Classes to masses: how advertising agencies responded to the challenges of the mass market in interwar Britain*

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"To other people, we also are masses. Masses are other people… There are in fact no masses; there are only ways of seeing people as masses."
Raymond Williams, Culture and Society, 1780-1950 (1958)

1. Images of "mass" and "class"

Historians of British marketing have acknowledged that images of the "mass" consumer were being utilised by marketers of consumer goods well before the First World War.[1] As Michael Heller in his study on the London clerical worker in the late Victorian era has shown, the idea of discovering and targeting a "mass" of consumers in Britain always entailed the necessity to widen the focus of marketing to include the better-off and skilled working-class labourer as well as the lower middle-classes.[2] This new inclusive focus of marketers who tried to cover large sections of British consumers was traced back by Roy Church to the second half of the nineteenth century.[3]

While the lower middle-class and the working-class consumer had been discovered before the turn of the last century, I argue that the concept of a "mass" of largely similar consumers of standardised, mass-produced goods was not at all a dominant part of the self-definition of British marketers before the 1930s. British advertising agencies were adapted to a fragmented market with strong differences between social classes, class-dominated regions and between cities and rural areas. This disparity between the advertising discourse's focus on the importance of class and social segmentation on the one hand and the reality of an emerging unified mass market on the other put British advertising agencies at a serious disadvantage against their American competitors, which after the First World War began to set up branches in London. This, in its turn, not only led to a rising influx of American mass produced consumer goods into Britain, but also to an intensified competition for advertising clients. In this competitive struggle, British

agencies relied on their superior knowledge of class habits, regional customs, and the multifaceted relationship between periodicals and their readers as consumers. American agencies, on the other hand, approached the British market with a liberating disregard for its built-in class barriers and instead relied on the use of refined market research techniques.

2. American "mass" marketing in interwar Britain

These market research techniques - readership surveys, consumer investigations into the uses of products, panel surveys on consumer habits and beliefs, etc. - became the working basis for the expansion to the United Kingdom in 1919 of America's most successful advertising agency, J. Walter Thompson (JWT). Although JWT only serviced American clients in its first years in London and hardly engaged with rest of the British advertising industry, its campaigns for mass-produced consumer goods and foodstuffs became the object of astonishment and even envy. Relying on a relatively small advertising budget that did not match the expenditure of other food giants such as Hartley's, Cadbury's or Nestlé, JWT managed to push entirely unknown products into the British market amidst economically difficult circumstances in the early 1920s.

In 1919, JWT was initially sent to the United Kingdom by one of its largest American clients, the manufacturer of tinned fruit and milk "Libby's", the products of which JWT helped launch in the UK. In 1924, JWT was elected by the Californian Raisin producer co-operative to launch "Sun-Maid Raisins" in Britain.[4] Both campaigns were quoted by contemporaries as "typical" examples of American marketing success stories. The techniques that JWT used reveal the extent to which the advertising agency gained from the employment of Paul Cherington, the former Harvard Business School professor in marketing. At JWT in New York, Cherington had introduced the idea to construct advertising text and slogans in a way that aided the market penetration and the market expansion of a product. In other words, advertisements were written in order to give consumers a "reason why" to purchase the product, advertisements helped consumers rationalising their choice and constantly suggested new uses to which the product could be put.[5] For example, through market research JWT found out that housewives used raisins mostly for Christmas pudding – so rarely purchased them at all and "brands" were not seen as important. In order to increase the frequency of purchase and increase the significance of the brand as a guide for purchase decisions, the Sun-Maid advertising campaign introduced the raisin bread, or the use of raisins for fruit dishes and deserts. The increased frequency of purchase

added significance to the brand: housewives seeing the “Sun-Maid” were assured of a positive quality-price relation. Moreover, while advertisements created by British agencies often randomly changed format and design, JWT used the same style monotonously and invested in the visual dominance of brands and their logos.

