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FOREWORD

From all of the hullabaloo attending the inauguration of the International Advertising Congress at Berlin on August 11, 1929, Germany looked to be the pacesetter of twentieth-century merchandising. With its booming economy, the Weimar Republic was the fulcrum of European commerce. Its fifth largest city, Leipzig, hosted the world's oldest and biggest trade fair, its twice-yearly expositions of hundreds of thousands of craft and industrial wares attracting buyers from a hundred lands. Its capital, Berlin, was home to artistic circles bubbling over with the cultural irreverence on which the new marketing professions thrived. True, the congress's logo, "Advertising: the key to world prosperity," was an American advertising man's conceit. But a Berliner had come up with the logo design in the shape of a key so palpably phallic that it gave a jolt of visual testosterone to the whole proceedings.

That 1920s Germany stood at the forefront of world advertising culture looked plausible on other grounds as well. There were those 80 million German speakers, the largest language concentration in Europe and the most literate as well, and, if a third or more didn't live in Germany itself, that was fine too, for they still promised to be good markets for the country's export-oriented economy. There was also Germany's legacy as homeland to Gutenberg's print revolution, a legacy still visible in its global leadership in the typographic arts, lithography, and packaging design. There were the vibrantly colored posters affixed to the downtown kiosks that spoke of a merchandising tradition comfortably at home on the city streets. There was the upstart *Sachlichkeit* aesthetic, superbly combining utility and modernist beauty in an iconoclastic struggle against the rhetorical conventions of academic design. Finally, there was the multitude of German artists ready to engage with modern advertising, some out of the con-

viction that it represented a new avant-garde, others because it could pay handsomely. From the memoirs of the prudish Elias Canetti, a visitor to late 1920s Berlin, we have the unsettling image of Bertolt Brecht lounging at the Café Schlichter, boasting of the copy he had composed for Steyr and the automobile he had received as compensation.

But notoriously, advertising is about illusions. The disquieting reality was that the United States, not Germany, was the force driving the internationalization of advertising. It was the bedrock of the American profession, the famous 4-A's (the American Association of Advertising Agencies), that had initially promoted periodic international congresses, and the decision to hold this one, the first on the Continent for the first time in 1929, coincided with the installation in Europe's capitals of some of the biggest American advertising agencies. American-style advertising signaled the advent of an altogether new industry, whose basic unit of enterprise, the full-service agency, was capable of taking a new product and turning it into a high-profile brand, armed with the belief that advertising was a science, and the business a high-minded, reputable profession. Above all, American advertising presented itself as the mouthpiece of a new language, accustoming people to speak about the things they appeared to have in common and enriching their conversations about the things they adored or abhorred with visual images and idiomatic expressions. Abroad, as at home, American corporate advertising was in every way at the cutting edge of the capitalist dialectic of creative destruction.

The Weimar statesman Hans Luther spoke to the deep cultural disquiet created by American advertising when at the opening ceremonies he addressed his compatriots about "the need to make a home in both the world of the present and that of the future." Advertising was "the language of this new world," the former chancellor insisted. But as much as Germans will "want to learn from other lands which already possess a much richer experience in this language," there should be no doubt that "we also desire to develop the German dialect of this language and we want to do this in a German spirit and through German artistic sensibility."

With these words, Hans Luther captured a point that is central to *Selling Modernity*, namely, that advertising had to be treated as much as a cultural question as a business proposition. Advertising may appear to be about selling goods. But that is only one ambition. Whatever its form or technique—the handout or poster, the press insert, radio ditty, mail-order catalogue, or website pop-up—it has long been the expression of a complicated dialogue about the meaning of

market relations, one mediated by specialists with diverse interests to balance. Advertisers themselves, as the contributors to this wide-ranging book so vividly illuminate, hankered after professional dignity, social status, and income. And these acquisitions depended in turn on cultivating business relations with clients and gaining the confidence of the public whose own growing expertise they were under constant pressure to probe, test, and master. Rightly, this book speaks in the plural of cultures of advertising—for the practices of advertising were highly rarified at the same time as they penetrated into the very interstices of societies, so much so that even as early as the 1920s, they emerged as a signally important signifier of modernity. How that happened will have to be told again and again, from myriad perspectives, lest we never fully grasp how advertising messages in the world today and on a global scale have become as inescapable an element of the societies we live in as the air we breathe.

The great virtue of this book is to speak of this cultural complexity from the perspective of the history of twentieth-century Germany. In common with a whole transnational cohort of young historians, its authors move from the premise that the visibility and power of the consumer economy in contemporary societies calls for a detailed, wide-ranging history of its origins. The main point here is that in twentieth-century Germany, this development was exceptionally fraught—out of fear that hyperaggressive modernity would eradicate time-honored traditions, internationalism was irreconcilable with local knowledge, soulless science would destroy disinterested art, and the monstrous commodification of everything would splinter apart the bonds of human community. It was also fraught because the internationalization of advertising culture spearheaded by American "best practices" took place in Europe against the background of a full-blown bourgeois commercial culture, based on craft industry, segmented regional markets, deep social fissures, abiding distress at a moneyed culture, and wracking political and racial conflict. Against this background, we have a book whose authors are in dialogue with one another and with the many voices that today speak to the history of consumer culture, so that by its end we have taken a big step toward knowing how the trends in the arts and technologies of advertising were bound up with the fate of Germany.

Reading this volume as a generalist, I was especially struck by three elements that give a particular German cast to the history of selling practices which today appear practically universal, so much so that differences really appear to be only a matter of national stereotypes—or in any case, not intertwined with the grand narrative of Europe's fall and recovery over the past century.

