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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Narrating the anxious market: in search of alternatives during global crises

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ABSTRACT

In this virtual roundtable, the editors of the special issue convened a discussion between three leading scholars in the fields of critical communication studies, CCT and marketing, to explore the roles, challenges and tensions that arise from the engagement of consumption and markets at the juncture of global crises. In the eclectic conversation, they critically probe the power imbalances in market narratives between the centre and the margin at moments of global crises and look towards alternative forms of markets and consumption culture. While sceptical of counter-market narratives that are appropriated by market mechanisms, they probe the opportunities for radical changes in the future that will subvert neoliberal arrangements and open the way to more equitable infrastructures of survival and overcoming, essential to our future.

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Introduction

In this virtual roundtable, Professor Dennis Mumby, Professor Debashish Munshi and Dr Clea Bourne joined the editors to discuss the way power imbalances and resistances take shape during global crises, occupying an essential role in aiding us to rethink market-culture convergence both during and after the actual moment of crisis. The discussion focuses on how market discourses from the centre and the margin handle and respond to the moments of crises, in the context of performances, narratives, and communications by market actors that contribute to the reverberances of global crises. The discussants probe the role of the market and the ethics around consumption; the algorithmic principles of profit-oriented capitalism during the crisis and the resistive responses to the same; the ways in which neoliberalism instils ontological insecurities in the consumer during a crisis; and the various subversions that counter these feelings of instability. They reflect on the role of organizational communication within these contexts, and the power/knowledge with which it is invested. The possibilities of alternative discourse that subverts the capitalist agenda of the market during a crisis, including possibilities of transformations, especially in the Global South, are

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heralded as decolonizing moves that strengthen indigenous perspectives of market performances. That said, and while the discussants note several cases where market subalterns extend an alternative narrative during global crises, the scepticism of the same being appropriated by the hegemonic market persists.

The roundtable was convened from December 2021 to February 2022, as the Omicron variant of COVID-19 was spreading rapidly. The participants were thus reflecting primarily on the impact of the pandemic as the immediate crisis context. In the process, they also referred to several other crises including the crisis of global capitalism, the climate crisis, mass racial violence, and technological solutionism. Since the roundtable, the crisis of wars has also come under sharper focus. Although the discussions do not specifically talk about wars, many of the insights help analyse this crisis as well, especially at a holistic level that considers multiple wars, as well as movements of self-determination, raging in different parts of the world, although only some are discussed in relation to consumer market cultures.

The neoliberal context of capitalism

Dennis: I want to begin in what might seem like an odd place: a quotation from a 2020 report issued by Interbrand. Over the last two or three decades Interbrand has established itself as the arbiter of good branding, publishing an annual report on the "Best Global Brands," opining on what makes such brands successful, what keeps them on the cutting edge of innovation and brand loyalty. Interbrand's 2020 report – published at the height of the COVID global pandemic – made the following claim:

> Covid-19's most enduring legacy will not be facemasks, graffiti and social distancing, but the end of continuity as the default assumption. … As disruption replaces normality, we are discovering ourselves more vulnerable, restless and confused than we could have ever imagined. Our rising expectations as customers are morphing into something deeper and more emotional. As we are all torn between the fear of being trampled by the next rhino and the hope of hopping on its back and seizing new opportunities, one prevailing sentiment will unite us all well beyond the current crisis: Anxiety. A constant tension between fear and hope. In conducting this year's study of the one hundred most valuable global brands, one question emerged as the keystone of our analysis: what is brand's role in an anxious world?

In this quotation "the next rhino" is a reference to, and rejection of, the idea that the global pandemic was a "black swan" crisis; that is, a rare, unpredictable event that is difficult to plan for and often catastrophic in its consequences. A "grey rhino" is a highly probable, high impact, yet neglected threat. A black swan worldview presumes continuity as the default condition; a grey rhino worldview takes change and discontinuity as the norm.

My point is that while COVID-19 is widely (and, in many respects, correctly) viewed as a global catastrophe for global markets, examined through a wider historical lens it is actually grist for the mill of capital's money-making algorithm. The above quotation speaks precisely to the idea of COVID as an opportunity; its legacy is anxiety, and who better to provide salve for human anxiety than corporations and their brands? A historical view of capitalism shows that it has always fed off, and taken advantage of, crises, and the current one is no exception. One might even argue that the shift to a neoliberal economic model in the 1980s is precisely what prepared capitalism for the "grey rhino" of the global pandemic.

