

James Rorty

OUR MASTER'S HOUSE
ADVERTISING

MEDIASTUDIES.PRESS

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Dedicated to the memory of Thorstein Veblen, and to those technicians of the word whose "conscientious withdrawal of efficiency" may yet accomplish that burial of the ad-man's pseudoculture which this book contemplates with equanimity.

About the Author

JAMES RORTY was born March 30, 1890 in Middletown, New York. He was educated in the public schools, served an early journalistic apprenticeship on a daily newspaper in Middletown, and was graduated from Tufts College. Mr. Rorty was a copy-writer for an advertising agency from 1913 to 1917, at which time he enlisted as a stretcher bearer in the United States Army Ambulance Service. He was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for service in the Argonne offensive.

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Since the war Mr. Rorty has worked variously as an advertising copy-writer, publicity man, newspaper and magazine free lance. He is the author of two books of verse, "What Michael Said to the Census Taker" and "Children of the Sun", and has contributed to the *Nation*, *New Republic*, *New Masses*, *Freeman*, *New Freeman*, and *Harpers*.

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FOREWORD

TWO BASIC definitions will perhaps assist the reader to understand the scope and intent of this book.¹

The *advertising business* is taken to mean the total apparatus of newspaper and magazine publishing in America, plus radio broadcasting, and with important qualifications the movies; plus the advertising agency structure, car card, poster, and direct-by-mail companies, plus the services of supply: printing, lithography, engraving, etc. which are largely dependent upon the advertising business for their existence.

The *advertising technique* is taken to mean the technique of manufacturing customers by producing systematized illusions of value or desirability in the minds of the particular public at which the technique is directed.

The book is an attempt, by an advertising man and journalist, to tell how and why the traditional conception and function of journalism has lapsed in this country. It describes the progressive seizure and use, by business, of the apparatus of social communication in America. Naturally, this story has not been "covered", has not been considered fit to print, in any newspaper or magazine dependent for its existence upon advertising.

In attempting to examine the phenomenon of American advertising *in the context of the culture* it became necessary to examine the culture itself and even to trace its economic and ideological origins. This enlargement of scope necessitated a somewhat cursory and inadequate treatment of many detailed aspects of the subject. The writer accepted this limitation, feeling that what was chiefly important was to establish, if possible, the essential structure and functioning of the phenomena.

Since the book is presented not as sociology, but as journalism, the writer felt free to use satirical and even fictional literary techniques for whatever they might yield in the way of understanding and emphasis. The writer wishes to acknowledge gratefully the help and encouragement he has received from many friends in and out

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¹ [Clarifying footnotes from the reprint editor, Jefferson Pooley, will appear in brackets, followed by "—Ed."]

of the advertising business. The section on "The Magazine" is almost wholly the work of Winifred Raushenbush and Hal Swanson. Thanks are due to Professor Robert Lynd for reading portions of the manuscript and for many stimulating suggestions; to Professor Sidney Hook for permission to quote from unpublished manuscripts; to F. J. Schlink and his associates on the staff of Consumers' Research for permission to use certain data; to Stuart Chase for much useful counsel and encouragement; to Dr. Meyer Schapiro for valuable criticisms of the manuscript and to Elliot E. Cohen for help in revising the proofs; to the officials of the Food and Drug Administrations for courteously and conscientiously answering questions.

PREFACE to the *mediastudies.press* edition

JAMES RORTY'S *Our Master's House* is buried treasure, so it's the perfect text to launch the Public Domain series. The book set off tremors when it was published in 1934, perhaps because its author so decisively repudiated his former profession. But Rorty and his spirited takedown of advertising were all but forgotten after the war. There's almost no mention of the book in the scholarly literature that coalesced around "mass communication" in the early postwar decades. And popular treatments of advertising—like Vance Packard's 1957 bestseller *The Hidden Persuaders*—neglect the book too.² When *Our Master's House* surfaces, today, there's usually a filial explanation: The book appears in biographical sketches of Rorty's far more famous son, Richard.³

So no one reads James Rorty anymore. This is too bad, since the book is remarkably spry 85 years after its first printing. In fact Rorty's dissection of the ad business has fresh things to say to scholars of Google-style "surveillance capitalism." The good-natured urgency of Rorty's prose resonates too—maybe especially because his aim to bury the "ad-man's pseudoculture" was a spectacular failure.⁴ We can, in 2019, pick up where Rorty left off.

Thus *Our Master's House* is the right book to inaugurate our Public Domain series. It is, of course, in the public domain, having lapsed out of copyright in 1962. But that copy-freedom is just the book's baseline qualification. We are, at *mediastudies.press*, looking to republish works that cling to relevance, even if they've long since fallen out of print. There's an even narrower wedge of books that stand out, like *Our Master's House*, for their unmerited banishment from the field's memory. Books like that—unheralded but for no good reason—are what we have in mind for the new series.

The Public Domain project has a pair of inspirations. The first is the University of Chicago Press's long-running "*Heritage of Sociology*" series. Morris Janowitz established the series in the early 1960s, on his return to Chicago. The first handful of volumes were devoted

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² Vance O. Packard. *The Hidden Persuaders*. New York: McKay, 1957.

³ See, for example, Neil Gross, *Richard Rorty: The Making of an American Philosopher* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 38, 42–43.

⁴ The phrase is from the book's dedication, which reads: "Dedicated to the memory of Thorstein Veblen, and to those technicians of the word whose 'conscientious withdrawal of efficiency' may yet accomplish that burial of the ad-man's pseudoculture which this book contemplates with equanimity." viii.

to prominent figures in what was, by then, known as the “Chicago School.”⁵ But the series grew more catholic over time, with volumes devoted to scholars—Kenneth Burke and Martin Buber—far beyond the orbit of Chicago or even sociology itself.

That ecumenical spirit also animates the second inspiration for the Public Domain series, a 2004 reader on *Mass Communication and American Social Thought: Key Texts 1919–1968*, edited by John Durham Peters and Peter Simonson.⁶ The tome (and it really is one) collects almost 70 excerpts and reprints of media-related reflection. What unites a 1919 Sherwood Anderson short story and, say, an obscure 1959 study on “The Social-Anatomy of the Romance-Confession Cover Girl”? The texts—and the other entries in the anthology—are all sedimented reflections on what was a then-new panoply of mass mediums. “These observers,” Peters and Simonson write,

hold unique historical positions as part of the first generations to live with commercially supported, national-scope broadcast technologies. They are at once informants, ancestors, and teachers. As informants, they tell us about experiencing and studying ‘mass communication’ as a generation new to it. As ancestors, they speak languages we recognize but in dialects different than our own. As teachers, their role is more complex. Often they speak with more clarity and conceptual insight than do the journals and books of our own day, and thus they teach by precept and example. At other times, they display their blind spots, weaknesses, or arrogance in such a way that we either swear never to follow their lead or perhaps see something better because of their failure.⁷

The editors sifted through their candidate texts—“blowing dust off bound volumes”—with an eye for works that have something to say to the present.⁸ This is our aim too. We endorse, moreover, the view that a work’s warrant for attention may take a variety of forms. A jarring anachronism may merit a reader as much, or more than, a still-apposite line of reasoning.

There is a final borrowing from *Mass Communication and American Social Thought* that we should acknowledge. Simonson and Peters disclose an agenda, one that we affirm too. They fault media and communication research for its “rather pinched view of the past,” and position their anthology as a recovery project for the field’s forgotten pluralism.⁹ The purpose of this Public Domain series is, in the same spirit, to ventilate the field’s memory of itself.

On the model of *Our Master’s House*, then, we plan to re-publish works that:

1. are in the public domain;
2. promise contemporary relevance; and yet,
3. have settled into obscurity.

⁵ In his history of the Chicago department, Andrew Abbott called Janowitz “the most industrious retrospective creator of the first Chicago school” and a “self-appointed prophet of the past”—on the strength of the Heritage series. Andrew Delano Abbott, *Department & Discipline: Chicago Sociology at One Hundred* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 18–19.

⁶ John Durham Peters and Peter Simonson, eds., *Mass Communication and American Social Thought: Key Texts, 1919–1968* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 495. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Peters and Simonson included an excerpt from *Our Master’s Voice*. “The Business Nobody Knows,” 106–9.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

The first criterion is an undeniable limitation, but an important one. We are **committed to open access** on principle, so charging readers to cover copyright fees isn't an option for us. Fortunately, all works published in the U.S. before 1924 are already in the public domain. What's less well-known is that many books published between 1924 and 1963 are also owned by the public. Before the **Copyright Renewal Act of 1992** made renewal automatic, copyright holders were required to file for an extension before their 28-year initial term ran out. Books published in 1964 were up for renewal when the 1992 law passed, so they (and all subsequent published works) remain intellectual property—and will remain locked for **a long time**.¹⁰ The good news is that **up to 80 percent** of the 1924–1963 failed to renew—so now they're owned by the public.¹¹ *Our Master's House* is one of those: Rorty and/or the John Day Company, the volume's publisher, did not file for renewal, so the copyright lapsed.

