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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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14 WHOSE SOCIAL SCIENTIST ARE YOU?

AS ADVERTISING became more and more an essential part of the mechanism of sales promotion, and as our newspapers and magazines took definite form as *advertising businesses*, the advertising profession became highly respectable. It was part of the status quo of the acquisitive society and could be effectively challenged only by persons and interests standing outside this status quo.

As already indicated, the product of advertising was a culture, or pseudoculture. Advertising was engaged in manufacturing precisely the material which our economists, sociologists and psychologists are supposed to study, measure and interpret—necessarily within some framework of judgment. What framework? Where did our social scientists stand during advertising's period of expansion and conquest?

They stood aside for the most part while advertising proceeded to play jackstraws with the "law" of supply and demand, and other items of orthodox economic doctrine. Thornstein [*sic*] Veblen saw the thing clearly and his brief treatment of advertising in *Absentee Ownership* remains today the most exact description of the nature of the advertising phenomenon which has yet appeared.¹ But Veblen was a lone wolf all his days. And it has been the journalists, publicists and engineers, rather than the professors, who have made most effective application of Veblen's insights. Stuart Chase, a disciple of Veblen, has worked without academic sanctions, while the director of Consumers' Research, Mr. F. J. Schlink, is an engineer, and Mr. Arthur Kallet, his collaborator in the writing of *100,000,000 Guinea Pigs* is another.² For the most part, orthodox economists have either ignored advertising, or in very brief and inadequate treatments, have complained gently about its "vulgarity," as if, in the nature of the case, it could be anything but vulgar. A notable exception is the chapter on "Consumers in the Market" by Professor Corwin Edwards in the second volume of *Economic Behavior* by members of the Economics department of New York University.³ Against this competent and forthright analysis, however, must be set the sort of thing which

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¹ [Thorstein Veblen, *Absentee Ownership and Business Enterprise in Recent Times: The Case of America* (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1923), chap 11.]

² [Arthur Kallet and F. J. Schlink, *100,000,000 Guinea Pigs: Dangers in Everyday Foods, Drugs, and Cosmetics* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1933).]

³ [Corwin Edwards, "Consumers in the Market," in *Economic Behavior: An Institutional Approach*, edited by Willard Earl Atkins and Donald William McConnell, vol. 2, 20–40 (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1931).]

Leverett S. Lyon, economist of Brookings's Institute, contributes to Volume I of the *Encyclopedia of Social Sciences*. I quote here the concluding paragraph of Mr. Lyon's article:

Consumer advertising is the first rough effort of a society becoming prosperous to teach itself the use of the relatively great wealth of new resources, new techniques, and a reorganized production method. Whatever eventually becomes of advertising, society must provide some device for this task. Some agency must keep before the consumer the possibilities resulting from constant advance, for the world appears to be learning to produce goods ever faster. Today the voices crying most loudly in the wilderness of consumption are more concerned with noisily advertising the weaknesses of advertising than with patient teaching of standards of taste which will reform advertising by indirection. Other action is possible. An increase of government specifications would help, although not as much as is often thought, and they would require an enormous amount of advertising. What is most needed for American consumption is training in art and taste in a generous consumption of goods, if such there can be. If beauty is profitable, no manufacturer is desirous of producing crudity or vulgarity. Advertising, whether for good or ill, is the greatest force at work against the traditional economy of an age-long poverty as well as that of our own pioneer period; it is almost the only force at work against puritanism in consumption. It can infuse art into the things of life; and it will, if such an art is possible, and if those who realize what it is will let the people know.⁴

Intelligent and honest advertising men, at least, will have no difficulty in recognizing this as a piece of advertising copy about advertising. Like practically all advertising copy it is a piece of special pleading and its appearance in an otherwise excellently edited reference work is calamitous enough in all conscience.

It may be observed incidentally that Mr. Lyon is a frequent contributor to the advertising trade press. He stands well within the status quo, not merely of orthodox economic teaching, but of the advertising business itself. It is natural enough that he should rationalize and justify the rôle of advertising in our society, while making the usual pretense of "objectivity."

The fact is, of course, that as advertising became powerful and respectable it had a good many well-paid jobs to offer social scientists, and that none of these jobs tolerated any degree of "objectivity" whatsoever: Jobs of teaching merchandizing and market analysis in schools of business administration; jobs for statisticians as directors of research in advertising agencies; jobs for psychologists in testing new devices of cozenage, measuring "consumer reactions," etc. There can be no doubt as to whom these social scientists belong. They belong to the advertising business, and they can no more write "objectively" about that business than a copy writer can write objectively about his client's gargles and gadgets.

⁴ [Leverett S. Lyon, "Advertising," *The Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, edited by Edwin R. A. Seligman, vol. 1 (New York: Macmillan, 1930), 470.]

