



CRESC Working Paper Series

Working Paper No. 84

Following the line of least resistance?: advertising, agencements and crashes

Liz McFall

CRESC, Open University

October 2010

For further information:

Centre for Research on Socio-Cultural Change (CRESC)
Faculty of Social Sciences, The Open University,
Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA, UK
Tel: +44 (0)1908 654458 Fax: +44 (0)1908 654488

Email: cresc@manchester.ac.uk or cresc@open.ac.uk

Web: www.cresc.ac.uk

Following the line of least resistance?: advertising, agencements and crashes

Liz McFall

Abstract

For Walter Benjamin, advertising had an uncanny capacity to use sentiment to reawaken human mimetic facility. Confronted by the giant neon images of early twentieth century advertisements, people were taught to feel and to imitate once more. From Adam Smith, through to Gabriel Tarde and Marcel Mauss, the capacity to imitate, prompted by prestigious or authoritarian examples, is the core condition of the social. This capacity to inspire emulation and imitation such that the line of least resistance subtly becomes buying the toothpaste, smoking the cigarette, wearing the perfume etc has become one of the most widely held, and widely reviled, attributes of advertising. The trouble with this lies partly in the artificial isolation of advertising from its environment and partly in the neglect of advertising's many failures. Drawing upon the long history of life assurance promotion, the paper aims to reconsider advertising's impact on the mimetic facility by locating it as an element within a socio-technical market device or agencement. From this perspective new forms of conduct and consumption emerge through the dynamic articulation of a range of elements which combine to make purchasing necessary, inevitable, habitual or unthinking. Yet these same elements can also collide or crash and to date the interesting questions raised by such failures have received little attention.

Biographical note

Liz McFall is Senior Lecturer in Sociology at the Open University. Her work is concerned with how markets are 'made', especially through advertising and other promotional practices. She is the author of *Advertising: a cultural economy* (Sage, 2004), co-editor with Paul du Gay and Simon Carter of *Conduct: sociology and social worlds* (Manchester University Press 2008) and co-editor of the *Journal of Cultural Economy*. She has published a number of articles exploring commercial promotion, of life assurance in particular, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and is currently working on a new book entitled 'Devising Consumption: cultural economies of insurance, credit and spending' (forthcoming Routledge, 2012)

Following the line of least resistance?: advertising, agencements and crashes)

On this occasion it was the unpunctuality of the little girls. They came in with their governess some minutes after he was seated: two small Millicents, with all her arts in miniature. They arranged their frocks carefully before seating themselves and turned up their little Greek noses at the food. Already they showed signs of finding fault with as much ease and discrimination as Millicent; and Mr. Mindon knew that this was an accomplishment not to be undervalued. He himself, for example, though Millicent charged him with being a discontented man, had never acquired her proficiency in depreciation; indeed, he sometimes betrayed a mortifying indifference to trifles that afforded opportunity for the display of his wife's fastidiousness. Mr. Mindon, though no biologist, was vaguely impressed by the way in which that accomplished woman had managed to transmit an acquired characteristic to her children: it struck him with wonder that traits of which he had marked the incipience in Millicent should have become intuitions in her offspring. To rebuke such costly replicas of their mother seemed dangerously like scolding Millicent -- and Mr. Mindon's hovering resentment prudently settled on the governess

Edith Wharton *The Line of Least Resistance* 1900

Organisms don't struggle because they must evolve; they evolve because they must struggle.

(Menand, 2001, p123)

Introduction

It comes as little surprise reading Wharton's short story that aside from being a critic - or maybe more of an ethnographer- of the habits, norms, institutions and fashions of the leisure class she was also someone who had read Charles Darwin and Thomas Huxley and who had thought about what evolutionary theory might mean in a societal context. Through her connections to the post civil war intellectual milieu surrounding figures like the novelist Henry James and his brother the psychologist and philosopher William James, Wharton was exposed to, was part of, a world in which Charles Darwin's ideas about natural selection were having a profound impact. Darwin's impact, as Louis Menand (2001) has shown, was not just felt within the sciences but across academia, upon intellectual work generally and on the emergence of pragmatist philosophical thought in particular. Darwin's insight that evolution is the incidental by-product, not the goal, of material struggle in a world characterised by 'chance, change and difference', Menand (2001, p123) explains, encountered a ready-made audience. A theory interested not in types or essences, but in the individual and the relations and interactions between individuals, carried significant appeal for a post civil war philosophical generation suspicious of certainty and certitude. By positing ways of looking at probabilities, relations and functions rather than causes, categories and purposes Darwin's ideas were generative devices for philosophers seeking new ways of thinking about the social world.

These philosophers were interested in Darwinian thought not just because the boundaries between the natural, physical and human sciences had yet to be settled but because Darwin's schema buttressed emerging ways of thinking about the character of knowledge and the relations between knowledge and the social order. In particular the idea of natural selection, in positing an explanation of how organisms with certain characteristics are *randomly* favoured in certain environments for adaptation and survival, offered an alternative to explanations couched in terms of a designing hand to a generation already experienced, thanks to the war,

in the messiness of societal transition. Here was a theory about the mechanics of relations between individual organisms and environments which did not suppose an intelligent design or a predetermined destination but did resonate with philosophical, psychological and sociological questions about social order, reproduction and change. What Edith Wharton was alluding to was a process in which a social order – a set of habits, customs and fashions not to mention class and gender divisions – was absorbed and reproduced, from Millicent the mother to the two small Millicents, by imitation and habitual inculcation. It was what could be said of this same process that exercised the philosophers and social thinkers of her generation.