So our Public Domain books are on the open web and—crucially—they're discoverable. We assign a new ISBN for each reprint, DOIs for each chapter, and otherwise work to ensure that the volumes show up in library, OA directory, and web searches. Because they're digital, *Our Master's House* and other volumes in the series are easy to search and excerpt. Our underlying **PubPub platform**—nonprofit and open source—adds **public annotation, citation formatting**, and a robust array of auto-generated download options. We include a high-quality scan of the corresponding originals, in all their sepia-and-baskerville glory. Corrections and updates are simple to make, since there's no fixed version of record.

So there are major advantages to our web-based model of open publishing. Like the Heritage of Sociology and compendiums like *Mass Communication and American Social Thought*, we commission freshly written introductions to contextualize the republished work. But we sidestep the copyright muck, and the costs passed on to readers. The Peters and Simonson volume includes four dense pages of small-print permissions—and it's **priced accordingly**, out of reach of most readers.¹²

Rorty, back in 1934, summarized *Our Master's House* as “an attempt, by an advertising man and journalist, to tell how and why the traditional conception and function of journalism has lapsed in this country.” The book describes “the progressive seizure and use, by business, of the apparatus of social communication in America.”¹³ Eighty-five years later, and we are still domiciled.

¹⁰ The best book on the corporate enclosure of the public knowledge remains James Boyle, *The Public Domain: Enclosing the Commons of the Mind* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), which is, fittingly, **free to download**.

¹¹ Sean Redmond, “U.S. Copyright History 1923–1964,” *New York Public Library Blog*, March 31, 2019, <https://www.nypl.org/blog/2019/05/31/us-copyright-history-1923-1964>

¹² Peters and Simonson, eds., *Mass Communication and American Social Thought*, 519–23.

¹³ Rorty, *Our Master's House*, ix.

Jefferson Pooley, August 2019

OUR MASTER'S HOUSE

ADVERTISING

"I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him."

—WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

"A trading on that range of human infirmities that blossoms in devout observances and bears fruit in the psychopathic wards."

—THORSTEIN VEBLEN

"Business succeeds rather better than the state in imposing its restraints upon individuals, because its imperatives are disguised as choices."

—WALTER HAMILTON

PREFACE: *I was an Ad-man Once*

IMAGINE, if you can, the New York of 1913. In that year a young man just out of college was laying siege to the city desks of the metropolitan papers. He had good legs, but his past record included nothing more substantial than having been fired out of college, and having worked before college, and during vacations, on a small-city paper upstate; also on a Munsey-owned Boston paper. It was the last count that did for him. He couldn't laugh that off anywhere, and funds were getting low.

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Finally, a relative got the young man a job as a copy writer in an advertising agency, housed near the Battery in an ancient loft building which has since been torn down. Perhaps it is time to drop the third person. The young man was myself. I remember him well, although at this distance both the person and his actions seem a little unreal.

The young man didn't know anybody, or anything much. At that time he hadn't even read H. G. Wells' *Tono-Bungay*. But he was full of fervor. His father was an Irish Fenian who believed to the end of his days that the world was just on the point of becoming decent and sensible, and the young man, to tell the truth, has had trouble in overcoming that paternal misapprehension.

In those days business had pretty well beaten the muckraking magazines by the painless process of seizing them through the business office. But the old *Masses* was going full blast, and the blond beasts of the *New Republic* were about to launch their forays upon the sheepfolds of the Faithful.

The young man was a Socialist already, in sympathy at least, although in the matter of fundamental economics and sociology he was as illiterate as most of his contemporaries. He was literary; that is to say, he knew Ibsen, and Hauptman, and Shaw, and Jack London, and Samuel Butler—even a little Nietzsche. Not until some years later did he come to know Karl Marx and Thorstein Veblen.

But life was real and landladies were earnest. The young man was hungry. He had a job now and he was taking no chances. He was

assured that at the end of the month he would be paid sixty dollars for his services, in negotiable currency. It was up to him to earn that sixty dollars. He was young and energetic. During the economy wave under which Mr. Munsey extinguished the *Boston Journal*, he, a cub reporter, had covered as many as three supposedly important assignments in one day, being obliged, of course, to steal or fake most of his facts.

The young man was given his first advertising-copy assignment: to write some forty advertisements commending a certain brand of agricultural machinery about which he knew nothing whatever. The young man took off his coat.

I wrote those forty advertisements in three days, with my eye on the clock. Three days is ten per cent of thirty days. Ten per cent of sixty dollars is six dollars. Were those forty advertisements a big enough stint to earn those six dollars? Trembling, I turned in my copy ... it was enough for a year.

The copy was fully up to current standards, too, as advertising copy, although of course it went through endless meaningless revisions. As news and information it didn't, at the time, seem to me to be worth the price. I still don't think so. But in those three days I learned all that any bright young man needed to know about the mysteries of advertising copy-writing in order to earn, in 1929, not sixty dollars a month, but a hundred and sixty dollars a week. I say this in the teeth of the Harvard School of Business Administration, the apprentice courses of all the agencies, Dr. John B. Watson, and the old sea lion in the Aquarium to whom, in my dazed and shaken condition, I turned for comfort and understanding.

The Aquarium was close at hand. During the noon hour I would sit on a bench in Battery Park, eating my necessarily frugal lunch of peanuts and chocolate, and then spend the remaining half-hour wandering among the glass cases and peering at the fishes, who peered back at me with their flat eyes and said nothing. Sometimes one of them would turn on his side, his gills waving faintly. Nothing to do, nowhere to go. We cried our eyes out over each other, I and the other poor fishes.

Then I discovered the sea lion, who occupied a big pool in the center of the main floor. The sea lion, I soon became convinced, had some kind of an idea. There was a slanting float at one end of the pool. He would start at the other end, dive, emerge halfway up the float with a tremendous rush, and whoosh! he would blow water on the mob of children and adults who crowded around the tank. Always they would shriek, giggle, and retreat. Then, gradually, they would come back; the sea lion would then repeat the performance with precisely the same effect.

It has taken me years to understand that sea lion. I know now that he was an advertising man. Recently, I became acquainted with his human reincarnation, one of the ablest, most philosophical, and best paid advertising men in New York. If there is a "science" of advertising, he has mastered it. Yet his formula is very simple. It is this: "Figure out what they want, promise 'em everything, and blow hard."

This philosophical ancient is greatly valued as an instructor of the young. His students are very promising, although some of them are not wholly literate. He is, however, indulgent of their cultural limitations, remarking kindly: "What are a few split infinitives between morons?"

In the annex to the Aquarium where I served my advertising apprenticeship there were many mansions, housing as varied a collection of the human species as I have ever encountered together in one place. Through a stroke of luck, the agency had started with a nucleus of important accounts and expanded rapidly. Its owner, a quiet Swede who never, to my knowledge while I was in his employ, wrote a single piece of advertising copy himself, became a millionaire in a few years. He was, then, an economist, a commercial engineer, an executive of tremendous driving power? Not so that anybody could notice it. His success is quite unexplainable in terms of logic or common sense. I think he was just a "natural." Also, he played golf well, but not too well. Puzzling over this phenomenon, I remembered hearing the Socialists tell me there is no sense in trying to make sense out of the people and institutions of our chaotic capitalist civilization.

Nevertheless, the boss was a natural. Either by shrewdness or by accident, he gathered into his organization a considerable number of able and interesting people. They didn't know much about advertising. Nobody did in those days. Six months after my initiation, the company moved to a neighboring skyscraper, and the expanded copy staff soon numbered eight people. We all sat in one large room. By right of priority, I had a desk next the window where I could look out and watch the ferry boats swimming about like water beetles, and the tugs pushing liners out to sea, as ants push big crumbs. They seemed so earnest, so determined. . . . Every now and then an office boy would stroll by and deposit in one of the desk baskets a yellow printed form with here and there a little typing on it. The form called for one, two, six or twelve advertisements about a certain product, to fit specified spaces in certain scheduled publications. Usually the form was destitute of other information or instruction.

I think, although I am not sure, that those forms were the bequest of an efficiency expert who functioned briefly during the early months of my employment. He was a tall, gangling man, with a high

white brow, a drooping forelock and a rapt and questing eye. He dictated inspirational talks to his stenographer. While so engaged, he would pace up and down his office and quite literally beat his breast. In fact, he had all the equipment of a medicine man except the buffalo horns and the rattlesnake belt. It was he, I think, who started the idea of timing and systematizing the copy production of the office. Years after he had left, unfortunate copy writers were still digging the splinters of that system out of their pants.

You got a yellow form, then, which required that you write so many pieces of copy and turn them in by a certain date. What kind of copy? The form was silent. The headline goes at the top, the slug at the bottom and what goes in between you rewrite from a booklet or make up out of your head. Sometimes an illustration was called for. In such cases you conferred with the art director, who was of the opinion that you, your words, and especially your ideas about pictures were a damned nuisance and so informed you.

I felt it necessary to resent such acerbities, but I could never do so with any great conviction. Privately, I suspected that he was right. Sometimes I was tempted to put my hands on my hips and retort stoutly, "You're another." But I never did so. That would have been to widen the field of discussion intolerably. And there were always closing dates to meet.

Feeling as I did about it, it frequently seemed to me that one advertisement would do exactly as well as six. But I always wrote six. Anything to keep busy. There were never enough yellow forms.

