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Business and the Culture of the Enterprise Society

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For Linda Marie

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Contents

FIGURES AND TABLES xi

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS xiii

Chapter 1. INTRODUCTION: BUSINESS, THE THIRD CULTURE 1

Chapter 2. BUSINESS, SOCIETY AND CULTURE 9

Business, Society and Social Change 9

Business, Culture and Cultural Change 12

"What Do They Know of Cricket, Who Only Cricket Know?" 15

Toward Defining the Conditions of a Business Culture 19

Chapter 3. THE MARKET: FROM MORAL PARIAH TO MORAL PRINCIPLE 23

The Gift-Exchange Economy 23

Development of the Market Economy 29

The Culture and Morality of the Market 34

"Market Relationships May Seriously Damage Your Health" 40

Chapter 4. TECHNOLOGY: FROM TOOL TO TALISMAN 45

"If You Can't Win a Nobel Prize, the Next Best Thing Is to Start Your Own Company." 45

Technology and Culture 46

Technology and Technology Practice 51

Space Technology: Reclaiming the Human Territory 52

Computer Fetishism 58

Technology and Consciousness 60

Chapter 5. THE LANGUAGES, SIGNS AND SYMBOLS OF THE BUSINESS WORLD 67

The Bizarre Bazaar: Semiology and the Language of Advertising 67

"Last Year's Words Are as Dated as Last Year's Hats." 71

"Fictitious Values as Evanescent as Rainbow Gold." 74

"Pecuniary Truth" and the "Permissible Lie" 77

Jesus as Ad-Man 80

Language and Consciousness 84

Chapter 6. IMAGE AND REALITY IN THE CARTOON WORLD OF THE BUSINESS EXECUTIVE 87

The Cartoon World 87

Business Relationships, Sexual Stereotypes and Other Themes in the Cartoon World of Business 90

The Medium and the Messenger 99

The Cartoonist as Fool, Sage and Psychoanalyst 102

The Cartoonist as Business Critic 105

Chapter 7. THE BUSINESS OF LITERATURE AND THE LITERATURE OF BUSINESS 111

The Consciousness Industries: Culture and the Medium of Communication 111

Publishing: From "Gentlemanly Profession" to "Real Business" 119

The Literary Reaction to Fiction as Commerce 124

The Businessman as Anti-Hero 126

Electronic Culture: Television As Socio-Cultural Agency 130

Chapter 8. FASHION AND SOCIETY 137

The Language and Images of Fashion 137
Fashion and Social Control 140
Dress Codes 143
Sex Roles and Erotism 146
Fashion and the Zeitgeist 149

Chapter 9. "THERE'S NO FASHION IF NOBODY BUYS IT" 153

Haute Couture and the Aristocracy of Fashion 153
The Denim Democracy 156
Fashion and Consumer Sovereignty 159
The Commercialization of the Self 162
Fashion and the Business Mode 166

Chapter 10. PACKAGED AUTHENTICITY: TOURISM AND CULTURE 173

From Grand Tour to Cook's Tour 173
The Cultures of Travel and Tourism 179
"Wherever You Go, There You Are": The Sociology and Psychology of Tourism 183

Chapter 11. SPORT: "IT IS NOT LIKE AMERICAN BUSINESS, IT IS AMERICAN BUSINESS" 191

Sport as Culture 191
The Ideologies of Sport 195
Sport and the Market 200
Sport as Entertainment 203
Sports Sponsorship 207

Chapter 12. SCHEMES FOR DREAMS: COMMERCE AND CULTURE 213

Culture and Counterculture 213
Technocratic and Craft Utopias and the Engineered Society 216

Business and Postmodernism 223
Business Culture: Reprise 228

BIBLIOGRAPHY 233

INDEX 245

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Figures and Tables

Figure 1. Diagrammatic Definitions of "Technology" and "Technology Practice" 53

Figure 2. Business Modes in the World of Fashion 171

Table 1. Relationships Portrayed in 361 *New Yorker* Cartoons, 1985–1989 91

Table 2. Themes of 361 *New Yorker* Cartoons, 1985–1989 93

Table 3. Business Practices and Values 99

CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Business, the Third Culture

This book is about "seeing" aspects of our everyday world that are frequently taken for granted yet have a major impact on our lives. It is about books, newspapers, advertisements, television, computers, clothes, travel, and sport. Such things reflect and shape the values of our societies and are intrinsic elements of our culture. In Western societies they are largely the products of business activity. What we read, wear, view on film and television, how we travel from place to place, the nature of the games we play and watch, are the consequences of a myriad of business decisions. Indeed, so integral is business activity to our way of life that we can play with, and explore, the idea that our culture is a "business culture." In such a culture business practices and values dominate the material, intellectual and spiritual life of the whole community.