This might seem an arcane way into a discussion about advertising but, as I aim to show, a concern with the mechanics of the social, including the roles of imitation, habit and chance, not only marked the thinking of a generation of social philosophers but also that of some of advertising's most influential critics and proponents. These same mechanics, more to the point, offer a perspective – neglected in academia certainly – on advertising, on how it works, how it struggles and how it fails. I'm going to try and make this case by briefly recounting something of the significance accorded to imitation in the work of thinkers like Gabriel Tarde and Marcel Mauss before moving on to consider how Walter Benjamin characterised advertising's capacity to 're-school' human imitative, mimetic facility. For Benjamin, as for subsequent critics, advertising could provoke imitation because it could provoke emotion. It is this manipulation of emotions and desires in the service of commercial profit that has prompted the strongest critical censure. There are, I want to suggest, a number of difficulties with this account ranging from how the emotional content of advertising is to be reckoned, to how any such content or effect is to be disentangled from other sources, to how all those failed assaults on the consumer's heart strings are to be accounted for. Rather than understanding advertising as successful to the extent that it pushes the appropriate emotional buttons, I want to suggest that a more pragmatic approach is to treat advertising in more Darwinian terms, as a device that works to the extent that it adapts to an always changing environment.

Imitation and what it has to do with advertising

In this section I want to do three things. First I want to briefly make a case for the importance of imitation in the systems of thought outlined by early social theorists and sociologists. Lest this seem purely an exercise in unearthing intellectual relics I want secondly to trace this preoccupation with imitation, recast as mimesis, in the work of Frankfurt school thinkers, and notably Walter Benjamin, which went on to imprint critical accounts of advertising throughout the twentieth century. Finally I want to suggest that there is something in the matter of imitation that can still inform an understanding of how contemporary advertising works.

Adam Smith famously saw the 'desire to better our condition' as the foremost motive of behaviour in commercial society but less famously this was not because he viewed human being as self-interested or materialist in some essential way. Rather, he regarded the desire for material improvement as really all about the desire for sympathy and approbation. Striving might be 'keeping up with the Jones's' but it's keeping up in order to fit in, to gain approval. For Adam Smith this desire is only properly understood when seen in light of its part in sustaining an orderly, regular and harmoniously functioning system. It is propriety, understood as a sort of godly, systemic order, which is the virtue that economic toil helps achieve.

Leaping forward a century or more the importance of Smith's concern with imitation as a means to sympathy was extrapolated in the work of French sociologist Gabriel Tarde. Tarde was a post Darwinian social thinker but he was no Social Darwinist. What Tarde drew from Darwin was not the clumsy 'survival of the fittest' translation of Herbert Spencer but a more

metaphysical lesson about relations and associations. In Bruno Latour's (2002) recuperation, Tarde is described as the grandfather of actor-network theory in part because of his odd refusal to make the individual human agent the 'micro' from which society, the 'macro', is composed. Society, the social, is merely association. There is no unique realm of the social for Tarde; as in actor-network theory, the economic, the cultural, the social are all forms of association and there is nothing peculiarly human about social association. This puts relationality, in a Darwinian sort of form, at the centre of a schema in which the individual has to be understood through the relations in which s/he stands and vice versa..

Exactly as in ANT, whenever you want to understand a network, go look for the actors, but when you want to understand an actor go look through the net at the work it has traced. In both cases, the point is to avoid the passage through the vague notion of society.

(Latour, 2002, p127)

Tarde saw the sociological preoccupation with uncovering the laws of society and the social in their abstract and general form as a mistake. The idea that 'while man agitates himself, a law of evolution leads him' was the commonplace of Social Darwinism - indeed in some form it continues to haunt the social sciences - but for Tarde the crucial point was to look down at the details, the differences between, and the characteristics of, what he called (after Leibniz) 'monads'. Society appears not as the cause but the fragile consequence of monadic activity. Exactly what Tarde was driving at in his conception of monadic activity is less important here than understanding the weight consequently attached to repetition and difference. Rather than identity and being, Tarde would place 'having' at the core of existence; 'possession is the universal fact, and there is no better term than that of 'acquisition' to express the formation and the growth of any being' (Tarde; in Latour, 2002, p130). In this way, entities are defined by their properties and by how they come to possess them.

By such moves, Tarde produces a definition of all entities as 'agency plus influence and imitation' and in this formulation Latour detects the actor-network, differently phrased. Somewhere in this model there is the germ of a better understanding of advertising but for now I want to consider the idea of imitation a little more closely. If the acquisition of characteristics is the necessary condition of formation and growth it is enabled through imitative repetition. Society, Tarde maintains in *The Laws of Imitation* 'may be defined as a group of beings who are apt to imitate one another' (1903, p68), in short, society *is* imitation. Tarde's intervention stretches the widely accepted sense of interdependent social relations to reveal individual identities, acts, authorships as apparitions - everything is collaboration and imitation.

Just as man does not see, listen, walk, stand, write, play the flute, or, what is more, invent or imagine, except by means of many coordinated muscular memories, so a society could not exist or change or advance a single step unless it possessed an untold store of blind routine and slavish imitation which was constantly being added to by successive generations.

(1903, p75)

In contrast to liberal ideas about habit and the retarding influence of the 'yoke of custom' on 'backward' peoples (cf J.S. Mill in Bennett, 2008, pp94-95), Tarde maintained that the belief that 'we' have become less docile, credulous or imitative than our ancestors was a flattering fallacy. Modern Europeans may see mutual reciprocity rather than slavish imitation in their democratic societies, but at the root of all societies there lies a one sided imitation of authoritarian examples. As the habits of the two Millicents are their mother's in Wharton's story, the father for Tarde is always the son's 'first master, priest and model' (1903, p78). This is not coerced imitation but the imitation of prestige. Tarde characterises the process as

‘somnambulistic’ – he might have said unconscious – but what he seems to be driving at is imitation as a sort of magnetism between the model and subject more than a deliberate, intended copying.