Sometimes, unable to control my restlessness, I would wander upstairs, knock on the door of the account executive's office, and ask mildly if anybody knew anything about that product and what it was supposed to be used for. I knew that many heavy conferences had preceded the planning of that campaign. But the decisions reached in those conferences never seemed to get typed on that yellow form. Usually I got nothing out of such interviews except the suggestion that I do some more like last year's, or that an ad was an ad, wasn't it, and I was to have six done by Friday. Such admonitions were heartbreaking. The ads were already done. Nothing to do now except to stew miserably in the juice of my frustrated energies.

In time, merciful nature came to my aid. I, who was normally facile, as even a cub reporter has to be, found that writing even a six-line tradepaper advertisement cost me intolerable effort. My brain wouldn't function. My fingers were paralyzed. I was fighting the cold wind of absurdity blowing off the waste lands of our American commercial chaos. The workman in me had been insulted. Very well, then, he would strike. I dawdled. I covered reams of paper with idiotic pencilings. I missed closing dates and didn't care. My

fellow copy writers, suffering the same tortures, would go out and get drunk. One of them, in fact, who had genuine literary talent, ultimately drank himself to death.

Since I was still a virtuous youth, I had no such escapes. Even my health, which had been excellent, was shaken. I began mumbling to myself on the street. Once, for three weeks, an office associate converted me to Christian Science.

The Truth and the Light, he said, were in Mrs. Eddy's *Science and Health*, which I accordingly undertook to read for several evenings. I do not think I ever got beyond page 38, although I tried very hard. The difficulty was that it didn't make sense at first reading, so that on resuming the book I was always obliged to start over again from the beginning. It was like driving a model T Ford uphill through sand. At the end of three weeks I was utterly exhausted, and sleeping soundly, but unable to bear another word of Mary Baker Eddy.

I cite the episode merely to indicate how acute was my condition. If my friend had been a Holy Roller, I think I would have rolled for him cheerfully.

The workman in me was paralyzed. Even when, outside the office, I tried to write poetry and plays the words and ideas stared coldly at me from the page.

But the reformer in me still lived and was shortly to have his inning. The house acquired as a client a company manufacturing a proprietary remedy. As it happened, it was an excellent product, which, minus its proprietary name, was much used and recommended by the medical profession. There was my chance. I would make the advertising of that product honest. I did make it honest, for a while. I had every word of my copy censored by representative medical men. I fought everybody in the office, singly and in groups. I was obsessed, invincible and absurd.

But the client became impatient—sales weren't growing as fast as he thought they should. He hired as advertising manager an experienced and entirely unscrupulous patent-medicine salesman—a leather-hided saurian who scrapped all my carefully censored copy and furnished as a model for future advertising an illiterate screed recommending the product, directly or by implication, as a cure for everything from tuberculosis to athlete's foot.

I threw him out of my office. I rushed over to the client and talked very crudely to a very eminent gentleman. Even that wasn't enough. I considered blowing the works to the organized medical profession, although I never actually did so. Instead, I wrote a furious and entirely unactable play about a patent medicine wage-slave who went straight and took a correspondence course in burglary.

I wasn't fired, although logically I should have been. The President

of the United States had just declared war, and in the confusion I escaped into the army as a buck private. Even the war, I thought, was more rational than the advertising business. I was wrong, but that is another story.

I was an ad-man once. Indeed, I am, in a small way, an ad -man still, although I no longer carry a spear in the monotonously hilarious spectacles which the orthodox priests continue sweatingly to produce in the Byzantine, Chino-Spanish and Dada-Gothic temples of advertising which crowd the Grand Central district of New York.

I still practice, however, after my fashion. My motto, "The Less Advertising the Better," appeals poignantly to certain eminent industrialists to whom I have talked. My sales argument goes something like this:

"Mr. Hoffsch Nagel, you and I are practical men. I don't need to tell you that advertising is not an end in itself. Neither is selling. The end, Mr. Hoffsch Nagel, the true objective of the manufacturer and dispenser of products and services, should be the efficient and economical delivery to the consumer of precisely what the consumer wants and needs: what the consumer needs to buy, I repeat, not what the manufacturer needs to sell him. In any functional relationship between producer and consumer, advertising and sales expenditures are just so much frictional loss; in the ideal setup, which of course we can't even approximate under present conditions, released buying energy would be substituted entirely for the selling energy which you now spend in breaking down 'sales resistance.' My task, therefore, is to redefine and reinterpret your relationship with your customers; not to pile up sales and advertising expenses" Mr. Hoffsch Nagel nods energetically "but to cut them. What do your customers want from you? Service! What do you want to give them? Service! Not advertising the less advertising the better that's just so much friction and loss. But service! The end, Mr. Hoffsch Nagel, the end is service!"

Mr. Hoffsch Nagel meditates, while as if unconsciously his hand strays to the right-hand drawer of his desk.

"Have a drink," says Mr. Hoffsch Nagel.

It is possible to get a good deal of hospitality in this way, and even some business. Sometimes, as I listen to myself talk, I sound like one of these newly spawned capitalist economic planners. I am not. I know, or think I know, that the advertising business, with all of its wastes and chicaneries intact, is woven into the very fabric of our competitive economic system; that the only equilibrium possible for such a system is the unstable equilibrium of accelerating change, with the ad-man's foot on the throttle, speeding up consumption, preaching emulative expenditure, "styling" clothes, kitchens, automobiles—everything, in the interest of more rapid ob-

solescence and replacement. Up to a certain point it is possible to build, and after the inevitable crash, to rebuild such a system always with a progressive and cumulative intensification of wastes and conflicts. It is not possible to operate such a system sanely and permanently, because its underlying economic and social premises are obsolete in the modern world.

If this is so—even some advertising men apprehend that it may be so—then it would be, perhaps, not a bad idea, if ad-men removed their tongues from their long-swollen cheeks and tried talking approximate sense for a change. It wouldn't do much if any immediate good, of course, but it might provide a desirable mental discipline, a kind of intellectual preparation for the severer disciplines which the future may hold in store for the profession.

As a matter of fact, the abler people in advertising are becoming increasingly mature, realistic, and cynical. They don't believe in the racket themselves. But they insist that the guinea pigs, not merely the consumers outside the office, but the minor employees inside the office, *must* believe in it. The role of the advertising agency guinea pig—the minor copy writer, layout man, forwarding clerk or other carrier of messages to Garcia—is hard indeed. The outside guinea pig, the consumer, can't be fired. But the inside guinea pig can be and is fired unless he is utterly and sincerely credulous and faithful. A good, loyal guinea pig is a pearl without price in any agency. I am even told that in some of the larger agencies, eugenic experiments are being conducted with the idea ultimately of breeding advertising guinea pigs, or pearls—I admit the metaphor is hopelessly mixed who will come into the world crying "It Pays To Advertise".

TO SUCH HEIGHTS of fantasy are we lifted by an attempt to examine the phenomenon of contemporary advertising in America. It is not, as contemporary liberal historians and social critics have tended to regard it, a superficial phenomenon: a carbuncular excrescence of our acquisitive society, curable by appropriate reformist treatment, or perhaps by a minor operation.

A book about advertising therefore becomes inevitably a critique of the society.

Much of the data presented in this book I have gathered in my personal experience as an employee of various advertising agencies. If some of this material seems absurd, even incredible to the lay reader, I can only reply, helplessly, that I did not make the advertising business; nobody made it; that is why it is so absurd. Whether one regards the advertising business as farce or as tragedy, one is convinced that the play is badly made; there are no heroes and the villains have a way of turning into victims under one's eyes; none of

them is consistently bad, consistently sad or even consistently funny.

As I shall try to show in a later section entitled "The Natural History of Advertising," the advertising business just grew. It is the economic and cultural causes, the economic and cultural consequences of this growth that I shall try to describe in this book.

1 THE BUSINESS NOBODY KNOWS

THE title of this chapter was chosen, not so much to parody the title of Mr. Bruce Barton's widely-read volume of New Testament exegesis, as to suggest that, in the lack of serious critical study, we really know very little about advertising: how the phenomenon happened to achieve its uniquely huge and grotesque dimensions in America; how it has affected our individual and social psychology as a people; what its role is likely to be in the present rapidly changing pattern of social and economic forces.

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The advertising business is quite literally the business nobody knows; nobody, including, or perhaps more especially, advertising men. As evidence of this general ignorance, one has only to cite a few of the misapprehensions which have confused the very few contemporary economists, sociologists and publicists who have attempted to treat the subject.

