

Gerulf Hirt. *Verkannte Propheten?: Zur „Expertenkultur“ (west)deutscher Werbekommunikatoren bis zur Rezession 1966/67.* Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2013. 660 S. ISBN 978-3-86583-757-8.



Reviewed by Stefan Schwarzkopf

Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (May, 2014)

Gerulf Hirt's book, based on his 2012 PhD thesis at the University of Jena, aims at nothing less than a collective biography of German advertising professionals between the turn of the last century and the full establishment of a competitive service advertising industry in the late 1960s. Hirt's analysis of the (self-)perception, social identities and professional strategies of the first generation of German product communicators, PR and propaganda specialists, and marketing strategists focuses on the – almost exclusively male – advertising experts born between the late 1870s and 1918. The question that guides Hirt's narrative is why, despite the economic success of their enterprises and often increased personal wealth, German advertising professionals continued to project to the outside and communicate among themselves the image of a group of unrecognized experts. Like other historians of the advertising industry before him, Hirt also noticed that the members of this sector lived and worked under the shadow of a perennial professional identity problem, a collective schizophrenia one might say, which seemed to pull them into two diametrically opposed directions. On the one hand, this cohort indulged in

endless fantasies of their own power to influence consumers, guide the marketing strategies of mighty industries, and thus create a better quality of life for an increasingly affluent population. On the other hand, these self-crowned captains of consciousness ceaselessly agonized over their own perceived lack of professional status, lack of recognition, and lack of appreciation amongst those whom they provided with a plethora of choices and branded goods.

Hirt delves deeply into the collective psyche of early advertising experts and in that process quarries an impressive amount of evidence on the personal, professional but also discursive continuities that characterized this industry in its transformations from the *Kaiserreich* to the West Germany of the postwar 'economic miracle'. The image that emerges here is based on a painstakingly researched sample of nearly 400 advertising experts, whose professional lives Hirt searches for clues about how career patterns influenced the strategies employed by the industry to communicate status and expertise. Since there is no centralised archive as such for the German advertis-

ing industry – a situation that is somewhat different in Britain and the United States – the author had to build up this database by trailing the life-stories of these practitioners in a wide range of sources, including trade journals, autobiographical material and interviews he conducted himself. What Hirt finds is a hotchpotch of self-taught newcomers (autodidacts) with a variety of backgrounds, ranging from those with university degrees in macroeconomics and law to former journalists and graduates from Germany's numerous and internationally highly respected art schools. Following their professional careers, career changes and entry/exit strategies, the author advances the thesis that members of the industry agreed that their professional status needed raising, but ultimately failed to agree on how their competences to project professional competencies ('Kompetenzdarstellungskompetenz') could possibly be enhanced in an environment that provided no enforceable entry criteria to the industry, such as a diploma.

Authors like Hartmut Berghoff, Nepomuk Gasteiger, Stefan Haas, Christiane Lamberty and Alexander Schug have identified this problem and other shortcomings that held back advertising practitioners in constructing a stable professional identity as 'experts'. In comparison to the existing literature, however, which often looked at particular periods selectively, Hirt excels at identifying the discursive, but also organizational and personal, continuities which connected the early professionalization debates of the Fin de Siècle with the Americanization debates of the interwar period, the overblown expectations and power fantasies that practitioners created during the Nazi era, and finally the cautious and not always successful attempts by the industry to connect itself to the narrative of the 'economic miracle' after 1948. The insights that Hirt unearths make clear that one cannot hope to understand the modernization of advertising without acknowledging the impact of stakeholder groups *outside* that industry which determined the measure of 'worth' that

could be attached to the services generated by its practitioners. These stakeholder groups included, very early on, critics of the industry who bemoaned the effects that advertising had on cultural life, natural landscapes and cityscapes, and people's value orientations. Beginning, for example, with the 'Heimatschutz' movement (protection of the identity of a regional or national homeland) of the early twentieth century, the suspicions the NSDAP harboured against any form of commercial pluralism, continued by more left-wing critiques of advertising by the Frankfurt School since the late interwar years, and finally the widely publicized German translation of Vance Packard's 'The Hidden Persuaders' in 1958 ('Die geheimen Verführer'), these voices strongly influenced the kind (self-)regulatory norms advertising practitioners were willing to see imposed on their industry.

Hirt devotes a particularly detailed account to the struggles of German advertising men with the promises offered and threats posed by their American counterparts. Again, the advances of American advertising agencies in the German market have been mapped before by authors like Alexander Schug, Harm Schröter and Corey Ross. But too often, this literature limited itself to either the internal debates as represented in the trade magazines or to the perspectives of US agencies themselves. Hirt adds more nuances to this literature, for example by demonstrating how industrial clients in Germany, such as the Hamburg cigarette manufacturer Reemtsma and the chocolate-makers Sprengel in Hannover showed immense interest in 'new', American advertising and consumer research methods from the 1950s onwards, and yet continued their relationship with communication experts like Egon Juda, Hanns Brose and Hans Domizlaff – warhorses the German advertising industry had inherited from before the war and who were less than excited about American agency organisation and consumer research methods. Against the idea of a pervasive 'Americanization' of German commercial culture as ad-

vanced by Victoria de Grazia *Victoria de Grazia, Irresistible Empire. America's Advance Through Twentieth-Century Europe*, Cambridge 2005 (reviewed by Kaspar Maase, in: H-Soz-u-Kult, 22.11.2006, <<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/rezensionen/2006-4-144>> [06.04.2014]). , Hirt provides archival evidence for the paramount role of long-term, trust-based, personal relationships between industrial firms and their communication advisers, which enabled the generation of those born around 1900 to continue to shape the whole sector until well into the 1960s.

Although their dream of a 'professionalized' industry with fixed remuneration standards and educational entry requirements never came true, West German advertising practitioners managed to hold their own norms against the full-service agencies from the United States. In 1964, at the height of Madison Avenue's global influence, the top thirty advertising agencies in Germany – measured by turnover – consisted of five subsidiaries of American agency networks (H.K. McCann at No. 1; JWT at No. 3; Young & Rubicam at No. 10; DDB at No. 19; Ted Bates at No. 30), while the rest of that ranking list consisted of owner-led (*inhabergeführt*) German agencies that had often been set up even before the war. Thus, people like Hanns Brose, Hans Domizlaff, Egon Juda, Hubert Troost, and the descendants of William Wilkens' *Centrales Annoncen Büro*, Germany's first advertising agency founded in Hamburg in 1876, deserve as much attention as American agencies when trying to explain the trajectories of modernization of marketing, advertising and public relations in Germany. Because of its detailed account of the people that created an advertising industry in Germany after 1900, Hirt's book deserves praise for enriching our knowledge of the historical development of marketing and commercial communications.

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Citation: Stefan Schwarzkopf. Review of Hirt, Gerulf. *Verkannte Propheten?: Zur „Expertenkultur“ (west)deutscher Werbekommunikatoren bis zur Rezession 1966/67*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. May, 2014.

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