

Any historical research with eighty pages of annotated notes (many of which would fit perfectly into the body of the text) shows a remarkable quality of work that deserves to be congratulated.

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Capitalism and the Senses. Edited by Regina Lee Blaszczyk and David Suisman. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2023. 312 pp., 21 b/w images. Hardcover, \$65.00. ISBN: 978-1-5128-2420-9. doi:10.1017/S0007680523000508

Reviewed by Robert Gordon-Fogelson

Capitalism is a notoriously fickle concept, the subject of innumerable studies each with its own definitions and parameters. At the most recent Business History Conference, the provocatively titled session “Is Capitalism a Useful Category of Analysis?” stimulated debate about the term’s expository value and its utility as a framework for research and pedagogy. The twelve essays in *Capitalism and the Senses*, edited by Regina Lee Blaszczyk and David Suisman, are valuable precisely because they give substance to capitalism’s often obscure contours and inner workings. Based on two conferences, one at the Harvard Business School in 2017 and the other at the Hagley Museum and Library in 2020, *Capitalism and the Senses* examines how twentieth-century businesses harnessed the senses for commercial profit and shaped sensory experience in the process.

The book builds on a rich literature in sensory studies pioneered by an interdisciplinary group of scholars who have worked to denaturalize the senses, establishing them as historically contingent and socially constructed. It contributes to this literature by revealing how economic actors were instrumental in the modern construction of the senses. It focuses on the twentieth century, when businesses faced with growing competition became increasingly invested in marketing and merchandising techniques and capitalized on the senses for their commercial potential. It therefore advances a vein of business history rooted in the work of Alfred Chandler, Jr., and concerned with the structures of capitalism, or what Chandler called the “visible hand” of management

(*The Visible Hand*, 1977). *Capitalism and the Senses* shows that commercial enterprise is in fact *multisensory* and suggests that, by studying its sensorial dimensions, we can better understand the history of business and its relationship to contemporary culture.

Blaszczyk and Suisman shrewdly rejected structuring the book around the five senses, a Western construct that risks siloing sensory experience. Some of the most fascinating passages deal with the entanglement of multiple senses. Not only are taste and smell often co-constitutive, but in their efforts to render these senses intelligible, sensory scientists regularly resorted to visual representations (chapters 2 and 5). In her chapter, Blaszczyk shows how the Du Pont Chemical Company enlisted sensory and marketing experts to conduct market research and to convey through advertisements how synthetic fabrics might satisfy both the eyes *and* the fingers of discerning consumers (chapter 11). While rejecting the senses as a structuring device allows for exciting cross-sensory explorations, the book's current organization seems haphazard. The first section purports to frame the topic, but successive chapters reproduce much of this framing. The second section considers how the senses resist rationalization, but almost all the chapters address the limits of commercialized sensation in some way. The last two sections address distinct stages of capitalism—production and marketplace—but the authors frequently move between these strata to trace the engineering and the effects of sensory stimuli.

To put a finer point on the form of political economy concerned with sensory experience and addressed in this book, Ai Hisano uses the term “aesthetic capitalism” (chapter 1). Many of the chapters, however, struggle to elucidate aesthetic experience, to describe what happens physically and psychologically when we savor a spoonful of soup, grasp the handle of a kitchen knife, or sample a perfume. This type of aesthetic analysis presents historical and historiographic problems for those studying the senses. Throughout the twentieth century, sensory scientists, marketing experts, and consumers tried and often failed to describe their sensory experiences—to distinguish between Kentucky bourbon and Scotch whisky (chapter 4); to assess the sweetness of cattle feed (chapter 8); or to identify the notes of a uniquely British smellscape (chapter 10). The authors encounter these same challenges in their efforts to write histories of the senses. While references to sight appear throughout the book, this sense is not the chief subject of any of its chapters. Indeed, *Capitalism and the Senses* might be seen as a corrective to a robust literature that has focused on the visual dimensions of capitalist enterprise. Scholars of the visual, however, have devised useful analytical tools to explicate the form, as well as the content, of visual representation—to consider not just what but also *how* images communicate. Scholars studying

other senses might draw on these models to refine their accounts of sensory experience.

On the other hand, *Capitalism and the Senses* offers a wealth of insight into the cultural, political, and social dimensions of commercialized sensation. Three chapters dealing with sound demonstrate the varied methodologies we might bring to bear on this topic. In chapter 3, Sven Kube identifies a Cold War sonic divide generated by Western innovations in music equipment, which produced sounds difficult for Eastern bloc musicians to replicate. Kube combines a keen understanding of electronic media and its aural effects with insights from interviewees to show how the synthetic sounds of Western pop music came to signal capitalism and its ideals of prosperity, modernity, and freedom. Suisman's study of supersonic aviation addresses a very different aural experience: the shocking sonic booms created by aircraft traveling faster than the speed of sound (chapter 6). Suisman analyzes political commentary, federal legislation, and press coverage to uncover the overlapping ethical, economic, and political concerns that circumscribed America's supersonic transport program, ultimately showing how sensory experience on the ground collided with high-flying capitalist ambitions to scupper commercial supersonic aviation in the United States. Finally, Nicholas Anderman melds material analysis of weathering steel with a form of speculative thinking to suggest that the creaking of Cor-Ten steel containers at sea constitutes the sound of global capitalism (chapter 7). When listened to the right way, or perhaps the wrong way, Anderman argues, these sounds disclose dissonances in the seeming hegemony of capitalist enterprise.

Capitalism and the Senses offers many inventive approaches to writing business history. Together, its chapters reveal that capitalism is neither inevitable nor imperceptible, that it relies on skillful exploitation of the senses, and that the resulting sensory stimuli have had transformative effects on how we experience daily life. Shifting focus from abstract market forces to embodied sensations and their calculated commercialization, the book offers much for business historians to sink their teeth into.

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Dr. Gordon-Fogelson's current book project examines the concept of integration as a visual, economic, and social ideal in the mid-twentieth-century US, a topic explored in his article "Vertical and Visual Integration at Container Corporation of America" (Journal of Design History, 2022).