Perhaps the chief of these misapprehensions is that of regarding advertising as merely the business of preparing and placing advertisements in the various advertising media: the daily and periodical press, the mails, the radio, motion picture, car cards, posters, etc. The error here is that of mistaking a function of the thing for the thing itself. It would be much more accurate to say that our daily and periodical press, plus the radio and other lesser media, are the advertising business. The commercial press is supported primarily by advertising—roughly the ratio as between advertising income and subscription and news-stand sales income averages about two to one. It is quite natural, therefore, that the publishers of newspapers and magazines should regard their enterprises as *advertising businesses*. As a matter of fact, every advertising man knows that they do so regard them and so conduct them. These publishers are business men, responsible to their stockholders, and their proper and necessary concern is to make a maximum of profit out of these business properties. They do this by using our major instruments of social communication, whose free and disinterested functioning is embodied in the concept of a democracy, to serve the profit interests of the advertis-

ers who employ and pay them. Within certain limits they give their readers and listeners the sort of editorial content which experience proves to be effective in building circulations and audiences, these to be sold in turn at so much a head to advertisers. The limits are that regardless of the readers' or listeners' true interests, nothing can be given them which seriously conflicts with the profit-interests of the advertisers, or of the vested industrial and financial powers back of these; also nothing can be given them which seriously conflicts with the use and wont, embodied in law and custom, of the competitive capitalist economy and culture.

In defining the advertising business it must be remembered also that newspapers and magazines use paper and ink: a huge bulk of materials, a ramified complex of services by printers, lithographers, photographers, etc. Radio uses other categories of materials and services—the whole art of radio was originally conceived of as a sales device to market radio transmitters and receiving sets. All these services are necessary to advertising and advertising is necessary to them. These are also the advertising business. Surely it is only by examining this business as a whole that we can expect to understand anything about it.

The second misapprehension is that invidious moral value judgments are useful in appraising the phenomena. Advertising is merely an instrument of sales promotion. Good advertising is efficient advertising—advertising which promotes a maximum of sales for a minimum of expenditure. Bad advertising is inefficient advertising, advertising which accomplishes its purpose wastefully or not at all. All advertising is obviously special pleading. Why should it be considered pertinent or useful to express surprise and indignation because special pleading, whether in a court of law, or in the public prints, is habitually disingenuous, and frequently unscrupulous and deceptive? Yet liberal social critics, economists and sociologists, have wasted much time complaining that advertising has “elevated mendacity to the status of a profession.” The pressure of competition forces advertisers and the advertising agencies who serve them to become more efficient; to advertise more efficiently frequently means to advertise more mendaciously. Do these liberal critics want advertising to be less efficient? Do they want advertisers to observe standards of ethics, morals and taste which would, under our existing institutional setup, result either in depriving stockholders of dividends, or in loading still heavier costs on the consumer?

There is, of course, a third alternative, which is neither good advertising nor bad advertising, but no advertising. But that is outside the present institutional setup. It should be obvious that in the present (surplus economy) phase of American capitalism, advertising

is an industry no less essential than steel, coal, or electric power. If one defines advertising as the total apparatus of American publishing and broadcasting, it is in fact among the twelve greatest industries in the country. It is, moreover, one of the most strategically placed industries. Realization of this fact should restrain us from loose talk about "deflating the advertising business." How would one go about organizing "public opinion" for such an enterprise when the instruments of social communication by which public opinion must be shaped and organized are themselves the advertising business?

As should be apparent from the foregoing, the writer has only a qualified interest in "reforming" advertising. Obviously it cannot be reformed without transforming the whole institutional context of our civilization. The bias of the writer is frankly in favor of such a transformation. But the immediate task in this book is one of description and analysis. Although advertising is forever in the public's eye—and in its ear too, now that we have radio—the average layman confines himself either to applauding the tricks of the ad-man, or to railing at what he considers to be more or less of a public nuisance. In neither case does he bother to understand what is being done to him, who is doing it, and why.

The typical view of an advertisement is that it is a selling presentation of a product or service, to be judged as "good" or "bad" depending upon whether the presentation is accurate or inaccurate, fair or deceptive. But to an advertising man, this seems a very shallow view of the matter.

Advertising has to do with the shaping of the economic, social, moral and ethical patterns of the community into serviceable conformity with the profit-making interests of advertisers and of the advertising business. Advertising thus becomes a body of doctrine. Veblen defined advertisements as "doctrinal memoranda," and the phrase is none the less precise because of its content of irony. It is particularly applicable to that steadily increasing proportion of advertising classified as "inter-industrial advertising": that is to say, advertising competition between industries for the consumer's dollar. What such advertising boils down to is special pleading, directed at the consumer by vested property interests, concerning the material, moral and spiritual content of the Good Life. In this special pleading the editorial contents of the daily and periodical press, and the sustaining programs of the broadcasters, are called upon to do their bit, no less manfully, though less directly than the advertising columns or the sponsor's sales talk. Such advertising, as Veblen pointed out, is a lineal descendant of the "Propaganda of the Faith." It is a less unified effort, and less efficient because of the conflicting pressure groups involved; also because of the disruptive stresses of the under-

lying economic forces of our time. Yet it is very similar in purpose and method.

An important point which the writer develops in detail in later chapters is that advertising is an effect resulting from the unfolding of the economic processes of modern capitalism, but becomes in turn a cause of sequential economic and social phenomena. The earlier causal chain is of course apparent. Mass production necessitated mass distribution which necessitated mass literacy, mass communication and mass advertising. But the achieved result, mass advertising, becomes in turn a generating cause of another sequence. Mass advertising perverts the integrity of the editor-reader relationship essential to the concept of a democracy. Advertising doctrine—always remembering that the separation of the editorial and advertising contents of a modern publication is for the most part formal rather than actual—is a doctrine of material emulation, keeping up with the Joneses, conspicuous waste. Mass advertising plus, of course, the government mail subsidy, makes possible the five-cent price for national weeklies, the ten- to thirty-five-cent price for national monthlies. Because of this low price and because of the large appropriations for circulation-promotion made possible by advertising income, the number of mass publications and the volume of their circulation has hugely increased. These huge circulations are maintained by editorial policies dictated by the requirements of the advertisers. Such policies vary widely but have certain elements in common. Articles, fiction, verse, etc., are conceived of as “entertainment.” This means that controversial subjects are avoided. The contemporary social fact is not adequately reported, interpreted, or criticized; in fact the run of commercial magazines and newspapers are extraordinarily empty of social content. On the positive side, their content, whether fiction, articles or criticism, is definitely shaped toward the promotion and fixation of mental and emotional patterns which predispose the reader to an acceptance of the advertiser's doctrinal message.

This secondary causal chain therefore runs as follows: Mass advertising entails the perversion of the editor-reader relationship; it entails reader-exploitation, cultural malnutrition and stultification.

This situation came to fruition during the period just before, during and after the war; a period of rapid technical, economic and social change culminating in the depression of 1929. At precisely the moment in our history when we needed a maximum of open-minded mobility in public opinion, we found a maximum of inertia embodied in our instruments of social communication. Since these have become advertising businesses, and competition is the life of advertising, they have a vested interest in maintaining and promoting the competitive acquisitive economy and the competitive acquisitive social psychol-

ogy. Both are essential to advertising, but both are becoming obsolete in the modern world. In contemporary sociological writing we find only vague and passing reference to this crucial fact, which is of incalculable influence in determining the present and future movement of social forces in America.

In later chapters the writer will be found dealing coincidentally with advertising, propaganda and education. Contemporary liberal criticism tends to regard these as separate categories, to be separately studied and evaluated. But in the realm of contemporary fact, no such separation exists. All three are *instruments of rule*. Our ruling class, representing the vested interests of business and finance, has primary access to and control over all these instruments. One supplements the other and they are frequently used coordinately. Liberal sociologists would attempt to set up the concept of education, defined as a disinterested objective effort to release capacity, as a contrasting opposite to propaganda and advertising. In practice no such clear apposition obtains, or can obtain, as is in fact acknowledged by some of our most distinguished contemporary educators.

There is nothing unique, isolate or adventitious about the contemporary phenomena of advertising. Your ad-man is merely the particular kind of eccentric cog which the machinery of a competitive acquisitive society required at a particular moment of its evolution. He is, on the average, much more intelligent than the average business man, much more sophisticated, even much more socially minded. But in moving day after day the little cams and gears that he has to move, he inevitably empties himself of human qualities. His daily traffic in half-truths and outright deceptions is subtly and cumulatively degrading. No man can give his days to barbarous frivolity and live. And ad-men don't live. They become dull, resigned, hopeless. Or they become daemonic fantasists and sadists. They are, in a sense, the intellectuals, the male *hetærae* of our American commercial culture. Merciful nature makes some of them into hale, pink-fleshed, speech-making morons. Others become gray-faced cynics and are burned out at forty. Some "unlearn hope" and jump out of high windows. Others become extreme political and social radicals, either secretly while they are in the business, or openly, after they have left it.

This, then, is the advertising business. The present volume is merely a reconnaissance study. In addition to what is indicated by the foregoing, some technical material is included on the organization and practices of the various branches of the business. Some attempt is made to answer the questions: how did it happen that America offered a uniquely favorable culture-bed for the development of the phenomena described? What are the foreign equivalents

of our American rule-by-advertising? How will advertising be affected by the present trend toward state capitalism, organized in the corporative forms of fascism, and how will the social inertias nourished and defended by advertising condition that trend?

The writer also attempts tentative measurements of the mental levels of various sections of the American population, using the criteria provided by our mass and class publications. Advertising men are obliged to make such measurements as a part of their business; they are frequently wrong, but since their conclusions are the basis of more or less successful business practice they are worthy of consideration.

