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

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 xxxxxxxxxxxxx | DOI 10.21428/3f8575cb.dbba9917

Edition 1 published in August 2019

PREFACE to the mediastudies.press edition

doi

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[7] Ibid.,2.

[8] Ibid., 495. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Peters and Simonson included an excerpt from *Our Master's Voice*. "The Business Nobody Knows," 106–9.

[9] Ibid., 8.

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

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

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

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

Jefferson Pooley, August 2019

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

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

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

[13] Rorty, *Our Master's House*, ix.