

Big business in America is producing what the Socialists held up as their goal: food, shelter and clothing for all.

—LINCOLN STEFFENS (1929)

Stuart Ewen. (1976). Captains of
Consciousness: New York: McGraw-Hill.

1 Assembling a New World of Facts

With the wide-scale implementation of mass production in the 1920s, advertising and the ideal of mass consumption were catapulted to the foreground of modern economic planning. In the internal arguments of the business community as well as in their more public expressions, American businessmen celebrated the coming of the new industrial age as one which would accelerate social progress among the masses and at the same time vindicate "the great stream of human selfishness" of which they were an undeniable part.¹ And yet the economic and social presence of a mass industrial machinery was not something that could arouse popular fidelity by virtue of its productive capacity alone. For as an increasingly large fraction of the material world became the domain of American business enterprise, the organization and manipulation of a responsive social context became clearly imperative. Faced on the one hand with the crisis of overproduction which prompted Bernard Baruch to issue the warning

that while "we have learned to create wealth . . . we have not learned to keep that wealth from choking us,"² and on the other hand the emergence of tendencies and movements among the working classes which questioned the basis of capitalist wealth *per se*, businessmen sought to utilize their technology for their own political purposes. It became a central function of business to be able to define a social order which would feed and adhere to the demands of the productive process and at the same time absorb, neutralize and contain the transitional impulses of a working class emerging from the unrequited drudgery of nineteenth-century industrialization.

More and more, the language of business expressed the imperative of social and ideological hegemony. Such a development was not without its precedents in American history, or that of other nations, however. John Adams had spoken of the political requirements of industry. "Manufactures cannot live, much less thrive," he cautioned, "without honor, fidelity, punctuality, and private faith, a sacred respect for property, and the moral obligations of promises and contracts."³ So too is much of American industrial development punctuated by attempts to channel thought and behavior into patterns which fitted the prescribed dimensions of industrial life.⁴

In a nineteenth-century society basically devoted to industrialization and regulating patterns of work, the arena of business manipulation was concerned predominantly with the basics of production. As Paul Nystrom, one of America's first consumer economists, wrote retrospectively of that early era: "under such conditions, society itself becomes industrialized. It develops its own ideals of life and puts its high stamp of approval on such virtues as working efficiency, special working ability,

industry, thrift and sobriety. Respect and honor are paid to the principles of industrialism, and reverence is offered its founders and leaders. The captains of industry become popular heroes. These are the characteristics of a true industrial society, a society in which ideals of production rather than of consumption rule."⁵

With the development of methods of mass production and the expanded notion of markets that this entailed, the ideology of "private faith" to which John Adams had alluded became a matter that extended beyond the strictures of industry and of work. For the "new order" was one which sustained itself not merely around the question of labor fealty to the mechanical process of capitalism, but one which demanded a dedication of *all* social energy to a world being fashioned by industrial technology. It is out of such a modern imperative that Jacques Ellul, critic of technological society, has developed a common conception of *technology* and *technique* as a constellation of devices for the "technical management of physical and social worlds."⁶

By the 1920s businessmen had reached a considerable awareness of the political and social roles that the process of consumption and the advertising that stimulated it must play. Putting aside the buoyant ad rhetoric of progress and beneficence for a moment, *Printers' Ink* put the need for social control in the frankest terms: "modern machinery . . . made it not only possible but imperative that the masses should live lives of comfort and leisure; that the future of business lay in its ability to *manufacture customers* as well as products."⁷ Elsewhere the business community was infused with a political messianism which implied that the mere selling of products was no longer an adequate goal of advertising. Writing in the twenties, Walter Pitkin, professor of marketing at the Columbia School of Journalism, spoke

of goods advertising, even sophisticated "national" market goods advertising, as merely an initial step "in a direction toward which we must go a long way further." Even institutional advertising, a public relations scheme which tried to boost a whole sector of industry, did not meet the political demands of mass industrial society. What was necessary, rather, was a broad scaled strategy aimed at selling the way of life determined by a profit-seeking mass-productive machinery. Pitkin ordered a campaign for an entire industrial value system, imploring his colleagues "to go beyond institutional advertising to some new kind of philosophy of life advertising."⁸