With the rapid growth of the schools of business administration since the war, these business-minded economists, psychologists, statisticians, etc., came to rival in number and in influence their colleagues in the departments of economics and psychology proper. But even the strictly academic social scientists, practitioners of a "purer" discipline, found increasing difficulty in sustaining their claim of "objectivity" and the younger ones, especially the economists, pretty much gave it up. Both the motivation and the futility of this claim are well analyzed by Mr. Sidney Hook in an unpublished manuscript:

The fascination of physical science for the social theorists is easy to explain. Not only does it possess the magic of success, but what is vastly more important, the promises of agreements and objectivity. In the popular mind, to be objective and to be "scientific" are practically synonymous terms. What is more natural, therefore, than the fact that in a field in which prejudice, bias, selective emphasis are notorious, there should be a constant appeal to a neutral point of view. It is this quest for objective truth from a neutral point of view, independent of value judgments, which has become the great fetich of American social science.

It cannot be emphasized too strongly that the social activity which contributes the subject matter of the social sciences is an activity carried on by human beings in pursuit of definite ends. If we take these ends as our starting point nothing is clearer than the fact that these ends, whether they be of individuals or of classes, conflict. Social conflicts are a real and permanent feature of the society in which we live. Every attempt to develop an objective social science which will do for social organization what science has done for technology must grapple with the difficulty that there are as many directions in which social reorganization may be attempted as there are social classes. The attempt to evade this class conflict and to refuse to regard it under existing conditions as fundamental is behind the strenuous effort to emulate the "exact sciences" in which the only recognized conflict is between the "true" and the "false."

Taking, as Mr. Hook suggests, the ends sought by advertising as the proper starting point for a consideration of the phenomenon, let us return to Mr. Lyon's forensic summation and see what it amounts to. He says: "Consumer advertising is the first rough effort of a society becoming prosperous to teach itself the use of the relatively great wealth of new resources, new techniques and a reorganized production method." In the first place, advertising is conducted by and for advertisers, and the dissemination of a material culture which it accomplishes is strictly in the interest of the advertiser, primarily, and of the total apparatus of the advertising business secondarily. The advertiser is concerned with "teaching" the consumer only in so far as such teaching profits the advertiser and the routine product of advertising is therefore pretty consistently mis-educational rather than

genuinely educational. This "teaching" involves not merely huge economic wastes but a definite warping and conditioning of the consumer's value judgments into conformity with the profit-motivated interests of the advertiser.

Mr. Lyon proposes, by implication, a "patient teaching of standards of taste which will reform advertising by indirection." A teaching by whom and for whom? Advertising is itself a tremendous "educational" effort which operates in the interest of the advertiser with incidental profit to the consumer only in so far as he can disentangle the truth from a mass of special pleading, this incidental profit being vastly overbalanced by the mis-educational pressures exerted not merely on his pocketbook but upon his "taste," that is to say, his value judgments. Advertising, as Veblen said, is not merely an enterprise in sales promotion, but an enterprise in the production of customers which necessarily becomes an enterprise in "creative psychiatry."⁵ Does Mr. Lyon propose that this huge *interested* mis-educational and anti-cultural activity be balanced and corrected by another educational activity? In whose interest? Financed and conducted by whom? By Consumers' Research, perhaps? By government? But why should any government which pretends to govern in the interests of the people as a whole proceed by "indirection"; that is to say, educate consumers to resist in their own interest the "education" which advertisers disseminate in *their* interest? Wouldn't it be simpler to eliminate your negatives first and then see how much and what kind of positive education is required?

⁵ [Veblen, *Absentee Ownership*, 307n12.]

Advertising, says Mr. Lyon, "is almost the only force at work against puritanism in consumption." By what right and in whose behalf does he introduce this value judgment into his argument? Maybe our people would prefer a little more puritanism in consumption, intolerable as such an attitude may be to advertisers operating in the "surplus economy" phase of industrial capitalism. And does advertising really work against puritanism in consumption? What do you mean, puritanism in consumption? Buying wheat for what it is worth instead of "puffed wheat" at eight times as much? Buying a radio instead of shoes for the baby?

Advertising, says Mr. Lyon, "can infuse art into the things of life, if such an art is possible, and if those who realize what it is will let the people know." How? By more advertising, doubtless, along the lines so frequently proposed by Mr. Bruce Barton and Mr. Walter Pitkin in the interests, not of the "people" but of the advertiser and the advertising business?

One gives space to such lamentable rationalizers as Mr. Lyon only because he represents so typically the values, attitudes and motives of the ad-man's pseudoculture as they are currently set forth by ad-

vertising apologists. We shall encounter precisely the same kind of logical jabberwocky when we come to consider the radio and the movies. Meanwhile, let us have a look at the rôle of the psychologists.