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Approaching place and space as craftsperson: on the dialogue between theory and practice

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to contribute to this Special Issue about alternative and critical marketing theory on space and place by discussing its link with practice. More generally, this paper intends to suggest that more effective links between theory and practice can result into more meaningful conceptual research in business administration and marketing.

Design/methodology/approach – This is a reflexive introspective essay that relates the author's personal experience to the recent literature on the dialogue between theory and practice within general marketing research and marketing scholarship on place and space.

Findings – After recognising that different modes of knowledge creation exist, some gateways between theory and practice are identified, as part of a future agenda that could accompany scholars in improving their engagement with society. These gateways include dissemination strategies; teaching and public engagement; and formats of "engaged" research that comprise action research and collaboration with non-academic actors.

Research limitations/implications – The alternative and critical marketing theory on space and place comprises different specific domains, some of which appear to be closer to practice than others. Because of the author's background, place branding and destination marketing are granted preferential attention.

Originality/value – The figure of the craftsman depicted by Sennet (2008) is identified as a source of inspiration for marketing scholars interested in space and place. The metaphor of the craftsperson could be useful for business and marketing scholar alike while reflecting on their roles and positionalities.

Keywords Theory and practice, Place, Space, Marketing, Critical management studies

Paper type Viewpoint

Introduction

Nobody can deny that the research developed by marketing scholars interested in geographical dimensions is theoretically challenging, conceptually intriguing, genuinely multi-disciplinary and often empirically compelling. Studying how rural areas are rebranded, how "overturistified" mass destinations can marketed more sustainably or how the architecture of totalitarian regimes is reimagined by local communities constitute only a sample of the challenges faced by researchers in this domain. These researchers, whose ideas and ethos underpin this Special Issue, have a crucial role in disclosing alternative ways of conceptualising marketplaces and simulating students, as well as colleagues

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working on retail, tourism management, city marketing and branding. The call for papers of this Special Issue is no exception, inviting a varied array of critical and alternative marketing perspectives to space and place and confirming the extent to which the fascination for geographical dimensions can stimulate the curiosity of eclectic marketing academics.

In this essay, which is written in the form of a self-reflective introspective account, I intend to emphasise an angle that should be given consideration even though it might sound as inconvenient matter. This regards the dialogue between theory and practice, which is certainly not a new discussion in marketing or business research (Hughes *et al.*, 2008; Reed, 2009; Lee and Greenley, 2010). I would like to argue that this body of critical and alternative research has potentially a lot to offer to – and a lot to gain from – the activity of practitioners and local authorities, as the implications of issues at stake are relevant not only to academic communities but also to society at large. In the next paragraphs, I will reflect on how we can perceive us as scholars engaged in the "experience" (Sennet, 2008) with the social and spatial processes that we theorise. Given the previous frustrations occurred in the "audience development" of critical management studies (Parker, 2021), discussing the relationship between critical/alternative spatial marketing theory and practice is "too important not to debate" [1]. This can be useful to prevent us from possible allegations of "defensive isolation" (Parker, 2021), or from other undesirable consequences that such isolation could cause in the long term, such as the perceived social utility of the knowledge we produce and, perhaps, our sense of engagement as "researchers in society". Finally, it is from the dialogue with practice that thought-provoking theory can unfold.

Knowledge for academics or knowledge for society?

As I begin to organise my thoughts, preliminary doubts arise. Is it fruitful to express apprehension about the disconnection between theory and practice, in the attempt to pursue greater integration? My mind is crossed by the reminiscences of the spreadsheet used by one of my former employers during the annual transparency review. On a given week of the year, every scholar was requested to fill the form by reporting all the hours allocated to teaching- and research-related work tasks. Out of the ten rows describing the "categories to be used" for research, six of them were pointing to funded research, depending on the source of funding. As I was not participating in any major funded research projects at that time, I found myself allocating remarkable number of hours towards the most reasonable options for me in the list, including PhD students' supervision, teaching-focused research and, above all, something labelled "Exploratory/Speculative/Curiosity-driven". I admit I felt discomfort in repeatedly declaring "non income-bearing" activities while other colleagues were doing great in income generation – this would lead to an interesting critical discourse analysis on the hegemonic value of fundraising in neoliberal academia. However, the main point here regards the rigidity of the categories and, above all, the fact that these seem to differentiate quite neatly what is "Exploratory/Speculative/Curiosity-driven" from what is not. Can "speculation" be involved in some government-funded research too? Can "curiosity" be valuable, and possibly used to address issues that matter for society? One could simply decide to keep research curiosity-driven papers, for example, in the form of theoretical papers, separated from more applied-research projects (for instance, consulting), confused (or convinced) by the rigidity of the categorisation. In other words, one would be tempted to produce "differentiated" efforts, in the conscious attempt to tap into distinct goals: a "science for science" effort, where knowledge is mainly produced by