Consumerism, the mass participation in the values of the mass-industrial market, thus emerged in the 1920s not as a smooth progression from earlier and less "developed" patterns of consumption, but rather as an aggressive device of corporate survival. Edward Filene, the Boston department store merchant and a man who had developed an international reputation as "the mouthpiece of industrial America,"⁹ spoke frankly of the role and purpose of consumerizing the broad American population. The attempt to create a national, unified culture around the social bond of the consumer market was basically a project of broad "social planning."¹⁰ Industry, Filene argued, could "sell to the masses all that it employs the masses to create," but such a development would require a selective education which limited the concept of social change and betterment to those commodified answers rolling off American conveyor belts. "Mass production demands the education of the masses," Filene axiomized, "the masses must learn to behave like human beings in a mass production world."¹¹ Such an education, however, was to be one with extremely proscribed horizons. Fearing the implications of the kind of education that might

suggest an adversary relationship between the interests of American workers and those of the captains of industry, Filene presented a vision of education into industrial and social democracy within which the element of conflict was eradicated from the world of *knowledge*. Education, for Filene, became a task of building a culture on the basis of "fact-finding." Just looking at the given "facts" about what is being produced rather than questioning the social bases upon which those facts lay was what modern education should be all about. Education should be a process of acclimating and adjusting the population to that world of *facts*, to make it their own. "The schools do their best to teach patriotism—loyalty to the political state . . ." Filene observed, "But what are the schools doing to interpret the machine civilization" to the citizenry?¹² "The time has come," he argued, "when all our educational institutions . . . must concentrate on the great social task of teaching the masses not what to think but *how to think*, and thus to find out how to behave like human beings in the machine age."¹³ (My emphasis.)

The concept of "facts" as the essential world to which a worker should address him or herself is something that bore implications beyond the process of consumption. Although Filene's notion of *fact* was largely circumscribed by the wares of the commodity market, the notion of workers feeling comfortable in a world of fact reflects basic transformations in industrial life that characterize machine production and mass production in particular. As long as the apprentice-craftsman system had endured, earning a living was comprised of both productive activity and the social relations of commerce. Goods were made and sold for individuals, and the relationship between craftsmen and individual purchasers essentially affected the definition

of work. In a highly mechanized machine production, however, where both commercial interchange and the interchange of long-term training had been eradicated, human intercourse had been largely excised from the work routine of laboring classes. Robert and Helen Lynd, in *Middletown*, their 1924 study of Muncie, Indiana, described how the world of people and the world of things had been cleaved from each other in the industrial process:

Members of the [working class] . . . address their activities in getting their living primarily to *things*, utilizing material tools in the making of things and the performance of services, while members of [the business class] . . . address their activities predominantly to *people* in the selling or promotion of things, services, and ideas.¹⁴

Presenting "education" as an indoctrination into the world of facts of the marketplace—as opposed to the social relations of production and distribution—was a replication of developments which had shaped patterns of production. Consumption was but a reinforcement of the basic transformation that had increasingly characterized the world of work—a response to *things* rather than *people*, this time extended into daily life and leisure.

Widespread within the socially oriented literature of business in the twenties and thirties is a notion of educating people into an acceptance of the products and aesthetics of a mass-produced culture. Industrial development, then, became far more than a technological process, but also a process of organizing and controlling "long pent-up human impulses" (Filene) in such a way that these impulses might serve to provide social underpinnings to the industrial system.¹⁵ Branding all patterns of life which resisted the domination of culture

by the industrial machinery as "puritanism in consumption," Leverett S. Lyon's 1920s contribution to the *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* called for a training in industrial aesthetics to combat traditional patterns of culture. "What is most needed for American consumption," he wrote, "is training in art and taste in a generous consumption of goods, if such there can be. Advertising," he continued, "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 [!] . . ."¹⁶

