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William L. Bird, Jr. *"Better Living": Advertising, Media, and the New Vocabulary of Business Leadership, 1935-1955.* Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1999. 288 pp. $30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8101-1585-9.

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The cover of William L. Bird Jr.'s *"Better Living": Advertising, Media, and the New Vocabulary of Business Leadership, 1935-1955* shows a 1951 picture of a family posing in the midst of a warehouse filled with food. Titled "Why We Eat Better," the photograph originally appeared in DuPont's employee publication before being picked up by *Life* magazine. As Bird argues, the picture suggests the ways in which businesses learned to dramatize their claims to renewed legitimacy in the wake of the Depression. Abandoning shrill attacks on the New Deal and pompous lectures on the virtues of the free enterprise system, business leaders increasingly linked their corporations with consumer abundance. Embracing a language of "more," "new," and "better," advertising executives, public relations specialists, broadcast network executives, and corporate chieftains developed radio and television programs and sponsored motion pictures that played a transitional role, Bird claims, "in moderating business discourse from the dark days of the Depression to the restored hegemony of the corporate commonwealth of the early 1950s" (p. 3).

The acceptance of this "new vocabulary of business leadership" on the part of corporate executives proceeded in fits and starts. The business leaders Bird focuses on, centering on the National Association of Manufacturers, the Liberty League, and an "entrepreneurial right," were actively hostile to Roosevelt's New Deal. Their idea of a public relations offensive ran no deeper than public denunciations of the President's perfidy. Bird's story focuses on how these executives were gradually convinced of the greater efficacy of using entertainment to indirectly claim that business could provide a standard of living superior to that ensured by government.

Bird presents a sophisticated analysis of how this came about, weaving together advertising agencies, public relations firms, entertainment companies, business leaders, survey and market research firms, historians, and entertainers. Simplified drastically, Bird argues that, in the mid-1930s, advertising agencies such as Batten, Barton, Durstine, and Osborn (BBDO) sought to convince businesses like DuPont and General Motors to abandon direct attacks on the New Deal in favor of learning from Roosevelt's success. The President's popularity, and his huge victory in 1936, Bruce Barton claimed, was due to his ability to convince Americans that he was doing something for them. Business needed to appropriate that claim, Barton argued, and persuade Americans it could be trusted to better their lives. Americans were not persuaded that the New Deal threatened their liberties; they could be convinced that business could, in the DuPont slogan that epitomized the "new vocabulary," "bring good things to life."

The second part of the message Barton and others tried to sell business was that indirect entertainment was more effective than direct preaching. Corporations could benefit by being linked with America's glorious past (in programs such as DuPont's "Cavalcade of America") and with its hopeful future (as in Westinghouse's "The Middleton Family" at the World's Fair). This proved a more difficult message for corporate leaders such as Alfred Sloan and Lamont DuPont to accept. Preferring their culture whole and coherent, they resisted until advertising agencies abetted by polling data were able to show the effectiveness of such indirect campaigns in improving the image of corporations such as DuPont. Business leaders began to grudgingly give way, though their commitment remained partial and subject to revision.

Take, for instance, Bird's discussion of the "inner conflict of wills" between Bruce Barton and General Motors (p. 25). BBDO had helped General Motors develop a number of different means to simultaneously attract an audience and present GM as a public-spirited institution. Beginning with "Parade of the States" in 1931 (a series of tributes to states, cities, and industries throughout the land) and continuing through "General Motors Symphony Concerts," General Motors had accepted Barton's insistence on indirection as the best way to "rediscover America–and re-sell it to Americans" (p. 33). Yet when the sit-down strikes occurred in 1936-37, General Motors returned to lecturing the audience it had attracted. It now used concert intermissions to broadcast fare such as "The Right to Work," and "Human Rights and Property Rights–Inseparably Bound."

