The writings of a sixteenth century French teenager may seem a stretch for a public health readership, but Etienne de la Boétie's treatise on Voluntary Servitude explains why unjust systems prevail and how they can be changed. They prevail, he shows, because we let them (the losers always vastly outnumber the winners); and they change when we retract our permission (as Ghandi demonstrated). These vital insights have inspired progress down the centuries – the enlightenment philosophers, the French Revolution, Tolstoy, the American civil rights movement as well as the Indian struggle against the British Empire. In an era when widening inequalities have become all too apparent, and the harm this does to the commonweal much better understood, this paper argues that La Boétie's analysis retains all its power and can inspire a new vision for public health.

© 2015 The Royal Society for Public Health. Published by Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Recent debates about the divisions in our society show that La Boétie's observations retain their resonance. When Joseph Stiglitz warns about the 'inequality of the 1%, by the 1%, for the 1%', and that this tiny proportion of the US population now controls 40% of the national wealth, the passivity of the population is perplexing. When the UK has become as economically divided as it was when Charles Dickens wrote Hard Times, the absence of protest is remarkable. When Thomas Piketty provides a blow by blow account of this unfairness and argues that it betrays a systemic problem – the 'contradiction of capitalism' - our quiescence is startling.

La Boétie's answer to his own question also stands up to contemporary scrutiny. He argues that the elite uses four basic techniques to ensure the 99% remain passive: the ready provision of both bread and circuses, a cloak of symbols and mysticism and the systematic reward of collusion. These still pertain today, with the only difference that they have been
monetized and deployed on an industrial scale. Modern marketing has ensured that bread and circuses - ultra processed food (as well as innumerable tobacco and alcohol products) and undemanding entertainment - have become ubiquitous (though we now pay for what was once freely bestowed by the Caesars); mystification is furnished by the multinational advertising industry, and the attractions of collusion now recruit not only millions of marketing professionals, but, thanks firstly to stakeholder marketing we in public health, and secondly to social media and 'relationship marketing', consumers themselves.

Finally La Boétie's solution still makes complete sense: we simply need to end our collaboration; we should retract our permission. In 21st century terms this means we should stop being consumers and start being citizens. The job of public health is to facilitate this change – to encourage the critical thinking, independence of spirit and self-actualisation it requires. This individual rekindling has to be matched with regulatory change; in particular regulation of the marketing forces that would push us back into passivity and obedience. These two approaches are symbiotic: in a democracy, the most effective way to bring about regulatory change is by popular demand; and enlightened regulatory change stimulates critical awareness.

**Bread, circuses and corporate marketing**

Despite his 500 year absence, the world of consumer capitalism would hold few surprises for La Boétie. For those of us with money, we ‘sharers in his plunders’, the crumbs we get from the rich man's table, seem pretty good. We can get virtually anything we want: year-round fresh vegetables, beer from countries we've never heard of and cheap flights to all the ones we have. We can telephone our friend in Guatemala, use the same device to watch movies on the bus to work and rejoice in the knowledge that this palm-sized box has more processing capacity than was needed to land the first man on the moon. Our houses are heated (or cooled) to perfection, processing capacity than was needed to land the first man on the moon. Our houses are heated (or cooled) to perfection, our SUVs will take the roughest of terrain in their stride and our designer jeans will combine raw materials and labour from a dozen countries just to ensure our bums do not look big in them – despite the super-abundance of ultra-processed food.

All this happens thanks to marketing. Marketing is often used as a synonym for advertising, a collective noun to take in TV commercials, public relations, pop-ups, sponsorship, merchandising, sales pitches and all the other forms of commercial publicity we encounter everyday of our lives. However, extensive and influential though this promotional activity is, it comes nowhere near describing the true nature and power of marketing; it is just the axiomatically visible tip of the iceberg. Marketing takes in not just promotion, but everything a business does to encourage us to buy its products and services. It combines a potent idea with a tempered and well-honed set of tools.