But most importantly, JWT entered the British market by continuously and specifically addressing both the middle-class *and* the working-class consumer. Libby’s and Sun-Maid Raisins advertisements appeared in John Bull, the Daily Star and the Daily Mail. At the same time, these products were not advertised on the basis of lower price but on the understanding that *all* housewives, *all* mothers, *all* family members of whatever class could relate to these products. Even the respectable, up-market Times newspaper was swamped in 1919 with Libby’s advertising.[6] What had worked for Libby’s tinned fruit and evaporated milk certainly worked for Sun-Maid Raisins. When launched in Britain in 1924, the company initially followed a positioning and target marketing strategy which evolved entirely around the idea of getting affluent middle-class women to buy Californian raisins. Accordingly, advertisements were initially placed in so-called “class” magazines for women (The Lady, Country Life). But soon JWT persuaded its client to change this strategy and target the working-class mother as well as the wealthy middle-class housewife. The decisive factor for this change in marketing strategy had come from market research. JWT convinced the Sun-Maid client that a broader market base was necessary because “research shows that 91.2% of the families of Great Britain have incomes of under £400.”[7]

Throughout the 1920s and ‘30s, JWT followed this strategy for most of its products. It advised its client Lever Bros. to extend the more exclusive range of LUX (soap, soap flakes, shampoo etc.) into the working-class market and exploit the fact that working-class families used more woollen garments as a “wedge” to get the rather expensive LUX Soap Flakes into the working-class households of England’s north. Here again, it was market research which pointed the way for JWT. In 1928, when LUX Soap Flakes were re-launched on the British market, JWT had conducted a research survey among British housewives of hitherto unknown scale. In spring 1928, JWT market researchers interviewed 3200 women in 20 towns across Britain about their washing habits, the use of soap, typical expenditure on garments and so on. The market research conducted in 1928 found that for every one visit to the chemist housewives made six visits to the grocer. Since soap and shampoo at that time would only be stocked by chemists, JWT began to

push the LUX product line into grocers and other stores. Thus, JWT's focus was set not on the "class" of consumers, but on distribution channels which could reach the "mass" consumer.[8]

Through its market research subsidiary the British Market Research Bureau, JWT was able to deliver extensive and detailed market research reports to all its clients at short notice. In most of the market research reports filed at the company archive, JWT can be seen to use a specific strategy which mainly consisted of finding out when, why and how mass consumers bought and used a product and what the typical psychological barriers against products were. In order to study this set of problems, JWT London established an experimental kitchen at its offices in Bush House, where women could be observed how they opened and closed packages and invented new recipes for advertised food products. In this experimental space of 1920s market research, consumers were still understood in terms of "class"; yet what rendered them different from each other were only income differences, while the psychological machinery of needs and wants, objections and desires unified them all to become a mass of striving individuals.[9] This ideology was visualised in a series of advertisements placed by JWT in advertising trade journals in the late 1930s, which showed the "Agency in Action". In this series, JWT described how it used advertisements to turn people into consumers of standardised, mass-produced consumer goods. In advertisement No. 6, "Learning our A B C D's", a selection of photographs of different people in different settings showed that branded goods could not only be sold to the "stately home" and "comfortable Kensington", but that "John Citizen", the London bus driver, the sailor and even the casual labourer could be sold on Rowntree's table jelly, Horlick's, Kraft cheese and gravy made with Brown & Polson corn flour. In advertisement No. 9, "A day in the life of Mrs. Green", JWT followed the life of a working-man's housewife and the way she used newspaper advertisements and radio commercials from Continental stations to learn about the brands she bought at the grocer. Her husband's income was given at £3 a week, but "one day she may be able to afford a vacuum cleaner". As part of the lower income bracket (C and D class), Mr and Mrs Green were "the great mass market".[10]

3. British "class" marketing

The definitions of the role of advertising within the marketing mix differed between British and American advertising agencies operating in London. For an American agency such as JWT, research and planning were essential for the long-term economic success of a campaign. British

agencies on the other hand could often be found on the poles of either extreme "short-termism" or extreme "long-termism" in marketing. "Short-termists" told their advertising agencies to waste no time or money on long-term planning or research, but instead produce immediate results in sales figures. These advertisers saw advertising not as a long-term investment and as part of a planned positioning on the market, but as a necessary and unpopular expenditure which was best kept down to economise (manufacturers employing agencies for one-off "stunts"; focus set on the lower end of the market with "price-cut" offers etc.). The other extreme in early twentieth-century British advertising was represented by "long-termists" or firms which understood advertising not at all in terms of sales orientation, but instead as a form of PR to keep alive a favourable image in the public eye through colourful, artistic posters and "prestige advertising". Railway companies and petrol firms such as Shell, which marketed goods that were thought to attract mainly up-market consumers, were often afraid to antagonise their target market with "pushy" sales and marketing messages and therefore relied heavily on artistic, up-market "prestige advertising".[11]

