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Our Master's Voice: Advertising

James Rorty

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with a new
introduction by
Jefferson Pooley



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OUR MASTER'S VOICE
ADVERTISING

A MEDIASTUDIES.PRESS PUBLIC DOMAIN EDITION

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26 CONCLUSION: *Problems and Prospects*

“THERE is nothing the matter with advertising,” Bruce Barton once protested, “that is not the matter with business in general.”

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Since advertising is, in the end, merely a function of business management, Mr. Barton’s statement is true, broadly speaking. It might be added that there is nothing the matter with business that is not the matter with the professions; also, that there is nothing the matter with business *and* the professions except that they are obsolete as practiced under the limiting conditions of an obsolete capitalist economy. Finally, there is nothing the matter with the machine, with industry, except that its productive forces cannot be released, and its dehumanizing effects controlled, under a profit economy.

All these qualified acquittals must be rendered lest the edge of criticism seems to bear too sharply and too invidiously upon the ad-man. Invidiousness is, of course, the bread of life in a competitive capitalist society. It is inevitable, in a fragmented civilization, that the fragments should quarrel. It is curiously unsatisfying for a man to be honorable and respectable in the sight of God. No, his sense of virtue and status must be fortified by the conviction that he is *more* honorable, more respectable than other men.

I have been greatly amused, more than once, by the complacent naïvetés of architects, engineers, doctors, dentists, “pure” scientists, and “objective” social scientists, who were quite prepared to agree with me that advertising is a very dirty business. They regarded me, apparently, as a reformed crook who was prepared, like a mission convert, to testify concerning the satanic iniquities that I had put behind me. I have noticed that my replies tend to chill the sympathetic interest of such people. I say, first, that I have not wholly reformed. Since I intend to maintain myself economically in an exploitative economy while it lasts, I expect to enjoy the luxury of integrity in strict moderation. I say, second, that I am not interested in pouring invidious moral and ethical comfort into their pots by telling them how black my particular kettle undoubtedly is.

This invidiousness, these differential judgments, came to the surface with a rush when, in the aftermath of the 1929 stock market crash, the magazine *Ballyhoo* was launched. This development, revealing as it did the catastrophic collapse of "reader-confidence" in advertising, deserves some detailed consideration.

Whereas the stock in trade of the ordinary mass or class consumer magazine is reader-confidence in advertising, the stock in trade of *Ballyhoo* was reader-disgust with advertising, and with high-pressure salesmanship in general. Initially the magazine carried no paid advertisements. It directed its slapstick burlesque primarily at the absurdities of current advertising. By October, 1931, its circulation had passed the million and a half mark and a score of imitators were flooding the news stands.

The editor of *Ballyhoo*, Mr. Norman Anthony, was formerly one of the editors of *Life*, and had at various times vainly urged that humorous weekly advertising medium to bite the hand that fed it by satirizing advertising. The stock market collapse, and the consequent reaction against super-salesmanship of all kinds, gave Mr. Anthony his opportunity, which he seized in realistic commercial fashion.

In style, *Ballyhoo* is a kind of monthly Bronx Cheer, bred out of *New Yorker* by *Captain Billy's Whizbang*. It expresses the lowest common denominator of sterile "sophistication," and it is still successful, although its circulation, at last reports, had dropped to approximately half of its 1931 peak. And for at least two years it has taken advertising—advertising designed to sell goods, although adapted to the pattern of *Ballyhoo's* burlesque editorial formula.

What had apparently happened was this: the frantic excesses of the ad-man in the production of customers by "creative psychiatry" had created a new market in which Mr. Anthony established a pioneering vested interest. This new market consisted of a widespread popular demand to have advertising burlesqued. Hence *Ballyhoo* became what might be called an enterprise in tertiary parasitism. In the present period of capitalist decline, business, as Veblen has shown, parasites on the creative forces of industry. Advertising, as the writer has tried to show in this book (c.f. the chapter on "Beauty and the Ad-Man") parasites to a considerable degree on business. *Ballyhoo*, in turn, parasites on the grotesque, bloated body of advertising.

Mr. Anthony's enterprise is, of course, strictly commercial. When, after its initial success, the owners of the magazine desired to two-time their readers in the conventional manner of publishing-as-usual, it is reported that Mr. Anthony at first objected. But he was overruled, and in due course an advertisement appeared in *Printers' Ink* offering advertising space in *Ballyhoo*.