The idea is elegantly simple: marketers have worked out that it is much more effective to produce what you can sell than it is to sell what you happen to produce. And having done this successfully once or twice, the customer begins to trust you, so it is easier to repeat the exercise. The rhetoric of marketing is therefore reassuringly democratic: ‘consumer sovereignty’, ‘value provision’, ‘customer service’, ‘freedom of choice’, ‘consumer satisfaction’; we even refer colloquially to shopping as ‘retail therapy’. The language becomes more grandiloquent in the mouths of academics, but remains equally emollient: a recent conference of business thinkers spoke of ‘value co-creation’, ‘equality of resource integration’, ‘empowered customers’ and ‘integrating value to make our lives better’. La Boétie points out that tyrants down the ages have reigned by giving their underlings a (small) part of the spoils; that tyranny is itself co-created.

Soothing words are backed by perpetual activity. Marketers dedicate themselves to studying, understanding and developing the means to satisfy our needs. Focus groups, surveys, online monitoring – studies of every shape and size - are deployed to get inside our heads and hearts. Implicit in this is the recognition that we are all individuals and so a degree of customisation is needed if satisfaction is to be maximised. This requires more research, more ‘customer insight’, so that we can be segmented into reasonably homogenous groups and then targeted with bespoke offerings. Products and services are designed with us in mind, these are distributed and displayed (placed) with ubiquity and skill, priced at a level that best matches our sense of value and promoted to draw attention to all these benefits. These four Ps (product, place, price and promotion) form the marketing mix which is carefully and collectively manipulated to maximise our satisfaction. Excellent customer service makes sure that we don't just get desirable products and services, but that we acquire them in a way that is itself pleasant and satisfying. So marketers win our custom by meeting all our expectations – even those we haven't yet imagined - in a way that makes us feel good about ourselves and our consumption. We are lovin' it, every little is helping and we do feel we are worth it. Thus, in La Boétie's terms, do we voluntarily embrace our servitude; and corporate marketing ensures we do this on a scale and with an enthusiasm unparalleled in history.

This process has become increasingly systemic in recent decades, as marketers have come to realise the profitability of turning ad hoc transactions into ‘mutually beneficial relationships’. Mutual in that we get the products and services we want, and the marketer gets our loyalty and the consequent long term business opportunities. In this way, companies can not only address our current requirements, but also anticipate our future ones, greatly enhancing their strategic planning capacity. The concept of ‘relationship marketing’ has taken the business world by storm in the last thirty years, as the plethora of loyalty schemes and cards demonstrate. One business academic even went so far as to compare such long term marketing campaigns with marriages. But this is a debasement of the word relationship. La Boétie reminds us that ‘friendship is a sacred word, a holy thing’ which ‘flourishes not so much by kindnesses as by sincerity’. There is nothing sincere about a Tesco Club card or an Airmiles deal – these are just self-interested, commercially calculated pitches dressed up as generosity. La Boétie explains how tyranny

---

Please cite this article in press as: Hastings G, Public health and the value of disobedience, Public Health (2015), http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.puhe.2015.03.010
always builds manipulative imitations of relationships that don’t make the participants into friends, ‘merely accomplices’. The move to relational thinking also points up the fact that marketers don’t just address our functional needs, but also our psycho-social ones. This wider ministry is typified in the brand, which adds emotional, psychological and even spiritual value to an otherwise generic product. A trainer is just a shoe until it acquires the Nike swoosh, when it becomes a cool fashion statement; a malt whisky is one amongst many distilled spirits, until it becomes Glen Morangie from the Glen of Tranquility and the very image of coutchy Scotland — and in the hands of a devoted customer the iPhone becomes a fetish. As a leading business textbook puts it: ‘today, marketing professionals prefer to talk about brands rather than products. This reflects the recognition that consumers do not buy just physical attributes, but also the psychological associations associated with a supplier’s offer’.9 The appalling ability of multinational tobacco companies to turn an addictive carcinogen into an aspirational lifestyle choice beautifully illustrates the marketers’ power to recruit La Boétie’s voluntary servitors.

Marketers also recognise the macro determinants of our lives - that our decisions are governed not just by our own volition, but also the social circumstances and physical environment in which we live. The consumption of malt whisky will be as much influenced by licensing laws as excise policy as it is by consumers’ palates; smartphone usage depends on wavelength availability and rules about public usage as well as brand loyalty. Marketers therefore direct just as much marketing effort at politicians and policy makers as they do at consumers. This ‘stakeholder marketing’ is focused on ensuring that the business environment is made and remains as supportive as possible. For example a few years ago when the European Parliament was considering regulation to make the labelling of food much more explicit, including the use of ‘traffic light’ symbols to identify healthy and unhealthy options, the food industry spent an estimated one billion Euros lobbying against — and derailing - the move.10 Similarly tobacco companies have for years built alliances with other sections of industry — in advertising, for instance, or hospitality — to fend off tobacco control regulation. Meanwhile the buying of influence in the House of Representatives has become a running sore in American politics.

