FROM POLEMICS TO DISCOURSE: A PRELIMINARY EXAMINATION OF THE IDEOLOGICAL CHARACTER OF ADVERTISING

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Abstract

This paper examines the prevailing critique of the advertising process suggesting that advertising results in negative social consequences. While defenders of advertising suggest that the critique is "ideological," it is suggested here that advertising itself is ideological in the pejorative sense. Until each party in the debate recognizes the ideological nature of its arguments, the conversion from polemics to discourse will not ensue.

Introduction

A few years ago Pollay (1986) reviewed the works of virtually all North American social science scholars who have analyzed, examined or commented on the potential or actual effects of advertising. Based on this effort, he developed a framework to categorize a broad spectrum of advertising's consequences. Included in the framework are consequences of commercialism, precipitation of irrationality, proffering a distorted model of reality, perpetuation and exacerbation of social problems, a degradation of language which promotes cynicism within the culture, and a general degradation of traditional values, both moral and spiritual. While each of these categories is characterized as latent, or unintended, their dysfunctional character is, nevertheless, manifested in the behaviors and attitudes so categorized.

Pollay identified the projected behaviors and/or attitudes ensuing from advertising as materialistic, cynical, irrational, selfishness, anxiety, social competitiveness, sexual preoccupation, powerlessness and loss of self-respect. While most of these characteristics would be described as dysfunctional by many people, exceptions might exist. A Randian votary might, for example, consider selfishness a virtue and an ardent Capitalist might consider social competitiveness a necessity. However, since these positions are not likely to be representative of the population at large, they are considered here to be exceptions. The value of Pollay's approach is that it provides a taxonomy of the latent dysfunctions of advertising, or at least an excellent first pass at one. The purpose of this paper is to extend his analysis by providing an integrating framework from which new insights might be drawn. The attempt is made to demonstrate that Pollay's taxonomy is not a
simple list of potential social and psychological consequences of the advertising process, but a set of singular pieces to a larger puzzle, the solution to which is necessary for continued social progress.

Pollay (1986) states, "Thus, the concerns of nonbusiness academics and the general public are too often dismissed with a wave of the ideological wand (p. 19)." If this is indeed the case, it is indicative of a larger problem than that suggested by Pollay or the many sources from which he drew. There would appear to be a multiplicity of ontological judgments as each of the diverse groups, both business and nonbusiness, seem to move through separate and distinct realities. In the end, it is more likely that each views the same reality through different modes of experience. Until the schism between the different world views is narrowed and a synthesis (or at least a better understanding of each) is achieved, the dissimilitude will continue to be a barrier to discourse on the effects of advertising and, indeed, to social progress itself.

The approach taken here is the examination of various aspects of Pollay's taxonomy of the latent dysfunctions of advertising to ascertain the common elements among them. Specifically, the common elements in many of the criticisms are extracted and examined to ascertain if they might be describing modes of thought possessing an ideological character. While the comments of critics of advertising have historically been dismissed as merely the reflections of "ideologists" who do not comprehend the nature of the situation, it is argued here that quite the reverse may in fact be the case; that is, those who categorically dismiss the criticism of advertising may resonate ideological purposes. To this end, we examine the degree to which advertising has been used to engender, or at least perpetuate, a consumption ideology in this culture.

What follows is predicated on two assumptions. The first has been clearly expressed by Parenti (1987) who states:

Cultural beliefs do not just "happen;" They are mediated through a social structure and are, to a large degree, the products of those groups which control the material resources of society, those who control the institutional and communication systems and who enjoy special access to the symbolic environment and to mass communications (p. 43).

Based on this observation, it is evident that what one believes and the way one structures his/her reality can be manipulated. Further, it is those who possess power within any culture who
have the capability to affect such cultural mandates. Advertising is, of course, among the communication apparatuses available for manipulation and along with it comes access to the content of the media through which advertising travels. Whether or not advertising can be effective in manipulating beliefs is addressed by Sherry (1987) who posits that:

...we can view advertising as a cultural system, and individual advertisements as a species of secular ritual, that is, an enactment or performance manifesting the larger system. It is further claimed that such symbolic activity not only expresses reality, but also structures experience (p. 451).

With the ability to structure experience, the concomitant ability to shape reality follows. Whether advertising reflects reality as well, or which (shape of reflect) it does better are not at issue here. The supposition is that the ability to manipulate the symbolic environment carries with it the ability to structure experiences and through this, the perception of reality (Holzner 1972; Berger and Luckmann 1966).