Yet the argument for "education" that became so frequently heard among businessmen in the 1920s, and grew quite frantic as economic crisis appeared at hand,¹⁷ was one which confronted many varieties of historical resistance. First of all, while the adoption of a consumerized mentality among working people might effect a political loyalty to the capitalistic premises of the industrial system, there was too little materially—during the 1920s—to secure such loyalties. Despite rhetorical calls among business people for "higher wages" as a tactic of social integration, wages among the vast number of working people remained too low and the desire for expanding profits among business too high to create a high level of material participation by workers in the commodity market.

During the 1920s, notes historian Irving Bernstein, wage earners "did not enjoy as great a rise in income as did those in higher brackets."¹⁸ Citing figures worked out in Paul Douglas' 1924 study of "Wages and the Family," Bernstein argues that a majority of American working-class families throughout the twenties failed to earn a living which would make them consumers of any

great amount of goods beyond subsistence.¹⁹ If an "American" standard of consumption required at least \$2,000 to \$2,400 annual income, as Douglas argued, most wage-earning families (16,354,000 families according to Bernstein's calculations) received less than \$2,000 per year. While mass consumption rose steadily throughout the twenties, it did not significantly alter the amount of capital in-flow from working-class sectors of the population. Where consumption rose among workers, it rose largely as a result of installment buying on the one hand (this was also an aspect of middle-class consumption) or the forgoing of one set of goods for another. Regarding the latter, the Lynd's study, *Middletown*, indicates that the widespread consumption of automobiles during the twenties, even among working-class families, was often done at the expense of clothing, food or the mortgaging of family property, where it existed.²⁰

Beyond this, and perhaps more important to the consciousness of many, were the indigenous networks of social structure that carried premises and values which generated mistrust or open opposition to the corporate monopolization of culture. Traditional family structures, agricultural life styles, immigrant values which accounted for a vast percentage of the attitudes of American working classes, and the traditional realms of aesthetic expression—all these were historically infused with an agglomeration of self-sufficiency, communitarianism, localized popular culture, thrift and subjective social bonds and experiences that stood, like Indians, on the frontiers of industrial-cultural development. It was these subjective experiences of traditional culture that stood between advancing industrial machinery and the synthesis of a new order of industrial culture. And it was incumbent on industry, in formaliz-

ing the new order, to find a means to sacrifice the old. It was within this historical circumstance that the creation of an industrialized *education* into culture took on its political coloration.

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s the contiguity of industrialization and social control came to the fore in the United States and elsewhere. As Max Horkheimer, a social critic from the Frankfurt School, has noted in discussing monopolizing industrialism: "the rule of economy over all personal relationships, the universal control of commodities over the totality of life" must in the face of historical resistance become "a new and naked form of command and obedience."²¹ Much as in the case of totalitarian Nazi Germany which he was addressing himself to, the advance of corporate industrialism required that "the objects of organization [be] . . . disorganized as subjects."²²

2 Commercializing Expression

In the propagation of an aesthetic of mass industrialism, it was in the realm of artistic creativity itself that the organization of objects and the dissolution of the subject took perhaps its most obvious toll. The business of advertising and marketing was one which drew heavily on creative human resources in order to formulate its product. The utilization of art in business promotion, wrote Walter Dill Scott, must maintain the primacy of profits. "To substitute the standard of the artist for the standard of the capitalist would be impossible in business," he noted decisively. Yet, understanding the ways in which the further use of the aesthetic dimension might enhance the social viability of capitalist mass production and distribution, Scott added that "a harmonious working of the two is [nonetheless] . . . possible."²³

Not coincidentally, the enormous growth of the advertising industry and the commercialization of art that it entailed took place along with the gradual

depletion and demise of traditional sources and arenas of artistic expression and localized cultures. Artistic patronage, a province of the wealthy since ancient times, now was doled out through the economic avenues provided by advertising and its related industries (packaging for example). The effect on the graphic, literary and performing arts in America was to be monumental.