More subtly, companies also get heavily involved in corporate social responsibility campaigns. They link up with a good cause or organisation with the explicit aim of enhancing the corporate reputation. For example, Coca Cola, which has been criticised for damaging water resources in developing countries, has now formed an alliance with WWF. Similarly a recent paper in the British Medical Journal details how the UK alcohol industry has systematically courted UK politicians to undermine a proposed legislative move on minimum unit pricing (MUP) for alcohol. Strong academic evidence shows that setting a minimum price at which drink can be sold reduces the risk to heavy drinkers without significantly affecting moderate drinkers. The beverage alcohol industry saw this as a threat to sales, so they used their carefully nurtured contacts with policy makers to oppose it. As with consumers ‘it is really about building long term relationships with key policy actors so influence can be exerted in very subtle ways … and within these long term relationships what you see is quite astonishing levels of contact’.11 Their success in opposing the measure is daunting: David Cameron the Prime Minister had publically declared his avowed intention to introduce MUP, but within a year industry pressure had succeeded in reversing the decision.12 In the separate jurisdiction of Scotland, persuasion did not deter politicians from passing MUP legislation, so the industry simply took legal action which will delay implementation for years.

Marketers, then, as La Boétie would have predicted, have got every base covered.

Well-mannered tyranny

The price we pay for having all our needs perpetually met is a business system that interpolates itself into every aspect of personal, cultural and political lives. The resulting dangers are more subtle than the harms familiar to La Boétie in mediaeval France, with its bloody religious divides, but no less deadly. Indeed, the reach and scale of consumer capitalism, has given rise to concerns that few had imagined until Rachel Carson wrote Silent Spring.13 Harms to physical health were the first to be widely documented. The toll from tobacco leads the field, and whether evidenced by deaths (an estimated eight million a year by 201514) or relative risk (more than one in two of smokers who cannot quit the habit are being killed by it15) the figures are shocking. The fact that we still have extremely profitable multinational tobacco companies six decades after this evidence began to emerge suggests our economic system has fundamental flaws. Nor is tobacco an aberration. The health impacts of alcohol and diets increasingly dominated by ultra-processed foods are also generating enormous concerns and, it is becoming increasingly clear, causing similar levels of harm.

The food industry illustrates the brutal logic of corporate marketing. Food processing — turning a potato into a savoury snack or cheap meat into a tasty burger — greatly adds to its monetary value. In the UK, for example, Tesco Maris Piper potatoes retail at about 80 pence a kilo, but sour cream and sweet onion kettle chips cost nearly £15 a kilo.16 This releases massive marketing budgets which are used to ensure that the processed product is also highly valued by consumers. Product formulation — the manipulation of salt, sugar and fat levels — delivers palatability, and the other elements of the marketing mix, distribution and point of sale marketing, pricing and promotion are all used to reinforce the inclination to consume stimulated by a seductive formulation. However, because manipulation of salt, sugar and fat levels typically means greatly increasing them, there is a simultaneous and inevitable reduction in nutritional value (see Fig. 1). Thus food marketing is hard-wired to health-harm. Tobacco and alcohol marketing have the same built-in dangers which marketers are also able to transform into perceived customer benefits. The resulting non-communicable illnesses have become depressingly familiar: cardio-vascular disease, COPD, cancer, diabetes — and dominate the public health agenda. The fact that they are now routinely referred to as ‘industrial epidemics’ demonstrates the umbilical link they
have to corporate marketing. It also makes a nonsense of all the reassuring marketing talk of customer satisfaction and consumer sovereignty.

