



BOOK REVIEW

## Anat Rosenberg. *The Rise of Mass Advertising: Law, Enchantment, and the Cultural Boundaries of British Modernity*

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Peter Gurney 

University of Essex

Email: [pjgurney@essex.ac.uk](mailto:pjgurney@essex.ac.uk)

Remarkably, there is no satisfactory scholarly history of advertising in Britain during the long nineteenth century, even though Victorian commentators frequently described their epoch as an “Age of Advertising.” One has therefore still to recommend that students approaching the subject consult E. S. Turner’s entertaining popular account published in the 1950s, or else Terry Nevett’s much drier study from the 1980s. A new synoptic work is therefore long overdue. Anat Rosenberg’s intriguing monograph is not intended to fill this gap but focuses instead on the relationship between law and advertising, an approach with real potential and which generates many useful insights. Rosenberg’s definition of law is capacious, encompassing not only the judicial system and institutions like the courts, but also the ways in which law was culturally dispersed through “local organisations, practices, and material environments that are part of daily pursuits, market relationships, and substate structures” (30). Broadly construed in this way, Rosenberg convincingly demonstrates how law performed so-called boundary work that sought to differentiate advertising from other cultural fields with which it frequently overlapped. Advertising’s suspect qualities threatened to destabilize domains that aspired to greater respectability and rationality, such as an expanding press, high art, and medicine, and the legal conflicts generated when advertising bled into these domains are discussed in separate chapters, though other boundary conflicts occurred—between advertising and literature and advertising and politics, for example (about which a good deal has been written)—though Rosenberg omits these debates, for reasons that are not entirely clear.

Enchantment provides the unifying theme. Following other scholars across disciplines, Rosenberg rejects Max Weber’s famous thesis about capitalist modernity being bound up with rationality and disenchantment. Historians like Jackson Lears and Eugene McCarragher have argued that the centrality of advertising in the US context during this period shows how enchantment persisted, but Rosenberg is the first to apply this argument more systematically to the British case, notwithstanding Raymond Williams’ seminal essay on advertising as modern capitalism’s “magic system.” According to Rosenberg, legal cases involving advertisers served to disavow enchantment, pushing consumers’ desire for fantasy and escape to the margins. However, advertising itself did not simply embrace irrationality but instead “required weaving together enchantment and reason” (79). Some of the ground covered is quite familiar—debates over outdoor advertising and hoardings, the Zaeo poster scandal, the Carbolic Smoke Ball case—but Rosenberg has some new things to say about these causes célèbres and has unearthed many other more obscure cases besides. After a chapter on the legal doctrine of puffery (which is somewhat out on a limb), we return to the stuff of dreams proper with a rambling chapter on gambling and indecency.

Unsurprisingly, legal cases rarely had clear-cut outcomes as boundary work was inevitably messy and inconclusive. Cases brought against advertisers of quack medicines in the press that promised to cure ailments such as consumption, including the libel suit brought by Dr Hunter against the publisher of the *Pall Mall Gazette* in 1866, demonstrated this very well. Hunter won a pyrrhic victory, was awarded no compensation, and eventually fled the country. As Rosenberg observes, quackery was not outlawed by the courts but was instead “made to inhabit a differentiated role characterized by exaggeration” (219). The failure of the courts to regulate successfully helps explain why the campaign against quackery waged by the British Medical Association increased in tempo during the early twentieth century.

The book is impressively researched and its interdisciplinarity is a great strength. There are, however, some odd omissions and absences, apart from those already noted. Rosenberg is keen to recover the agency or “*will to enchantment*” (19) of readers of advertisements, though sometimes the term *gullibility* seems more appropriate. Understanding reception is a tough nut to crack, of course, and while Rosenberg offers some persuasive interpretations, not all are convincing. A disabling weakness of the book as a whole is a tendency to interpret all consumer motivation as evidence of enchantment, even though more mundane explanations were probably more important. It is not very helpful, perhaps, to explain the demand for abortifacients in terms of “women’s dreams of abortions” (291). Moreover, while one might have expected an extended discussion of religious discourse given the key theme, this subject is not properly focused, despite many contemporary critics who believed spreading advertising was proof of the increasing sway of the religion of Mammon, including George Gissing in *In the Year of Jubilee*, a text that Rosenberg surprisingly overlooks. The importance of empire and the imperial dimensions of the business of advertising are also downplayed. The internal connections between consumer culture and colonial expansion is a central concern in H. G. Wells’s great novel *Tono-Bungay*, a text that Rosenberg does refer to at various points, though she underemphasizes this aspect. Finally, one wonders why there is no consideration of how canny consumer capitalists used the drama of the courtroom itself for advertising purposes, something that newspaper magnate Arthur Pearson was keen to do when he tested the law by publishing prize competitions, but other businessmen used law for such purposes—Thomas Lipton, for instance.

An interesting final chapter on advertising professionals as “sorcerers” of enchantment provides narrative closure of sorts. Based on advertising literature that boomed from the turn of the century, Rosenberg shows how advertising professionals embraced the new ‘science’ of psychology in an attempt to not only corral existing demand but also create new wants, though they were still eager to justify their trade rationally and make enchantment respectable. The growth of the advertising industry provides the backdrop, but Rosenberg’s treatment of this lacks sufficient depth. As capitalist firms organized increasingly on a global scale from the late nineteenth century advertising agencies boomed, crucial developments merely touched on here. There is nothing much on law in this chapter either. In sum, this is an uneven book. While it contains many fascinating readings and sharp insights (some of which are in the footnotes), it is also unduly repetitive, structurally problematic, and in places quite disjointed. Students of consumer culture must wait for a work that does justice to the importance of the subject and the richness of the available evidence.