Without serious injustice the sales talk of *Ballyhoo's* advertising

manager may be paraphrased as follows:

"Advertisers: Buy space in *Ballyhoo*. Of course we burlesque you and shall continue to do so, whether you buy space in the magazine or not. But these burlesques don't hurt your business. They help it. True, the saps laugh, but they also buy. Think of it! A mob of a million and a half saps, laughing and buying! Here they are, packaged and ready to deliver. How much do you offer?"

After this, the hostility with which many advertisers and many advertising-supported publications had regarded *Ballyhoo* began to subside. What if Mr. Anthony's publication was, in a sense, a parasitic enterprise? He was smart. *Ballyhoo* had got away with it. And forthwith they proceeded to imitate him.

More and more, advertising began to step out of its part and kid itself. The single column, cartoon-illustrated campaign for Sir Walter Raleigh Smoking Tobacco is an early example of this trend. The early copy, particularly, was an obvious burlesque of the Listerine halitosis-shame copy. Other advertisers picked up the idea, especially radio advertisers. Ed Wynn's kidding of Fire Chief gasoline is an excellent example of the application of burlesque to the production of customers. More and more, it is the fashion to make radio sales talk allegedly more palatable by infecting the whole program with burlesque advertising asides.

Even the preview advertising in the motion picture theatres is beginning to betray a similar infection. For example, the preview promotion of *George White's Scandals* consisted of a genuinely amusing satire of the hackneyed extravagances of motion picture advertising. The Jewish comedian who played the rôle of assistant impresario was sternly forbidden by Mr. White to use the words "stupendous," "gigantic" and "colossal" in describing the wonders of the new show. Driven to desperation by this cruel stifling of commercial enthusiasm, the comedian threatened to shoot himself, and did so. His dying words are: "George White's Scandals is a stupendous, gigantic, and colossal show."

It is contended by the broadcasters, and doubtless also by the movie producers, that this burlesque sales promotion takes the curse out of sales talk, and this is probably true to a degree. But the prevalence of the trend gives rise to certain ominous suspicions. In every decadent period, satire and burlesque tend to become the dominant artistic forms. When the burlesque comedian mounts the pulpit in the Church of Advertising, it may be legitimately suspected that the edifice is doomed; that it will shortly be torn down or converted to secular uses.

Confirmation of this suspicion appears in the current rôle of the advertising trade press, indeed of the trade press in general. The

writer has had occasion to note that his contributions on the subject of advertising were not welcomed by consumer publications supported by advertising. In contrast, the trade press has given space to forthright radical attacks upon the advertising business both by the writer and by other critics of advertising such as Dr. Robert Lynd, F. J. Schlink and others.

This is less surprising than it might seem at first sight. Both *Advertising and Selling* and *Printers' Ink* have at first times built their circulations by crusading for "truth in advertising," the prohibition of bought-and-paid-for testimonials, and other items of pragmatic advertising morality. Moreover, their readers want to know what the dastardly enemies of advertising are doing and thinking, and who is in a better position to tell them than these very miscreants themselves?

This brings us to a consideration of the agitation for government grading of staple products, which is the chief threat by which the advertising business is now menaced. It met and defeated this threat by deleting the standards clause from the original Tugwell Bill. But the same threat popped up at every code hearing and in Dr. Lynd's report urging the establishment of a Consumers' Standards Board, which was followed by F. J. Schlink's more sweeping demand for a Department of the Consumer with representation in the Cabinet.

To defeat the raid of the New Deal reformers on the advertising business, the food, drug, cosmetics and advertising interests concentrated in Washington a lobby reliably estimated to be from three to four times as big as any other Washington lobby in history. Yet in spite of this huge effort the Copeland Bill, after successive revisions by the Senate Commerce committee, emerged with a number of its smaller teeth still intact, and conceivably it may be passed by the time this book appears.