The ubiquity and power of this marketing effort also belies the idea of the empowered customer. A large supermarket has around 40,000 different products on offer. It takes 11 h just to count to 40,000. As a result many of our purchases are based on impulse and decided in-store, a tendency which marketers exploit energetically. Studies in ‘retail atmospherics’ show how each minute detail of the retail environment ‘from the lighting, to music, to the employees’ can have an impact on shopping behaviour. Recent research shows, for example, that ‘simple scents (vs. complex scents or no scent) result in more spending and red-coloured prices (vs. black-coloured prices) result in greater perceived value’. Moving a product from the side aisle to the main aisle can increase sales by 400%. Robert Cialdini’s book ‘Influence’ documents how what he terms the ‘compliance professionals’ use the output of decades of psychological research to get us do what they want. So products are bought and, wages are earned and spent, not in the interests of the consumer but at the behest of the marketer.

These individual harms are matched by collective ones. Big box retailers are strangling high streets and industrialising agriculture, because the competitive hunt for ever increasing profits demands tighter margins and bigger sales.

The profit motive also dictates that the benefits of marketing come to those with money. In the absence of compensatory regulation this inevitably exacerbates inequalities — to those who have is given more. At a local level these disparities lead to different consumption patterns and the divisive results have become such a commonplace as to be unremarkable. The cars we drive and the clothes we wear differentiate us not just in terms of personal preferences but relative wealth. Aspirational brands and conspicuous consumption reinforce the effect.

At a global level the results are appallingly regressive. Joel Bakan shows how the pharmaceutical industry caters for the trivial ills of the rich north, but ignores the lethal diseases of the poor south. This profit driven myopia showed its worst excesses with HIV and antiretrovirals. In the first years of this century an estimated ten million people died unnecessarily from AIDS when pharma companies succeeded in using patent protection to stop generic versions of these treatments getting on to the African market — despite the fact that their branded offerings were principally developed with public funding. Similarly historian Clive Ponting describes how the distribution of food around the world, already desperately unfair, has got worse over the last 50 years at the hands of corporate marketers: ‘After the mid twentieth century there was, for the first time in world history, enough food in the world to feed everybody adequately. The problem was that it was very unequally distributed ... By the late twentieth century the people of the industrialised countries of western Europe, Japan and north America ate half the world’s food though they constituted only a quarter of the world’s population ... a domestic cat in the US ate more meat than people living in Africa and Latin America’. US obesity statistics showing that two thirds of Americans are now overweight or obese, speak articulately to this last point, and remind us that, as Wilkinson and Pickett’s work shows, inequalities are bad for everyone. The rich are harmed as well as the poor. This is counterintuitive, just as is the idea that the material plenty being provided by corporate marketing to the minority of the world’s population is bad even for them, its seemingly privileged recipients; counterintuitive but true.

\* A large Tesco actually has 90,000 (Guardian newspaper, January 30 2015, p 15 Public Health [in press]).
The selfish giant

One aspect of marketing driven inequality that has become particularly apparent in recent years is corporate remuneration. The enormous salaries and bonuses paid to senior management have become a matter of public scandal and clash stridently with the customer service rhetoric of marketing. How could the sub-prime mortgages which so enriched unscrupulous traders, but bankrupted the hapless borrowers, ever be described as ‘value co-creation’ or ‘integrating value to make our lives better’?

This exposes the oxymoron at the heart of big business. A corporation is owned by its investors (shareholders in the UK, stock holders in the US) and required by law to put their returns first. Whatever the marketing terminology might suggest, the focus is, therefore, inevitably on maximising profitability. In a system where the shareholder is absolute ruler, consumer sovereignty is treason. The marketer’s focus on customer satisfaction is real enough, but only as a means to the end of enhanced shareholder returns. Like Aesop’s fox, the corporate marketer flatters to deceive. Only this can explain how tobacco companies, who kill one in two of their most loyal customers, can, at the same time, be such consummate marketers. A key function of marketing is to mask this contradiction, disguising single-minded selfishness behind talk of customer service and value.

Branding, for instance, emerged as a serious business tool around a century ago. It was developed by the giant US corporation, General Electric, to try and give a human face to what was in reality a monolithic conglomerate necessarily focused on delivering maximum returns to its shareholders. The company approached the task quite literally – it used the faces of its workers in its image building campaigns. Thus whilst a brand is a mark of ownership, it is also a deliberate disguise for the realities of remorseless power accumulation; it helps to keep us quiescent.

Since General Electric’s early ventures, corporate power has become increasingly concentrated.