Debashish: I think this is common ground across all our views. Neoliberal capitalism has had a toxic impact on people and the planet, an example of which is the insidious influence of algorithms and artificial intelligence on people's consumption and communication choices. The strategic communication machinery of influential groups of state and corporate promotional industries have forced upon the world relentless messages of constant growth and consumption over the last several decades. These include seductive messages to buy more, buy the latest, and buy the dream as well as covert messages feeding individual aspirations over collective good.

Dennis: Over the last 30–40 years neoliberalism has gradually eroded the mediating elements between the individual and the market – the individual has been exposed to market forces in various ways. The institutional forms that historically protected the individual against the market have disappeared. And neoliberalism has also undermined forms of social solidarity that people are able to engage with – their ability to feel that their actions are part of a collective, in some sense connected to the common good. In the US, for example, COVID responses are so incredibly politically divisive that in this crisis, narratives of a commitment to a common good have been difficult to even suggest.

In their place, branding has consciously replaced those institutional forms. The brand is now the principal institutional form that mediates between the individual and the market, around processes of meaning-making and identity formation. So, in terms of self-hood, in terms of creating ontological security, the brand looms large and functions at the economic, political and socio-cultural level.

That said, the role of the state is really important to bear in mind too. The state plays an important mitigating role in the practices of capitalism. The emergence of nationalist populism is complicating the ways we respond to global capitalism and presents a real danger to our ability to act globally.

Clea: We've mentioned the role of the state – it's not just how government steps forward in response to global capitalism that matters, the territory that government cedes is also crucial, whether to markets, or some other neoliberal structure. One could certainly say that territory is being ceded to that other new institutional form, the digital platform. Platforms are fundamental to how markets and institutions work today, and are not just a market feature any more, they extend into all areas of economic and political life. Some governments (e.g. India, Brazil) are aiming to be platformised governments; these initiatives organise not just the consumer's relationship to the market, but also the taxpayer's relationship to the government, backed up by what is essentially a market structure. So, focusing on platforms as institutions, as Nick Couldry (2015) has argued, can help us understand the shifts that are happening in civic life as well as markets.

There is a contention that brands won't need to exist because platforms allow products and services to reach people on an individual level and deliver up exactly what they want without having to have any relationship whatsoever with a brand. We're not there yet, but the capacity exists, if there aren't checks on the powers of these platform companies, which are now enjoying near-monopoly status. For promotional workers, it will feel as if they're working *for* a brand and communicating *with* consumers, but the intermediaries who are controlling much of that communication are digital platforms themselves.

Debashish: I agree. Just as social media sites use algorithms to decide on the kinds of content to show a particular user, almost always tied to ads on the page, based on the user's likes, preferences, and even ideological leanings, communication strategies designed by organizations and states are based on algorithmic models geared to satisfy the stakeholders that matter most. These algorithms are not merely computational – they are also organizational and social models based on the constant needs and responses of those who wield greater power in the global "market system" and benefit from a capitalist, neoliberal world order. Way back in 2005, my colleague Priya Kurian and I had described how the communication strategies of this dominant core manifested themselves "through an asymmetric hierarchy of publics: (1) the predominantly Western shareholders; (2) the Western consumer public/the global middle-class consumer; (3) the Western activist public; (4) the vast numbers of Third World workers who produce the goods for consumption by others; and (5) the even greater numbers of Third World citizens too poor to consume" (Munshi and Kurian 2005, 514). These hierarchies are implicit in the algorithms that drive mainstream crisis communication, reinforcing inequalities in the ways in which information is generated, justified, funded, valued, disseminated, and targeted.

Organizations and their roles

Dennis: The backdrop of neoliberalism has changed organizations fundamentally. It created the need for much more nimble and flexible organizational forms that could adapt quickly to market

shifts. Look no further than Jeff Bezos' philosophy that it is always "day one" at Amazon because "Day 2 is stasis. Followed by irrelevance. Followed by excruciating, painful decline. Followed by death" (2016 letter to shareholders). In other words, innovation and change is a permanent condition – so crises are just another moment of change for many organizations.