This is less mutual than Adam Smith’s imitation in the service of sympathetic approbation but it runs very close to the idea of prestigious imitation later outlined by Marcel Mauss. Mauss echoes much of Tarde’s model but in Mauss’s hands a distinct, but at the same time more recognisably social scientific, model emerges.¹ Imitation is less like a condition of all species for Mauss. Instead he marks the role of education in what he terms a ‘triple viewpoint’ comprising biological, psychological and sociological elements. Prestigious imitation is at the root of all bodily techniques from walking to swimming and spitting.

The child, the adult, imitates actions which have succeeded and which he has seen successfully performed by people in whom he has confidence and who have authority over him. The action is imposed from without, from above, even if it is an exclusively biological action, involving his body. The individual borrows the series of movements which constitute it from the action executed in front of him or with him by others. It is precisely this notion of the prestige of the person who performs the ordered, authorised, tested action vis-a-vis the imitating individual that contains all the social element. The imitative action which follows contains the psychological element and the biological element. But the whole, the ensemble, is conditioned by the three elements indissolubly mixed together.

(Mauss, 1973, p73-4)

Mauss’s indissoluble ensemble was part of a way of understanding the acquisition of body techniques and the inculcation of fashionable modes of comportment. Mauss refers by way of example to the styles of walking adopted by young women following the circulation of Hollywood movies. Other fashionable bodily modes are easy to imagine as are their links to ‘habitus’; a term he used to refer to ‘the techniques and work of collective and individual practical reason’ as distinct from ‘merely the soul and its repetitive faculties’ and which varies between ‘societies, educations, proprieties and fashions, prestiges’ (1973, p73). This gives imitation in Mauss’s schema more of an overtly human and social flavour than what Tarde seems to have had in mind. Tarde’s more general and more somnambulistic theorization of society as imitation led some of his followers in a rather different direction.

Until recently, Tarde was largely forgotten in European sociology but he retained an influence in propaganda and communication theory. This influence stemmed from the ease with which Tarde’s formulation lent itself to understanding crowds and the ‘group-mind’. If society is imitation and imitation is somnambulistic, this ‘suggestive and hypnotic phenomenon’ (Borch, 2007, p561) is well placed to explain how propaganda could work upon crowds. This dimension of Tarde’s theory was taken up by, among others Gustave le Bon, Walter Lippman and Freud’s nephew Edward L Bernays in their development of the theory and practice of propaganda and public relations. Crucially in the present context, Tarde’s sense of hypnotic suggestion did not require the intervention of a human hypnotizer subject ‘but may find substitutes in images, objects, etc’ (Borch, 2007, p.56).

This model is alive in Walter Benjamin’s (1985) writings in the 1920s and 1930s. In *On the Mimetic Faculty* (1985) Benjamin agrees that nature creates similarities but he locates the highest mimetic capacity in man. This capacity, the powers and objects of mimesis, have changed through history and that change lies in the direction of increasing decay. At the risk of over-simplifying an elaborate argument, what Benjamin seems to have had in mind in this is the potential modernity presents for re-schooling a declining mimetic faculty by recombining the very old with the very new. Where the ancient’s genius for producing similarities through dance and cultish ritual may be lost, Taussig (1993) reads Benjamin as

seeing in the commodity-form the opportunity to subvert or transcend capitalism apparently through this rejuvenation of human mimesis. Advertising is at the core of this as the following long extract makes clear.

Today the most real, the mercantile gaze into the heart of things is the advertisement. It abolishes the space where contemplation moved and all but hits us between the eyes as a car, growing to gigantic proportions, careens at us out of a film screen. And just as the film does not present furniture and facades in completed form for critical inspection, their insistent, jerky nearness alone being sensational, the genuine advertisement hurtles things at us with the tempo of a good film. Thereby “matter of factness” is dispatched and in the face of the huge images across the walls of houses, where toothpaste and cosmetics lie handy for giants, sentimentality is restored to health and liberated in American style, just as people whom nothing moves or touches any longer are taught to cry again by films.

(Benjamin, 1985, p89)

Here, images and objects hurtle at a speed ferocious enough to re-awaken the mimetic facility. This is not quite the hypnotic process envisaged by Tarde but a more materialist, technological, structural vision. In Benjamin’s rumination the structural form of commodity capitalism, enabled by the technologies of large screen film and hoardings, viscerally, even violently ‘touch’ people once more. This notion of visual tactility, for Taussig (1991), was Benjamin’s conceptual breakthrough and its ideal type is movies and advertising. People see advertising in a distracted, habitual, passive mode but it’s a mode that ‘touches’ like a secular sort of magic.

In casting advertising as a magical or mystical system with a newly rejuvenated capacity to move people Benjamin captured much of the mood in which advertising was understood by critics but also by proponents and practitioners in the period between the wars. Benjamin’s tactile seeing was in sympathy with the psychoanalytic modelling of the unconscious. If crying in movies was a function of the weird capacity of the big screen to hit you between the eyes, triggering unknown emotions, large advertising hoardings – ‘the language of the walls’ in the words of a C19 commentator – were doing something similar. For the critics, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, Benjamin was on the right track even if he hadn’t grasped the full horror of the copied performances advertising induced. Adorno (1991, p82) compared these to ‘St Vitus’s dance or the motor reflex spasms of the maimed animal’. Advertising, is scored here as part of the culture industries in which authentic individual expression gives way to cheap emotional manipulation.