The one conclusion which the writer offers in all seriousness is that the advertising business is in fact the Business Nobody Knows. The trails marked out in this volume are brief and crude. It is hoped that some of our contemporary sociologists may be tempted to clear them a little further. Although, of course, there is always the chance that the swift movement of events may eliminate or rather transform that particular social dilemma, making all such studies academic, even archaic. In that case it might happen that ad-men would be preserved chiefly as museum specimens, to an appreciation of which this book might then serve as a moderately useful guide.

Advertising has, of course, a very ancient history. But since the modern American phenomenon represents not merely a change in degree but a change in kind, the chronological tracing of its evolution would be only confusing. It has seemed better first to survey the contemporary phenomena in their totality and then present in a later chapter the limited amount of historical data that seemed necessary and pertinent. of ethics, morals and taste which would, under our existing institutional setup, result either in depriving stockholders of dividends, or in loading still heavier costs on the consumer?

2 THE APPARATUS OF ADVERTISING

WHEN we come to describe and measure the apparatus of advertising, some more or less arbitrary breakdown is necessary. Let us therefore start with the advertising agency, which is the hub of the advertising business proper, where all the lines converge. We shall then draw concentric circles, representing increasingly remote but genuinely related institutions, people and activities.

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In *Advertising Agency Compensation* Professor James A. Young, of the University of Chicago, estimates that in 1932 there were 2,000 recognized national and local advertising agencies engaged in the preparation and placing of newspaper, magazine, direct-by-mail, card, poster, radio and all miscellaneous advertising. These 2,000 agencies served 16,573 advertisers. Advertisers served by agencies having recognition by individual publishers only are excluded from this estimate.

Prof. Young estimates the 1930 volume of advertising placed through 440 recognized agencies at \$600,000,000. An additional 370 agencies placed \$37,000,000 in that year. The trend during the post-war decade was steadily toward the concentration of the business in the larger agencies with a further concentration brought about by mergers of some of these already large units.

In 1930 there were six agencies doing an annual business of \$20,000,000 or over, and fourteen with an annual volume of from \$5,000,000 to \$20,000,000. A further indication of the trend is contained in the figures showing the advertising income of *American Magazine*, *Colliers*, *Saturday Evening Post*, *Delineator*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, *McCalls* and *Woman's Home Companion*. In 1922, 57.8 per cent of the combined advertising income of these publications came from the ten leading agencies. In 1931 this proportion had risen to 68.3 per cent.

A similar trend toward concentration in the sources of advertising revenue is apparent. Advertisers spending between \$10,000 and \$100,000 annually dropped from 43.8 per cent of the total volume in 1921 to 21.1 per cent of the total volume in 1930. Advertisers spend-

ing between \$100,000 and \$1,000,000 annually increased from 51.3 per cent of the total volume in 1921 to 55.9 per cent in 1930. Finally, advertisers spending over a million a year increased their percentage of the total volume from 4.9 per cent in 1921 to 23 per cent in 1930.

The agency employee, whether he writes advertising copy, draws advertising pictures or is concerned with one of many routine, mechanical and clerical processes of the agency traffic, must be listed as an advertising person; he makes his living directly out of the advertising business.

The manufacturer's or merchant's advertising staff is also clearly to be listed as a part of the personnel of the advertising business.

A publisher's representative, or "space salesman", is also clearly an advertising man; so is the circulation promotion manager and his staff—his budget is an advertising budget. But how about the editorial department of the newspaper or magazine? Here we are on debatable ground. If the newspaper or magazine is primarily an advertising business, since most of its income is derived from advertisers, and all of its activities, editorial and otherwise, are finally evaluated according to the degree of their utility in making the publication an effective and profitable advertising medium, then the total staff of the publication is an advertising staff; they too make their livings out of the advertising business.

Without attempting to settle the question, let us first consider certain statistical trends which show clearly enough the progressive transformation of our daily and periodical press into advertising businesses.

In 1909, 63 per cent of newspaper income and 51.6 per cent of magazine income was from advertising. By 1929 the proportion of advertising income had moved sharply upward to 74.1 per cent for newspapers and 63.4 per cent for periodicals. Approximately three-quarters of the newspaper's dollar and two-thirds of the periodical's dollar came from advertisers.

To correspond with this trend we should expect to find a certain re-orientation of the function of the newspaper and periodical press, and that is precisely what we do find. The reader is asked to follow a digression at this point, since it is important to the general argument.

Increasingly over the past thirty years we find the newspaper asserting its freedom—in *political terms*. Coincidentally, of course, it has come more and more under the hegemony of business exercised through advertising contracts to be either given or withheld. In 1900, 732 dailies acknowledged themselves to be "democratic" and 801, "republican." By 1930, papers labeled "independent democrat" and "independent republican" had increased fivefold, while papers pretending to be "independent" politically jumped from 377 in 1900 to

792 in 1930, when such papers constituted the largest single category. In commenting on this trend Messrs. Willey and Rice remark, in *Recent Social Trends*:

This increase in claimed political independence may indicate that the newspaper is becoming less important as an adjunct of the political party, that it seeks greater editorial freedom, or that *it desires to include various political adherents within its circulation and advertising clientele.*

The italics are the writer's. What this statistical trend would appear to show, especially when coupled with the coordinate increase of the newspaper's dependence upon advertising income, is that the newspapers have realistically adapted themselves to the exigencies of a changing social and economic situation. This holds almost equally true of the periodicals. Politics as a means of government was definitely recessive during this period, and public interest in politics correspondingly declined. The powers of government were shifting to business. Hence the press became more and more "free." It freed itself from involvement with the nominal rulers, the political parties, in order that it might be free to court the patronage of the real rulers, the vested interests of business, industry, finance; in return for this patronage, the press became increasingly an instrument of rule operated in behalf of business. The press, being itself a profit-motivated business was in fact obliged to achieve this transition; to orient itself to the emerging focus of power, and to become in fact though not in name, an advertising business. In essence, what happened was that both major political parties had become, in respect to the class interests which they represented, one party, the party of business; the press, as an advertising medium, tended to represent that party.

Taking 1909 to 1929 as representing the crucial period of this transition we find that in 1909 the volume of newspaper advertising was \$149,000,000 and of periodical advertising \$54,000,000. By 1929 the figures were \$792,000,000 for newspaper advertising and \$320,000,000 for periodical advertising. Except for the movies, the automobile, and the radio, no other major American industry has rivaled the swift expansion of the advertising business.

We have then a combined total of \$1,112,000,000 as the contribution of newspaper and magazine advertisers to the advertising "pot." In computing the total contents of this pot we must duly add at least \$75,000,000 for time on the air bought by advertisers from commercial broadcasters. The radio, since all its income is derived from advertisers, must be rated as essentially an advertising business. We must add \$400,000,000 for direct-by-mail advertising, \$75,000,000 for outdoor advertising, \$20,000,000 for street-car advertising, \$75,000,000 for business papers, and \$25,000,000 for premiums, programs, directories, etc. The foregoing are 1927 figures cited by Copeland in

Recent Economic Changes. Advertising volume in all categories went up in 1928 and 1929 and radio volume continued to go up during the first three years of the depression. Also in these figures no allowance is made for radio talent bought and paid for by the advertiser, and none for art and mechanical costs of printed advertising, billed by the agency to the advertiser with a 15-per-cent commission added. Hence Copeland's grand total of \$1,782,000,000 for all advertising must be taken as a very conservative estimate of the peak volume of the business. Two billion would probably be closer. As to the number of workers engaged in the various branches of the business, detailed estimates are difficult to get, chiefly because of the confusion of categories.

The General Report on Occupations of the 15th Census gives figures of 5,453 men and 400 women as the personnel of advertising agencies, but under *Advertising Agents and Other Pursuits in the Trade* the figures are 43,364 men and 5,656 women. Printing, publishing and engraving must be considered as in large part services of supply for the advertising business as above defined, and the personnel of these trades, including printers, compositors, linotypers, typesetters, electrotypers, stereotypers, lithographers and engravers totals 269,030 men and 33,333 women. In 1927 printing, publishing and allied industries ranked as the fifth industry in the United States with a total volume of \$2,094,000,000.

The question, who is or is not connected with the advertising business is indeed baffling. Is the printer, who makes all or most of his living out of the advertising business, an advertising man? How about the engraver, the lithographer, the matmaker, the makers and sellers of paper and ink—all the hordes of people who as producers, service technicians, salesmen, clerks operate back of the lines as advertising's Service of Supplies? Many of these people, especially the salesmen, certainly think of themselves as advertising people. They are members in good standing of Advertising Clubs. Toss a chocolate éclair into the air at any Thursday noon luncheon of the Advertising Club of Kenosha, Wisconsin, or Muncie, Indiana, and the chances are three to one it will land on a printer or on an engraver. They are there strictly on business, of course, and their dues are carried as part of the firm's overhead. But how they believe in advertising!

Spread the net a little more widely and all kinds of strange fish flop and writhe in the meshes of advertising. The Alumni Secretary of dear Old Siwash—is he an advertising man? No? Then why is he a member of the local advertising club? And how about the football squad, their trainer, coach, waterboy, cheer-leaders, etc. are they advertising men? Well, the team advertises the college, and, by general agreement, is maintained chiefly for that purpose. Why, then, isn't

the personnel involved an advertising personnel?