academics for academics and "science with and for society" or "science for policy", where the knowledge produced should also be of some relevance for practitioners, policymakers or society at large. If keeping things separated was my (implicit) choice at that time, I now feel motivated to examine the boundaries of my theory-driven intellectual endeavours, searching for a tighter nexus between my critical scholarship and the dimension of *praxis*. I find moral support and legitimacy in the writing of a former colleague of mine, who addressed the conversation on the relationship between theory and practices in business (education) (Reed, 2009; Lee and Greenley, 2010).

By narrating the rise and the decline of a critical business school, Parker (2021) demonstrates that asking such types of questions is very relevant for ensuring the survival of critical and alternative scholarship. Through an insider-ethnography, the British scholar elaborates on the challenges inherent in "defending 'critical' work" in the context of an increasingly marketised higher education scenario, providing a caveat for anyone who cares about the future of critical thinking within business education. Accordingly:

> [. . .] "critical" versions of academic disciplines risk being no more than academic fashions unless they clearly embed themselves in policy and practice within the university and also make clear links to allies in their institution's environment. (p. 1115)

In an attempt to consider strategies that might have prevented the end of the critical business school project, Parker writes:

> [. . .] support could have been its city and region. Given [the School's] commitments, it should have been possible to connect to networks of co-operatives, purpose led businesses, social enterprises, perhaps to the city and county councils, the local chamber of commerce, labour party, green party and so on. Alternative organisations could have been the topic and resource for a curriculum that was aimed at making the school useful for allies of its overall political project. (Reedy and Learmonth, 2009)

In addition to Parker's bitter chronicle on the failure of a critical business school, there are additional arguments that urge us to look into the theory-practice debate with renovated awareness. Rapid changes are reshaping the articulations between science and society, evident, for example, in the European Union policies that prescribe a tighter dialogue between scientific research and its reverberation on society. In other words, current policy orientations seem to urge us to consider that it is appropriate to move beyond the separation that has often distinguished two prevalent modes of knowledge creation. The first is understood as "disciplinary knowledge" and constitutes the traditional paradigm of scientific discovery, where the knowledge created needs mainly to be relevant to the academic community (Tribe and Liburd, 2016). The second mode of knowledge creation, instead, emerges as contextualised in its application and is usually "problem-based" (Tribe and Liburd, 2016), or embedded in practice, one might say. Differently from the former, this latter is nurtured by tacit knowledge and is not an exclusive realm for academics, who however can collaborate with-non academics to address and understand problems within specific spatial and temporal contexts. One could argue that it is the exclusive focus on disciplinary knowledge that Parker is criticising, lamenting the lack of integration with other modes of knowledge creation. With this distinction in mind, we have now a better instrument to look at how the theory-practice debate has been faced by colleagues in the marketing field.

"Theory meets practice": a marketing *déjà vu*

Some commentators have addressed the divorce between theory and practice in marketing by focusing on their gaps, as November (2004) does in his cynical "Seven reasons why

practitioners do not pay attention to marketing research". The title does not seem to leave room for nuanced interpretations: marketing academics and practitioners leave in two incommensurable worlds. In what has become an established perspective, the work of van de Ven and Johnson (2006) clarifies how the two groups draw on *different* ontologies and epistemologies in the attempt to answer *different* questions. Observing this dichotomy from a different lens, Crespin-Mazet and Ingemansson-Havenvid (2021) further elaborate on this separation, considering knowledge as a heterogeneous resource. They argue that theorising is not being co-created in the interaction between academia and the industry, but is actually produced separately by each party. Accordingly:

> [...] the benefit of this cooperation does not lie in its power to generate academically or managerially-relevant theories, but rather in its power to generate rich insights on novel phenomena and specific contexts. (p. 286)

In this view, academia–industry interaction remains beneficial, because it enables the creation of a "fertile middleground in which *common-pool* knowledge resources can be jointly produced" (Crespin-Mazet and Ingemansson-Havenvid (2021). Therefore, the task of promoting dialogue and collaboration between the two, for example, in the form of action research, is very meaningful.

