

From salvation to self-realization: Advertising and the therapeutic roots of the consumer culture, 1880-1930.

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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“On or about December 1910,” Virginia Woolf once said, “human character changed.” This hyperbole contains a kernel of truth. Around the turn of the century a fundamental cultural transformation occurred within the educated strata of Western capitalist nations. In the United States as elsewhere, the bourgeois ethos had enjoined perpetual work, compulsive saving, civic responsibility, and a rigid morality of self-denial. By the early twentieth century that outlook had begun to give way to a new set of values sanctioning periodic leisure, compulsive spending, apolitical passivity, and an apparently permissive (but subtly coercive) morality of individual fulfillment. The older culture was suited to a production-oriented society of small entrepreneurs; the newer culture epitomized a consumption-oriented society dominated by bureaucratic corporations.¹

It is easy to exaggerate the suddenness or completeness of this transformation. Early on it occurred primarily within the official norms and expectations of the dominant social groups—and even there it was halting and only half-conscious. Further, a producer orientation survived in the consumer culture, though it was cast in a secular mold. By the 1920s, among the American bourgeoisie, the newly dominant consumer culture was a muddle of calculated self-control and spontaneous gratification.

Focusing on the United States, this essay aims to explore the role of national advertising in this complex cultural transformation. Since the subject is too large for comprehensive treatment here, what follows will attempt to be suggestive rather than exhaustive — to indicate a new approach to the history of American advertising, which has long remained a barren field. Aside from in-house or administrative histories, there is

little to choose from. The few historians who have addressed the subject in recent years tend to fall into two opposing camps, best represented by Daniel Boorstin and Stuart Ewen. Boorstin thoughtfully sketches some moral and emotional dilemmas in the culture of consumption, but he ignores power relations. To him advertising is an expression of impersonal technological, economic, and social forces. Ewen, on the other hand, can see nothing but power relations. To him the consumer is the product of a conspiracy hatched by corporate executives in the bowels of the Ministry of Truth, then imposed with diabolical cleverness on a passive population. Neither Ewen nor Boorstin grasps the complex relationship between power relations and changes in values — or between advertisers' changing strategies and the cultural confusion at the turn of the century.²

My point here is obvious but usually overlooked: Advertising cannot be considered in isolation. Its role in promoting a consumer culture can only be understood within a network of institutional, religious, and psychological changes. The institutional changes have been much discussed elsewhere; the religious and psychological changes have not. To thrive and spread, a consumer culture required more than a national apparatus of marketing and distribution; it also needed a favorable moral climate. In this essay, I shall argue that the crucial moral change was the beginning of a shift from a Protestant ethos of salvation through self-denial toward a therapeutic ethos stressing self-realization in this world — an ethos characterized by an almost obsessive concern with psychic and physical health defined in sweeping terms.

Of course, one could argue that there is nothing specifically historical about this therapeutic ethos. People have always been preoccupied by their own emotional and physical well-being; all cultures, ancient and modern, have probably had some sort of therapeutic dimension. But my research in magazines, letters, and other cultural sources suggests that something was different about the late-nineteenth-century United States. In earlier times and other places, the quest for health had occurred within larger communal, ethical, or religious frameworks of

meaning. By the late nineteenth century those frameworks were eroding. The quest...



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