General Motors' campaign against the sit-down strikes heralded a renewed effort by business interests to use network airtime to attack the New Deal. Network executives at NBC and CBS struggled to resist such efforts. They were soon joined by advertisers such as BBDO in steering corporate clients away from direct political attacks and towards developing new programming designed to link corporate America with consumer desire. The result was dramatic programming such as DuPont's "Cavalcade of America." Yet even the success of "Cavalcade" and similar programs could not keep corporate leaders from making direct political appeals to audiences, as the renewed free enterprise campaigns of the late-1950s demonstrated. Bird argues, however, these campaigns were a side-show. He focuses instead on corporate-sponsored entertainment, such as the "General Electric Theater," hosted by actor Ronald Reagan. Such entertainment, by "personalizing the meaning of corporate enterprise," had displaced public education as a means to restore business hegemony (p. 124).

The virtues of Bird's book are plentiful. First, Bird has put his extensive work in the archives to excellent use in weaving a thickly textured account of the behind-the-scenes efforts to alter corporate communication. The give-and-take between figures such as Barton, Edward Bernays, Sloan, and DuPont; network officials at NBC; and even academic consultants, such as historian Arthur Schlesinger and Yale president emeritus James Rowland Angell, richly documents how corporate use of media developed. And Bird's overall argument, that this new vocabulary played a crucial role in bolstering corporate legitimacy, is provocative and compelling.

Bird joins historians such as Roland Marchand and Jackson Lears in deepening our understanding of how American business legitimated itself in twentieth-century America. Bird's book is a wonderful complement to the late Marchand's *Creating the Corporate Soul: The Rise of Public Relations and Corporate Imagery in American Big Business* (1998), and both mark a significant improvement over earlier accounts (Elizabeth Fones-Wolf's *Selling Free Enterprise* [1994], for instance) that assumed the effectiveness of business attempts to ram political arguments down the throats of workers and consumers alike. Dismissing these campaigns has always been easy (see William H. Whyte Jr.'s *Is Anybody Listening? How and Why U.S. Business Fumbles When It Talks with Human Beings* [1951]), but Bird takes us beyond skeptical dismissal to demonstrate the more sophisticated weapons business deployed in the battle of ideas. Bird's work also resembles Thomas Frank's *The Conquest of Cool* (1997) about sixties advertising in its insistence that advertising executives were the key figures in convincing business leaders that indirect appeals were a more effective way to get their ideas across. Indeed, one cannot help wondering if the work of Bird, Marchand, and Lears risks turning Bruce Barton into the *deus ex machina* of twentieth-century capitalist hegemony.

As deft as Bird's analysis is, it evades certain central questions. Convinced by advertising executives, such as Barton, that the direct sell favored by business leaders was ineffective and even counter-productive, Bird argues for the superiority of the more subtle vocabulary of "better living." But was it the rhetoric of "better living" that helped re-legitimize business, or was it the living itself? Was DuPont's long-term sponsorship of the "Cavalcade of America" what improved its image, or was it the introduction of nylons? Bird provides evidence that image advertising effectively built a more positive image of

corporations such as DuPont, but his chronology complicates the picture. Did business accept the new vocabulary because they were finally convinced of its superior effectiveness? Or did they only come around after the postwar economic expansion had helped regain their lost legitimacy, thus eliminating the need for their fevered defense of free enterprise?

Bird's "better living" refers both to a means of communication (indirect entertainment replacing direct rhetoric) and a message (more, new, better). Bird does not make this distinction, leading to occasional confusion. Do business leaders accept both simultaneously? Do they more easily embrace the message or the medium? More importantly, to be fully persuasive Bird needs to establish the place of his corporate-sponsored entertainment within the larger world of commercial media. Bird assumes a centrality for "Cavalcade" and Ford's "Rhapsody in Steel" that needs to be demonstrated. The problem deepens as his analysis extends to industrial films that clearly reached a far smaller audience.

Bird is on the right trail when he insists on the importance of the messages business propagated, and he brilliantly shows how advertising, public relations, and network executives all pushed business towards embracing a dramatic rhetoric they distrusted. His argument is rich; his evidence equally so. It is the connection between the two that remains open to question.

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