Then there are the advertising departments of our numerous university-sanctioned Schools of Business Administration. Are these fellows advertising men or educators? Dr. Abraham Flexner maintains that they are not educators, while practical agency heads insist with equal energy that they are not advertising men. But they can't belong to nobody and the writer's guess is that they must, however reluctantly, be categorized as part of the personnel of the advertising business.

Hastening back to firm ground, we can agree that advertising copy-writers employed by agencies or advertisers are unmistakably advertising men. So are the fellows who sell space in publications. But how about the staffs of the various institutes, bureaus, etc., such as Good Housekeeping Institute, whose job is to test and pass on the products and appliances advertised in the publication? The *raison d'être* of such departments is that they nourish the confidence of the reader and thus increase the value of the publication to the advertiser. Are these fellows scientists, engineers or advertising men?

Without attempting to answer this embarrassing question, let us go across the hall or upstairs to the editorial department of a modern publication. The "travel editor" is busy computing the current and prospective lineage bought by various steamship and railroad lines. On the result of this computation will depend whether next month she will praise the joys of California's sun-kist climate or the more de luxe attractions of the Riviera. Is the young woman an editor, a literary person or an advertising woman?

The fiction editor has on his desk a very suitable manuscript. It has neither literary nor other distinction, but the subject matter and treatment are excellent from a pragmatic point of view. The story tells how a young man was nobody and got nowhere until he bought some well-tailored clothes; with the aid of these clothes and other items of conspicuous waste, he established his social status and shrewdly used his newly-won acquaintances to promote his business career. He ends up as partner in the firm where he was formerly a despised bookkeeper. Moral: it pays to wear smart clothes, even if you have to go in debt to buy them. The story is in effect an excellent institutional advertisement for the men's clothing industry, and will be so regarded by present and prospective clothing advertisers. Is its author a literary man or an advertising man? Is the editor who chose this story, for the reasons indicated above, an editor and critic or an advertising man? The story will be illustrated by an artist who specializes in his knowledge of styles in men's clothing. When he makes his illustrations he will have before him as "scrap" the latest catalogues of the clothing houses. Is he an artist, an illustrator or an

advertising man?

It may seem unkind to press the point, but we have barely begun to list the peripheral personnel of the advertising business. The electrician who repairs the neon signs on Broadway—is he an electrician or an advertising man? The truck driver who delivers huge rolls of paper to the press rooms of the newspapers—where would he be, but for the advertising business that keeps those presses busy dirtying that paper? And the bargemen who floated that newsprint across the Hudson? And the train crew that freighted it down from Maine? And the loggers in the Maine woods that supply the pulp mills? And the writers for the “pulp” who go to Maine for their vacations?

It is not necessary to project this unbroken continuity into the realm of fantasy. Both in respect to the number of persons employed and the total value of manufactured products, advertising is, or was in 1929, one of the twelve major industries of the country. We are living in a fantastic ad-man's civilization, quite as truly as we are living in what historians are pleased to call a machine age, and a very cursory examination of the underlying economic trends will be sufficient to show how we got there.

The essential dynamic of course is the emergence of our “surplus economy” predicament, generated by the application of our highly developed technology to production for profit. Advertising played a more or less functional though barbaric and wasteful role during the whole expansionist era of American capitalism. The obsolescence, the *reductio ad absurdum* of advertising is betrayed by the exaggerations, the grotesqueries, which accompanied its period of greatest expansion during the postwar decade. Like many another social institution, it flowered most impressively at the very moment when its roots had been cut by the shift of the underlying economic forces.

Between 1870 and 1930 several millions of people were squeezed out of production. Where did they go? The statistical evidence is plain. In 1870 about 75 per cent of the gainfully employed people of the United States were engaged in the production of physical goods in agriculture, mining, manufacture and construction. In 1930 only about 50 per cent of the labor supply was so required. In 1870, ten per cent of the employed population was engaged in transportation and distribution. In 1930, 20 per cent was engaged in transportation and distribution. What caused this shift was chiefly the increase in man-hour productivity made possible by improvements in machine technology and in the technique of management. The chapter on “Trends in Economic Organization” by Edwin F. Gay and Leo Wolman in *Recent Social Trends* documents this increase as follows:

The combined physical production of agriculture and of the manufacturing, mining and construction industries increased 34 per cent

from 1922 to 1929.... The advance in output was steady throughout the period and even in the recession years, 1924 and 1927, the decline was surprisingly small. Much more important, however, is the comparison between the rate of increase in physical output in the prewar and postwar periods. Per capita output, reflecting retardation in the rate of population growth, as well as the rise in production, advanced twice as fast in the later years as in the earlier, as is indicated by the average annual rate of increase.

| <i>Period</i> | <i>Volume of production per cent</i> | <i>Population per cent</i> | <i>Per capita production per cent</i> |
|---------------|--|--------------------------------|---|
| 1901-1913 | +3.1 | +2.1 | +1.1 |
| 1922-1929 | +3.8 | +1.4 | +2.4 |

Although real wage levels rose slightly during this period they did not rise proportionately to the increase in man-hour productivity, the increase in profits, the increase in plant investment, and the increase in capital claims upon the product of industry. The result of these conflicting trends was to place an increasing burden upon the machinery of selling. This is reflected in the rising curve of sales overhead, the increase in small loan credit and installment selling and the meteoric rise of advertising expenditure during the post-war period. According to the estimate of Robert Lynd in *Recent Social Trends* the total volume of retail installment sales in 1910 was probably under a billion dollars. By 1929 it had increased to seven billion dollars.

Undoubtedly this six-billion-dollar shot in the arm postponed the crisis, intensified its severity and contributed importantly to the Happy Days of advertising during the New Era. After the crash it was of course the ad-men who were urged to put Humpty-Dumpty back on the wall. They tried manfully, but since it is impossible to advertise a defunct buying power back into existence, they didn't succeed. And now, after four years of depression it would appear that the ad-man has learned nothing and forgotten nothing.

That two-billion-dollar advertising budget is a lot of money. In 1929 it represented about two per cent of the national income for that year, or \$15 per capita. It might well be alleged that the bill was high, would have been high even for a competently administered service of information. And, as already indicated, advertising is scarcely that. What that two billion represented, what the present billion and a half advertising volume represents, is in considerable part the tax which business levies on the consumer to support the machinery of its super-government—the daily and periodical press, the radio, the apparatus of advertising as we have described it. By this super-

government the economic, social, ethical and cultural patterns of the population are shaped and controlled into serviceable conformity to the profit motivated interests of business.

Our notoriously extravagant official government is really much more modest, considering that it gives us in return such tangible values as roads, sewers, water, schools, police and fire departments, and such grandiose luxuries as the army and navy. The combined tax bill of the nation, Federal, State, and local, amounted to only \$10,077,000,000 in 1930 or roughly about \$75 per capita.

It will be argued, of course, that even if advertising is thrown out of court as a service of information, since that is neither its intent nor its effect, nevertheless this two-billion-dollar industry does net us something. But for advertising, we should not be able to enjoy the radio free, or read the *Saturday Evening Post* at five cents a copy, or Mr. Hearst's *American Weekly*, which is thrown in free with his Sunday newspapers. In other words, it will be argued that advertising is justifiable as an indirect subsidy of our daily and periodical press and the radio; that for this two billion dollars, which has to be charged ultimately to the consumer, we get a tremendous quantity of news, information, criticism, culture, pretty pictures, education and entertainment. We do, indeed, and as taxpayers we value this contribution to our welfare so highly that our Post Office Department also heavily subsidizes our daily and periodical press. Also we pay the Federal Radio Commission's annual million-dollar budget, consumed chiefly in adjusting commercial dog-fights over wave lengths.

But the actual quality and usefulness of what we get is another matter. In exchange for these official and unofficial subsidies we get a daily and periodical press which has practically ceased to function as a creative instrument of democratic government: which does, however, function effectively as an instrument of obscuration, suppression and cultural stultification, used by business in behalf of business; which levels all cultural values to the common denominator of emulative acquisition and social snobbism, which draws its daily and weekly millions to feast on the still-born work of hamstrung reporters, escape- formula fictioneers, and slickempty artists; which, having stupefied its readers with this sour-sweet stew of nothingness, can be counted on to be faithful to them in all issues which don't particularly matter and to betray them systematically and thoroughly whenever their interests run counter to the vested interests of business.

In this indictment it is not denied that we have in America many honest newspapers and honest magazines, honest editors, honest reporters and honest advertising men. They are honest and blameless within the limits of the pattern prescribed for them by the economic

determinants of the institutions which they serve. Some of them even struggle at great peril and sacrifice to break through and transcend these limits. It is inevitable that they should do so, since not only their readers but themselves are violated by the compulsions of the system in which both are caught.

But the system itself is substantially as described. The American apparatus of advertising is something unique in history and unique in the modern world; unique, fantastic and fragile. One needs but little knowledge of history, or of the movement of contemporary economic and social forces, to know that it can't last. It is like a grotesque, smirking gargoyle set at the very top of America's skyscraping adventure in acquisition *ad infinitum*. The tower is tottering, but it probably will be some time before it falls. And so long as the tower stands the gargoyle will remain there to mock us.

