

Marketing with More Meaning: Insights from Stanley Shapiro on Sustainable Societal Provisioning Systems

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ABSTRACT

The evolution of marketing thought has shifted from its initial focus on consumption and economic growth to encompass broader societal and environmental concerns. In this insightful interview, Professor Emeritus Stanley Shapiro, a pioneer in macromarketing and long-time advocate for sustainable societal provisioning systems, reflects on his academic journey, from the managerial orientation of marketing in the mid-twentieth century to his later involvement in the Canadian Conserver Society and macromarketing movements. He discusses how sustainable provisioning reframes marketing's goals around distributive justice, resilience, and global sustainability, proposing that marketing management practices must evolve beyond profit-driven logics. Offering both historical and forward-looking perspectives, the conversation provides valuable guidance for scholars interested in developing research that truly matters for society and the environment.

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Professor, your career began when marketing was primarily focused on consumption and economic growth. What has changed in the world and in your own thinking that now leads you to advocate for a focus on sustainable societal provisioning systems? (Renata Andreoni Barboza)

Stanley Shapiro: For purposes of this question, I think we need a broader timeline, one that goes back to the early 1900s. From then until the late 1950s, marketing textbooks were all primarily descriptive in nature, though they varied to some degree in the extent to which they put their emphasis on how different types of products were marketed, on the institutions either directly (i.e., retailers) or indirectly (i.e., advertising agencies) that were involved as goods moved to market, or on the different marketing functions (buying, selling, transportation, storage, etc.) as goods moved from producer to consumer.

My own doctoral studies began just about at the end of this period, when, rather rapidly and in large part due to the Ford Foundation, younger scholars adopted a more analytical perspective, and the leading textbooks, those by John Howard, E. J. McCarthy, and Philip Kotler, took much more of a 'how you should market' approach. I moved in that direction myself for a number of years and thought of marketing primarily as a management function.

In the mid-1970s, however, about a decade after I had relocated from the United States to Canada, I became heavily involved in the Canadian government's Conserver Society initiatives. Our GAMMA group examined three prototype societies: 'doing more with less,' 'doing the same with less,' and 'doing less with less.' All this was in marked contrast to the then still-prevailing 'more is better and still more is better still' mantra. As the Conserver Society project came to an end, I first discovered and then joined the Macromarketing group, one to which I have now belonged for almost fifty years (e.g., see [Shapiro, 2013](#)).

When you talk about sustainable societal provisioning systems, what are the key elements that define this idea, and how does it differ from traditional green consumption or corporate responsibility approaches? And, following your Journal of Macromarketing paper (Shapiro, 2024), how can this perspective help reassert macromarketing's distinct identity as newer fields like Transformative Consumer Research and Subsistence Marketing engage with similar themes? (Renata Andreoni Barboza)

Stanley Shapiro: Once again, a little historical perspective can help. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, there were only two what I would call academic 'special interest' groups within the broad 'marketing and society' area. The first was the Macromarketing group, and the second a Marketing and Public Policy group, which at the time had an almost exclusive U.S. focus. That, fortunately, is no longer the case. Many other special interest groups now exist, and they are also making meaningful contributions in areas that macromarketers have long studied, areas like the climate crisis, sustainability, marketing ethics, and marketing's role in now emerging economies.

However, what still remains unique about macromarketing is its focus on provisioning systems, both those that are market-based and those that are prescriptive, usually government-driven ones. Collectively, and with relatively few exceptions, they account for all of the provisioning that takes place in any given country. However, all of that provisioning must be looked at in terms of both its global sustainability and its distributive justice dimensions. One way of doing this that I find especially effective is to draw upon 'doughnut economics' ([Raworth, 2012; 2017](#)).

As a society, we want as few people as possible left struggling to get out of the hole in the middle of the doughnut so they can join those living far more comfortably inside. As far as sustainability is concerned, we do not want any necessary resource to be used up at a faster rate than it can be produced or processed within the doughnut itself. It is when I put all this together that I concluded that macromarketing's USP (Unique Selling Proposition) ought to be its focus on 'sustainable, societal provisioning systems' ([Shapiro, 2024](#)).