Lou Pingeot (2014), using data from the World Bank and Fortune Magazine, shows that ‘110 of the 175 largest global economic entities in 2011 were corporations, with the corporate sector representing a clear majority (over 60%) over countries’. The revenues of Royal Dutch Shell, Exxon Mobil and Wal-Mart each exceed the combined GDP of the 110 poorest countries (that is more than half of all nations). Furthermore mere size understates the problem. Network analysis makes it clear that interconnections between transnational corporations further concentrate power to the extent that fewer than 150 companies control 40% of this corporate wealth, and 737 control 80% of it.

This power translates into massive influence and a consequent tendency for business friendly ideas to dominate policy thinking. Pingeot shows just how instrumental corporate interests have become in United Nations debates on crucial global issues like poverty, human rights and sustainability. This results in a dangerous confusion between causes, effects and potential solutions, with preference being given to partnership working between private and public sectors, market solutions and a focus on continuous growth.

This accumulation of power further undermines any idea of consumer sovereignty. In the food sector for instance a small number of companies now own many different brands (Fig. 2). What at first glance looks like a plethora of choice is actually a very limited one. But corporate marketing says nothing of this; it simply focuses on our needs and wants and how these are being serviced.

Marketing’s dyadic framing around individual satisfaction also takes attention away from the externalities. The low prices my new Walmart can offer distracts me from the harm
caused to small traders and thereby the social capital of my community. The tangible reality of cheap milk and bread drowns out the abstraction of an unfair supply chain.

These over-looked externalities are most alarming at a global level. Ever increasing consumption is at the heart of our currently unsustainable lifestyles. Leaving aside the arguments about anthropomorphic climate change and the science of global warming, a system that is built on corporate marketers using all their skills to get us buy more and more of their products does not fit with the reality of a finite planet. As climate scientist Stephen Emmott points out, in actuality ‘we need to consume less. A lot less. Less food, less energy, less stuff. Fewer cars, electric cars, cotton T-shirts, laptops, mobile phone upgrades. Far fewer’. In other words we have to stop falling for the blandishments of corporate marketing. Emmott is pessimistic: he points out that ‘every decade global consumption continues to increase relentlessly’, so he concludes with Anglo-Saxon bluntness that ‘we are fucked’. For La Boétie the shocking but crucial truth underlying this painful prognosis rests in the uncomfortable fact that we are willing collaborators in it all.

The paradox of collaboration

Given the calamitous consequences of our marketing driven system it is perplexing to remember that it all rests on our voluntary cooperation. We are not compelled to shop. Indeed we have to work hard to earn money which we then freely exchange for the cigarettes that wreck our lungs, the Walmart special deals that ruin our communities and the SUVs that destroy our planet. Marketing is undoubtedly powerful and its reach immense and, with digital developments, growing all the time; our choices are also constrained by the consolidation and increasing power of large companies; nonetheless we can still choose, if not whether, at least how much business we do with these increasingly over-bearing companies. Fig. 2 tells a second equally uncomfortable tale: that we continue to collaborate.

None of this would surprise La Boétie. Half a millennium ago he had recognised our predilection to accommodate those in power, and identified the four control mechanisms that find their apotheosis in corporate marketing:

- **Bread.** The support of the Roman mob, he points out could be bought for the price of a meal: ‘a bushel of wheat, a gallon of wine and a sesterce: and then everybody would shamelessly cry, ‘Long live the King!’’. In today’s terms we have the material plenty of 40,000 supermarket lines. Unlike ancient Rome however, where the mob got their bread for nothing, we pay for ours and in the process increase the wealth and reinforce the power of the elite. And we show our acquiescence, not with shameless patriotic cries, but loyalty cards and air-miles — which have taken La Boétie’s venal compact into the digital era;

- **Circuses.** Entertainment also helps buy support: ‘plays, farces, spectacles, gladiators, strange beasts, medals, pictures, and other such opiates, these were for ancient peoples the bait toward slavery, the price of their liberty’. Endless sport and screen-based entertainment are perfect modern equivalents, and again, Roman citizens got theirs free, but we willingly pay for ours. The vast increase in all forms of sports and entertainment sponsorship by corporate marketers in recent years tells its own story of the power of innocence by association, and La Boétie, like Coke and McDonalds, would have completely understood the marketing value of a public spectacle like the Olympic games (see Fig. 3);

