

*James Rorty*

OUR MASTER'S HOUSE  
*ADVERTISING*

MEDIASTUDIES.PRESS

*Our Master's Domain: Advertising*, originally published in 1934 by the JOHN DAY COMPANY, is in the public domain

Published by MEDIASTUDIES.PRESS in the PUBLIC DOMAIN series

mediastudies.press | 414 W. Broad St., Bethlehem, PA 18018, USA

New materials are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 (CC BY-NC 4.0)

CREDIT FOR SCAN: Internet Archive, contributor Prelinger Library, 2006 upload

CREDIT FOR LATEX TEMPLATE: Book design inspired by Edward Tufte, by The Tufte-LaTeX Developers

IDENTIFIERS: ISBN xxxxxxxxxxxxxx | DOI 10.21428/3f8575cb.dbb9917

*Edition 1 published in August 2019*

*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.

[doi](#) | [original pdf](#)

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*.

# Contents

FOREWORD	ix
PREFACE to the <i>mediastudies.press</i> edition	xi
PREFACE: <i>I was an Ad-man Once</i>	3
1 THE BUSINESS NOBODY KNOWS	11
2 THE APPARATUS OF ADVERTISING	17
3 HOW IT WORKS: <i>The Endless Chain of Salesmanship</i>	18
4 PRIMROSE CHEESE: <i>An Advertising Accouchement</i>	19
5 AS ADVERTISED: <i>The Product of Advertising</i>	20
6 THE MAGAZINES	21
7 THE NATURAL HISTORY OF ADVERTISING	22
8 THE THREE GRACES: <i>Advertising, Propaganda, Education</i>	23
9 TRUTH IN ADVERTISING	24
10 CHAIN MUSIC: <i>The Truth About the Shavers</i>	25
11 BEAUTY AND THE AD-MAN	26
12 SACRED AND PROFANE LOVE	27
13 SCIENCE SAYS: <i>Come up and see me some time</i>	28
14 WHOSE SOCIAL SCIENTIST ARE YOU?	29
15 PSYCHOLOGY ASKS: <i>How am I doing?</i>	30
16 THE MOVIES	31
17 RULE BY RADIO	32
18 RELIGION AND THE AD-MAN	33
19 EVOLUTION OF THE AMERICAN HERO	34

20	THE CARPENTER RE-CARPENTERED	35
21	A GALLERY OF PORTRAITS	36
22	GÖTTERDÄMMERUNG: Advertising and the Depression	37
23	NIRA—THE AD-MAN ON THE JOB	38
24	ALL FOR PURITY	39
25	CALL FOR MR. THROTTLEBOTTOM	40
26	CONCLUSION: Problems and Prospects	41

# FOREWORD

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

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

[doi](#) | [original pdf](#)

<sup>1</sup> [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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup> 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

doi

<sup>2</sup> Vance O. Packard. *The Hidden Persuaders*. New York: McKay, 1957.

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

<sup>4</sup> 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.”<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup>

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.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> 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.

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

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

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

<sup>9</sup> *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**.<sup>10</sup> The good news is that **up to 80 percent** of the 1924–1963 failed to renew—so now they're owned by the public.<sup>11</sup> *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.<sup>12</sup>

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.”<sup>13</sup> Eighty-five years later, and we are still domiciled.

<sup>10</sup> 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**.

<sup>11</sup> 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>

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

<sup>13</sup> 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.

[doi](#) | [original pdf](#)

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 patentmedicine 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. didn't

[doi](#) | [original pdf](#)

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 hetserae 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 corporate 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*

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

#### *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*