This dystopic picture comes as no surprise to anyone with a passing acquaintance with Frankfurt School critique. What is a little more unexpected is how closely it parallels, in some key particulars, not only the broad swathe of advertising critique and analysis that followed Benjamin, but the ideas of some key proponents and practitioners. Edward Bernays’ development of the philosophy of propaganda and public relations, for instance, drew heavily on Tarde’s formulation of imitative behaviour and the ‘group mind’ as well as Freudian formulations of the unconscious. While Bernays’s ideas about the utility of propaganda for the ‘public good’ have since encountered considerable criticism (St John Burton III, 2009; Schwarzkopf, 2009) he may be only the most notorious of a number of practitioners who saw the capacity of advertising and public communication to provoke imitation in similar terms. Schwarzkopf’s account of the range of nineteenth and twentieth century advertising concepts (2009) describes how practitioners at different periods have understood the task of provoking repetitive habitual behaviour in the consumer. Whether promoting techniques like repetition, behavioural branding or propaganda, practitioners in the interwar period seem to have shared certain ideas about how advertising worked with Tarde, Benjamin and the Frankfurt school - even while they disagreed with them about its consequences. This shared territory is in the

conceptual overlap between what practitioners called ‘consumer engineering’ or even in Roy Sheldon and Egmont Arens case, ‘humaneering’ (cited in Schwarzkopf, 2009, p14), and what theorists called imitation or mimesis.

For both critics and practitioners the core, the *raison d’être*, of advertising is, of course, its capacity to influence consumer behaviour. Insistently, if not consistently, this capacity has been seen from both sides, critical and practitioner, as grounded in its emotional power (cf. Nixon, 2009). Benjamin’s claim that posters restored sentimentality might sound anachronistic and implausible but it is simply an historical instance of the view that advertising punches hardest when it aims at the emotions. This has also been one of the most controversial characteristics of advertising as the long catalogue of critique aimed at advertising’s hidden persuasive and manipulative capacities demonstrates.² More recently advertising’s role in ‘mobilising the consumer’ and in provoking mimesis has been directly linked to its psychological and emotional literacy (eg Miller & Rose, 1997; Nixon, 2009; Illouz 2009). For Illouz (2009, p405) emerging techniques of emotional branding are related to an understanding of how ‘consumer fantasies are elicited by the ways in which advertising evokes the sensory character of goods [and] simultaneously provides a ‘delayed sensory content’ – that is, the instructions for the production of the sensory content – and ‘perceptual mimesis’.

Now, there are a number of problems with putting emotional manipulation at the centre of an account of how advertising works. First of these, as has been demonstrated elsewhere, is that not all advertising works this way. There may always be debate over what counts as an informational ad and what counts as a persuasive emotional ad, about whether advertising, as a whole, is getting more emotive and about the various ways in which an emotional appeal might work on different individuals. It is nevertheless clear that some ads, in some product categories, are not trying to make anyone cry. Second, the question of emotional influence opens up the long-running ‘which half’ debate. Even if it is agreed that advertising is most effective when it features an emotional appeal how is any emotional response to be disentangled from all the other environmental factors that might provoke such a response? Is advertising what provokes imitative consumption? Is it marketing or branding activity more broadly conceived? Is it the photograph in *Heat* magazine of Kate Moss wearing UGG boots, some combination or none of the above? Finally if the key to advertising ‘effects’ is ‘affect’ – or even if it’s not – how are the frequent failures of advertising to be explained? The remainder of the paper is an attempt to grapple with these questions and propose a possible solution in a more pragmatic approach to promotion as a system or device.

The fiery pool

What in the end makes advertisements so superior to criticism? Not what the moving red neon sign says – but the fiery pool reflecting it in the asphalt.

(Benjamin, 1985, p89-90)

If the key to advertising’s claim to influence is not in its emotional content where is it? In this section I’m going to suggest that, esoteric as it might seem, Benjamin was on to something in picking on the neon reflection. The significance of the reflection for Benjamin almost certainly derives from the distracted, tactile mode of seeing - and imitating – advertising provokes. It’s this, not the content of the sign itself, which matters. But the reflection hints at something else that offers a rather different way of understanding advertising. That is the way in which any advertisement is always part of a system and an environment and it is this connectedness that offers the best chance of understanding the links between advertising and consuming.

Now there is nothing particularly new or interesting about defining advertising as a system. Raymond Williams (1980) saw that as an institutional characteristic long ago while semiotics explains meaning in advertising as always deriving from the relations between signs in the system. In the accounts of post-structuralist thinkers, moreover, meaning is tracked inter-textually across the advertising system and beyond to overlapping promotional, media and cultural universes (cf. McFall, 2004). What I have in mind however is not just looking at relationality to explore the transfer of meaning but as a way of thinking about how the material and technical elements of advertising in its place within a market system enrol and equip people as consumers. That means using something like what John Law (1999) called a 'semiotics of materiality', to think about consumption as a form of habitual imitation where the dispositions of consumers arise within the functioning of a market(ing) system or device.

In recent years, the reviving interest in economic sociology has been bolstered, in some quarters, by efforts to reconsider the relation between individuals and social worlds and more particularly the agency/structure dualism along more pragmatic, more material lines. One of the more fruitful lines of enquiry came initially from efforts within actor-network theory (ANT) to rethink the sociological conception of the human agent as the prime source of social action. ANT, famously challenged the idea that agency, understood as the capacity to undertake voluntary willed action, was contained in a human being. Rather, agency was to be understood as materially endowed and distributed across networks of arrangements. This is more or less exactly what Tarde had been driving at in insisting upon the significance of relations between entities, their properties and possessions. Tarde 'never places society and the individual in opposition ... [instead they] are nothing but temporary aggregates, partial stabilizations, nodes in networks that are completely free of the concepts contained in ordinary sociology' (Latour and Lepinay, 2009, p9). Viewed in this light, his rediscovery within ANT is little surprise even while the implications of his thinking for economic sociology are only beginning to be explored (eg. Borch, 2007; Latour and Lepinay, 2009). For Tarde, existence is all about fragile associations and relations and the best chance of understanding comes from by looking down at the detail not upwards for general, social laws.