- **Symbolism.** Mystery, magic and propaganda also plays a role: ‘It is pitiful to review the list of devices that early despots used to establish their tyranny; to discover how many little tricks they employed, always finding the populace conveniently gullible, readily caught in the net as soon as it was spread’. La Boétie’s portrayal of classical Rome could easily be used to describe modern advertising and branding. His words about his own time are equally apposite. In sixteenth Century France, he explains, those in power ‘never undertake an unjust policy, even one of some importance, without prefacing it with some pretty speech concerning public welfare and common good’, which provides a serviceable exposition of corporate social responsibility. No right-minded tobacco multinational would consider addicting another generation of children without first producing a glossy report on its good works in the inner cities or Sub-Saharan Africa;

- **Collusion.** Still there are so few in the elite, and so many of us; as Stiglitz reminds us we outnumber them by at least 99 to one - how can such a tiny minority hold sway? La Boétie argues they can only do it with the collaboration of an army of functionaries who themselves gain from the accepted order. Those who benefit, in however small a way, from the tyrant’s rule provide what he calls ‘the mainspring and the secret of, domination; the support and foundation of tyranny’. In our era, the profit motive honies this self-interest. As Fig. 4 shows, it explains how sugary, unhealthy Coke can get to every corner of the globe, but life-giving complimentary condoms cannot. And the army of functionaries profiting from the ‘aggregate marketing system’ is prodigious indeed – over a decade ago it was estimated to comprise 30 million people in the US alone, and oversaw the expenditure of five trillion dollars a year.

However even this understates the point in two key ways. First through the clever deployment of stakeholder marketing we in public health are increasingly being pulled into active service – the UK public health responsibility deals are a perfect example. Similarly the wider population is being recruited to the cause. La Boétie’s next sentence ‘Where has he acquired enough eyes to spy upon you, if you do not provide them yourselves?’ is a prescient depiction of the digital age which, through our voluntary use of smart phones and social networking, enables massive data mining by the marketing industry. We are, as Mark Grindle says, not only collaborating with our own surveillance, but once again paying for the privilege. We are also, thanks to social networking, frequently doing the marketer’s job for them. When Diageo went into partnership with Facebook recently its stated purpose was ‘to make sure that we are not only fan collecting but that they are actively engaged and driving advocacy for our brands’.
La Boëtie’s solution

La Boëtie’s acute observations are uncomfortable to contemplate, but impossible to refute. Adding to his bleak assessment he anticipates social norms theory by five centuries to argue that we become habituated to our servitude. Because everyone else does the same thing, and says it is the right to do so, we come to accept our self-destructive collaboration as absolutely normal. Thus the status quo is reinforced, inertia sets in and tyranny is sustained.

Condom social marketing in developing countries provides instructive lessons here. Initial efforts to encourage contraception in India involved shipping out large quantities of free condoms. However, because they were free neither the distributors or the would-be users treated them with much respect. The product ended up mouldering in warehouses, sell-by and storage instructions were not respected and the products acquired a poor public reputation.

By contrast it was very apparent that commercial products such as soft drinks were doing much better. They were well distributed (even the poorest village seemed to have a Coke machine), properly stored and readily consumed. Brand value was also very much in evidence. Success was due to commercialisation: everyone in the supply chain stood to make money out of effective distribution. Even the final customer gained because the product offering had added brand value, to which price contributed. The condom social marketers decided to follow suit and charge (a very modest) amount for their products. The result has been a vastly increased condom usage and much wider availability.

Please cite this article in press as: Hastings G, Public health and the value of disobedience, Public Health (2015), http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.puhe.2015.03.010
However, as is often the case with accurate diagnoses, La Boétie’s also offers hope. It is possible to take remedial action – and even find a cure. His first source of solace is that whilst most people are, either wittingly or unwittingly, pulled into the system there is a minority who are not and ‘feel the weight of the yoke and cannot restrain themselves from attempting to shake it off’. Here in lies the potential for change. ‘These are the ones who, having good minds of their own, have further trained them by study and learning ... For them slavery has no satisfactions, no matter how well disguised’.

