H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

German Studies Association Conference 2003 Session 27: Capitalism, Commercialism and Marketing around 1900. German Studies Association.

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Published on H-German (October, 2003)

In their widely known critique of modernity, the leading theorists of the Frankfurt School argued that commercialism provided a new way for bourgeois elites to subjugate the unsuspecting German masses. This neo-Marxist alternative to the Sonderweg blames the onset of late, industrial capitalism (what Detlev Peukert has called the "crisis of classical modernity") and not any latent pre-modern traditions for Germany spiraling down a totalitarian path. More recently, historians have begun to reject Adorno and Horkheimer in favor of their Frankfurt colleague and mentor, Siegfried Kracauer. Kracauer argues that capitalism "rationalizes not too much, but too little", in that mass consumption provides an impetus for democratic participation and social differentiation. All three of the papers on this fascinating panel approached consumerism through Kracauer's revealing lens. But unlike the most recent work on German consumerism–from Uta Poiger's <cite>Jazz, Rock and Rebels</cite> to Konrad Jarausch and Michael Geyer's <cite>Shattered Past</cite>–our panelists discuss the implications of German consumerism well before the First World War. Consequently, by establishing the onset of mass consumer culture already in the mid- to late nineteenth century, these papers suggest new forms of continuities that recollect more traditional interpretations of German intellectual and cultural history. <p> After a gracious introduction by the moderator, David Hamlin's "Consumption, Spectacle, and a Cultural Critique of Wilhelmine Capitalism" provided a revealing glimpse into his larger project on the social and cultural meaning of children's toys in Imperial Germany. In the works of two fin de siecle social scientists, Ferdinand Avenarius and Georg Simmel, Hamlin locates an early critique of mass market aesthetics reminiscent of Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction". For Avenarius, glitzy, modern, mass-produced toys weakened children's minds and dulled their imaginations, undermining the romantic elements of fantasy, creativity and individual expression that children cultivated through their play. Simmel takes a similar line, arguing that, instead of expressing his or her individuality by the imposition of one's own imagination on particular products, the modern consumer submerged his or her personality in a mass-produced aesthetic. Preoccupied by their neo-romantic visions of the world, however, neither critic appreciates the ephemerality of mass produced commodities, nor the ease with which the modern individual might puncture the uniformity of mass production by playing with the "shifting, fugitive images" of the market. Here Hamlin's implicit comparison of Avenarius and Simmel with the Frankfurt School comes full circle, since Benjamin has also been taken to task for exaggerating the negative social consequences of capitalist commodification. <p> David Ciarlo's "Colonizing the Consumer Imaginary: German Advertising and the African Colonial Subject circa 1900" also constituted a plea for rescuing mass market capitalism from the condescension of posterity. Indeed, following Kracauer, Ciarlo sees the commercialization of Wilhelmine society, and the colonial project in particular, as something that goes well beyond the nationalist manipulation of the masses by bourgeois capitalist elites. Increasingly commodified images of the African native were used, on the contrary, "to initiate modern consumer society" by helping to create– while simultaneously appealing to– an emerging "consumer imaginary". Even though the market produced increasingly rigid racialist typologies which, in turn, provided new and more insidious methods for manipulating the masses, Ciarlo nonetheless emphasizes the myriad ways in which popular, commercial