This form of prestige advertising was closely related to and embedded in the cultures of middle-class aspiration. One of the foremost examples of this strategy was the well-known British agency owner Charles Higham, whose advertising strategies for all sorts of products from tyres to cigarettes, beer and air-travel were based on the idea to place a product in the surrounding of "class" magazines, an environment, which added symbolic and social value to products.[12] Higham and his many followers in British advertising believed it was this addition of "class" value which made a product attractive. Another marketer, the clothing retailer Austin Reed, followed a similar strategy. Austin Reed, a firm that had made its name by bringing the idea of the suit as a fashion item from Saville Row to High Street, could well have opened itself up in the interwar years to the lower end of the market. Austin Reed, however, like so many interwar marketers, devised its campaigns around the idea of selling that "touch of class" (Berry Ritchie) to middle- and lower middle-class consumers.

A large number of British manufacturers before the early 1930s similarly headed for the affluent middle-classes as their main and sometimes only market segment. Within this strategy, advertising was created in order to assure middle-class consumers and help them distinct themselves from the imaginary "masses". In that culture, market research was not seen as necessary at all: the right product was that of high quality and the customer could be told in

advertisements to come to the merchant or manufacturer in order to buy into the right lifestyle. Charles Higham for example had no space for market research, which he derided as gimmicky, American nonsense, a waste of time and the client's money.[13] Between the American and British advertising agencies, thus, two different concepts of the market emerged which competed with each other. JWT's focus on the working class consumer followed a market expansion and market penetration philosophy which believed in the possibility of a mass market from the bottom up. Most British agencies, on the other side, still tended to follow a class-based philosophy of the trickle-down effect in consumption, whereby middle-class lifestyles acted as a magnet for those affluent workers who only worked and strove hard enough.

4. From classes to masses

The onset of the economic depression in the early 1930s profoundly changed this division of attitudes towards the market. The need to attract larger audiences for mass-produced consumer goods meant that about ten years after American agencies had discovered the working-class mass consumer many more British advertisers now also began to build up the "affluent worker" as the basis for mass consumption and mass marketing.

A source which provides rich insights into the changing concept of the market among British marketers and advertising professionals in the early 1930s are the advertisements used by newspapers and other periodical publications to attract potential advertisers. These advertisements were specifically devised to convince marketers that their core target group was to be found among the readers of a specific paper or magazine. Before the depression of 1930/31, most newspapers realised that marketers were interested in the wealthy middle-classes. Only a few papers "outed" themselves as attracting working-class readers, which were then sold to marketers as the "folks who economise".[14] A large number of periodicals, such as the Sunday Chronicle, the Windsor Magazine, the Nottingham Guardian or the Yorkshire Post stressed their overwhelming middle-class readership. Understanding and controlling the market here meant tapping into Britain's class structure. After 1930/31, however, the picture changed radically, with conservative, middle-class papers such as the Yorkshire Post now boasting their high readership among the masses of "affluent workers".[15] Thus, a much more positive attitude towards the "big numbers" and the mass consumer now prevailed: magazines and newspapers were falling over

each other to convince the advertiser that it was their paper which was read by the masses. Understanding and controlling the market now meant to have a feel for the "mass mind".

This "feel for the mass mind" and the working-class consumer was still JWT's prerogative in the early 1930s. At that time, it became ever more obvious for the market research and planning teams at JWT that the working masses lacked a daily newspaper which could be used to sell the idea of mass consumption to them. There was, of course, the Daily Herald and John Bull; but their publisher, Odham's Press, was seen as too powerful to be influenced on the policy and content of its papers. Similarly, the Herald had the smell of being a Labour and Trade Union paper (just as the Daily Worker) and the idea of getting workers simply to buy more and be happier was alien to them. John Bull catered for working class readers to some extend, but its penetration into that segment was not seen by JWT as effective enough. One paper, eventually, became the beacon of hope: by the early 1930s, the Daily Mirror was a dying paper which had been left behind by the struggle of the Daily Express and the Daily Mail for the middle-class and lower middle-class reader. In 1931, Lord Rothermere had disposed of its shares in the Mirror, which many Fleet Street pundits interpreted as the final farewell to the paper. JWT in London jumped on this opportunity to build up the Daily Mirror as a paper that sold mass consumerism to the Britain's middle and low-end market. While the editor Harry Bartholomew ensured that the Mirror followed a popular, left-wing, anti-establishment line, JWT acted in the background as the advisor on the paper's re-launch in 1933/34. Throughout the difficult exercise of repositioning the paper, JWT carried out market research into reader preferences, advised on layout, and ensured that advertising clients supported the new venture. Following the advice from JWT, the Daily Mirror expanded its coverage of the radio programme and introduced new dramatic serials ("Stolen Kiss"). JWT also advised the Mirror to stay a tabloid paper despite the dislike of tabloids by most advertisers. Eventually, JWT relinquished members of its own staff to become key members of the new Daily Mirror team.[16]