Next La Boétie underlines the power of education to bring about this change. He notes how throughout history tyrants have feared and repressed it because it offers up the hope for change. Everyone has ‘some native seed of reason, which, if nourished by good counsel and training, flowers into virtue, but which, on the other hand, if unable to resist the vices surrounding it, is stifled and blighted’.

However to such ‘counsel and training’, he argues, has to be added the vital sparks of courage and determination. He tells the story of Hippocrates, who ‘was certainly endowed with a great heart’ when he refused preferment from the King in the interests of serving the people. Education, he implies needs to have the same strength of purpose, the same greatness of heart if it is to wake people from their current torpor; if it is going to enable the enlightened minority ‘to deliver their country from evil hands’ then they must ‘set about their task with a firm, whole-hearted and sincere intention’. The language did not yet exist, but La Boétie is calling not just for education, but empowerment, critical thinking and the opportunity for people to recognise and rebel against their servitude. He would surely have approved of the Truth campaign, which openly called on American teenagers to rebel against the tobacco industry.

Furthermore La Boétie argues, and the Truth campaign demonstrates, the current system is vulnerable to attack. Whilst the litany of problems with consumer capitalism discussed here do demonstrate its immense power, they also lay bare its profound weaknesses.

Finally La Boétie pulls hope from our tendency towards inertia. Just as the current unjust system has become ossified by custom, so more enlightened alternatives, such as those discussed below, have the potential to gain lock-in. Change for the better can be sustained.

**A vision for public health**

500 years after it was written, La Boétie’s concern with our ‘voluntary servitude’ has an uncanny resonance in a consumer capitalist world. The essential problem is exactly the same: from lung cancer to melting ice caps we are voluntarily collaborating in our own destruction. His analysis of the causes remains as cogent as ever: we continue to fall for the threadbare offerings of bread and circuses dressed up in evocative symbolism, and we continue to profit, however meagrely, from playing ball. And his solution also holds its veracity: we need to set about their task with a firm, whole-hearted and sincere intention. The language did not yet exist, but La Boétie is calling not just for education, but empowerment, critical thinking and the opportunity for people to recognise and rebel against their servitude. He would surely have approved of the Truth campaign, which openly called on American teenagers to rebel against the tobacco industry.

In this new public health, ‘Marmot’s focus on the social determinants of ill health needs to be matched with an equal concern for the commercial determinants of ill health’ and this agenda should be built on three pillars. First the pathogen of corporate marketing needs to be contained by independent, comprehensive and robust regulation. The purpose should be to reduce radically everyone’s exposure to commercial marketing, and corporate operators should not be involved in developing or deploying these new rules, merely in obeying them. Second commercial marketing needs to be countered with public health messaging and robust deconstruction. The recent CRUK ‘Smoke This’ digital campaign attacking the tobacco industry neatly illustrates the former, and BUGA UP, the Australian graffiti-based social movement against tobacco advertising of a decade ago, the latter. Thirdly, and most importantly, critical capacity needs to be built in the population. Small steps in this direction have been taken with media literacy, but the idea has to be pushed much further addressing not just advertising but the whole neoliberal business system. The marketing mix, stake holder marketing and the fiduciary imperative which requires corporations to prioritise profit each need to be unpacked and critiqued. Not so much media literacy, as marketing literacy.

These three Cs of containment, counteraction and critical capacity are mutually dependent: regulation without public support is severely weakened, whilst a politician’s inclination...
to regulate is greatly increased by popular demand – and both are aided and abetted by effective counter marketing (see Fig. 5).

The move to smokefree public places in Scotland during 2006 perfectly illustrates this strategic potential: the near perfect alignment of public and parliament defeated a notori­ously powerful multinational industry and delivered what many would consider to be the greatest single achievement of the McConnell Government.

In conclusion, if the aim of corporate marketing is to encourage obedience, to get us to do as the marketer says, that of public health has to be more than simply saying ‘no, do as we say’. It must be about enabling people to question current assumptions, understand the manipulative power structures these entail and withdraw their collaboration; about replacing obedience, not with another form of obedience, but with disobedience.

Author statements

Ethical approval

None sought.

Funding

None declared.

Competing interests

None declared.

REFERENCES

1. De La Boëtie Etienne. The politics of obedience: the discourse of voluntary servitude; 1548.
12. ibid.
18. ibid.
27. ibid p 196.
37. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a19KsAaue0K.