Additional researchers have emphasised constructive angles, by highlighting a number of "routes to knowledge exchange" that could mitigate the theory–practice gap (Hughes *et al.*, 2008). They map the tools that each group evaluate as effective or ineffective, besides offering an appraisal of the various sets of criticisms developed by one group towards the other (for instance, whether lack of practical knowledge may affect scholars, while consultants may display an apparent short-termism). The authors conclude by contrasting two approaches, a "pure science" one, where academics are given the role of external observers, and one called "pluralism of research approaches", where academics are supposed to get closer to the object of study, and provide situated accounts in specific spatial and temporal settings, possibly contributing to solving problems experienced by companies or local authorities. I appreciate their effort as a means to pave the way towards the convergence between the two modes of knowledge creation described in the previous section.

A similar discussion is not unprecedented in particular domains of space and place research, one in which the qualms on the convergence between theorists and practitioners has turned out to be particularly relevant: place branding and marketing. This is the line of inquiry that Kavaratzis (2015) takes forward by reporting the main findings of a conference session titled "Theory meets Practice". After having identified place "practitioners" as the counterpart of place theorists, the needs of both groups are investigated through a number of driving questions. In particular, the question of whether there is any need to bring academics and practitioners closer together is given a positive answer. In spite of the current distance, there are in fact "perceived benefits" that more proximity (or at least reciprocal interest) can offer to both groups. The "High Street UK 2020" project developed at the Institute of Place Management in Manchester is discussed by Kavaratzis (2015) as a virtuous example of how academic competence can be put at the service of practitioners and used to inform the development of urban policies. Other relevant best practices can be found in the work of Millington *et al.* (2020) and Ripoll-Gonzalez and Gale (2020). In the first project, researchers contributed to enhance stakeholders' understanding how to improve the vitality and viability of smaller district centres available in Manchester, triangulating several sources of primary and secondary data and involving representatives of the private and public sector (Millington

et al., 2020). The second project combined Participatory Action Research and Sociological Intervention to inform alternative place brand governance arrangements in Tasmania. The next section aims at extending this conversation.

Gateways between theory and practices

In continuity with what proposed by colleagues, I would like to discuss three families of gateways between theory and practice: the first regards how theoretical research can be disseminated and popularised; the second involves teaching; and the third regards instead how research can be planned and (co)constructed with non-academic stakeholders. As many before me have been writing interestingly about these issues, I am trying to focus on the personal sense of purpose (and satisfaction) that I have received in trying to use those gateways, while experiencing problems and contradictions.

Dissemination strategies

Disseminating findings to larger audiences, outside the academia, is not in contrast with the academics' need to produce knowledge for academics (science for science). Getting back to our interviewees by sharing research findings, for example, would be the "minimum wage" in this respect. This gateway can thus be seen as a form integration that works downstream of our traditional research habits and entails communicating knowledge in more "popular" formats. Furthermore, while discussions on open science and open access publishing keep unfolding, there is an increasing sense that we need to address the problem of journal articles usually offered with restricted access. I think this is a relevant issue for theorists with an intention to challenge the status quo, unveil tacit power structures and facilitate more inclusive place development. I was one of those (many) "unlucky" PhD students based in "peripheral" universities, who had to pay for purchasing academic articles before moving into more "central" institutions, way before ResearchGate enhanced the availability of published papers. Some European projects, for example, require researchers to produce open-access outputs, resulting into an additional share of taxpayers' money spent on securing gold publishing options in usual journal (let alone the proliferation of predatory open access journals). This suggests that the dialogue on how open access science may be "(re)shaping the Academic Self" (de Knecht *et al.*, 2012) is a complex one, speaking to the wider debate on the dominant role of major publishers and the limited inclusiveness of the global system of publishing.

Thus, in addition to presenting our papers' findings in more accessible ways (such as short summaries free of jargon, with infographics) and in more accessible outlets (such as newsletters, our Departments' official websites) (Kavaratzis, 2015, p. 269), what else we can do? For example, scholars, who have reached a certain seniority level, could decide to share part of their research with carefully selected academic outlets falling outside preferential rankings in terms of employability, and that satisfy certain criteria of inclusiveness. My contribution is not extensive in this sense, but a few years ago, I co-edited a Special Issue on *Alma Tourism*, an emerging open access tourism journal edited at the University of Bologna by the Centre for Advanced Studies in Tourism. If the outcome of that work was not relevant for the official performance appraisal of a British business school, it served as a meaningful political act to support a cultural and scientific project that, I thought, deserved my intellectual energy. I am sure we all have equivalent projects that we care for and we may want to fight for, inside and also outside of the Associated Business Schools list. Another outlet that has recently drawn my attention is *Via – Tourism Review* (https://journals.openedition.org/viatourism/?lang=en), which is an international, pluri-lingual and multidisciplinary tourism journal that seeks to go

beyond the beaten tracks of Anglo-Saxon-centric tourism studies. Publishing open access articles in other languages than English could be a way to bring our scholarship messages beyond the usual boundaries and expanding our readership.