Newspapers, which throughout the nineteenth century had provided an arena for literary serialization and popular expression and whose diversity had provided for varied audiences, became increasingly commercialized and centralized in their direction. From 1900 through 1930 the number of daily newspapers in America declined steadily if not monumentally.²⁴ More important, there was an even greater decline in the existence of a diverse press. In 1909-10, 58 percent of American cities had a press that was varied both in ownership and perspective. By 1920, the same percentage represented those cities in which the press was controlled by an information monopoly. By 1930, 80 percent of American cities had given way to a press monopoly.²⁵ The role and influence of advertising in all of these developments is marked. In the period 1900-1930, national advertising revenues multiplied thirteen fold (from \$200 million to \$2.6 billion), and it was the periodicals, both the dailies and others, which acted as a major vehicle for this growth.

The immigrant press was particularly hard hit by commercial pressures. While the diversity of immigrant communities in America would have appeared to make the foreign language press an exception to the monopolistic development of American culture, that was hardly the case. In fact, it was within this press that some of

the most naked forms of commercial control were exercised.

The American Association of Foreign Language Newspapers, under the direction of Louis N. Hammerling, was an advertising agency which catered specifically to the immigrant press. The association, formed by a back-room consortium of such corporations as Standard Oil, Consolidated Gas, American Tobacco Company and some members of the Republican National Committee, had first recruited Hammerling in 1909 out of the Wilkes-Barre lumber industry, where he had been an immigrant worker, to run the Republican campaign in the foreign language press.²⁶ As the head of the advertising association, Hammerling provided ads (both political and consumer) for most of America's non-English-language newspapers, and exerted a vast control over their political and economic orientation. Robert Park, a contemporaneous student of foreign-born communities in America, noted that Hammerling "could give advertising or he could take it away. He could promise the struggling little publisher that he would either make him or break him."²⁷ Frank Zotti, editor of *Narodni List*, described Hammerling's policy as one which was aimed to "secure patronage of large corporations, and through that patronage to subdue or at least control these smaller newspapers that were barely making an existence; and eventually to put Mr. Hammerling in the position of dictator to the foreign-language press."²⁸

Hammerling did not merely feed ads to the non-English American press. Senate investigations into Hammerling's activities revealed that he also fed editorials and news material to these papers and required that they be published without the remuneration usual-

ly paid for advertising. Functioning as a "press bureau," the American Association of Foreign Language Newspapers was able to forge a political and social direction which was tantamount to almost total corporate control.²⁹

Even after Hammerling was discredited in 1919 for forcing his clients to sign a pro-German "Appeal to Americans" in the early days of World War I and ousted from his position in the Association, the agency maintained its dedication to corporate development and the "Americanization" of immigrants. Under Hammerling's successor, Frances Alice Kellor, the association continued to equate the acceptance of American products with patriotism. Striking out for the destruction of all cultural distinctions within the nation, and dedicated to producing "one people in ideals"³⁰ through the unification of "racial and native born thought in this country,"³¹ Kellor offered the commodity market as a bond which would insure that "the American point of view will prevail."³²

Writing about the foreign language press in America as "an American institution, an American Advertising Medium, an Americanization Agency," Kellor offered a program for political consolidation:

National advertising is the great Americanizer. American ideals and institutions, law, order and prosperity, have not yet been sold to all of our immigrants.

American products and standards of living have not yet been bought by the foreign born in America . . .