An ironic aspect of the matter was the dual rôle played by Senator Copeland, as broadcaster for Fleischmann's Yeast and Nujol, and as sponsor of a bill which would, if passed, have definitely limited the advertising activities of his commercial employers. On March 31st, Arthur Kallet, Secretary of Consumers' Research, who, with F. J. Schlink, had ably and energetically defended the consumer interest in Washington in connection with the Tugwell and Copeland Bills, the censorship and suppression of the Consumers' Advisory Board, etc., signed a circular letter urging the defeat of the emasculated Copeland Bill and the mobilizing of consumer support of the Consumers' Research Bill (H.R. 8313). Enclosed was the following statement by the Emergency Conference of Consumer Organizations.

"The Fleischmann Yeast Company, probably to an extent greater than almost any other national advertiser, would be affected adversely

by the original Tugwell Food and Drug Bill. This bill has been twice revised by Senator Royal S. Copeland, who is employed by the Fleischmann Yeast Company at a high fee in connection with its weekly advertising broadcast.

"The original Tugwell Bill was far too weak to afford adequate consumer protection, and the Copeland-revised Bill is so much weaker from the consumer viewpoint that it should be thrown out entirely and new legislation substituted. This cannot be accomplished unless it is driven home to the public that there is probably only one man in Congress who is and has been employed by manufacturers of dubious drug products, and that this person has, for some curious reason, been placed in charge of food and drug regulatory legislation. The twice revised bill shows that Dr. Copeland has taken excellent advantage of the opportunity thus afforded him to emasculate the original bill.

"The Tugwell Bill was introduced by Dr. Copeland at the last session of Congress. It was turned over to a sub-committee of the Senate Interstate Commerce Committee (where consumer-protective legislation certainly does not belong). The sub-committee consisted of Senator Copeland as chairman, Senator McNary (a fruit grower who would also be adversely affected by the bill) and Senator Hattie Caraway. This sub-committee held public hearings early in December. During the two-day hearings, Senators Copeland and McNary's antagonism to the best features of the bill was manifest. Moreover, while representatives of the manufacturers whose fraudulent and dangerous activities were to be controlled were given every opportunity to attack the proposed bill, not a single consumer was given a hearing until within two hours of the close of the session. Senator Copeland's commercial connections were pointed out by representatives of Consumers' Research, and new hearings under an impartial chairman were demanded, but this demand was ignored. It is noteworthy that at the end of the first day's session, Dr. Copeland went from the hearings to a broadcasting studio to speak on behalf of Fleischmann's Yeast.

"The Senator is now and has in the past been employed by other advertisers who would be adversely affected by the Tugwell Bill, among them the Sterling Products Company, and the makers of Nujol.

"The broadcasts for Fleischmann's Yeast were begun after the Senator introduced the Tugwell Bill. For a Senator to accept compensation from an organization affected by pending legislation is a violation of a criminal law, if there is any intent to affect the legislation. While intent cannot in this case be proved, there is clearly a violation of the spirit of the law."

Supplementing this statement, it may be noted that a business organization known as the Copeland Service, Inc., occupies the office at 250 W. 57th Street adjoining the office of Senator Copeland. The president of this organization is Mr. Ole Salthe, who in an interview with the writer on April 5th undertook to describe the nature of this business. A brief advertising folder issued by Copeland Service, Inc., offers the following services:

Laboratory Service

Including chemical and bacteriological examinations. Clinical and biological tests, particularly in relation to the improvement of present products or the development of new products.

Radio Programs and Lectures

Dr. Royal S. Copeland and a staff of experienced radio speakers are available to manufacturers of meritorious food and drug products. These speakers can talk authoritatively on health, food, diet and nutrition, and insure broadcasts that are interesting and productive of sales.

Labels and Printed Matter

Wide experience in the revision and preparation of labels and printed matter concerning claims made for food and drug products so as to conform to municipal, State and Federal Laws.

Special Articles

Relating to health, food, diet and nutrition written in a popular style for general distribution.

Market and Field Surveys

Staff of experienced investigators in the food and drug industries are available.

Dr. Salthe was for twenty years in the employ of the New York City Department of Health, being director of the division of foods and drugs when he retired in 1924. In 1925 he became president of Copeland Service, Inc., with which Royal S. Copeland Jr. is also now connected. Dr. Salthe declared that aside from broadcasting services for Fleischmann's Yeast and Stance, makers of Nujol and Cream of Nujol, Copeland Service, Inc., had no clients. Did I know of any prospects? Dr. Salthe earnestly denied any connection whatever between the Senator's sponsorship of the food and drug bill and his rôle as a radio artist for Yeast and Nujol. Copeland Service, Inc., he said, was trying to put on a sustaining program over N.B.C. stations in which the Senator would give "constructive educational talks on food buying, including the mentioning of worthy products."

