

Sean Nixon. *Hard Sell: Advertising, Affluence and Transatlantic Relations, c. 1951-69.* Studies in Popular Culture Series. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016. 240 pp. \$24.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-78499-105-0.



Reviewed by Stephanie Amerian

Published on H-Diplo (October, 2016)

Commissioned by Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

In the post-World War II decades, 1954 was an important year in Britain. It marked the final end to rationing that began in the early years of the war and continued well after its end. It also was the year that Parliament passed the Television Act, which allowed for commercial television to expand to the United Kingdom. Alongside rising incomes and purchasing power, these developments ushered in not only “new patterns of consumption” but also lasting social and cultural change, as “affluence” became the watchword of the day (p. 5). In *Hard Sell: Advertising, Affluence, and Transatlantic Relations, c. 1951-69*, Sean Nixon focuses on the role that advertising, particularly on television, played in these changes.

Advertising was a growing industry over the period of Nixon’s study, reaching a yearly high of 590 million pounds by the end of the 1960s. This impressive growth was fueled by the exploding consumer sector, which Nixon argues had the power “to shape the transformations in post-war domesticity” that included the development of the “modern housewife” ideal (p. 6). Yet this con-

sumer-based ideal originated not in Britain but in the United States; thus, the heart of Nixon’s study is an examination of the nature of this transatlantic influence. Indeed, Nixon points out that American agencies sought to assert this influence directly, as the 1950s and 1960s saw them acquire thirty-two British agencies, including six out of the top ten (pp. 4, 30). One of the key American agencies that expanded into the United Kingdom as early as 1899 was J. Walter Thompson (JWT). By the end of the period of Nixon’s study, JWT had firmly established itself as a leader not just in the American advertising sector but also internationally. Specifically, the firm’s London office was one of the largest in the British industry and was one of the company’s most profitable. One might expect to find evidence at such a large and important US-led firm of the wholesale “transfer of knowledge and practices” across the Atlantic (p. 3). Such a finding would reinforce the argument that Victoria de Grazia, most notably, has made for the “Americanization” of Europe in the post-war period through consumer culture (*Irresistible*

Empire: America's Advance through Twentieth Century Europe [2005]). On the one hand, Nixon acknowledges the "subordinate," or "subaltern," position of British advertising in relation to their American parent companies during this period (p. 4). On the other hand, Nixon's findings and key argument demonstrate how JWT employees in the United Kingdom "adapted, hybridized, and indigenized" their American parent company's approaches (p. 3). Rather than blindly try to replicate what worked across the Atlantic, JWT London responded to the specific circumstances at home. Indeed, the "hard sell" approach that JWT excelled at in the United States would not work in the UK context and had to be adapted to appeal to British audiences. Thus, resisting the seemingly "irresistible" force of the American "hard sell" was how British advertising became British.

Hard Sell's voices include not only those of the advertising world but also consumers themselves, the press, contemporary critics, and government officials. The primary evidence for Nixon's argument comes from several key sources, and the book is very well researched. Nixon utilized archival sources from the J. Walter Thompson Company Archives at Duke University and at the History of Advertising Trust in the United Kingdom. These sources allow him to analyze internal workings at JWT and to lay out how JWT executives in London worked to define their own approach, even when it meant pushing back against their American parent company. JWT employees in the London office understood that they faced unique challenges. While American agencies faced sociological and cultural critics of their profession, like Vance Packard and David Reisman who decried the "social costs of affluence" (p. 168), British advertising faced not only these same critics but also added concerns about national identity. Nixon argues that these British critics viewed the surge of American agencies as "an alien presence" that threatened "to transform the broader national culture and sensibilities of the British people" (p. 37). These fears of Ameri-

canization drove JWT London executives to indigenize their approaches in the postwar period. Nixon acknowledges, however, that the New York-based parent company still had considerable sway, often exerted through regular visits by Edward Wilson, the head of the JWT International Department. Wilson was tasked with ensuring consistency among the various branches and adherence to the "Thompson way," in which JWT sought to first establish "the facts" in terms of what was being sold (p. 40). The "Thompson way" was embodied in the "T-square" that reminded employees to always first ask: "What are we selling? To whom are we selling? Where are we selling? When are we selling? How are we selling?" JWT took the Thompson way seriously, and even had laminated copies produced for every employee at JWT London to keep at their desks (p. 40). Yet, while the American influence was strong throughout the 1920s and 1930s, it waned after the war. As of 1946, JWT London was staffed with solely British senior executives, many from the social elite, who worked to "emphasize the Britishness of the London office" in response to growing postwar anti-Americanism and the realities of continuing austerity (p. 43). JWT London especially made sure to be connected to British popular culture. For example, with its Parker Pens account, the London office used British film stars instead of the American writers that JWT used in the US versions of the ads. In the 1960s, JWT London was also incorporating the British cultural trends of "Swinging London" into its work that clearly differentiated it from its American parent.

