

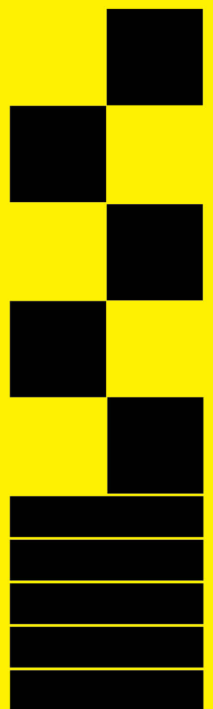
1934

Our Master's Voice: Advertising

James Rorty

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edition

with a new
introduction by
Jefferson Pooley



James Rorty

OUR MASTER'S VOICE
ADVERTISING

A MEDIASTUDIES.PRESS PUBLIC DOMAIN EDITION

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13 SCIENCE SAYS: Come Up and See Me Some Time

THE mission of the ad-man is sanctified by the exigencies of our capitalist economy and of our topsy-turvy acquisitive pseudoculture. His mission is to break down the sales resistance of the breadlines; to restore prosperity by persuading us to eat more yeast, smoke more Old Golds and gargle more assorted antiseptics.

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In fulfilling this mission it is appropriate that the ad-man invoke divine aid. The god of America, indeed of the modern world, is the scientist. Today it is only in the Fundamentalist, Sunday School quarterlies that God wears long white whiskers. In the advertising pages of the popular magazines He wears a pince-nez and an imperial; sometimes He squints through a microscope; or, instead of Moses' rod, He brandishes a test tube. The scripture which accompanies these pictorial pluckings of modern herd responses is austere, erudite, and asterisked with references to even more erudite footnotes. The headline, however, is invariably simple and explicit. In it the god says that yeast is good for what ails you.

The god is often a foreign god, resident in London, Vienna, Paris or Budapest. That makes him all the more impressive—and harder for the skeptical savants of the American Medical Association to get at and chasten.

In response to a recent inquiry printed in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, these savants remarked: "Yeast is so uncertain in laxative effect that it is hardly justified to classify it among the cathartics.... That, among the hosts of persons taking yeast a skin disorder clears up occasionally is not surprising. The association might be entirely accidental. The history of yeast, the periodic waning and gaining in favor, suggest that it has therapeutic value, but that this value is slight indeed."

Sometimes, as in the case of yeast, the god is appeased by appropriate sacrifices: \$750, f.o.b. London, was the price offered to and declined by one prominent English medico. Advertisers, however, have little difficulty in rounding up plenty of less fastidious impersonators of the deity, and the required honorariums are distressingly

small—less than half what is normally paid to society leaders. After being duly salved and photographed, surrounded by the paraphernalia of his profession, the “scientist” gives his disinterested, expert, scientific opinion. But sometimes he goes further. He *proves* that the advertisers product is the best.

The makers of Old Gold cigarettes have gone in heavily for this sort of proof. A while back they proved that Old Gold is the “coolest” cigarette. This demonstration was made by Drs. H. H. Shalon and Lincoln T. Work, for the New York Testing Laboratories. They proved, using the “bomb calorimeter,” the “smokometer” and other assorted abracadabra, that an Old Gold cigarette contains 6576 B.T.U.’s; whereas Brand X contained 6688 B.T.U.’s, Brand Y 6731 B.T.U.’s and Brand Z 6732 B.T.U.’s.

What, by the way, is a B.T.U.? It is an abbreviation for “British Thermal Unit”—a measurement of *heat content*. If Old Golds contain a fraction of a per cent less B.T.U.’s than the other tested cigarettes, does that make them any “cooler.” Not by a jugful. What does it prove? Nothing.

Scientists of this stripe are almost painfully eager to show that they are good fellows—that they are prepared to “go along.” Intellectually, they are humble creatures—the altar boys and organ blowers of the temple of science. They have wives with social ambitions and children who need shoes. They lack advancement, and when advertisers, who are often very eminent and respectable, make friendly and respectful overtures, they are often very glad to serve the needs of business.

Such friendships would doubtless be more general but for certain unwarranted apprehensions, especially prevalent among the banking fraternity. The strong men of Wall Street have been slow in realizing that the glamorous Lady Lou and many of these stiff, spectacled earnest creatures of the laboratory know their place in an acquisitive society; that beneath that acid-stained smock there often beats a heart of gold.

Recently Mr. Kettering, vice president and research director of General Motors, felt obliged to defend the engineer against the banker’s charge that he is upsetting the stability of business. Said Mr. Kettering, with a candor which cannot be too much admired: “The whole object of research is to keep every one reasonably dissatisfied with what he has in order to keep the factory busy in making new things.”

This definition of the object of engineering research may seem a little startling at first. But it must be remembered that Mr. Kettering is not merely an engineer, a scientist, but also a corporation executive and as such a practical business man. In fact, it might almost be said

that in the statement quoted Mr. Kettering speaks both as a scientist and as an advertising man; a scientific advertising man, if you like, or an advertising scientist. Hence, when he says in effect that in our society the object of scientific research is the promotion of obsolescence in all fields of human purchase and use, so that profit-motivated manufacturers may be kept busy making new things, his words, even though they sound a little mad, must be listened to with respect. It would appear that under the present regime of business, subject as it is to the iron determinants of a surplus economy, the sales function must be reinforced in every possible way. Hence the lesser departments of science, with their frail purities, their traditional humanities, their obsolete and obstructive idealisms, will be brought more and more under the hegemony of the new "science" of advertising, than which no department of science is more pure, more rigorous. The objects and ends of this science are predetermined: they are, quite simply, to turn people into gold, or to induce people to turn themselves into gold.

The medical experimenter may have qualms about vivisectioning his guinea pigs until he has first anesthetized them. The biologist may drop a tear over his holocausts of fruit flies. But the young Nietzscheans who run the advertising agencies observe a sterner discipline. The science of advertising is the science of exploitation, and in nothing is the ad-man more scientific, more ruthless than in his exploitation of "science." He is beyond the "good" and "evil" of conventional morality. Not for a moment can he afford to forget his motto: "Never give the moron a break."