References


Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America


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There is no definitive history of American advertising. Perhaps because of the complexity of the area and the different approaches one may take toward advertising, previously attempted histories have been limited (often purposefully) by the author’s theoretical position or the temporal constraints of the project. Daniel Pope’s *The Making of Modern Advertising* (1983), for example, takes an industrial perspective on early American advertising, but, by concentrating on its economics, omits much of the symbolic dynamics of advertising’s messages. The deservedly influential *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture*, by Stewart Ewen (1986), focuses on the growth of advertising during the early 20th century and, in fact, does discuss the content of ads. The work’s spotlight on how advertising served as social control for new industrial powers, though, necessarily leaves other elements of advertising’s history in the dark. The most detailed history of advertising, the 600-page *The History and Development of Advertising*, by Frank Presbrey (1968), ends with 1929, the year it was originally published. Steve Fox’s contribution, the very readable *The Mirror Makers* (1984), presents advertising through the filter of a “great individuals” assumption of historical development, thus downplaying many of the more structural and contextual components of advertising’s chronology. A delightful and thought-provoking history of advertising, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920–1940* (1985), by Roland Marchand, limits itself to a 2-decade period, as the title suggests. Erik Barnouw’s *The Sponsor* (1978) focuses on broadcast, but not print, advertising.

Despite the many scholarly variations on the formation of mass-mediated selling, one gap that had yet to be filled is the place of advertising in the cultural gestalt of the United States at various times. How has advertising affected, and been affected by, religious, intellectual, artistic, and literary movements throughout American history? *Fables of Abundance* tries to rectify this deficiency by contextualizing the history of advertising in assorted cultural and intellectual movements. The author acknowledges that advertising as a whole has tended to present material goods—and the values they symbolize—in a way that flows with the powers of the Industrial Age (patriarchy, capitalism). He also concentrates on the waves, or at least occasional ripples, of resistant visions of goods and symbolization that have been
found throughout modern American history in art, literature, and sometimes even advertising itself. Labeling his approach "intellectual bricolage" (p. 13), Lears pulls from impressively diverse perspectives and texts to place advertising in often complex historical milieux.

The book is divided into three major sections. The first section deals with preindustrial views of abundance, tracing the discourse about goods from a celebration of the "earth as goods-giver" to the modern era's celebration of the "factory as goods-giver." The section also explores the "carnivalesque" roots of advertising and selling, a strain that the author juxtaposes against the more mechanistic character of much modern advertising. The first section may expose advertising scholars to unaccustomed ideas and literature, which is the strength of this section. Researchers interested in work directly centered on advertising, as opposed to cultural history, may be a bit disappointed with the early section of the book because advertising is not pointedly addressed until the third chapter.

The second section is the most conventional in the book and perhaps would be of most immediate interest to those beginning to learn about advertising or to the traditional advertising scholar. This section focuses on the development of advertising from the middle of the 19th century until the 1960s. Two characteristics distinguish this section from other advertising histories. One is the connection of advertising with different cultural and social crusades, such as modern Protestantism, turn-of-the-century professionalism, and New Deal liberalism. Another element that this section and parts of the third section uniquely contribute to our historical understanding of advertising is the primary research into the advertising industry that Lears has done. Lears apparently had access to the archives of major advertising agencies, such as J. Walter Thompson. The author adroitly combines information from business letters and minutes of agency meetings with advertisers' autobiographies, magazine articles from the eras, other cultural histories, and, of course, advertisements themselves. For example, in exploring the relationship between the motion picture studio machine of the 1930s to advertising, Lears has uncovered a contradictory relationship. On the one hand, advertising agencies saw the potential in Hollywood, at least by the 1930s, as a possible revenue generator via product placement and tie-ins. However, Lears points out that the ethnocentric culture of the Madison Avenue agencies perhaps constrained the fullest possible exploitation of the promotional relationship between the two industries.

The young WASP executives at JWT, for example, returned from the West Coast smirking about their sojourn among the semitic tribes. It was as if Jewish moviemakers reminded admakers of their common peddler past: anti-Semitic reflexes were intertwined with the desire to distance national advertising from its disreputable origins. As the account executive George Faulkner acknowledged to a JWT group meeting in 1930, the big agencies had become shy of showmanship: The word showman
carries an undignified, cheap connotation. It has a vaguely Semitic, Barnumish, Broadway air to it. (p. 329)

One thing that I would have liked to see in this middle section—perhaps beyond the intended scope of the project—was more attention paid to the post-World War II period. It seems that the book just brushed upon the role of television and the upheaval of the 1960s and did not give the contextual depth to this era that it did to other eras. In fact, Lears acknowledges that TV and the 1960s encouraged advertising to (again) re-discover its roots in the carnival and the oral, roots with potentially subversive effects. This should have been argued in further detail.

The final section compares advertising with major movements in art, such as formalism, and major works in literature that addressed the issue of material goods and their symbolic power, including the work of Henry James and Marcel Proust. Lears argues that many of these movements kept alive, even during the height of industrialization’s hegemonic grip over commodity ideology, alternative views of representation.

It would be difficult, I believe, to introduce students and potential scholars to the history of advertising using this book alone; indeed, the author acknowledges early in his argument that this work is not intended to be a comprehensive, end-all history of advertising. But those who strive to have a complete picture of advertising—its place in culture and responses to its place—should include Fables of Abundance along with many of the other works. Advertising as an economic and symbolic system is incredibly complex, and this complexity cries out for multiperspectival understanding.

References


Through Jaundiced Eyes: How the Media View Organized Labor


The New Labor Press: Journalism for a Changing Union Movement


A review by David Porreca
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Writing in 1961, A. J. Liebling described organized labor as it was por-