Branding is really important in how organizations manage change. In the 1980s there was an important shift in capital's algorithm as it moved from the production of goods to the creation of lifestyles, subjectivities, and systems of meaning. Thus, Nike doesn't make athletic wear, it creates a lifestyle ("Just Do It"); Ford doesn't manufacture automobiles, it creates a driving experience (in this sense, Ford is post-Fordist); As cultural critic Jia Tolentino states in *Trick Mirror*, "selfhood has become capitalism's last natural resource" (2019, 15). With such a shift in the locus of the capitalist profit-making, the question "what is brand's role in an anxious world?" makes more sense and, indeed, speaks to the ways in which brand management of subjectivity and its productive effects have become central to the capital accumulation process.

Debashish: Before this particular pandemic, promotional dream merchants crafted a narrative projecting privatization as the hallmark of productivity and efficiency, starving public institutions and social welfare agencies of funding in the process. The undermining of public health systems, skewed distribution of resources, and structural inequities have inevitably led to disastrous consequences of the COVID-19 outbreak for the already marginalized. What is also striking is the consumption-mediated communication promoting the use of designer masks, sanitisers, home-use ergonomic desks and chairs and, of course, smart phones with the ability to scan QR codes and tap into health updates. All are geared to meet the needs of affluent publics.

Nonetheless, let me make a distinction between organizations that subscribe to the dominant capitalist system and organizations that resist such a system. These two broad sets of organizations react differently to a crisis. The former reacts to any threat to the stability of the capitalist market by adopting strategies such as monitoring changes in consumer behaviours to altering production and distribution patterns. The shift to a greater emphasis on online business during the COVID-19 pandemic is an example of efforts to find solutions to problems within the dominant market system. The latter, more alternative form of organizing is characterized by the numerous mutual aid movements that have sprung up in which communities help each other in what the socio-cultural historian Rebecca Solnit (2020) describes as "a superbloom of altruistic engagement" that resists the free-market obsession with competitiveness.

Clea: Debashish has just talked about grassroots organizing and its resistance to market power. At the other end of the market we find a more insidious form of organizing, where the notion of competitiveness itself dissolves in the quest for market supremacy. I'm referring here to trade associations, which play a crucial market role in responding to global crises. Trade associations primarily exist to protect market interests; as such, they bring together members who are otherwise *competitors* and play a visible role in the exercise of power in global markets through collective influence. The most effective trade associations are full-time communicative vehicles, building cohesion between member organizations, lobbying policymakers behind-the-scenes, and using promotional techniques to argue their positions in market narratives.

Whenever market threats and crises arise, these competitors have a shared market goal – to avoid regulation, preserve the status quo and compete aggressively against other special interests for market dominance. Throughout the Covid pandemic, trade associations worked assiduously to facilitate markets and consumption. They lobbied to end restrictions on freedom of movement to re-open the night-time economy, for example. They stepped in to defend air, sea and road transport operators as the global supply chain slowed down and the cost of goods increased. So, when it comes to crisis response, trade associations are a superpower in market communication. While a single organization's narrative might have a short life before being discarded, trade association narratives are sustained for years, even decades. This is their secret sauce, helping to ensure that the more things change during crisis, the more they remain the same once the crisis ends.

Debashish: That's a great example, Clea, of the hegemonic mechanisms of the market. The modes and processes of organizational communication adapt to changing contexts during any global crisis, but make sure pockets of power and influence are maintained. As we have seen, the pandemic has led to remote working mechanisms, with in-person meetings being replaced by virtual meetings and artificial intelligence tools. However, here too, organizational communication facilitates a hierarchical risk management structure that privileges some stakeholders over others. At a very basic level, it works to keep the engines of commerce working for larger entities with greater financial and technological resources to make remote operations viable. But at a more deceptive level, crisis situations allow more control mechanisms to be put in place that invariably manage risk for dominant interest groups. There's much more top-down, compliance-gaining communication at play than a deliberative engagement among diverse stakeholders, leading to greater insecurity and anxiety.

Dennis: The creation and management of anxious subjects is a feature not only of global crises but an endemic feature of neoliberal capitalism more broadly. What's different about this crisis is its impact on a wider swath of society (including academics) who have experienced precarity and anxiety in a way that they never have before. When the powerful are impacted by a crisis, everyone must address it. Meanwhile, those who experience precarity as a routine feature of daily life view the pandemic (and the government response to it) as an intensification of an already extant condition. For example, in the US those on the margins of society argue that vaccine rejection is a rational response to a government that has ignored them for decades, except when they are needed, for example, as frontline service workers during the pandemic; suddenly the lowest paid, most precarious workers are heroes. As one resident of a chronically underfunded New York City housing project put it, "If the government isn't going to do anything for us, then why should we participate in vaccines?"