It is here that the ideological content of advertising materializes. Through control of advertising and indirect control of the symbolic environment achieved through the economic power associated with advertising, virtually any version of reality has been conjured as this is accepted prima facie, but that the particular version is inappropriate and considered by most to be largely dysfunctional.

According to many, defenders of advertising practices have distorted the reality of the existing social situation by labeling all criticism of advertising as ideological. Using the term ideological with the full pejorative intended, defenders have attempted "with a wave of their own ideological wand," to discredit and render impotent the sundry charges (some unwarranted to be suer) frequently brought by critics. By categorizing all criticism under the rubric of ideology (read Marxist), it has been assumed by representatives of the establishment that no further debate need ensue. In cases in which formalized response has been developed, it generally resorts to an invocation of logical positivism, a system of analysis containing its own ontological presuppositions biased toward the status quo. As argued here, criticism of advertising by social and political theorists has not been purely ideological, but instead an attempt to expose the mode of thought characteristic of advertising as itself ideological. To examine this proposition we turn first
to a working definition of ideology and then examine various elements of Pollay's taxonomy as to their ideological content.

The Nature of Ideology

When society's ethical values are outstripped by norms for behavior in an historical period, individuals cannot accommodate thought and action to a new situation (a new reality). Ultimately, such individuals become prohibited or inhibited from adjusting to the new reality and their transformation to a higher level of existence is impeded. Such antiquated modes of thought become ossified and degenerate into ideologies which conceal and mystify the actual meaning of action.

As an example of this process, the practice of lending money for interest serves well. During the pre-capitalist period, social relations were developed and maintained on a localized level and in a neighborly basis. Under such circumstances, the lending of money without interest could be the norm. The Church, reflecting the sanctity of such social solidarity, condemned the collection of interest as usurious. In this situation, the norms for action and the ethical basis for that action were congruous. People knew how to act and recognized that there would be negative consequences if they failed to behave appropriately. However, with the rapid expansion of Capitalism came the disintegration of neighborly social relations and its replacement with atomized individualism; the norms for behavior changed to conform to the new social reality. The practice of usury became necessary.

Meanwhile, the ethics of usury were ossified in the doctrine of the Church, thereby rendering incongruous the norms for behavior and the ethical system through which that behavior was evaluated. As Tawney (1962) points out, the increased emphasis placed by the Church on the doctrines of economic ethics was not simply a reverence for the past but "... because the swift changes of the period in commerce and agriculture had, not softened, but accentuated, the problems of conduct for which it had been designed (p. 152)." Despite the Church's use of the ethic of usury as a weapon to impede the progress of Capitalism, socioeconomic forces prevailed and the ideological content of usury ultimately receded. The ideological character of the ethics of
usury during the stormy period of the Reformation, clearly reflects Mannheim’s (1936) observation that ideology is frequently used as a weapon against forces of change.

Ideology, then, can be said to prevail when existing knowledge fails to consider the new realities of the present situation. As stated by Mannheim (1936)...
...knowledge is distorted and ideological when it fails to take account of the new realities applying to a situation, and when it attempts to conceal them by thinking of them in categories which are inappropriate (p. 96)

The consequence of this is the degeneration of modes of thought into ideologies, the function of which is "...to conceal the actual meaning of conduct rather than reveal it (p. 95)." False consciousness subsequently develops in which individuals are not aware of the true nature of their existence nor of the forces producing their life circumstances. The acceptance of ideology as truth prevents individual's growth to higher levels of existence and, to the extend that the "ideological truth" can be imposed upon a less powerful group, those individuals will trudge on in their daily existence with the somnambulistic certainty characteristic of inured false consciousness.

Ideology and Advertising

To relate this notion of ideology to the problem at hand, the latent dysfunctions of advertising, a brief historical review is useful. The period succeeding the Reformation found a new ethic which had superseded that characteristic of the immediately preceding centuries. The success of Capitalism and the industrial revolution in secularizing the once dominant values of the Church resulted in an ethical system most frequently referred to as the Protestant Ethic. While the character and importance of this change have been examined thoroughly by Tawney (1962) and Weber (1905), several of its aspects are important to note here. The primary values associated with the Protestant Ethic were frugality in consumption and a selfless devotion to work as a demonstration of one's worthiness of salvation. While redemption itself was predetermined and beyond the influence of worldly behavior, demonstration of the possession of spiritual values was critical in one's social relations. Both Tawney and Weber attribute the success of Capitalism largely to these characteristics. At this period in history, modes of thought and action were
congruous with the ethical system by which behavior and thought were evaluated. This was not to remain the case however. With the growth of industrialization and its focus on mass production, modes of action became increasingly at odds with the Protestant Ethic. Through Veblen's (1895) perspicacity, the dramatic contradictions between the new reality and vestigial Protestantism were made abundantly clear. By the twentieth century the near perfection of the system of mass production rendered the Protestant Ethic anachronistic. Frugality in consumption and devotion to work, while still the mode in theory, were antithetical to mass production as a system of social organization. A new ethic to correspond with the new reality was necessary; an ethic that could embrace a reality bound in mass production.