This material connectedness is also what Deleuze and Guattari (1988) had in mind in proposing the term *agencement* as a way of staking out, philosophically, the necessary force of connections within the social fabric³. In the wake of this Michel Callon (2005, 2007), among others, has used *agencement* to help make sense of the constitutive interconnections between 'agencies' in market and economic practices. Agencies here are not human actors as such but in line with the distributed and material conception of agency in ANT, agencies are entities which act. They may be made up of human bodies but agencies also consist of 'prostheses, tools, equipment, technical devices, algorithms, etc. which together constitute 'agencements' (Callon, 2005: 4). Agencements, are the human and non-human, material, social, technical and textual assemblages which together form the source of all action. In an economic context, market agencements like advertising, are hybrid, collective devices which do things, meaning that 'they act or make others act' (Muniesa et al. 2007: 2).

Considering advertising as an *agencement* is more than just a clumsy way of saying that its production involves a complex assemblage of different elements. It is a way of signalling the generative force of the connections between these elements. *Agencement* refers to the connections between a state of affairs – in this case advertising – and the statements that can be made about it but, importantly, it designates the priority of neither. It is the connections themselves which matter in their production of new meanings or practices which exceed both the original states of affairs and the original statements.

If this seems a little abstract it may help to think about what is at stake as the relationship between description and action, or what Callon (2007) terms, the relationship between statements and their worlds. Agencements include all the material, social and technical elements of a given device or practice *and* the statements made about that device such that

they act in accordance with each other in the way that operating instructions are part of what makes a device work. The relationship between these different elements is performative. A performative act is one that creates a state of affairs by uttering it. The archetypal example ‘I pronounce you man and wife’ is one type of performativity, but the heat in economic sociology and in the debate around market agencements, has been around the action of a second type of performativity ‘perlocutionary’. Perlocutionary performatives *may* make certain things happen in certain felicitous conditions. The statements, knowledges and formulae that underpin a given economic or market practice or device are performative to the extent that they are part of what makes it succeed or fail. Statements, knowledges and formulae, Callon concludes, (2007: 320) ‘discover’ worlds – be they advertising, credit markets or whatever – that are themselves put into motion by the statements describing them. Economies and markets –of which advertising and consumption are a seldom considered part in this literature – acquire their form through continual observation, experimentation, fiddling, and ‘dickering’. These ongoing adjustments between advertising knowledge and its material practices together make up the collective assembly, the agencement, of advertising.

By highlighting the performative character of the links between elements, agencement marks agency as intricately distributed and continually evolving. This suggests that consumption habits are formed as an inevitable part of the constant, grinding movement of the device. Consumer behaviour, as a form of action or agency, then comes about as result of influence and imitation and advertising is an attempt to influence and trigger imitation. But, crucially, advertising’s role and effects can not easily be disentangled from the market device or even the whole set of social associations. In Tarde’s schema imitation works like a kind of contamination; desires and beliefs pass between individuals across a path or a trajectory. To be able to follow this passage ‘demands that we never presume the prior existence of a society or of an economic infrastructure, or of a general plan distinct from the coming together of its members’ (Latour and Lepinay, 2009, p9).

The key word here is ‘distinct’. If there is to be anything beyond metaphysical rumination in this schema it’s important to hang on to a way of talking about the economy and about the role of market and promotional devices within it. You don’t have to follow Tarde’s injunction all the way down to see that there is some potential in forgetting about the effects - emotional, psychological or behavioural – of advertising on individuals, to concentrate instead on how advertising works as part of a material and technical system that distributes habits, tastes and fashions collectively. Such an approach would aim, in Latour and Lepinay’s words to ‘bring into plain sight the practical means through which the contagion, the contamination from one point to another takes place - what Tarde calls “rayon imitative” (“imitative rays”)’ (2009, p9).

Tarde’s intervention and originality lies not in disqualifying any discussion of the economic rather he proposes that the economists’ mistake lies in the artificial separation of value and calculation from belief and desire. Value, Tarde explains, is utility but it is also truth and it is also beauty. These are all quantitative terms and they are all involved in human judgements.

No man, no people has ever failed to seek as a prize for relentless efforts, a certain growth either of wealth, or glory, or truth, or power, or artistic perfection, nor has he failed to fight against the danger of a decrease of all of these assets.

(Tarde in Latour and Lepinay, 2009, p10)

In this Tarde is pointing at the ways in which wealth, credit and economic worth are not distinct forms but are shot through with desire and passion. Nothing is economic, as anthropologists increasingly agree, without economics to make it so and this requires calculative instruments and devices to measure and make differences. As Latour and Lepinay explain to ‘practice economics is not to reveal the anthropological essence of humanity; it is

to organise in a certain way something elusive' (p14). That something elusive, I want to suggest, is what advertising is all about capturing but it can't do so in isolation from the market and its members and it can't do so without practical, material means. I'm going to try and illustrate what I mean by this in more concrete terms in the next section by turning to an example.

How did buying industrial life assurance become the thing to do for so many people for so long?