Debashish: This also highlights how risk needs to be evaluated at a holistic level and not just for pockets of influence. As Jagan Chapagain, Secretary General of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) says: "In the race against the pandemic, the poorest, most vulnerable, and marginalized are being left far behind. It is a humanitarian imperative and a global responsibility, not to mention an economic and recovery necessity, to ensure that everyone has access to vaccines, not only those in countries with the means to buy protection" (IFRC 2021). As it stands, the market provides a space for states and corporates to dictate the nature of access to and consumption of even essential commodities.

Clea: We've been talking about marginalization of access, so it's worth saying more about artificial intelligence (AI) as part of the markets-consumption nexus. Successive crises have accelerated technological solutionism. Well-resourced organizational communication now looks to AI, automation and big data as a way to manage and redistribute risk. Organizations crave advanced software tools and big data that can identify crises *before* they happen and recommend responses that effectively neutralize risks to the organization. It would be nice to think this will also benefit consumers, but the truth is that AI technologies and their digital infrastructure also pose global risks and have the potential to cause a major crisis. Considering the thousands of marketing technology solutions now in use, and the thousands of bots active online at any given moment, we should approach the question of risk and crisis with a rather different road map going forward.

Impact on crises

Clea: One of the impacts of platformization has been to speed things up in a way that is very hard for us as individuals to follow. Promotional workers used to have the time and the space to come up with really good ideas, but the platform approach is to say, "just chuck it out there, see what it does, and improve it on the next iteration". This is very much a Silicon Valley way of doing things and actually feeds into the climate crisis, because an iterative approach to doing promotion and to doing consumption results in a mountain of waste – electronic waste, fuel waste, and wasted human time

and attention. Platforms are now at the vanguard of the climate crisis, but most of us cannot see or feel the impact this has as we order something online.

At the centre of all this are our youth who will inherit this platformized world and its problems. One of the hallmarks of twenty-first century consumption-mediated communication has been the production of terms to describe younger consumers. The popular term "millennials" refers to the generation who are now 26 to 41 years old, while the more recent term "Gen Z" covers the generation from age 10 to 25. Both cohorts are at the wrong end of an intergenerational divide that has been building a head of steam since the 2008 financial crisis. In some countries, intergenerational divisiveness escalated into culture wars; market narratives cast millennials as spendthrifts who felt entitled to cushy jobs and parental hand-outs. The COVID-19 pandemic solidified this intergenerational divisiveness with age-based vaccine protocols and restrictions that have wielded a disproportionate impact on young lives and aggravated a youth mental health crisis. With so much to divide us, perhaps the real question is whether market narratives have any credible role to play in fostering unity and healing?

Debashish: Organizations that are solely guided by the market and growth in consumption, are unlikely to foster the spirit of sustainability that is so crucial in cushioning the impacts of global crises on the world. For example, narratives about addressing the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have largely focused on stimulus packages to revive the economy, which only signal a return to business as usual. The short-term view of what "economic recovery" means could be seen in the hype around the opening of fast-food joints at the end of a prolonged lockdown in cities near me. If we want radical change, we need to put the pandemic in the context of a much larger crisis – rapidly advancing climate change. It is time to abandon spinning empty rhetoric that does nothing to wean us away from lifestyles fuelled by fossil fuels and overconsumption. Moreover, communication processes mediated by markets and consumption cannot really contribute to genuine dialogue about the future because it exacerbates power imbalances between privileged and marginalized stakeholders.

Clea: It's true that what starts out as collective dialogue can quickly change to command-and-control communication in response to changes in the market environment. The dialogue about flexible working during the pandemic is just one example. In the early stages of the pandemic, many organizations consulted employees and offered caring promises about a flexible future of work. A year into the pandemic, some of these organizations changed their tune in response to varying factors including competitor behaviour, client demand, and pressure from local authorities. Changing market environments can make consumption-mediated communication erratic, unreliable, even untrustworthy, and these things harm collective dialogue.

Options for (radical) change?

