state, the basic goal of disciplinary power is the production of a docile subject. For Foucault, the need for docility is connected to the rise of capitalism. Disciplinary power is especially important in the policing of the workforce: 'without the insertion of disciplined, orderly individuals into the machinery of production the new demands of capitalism would have been stymied' (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982: 135). As Ritzer (2004) points out, the need for control of labor processes has remained central for capitalist organizations and has since been extended to processes of consumption, giving birth to the social technology of marketing (Beniger, 1986; Baudrillard, 1998; Cohen, 2003). In addition, as many commentators have shown (see, e.g. Ritzer, 1999; Sklair, 2001; Schor, 2004), the disciplinary power of capital successfully configures docile customers required for the efficient functioning of rationalized systems of capitalist production.

However, what capital equally requires for the continued reproduction of cycles of consumption are product and process innovations that reliably create new desires in consumers. Innovation and creativity are generated neither by docile workers nor by docile customers but increasingly by what Arvidsson (2006: 73) calls the 'consumer proletariat', whose 'natural state of alienation and defiance' fuels a constant desire to create oppositional forms of consumption relative to the aesthetic and functional norms of standardized and mass-marketed symbols of consumer culture. It is precisely the *non*-identification with commodities available in the market that brings about the kind of creative labor power of consumers that companies value. Thus, companies face the dual challenge of encouraging creative customer behavior and capturing ensuing consumer creativity in structured, appropriate ways. In this sense, customer management, just like its capitalist twin brand management, consists of providing a dynamic platform for practice (Lury, 2004: 6) that activates the creativity of the social – Virno's mass

intellectuality – and channels it ‘to evolve in particular directions’ (Arvidsson, 2006: 74).

If the balancing act between consumer control and freedom (Lury, 2004) cannot be accomplished, the creative labor of the consumer proletariat may become stifled, or worse, the company will fail to appropriate the surplus value created by this multitude of productive social relations. In other words, the subsumption of the economic value of new forms of life produced in the autonomous networks of the consumer multitude relies on the operation of a social technology of discipline and control that goes beyond simple imaginations of efficient production and streamlined processes. The discourse of value co-creation stands for a notion of modern corporate power that is no longer aimed at disciplining consumers and at giving orders or shaping actions according to a given norm (Arvidsson, 2006). Rather, we witness the emergence of customer management as a form of governmentality, where corporations work with and through the freedom of the consumer subject all the while hoping to ensure that the subject’s experience of freedom follows a prescribed program (Lury, 2004; Arvidsson, 2006). In short, administering consumption in ways that allow for creative new forms of life to continuously emerge is the true meaning of the concept of co-creation.

CONCLUSION

The smartest marketers today bow to the empowered, entrepreneurial, and free consumer who, according to their consensual gospel, now rules the digital, globally networked marketplaces in search of open-ended value propositions. Unlike old-style marketers who cling to Philip Kotler’s celebrated ‘four Ps’¹⁹ for effective customer management, the iconoclastic adherents to the logic of co-creation focus on the provision of ambiances that set consumers free to produce and share technical, social, and cultural knowledge. The challenge of new marketing ‘govern-mentality’ is to ensure that consumer freedom evolves in the ‘right’ way. By inserting the customer squarely into the very process of value production of which previously he or she was merely the intended buyer, co-creation represents more than merely a further push towards customization, the mantra of traditional marketing. Co-creation, as a set of organizational strategies and discursive procedures aimed at reconfiguring social relations of production, works through the freedom of the consumer subject with the objective of encouraging and capturing the know-how of this creative common.

The emergence of this latest brand of popular management theories is hardly accidental (see, e.g. Thrift, 2005). Co-creation addresses head-on

a central marketing question in the age of fragmented and rapidly changing consumer tastes: how to bridge the enduring distance between spaces of production and consumption, or perhaps more accurately, how to 'articulate', in Hall's (1980) sense, production with consumption (see also du Gay et al., 1997; Negus, 2002). It is this desire that prompts firms to seek control by 'bringing in' the consumer (Learmans, 1993). Therefore, the concept of co-creation radicalizes traditional methods of consumer control based on technologies of surveillance and discipline, replacing them with modular 'modes of relating' (Deleuze 1992), which in their latest manifestation aim at involving customers directly in the production process. Enlisting customers as producers and charging them for their own work constitutes an interesting contradiction that points to the importance of promoting a discourse of empowerment and self-actualization in conjunction with that of co-creation. Put differently, the ideological recruitment of consumers into productive co-creation relationships hinges on accommodating consumers' needs for recognition, freedom, and agency.