Public lectures and teaching

Suspended between dissemination and teaching, public lectures or speeches given during public engagement opportunities act as a significant driver that have forced me to bring my conceptual work to a different level of elaboration, and to meet non-academic actors who in turn stimulated my curiosity. For example, lecturing about responsible tourism at *Unijunior* – an event where university teachers meet elementary schools- was a challenging experience for me. Of course, I was aware that studying the practices of today's consumer can be useful, but I learned that interacting with the consumers of tomorrow can be even more stimulating. I got to know an unusual audience and experiment unusual teaching methods, such as working with drawings. I know for sure that many of us incorporate an alternative and critical posture into their teaching practices. Educating students implies much more than sharing with them an industry's best practices, with the aim to promote the acquisition of critical reflexivity and a cultural toolkit that would facilitate their future awareness as professionals.

Along these lines, I sometimes encourage MSc students to write action-research dissertations rooted into their internship contexts. In many cases, I witnessed the extraordinary capacity of students to reflect on their own practice and observe their bosses' or colleagues' routines through the lens of space- or place-related theories. Going one step forward, "service-learning" or "community-based learning" (Lin *et al.*, 2017) is going to be an additional step I would like to pursue. Designing a course where students actively work on problems that are relevant for a community, for an NGO or a local Destination Management Organisation, is a way to negotiate research objectives that serve the needs of a wider array of place stakeholders. This leads towards the final family of gateways, where our engagement as researchers can become more radical and first-hand.

Setting up engaged research

I finally shift from the task of communicating research to the one of designing research that incorporates from its beginning more engagement with society. First of all, there are spatial researchers who have always been immersed in space-related practical experiences and distilling from practice meaningful theory, which in turn has contributed to alter the aspects of practice. I always get inspired in re-reading conceptual work that comes directly from the authors' first-hand involvement in specific spatial development setting, be that framed into self-reflective commentaries (Kalandides, 2011, 2020), conceptual papers (Boisen *et al.*, 2018) or two-stage research processes that include an action research component (Le Feuvre *et al.*, 2016). In these contributions, theory is grounded in experience and facilitates the creation of conceptual accounts that are likely to be useful to both academic and non-academic audiences, such as the local authorities involved in the project reported by Le Feuvre *et al.* (2016).

One could argue that the maximum level of integration between theory and practice can be observed while co-constructing research–practice collaborations, where higher education institutions, public authorities and private entrepreneurs negotiate from the beginning the function and scope of the research. The most ambitious model that I want to remark here is offered by those colleagues who conceive (and operate!) universities as "co-creators for sustainability", immersed within their territories (Rinaldi *et al.*, 2020). These scholars, whom I had sometimes the pleasure to help during their place branding student projects, show that

it is possible to contribute to conceptual debates hosted in leading journals by implementing multiple stakeholders projects that bring international students and local place managers together (Cavicchi *et al.*, 2018). In this avenue, securing European funding for territorial projects pave the way for prolonged action research and stakeholder management work, which then results into reports that usually highlight contributions for practitioners and local authorities affected by the initial problems (problem-based research), and also results into academic papers (disciplinary knowledge).

Furthermore, I want to emphasise the meaningfulness of other collaborations with professionals that are not academic. Doing and writing research with a non-academic co-author (Goulart Sztejnberg and Giovanardi, 2017) has been an experience I can recommend and that I hope to replicate in the future. Similarly, developing a daily dialogue with local authorities tasked with tourism development has been an illuminating experience. Assisting local authorities as academic consultants, in fact, grants access to the "behind the scenes" where it is possible to appreciate unfolding power dynamics and hidden decision-making. In a recent project, officially led by the Tourism Department of a Local Council, it has been thrilling for me to test the flexibility of the institutional context by involving in research meetings some representatives from the Culture Department and the Planning Department. It was disappointing, but equally worthy of note, to observe vetoes being expressed in the room and, therefore, to make a step back and find the right "theory-in-use" for restoring the harmony and "political equilibrium". Usually, the juiciest stuff emerging from such situations cannot be openly reported in research papers because of ethics-related reasons or non-disclosure agreements. Looking forward, observing the unfriendly relationships or the scarce attitude to collaboration between the departments of same local council can suggest ways to modify the terms of engagement during the research agreement phase. For example, one could negotiate with the leading department the right to involve in the research any other local officials, or the right to communicate research findings with all the members of the organisations (or a list of primary agreed beforehand). Even though we may work closely to older and very experienced researchers, improving our work as pracademics engaged in action research largely progresses as a trial-and-error process, where we learn from our own mistakes in the attempt to produce impact and create long-lasting trust between us and non-academic knowledge co-creators (Trencher *et al.*, 2014).