The gargoyle's mouth is a loud speaker, powered by the vested interest of a two-billion-dollar industry, and back of that the vested interests of business as a whole, of industry, of finance. It is never silent, it drowns out all other voices, and it suffers no rebuke, for is it not the Voice of America? That is its claim and to a degree it is a just claim. For at least two generations of Americans—the generations that grew up during the war and after—have listened to that voice as to an oracle. It has taught them how to live, what things to be afraid of, what to be proud of, how to be beautiful, how to be loved, how to be envied, how to be successful. In the most tactful manner, and without offending either the law or the moralities, it has discussed the most intimate facts of life. It has counselled with equal gravity the virtue of thrift and the virtue of spending. It has uttered the most beautiful sentiments concerning the American Home, the Glory of Motherhood, the little rosebud fingers that clutch at our heartstrings, the many things that must be done, and the many, many things that must be bought, so that the little ones may have their chance. It has spoken, too, of the mystery of death, and the conspicuous reverence to be duly bought and paid for when Father passes away.

So that today, when one hears a good American speak, it is almost like listening to the Oracle herself. One hears the same rasping, over-amplified, whisky-contralto voice, expressing the same ideas, declaring allegiance to the same values.

So that when somebody like the writer rises to say that the Oracle is a cheat and a lie: that he himself was the oracle, for it was he who cooed and cajoled and bellowed into the microphone off stage; that he did it for money and that all the other priests of the Advertising Oracle were and are similarly motivated: that the Gargoyle-oracle never under any circumstances tells the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, for the truth is not in her: that she corrupts

everything she touches—art, letters, science, workmanship, love, honor, manhood....

Why, then, your American is not in the least abashed. He knows the answer. It was pretty smart, wasn't it? It certainly does pay to advertise! You know, I've always thought I'd like to write advertisements! How does one get into the Advertising Business?

3 *HOW IT WORKS: The Endless Chain of Salesmanship*

THE apparatus of advertising, conceived of as the total apparatus of daily and periodical publishing, the radio, and, in somewhat different quality and degree, the movie and formal education, is ramified interlocking and collusive, but *not unified*. This distinction must be kept carefully in mind. Most of the residual and fortuitous mercies and benefits that the public at large derives from the system are traceable to the fact that the apparatus of advertising is not unified; it exhibits all the typical conflicts of competitive business under capitalism plus certain strains and stresses peculiar to itself.

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With the system operating at the theoretical maximum of its efficiency, the sucker, that is to say the consumer, would never get a break. In practice, of course, he gets a good many breaks: a percentage of excellent and reasonably priced products, a somewhat higher percentage of unbiased news, a still higher percentage of good entertainment both on the air and in the daily and periodical press. He even gets a modicum of genuine and salutary education—more, or less, depending on his ability to separate the wheat from the chaff.

No system is perfect and the apparatus of advertising suffers not merely from human frailty and fallibility but from the lag, leak, and friction inherent in its design.

The apparatus of advertising is designed to sell products for the advertiser, and to condition the reflexes of the individual and group mind favorably with respect to the interests of the advertiser. The desired end result of the operation of the apparatus is a maximum of profitable sales in the mass or class market at which the advertising effort is directed.

But the apparatus itself is made up of a series of selling operations as between the constituent parts of the system. Each of these parts is manned by rugged individuals, all bargaining sharply, not merely for their respective organizations but for themselves. In attempting to trace this endless chain of selling one wonders where to begin.

Perhaps the advertising agency is as good a starting point as any.

THE ADVERTISING AGENCY.

The advertising agent was originally a space broker dealing in the white space that newspapers and periodicals had for sale. He bought space wholesale from the publishers as cheaply as possible and re-tailed it for as much as he could get from advertisers. In the early days he frequently made a handsome profit—so handsome that the more powerful publishers attempted to stabilize the system by appointing recognized agents and granting them a commission on such space as they sold to advertisers. The amount of the commission varied. For the compensation they delivered a service consisting of selling, credit and collection. The advertiser planned and wrote his own advertisements and had them set up and plated; he did his own research, merchandising, and so forth.

But more and more the agent tended to take over these functions. He dealt with many advertisers and hence was in an excellent position to become a clearing house of experience. From a seller of white space he became a producer of advertising. In a comparatively short period of years the larger national advertisers were placing their advertising through agents whose functions were the following: planning and preparing the advertisement in consultation with the sales or advertising manager of the advertiser; attending to all details of art purchase, mechanical production, etc.; selection of publication media in which the advertising campaign would appear; checking the insertions in these media. "Research," "Merchandizing," etc., were later functions of the agency, which in the larger agencies today are handled by well-established departments.

The advertising agency is thus in the somewhat ambiguous position of being responsible to the advertiser whom he is serving but being paid by the advertising, publication or other advertising medium, his commission being based on the volume of the advertiser's expenditure. Objection to this commission method of agency compensation has been chronic for years. There are today a few relatively small agencies that operate on a service fee basis. But the commission method of compensation has persisted and is a factor in the endless chain of selling that links the whole advertising apparatus.

Before the agent is entitled to receive commissions from the various advertising media—magazines, newspapers, radio broadcasters, carcard and outdoor advertising companies—he must first be "recognized." To secure recognition he therefore presents to each of these media groups, which maintain appropriate trade committees for this purpose, evidence that he is financially responsible and controls the

placing of a certain minimum of advertising business. The first selling job is therefore that of the agent in "selling" his competence and responsibility to the organized media.

When recognition is once granted, however, the agent steps into the buyer's position in respect to the media. His duty is then to his clients, the advertisers. In return for the commission paid by the media which has been more or less stabilized at 15 per cent less a two per cent discount for cash, which is passed on to the client, the agent is expected to prepare effective advertising, properly coordinated with manufacturing and sales tactics, and place it in the media most effective for the purpose.

Walk into the lobby of any large advertising agency and you will see about a dozen bright young men with brief cases waiting to see agency account executives or media department heads. They are space salesmen. The brief cases contain lavishly printed and illustrated promotion booklets which serve as reference texts for the salesmen. Many thousands of dollars go into the compilation of the data printed in one of these booklets. In it the publication's advertising manager proves that his "book" has so many subscribers and is bought at newsstands by so many people, as attested by the impartial Audit Bureau of Circulations. These readers are concentrated in such and such areas. They represent an average annual unit buying power of so much as evidenced by the property ownership of houses, automobiles, etc., etc. Their devotion to the publication is evidenced by such and such a turnover of subscribers and such and such a curve of circulation increase. Their confidence and response to advertising placed in the publication is evidenced by the success of advertisers A, B and C, whose campaigns last year proved that advertising in the Universal Weekly brings inquiries for only so much per inquiry; furthermore such and such a percentage of these inquiries were materialized into sales. The Universal Weekly also exercises an important influence upon dealers. The broadside reproducing his campaign with which advertiser A circularized the trade, resulted in stocking so and so many new dealers. The advertising department of the Universal Weekly also co-operates earnestly with advertisers; in fact staff representatives of the publication delivered so and so many of these broadsides, and are even responsible for the addition to the advertiser's list of so and so many new outlets.

The editorial department of the Universal Weekly is also warmly co-operative. During the year 1932 the Universal Weekly applied the editorial pulmotor to its readers' flagging will-to-buy with measurable success. Note also the "constructive" quality of the articles printed in the Universal Weekly, that it gives also abundant quality in its fiction did it not pay Pete Muldoon the highest price ever paid a

fictioneer for a serial?

These promotion booklets constitute an important and greatly neglected source of economic and sociological data. Moreover, some of them are honest from start to finish. They had better be, on the whole. The agency's space buyer is hardboiled. He sees *all* the promotion booklets. Moreover, he has access to the advertising and sales records of a variety of clients. He can and does construct his own private pie charts; he can and occasionally does send his own crew of collegebred doorbell ringers into the field to find out what sort of people read what. On the basis of this calculus he says yes or no to the publisher's representative.... Well, not quite that. The publisher's representative has also seen the advertiser's advertising manager. And the publisher himself played golf last week with the Chairman of the Advertiser's Board. And the wife of the publisher's advertising manager gave a tea yesterday to the wife of the agency's vice-president who would like to get into the Colony Club. Also, the space salesman and the agency's space buyer are both enthusiastic members of the Zeta chapter of Epsilon Sigma Rho—remember that time we smuggled Prexy's prize pig into the choir loft?

There are certain other considerations. Agencies select media subject to the approval of the client. But publishers' representatives are also in a position to recommend agencies to manufacturers who are about to make their debut as advertisers or to regular advertisers who are thinking of changing agencies. Also agency space buyers sometimes change jobs. They may go to other agencies or become space salesmen themselves. And space salesmen frequently graduate into agency account executives.

What with one thing and another the agency space buyer is likely to say *yes and no*—until *all* the data of his calculus is in hand.

It is necessary to sketch this background of intrigue because it is unquestionably a factor in the traffic of advertising where the stakes are large and a decision one way or another can readily be justified on entirely ethical grounds. It is a minor factor. Curiously enough there is probably less of it in the advertising business than in most other businesses; much less, for instance than in the movie industry, or in the field of investment banking. It is indeed puzzling that the ad-man,, whose stock-in-trade in his relations with the public, is pretty much bunk, should exhibit, in the internal traffic of the business, a relatively high standard of personal integrity. Yet the writer is convinced that this is so, and in later chapters will offer tentative explanations why this should be so.