Consumers of foods, drugs and cosmetics are invited to decide what is wrong with this picture and to extract whatever wry amusement they can from it.

Obviously, neither the emasculated Copeland Bill, nor the original Tugwell Bill, nor even the Consumers' Research Bill represent a direct functional approach to the economic and social problems involved,

because no such approach is possible within the framework of the capitalist economy. All that is possible is to set up more and more rigid legal and administrative controls over the exploitative activities of business. The Consumers' Research Bill goes the limit in this direction. Under its provisions manufacturers of drugs and cosmetics, and of food products potentially dangerous to health, would be licensed and bonded; only approved products could be manufactured; all labels and advertising claims would have to be approved by a board of experts.

The bill is well calculated to freeze the blood of the ad-men, drug men, vitamin men and cosmeticians. Incidentally, it constitutes an *excellent reductio ad absurdum* of the whole idea of progress by reform, capitalist planning, etc. Obviously, it would be much simpler to socialize pharmacy, medicine and the production and distribution of foods, and, also obviously, no such socialization could be achieved without a social revolution.

The most serious challenge to advertisers, and to the advertising business is, of course, embodied in the agitation for government grading conducted by the Consumers' Advisory Board, the Consumers' Counsel of the AAA, and from the outside by Consumers' Research. Here, too, the maximum result to be attained within the framework of the capitalist economy would still leave untouched the major contradictions of capitalism. The agitation is none the less important and fruitful. The demand for government grading of consumers' goods cannot be successfully argued against, even from the premises of competitive capitalism. The promulgation of quality standards and their control would be necessary government functions in any economy. Significantly, the agitation for standards has brought to light serious cleavages between the vested interests affected.

Between the manufacturers and the consumer stand the big distributors, the mail order houses, the department stores, and the chain stores. They tend increasingly to sell house products rather than advertised brands. They represent the more nearly efficient and functional agencies of distribution under capitalism. They are powerful, and they object to being squeezed by manufacturers, either through high prices or lowered standards.

In the course of General Johnson's field day for critics last March, Irving C. Fox, secretary of the National Retail Dry Goods Association, in addition to protesting against price rises, revealed that within a week or two after the codes went into effect, with provisions prohibiting returns after five days, the quality of merchandise became much lower than prior to the adoption of these provisions. Chain store, mail order and department store buyers, and buyers for municipal, State and Federal departments, have been, in all probability, the

most effective allies of the Consumers' Advisory Board in the fight against high prices and lowered standards. Not that the consumer standards movement has got anywhere to date. In one of the reports of the Consumers' Advisory Board, Prof. Robert Brady testified that

"Of the first 220 codes, which cover the most important American industries, only about 70 contain clauses having anything to do with standards, grading or labeling. Most of these clauses are absolutely worthless from the point of view of the consuming interests. In some cases they are so vague that they permit anything and condone everything. In some cases they are positively vicious in that they may be used covertly for price fixing purposes and even practically to compel the lowering of quality. In four cases, for example, the code authority is instructed to declare that the giving of guarantees beyond a certain point is an unfair trade practice, whereas most of the industries affected have long been accustomed to give and live up to guaranties far beyond these points."

For confirmation of this statement we have only to turn to the *Journal of Commerce* for April 13, 1934, from which the following quotation is taken:

"Substitution of lower quality for standard products continues on a substantial scale and prevents consumers from realizing the full import of price increases that have taken place.

"Retail prices in many lines have been arrived at after study and experience with mass buying habits. Merchants conclude, therefore, that they must preserve these established price levels even at the cost of sacrificing quality, to maintain their physical volume of sales.

"This reasoning has been found so practical and effective in many instances that manufacturers of branded and trade-marked merchandise have been adopting the same policy in increasing numbers, it is reported. In some cases, manufacture of the previous standard quality is being given up altogether. In some other instances goods meeting the old specifications are being sold under a new branded name at a higher price."