The role of business practices and business institutions in mediating our encounters with the everyday world may seem self-evident. Yet the idea of a business culture remains relatively unexplored. When, for example, the English scientist-novelist C. P. Snow delivered his 1959 lecture "The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution," he raised a storm of controversy in the bitchy world of British academic politics. Snow described a deep divide between the world of science and technology and the world of literature. At one pole were the scientists and technologists; at the other, the writers and literary intellectuals. The divide between them stemmed from the lack of a shared language of communication, a shared education and a shared set of values. Notwithstanding the virulent and, in some cases, very personal criticism of Snow and his thesis, the idea of two cultures—a culture of science and technology on the one hand and a literary culture on the other—became

entrenched in the English-speaking world. It still provides a productive paradigm for the analysis of contemporary society.

Criticized for restricting his discussion to merely two cultures, Snow later mooted the idea of a third, a culture based in the social sciences and in social history and "concerned with how human beings are living or have lived" (Snow 1964: 70). The idea that this third culture might appropriately be labelled a business culture was not considered by Snow or his contemporaries. Yet the world of business has progressively expropriated the worlds of science and technology, art and literature, dispossessing them of their claims for pre-eminence in shaping our social and cultural experience. A key theme of this book is the centrality of business activity to all aspects of life in Western society—economic, social, psychological, cultural. However, business both shapes and is shaped by society. It is not a one-way street. Contemporary business practices and values are themselves the product of particular social, cultural and economic histories. They are embedded in culture and not readily separated from it, even for analytical purposes. The intent here is to tease out this ebb and flow of shaping and being shaped, to explore the tensions that arise in the development of a business culture, and to examine the mechanisms through which business values become the dominant values in society.

The range of material available in such an ambitious enterprise is vast. To make the task more manageable, a simple structure is used, one that evolved from the development of the idea of an extended business culture. Chapter 2 defines the concepts of business, society and culture, identifies the role of business in social and cultural change, and outlines the distinctive characteristics of this extended business culture. It suggests that a number of core building blocks are needed to understand the dynamics of cultural developments related to the activities and values of the business world, namely markets, technology, language and symbols, consciousness, and ideology. It is these core blocks that underpin both the idea of an extended business culture and the structure of the book.

Chapter 3 discusses markets. It traces the history of exchange systems, from gift-exchange to the modern market economy. It highlights the social and political impacts of the market. It illustrates how attempts have been made to make the operations of the market compatible with social and cultural values, and how market values have progressively displaced other values as guides to social behavior and moral conduct.

Chapter 4 analyzes the role of technology in cultural change, utilizing a distinction between technology and technology practice. The institutionalized technology of the space program, and the portrayal of that program by Tom Wolfe and Norman Mailer, provide a basis for exploring the tension between Snow's two cultures, the world of science and technology and the world of literature. The chapter goes on to discuss computer language and computer fetishism and to examine the impact of technology on conscious-

ness—of transport technology on concepts of time and space, and of computer technology on the way in which we apprehend the world around us and our place within it.

Chapters 5 and 6 focus upon business language and symbols. Chapter 5 takes a critical look at the signs, symbols and language of advertising—the semiology of advertising. Drawing upon advertising history and literature, it explores the critiques of advertising and some of the constraints that have been imposed upon advertising practice. It highlights the contest in the public domain for control of the language in which the values and ethics of the broader society are expressed.

Chapter 6 analyzes the world of business as seen in the simplest of symbolic representations, the drawings of a number of America's leading cartoonists. It discusses some explanations for the image that cartoons foster of the characteristics of U.S. business practice and the concerns of American executives.

Chapter 7, on "the consciousness industries," expands the discussion about the role of business in the industrialization of the mind. The chapter traces the history of street literature and early journalism. It outlines the development of the publishing business from a gentlemanly profession to a conglomerate investment, and it explores the literary reaction to this process of commercialism.

Chapters 8 and 9 explore the intermeshing of social values and business values in the world of fashion. Ways in which business reflects, creates, exploits and responds to social and cultural values are described and analyzed. Because clothing has so many richly symbolic aspects, the world of fashion provides an excellent medium in which to examine the interplay between business values and other social and cultural values.

Chapter 8 concentrates primarily on the social aspects of fashion. It highlights ways in which the symbolism of the fashion world is carried through tension between recurring images of change, novelty and freedom on the one hand and conformity, stability and conservatism on the other. Attention is given to the role of fashion in status placement and enhancement and in the maintenance of hierarchical social structures. In particular, dress codes, especially occupational costumes and business dress codes, together with stereotypical attitudes toward male and female attire, allow social controls to be enforced through the control of fashion behavior.