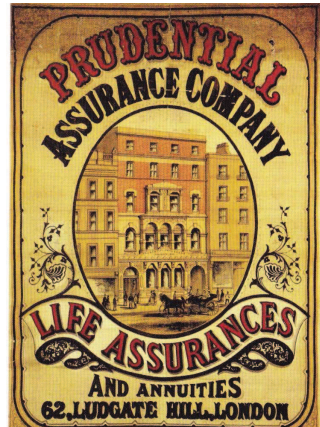


Fig 1: First Prudential Advertising Poster 1852



Fig 2: Prudential Advertising Poster 1924

Industrial assurance, a form of life assurance targeted at the poor, dates back to the 1840s in the UK. Life assurance was- to some extent still is - the archetypal example of a product that is not bought but has to be sold. It is technically and mathematically complex, initially it was dubious on moral grounds (even illegal in a number of European countries until the middle of the nineteenth century), the probity of a number of companies trading in it was initially in some reasonable doubt and to top it all, its core function, to offer protection in the event of an early death, is far from seductive. To make matters still worse industrial assurance was to be sold to people who had no money.

Yet industrial assurance was phenomenally successful. To be sure the industry was, by the standards of the time, a prolific advertiser. Figure 1-4 shows examples of full colour advertising posters for the largest industrial company the Prudential, dating from 1852 to 1946. But as pervasive as insurance advertising was in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the key to how industrial insurance caught on is not to be found anywhere in these ads, interesting though they, and the differences between them, are. Rather the key is somewhere in the peculiar agencement, the assemblage of commercial insurance, government and people.

Industrial life assurance is an odd term for a product that was nothing directly to do with industry and was far more to do with death than life. Commercial industrial insurance companies including the Prudential founded in 1848, the Refuge founded in 1858 and the Pearl founded in 1864 initially provided burial insurance in the main. By 1910 there were around 75 industrial insurance organisations in existence and between them they had issued over 30 million policies, with the vast majority, over 90 per cent, of this business being transacted by just 12 companies (Gilbert, 1966). By the time the Beveridge Report (HMSO, 1942) was published the figure stood at over 60 million. This growth continued well into the twentieth century, and it happened despite the fact that industrial assurance was not only a difficult product but an expensive and controversial one.

The industrial market was built on the necessity of staging a 'respectable' funeral. This necessity meant that it was not unusual for even the poorest families to 'well nigh starve' in order to devote 5 per cent, or more, of their income to fund premiums because avoiding the disgrace of a pauper's interment was an expensive business (cf. Johnson, 1985; McFall, 2010). The fashion for elaborate funerals among those of very limited means may be difficult to grasp, and it was controversial at the time, but it was a pressing thing. A pauper's funeral in an unmarked multiple grave was a genuine horror that could stigmatise and exclude a family. Avoiding this and 'fitting in' was therefore a very significant driver of demand but this does not explain how industrial assurance came to supply the need, so successfully and for so long.

The answer to this lies largely within the design of the agency system. Unlike older commercial insurance companies which relied on an annual premium being sent to the office, industrial companies collected premiums on a weekly basis. This mode of collection was expensive and notoriously meant that the return on an industrial insurance policy was much poorer than on an 'ordinary policy'. It also meant that industrial companies required collectors or agents.



Figure 3 Prudential agents 1902

Often recruited directly from the communities they sold to, agents knew their communities and were exhorted to make good use of that knowledge, timing weekly collections to coincide with teatime on payday and reading signals of financial stress or excess. Agents were systematically exhorted to ‘know their books’ that is, to develop their sensitivity to, the daily rhythms, routines and, notably, the relations of their customers⁴. To insure one member of a family established a foothold into insuring others, and through the long term nature of the contract agents could follow in births, deaths and marriages, openings for new policies. Their ability to intrude on such intimate turf would have been limited had they not - corporeally and materially - looked and acted the part. Agents were articulate, well-turned out and well-remunerated working-class boys ‘made good’ displaying just enough of the spoils of sales recognition; ‘fountain pens, English lever silver watches and silver mounted umbrellas’ to bolster their status as ‘philosophers, guides and friends’ but not so much that they might alienate their customers (Alborn, 2001: 577).

Like the patent non-crushable, non-stainable, detachable collar he wore, or the Coventry bicycle he rode, the industrial insurance collector-salesman was a product of the mature, late-Victorian British industrial society. His equipment was a board school education and the ambition to get on. The sale of funeral policies offered the sharp, unabashed, clever young man from the slums a quick way to the £3 or £4 per week income enjoyed by only one person in six before World War I. With a bowler hat on the back of his head, a straight-steel pen behind his ear, and a bottle of Stephen’s Blue-Black Ink in his waistcoat pocket, the collecting agent was an easily recognizable figure in working-class neighbourhoods.

(Gilbert, 1966: 320)

Agents were supported by materials, in the form of premium cards, prospectuses and most importantly the collecting books in which all accounts and debits were recorded, that were well adapted to the collection system and to its administration by a vast staff of clerks working in the central office. A field structure organisation with marked divisions and blocks ensuring that agents did not trespass or duplicate the work of other agents was devised in the 1880s and remain unchanged in principle into the 1980s (Pearl Assurance, 1990). Companies devised large-scale data processing systems that enabled them to technically process millions of policies years in advance of automatic data-processing machinery (Campbell-Kelly, 1992).

The technical, data-processing efficiencies established at companies like the Prudential also have to be understood as contingent upon the market and political context. Companies were keenly aware of the political controversy surrounding the high administrative expense ratio of industrial assurance. Henry Harben, the Prudential secretary, perceived in initiating administrative improvements that would cut the firm’s expense ratio, the key to improving the

firm's public reputation and standing with legislators as well as its competitive advantage (cf. Campbell-Kelly, 1992). By such means the Prudential achieved its dominant market position and secured its standing as the acceptable side of the industry.

It was the lobbying power of industrial insurance companies, bolstered by the influence of the 'army of collecting agents' with a foothold in practically every house in the country, that derailed Lloyd George's original intentions to promote a voluntaristic, socialised insurance model within the framework of the 1911 National Insurance Act (NIA). This influence went on to undermine successive legislative attempts to socialise or nationalise industrial insurance, including the post-war Beveridge reforms, through to the 1980s when ironically it was neo-liberal legislation in the form of the 1986 Financial Services Act that put the final nail in its coffin (McFall 2010). Despite its expense and the low returns to policy holders, the collecting agency device offered industrial insurance companies unanticipated scope to shape a market, and a world, in which their insurance model succeeded, for a time.