Debashish: A crisis is usually a manifestation of a system failure and so also provides opportunities to think and act differently, to reimagine a wholly different space and prepare to go there, as the novelist-essayist Arundhati Roy (2020) says, with "light luggage," leaving our "dead ideas" and "dead rivers" behind. It allows us to question the cynical greenwashing by states and corporates that perpetuates lifestyles fuelled by fossil fuels and overconsumption. A crisis also makes the space for alternative organizing to take root and build structures of resistance.

Resistance movements are emerging across the global landscape from India, Thailand, and Hong Kong to Belarus, Brazil, and the US, and many more locations in between. Most significant are the alliances being led and reinforced by marginalized groups. As Priya Kurian and I have said elsewhere, the growing climate justice movement is an example of "the processes of relationship building" among collectives of Indigenous and other vulnerable communities who are "interrogating and resisting the dynamics of power to clear the fog of a deceptive promotional endeavour that imperils the planet" (Munshi and Kurian 2021, 33).

Dennis: I don't think there's any way we can shift away from branding. It is an inevitable process, and what we have to think about is alternative forms of branding, alternative ways of constructing meaning-making which focus more on forms of collectivism, social solidarity, responses which reflect the common good. Perhaps this is one way of "clearing the fog".

Because of the nature of meaning-making, brands – these institutional mediators between the market and us – are also incredibly vulnerable. So, I think political movements, social movements are most successful, most effective when they manage their narratives, or create a narrative that has a great deal of uptake. Brands are powerful precisely because they're able to manage narratives in particular ways, and activists and movements for change can do the same thing.

Apart from narrative, other movements for change can be embedded in practice. In fashion, movements have started around post-consumption practices – renting clothes instead of buying them, for example. These things create an alternative narrative around the fashion industry.

Debashish: Indeed, anti-capitalist organizations look to a crisis as a time for systemic change and advocate "alternative organizing" as a response to, among other things, "globalizing capitalism and growing inequalities" and "cultural imperialism and related homogenizing forces" (Cheney and Munshi 2017, 60). Alternative organizations don't see a crisis as an isolated event – for example, they see the pandemic as part of the larger economic, social, and environmental crisis imperilling the planet and its people. For such organizations, capitalist markets and consumption are the problem and not the solution. For them, a re-defined market is where there are meaningful relationships between producers and consumers that are not based on destructive exploitation of nature or people.

Arindam: At the grassroots level, participation, engagement, and involvement of organizational stakeholders from the subaltern communities and a consequent admittance of alternative modes of agency also help to deconstruct the lacuna/crisis around "standard" brand communication. For me, what Mohan J. Dutta calls "Culture-Centred Approach" (Dutta 2008, 2011) to communication, whereby marginal voices of the subalterns re-claim the ethno-cultural space of utterance and dissent to the neoliberal organizational voice, must be the tool to deconstruct brand hegemony. Through this, alternate agencies, especially from marginal communities, will be heard.

This paradigm shift will pressurize market/brand communication to be more inclusive, holistic, legitimized, and futuristic towards crises-resolution, otherwise inflicted by power-disparities. A case in participatory dialogic brand communication that intends to resolve the inequity between the capitalist organization and its B.O.P. stakeholders from non-mainstream culture is that of the CSR communication carried out by Tata Steel for-with their *Adivasi* community. The annual "Samvad," a pan-India tribal conclave organized by Tata Steel in 2021, witnessed the phygital participation of four thousand tribal members from eighty-seven different tribal communities during the high second wave of the pandemic in India. The participants comprised of traditional artists, chefs, storytellers, and healers (the latter group discoursed about the possibilities of forming an alternate episteme-based traditional-healer-collective that could constructively contribute to the national-public health space, especially during crises). Such dewesternized communication of brands, though rare, creates aporetic moments to deconstruct the neocolonial structures of the neoliberal marketscape.

Clea: Alternative organizations are important: it's crucial that we pay attention to what has happened to so many not-for-profit and grassroots organizations following economic recession. Funding sources have shrunk and, in the UK, at least, there is a push for non-profit organizations to become social enterprises, turning everything into a market-like relationship. This has placed huge pressure on not-for-profits to show they are earning revenue, at the expense of the work that they actually set out to do in the first place.