Chapter 9 gives a more explicit focus to the business aspects of fashion. Haute couture and ready-to-wear fashion are described, with particular attention to the origins of fashion changes and the respective roles of designers, manufacturers, retailers and consumers in influencing clothing styles. Links between fashion merchandising practices and concepts of personality expressed through dress are examined. Finally two predominant modes of fashion business operation are discussed, a managerial mode and an entrepreneurial mode.

Chapter 10 looks at the tourist industry as a locale in which the cultural values of business inevitably collide with traditional non-business cultural values. It traces the history of tourism and explores the psychology of travel with particular reference to the development of tourist attractions and "authentic" tourist experiences.

Chapter 11 uses the medium of sport to bring together a number of the themes of the book. It looks at the impact of industrialization on sport and at the ideologies linking sport to education and to achievement. It traces the development of professionalism and commercialism in sport and the decline of the ethos and values associated with the amateur. Attention is also directed to the role of the media, particularly television, in the development of sport, both in the changing structures of games themselves and in their cultural contexts. The link between sport and business through sponsorship is discussed, as is the common ground between the languages of sport and the languages of business.

Chapter 12 utilizes utopian writing to explore different conceptions of the structure and role of business in an idealized society. Finally it draws together the key themes of the book in a general discussion about commerce and culture.

As can be seen from this brief synopsis, throughout the book material from a number of industries is used to illustrate different facets of the interface between business and culture. A variety of "texts" have been drawn upon, both within particular industries and across the broader spectrum of business. These include the texts provided by the lives of particular entrepreneurs and business men and women and by the business and management practices of their organizations. They include reference to some visual texts, particularly the images of business projected through advertising and through cartoons. In addition, literary and dramatic texts—novels, plays, television dramas, and films—are used where appropriate to allow for a broader social commentary on the business world and to place that world within its rich cultural context.

Such texts are used as a means to discuss general issues without losing touch with the particularity of specific events. In an issue as broad as that of business culture, such a particularity helps to avoid the danger of writing at too abstract a level. It also gives author and reader a basis for testing out agreement and disagreement. It provides the opportunity and the confidence to work from within the limitations of our own special knowledge and expertise out into areas that are more speculative and uncharted, to mix what we know with what we think it means, to add interpretation to description. The intention is to facilitate general observations about the world of business in its cultural context but to ground these observations in concrete events and in the symbols and artifacts of business activity. The texts, then, are entry points designed to provide a fruitful basis for a broader analysis of business and cultural issues.

In the choice of texts and illustrative materials I have been anxious to avoid being influenced by preconceived notions and theories. I have tried to draw theory and general observation from the textual material rather than seeking out examples to illustrate pet theories. However, the choice of texts is inevitably idiosyncratic, and I make no claim that they are representative. The bias in their selection arises both from the availability of published work (although there is a certain randomness in which published works come to one's attention) and from a preference for the colorful, telling and amusing anecdote. The best to be hoped for is that the chosen texts are exemplary, that the selection of alternative texts would not have led to markedly different interpretations.

The approach adopted is more akin to that of the literary critic, the historian, or the anthropologist than to the mainstream of business books. Although this work is grounded in specific texts, events, and artifacts, it is important to understand something of the social and economic contexts of these texts, events and artifacts, to understand their broader impact and relevance, their place in the culture of the period from which they are drawn as well as their place in our culture now. Like Jeremy Hawthorn (1983: x), I do not share the position of those "who argue the pointlessness of trying to establish any links between social life, history and literature." Connections are precisely what I am seeking to make, connections across an eclectic range of material drawn from economics, sociology, anthropology, history, art, literature, and computer science, integrated by the common thread of business. By using a collage of literary, dramatic and visual texts alongside material on entrepreneurship and business management, I hope to enter the world of business imaginatively. Such an approach is the corollary to the idea of business culture, and it is integral to discussion and analysis of the impact of business on the ways in which we interpret and understand the modern world.

Two examples will illustrate the influences behind the approach adopted. Jeremy Hawthorn, in his book *Multiple Personality and the Disintegration of Literary Character*, sets literary portrayals of personality disintegration alongside clinical accounts. He illustrates the common themes shared by literary and clinical perceptions and descriptions of personality and personality disorders. These themes change over time in response to changes in social life. Similarly one can anticipate some interplay between the behavior and characteristics of entrepreneurs and business managers in particular historical periods and the portrayal of entrepreneurs and business managers in the literary and dramatic works of those periods. The present work, however, while attuned to business history, is not a business history. It is beyond this work's scope to adequately root the texts it uses in their particular cultural contexts. I am sensitive of the need to look to the changing *context* of business—to changes in the social, cultural and economic environment—for explanation of changes in the *content* of particular texts, whether entre-

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