Since the sine qua non of mass production is mass consumption, a mode of behavior inconsistent with the Protestant Ethic, strategies were effected to engender a new ethical system that was consistent with the exigencies of mass production. The new ethical orientation required self-indulgence an cupidity as personal values and a devotion to consumption as a mode of behavior. Salvation as the end of Life had to be superseded by self-realization in the present. The belief that this realization of the self could be achieved through therapeutic consumption became the foundation for the new morality of consumption. Captains of Industry became, in Ewen's (1978) terms, Captains of Consciousness whose efforts spawned a cultural realignment with the new reality. The secularization of salvation and the substitution of self-indulgence for frugality sounded the death knell of the Protestant Ethic. With its passing, the new reality of mass production and the ethic of consumption could be juxtaposed in harmony.

As with the case of usury, modes of thought and action had outstripped the prevailing ethical system. As a consequence, the conflict was resolved in favor of the new reality. In this case, however, it was not a natural development but one brought about by the choice and through the efforts of the dominant class. The vestiges of the Protestant Ethic were, in effect, ideological in that they represented an anachronistic system whose time had been passing for almost a century. The exigencies of mass production provided the final thrust.
In examining the nature of these changes we must adopt a non-evaluative approach, being careful that we do not judge the change on the basis of our own ontological presuppositions. At the time these cultural shifts were occurring, society had reached a new stage of economic and technological development, a new epoch in human history. The possibility of satisfying the consumption needs of an entire society at levels of existence heretofore unimaginable was on the immediate horizon. The changes to be effected were imperative if the full potential of the new industrial system were to be achieved. This was a truly utopian ideal, one that would shatter the existing structure of society and replace it with a new order of existence. While it may be true that many of the leaders of this new order were odious at best, there were no mystics or oracles among them. Certainly, they could not have understood the magnitude of the consequences of the cultural change they helped to fashion at the time.

A closer Examination

The role that advertising played in this process has been examined in great detail by Ewen (1976) who presents an analysis that borders on the conspiratorial. While Ewen makes it very clear that some members of the establishment were aware of the requirements of the new morality, it is uncertain whether they had the vision to understand the nature of the processes with which they were dealing. While most of the writers that Pollay (1986) reviewed draw similar conclusions, the notion of a conspiracy is largely (and probably correctly) missing from their analyses. This, then, suggests that advertising's consequences fall more within the domain of latent dysfunction rather than manifest dysfunction as suggested by Ewen.

To examine the consequences of commercialism, we offer as an example the commonalities among Leiss (1976), Skolimowski (1977) and Fromm (1976) expressed in Pollay (1986). Discussing the effects of advertising, Leiss argues that it produces the reification of abstract meanings into goods, while the others submit that it lead to the objectification of personal relations through which individuals themselves are reduced to objects. These are the images that are reproduced repeatedly in advertising and which are felt to be ontologically inappropriate since they reverse the subject-object relationship. In an ironic juxtapositioning of authority, advertising is
seen as transforming the individual, the subject, into an object that is being acted upon; in essence, advertising becomes the subject that is capable of conferring status upon the individual, the object, rather than the reverse.

In this perverse relationship depicted repeatedly in advertising, the essence of individuals is reduced to that of thing. Nevertheless, during the incipient mass consumption, mass production era at the turn of the century, this was, in fact, necessary. Immoral as it may seem, workers and consumers had to be reformed in the image of machine production and mechanistic consumption with a machine-like efficiency in both domains.