If Americans want to combine business and patriotism, they should advertise products, industry and American institutions in the American Foreign-Language press.³³

Such a policy, argued Kellor, was crucial in order to combat heritages and behavior that were "so different from our own" as to constitute a threat of "action that is inimical to our national purposes, or that interferes with our social machinery."³⁴

This centralization of control in the immigrant press is filled with political implications, but for now let it suffice to say that advertising in this press was of no small significance. By 1914, *Printers' Ink* noted that "foreign advertising is now about 20% of all the advertising in newspapers, and is constantly increasing."³⁵ By 1919, at his own admission,³⁶ Hammerling was a conduit for 5 percent of the entire national advertising revenues in the United States (around \$145 million) and exerted commensurate economic influence in over 700 newspapers throughout the country.³⁷ Beyond Hammerling's operation, the centralization and commercialization of control was a phenomenon that spanned the widest range of publications, and the long-term effect of such a development on what kinds of creativity received publication and support has undoubtedly left a significant mark on American intellectual and cultural development in the twentieth century.

The relationship that developed between advertising and the whole question of artistic creativity was fundamentally connected to the broader process of consumerization. While advertising attempted to turn people away from traditional life-styles, within the confines of the ad industry itself, the sacrifice of creativity to the authority of commerce was also taking place. The proliferation of artists and writers employed in the ad industry was marked, as was the psychological attrition that they experienced in this association.³⁸ Artists, often gifted in their sensitivities and sympathies to human frailties, were called upon to use those sensitivities for

manipulation. The result may be seen in the bitter renunciation of modern commerce that marks the writings of ex-ad men Sherwood Anderson, Wallace Stevens, and James Rorty (poet, and later editor of *New Masses*). All three, in their noncommercial writings, indicate the sense of artistic strangulation that capitalistic "patronage" of the arts had produced. Anderson's decrying of commerce as a system which has effected a "dreadful decay of taste, the separation of men from the sense of tools and materials"³⁹ is only echoed by Rorty's romanticized denunciation of commerce as a world which "is fueled by the organic cultural life which it disintegrates and consumes, but does not restore or replace."⁴⁰ While such flailings tend to glamorize pre-industrial workmanship, they are nonetheless statements of anguish felt by the artist whose art has been conscripted and deformed.

This crisis in the arts, the emergence of advertising and the commercial mentality as a growing and increasingly exclusive arena for artistic endeavor, was a theme among writers who were not involved in advertising *per se*, but who nevertheless felt the demands of industry closing in on them, forging their profession. Based on real characters, Theodore Dreiser's novel, *The Genius*, dealt with the destruction of a painter (artist Eugene Witla) who found his "success" in the world of advertising as early as 1909. The commercialization of creativity may be found as a theme in the writings of Dos Passos, Randolph Bourne, Gertrude Stein and others. One of the most intense denunciations of the effect of commerce on intellectual life is James Agee's in the opening chapter of his study of southern sharecroppers, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. While ending up with a defense of elite culture against an overcommercialized one, Agee too strikes to the heart of the crisis in creativity:

... the weak in courage are strong in cunning; and one by one, you have absorbed and have captured and dishonored, and have distilled of your deliverers the most ruinous of all your poisons; people hear Beethoven in concert halls or over a bridge game or to relax; Cézannes are hung on walls, reproduced, in natural wood frames; van Gogh is the man who cut off his ear and whose yellows became recently popular in window decoration; Swift loved individuals but hated the human race; Kafka is a fad; Blake is in the Modern Library; Freud is a Modern Library Giant; Dovschenko's *Frontier* is disliked by those who demand that it fit the Eisenstein esthetic; *nobody* reads *Joyce* any more; Céline is a madman who has incurred the hearty dislike of Alfred Kazin, reviewer for the *New York Herald Tribune* book section, and is, moreover, a fascist; I hope I need not mention Jesus Christ, of whom you have managed to make a dirty gentile.⁴¹

Fearing the fate of all artistic endeavor in the modern world, Agee pleads for his book. "Above all else: in God's name don't think of it as Art."

For many, the conscription of the arts by the industrial machine was a personal crisis. But perhaps more importantly, it represented a broad cultural tendency that was central to the ideology of consumerism—the eradication of indigenous cultural expression and the elevation of the consumer marketplace to the realm of an encompassing "Truth."