



“Summary of article by T. J. Jackson Lears: From Salvation to Self-Realization: Advertising and the Therapeutic Roots of Consumer Culture” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 2: The Consumer Society. Island Press: Washington DC, 1997. pp. 141-143

Social Science Library: Frontier Thinking in Sustainable Development and Human Well-being

“Summary of article by T. J. Jackson Lears: From Salvation to Self-Realization: Advertising and the Therapeutic Roots of Consumer Culture”

The summarized paper is made up of three sections – only the first two are summarized below. The third examines the life of an advertiser and uses the biography to illustrate the author's argument.

During the nineteenth century the Protestant ethos of salvation and self-restraint dominated the moral landscape of the United States. In contrast, modern consumer culture is characterized by the unrestrained pursuit of goods and services. The significance of Protestantism gradually diminished with the rise of a therapeutic morality that emphasized self-realization and a quest for psychological and physical health. This paper argues that the emergence of a therapeutic ethos provided the moral climate in which consumer culture could flourish. National advertising quickly developed as an expression of and tool for the dissemination of this ethos.

THE EMERGENCE OF A THERAPEUTIC ETHOS

All people to varying degrees are preoccupied with their own physical and emotional wellbeing, but the modern ethos is unique in its secular and obsessive concern with developing a coherent sense of self. It developed primarily as a response to a growing feeling of "unreality" amongst the educated, urban bourgeoisie who perceived reality as something to be sought, rather than lived. This feeling of unreality derived essentially from an erosion of individual autonomy that developed within the framework of technological, religious and economic changes .

In all, the modern sense of unreality stemmed from extraordinarily various sources and generated complex effects. Technological change isolated the urban bourgeoisie from the hardness of life on the land; an interdependent and increasingly corporate economy circumscribed autonomous will and choice; a softening Protestant theology undermined commitments and blurred ethical distinctions. (10)

Personal isolation from the world bred a historically unique collection of emotional needs that valued bodily vitality, emotional intensity and a coherent sense of self. The flight from unreality became a quest for self-realization as the ultimate solution to feelings of disconnection.

Two disparate approaches to self-realization developed: one emphasized self-control through the management of personal resources and the other stressed personal growth through intense

experience. The "prudential" approach carried some vestige of the Protestant value of restraint, but success in life came to be understood in a moral and spiritual vacuum. The "abundance" approach promoted the impulse to let go and replaced morality with morale. These approaches shared the belief that self-realization is the most significant aim of human existence.

The secular world view of the therapeutic ethos competed with the values of religious institutions. Ministers mistakenly thought that by emphasizing the value of human potential they could maintain interest in traditional religious symbols. For example, in both the Emmanuel movement and liberal Protestantism, ministers redefined religious goals in terms of self-realization and prudence, thereby devaluing ultimate purposes (e.g. God and heaven) and transforming religion into a form of abundance therapy. By supporting the secular worship of personal growth, the therapeutic ethos diminished the values of customs, traditions, and family history.

ADVERTISING STRATEGIES AND THE THERAPEUTIC ETHOS

The advertising industry targeted the American longing for autonomy, authority, and cultural roots, and unintentionally reinforced these emotional needs. Between 1880 and 1930 the national market and urban conditions spawned a group of harried consumers. In response, advertising altered its product messages from descriptions to sensational imagery that caught the attention of the busy consumer. This shift was facilitated by advances in image technology that rendered lexical advertising dull by comparison. By the early 1900s, psychological consultants had developed advertising methods to manipulate the consumer and associate images of physical, psychic and social wellbeing with the acquisition of products. The idea that the human mind is malleable, susceptible to suggestion and irrational longings, played an important role in the social control exercised by advertisers. Advertising expressed this control through a developing industrial complex of mass media and mass amusement which facilitated the proliferation of sensational and confusing advertising messages.

The bewildering array of symbols and images that accompanied the new marketing strategies established a culture of meaningless symbols. Few symbols were rooted in specific customs or clearly referred to anything in particular. Images were divorced from the functional attributes of products, while advertising language spread misleading information.¹ The "corrosion of meaning" was gradual and unintended, as national advertising suggested an alternative set of values that promised well-being and fulfillment. Desires and anxieties were associated increasingly with criteria that were based in the perceptions of others. Fulfilling domestic responsibilities, climbing the corporate ladder, self-improvement, avoiding disease, and confronting social fears all were linked increasingly with consumption and a concern for what other people think.

These advertising strategies had a particularly strong effect on women. Advertising appropriated the role of educator and cultural authority for many women by informing young mothers how to care for their children, educating wives in the etiquette of domestic respectability, and promising youth, social acceptance, and liberation through appropriate consumption. Unfortunately, feminist calls for social equality were muted by the emphasis of the therapeutic ethos on the pursuit of self-realization and intense experiences.

Not all advertising strategies focused on aspirations and fears; some directly addressed feelings of unreality. This advertising promoted "natural" goods as a salvation from the artificiality of modern living. Advertising's emphasis on "natural" states reflected and addressed an urban bourgeois nostalgia for traditional authority by linking many products with the growing prestige of medicine and science. Advertising replaced ancestral cultural authorities with corporate and therapeutic commodified versions.

Thus, the therapeutic ethos developed in response to the demands of urban alienation and was shaped simultaneously by business interests and by the need for emotional stability and a coherent sense of self.

Notes

1. For example, Schlitz beer advertised that its beer bottles were steam cleaned, a practice that was common to all beer manufacturers. While the claim was not false, its implication that this practice was unique was misleading.