Interestingly, in some cases where consumers show themselves to be rather impressively innovative, as for example in the case of the Sony AIBO enthusiast AiboPet²⁰ or the iPod Linux Project Community,²¹ they may face legal troubles and not a warm collaborative embrace by corporations. Perhaps announcements of the advent of co-creation are overly sanguine. Indeed, corporate exploitation of consumer labor is not entirely new. As Frank (Frank and Weiland, 1997; Frank, 1999, 2000) convincingly demonstrates, consumers' counter-cultural and resistive acts against the hegemony of corporate market ideology in fact reproduces the success of the capitalist market. That is, consumers' subversive energy has long been harvested to fuel the market's regenerative engine (see also Holt, 2006). From this perspective, it becomes clear that the notion of co-creation represents a radicalization of the co-optation of resistance by the market because it suggests nothing less than the complete incorporation of *all* of consumers' productive capacity, not just their symbolic or 'immaterial labor' (Lazzarato, 1996) into production.

Under normal circumstances it would appear that the interplay between dominant and resisting discourses results in the emergence of new ways to dominate and, therefore, new ways to resist (Hall, 1996). Under the specter of co-creation however, even collective ideological resistance becomes creative mass collaboration that is then often seamlessly incorporated into the product itself. In the final analysis, new marketing 'governmentality' represents a form of political power that enables the autonomous creativity of the masses and reconstitutes it as a docile and managed form

of consumer life desired by capital. Marketplace hegemony remains intact as the company benefits from outsourcing some of the costly functions once conducted internally to a diverse and flexible workforce. Consumers indeed have been turned into what Vargo and Lusch (2004) call 'operant resources.'²²

Ultimately, co-creation represents perhaps the most appropriate mode of production in the age of post-Fordist fragmentation of demand (Lash and Urry, 1994; Kumar, 1995; Castells, 1996). Competing successfully means to innovate rapidly and to generate and control consumption. Under the pressure of accelerating production formats and quickening model obsolescence cycles, capital increasingly has to rely on a skilled, flexible, and autonomous, yet docile labor force. From this vantage point, then, consumers represent the most pervasive and arguably most productive form of labor given the size and motivation of the exploitable workforce (see Lazzarato, 1996). 'This way, the post-Fordist production process directly exploits the communitarian dimension of social life' (Arvidsson, 2005: 241). That is, co-creative labor occurs when consumers manufacture social relations and emotional involvement around a product, and when this affective and collective work forms the basis for the product's economic value (see e.g. Arvidsson, 2005). Hence, value according to this model is a function of the productive communication between consumers and marketers, which, in a rather astute marketing move, is then subsumed under capital when consumers are asked to pay for the surplus extracted from their own work. Management and marketing thinkers celebrate the new logic of collaborative value creation as a moment of consumer empowerment and transfiguration of marketing to a model of equal, satisfying, and mutually beneficial relationships between producers and consumers. Yet, the crux of value co-creation, to paraphrase Deleuze (1992), is to provide the surest way of delivering the customer over to the corporation.