2.

In the light of all these developments, the advertising profession is bound to contemplate its future with alarm and foreboding. Where business in general fears the still remote prospect of social revolution, the advertising business faces deflation through the inevitable and already well-begun processes of industrial cartelization, of capitalist "rationalization," which here, as in Italy, Germany, and in England are bound to enforce a lower standard of living upon the masses of the population.

At the last convention of the Association of National Advertisers, Dr. Walter B. Pitkin, Professor of the School of Journalism at Columbia University, played Cassandra to the assembled ad-men by adding up the costs of the depression to advertising. "To begin with," said Dr. Pitkin, "we are left with between 60 and 64 million people at or below the subsistence level." These are "extra-economic men" as far as the advertising business is concerned. The arts of "creative psychiatry" are wasted on them because their buying power is negligible. The average annual per capita income is down to \$276. If from this is subtracted an average of \$77 for fixed debt charges, we are left with an average of per capita expendible income of \$199. Multiply this by four and we have \$800 as the family average.

But Dr. Pitkin had worse horrors than this to reveal. He believes that even if we have recovery sufficient to bring about a return of the pre-depression income levels, this recovery will not be accompanied by similar spending. Not only are there between 60 and 64 million "extra-economic Americans—outside the money and profit system," but they don't want to get back into this system. Dr. Pitkin cited examples of middle class professional people, who, having become adapted to the shock of having to live on eighteen dollars a week, were content with what they had; at least they were unashamed, since so many of their friends were in a similar condition. Dr. Pitkin sums up the problem confronting the advertising profession as follows:

"You have got not merely the problem of scheming to get people's income up, but you have got the problem of breaking down what you might call a degenerate type of social prestige, and that is a new problem in advertising and selling, it is a new problem in merchandising which not one manufacturer in the United States has yet attempted to face."

In passing it might be noted that as a result of the "scheming to get people's income up" as conducted by the industrialists who wrote the codes, some of whom were in Dr. Pitkin's audience, the volume of goods sold in February, 1934, was apparently from 6 to 8 per cent less than in February, 1933.

The assembled advertising men fired questions at Dr. Pitkin. They begged this earnest savant for some hope, for some way of "meeting the issue." This is what they got:

"We have seen advertising in the last twenty-five years develop from local commodity advertising, next to trade advertising, then institutional advertising of a whole domain of businesses....Those are merely the first movements in a direction toward which we must go a long way further. You have got to go beyond institutional advertising to some new kind of philosophy of life advertising. I don't know any

better expression for it than that, but what I mean is that you have got to sell an enormous number of people in the United States, people of power, people of intelligence as well as the down-and-outs; you have got to sell them the conception very clearly of the American standard of living as we used to think of it, and have a return to it with all that it implies."

If this seems fantastic under the circumstances, I can only point out that among advertising men in general, Dr. Pitkin is regarded as a top-leader intellectual. The ad-men were made pretty unhappy on this occasion, for they couldn't see how they were going to carry out Dr. Pitkin's recommendations. In effect, what he said was: "What you need is more advertising." And they knew that before.

Advertising men are indeed very unhappy these days, very nervous, with a kind of apocalyptic expectancy. Often when I have lunched with an agency friend, a half dozen worried copy writers and art directors have accompanied us. Invariably they want to know when the revolution is coming, and where will *they* get off if it does come.

The other day I encountered a very eminent advertising man indeed, emerging from an ex-speakeasy. He hailed me jovially and put the usual question: "How's the revolution coming?"

"Rather badly," I replied. "Although I think you and your crowd are certainly doing your bit."

"You're damned right," replied this advertising magnifico. "I've got a big white horse. I call him 'Comrade.' And when the revolution comes, I'll be right out in front: 'Comrade Blotz'."

With a sudden chill I reflected that, given the sort of mass moronism which the advertising business has been manufacturing for these many years, something of the sort might conceivably happen. What that eminent ad-man thought of as "revolution" was, of course, Fascism. I venture to predict that when a formidable Fascist movement develops in America, the ad-men will be right up in front; that the American versions of Minister of Propaganda and Enlightenment Goebels [*sic*] (the man whom wry-lipped Germans have Christened "Wotan's Mickey Mouse") will be both numerous and powerful.