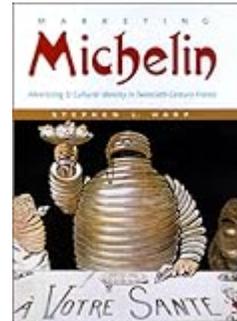


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Stephen L. Harp. *Marketing Michelin: Advertising and Cultural Identity in Twentieth-Century France.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001. ix + 356p. 95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-6651-7.



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“With few exceptions (food, shelter, sex), our needs are cultural ...” is a short pithy way of summarizing the now vast literature of consumption theory and, in effect, inviting us—historians, anthropologists, sociologists and economists—to question taste.[1] If we accept that things have cultural meaning and that personal satisfaction is somehow tied to the cultural meaning of things, cultural constructs can be devised to play on that meaning and, in so doing, promote and sustain or alternatively, diminish and redirect, demand. Those are the basic premises behind marketing in general and advertising in particular. Identity is bound up with what we eat, wear, drive and play.

It may also follow that we, the historians and archaeologists of culture, can gain insight into social, political and even economic constructs by focusing on the ads and marketing gimmicks of a bygone era which manipulated the sense of identity for economic ends. Promoting and sustaining a demand for tires was the *raison d'être* of the Michelin Company, or so I would have said prior to reading a new book from Johns Hopkins University Press, *Marketing Michelin: Advertising and Identity in Twentieth-Century France*, by Stephen L. Harp, a historian of France at the University of Akron. One happy and, I would suspect, intentional outcome of this exploration in economic and cultural history is to make overly

reductionistic readings of firm behavior passe.

Michelin is a fascinating company, worthy of study, in several respects. The name itself is associated with high quality automobile tires and longevity in a highly concentrated, rivalrous industry. It is also the source of the ubiquitous red and green guides that define tourism for many of us. Though it did not invent the star system of restaurant ratings, Michelin’s ranking of restaurants has enshrined fine dining in the consciousness of many. And there are few who would not recognize what Americans call the Michelin Man, though as Harp reminds us, his name is Bibendum and a great deal of effort went into making him recognizable to several generations of potential buyers of tires.

The Michelin name is also associated with innovative wage and payment systems, an outgrowth of the Michelin brothers’ commitment to both Frederick Winslow Taylor and their own very public, pro-natalist positions in the inter-war period. How, Harp asks, are we to understand the investment in these highly visible, but seemingly tangential forays from the main enterprise of producing and selling tires and what does the very nature of these marketing ploys tell us about France, the French and the market?

Harp is not the first in this field of cultural produc-

tion, but his approach is an illuminating one. Demand for tires is, as economists would say, a derived demand and therefore not a commodity whose meaning is easy to decipher. Tires “derive” their value from their complementarity to various modes of transportation. Why should the consumer pay any more attention to the tire than they do to the spark plugs or distributor caps of their cars? It is fairly easy to see how identity may be bound up with the kind of car you drive though, in fairness, marketers and advertisers have been at work a long time to make that connection clear.

Harp’s answer is to show us in a thorough and convincing way the evolution over time in Michelin’s use of *Bibendum* and its regular written publications, *Le Lundi* and the development of its red and green guides. What started out in the late nineteenth century as a mode of instruction for the users of a new product quickly became the means by which those with time and means could get off the “beaten track.” Being able to get off the beaten track was equated with the luxury of touring, and the message that this required not only maps and other guides, but good tires, was not lost on bicyclists or drivers at the dawn of the motoring age. Later in the history of the company, exploring the highways and byways of France was given explicitly patriotic and later religious overtones, as drivers made the pilgrimage to WWI battlefield sites. Over time, the Michelin tire became the means to fulfilling what began as a pleasure and mutated into a sacred duty. Still later, Michelin would tie good tires to the business of transporting the nations’ goods, thereby completing the process of transmuting what had once been a luxury into a necessity for the individual and for France.

Harp’s chronological approach has much to recommend it. In using the passage of time to move his narrative along, he emphasizes Michelin’s agency in the process of building its market. He can also extract a great deal of mileage from the ambiguity of saying Michelin. Does he mean Andre, the marketing genius who lived in Paris and devised much of Michelin Tire’s advertising agenda? Does he mean Edouard, the production genius who organized and oversaw the factory work in Clermont-Ferrand? Or does Harp refer to the company as distinct from the actions of the brothers? Where is the agency in a family firm? Did the Michelin company support pro-natalist policies as a means of selling tires or did

the elder brother use the resources of the company to promote a personal agenda? While the ambiguity may not trouble cultural historians, economists have a narrative of how firms as agents behave and it would be illuminating to have this ambiguity further explored.

The chronological approach also allows Harp to put structuralist and post-structuralist theory in his footnotes. Letting his narrative unfold with the twentieth century obviates what many readers find tendentious anyway. The repetitions that sometimes occur when history or advertising repeats itself may be a small price to pay for a simplicity of presentation that avoids controversial meta-narratives.

The downside of the chronological approach may be apparent only to the economic and business historians in Harp’s audience. Economists and business historians tell stories that suggest that markets have structures that impinge on the agency of individual players. The use of marketing and advertising are tactics in a basket of strategies firms might pursue to obtain market power. What does Michelin’s history—in particular its highly visible marketing strategy—tell us about the construction and maintenance of market and political power in highly concentrated industries? More economic data, presented much earlier, would have been helpful. It is not that Harp does not offer some background on Michelin’s major competitors; rather, these data are not presented until two-thirds of the way through his text. Given Harp’s access to company records, it would also have been illuminating to know more about the profitability of the family firm. Sprinkled here and there through the text (a by-product again of a chronological approach) are inklings of how Michelin fortunes waxed and waned, but only inklings.

Stephen Harp’s *Marketing Michelin* is a fascinating, well-researched book. His strengths as a historian and speaker of French are well displayed here. His archival work is also very impressive. If the book does not entirely succeed in its objective to wed cultural and economic history, it is certainly a worthy effort in that direction.

Note

[1]. James B. Twitchell, *Lead Us into Temptation: The Triumph of American Materialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 27.

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