While Nixon does use substantial evidence from print advertising, it is the realm of television that is key for the study. The growth of TV advertising was a defining development of 1950s and 1960s consumer culture, specifically its focus on the coveted consumer market of housewives, who remain a symbol of the era of affluence. American advertising had already shaped this image and medium by the time that commercial television arrived in the United Kingdom. Thus American

developments and innovations did guide the evolution of television advertising across the Atlantic. However, Nixon uses television to further enforce his argument that British agencies did not simply parrot their American counterparts but rather used the American example to create a “distinctive tradition of British television advertising” (p. 97). To demonstrate this distinction, Nixon turns to the genre of ads aimed at the mass-market housewife so typical of the period. Specifically, he examines ads that JWT London developed for its Persil washing powder and Oxo bouillon cubes accounts. For the Persil ads, the agency developed a “slice of life” series centered around the figure of “Mum,” while Oxo received a serial titled “Life with Katie” that featured a young, middle-class couple named Katie and Philip. To avoid the taint of the American “hard sell” and achieve a more British look and feel, JWT London made sure to eschew American associations in the ads’ settings, cast actors who were attractive but not too glamorous, and use a more staid, documentary verbal intonation. Nixon thus concludes that “the images of the housewife within television advertising rendered her a distinctly British social type” (p. 137).

Yet, without a contrast to the American version of the mass-market housewife on television, it is difficult to see how the figure that Nixon describes was “distinctly British.” What did a “hard selling” television ad aimed at the American housewife look like, and thus, how did the British version specifically differ? With the Parker Pens example, Nixon includes the American and British versions of the same ad, which clearly illustrate his point. While Nixon goes to great lengths to provide detailed descriptions and analyses of the television ads, without an accompanying American comparison, the level of specifically British indigenization is unclear. Indeed, his discussion of the gendering of the ads and the ways in which they underscored “assumptions

about women’s roles” and femininity were also key characteristics of American ads (p. 130).

Additionally, an area that would have been fruitful to explore in terms of depictions of gender roles is women working at British advertising firms. In a few instances, Nixon uses evidence from ad women, but he does not interrogate the role of these women themselves in shaping the gendered images they were selling. He includes a critique from *Advertiser’s Weekly* by an unnamed ad woman who decried the Persil “Mum” as an “all-too-often quite frumpish creature” (p. 131). By contrast, the writer heaped praises onto Oxo’s attractive, modern Katie. It would have been enlightening to analyze the reasoning for this shifting approach. Were any women on the staff at JWT London involved in creating these ads? Nixon attributes the Katie ad’s success to the performance of the actress Mary Holland who was a “warm” and “natural” contrast to the formal and dowdy Persil Mum. While Nixon provides an in-depth description of the “Life with Katie” ads, an analysis of the behind-the-scenes decision-making process and discussion of who was responsible for those decisions would have been helpful. Similarly, chapter 5 opens with a memo from Josephine Mackay to her senior colleagues concerning the intent behind the Persil ads in 1965, but we do not hear from Mackay again until the end of the chapter for another brief insight (pp. 119, 134). What roles did women like Mackay play at JWT London in shaping the deeply gendered imagery of 1950s and 1960s advertising? Nixon discusses Betty Friedan’s classic critique of advertising for promoting the housewife-consumer as the only path toward fulfillment for women but notes that “advertising people did not register the early American feminist critique of their practices in the 1960s” (p. 192). Were advertising women, as well as men, resistant to feminist critiques? Or did they unsuccessfully try to push for change from within? Scholars like Jennifer Scanlon, Denise H. Sutton, and Juliann Sivulka have begun to flesh out women’s roles in the advertising industry, but

much more remains to be done, especially for the postwar period and for British industry.[1]

Another area to further investigate would be the influence of the concept of “citizen-consumers” that Nixon brings up in the closing paragraphs of the book. He notes that advertising professionals defended their business from critics and presented an optimistic assessment of the “consumerist vision of the good life” (p. 194). Additionally, Nixon states, “advertising has contributed to the linking of private-sector consumption with an ethic of freedom” (p. 195). In the American context, Lizabeth Cohen has convincingly illuminated these concepts in *A Consumers’ Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (2003) and demonstrated the role of the US government in promoting them. But further analysis of how consumption and freedom also became linked across the Atlantic in the postwar period would provide a transnational perspective to this development that is often seen as typically American.

Nixon’s *Hard Sell* is a valuable addition to the field of advertising history that brings a much-needed transatlantic analysis to the fore. While the British did open the door to American-pioneered commercial television, Nixon effectively demonstrates how they worked to make it their own. His argument against the wholesale Americanization of the British advertising industry is an essential one that demonstrates how nations within the reach of US commerce could in fact resist what has been seen as “irresistible.”

Note

[1]. Jennifer Scanlon, “Advertising Women: The J. Walter Thompson Company Women’s Editorial Department,” in *The Gender and Consumer Culture Reader*, ed. Jennifer Scanlon (New York: New York University Press, 2000); Denise H. Sutton, *Globalizing Ideal Beauty: How Female Copywriters of the J. Walter Thompson Advertising Agency Redefined Beauty for the Twentieth Century* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009); and Ju-

liann Sivulka, *Ad Women: How They Impact What We Need, Want, and Buy* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2009).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-diplo>

Citation: Stephanie Amerian. Review of Nixon, Sean. *Hard Sell: Advertising, Affluence and Transatlantic Relations, c. 1951-69*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. October, 2016.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=46984>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.