In his memoirs, the advertising director of the Mirror Cecil King explained that the only hope the paper had was "to appeal to young, working-class men and women." Accordingly, as James Curran and Jean Seaton have pointed out, by 1936 the Daily Mirror's coverage of politics and domestic affairs had been radically cut down and amounted to merely less than half of its sports coverage and about one-third of its coverage of crime, sex and celebrity gossip.[17] At the same time of course, JWT's advertising clients invested heavily into this paper which attracted

both the young, spending working-classes as well as the traditional middle-class readership. By the late 1930s, the Daily Mirror had clearly moved beyond boundaries of "class": middle *and* working-class readers were now confronted by the same style of often JWT-produced advertisements and exciting titbits about murders and cinema stars.[18]

5. Conclusion

In the light of these developments, it seems worth revising the assertion made by Broadbery and others that the British market in the interwar years remained a series of segmented markets and that unification only took place well after World War II. The story of JWT, the Daily Mirror and their influence on the making of the idea of a mass consumer in the 1930s suggests that post-war "mass" marketing is indeed a story that began much earlier.

The notion of the working-class consumer targeted by marketers and the idea of mass consumption were dormant concepts in British society well before the First World War. Advertisements for watches, foods stuffs or the delights of seaside resorts already addressed working-class consumers *as such* in the Victorian and Edwardian era. With regard to this, Judy Giles and Paul Johnson have shown the crucial role played by notions of respectability, domesticity and "conspicuous consumption" in the making of working-class culture well before the interwar years.[19] Yet, while the knowledge of the existence of working-class consumers was alive, it was often deemed inappropriate and uneconomical by British advertising agencies to target or communicate with this social group for a large range of products. If working-class consumers were acknowledged, they often only figured as the "folk who have to economise". Thus, the knowledge of the working-class consumer was not always translated into an idea of unified, standardised mass consumption before the interwar years.

The example of JWT and its use of market research in the interwar years shows the substantial transformation of the British mass market from being structured by class differences to a mass market understood in terms of different income levels. The movement that took the British market beyond ideas of "class" into an age of "mass" consumers with different income levels but largely similar needs, desires and aspirations, was powerfully promoted by American advertising agencies. British and American agencies in the early twentieth century worked on two opposing conceptions of the market: until the early 1930s at least, the American worship of economies of scale and the promises of "mass" as noted by Roland Marchand and others were

met by the British insistence on the cultural reassurance of middle-class exclusiveness and individualism. Following Ross McKibbin, this insistence on the distinction of "class" among British marketing professionals and the belated discovery of the "mass" in mass marketing reflect the political marginalisation of the working class in interwar Britain and what John Carey has branded the "cultural disdain for the masses" as integral part of interwar British society.[20]

Endnotes

[*] This paper summarises an argument put forward in my PhD thesis at Birkbeck College, 'Advertising, mass democracy and consumer culture in Britain, 1900 – 1951', and is planned to appear in an extended version in Business History, Vol. 50 (2008). Contact: s.schwarzkopf@qmul.ac.uk

[1] Hamish Fraser, The coming of the mass market, 1850-1914. London 1981; Lory Ann Loeb, Consuming angels: advertising and Victorian women. Oxford 1994; Thomas Richards, The commodity culture of Victorian England: advertising and spectacle, 1850-1914. Stanford 1990; John Benson, The rise of consumer society in Britain, 1880-1980. London 1994.

[2] Michael Heller, 'London Clerical Workers 1880-1914: the search for stability', PhD thesis UCL, 2004.