Dennis: I agree. We need to understand the political context in which narratives emerge, including alternative narratives. And that idea that in a sense branding becomes less necessary is a really powerful one, and it does beg the question about the possibilities for alternative organizing, for resistance. Because platforms are incredibly monolithic and it's so easy to order something online,

or to ask Google to do something really simple. There is a sense of inevitably there – do you have any ideas about the possibilities for transformation?

Clea: I think one option is to pursue multistakeholder ways of organizing. Jose Van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal (2018) make the point that we need to understand platforms as institutions in order to understand what their institutional power actually is and how it becomes embedded in the system. They suggest that multistakeholder organizations are a good way to provide a balance. This may sound like an anachronism in neoliberal contexts, but multistakeholder organizations used to be more common – able to represent both civic interests, market interests and government interests. For instance, many civic groups have proposed people's digital platforms – these could be really useful educational tools for teaching people how platforms actually work and what alternative structures could achieve.

Debashish: One of the interesting paradoxes I see during a global crisis is in the relationship between capitalist organizations and states. Organizations wedded to the free-market/small-government ideologies have been reaching out to the state to bail them out in times of Covid19-induced stresses. Obliging states around the world have pulled out all stops to sustain markets and consumption with liberal financial help to prop up businesses without adequate measures to ensure that the benefits reach their most marginalized stakeholders. One way of breaking this nexus is for alternative organizations to forge alliances among themselves across borders and push for a global system change.

Global inequalities, consumption and markets

Himadri: In marketing and consumer research we talk about marketization, where social institutions are becoming commodified, commoditised and exchange oriented. And I wonder whether it would be too ambitious to really challenge or banish the market system.

I see issues with this, first because there are examples of using non-market transactions or non-market forms that are not very successful. On the other hand, there are examples of where people are already resorting to lesser consumption. However, in countries like India, or China, where we are getting the first taste of materialism, the first taste of consumption, there is a lot of literature that says consumption is liberatory in nature – so it liberates your spirit, it makes you more enthusiastic, it increases your well-being.

So, what is the way ahead when there are certain clear dichotomies that exist between the Global South and the Global North, if I may put it like that? So, you may shun consumerism as unacceptable. On the other hand we are trying to embrace it.

Arindam: Scholars such as Mignolo suggest that rethinking current arrangements is all about dewesternization or decolonization (Mignolo 2011). So, I wonder what path we are supposed to take in the Global South? Adopt dewesternization, where we cannot do away with capitalism but rework it in our way, or adopt the narratives of decolonization and alternative epistemes, or alternative indigenous knowledges? That question is really important because both have their characteristics. In a crisis like the pandemic, or any kind of other global crisis, I think responses from the Global North have been more aligned with dewesternization as we think of alternative platforms and organizations. While from the Global South, it's a matter of decolonization and invoking indigenous pockets of knowledges to rethink arrangements.

Himadri: I think one alternative might be conscious capitalism, which is trying to focus on what we can achieve, within the grand structure of capitalism. So, an example from India is the dairy brand, Amul. It works on a cooperative, sharing model that has evolved and been refined to the extent that it could become a global model. That is a more sustainable model for capitalism, but unfortunately, because it is situated in the Global South, it has not been adopted. So, why aren't we taking examples from such instances, and trying to replicate them in the way we market things, in the way the market is structured, and the way we consume?

Arindam: I agree. We cannot do away with consumerism, which is a global presence now, but we can rethink – turning capitalism on its head, rebrand and re-narrate organizational and marketing communication through activism or collectivism or community efforts or dialogic participation of both the organization and its stakeholders, especially the subaltern stakeholders. Or, as Clea would say, re-think platformization of the entire process.

"Amul India" and its iconic polka-dotted girl, through her "topicals," on numerous occasions, communicated against the hegemonic narratives of the nation-state and its ideology. Instead of supplying to the dominant neoliberal consumerist apparatus, in a way most Bakhtinian, Amul topicals de-normalize neoliberal discourses. Similarly, a closer look at the first Australian Aboriginal non-alcoholic craft beer, "Sobah" (an Aboriginal rendition of the English word "sober"), and its branding, are subtle identity politics from the realm of the "subaltern", speaking back to the consumerist Eurocentric discourses. Consolidating the Aboriginal identity/nation, created through its myths, lore, and narratives of well-being (well-being for the Aborigines is beyond the colonially debilitating culture of alcoholism), the brand pitches the community's age-old understandings of sustainability, the need for social equity, healthy life-choice, and de-stereotypes the colonial construction of "drunken Aborigine." Aptly its website reads:

> Sobah functions from the philosophies of Gamilaraay Lore "dhiriya Gamil". These include acting from a position of respecting people, place, and the environment; understanding and working towards fulfilling responsibilities to that we are connected to; and, engaging in positive reciprocity. We, therefore, have a responsibility to give back, to create opportunities for others, to encourage sustainable and healthy ways of living, and to assist in bringing about positive changes.