The agency-publication-advertiser relation is of course only one loop of the endless chain of selling. To complete the circuit in detail would scarcely be useful at this point. The major sequences may be

summarized briefly as follows:

SERVICES OF SUPPLY.

The raw material of advertising consists of ink, paper, paint, photographic materials and talk. The techniques involved are too numerous to list, especially since new techniques are constantly emerging. In the lobby of the agency swapping cigarettes and gossip with the space salesmen are regularly to be seen the salesmen representing advertising's services of supply. They are all there in person or represented by their salesmen. The printer, the lithographer, the photographer, the carcard and outdoor advertising companies, the direct-by-mail house, which is a printing house with much of the production personnel and equipment -of the agency; the advertising "novelty" house, a "public relations" expert, a couple of broadcasting companies and three specimens of radio talent. Also the de luxe young woman who serves as gobetween in the testimonial racket; also half a dozen people of both sexes who are looking for jobs. They have heard that the agency has just captured the Primrose Cheese account.

All told it makes quite a mob. The reception clerk is either gray-haired and dignified, or young, pretty and amiable. She is busy continuously on the telephone, glibly translating the account executive's "Nothing doing" into "Mr. Blotz is *so* sorry. Couldn't you come tomorrow at about this time?" Eventually most of these salesmen are seen by somebody. The agency is in the selling business too and can't afford to upstage anybody. While they are waiting they improve their time by selling each other. The printer sells the direct-by-mail house executive; the engraver sells the printer; the lithographer sells the outdoor advertising representative; the radio talent sells the broadcaster. Only the testimonial racketeer remains uninterested. Deciding that there isn't a profitable date in a carload of these people, she gives it up and goes home.

INTRA-MURAL SELLING.

It must be understood that an advertising agency is a loose aggregation of rugged individuals each of whom is very busy carving out his or her professional career. This occasions more or less continuous conflict and confusion. The technique of combat is salesmanship. The movement is the circular movement of the dance, with alternating tempos of dreamy waltz and frantic fox-trot. There is much cutting-in and swapping of partners. Everybody is busy selling everybody else; this entails much weaving from desk to desk; many

prolonged luncheon conferences; many convivial midnight parties in Bronxville, Great Neck and Montclair. The mulberry bush around which this dance revolves is known in the trade jargon as the Billing, that is to say, the total volume of advertising on which the agency gets commissions. Everybody knows the amount of the commission and everybody knows or can guess approximately the amount of the Billing. Hence everybody is constantly doing mental calculations in which the opposing factors are "How much do I do?" and "How much am I paid?" The answer never comes out right for anybody. The copy-writer notes that he writes all the copy on three accounts the total annual billing on which averages say a million dollars. Fifteen per cent of a million dollars is \$150,000. The copy-writer's salary is \$5,000 and this year no bonus was paid at Christmas time. The discrepancy is obvious. The copy-writer considers that all the other processes of the agency, such as art production for which a separate added commission is charged, media selection, client contact, new business getting, forwarding, billing and other routine tasks, are just as much overhead and that there is too damned much of it; also too damned much profit going into the salaries and dividends received by the heads of the agency. All the other members of the "creative" staff entertain similar views differing only in the focus of the particular grievance; whereas the lowly clerical and mechanical workers are convinced that the agency wouldn't get paid unless the advertisements got into the newspapers and magazines. They too have their grievances. The way out for all these people is salesmanship. Hence everybody sells everybody else; the copy writer and the art director sell the account executives on the relative importance of copy *versus* art or art *versus* copy; the research director sends memoranda up to the top pointing out that it is impossible to sell shoes without an adequate economic and anatomical study of feet; the new-business-getter inquires with some acerbity, who brought this account into the house?

Observing this disorder in the ranks, the heads of the agency are puzzled and heartsick. They work hard—yes, many of them do work preposterously hard. Few of them make large fortunes out of the agency business directly. They give more or less secure employment to hundreds of people. And in return they get an amount of grouch-ing, chiseling and intrigue that is positively appalling.

The dance around the mulberry bush grows dreamier and dreamier, or wilder and wilder. Since the generated energy is centrifugal in nature, it happens at more or less regular intervals that one of the dancers furtively leaves the floor and runs across the street with a sprig of the mulberry bush in his teeth. Panic ensues. A chosen few of the apostate's intimates follow their leader across the street. If the

mulberry sprig roots and flowers, a new agency is established, the music strikes up, and a new dance begins around the new mulberry bush.

Meanwhile, in the parent agency a period of stricter discipline is inaugurated. Disaffected staff members are scared or flattered back into line. New management devices are introduced, which have as their objective an improved agency morale. They are selling devices primarily. The staff is sold on the integrity and fairness of the directing heads; they are sold on the honor and dignity of the advertising profession; they are assured that the way to the top is always open; that copy writers, junior executives, etc., who work hard and keep their eyes off the clock will be given higher responsibilities, with commensurate increases in salary. The virtues of the ad-man are industry, alertness and loyalty, and the greatest of these is loyalty. On the anniversary of his employment with the agency each employee finds on his desk a white rose. All are urged to take a greater interest in the business. Monday morning staff conferences are instituted. A frequent subject of discussion at such conferences is the obligation, falling on every ad-man, to believe in what he is selling. How can he sell the public until he has first sold himself? This would seem a somewhat harsh requirement, but the reader is asked to believe that a percentage of ad-men fulfill it quite literally. By a process of self-hypnosis they become deliriously enthusiastic about whatever they are obliged to sell at the moment.

Their homes are museums of advertised toothpastes, soaps, anti-septics and gadgets. From themselves, their wives and their children, they exact the last full measure of devotion. They are alternately constipated with new condiments and purged with new laxatives, while their lives are forever being complicated with new gadgets.

Since accounts change hands frequently, a certain openmindedness of judgment, and a certain emotional flexibility are parts of the necessary equipment of the ad-man. He must be prepared at a moment's notice to forswear toothpaste A and announce undying devotion to toothpaste B; to rip out a whole line of bathroom equipment and install a new line; to turn in his McKinley Six for a Hoover Eight, whether he can afford it or not. His ability to do all these things without any outward evidence of insincerity is little short of miraculous.

The ad -man is indeed a kind of *Candide*. His world is the best of all possible worlds, as the Russians say, every change is good, even for the worse. For instance, he may work for a small agency and passionately proclaim the efficiency of the smaller service organization as against that of the half-dozen mammoths of the business. But let his agency be merged with one of these mammoths and he will make

speech at the ensuing convention of the joined staffs, in which he declares with tears in his eyes that this marriage was made in heaven. If, as sometimes happens, the merger was in fact a shotgun marriage consummated more or less at the behest of the sheriff, his fervor will be heightened only by this circumstance, which he will stoutly deny to all and sundry. He is not consciously lying. He literally believes what he is saying. His is indeed the faith that passes understanding.

In puzzling over such phenomena, it has occurred to the writer that there is something feminine about the makeup of your died-in-the-wool ad-man. This is probably an acquired characteristic, a sort of industrial hazard, or occupational disease peculiar to the business. The point will become more clear when it is remembered that the advertising agency is the scene of frequent accouchements—this is indeed the business-as-usual of the agency. Your ad-man is continuously either *enceinte* with big ideas, or nursing their infant helplessness. In this delicate condition he can scarcely be held intellectually or morally responsible for his opinions and acts. Behind him is the whole pressure of the capitalist organism, which must sell or perish.

Hence the ad-man's morning sickness, his tell-tale fits of dizziness after lunch, his periods of lachrymose sentimentality, his sleepless vigils after hours, his indifference to considerations of elementary logic—the charming hysteria, in general, of his high-strung temperament. Hence his trepidation as he approaches the ultimate ordeal to be described in the next chapter—the Presentation to the Client.

4 PRIMROSE CHEESE: An Advertising Accouchement

5 *AS ADVERTISED: The Product of Advertising*

6 THE MAGAZINES

7 THE NATURAL HISTORY OF ADVERTISING

*8 THE THREE GRACES: Advertising, Propaganda,
Education*

9 *TRUTH IN ADVERTISING*

10 CHAIN MUSIC: The Truth About the Shavers

11 BEAUTY AND THE AD-MAN

12 SACRED AND PROFANE LOVE

13 SCIENCE SAYS: Come up and see me some time

14 WHOSE SOCIAL SCIENTIST ARE YOU?

15 PSYCHOLOGY ASKS: How am I doing?

16 THE MOVIES

17 RULE BY RADIO

18 RELIGION AND THE AD-MAN

19 EVOLUTION OF THE AMERICAN HERO

20 THE CARPENTER RE-CARPENTERED

21 A GALLERY OF PORTRAITS

22 GÖTTERDÄMMERUNG: *Advertising and the Depression*

23 *NIRA—THE AD-MAN ON THE JOB*

24 *ALL FOR PURITY*

25 *CALL FOR MR. THROTTLEBOTTOM*

26 CONCLUSION: *Problems and Prospects*