We now can observe the negative consequences of this manipulation embodied in the desire to transcend prevailing reality. This desire is predicated on the ontological presupposition that we can become more than we are, more than objects ripe for further manipulation in the interests of the established power structure. The belief that material facticity can and must be transcended through a shattering of existing relations is, by definition, utopian, not ideological. It is advertising of the type of that supports crass commercialism and reifies an ethical system founded in the past and based on material conditions that no longer exist that is, in fact, ideological. In examining critical theory and its assessment of the current status of production and consumption Kilbourne (1989) states:

Marcuse suggests contemporary industrial societies have developed to the point that was "utopian" is now real potential but is being blocked from development. This satisfaction of all real needs is now possible within the bounds of existing production technology (p. 14).

Another area of dysfunction suggested by Pollay (1986) is the irrationality which is perpetuated by advertising. Drawing from Schrank (1977), Skilimowski (1977), and Fromm (1976), he argues:

The repetitive, fantastic, one-sided, and often exhortative rhetorical styles of advertising combine, it is felt, to blur the distinction between reality and fantasy, producing hypnoid states of uncritical consciousness wherein the subject is reduced to passivity and a relative sense of powerlessness (Pollay, p. 26).

It is the irrational nature of industrial "rationality" that must be overcome before the distinction between "reality and fantasy" can be achieved. The fantasy alluded to here is the
irrational notion that true freedom and transcendence reside within the commodified form of existence. This is, once again, the image consistently portrayed in advertising: that individuals can become "more than they are" by consuming the appropriate products. The essence of consumption rationality is the belief that to transcend the material conditions of existence, one must be free from the commodified form of existence, free "from" the economy.

The cornucopian flow of goods available in contemporary society veils the ideological nature of advertising. By constantly portraying consumption as good and consumption of more as better, individuals are turned against themselves, consuming their potential while militating against the forces of rational change. Again, advertising’s role in this charade is to redefine needs to accommodate constantly increasing production, a notion that is based in the past when growth in productive capacity was necessary. Attempts to persuade consumers to the contrary are ideological in that such efforts reflect the consumption ethic of early mass production, not contemporary reality in which growth in production represents one of the greatest threats to industrial societies and world ecological balance. The desire to transcend this situation is not ideological, it is the essence of reason; to support it is ideological.

The final dysfunctional area posited by Pollay (1986) to be addressed is the mirroring/modeling controversy in advertising. Reflecting the perspective adopted by many critics of advertising, Pollay submits in his taxonomy that advertising models behavior. In that regard, he writes:

Advertising models a pattern of behavior that is held out to be "the good life," with props, of course, for sales, and this is show to be the ideal for all to strive for (Pollay 1986), p. 26).

The model of behavior deposed in advertising is considered by critics to be quite consistent, resonating self-indulgence, self-doubt (Lasch 1978), cupidity, envy and lust (Commanger 1950) as well as other dysfunctional traits. When comparing our own reality with that proffered in advertising, our's "pales in comparison and seems a life half-lived (p. 26)" The solution to this quandary is to buy more of the products that will allow one to redress the shortcomings of our reality. The fact that the mirror in which we make our invidious comparisons
is a distorted one by contemporary standards seems to concern few, least of all the advertisers. The image which is presented is not a new one, though the trappings of success may have been modernized a bit. It is the image of the consumer of early mass production; one who lives to consume rather than consumes to live; one whose image of self-realization is having more and one in whom the cycle of consumption and production is complete. It would seem the reality of advertisers is locked in the year 1910 while the rest of society must exist in the reality of the present.

The institution of advertising is protecting what, to it, is a necessary condition for maintenance of the status quo. The ethic of consumption must be maintained if economic growth is to be sustained and the power establishment can see no alternative that is not a threat to its survival. Once again, the critics seem to be calling for a version of reality in advertising that is characterized by reason rather than by irrationality, by self-realization rather than by self-indulgence and by community rather than cupidity.

Genuine happiness is contingent upon knowledge of the truth about one's interests and potentialities. Critics argue that, in effect, advertising veils and distorts this knowledge. As a result, individuals cannot judge their own condition since everything is reduced to subjective relativism tied to the opaque contingency of the advertiser's vision of reality. Higher levels of self-awareness cannot be achieved under these conditions. The vision of reality in advertising is then ideological in its structure, maintaining modes of thought and action appropriate to an earlier period.

In summary, each of the areas examined, commercialism, rationality and modeling, provide evidence that critics of advertising are calling for a new ethic. While the ethic of consumption may have been useful in the past, it is no longer appropriate at the current level of cultural development and, as such, has been reduced to ideology. A social order based on rational production and consumption is now possible. The values of that order reflect personal growth and purposeful consumption focused on real as opposed to immediate needs. The ideology of advertising represents an inhibiting factor in development of this new order.
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