[3] Roy Church, Christine Clark, 'Product development of branded, packaged household goods in Britain, 1870-1914: Colman's, Reckitt's, and Lever Brothers', in: Enterprise and Society, Vol. 2, No. 3 (2001), pp. 503-42; Roy Church, 'Advertising consumer goods in nineteenth-century Britain: reinterpretations', in: Economic History Review, Vol. 53, No. 4 (2000), pp. 621-45.

[4] JWT Company Archives, Duke University, Sidney Bernstein Papers, Box 5, Report "The London Office" (August 1964); 'J. Walter Thompson Company', in: Fortune (November 1947), pp. 95-101, 202-6, 214-33; Jonathan Silva, 'The marketing complex: the J. Walter Thompson company, 1916-1929', in: Essays in Economic and Business History, Vol. 14 (1996), pp. 207-18.

[5] See Paul T Cherington's classic, The consumer looks at advertising. New York 1928 and The elements of marketing. New York 1928.

[6] 'Though cream is restricted', in: The Times, October 10 1919; 'The menace of the milk shortage', in: The Times, October 24 1919; 'At the base of the blue pyramid: successful British advertising of an overseas product', in: Advertising World, December 1925.

[7] JWT papers, HAT Archive (Norwich), "Sun-Maid" Market Study (1934).

[8] JWT papers, HAT Archive (Norwich), Lever Brothers, Box 694, "Short Brand Histories" (July 1952); Box 687, Report "Lux England 1928" (November 1927); JWT Company Archives, Duke University, Account History Files "Lever Brothers", Report: "Condition of Lux at time of J. W. Thompson appointment" (February 1926).

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[9] Clement Watson, 'Markets are people – not places: a few thoughts on Export', in: The JWT News Bulletin, July 1928, pp. 3-23; Henry Miner, 'The American manufacturer meets his foreign consumer', in: The JWT News Bulletin, October 1929, pp. 9-11; JWT Company Archives, Duke University, London Office Records, Box 1, booklet "Agency in Action" (London 1936); John Downham, British Market Research Bureau: the first sixty years, 1933-1993. London 1993.

[10] Advertiser's Weekly, March 12 1936; Advertiser's Weekly, April 9 1936.

[11] For the cultural politics of the notion of "prestige advertising" see Dan L. LeMahieu, A culture for democracy: mass communication and the cultivated mind in Britain between the wars. Oxford 1988, pp. 161-70, 266-73.

[12] See Charles Higham, Advertising: its use and abuse. London 1925.

[13] 'Sir Charles prophesies', in: Advertiser's Weekly, July 28 1932.

[14] 'The World's Pictorial News: sell to the folks who economise', in: Advertiser's Weekly, June 19 1925.

[15] See advertisements in Advertiser's Weekly, January 9 1925; April 3 1925; January 20 1938.

[16] Basil Nicholson became features editor of the Daily Mirror while William (Bill) Connor, copy-writer on the Harpic account at JWT, became a famous Daily Mirror columnist under the name of "Cassandra". Hugh Cudlipp, Publish and be damned! The astonishing story of the Daily Mirror. London 1953.

[17] Ruth Edwards, Newspapermen: Hugh Cudlipp, Cecil Harmsworth King and the glory days of Fleet Street. London 2003; James Curran, Sean Seaton, Power without responsibility: the press and broadcasting in Britain. London 1981.

[18] See the mix of JWT advertisements, murdered spouses, studio starlets, detectives and zodiacs in Daily Mirror, July 11 1933, p. 12; August 3 1933, p. 8; December 6 1934, p. 7.

[19] Judy Giles, The parlour and the suburb: domestic identities, class, femininity and modernity. Oxford 2004; Paul Johnston, 'Conspicuous consumption and working-class culture in late Victorian and Edwardian Britain', in: Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, Vol. 38 (1988), pp. 27-42; for this argument and the movement towards the standardised mass consumer in UK advertising imagery before World War I see also Matthew Hilton, Smoking in British popular culture, 1800-2000: perfect pleasures. Manchester 2000.

[20] Roland Marchand, Advertising the American dream: making way for modernity, 1920-1940. Berkeley 1985, pp. 267-9; Ross McKibbin, Classes and cultures: England, 1918-1951. Oxford 1998; John Carey, The intellectuals and the masses: pride and prejudice among the literary intelligentsia, 1880-1939. London 1992.