images of the African native could appeal to diverse social and political strata, eliciting a wide spectrum of modern, consumer responses. Hence these new, multifarious projections of Africa within the "consumer imaginary" contributed to the very modernization and democratization of German society which bourgeois capitalist instrumentalization of Wilhelmine colonialism ostensibly suppressed. <p> Turning to Nicholas Vazsonyi's provocative paper on "Marketing German Identity: The Wagner Industry" we are afforded an alternative to the traditional view of Wagner as xenophobic anti-modernist, as well as Udo Bermbach's revisionist picture of Wagner as utopian socialist. For Vazsonyi, Wagner becomes a self-consciously commercial anti-modernist, promoting his own image as a pure and disinterested "German" artist, for the purposes of mass consumption. In creating this "Wagner Industry", and in representing himself and his work as the very antithesis of commodity capitalism, the composer was able to exploit anti-modern tendencies to very modern, profit-centered ends. Or to quote Vazsonyi, when "You buy Wagner, you buy German". Thus Wagner's essay, "Eine Pilgerfahrt zu Beethoven", becomes a calculated attempt at "product placement" by associating the young composer and his oeuvre with Germany's greatest and most indelibly German musician. Meanwhile, Wagner's call for a "new kind of theater", distinct from French opera, was simultaneously an attempt to make German artists more aware of their "audience" or market and the need to produce a truly national, Kultur-based art form. <p> The commentator was impressed by Hamlin's elegant post-structuralist approach to more traditional interpretations of German "anti-modernism". But he worried about resurrecting the works of Simmel, and particularly Avenarius, without first noting the profound epistemological differences between neo-romantic and neo-Marxist critiques of commercial capitalism. Citing the classic works of Fritz Stern and Georg Mosse, in which Avenarius figures prominently, the commentator suggested that this earlier version of critical aestheticism was more a product of voelkisch anti-modernism than social progressivism. Although the commentator found David Ciarlo's description of "the consumer imaginary" as both a product of and a market for new commercial images ingenious, he felt that Ciarlo's paper did not do enough to account for why the image of the native African suddenly displaced other, more traditional consumer tropes. Perhaps it was no coincidence, he suggested, that the first of the Afrocentric images appear in 1898, coinciding with the radical nationalist campaign in favor of the first Navy Bill. The commentator also noted the paper's failure to discuss the Herero uprisings in German West Africa and the ensuing fascination with colonial Africa after 1904. In his opinion, it was this widespread colonial enthusiasm, both endorsed and exploited by bourgeois nationalists and imperialist elites, which accounts for the proliferation, subordination, and systematization of African images within the consumer imaginary after 1898. In conclusion, the commentator wondered if Vazsonyi had taken his argument too far in comparing Wagner's socially conscious yet commercial-minded anti-modernism to Social Democracy. Rather, he suggested that Vazsonyi's portrayal of Wagner as devout nationalist, calculated self-promoter, and entrepreneurial anti-capitalist actually buttressed claims that Wagner provided the intellectual foundations for National Socialism. <p> A lively discussion ensued, centering on an exchange between Ciarlo and Kevin Repp (Yale) over the reception of African imagery vis-Ã -vis Orientalist tropes, particularly with regard to the portrayal of Islam. Other audience members asked Ciarlo to clarify the relationship, brought up in the commentary, between political events, namely the Herero uprisings in colonial Africa and the Kiatschou expedition in China, and the developing consumer imaginary. At this point Hamlin posited that the much greater abundance of Chinese images in the production of children's toys after 1898 was possibly a commercial reaction to negative political events such as the Herero uprisings. Hamlin also responded to the commentary by noting that the discourse of "modernity" and "anti-modernity" was not at the heart of his research. Rather, he wished to show-following Repp-the difficulty in drawing ideological distinctions between the various critics who shaped the Wilhelmine reformist milieu. In response to a specific question about Wagner's "intention" in creating a capitalist-inclined "Wagner Industry", Vaszonyi did not deny the demagogic or market-oriented aspects inherent to Wagner's larger project. But Vazsonyi was reticent to suggest any comparisons between Wagner's mid-nineteenth century attempts to attract a small, nationally-conscious Bildungsbuergertum and efforts on the part of the voelkisch movement of the late-nineteenth century to employ Wagner's work selectively in order to market hyper-nationalist ideas to a wider mittelstaendisch audience. The discussion was still running strong when the moderator noted, regretfully, that time had expired. <p> For a complete listing of all sessions at the 2003 German Studies Association Conference, please visit <http://www.g-s-a.org>. <p>

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Citation: Eric Kurlander. Review of , *German Studies Association Conference 2003 Session 27: Capitalism, Commercialism and Marketing around 1900.* H-German, H-Net Reviews. October, 2003.

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