Advertising had a role to play in making that success but its role has to be understood in the context of the agency device. Figure 3 shows an early example of an advertisement linking agents to service and thrift which was to become an insistent theme in industrial assurance advertising throughout the twentieth century, famously culminating in the UK's 'man from the Pru' ads which ran from the late 1940s until 1965 (Dennett, 1998).⁵



Fig 4: Prudential Advertising Poster 1946

It is clear in the Prudential's company archives and in back issues of the *Prudential Bulletin* that the advertising campaigns the company ran were meant, not to run in isolation, but to build, sustain and shape the links between agents, their clients and the company's changing profile. Figure 5 for example, was announced in the *Bulletin* with the following request to agency staff.

The problem which faces those responsible for the Company's advertising is how best to arrive at a correct estimate of the value of publicity to an insurance company whose name is already a household word. It is possible to show results. Certain forms of advertising will produce a highly satisfactory return from direct enquiries. If a similar return is demanded from the whole appropriation, advertising must be confined to comparatively few channels. Many first class publications will be avoided because people do not cut coupons from them. There will be no posters, no illuminated boards, no films, no neon signs, no mention of the annual meeting and no editorial comments. Would anyone seriously contend that this is desirable? There is another

method of gauging results. That is, to take the figures for a district prior to and after an advertising campaign and compare them. Such an investigation usually strongly favours the advertising but so many other factors have to be taken into consideration that it cannot be regarded as an entirely satisfactory test. The solution of this problem is largely in the hands of the field staff because the field staff are in a position to gauge the indirect ‘pull’ of the advertising. It would greatly assist us if the Staff, as a whole, would take a vital interest in publicity and write telling us of any benefit directly arising from it. If the individual representative knows that an advertisement has interested his client in any small degree, he may think it a trivial point and not worth mentioning. To the individual representative it possibly is a trivial point but the combined total of such trivialities would probably give us the evidence which we seek.”

(*Bulletin* v17, n193 4/1936)



Fig 5: Prudential Advertising Poster 1936

As the extract makes clear, the company were invested in using coupon returns to measure impact according to the ‘scientific advertising’ techniques popularised by Claud Hopkins (1990/1929) but they were keen to support this with feedback which could, pragmatically, be collected from their field staff. These attempts to design a coordinated, integrated marketing system are evident in companies like the Prudential and the Pearl which sought to hone their agents through training events and literature, close supervision, sales recognition, community sports sponsorship etc. Repeated endlessly across the various elements of the market device were messages about the ‘man at the door’ and the role he played in sponsoring thrift and disciplining consumers. This repetition and the adapting fit between agents, marketing, advertising, regulators and consumers is the key to understanding the relationship between advertising and imitation.

Concluding comments

Technically, materially, even corporeally, agents ‘fitted’; into their communities and their product fitted a world in which there was a pressing need for provision to meet funeral costs. Agents’ weekly collections provided a discipline on the precarious cash economies of working class families at the same time as their presence in ‘nearly every house in the

country' effectively scuppered an array of governmental efforts to regulate, reform or remove the business (McFall, 2010). The links between the different elements of the industrial assurance agencement are what made it successful and what made it, for a time, habitual for so many working class people to buy industrial policies. Through the community demand for respectable funerals, through the collecting and promotional work of the agents, through the communication, lobbying and advertising of the companies and even through the legislative debates held in parliament and published in the newspapers, people were 'equipped' as industrial assurance consumers.

Industrial assurance is a very particular sort of example but what its case history might suggest is that it's not advertising itself - not even the finest, funniest, most emotive, persuasive or manipulative examples- that make people consumers. Rather the best answer, in an uncertain, constantly changing environment, to how market practices 'enrol' consumers lies in the dynamic fit between different social, technical and material elements of the device. Understanding this fit, as many practitioners have long appreciated, is key to the design of successful advertising. An advertising campaign doesn't prompt imitation because it's colourful, beautiful, passionate or 'cool' - it prompts imitation if it manages to capture the fit between product, market, marketing and world at just the right moment. Michel Callon, Fabian Muniesa, Franck Cochoy and others working on the performativity of economic knowledges and practices explain how worlds – insurance worlds, self-service supermarkets, global financial markets- can be summoned into being through these knowledges and practices but no-one pretends that this is a simple recipe for understanding or predicting how things will turn out. 'A successful performance', Callon (2010) explains 'implies the active presence of appropriate socio-technical agencements. As such an adjustment is always fragile and rare, the general rule is a misfire'.

Drawing on Tarde and his recent successors to privilege the imitations and associations implicit within the agencement model offers a partial and fragile explanation of what's going on in a world where things, and the relations between things, happen and change all the time. A similar refusal to offer a certain law provoked one unimpressed critic to describe Darwin's theory of evolution as 'nothing more than the law of higgledy-piggelty'. Darwin was convinced however that species evolved according to no necessary, intelligent design – they evolved because they had to struggle not the other way around. This conviction was shared by Gabriel Tarde and by the American pragmatist philosophers including William James and John Dewey that Edith Wharton seemed to have in mind when she described the habits of the fastidious little Millicents. A similarly pragmatic recognition of the effects and the limits of science-like laws of the market, the empirical force of the varied relations between elements and the unpredictable effects of accidents is an important corrective to a bit too much theorising and generalising of how advertising works.

¹ Mauss was, after all, Durkheim's nephew and never contradicted Durkheim's ring-fencing of the distinctively social fact.

