

Advertising on Trial: Consumer Activism and Corporate Public Relations in the 1930s. By *Inger L. Stole*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006. xviii + 290 pp. Illustrations, appendix, notes, index. Cloth, \$50.00; paper, \$25.00. ISBN: cloth, 0-252-03059-1; paper, 0-252-07299-5.

Reviewed by Elizabeth Fones-Wolf

Inger Stole's *Advertising on Trial* is an important contribution to the exciting field of consumer history. Recent works by Lizabeth Cohen and Meg Jacobs explore the relation between consumerism and citizenship and examine the ways that consumer concerns have transformed modern government. Stole's focus is on the intersection of consumerism and advertising. As America has become increasingly commercialized, advertising has become ubiquitous, saturating "every nook and cranny of our lived experiences" (p. xii). If today we often shake our heads in disgust over advertising's excesses, few question its legitimacy. Advertising seems as American and natural as apple pie. But as Stole effectively demonstrates, in the early decades of the twentieth century there was significant resistance to what reformers labeled "business propaganda." A militant consumer movement fought to regulate advertising, arguing that it was undermining "consumers' ability to make wise choices in the market and citizens' ability to live in a healthy industrial and civic environment" (p. viii). In the process of defending itself, the advertising industry pioneered public-relations strategies that are still common today.

The earliest consumer reformers, operating during the Progressive era, spearheaded legislation to improve food safety and factory working conditions. The late twenties saw the emergence of a new consumer movement, whose concern was to educate the public about the dangers of modern advertising, which relied on emotional appeals to sell products. Stole traces the emergence of modern advertising to the development of oligopolistic markets during the early twentieth century. As they began to manufacture similar products, firms had to rely on advertising to expand their share of the market, rather than engaging in price competition. The growth of this new form of advertising paralleled the expansion of the commercial mass media. Dependent on

advertisers' dollars, newspapers and magazines had little interest in policing the content of advertisements.

By the thirties, the industry found itself under siege. Reformers argued that advertisers manipulated consumers by exploiting their fears and insecurities, instead of providing them with sufficient product information to make informed buying decisions. Best-selling exposés called the nation's attention to fraudulent advertising practices in the food, drug, and cosmetics industry and portrayed the industry "as a fundamentally antidemocratic institution that helped cement corporate domination of both the economy and the polity" (p. 34). In 1929, two of the leading critics formed Consumers' Research Inc., which set up a laboratory to test consumer products and helped to lead a campaign to strengthen the Federal Trade Commission's ability to regulate advertising. The fledgling consumer movement received an added boost when the New Deal's National Recovery Administration formed the Consumer Advisory Board and created consumer councils. Within months of Roosevelt's inauguration in 1933, Congress was considering the first of a series of bills to protect consumers from false and misleading advertising. It would be five years of constant lobbying and negotiation before the Wheeler-Lea Amendment to the Federal Trade Commission Act was passed. Stole carefully traces the evolution of this legislative battle, which resulted in a bill that tightened the labeling requirements for food, drugs, and cosmetics. However, complicated and drawn-out legal procedures made it difficult to remove offensive advertising. Ultimately, the new law represented "little hardship for the vast majority of advertisers" (p. 156). Indeed, reformers lamented that the final version of the amendment was stripped of most elements of consumer protection.

Stole effectively intertwines the story of the legislative battle with an analysis of how the advertising industry deflected the consumer movement's campaign for regulation. To defend itself against militant consumer groups, advertisers turned to public relations. Among their innovative defense techniques was the establishment of a pro-business alternative consumer movement. The American Association of Advertising Agencies, along with other trade groups, large publishers, and powerful retailers like R.H. Macy and Co., sowed confusion by founding an array of groups with names similar to the independent consumer organizations. Promising to provide "unbiased" product

information, these industry front groups claimed to represent the real interests of consumers. At the same time, they worked to restore public confidence in advertising. Worried about anti-business sentiment in the nation's schools and universities, firms began providing classrooms with a myriad of teaching aids. Such material not only influenced future consumers' buying habits but also built confidence among students in advertising and the free-enterprise system.

The advertising industry also exploited a split in the consumer movement. By the mid-thirties, the management style of Frederick Schlink, the mercurial head of Consumers' Research, Inc., led to contentious employee relations, the formation of a union, and ultimately a bitter strike marked by violence. As Schlink was unwilling to negotiate, the striking workers formed a rival organization called the Consumers Union of the United States, Inc., and the two consumer groups struggled for leadership of the movement. The strike was perhaps the most visible manifestation of ideological differences within the consumer movement over the relationship between consumers and workers. While CU sought to "link middle-class and working class-concerns and tie consumers to producers" by publicizing labor conditions and promoting workers' drives for improved wages and unionization, Schlink's organization argued that labor and consumer interests were often in conflict (p. xi).

Business happily exploited the antagonism between the two groups. Although the advertising industry succeeded in derailing effective regulatory reform, it still felt threatened by consumer activism. In the late thirties, business stepped up its offensive against militant consumerism. Schlink's organization joined right-wing political forces in red-baiting Consumers Union and other progressive consumer groups like the League of Women Shoppers. While the late thirties' attack on the leftist elements of the consumer movement fell flat, Stole concludes that business succeeded in derailing the radical critique of advertising that had initially inspired the movement. Stole's meticulously researched study reminds us that the ascendancy of advertising as a dominant institution in American society was not without significant resistance.

Elizabeth Fones-Wolf is professor of history at West Virginia University. She is the author of Selling Free Enterprise: The Business Assault on Labor and Liberalism (1994)

and Waves of Opposition: Labor and the Struggle for Democratic Media (2006). She is currently working on a book on the relationship of labor, business, and religion in the postwar South.