

*The Rise of Mass Advertising: Law, Enchantment, and the Cultural Boundaries of British Modernity*. By Anat Rosenberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022. xx plus 406pp. £70.00).

In this work of dazzling scholarship, Anat Rosenberg provides not only a detailed and fascinating history of advertising in Britain between 1840 and 1914, but also a new way of conceptualizing the relationship between advertising, capitalism, and modernity. The book successfully recaptures what is easily overlooked or forgotten given our (over-)familiarity with it today: the tremendously disruptive impact of advertising, in particular the way in which it destabilized existing categories such as news, art, and science. Consequently, several of its chapters reconstruct the protracted boundary work which eventually established advertising as a legitimate but inferior form. Particularly insightful are chapters showing how useful advertising was in acting as a lightning rod for unease about the possibly corrupting influence of the profit motive in modern media (chapter 2) and medicine (chapter 4). In each case, advertising acted as the ‘dark alter ego’ – ‘puffery’ and ‘quackery’ respectively – to the superior categories of trustworthy news and rational science (p. 26). Advertising was something to be denigrated, but not into oblivion: its existence was essential to create and sustain the credibility of these other fields of activity. Law plays a marginal role in other histories of early advertising, the assumption being that these were advertising’s ‘wild west’ years, when attempts at regulation were minimal and mostly ineffective. Rosenberg, a legal historian, takes a very different approach, marshalling evidence from a large set of court cases, many of them hitherto unstudied, to document the centrality of law to the boundary work she describes. In doing so, she makes the intriguing argument that common ideas we

have about advertising – that it is biased, vulgar, exaggerated – are not axiomatic but ‘legally constructed’ (p. 32).

The ‘inferiorization’ of advertising involved disavowing its ability to enchant – in other words, ignoring much of what made it appealing to consumers. In a long opening chapter, Rosenberg uses a diverse mix of often neglected sources, including some wonderful scrapbooks, to explore people’s reactions to – and interactions with – advertising. In advertising, she argues, people found ‘possibilities for transforming their social and private selves’, sometimes playfully, sometimes excitedly, often – especially in the case of patent medicines – desperately (p. 65). Rather than being inflicted on them by manipulative businesses, enchantment ‘was often a willed condition’ in which consumers had some agency, and which advertisers could not necessarily control (p. 39). But the law saw no value in fantasy, or in dreaming, insisting upon defining advertising as an absence of knowledge, a failure of rationality. Ironically, however, law’s disavowal of enchantment ultimately freed advertisers from the constraints of rationalism, allowing them to claim enchantment as their own special domain. In a final chapter, Rosenberg explains the specific form this took around the turn of the century: the eager embrace of the science of psychology. Psychology provided advertisers with a powerful means of self-branding, giving them a language to explain, both to themselves and to others, what they were already doing, and in the process, to reinvent themselves as ‘the sorcerers of capitalism’, a myth which has been swallowed by nearly everyone – supporters and critics alike – ever since (p. 356).

The book – which is well produced and contains over a hundred illustrations – corrects tendencies which have restricted the reach of other studies. It takes the reception of advertising seriously, as well as its production. Rather than focusing on a handful of ‘iconic’ ads, brands, or campaigns, it considers the cumulative impact of the mass of advertisements, in all their manifestations. Indeed, it encompasses all kinds of advertising media – including

the forms usually written off as ‘gimmicks’ or ‘stunts’ – rather than focusing exclusively on newspapers and periodicals. It does not treat advertising as synonymous with ‘commodity culture’, recognizing that much advertising was for events and services as well as products. It avoids the trap of ignoring text ads in favor of those containing flashy imagery, understanding that reading is as important as seeing in advertising history. Above all, it grasps that an interdisciplinary approach, combining perspectives from economics, law, culture, and different methods of analysis, is the best way to account for the multifarious appeals of advertising.

Unfolding confidently and elegantly through the course of seven chapters, the argument poses invigorating challenges to ingrained ways of thinking about advertising and its place in capitalism more generally. Some might balk at the weight placed throughout the book on the concepts of enchantment and disenchantment, especially when this was not a language much used before Max Weber. But the terms are never deployed crudely, and Rosenberg is at pains to specify exactly what she means by them at different points in her account. It is impossible to do justice to Rosenberg’s complex and highly nuanced thesis in a short review. Its combination of conceptual sophistication and empirical richness is hugely impressive, and its implications for a wide range of scholars – historians of modernity, of science, of capitalism – are profound and too extensive to be immediately digested. *The Rise of Mass Advertising* is a landmark history whose influence is likely to be felt for years to come.

James Taylor  
Lancaster University  
[james.taylor@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:james.taylor@lancaster.ac.uk)