In provisioning systems, there is always a tension between efficiency and resilience/diversity. How should governments, firms, and communities navigate this narrow corridor between stability and chaos? (Renata Andreoni Barboza)

Stanley Shapiro: That's quite a question and one that I don't think I, or for that matter anyone else, can currently provide a conclusive answer. That tension you cite is always there, though I prefer to view it more generally as a conflict between the status quo and the forces of change. To the extent that there are insights to be found in the marketing literature, the most relevant sources now available are the last two articles coauthored by the late Roger Layton, macromarketing's premier contributor to systems thinking ([Layton et al., 2024; Layton & Domegan, 2021](#)). As for future empirical research exploring this area, the focus could be on the differences in the way that the provisioning systems of various nations were reshaped, both at the time and more permanently, by the Covid-19 epidemic. Also worth studying is the impact of the still evolving Trump tariff wars on different national provisioning systems and the quality of life the citizens of each nation enjoy.

Is there room to revisit central marketing theories, such as value, exchange, or segmentation, from the perspective of sustainable provisioning systems? (Renata Andreoni Barboza)

Stanley Shapiro: I think that the impact is, or at least should be, much more pronounced on marketing management practice rather than on theories in large part borrowed from economics. If you accept sustainable societal provisioning systems as an overall objective, then there are certain to be a number of changes in what is produced, how it is produced, and how it is marketed. More specifically, product, price, promotion, and place, all four of the founding dimensions of marketing management, are greatly impacted when a new guiding principle, one that places much more emphasis on both global sustainability and distributive justice, with the end objective being a better quality of life for all concerned, replaces the previously dominant focus on corporate profits.

In your answer, you emphasize that the most significant impact of sustainable societal provisioning systems should be on marketing management practice rather than on core theories derived from economics. Yet, might this paradigm also require us to rethink some theoretical underpinnings, for example, whether the very notion of 'exchange' remains adequate in contexts where provisioning replaces market-based logics? (Renata Andreoni Barboza)

Stanley Shapiro: Yours is a valid question, the answer to which, in my opinion at least, depends on which one of the two major provisioning systems you are considering. 'Exchange' remains as central a concept as ever if provisioning is being provided through a marketing system, which by definition is market-based. Individuals or small groups (i.e., families or businesses) 'exchange' the amount the seller requests in return for the desired good or service they want to acquire. The same holds for the labor market in which individual workers 'exchange' their services for an agreed upon wage.

But this is not the case when goods or services are provided by a prescriptive, usually government-fashioned provisioning system. It seems to me to be far too much of a stretch to consider that taxpayers, either individually or collectively, are 'exchanging' what they have paid in taxes for access to the full range of services being provided by their government. After all, you receive all of these services after being required to pay for them whether you want them or not. Also, no 'exchange' is involved, but rather a one-way transfer, when low-income consumers receive a financial subsidy from their governments.

What roles do emerging countries like Brazil play in shaping sustainable provisioning systems? Do cultural differences (e.g., between Latin America and North America) offer distinct insights for rethinking macromarketing? (Renata Andreoni Barboza)

Stanley Shapiro: You are asking two different though obviously related questions. In fact, every country in the world, be they developed nations, emerging economies or currently stagnating societies has its own provisioning systems, though these differ greatly in their commitments to both global sustainability and distributive justice. And yes, the cultural differences between nations and regions that affect macromarketing must be more fully studied in order that both differences and similarities are appropriately considered. Work comparing North America and Latin America should, in large part, be conducted by Latin American scholars well versed in local conditions. This type of research, replicated in other regions as well, should, over time, generate a more globally relevant body of macromarketing thought. Indeed, what could be more macro?

If you could give one piece of provocative advice to young Brazilian academics who want to make a meaningful contribution, what would it be? (Renata Andreoni Barboza)

Stanley Shapiro: I would urge each of these young scholars to focus their research on marketing matters that REALLY matter — to them and to society at large. We need this type of research far more than we do another generation of papers that, while they may generate statistically significant results, have no social relevance whatsoever. That said, I know too many Promotion and Tenure Committees still pay undue attention, not to the quality of any article, but rather to A Level or Top 50 classifications that include very few journals open to 'marketing and society' research. If that's the case at your university, publish what you must where you must in those first few years to get tenured and promoted but then, marching to your own drummer, focus your research on socially significant marketing issues.

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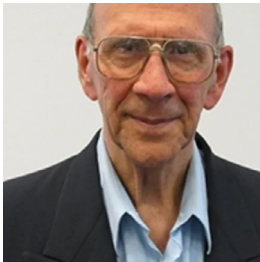
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