Intriguingly, collaborations with private organisations too can lead to gratifying results. "Le Spiagge Wellness Academy" has been a wellness tourism project stemmed in 2021 from the dialogue among three actors: the Department for Life Quality Studies (University of Bologna); Unirimini, a public–private organisation responsible for facilitating knowledge transfer in the region; and a private consortium of beach resorts owners, "Le Spiagge". In tandem with an academic colleague in the field of Pedagogy, I discussed with the entrepreneurs their willingness to design a line of products for seaside tourists interested in wellness. Thus, we decided to appeal to the imagination of the students attending our second cycle degree called "Wellness Culture: Sport, Health and Tourism", launching a call for project proposals that would entail the creation of a specific outdoor education programme. We shortlisted three project proposals that were finally merged into a well-structured schedule of training activities delivered by three trainees hosted by the consortium. The weekly schedule included dynamic stretching, guided walking tours and dedicated motor skills activities for children. The intervention was also the object of an ongoing scientific assessment conducted in the form of a survey-based MSc Dissertation, which I supervised and included elements of action research, since the post-graduate student

was also one of the trainees. Implementing leisure tourism products based on the principles of outdoor education and evaluating results, as well as the obstacles and the areas of improvement contributed to establish reciprocal trust between academic and non-academic actors. The theoretical implications of the project are still to be published, but the materials collected seems rich and promising.

Conclusion

In this short essay, I sought to share my concern as a place researcher interested in a more explicit reflection on the relationship between theoretical/conceptual work and practice. Pursuing more integration between our theory-driven, conceptual investigations and the domain of practice, such as tourism development or public policies on urban regeneration, can have a role in preventing allegations of "defensive isolation" (Parker, 2021), to generate inspiring theory grounded in spatial experiences and, ultimately, promote augmented engagement of marketing academics in society. To further emphasise this point, I find appropriate to underscore a pragmatist view of our role as academics in line with Jeremias' (2010) interpretation of Sennet's (2008) celebration of craftsperson. Accordingly, academics too can be viewed as craftsperson, given "an astonishing similarity between the medieval workshop of a master craftsman and the contemporary university chair of a German full professor" (Jeremias, 2010). In this view, marketing academics can be seen as architects in their studios or medical doctors in their hospitals, where disciplinary and problem-based knowledge meet and stem from each other continuously. One can envision lecture theatres as open spaces where different categories of stakeholders can converge to, for example, embark on enduring, patient confrontations on territorial governance. This is consistent with the suggestion of Reed (2009, p. 692), who emphasises the need of "strengthening modes of research and scholarship in business and management studies that engage with innovative intellectual developments in social science that reach beyond the academy into *civic society*" (emphasis added). Here, the idea of the university's "Third Mission" can be an effective, evocative concept summarising the contribution to society that researchers can enable with their work.

This is not to suggest that traditional research formats and accounts (historical papers or critical literature reviews, just to name a few) that do not relate to "direct engagement" are unwelcome: these remain desirable and crucial contributions that can stem from academic freedom and lead to unpredictable, interesting insights on the social and spatial phenomena observed. This would mean to protect specific time for what we call in Italy "ricerca di base", which is a much more alternative label to "curiosity-driven research", ensuring that a certain amount of time is devoted to the "freedom to research". The figure of the craftsperson in his stand and his "hands-on" attitude should suggest additional options and alternative modes of situating our theories within spatial and temporal settings, and to carve out a renovated role for conceptual inquiry into an increasingly marketised academia where the exploitation of research results risks to produce remarkable commodification of disciplinary knowledge. An active and aware search for the dialogue between disciplinary knowledge and problem-based knowledge creation would perhaps mean buying possibilities of existence for additional critical spatial research that frames, rather than passively accepts, certain research positionalities.

Note

1. This was the slogan of the critical management School that Parker (2021) illustrates in his self-ethnography.

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