² See McFall (2004) for an overview of critique.

³ Latour (2002) claims that Deleuze is rather more in debt to Tarde's thinking than he acknowledges.

⁴ This is clear in the insurance press, handbooks and in the agents supervision systems in place in companies like the Prudential and the Pearl. See Dennett (1998); Pearl (1990); 'A fieldman' (c.1935).

⁵ The 'man from the Prudential' was first used by the company as part of a campaign against the Labour party's plan to nationalise the industry in the late 1940s. According to Dennett (1998), the term itself was first used in music hall between the wars and did not originate in the company.

Bibliography

- Adorno, T. (1991) *The Culture Industry* Routledge, London & New York,
- Alborn, T. (2001) Senses of Belonging: The Politics of Working-Class Insurance in Britain, 1880-1914. *Journal of Modern History* 73, 561-602
- Benjamin, W. (1985/1928) This Space for Rent. In *One Way Street and Other Writings*, Verso, London
- Benjamin, W. (1985/1955) On the Mimetic Faculty. In *One Way Street and Other Writings*, Verso, London
- Bennett, T. (2008) Habit, freedom and the governance of social conduct, In L. Mcfall, P du Gay & S. Carter [eds] *Conduct: Sociology and Social Worlds*, Manchester University Press, Manchester
- Borch C. (2007) Crowds and economic life: bringing an old figure back in *Economy and Society*, 36: 4, 549-573
- Callon, M. (2005) 'Why virtualism paves the way to political impotence: a reply to Daniel Miller's critique of The Laws of the Markets', *Economic Sociology: European Electronic Newsletter*, vol 6, no. 2 (February): pp. 3–20. Available online at <http://econsoc.mpifg.de/archive/esfeb05.pdf> (accessed 19 November 2007).
- Callon, M. (2007) 'What Does It Mean To Say That Economics Is Performative?' In Mackenzie et al. [Ed.s] pp311-357
- Callon, M. (2010) "Performativity, misfires and politics" *Journal of Cultural Economy* vol. 3, no 2
- Campbell-Kelly, M. (1992) Large-scale data processing in the Prudential, 1850-1930. *Accounting, Business and Financial History*, 2, 2, 117-140
- Deleuze, G. & Guattari, F. (1988) *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Continuum, New York
- Dennett, L. (1998) *A Sense of Security: 150 years of the Prudential*. London, Granta Editions
- Illouz E. (2009) 'Emotions, Imagination and Consumption: A new research agenda' *Journal of Consumer Culture*; 9; 3, pp377–413
- Forrester, D.C. (1907) *The Industrial Canvassers companion*
- Gilbert, B. (1965) The British National Insurance Act of 1911 and the Commercial Insurance Lobby. *Journal of British Studies*, 4 (2) pp127-148
- Gilbert, B.B. (1966) *The Evolution of National Insurance in Britain*. London, Michael Joseph
- Hopkins, C. (1990/1929 & 1923): *My Life in Advertising and Scientific Advertising: two works by Claud Hopkins*. Chicago, NTC Business Books
- HMSO Beveridge Committee (1942) *Beveridge Report on Social Insurance and Allied Services* (CMD 6404/42)
- Johnson, P. (1985) *Saving and Spending: the Working-class Economy in Britain 1870-1939.*, Clarendon Press, Oxford
- Latour, B. (2002) Gabriel Tarde and the End of the Social: In P. Joyce, (ed.) *The Social in Question*. Routledge, London, pp 117-132
- Latour, B. & Lepinay, V.A. (2009) *The Science of Passionate Interests: an introduction to Gabriel Tarde's Economic Anthropology*, Prickly Paradigm Press, Chicago

- Mackenzie, D.; Muniesa, F. & Sui, L. (2007) *Do Economists make Markets?* Princeton University Press
- Mauss, M. (1973) 'Techniques of the body', *Economy and Society*, 2, 1, pp70-88
- McFall, L. (2004) *Advertising: a cultural economy*, Sage, London:
- McFall, L. (2010) Pragmatics and Politics: the case of industrial assurance in the UK, *Journal of Cultural Economy* vol. 3, no 2
- Menand L. (2002) *The Metaphysical Club*. Flamingo
- Miller, P. & Rose, N. (1997) 'Mobilizing the consumer, assembling the subject of consumption', *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 14, no. 1, pp. 1-36
- Muniesa, F., Millo, Y. & Callon, M. (2007) 'An introduction to market devices', in *Market Devices*, eds M. Callon, Y. Millo & F. Muniesa, Oxford, Blackwell, pp. 1-12.
- Nixon, S. (2009) 'Understanding Ordinary Women', *Journal of Cultural Economy*, 2: 3, 301-323
- Pearl Assurance (1990) *An Illustrated History 1864-1989*
- Prudential (1936) *Bulletin* v17, n193 4/1936
- Schwarzkopf (2009) What was advertising? The Invention, Rise, Demise and Disappearance of Advertising Concepts in Nineteenth and Twentieth-Century Europe and America. *Business and Economic History Online*, Vol. 7
- St. John III, Burton (2009) 'Claiming Journalistic Truth', *Journalism Studies*, 10: 3, pp353-367
- Tarde, G. (1903/1962) *The Laws Of Imitation* tr. E.C Parsons, Peter Smith, Mass.
- Taussig, M. (1991) Tactility and Distraction *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (May, 1991), pp. 147-153
- Taussig, M. (1993) *Mimesis and Alterity*, Routledge, London
- Wharton, Edith (1900) *The Line of Least Resistance* <http://etext.virginia.edu>, accessed 260310
- Williams, R. (1980) Advertising: the Magic System. *Problems in Materialism and Culture.*, Verso, London