Notes

1. CK Prahalad has been listed at number 1 in Suntop Media's 2007 rankings of 'most influential living business thinkers' in a top five completed by such luminaries as Bill Gates, Alan Greenspan, Michael Porter and Gary Hamel (Crainer Dearlove, 2007). His oeuvre on the value co-creation issue was largely co-authored with Venkat Ramaswamy.
2. The origin of the term does not lie with any of the authors cited. In fact, it may very well have been coined and popularized by futurologist Alvin Toffler in his 1980 book *The Third Wave*. He predicted that the role of producers and consumers would begin to blur and merge once mass production of standardized

products had satisfied basic consumer demands and the continued need of capitalism for growing profits would force businesses to shift to mass production of highly customized products. However, the idea that consumers are metamorphosing into producers because of the effect of new electric technologies was noted in Marshall McLuhan and Barrington Nevitt's *Take Today* (1972). More recently, the concepts of 'prosumer' and 'prosumption' have been employed in the service management literature. Wendelin Kuepers (2002: 32) for example, talks about how narrated plots provide 'prosumers' with a medium to create and experience vicariously the events of their service 'prosumption': 'The service-provider and the customer voluntarily become "caught up" in a co-created story.' In the last few years, 'prosumers' have received renewed popular attention with the advent of the internet.

3. As students of consumer culture would point out, consumers have always been active interpreters of objects and makers of symbolic meaning. However, it is safe to say that the current discussions in marketing about co-creation and collaboration seem largely oblivious to this body of work and generally suffer from a lack of historical perspective.
4. To remind the reader of previous ones: In management there have been, for example, Management by Objectives, Zero-based Budgeting, T Groups, Theory Y, Theory Z, Diversification, Matrix Organization, Participative Management, Management by Walking Around, Job Enlargement, Quality Circles, Downsizing, Re-engineering, Total Quality Management, Teams, and Empowerment. In marketing we have seen Target Marketing, Lifestyle Marketing, Relationship Marketing, Customer Relationship Marketing, to name but a few (Staw and Epstein, 2000).
5. To this day, Philip Kotler is revered and recited by business students across the globe as a relentless proponent of the 'marketing concept', a prescriptive formula that if followed correctly promises riches to marketers by making customers happy. Customers vary widely but systematically in taste and preferences, thus forming what has come to be known as market segments. Therefore companies must implement flexible production regimes to serve each of these segments with 'targeted' commodities. Failing to do so results in what marketers call dissatisfied customers who will 'defect' and seek their satisfaction in the form of a more customized market offering from a competitor.
6. Contrary to their academic counterparts, the practicing marketer seems to be more willing to admit that the real obstacle they face is 'the epidemic of consumer cynicism' (Bond and Kirshenbaum, 1998) toward their work in general, rather than a more demanding consumer.
7. One of the fallouts of business continued will to control consumers and the associated belief that more, and especially 'deeper' knowledge, equals more control has been an increase in the number of trained anthropologists and sociologists working in research departments of large corporations, advertising agencies, and other types of market research service providers.
8. We cite Thomas Frank (1999) here because his book discusses at length such attempts at consumer resistance to marketing ideology. We are aware of the fact that the more general point of his excellent discussion is to show the mechanics of the corporate exploitation of such subversive consumer acts for purposes of