One element surely is the impact on advertising of the vexed tradition of thinking of culture as *Kultur*. In the land of Kant and Nietzsche, where cultural wars were fought with the semiotic equivalents of Big Berthas and Blitzkriegs, how could advertising culture not be deeply implicated? On the one hand, what could be more odious to a culture that saw the "beautiful as that which gives us pleasure without self-interest" than the crassness of publicity? On the other, what could be more attractive than a cultural form whose acolytes delighted in stripping away the hypocrisy of bourgeois aesthetics and debunking the asceticism that denied the masses all of the real pleasures of life? In sum, there were awesome cultural stakes in inventing a local vernacular: from the conflict over the "Americanization" of local practices and the engineering of big brand marketing of foreign and national products, to finding a language to legitimate the lust in sex toys.

Inevitably the second element distinguishing the history of advertising in Germany is the role played by National Socialism. How did a regime known for its mastery of political propaganda deal with the best practices of publicity? It is a surprise, surely, to hear from the mouths of some of the most distinguished advertising experts in the United States that the Nazis had done "one good job" in eliminating "advertising abuses," or that the dictatorship's regulation of the advertising profession represented "probably . . . the most advanced legislation to be found in this field." The only caveat from this American perspective of the late 1930s was that it would have been more admirable, following the American corporate model, if regulation had come about through the profession rather than top-down from the state. No doubt about it: the Nazi regime well understood that yet one other means to enhance its totalitarian grip lay in reestablishing political power over the slippery terrain of the commercial public sphere. Its claim to have purged the market of the manipulations of foreign and Semitic elements by bringing transparency and truth to the advertising profession was part and parcel of a far more ambitious politics of building a mass market based ostensibly on the public celebration of the people's needs rather than on the covert workings of the price mechanism. Advertising had a central role to play in a market that pretended to modify the class-divisive nature of cultural goods and distribute scarce resources by rewarding and depriving consumers according to their place in the *Volksgemeinschaft*'s hierarchy of utility and race. The effects on any number of levels were catastrophic, spelling the eclipse of those practices where, indeed, Germany had been leader; the persecution, exile, and death of Jewish artists and an aesthetics favoring populist realism spelled the death of German

modernism, the restoration of the Gothic script, the end of Germany's superiority in the experimental typography that had yielded Bernhard Kursiv, Locarno, Ultra Bodoni, Memphis, Beton, Neuland, Prisma Capitals, and Futura in favor of the more conventionally eclectic American usage of fonts. However, for those in the profession itself, who handily continued working under the Third Reich and went on to thrive in postwar Germany, it was not a bad trade-off that, thanks to National Socialist regulatory powers, a disreputable profession of hucksters had been turned into a highly disciplined corporation of professionals, one that could be trusted to communicate wisely and effectively with a Volk that had been transmogrified from hagglers into heroes.

The third anomaly that strikes the reader is the bifurcated history of advertising as a result of Germany's postwar division. From the perspective of the 1950s, as industry picked up, we have the phenomenon of two countries working from similar legacies, yet experiencing the development of advertising cultures in ways that could not have been more distant from each other. So in the Federal Republic of Germany, advertising picked up and boomed with the miracle years. In the recognition that West Germany would be the fulcrum of the revived Western European economy, the biggest U.S. advertising firm of all, J. Walter Thompson, moved its European headquarters from London to Frankfurt in 1956, making the newly skyscrapered city the capital of continental corporate advertising. However squeamish West German political leaders were about advertising, which in its excess seemed to be inappropriate for the social market economy or a venerable *Kulturnation* (however far it had fallen from that ideal), the bottom line was that West Germany itself, as the European pivot of the Western Alliance, was a fabulous advertisement for the Western standard of living in the struggle against the totalitarian asceticism of the Soviet way of life. We have in this book marvelous evidence of the paradox that Coca-Cola flourished under the Third Reich; this fact is at least as noteworthy as the fact that it became the political signifier of the change of regime as one passed from one side of the Brandenburg Gate to the other.

And in the German Democratic Republic we have to face the paradox that austere socialism was by no means antithetical to advertising, and vice versa. In the five-year plans, there was space for advertising. After all, advertising was an art, or at least it had been, and in East German commercial design circles, it continued to touch base with Bauhaus ideas of the modernistic function of advertising; in its terse language, not only would it signal the advent of the modern, but it would tidily link consumers to supply. Very effectively, it would thereby

contribute to the utopia of real existing socialism by harnessing desires to needs and needs to the constraints and possibilities of the planned economy.

Ultimately, from the vantage point of the economy of desire revealed through its advertising culture, contemporary Germany could be said to have become a completely normal Western nation. Marketing experts might highlight any number of small anomalies; likewise ethnographers, cultural tourists, and historians. But no element of German advertising is so original that we could argue that it is significantly different from the practice found in other European nations today, nor for that matter from its Madison Avenue progenitors. Meanwhile these progenitors have lost their own peculiarities, as they themselves have fallen prey in recent years to aggressive corporate takeovers by giant European-based global conglomerates.

In sum, *Selling Modernity* is to be complimented for clarifying that the reconstruction of the history of advertising, that most pivotal and fascinating dimension of market culture, cannot be treated as a linear or unproblematic process. Time and again, the contributors have developed just the right case to illuminate the ferociously contentious struggles over the meaning of market culture. The razzle-dazzle of commodity culture is at home with dismal inequality, and the champagne bubbles of advertising creativity fizzle away amid the sledgehammer destructiveness of capitalist progress. Knowing the particular turbulence experienced in the development of commercial culture in twentieth-century Germany brings us closer to comprehending the turbulence of mass consumer society generally and today as much as ever.