This reminds me of the health communication by the Aboriginal Communities in Australia during the COVID-19 crisis that appealed to a changed and informed consumption practice among the Aborigines of the Northern Territory of Australia. As promulgators of Indigenous cultural education, the Elders of Darwin, Barunga, Lajamanu, Wurrumiyanga, and Galiwinku created five short videos in English, Kriol, Warlpiri, Tiwi, and Djambarrpuyngu that informed community members to quit smoking, maintain hygiene, if in outback then safely go for hunting and even natural medicine collection, follow health advisories, and medicine, and return to community and country for any emotional support. So, beyond the designer-mask, retail-driven, westernized consumer culture, during the pandemic, the health consumption discourses of the Fourth World nations were aspirational towards community support and holistic psychosomatic well-being.

Clea: I agree that we have to think more carefully about consumption from different cultural and geographical perspectives. For example, the WTO's adherence to the notion of the level playing field primarily benefits large, rich countries. This has significant effects on how "consumption" actually unfolds. In smaller economies like Jamaica, WTO policies have helped to decimate local farming and manufacturing. Jamaicans now have little choice but to buy many imported goods that used to be grown or manufactured locally – this kind of consumption is certainly not very liberating.

Arindam: So, we need to decolonize consumption in Global South and strategize it from an indigenizing perspective. Resistance is not adopting an essentialist decimating stance to western marketizing discourse but strategizing its very narratives for your good and purpose. The "Bhil" tribe from the state of Madhya Pradesh, India, through their ancient *halma* tradition, which undercuts individualism and solves community or individual problems through discussion, have started water conservation (planting trees, repairing hand pumps, introducing terrace farming) through a community participation effort. Hence Bhil consumption, rethought through "post-consumption" practices, is not anti-consumption but rethinking consumption from an indigenous perspective, narrating hegemony through the sub-culture.

Debashish: In relation to climate discussions over the years, you would have seen that developing countries have been making the point that the climate crisis is where it is today mainly because of the profligacy of the West. So, at this point, to expect countries like India and China to reduce its emissions to the same level as say the US, makes no sense. In thinking about the climate crisis, we

can see how colonial practices continue to hold sway. For instance, developed countries have proposed paying developing countries to reduce their emissions. So rather than changing their own lifestyles, they are talking about paying some other country so that they can continue their overconsumptive ways of life.

There is a need to acknowledge the historical and existing global inequalities in formulating action plans on climate change. As the environmental justice campaigner Sunita Narain (2019) has pointed out, "rich countries, with less than a quarter of the world's population, are responsible for some 70 percent of this historical burden" (xxvi) and, therefore, have a greater responsibility to cut back on emissions. As a result of colonial pasts and the neo-colonial present, there isn't a level playing field between the developed and developing countries. And then there are inequalities within these countries too. In countries like the US and India, for example, there are pockets of affluence and pockets of abject poverty.

Clea: I agree. We live in a global colonial economy. The experience of Black and Brown migrants in the UK is an example. The precarious rights of migrant communities, as illustrated by the Windrush scandal, shows how colonialism continues to exist as a lived experience for people when they try to access public health or education services. In these encounters with the state migrants and their families are continually reminded that they are not just second-class citizens, but third-class citizens who might not be entitled to the services, even though they pay taxes. So, it is important to re-examine the so-called "North" and "South" divide in order to recognize where lives are actually marginalized, and consider how consumption-mediated communication might provide greater voice to those at the margins.