- product and brand innovation, thus questioning the very possibility of the true political clout of such practices.
9. In this regard, one is reminded of the pervasive Web 2.0 applications in the digital economy and the value co-creation opportunities they afford (Terranova, 2000). Firms behind web spaces such as Facebook, MySpace, Flickr, YouTube and the like rely extensively on consumer input for their technical and financial success. Speaking of Second Life one observer notes (Communities Dominate Brands, 2006): 'SL tap(s) into something very powerful: the talent and hard work of everyone inside.'
 10. Even a business such as McDonald's, whose profitability is primarily dependent on the progressive rationalization of the production and distribution of massive amounts of food, recognizes that innovation, now more than ever, takes place on the symbolic (brand) level. To 'update' its brand image in the face of growing concerns over fast food's negative health impact, the company decided to enlist the help of 'an army of moms – often its toughest critics – as 'quality correspondents' to act as citizen consumer reporters. The idea is to spread the message – which it hopes to craft into a positive one – about McDonaldland and its products' (MacArthur, 2007: 1). Hence, in the remaking of their brand image, McDonald's draws on the (hard to control and even harder to predict) creativeness of consumers' social production of communication, affect, and community.
 11. As was the case with forms of sociality characteristic of the peasant culture during the time of the great transition to urban industrialization that gave way to new socialities with their own logic of social cooperation organized around the demands of 19th century factory discipline (Thompson, 1980).
 12. For an example of managerial hype around this objective see Tapscott and Williams (2006).
 13. If we accept the hype in the managerial literature (e.g. Tapscott, 1999; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004b; Chesbrough, 2006; Tapscott and Williams, 2006).
 14. A company called Linden Lab owns Second Life, although the meaning of 'ownership' in a context where significant economic value is created by the intellectual work of non-paid consumer 'workers' may become the site for interesting future legal disputes. This is true in particular for Second Life where in a radical departure from the norm of MMOG, designers of houses, clothes, and even the skin of their avatars retain full intellectual-property rights to their designs (Holtzman, 2007). Linden Lab credits this policy for being the single biggest factor behind their growth (Rymaszewski et al., 2006). A currency, the Linden dollar, was introduced to encourage entrepreneurs to build capitalist ventures and to facilitate economic exchange between 'residents' of the 'synthetic world' (Castronova, 2005). Reaping economic rewards and obtaining a sense of ownership of the virtual world means that players have a vested interest in SL's growth and prosperity, an interest that neatly coincides with that of Linden Lab. Consumer responsibilities have expanded from an initial emphasis on creating virtual SL artifacts to operations such as in-world policing and supervision, as well as developing and improving the game's underlying code (viewer application code has been made available to the open-source community).
 15. The Second Life message of liberation from corporate structures is mostly

targeted at traditional media corporations but we can also read it in a more general sense as a critique of all lived environments in advanced consumer cultures where, as Augé (1995) has observed, operations of global capital transform every place into non-places.

16. Second Life claimed a population of over 6.7 million unique residents as of September 2007, quickly approaching that of Sweden (Second Life, 2007b).
17. Obviously, these workers are not working in actual Lego factories in Asia, Europe, and soon Mexico, nor are they employed by LEGO.
18. Dutch LEGO fan Erik Brok developed the popular Market Street product (a traditional Dutch-style house) and German engineer Reinhard Beneke has created a range of train designs that are now available for purchase from LEGO. While it is difficult to pinpoint the exact effect of LEGO's co-creation strategy on the company's bottom line, LEGO's global sales were up by 11 percent in 2006, 'exceed[ing] all expectations for the year' (LEGO Group, 2007: 4). In its 2006 annual report, LEGO is unambiguous about its future strategic vision (LEGO Group, 2006: 18):

'The LEGO Group sees its direct contact to the consumers as something very unique and as an extremely significant asset for the development of both existing and new business. LEGO fans are involved in the product development in several areas and stages of the development process . . . The LEGO Group considers such very direct involvement of the users an important innovative driver in relation to the coming years' preparations for growth. By means of close contacts with the users, the company obtains unique knowledge of the wishes and needs of the users, and this will be applied in the development and marketing of the LEGO products.'

19. The so-called 'four Ps' refer to the marketing mix made up of considerations for product, place (i.e. the distribution of products), promotion, and price.
20. AIBO enthusiast AiBoPet wrote and distributed free software applications for Sony's robotic pet, thereby vastly extending AIBO's capabilities. Sony in response notified him that by manipulating the AIBO software he was violating copyright provisions and insisted he stop (Bollier, 2005).
21. This community brings together fans of the Linux operating system who use their often remarkable skills to extend the functionality of the Apple iPod in rather surprising and interesting ways.
22. At the core of Vargo and Lusch's (2004) argument is a distinction between what they call operand and operant resources. By operand resources they refer to a concept rather similar to what Marx called the basic means of capitalist production, including physical and material objects such as machinery, land, or other material inputs to production. The difference between the two notions, of course, is that for Vargo and Lusch it is the existing commodity that constitutes a resource for production by consumers rather than the outcome of a labor process. Operant resources include intangibles such as core competencies, the expertise of staff, or the variety of consumer skills that can be brought to bear on operand resources represented by commodities in order to generate 'unique value' for consumers. As Vargo and Lusch put it (2004: 7), goods are now no more than

'intermediate 'products' that are used by other operant resources (customers) as appliances in value-creation processes'.

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