I was heartened to see the way that Barbados, a small island state in the Caribbean, has leveraged two crises – the climate crisis and mass racial violence – to deliver a greater voice for its people. Barbadian Prime Minister Mia Mottley has spoken fearlessly about the climate crisis and the need for green debt relief; a new financial settlement to support debt-laden small island states. Just weeks after Mottley addressed world leaders at the global climate summit in November 2021, Barbados ended its constitutional monarchy and became a republic. Removing the British monarch as head of state had been mooted before, but Mottley cited the Black Lives Matters protests as her inspiration to press through constitutional change. Her accompanying gesture was a stroke of subaltern genius; she established Rihanna, Barbadian pop star, designer and businesswoman, as the country's eleventh national hero. In doing so, Barbados crafted a significant message about its new status on the world stage. Instead, of dwelling on the monarchy and its colonial past, Barbados generated an alternative and new market narrative about its future role in the cultural industries and global creative economy.

Scepticism as a mode of engagement?

Debashish: The question of alternatives is something that we have been grappling with. I think we have to problematize what we mean by alternative. On the one hand, we all agree on the need for alternative organizations that can counter this unjust, unequal system of capitalism and the crises it creates. On the other hand, alternative is also a word that is being co-opted. So you have big capitalist organizations that are turning "alternative" into profit systems – for example, corporations are taking up sustainability, wellbeing, and diversity initiatives more to promote their businesses than bringing about real change to struggling communities or societies. Truly alternative movements are the ones that have gone on to forge transnational alliances as platforms of resistance. So, the kinds of alliances we have seen between Black Lives Matter and the indigenous opposition to environmentally and culturally destructive pipelines in the US, for example, are really powerful.

At every level we have to problematize and challenge every concept that we use, and grappling with complexity is part of trying to address some of the things that we're concerned about.

Dennis: I agree Debashish. Whatever level of analysis we're working with, complicating our analyses and problematizing terms is really important. Does the current global crisis create possibilities

for challenging powerful actors? Yes and no. As I suggested earlier, crises often present new opportunities for capital accumulation. As Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) suggest, legitimation crises are the warp and weft of capital's reinvention process. On the other hand, the reliance of the current "spirit" of capitalism on meanings and subjectivities (via branding processes) also makes it vulnerable to challenges. Meanings are exquisitely open to contestation and reinterpretation. Corporations are increasingly being pressed by their various stakeholders to adopt environmentally responsible business practices and, given that branding processes increasingly drive actual business practices (and are not just decorative), engaging with corporations via their brands can have real impact.

Debashish: Throwing out the "system" is not an easy task in the short-term. But if we wait for the perfect system revolution there may be nothing left of the planet to save. In his gripping novel *Ministry for the Future*, Kim Stanley Robinson (2020) suggests that the way to create change is to turn the market on its head, to value actions that will save the world from mass extinction. This changes the way products and services are valued and/or the way capital moves so that it becomes more profitable to protect the planet rather than consume it. In terms of reorienting what is valued, as another novelist and climate change essayist Amitav Ghosh (2016) says, we can learn a lot more from culture rather than from economics.

Clea: This need for change is also imperative when thinking of the function of international institutions, such as the WTO, IMF, World Bank. They have a direct impact on how we deal with global crises, as we've seen with the role of the World Health Organization during COVID. While these institutions have global reach, their policies are moulded by major funders, especially the United States, and their ultimate goal during crisis is often to protect markets.

Dennis: One of the things we need to keep in mind is that change happens on a fairly regular basis, and social movements work, and processes of disenfranchisement are pushed back against, and processes of enfranchisement occur, and that's occurred regularly and historically. So, in terms of alternative organizational forms, the Mondragon collective in the Basque region of Spain has been successful over many decades, and of course there are revolutionary movements like the Zapatista movement in Mexico. This also reminds me that there's a progressive brand strategy company called Free-Range Studios that works with social justice movements to create alternative branding. One example is their "Story of Stuff" series that examines the effects of consumer products (bottled water, for example), on society. Those are the kinds of responses that I think are important. There have always been alternative market forms in existence and there are always possibilities for change, even though we are at a really difficult global political and economic moment right now. So, we're on the threshold of change, and the only question is what form that change takes. The next five years are going to be really significant.

Arindam: The hegemonic globalization and its homogenizing tendencies of consumption culture are potent enough to churn a crisis that leads to standardizing monocultural market practice. Such a hegemonic market value system leads to the westernized discourses of marketization, commodification, individualism, and materialism. Resistance from the Global South market that intends to decolonize itself should focus more on demarketization, decommodification, community well-being through consumption, and indigenous sustainable practices. This is a socio-political-cultural-ecological paradigm shift – pure resistance!

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