ROLAND MARCHAND

The Parable of the Democracy of Goods

Advertisements do not simply reflect American myths; they create them, as Roland Marchand shows in this selection from Advertising the American Dream (1985). Focusing on elaborate advertising narratives, he describes "The Parable of the Democracy of Goods," which pitches a product by convincing middle-class consumers that, by buying this toilet seat or that brand of coffee, they can share an experience with the very richest Americans. The advertising strategies Marchand analyzes date from the 1920s to 1940s, and new "parables" have since appeared that reflect more modern times, but even the oldest are still in use today. A former professor of history at the University of California, Davis, Marchand also published The American Peace Movement and Social Reform, 1898–1918 (1973) and Creating the Corporate Soul: The Rise of Public Relations and Corporate Imagery in American Big Business (1998).

As they opened their September 1929 issue, readers of the Ladies' Home Journal were treated to an account of the care and feeding of young Livingston Ludlow Biddle III, scion of the wealthy Biddles of Philadelphia, whose family coat-of-arms graced the upper right-hand corner of the page. Young Master Biddle, mounted on his tricycle, fixed a serious, slightly pouting gaze upon the reader, while the Cream of Wheat Corporation rapturously explained his constant care, his carefully regulated play and exercise, and the diet prescribed for him by "famous specialists." As master of Sunny Ridge Farm, the Biddles' winter estate in North Carolina, young Livingston III had "enjoyed every luxury of social position and wealth, since the day he was born." Yet, by the grace of a modern providence, it happened that Livingston's health was protected by a "simple plan every mother can use." Mrs. Biddle gave Cream of Wheat to the young heir for both breakfast and supper. The world's foremost child experts knew of no better diet; great wealth could procure no finer nourishment. As Cream of Wheat's advertising agency summarized the central point of the campaign that young Master Biddle initiated, "every mother can give her youngsters the fun and benefits of a Cream of Wheat breakfast just as do the parents of these boys and girls who have the best that wealth can command." 1

While enjoying this glimpse of childrearing among the socially distinguished, Ladies' Home Journal readers found themselves schooled in one of the most pervasive of all advertising tableaux of the 1920s—the parable of

the Democracy of Goods. According to this parable, the wonders of modern mass production and distribution enabled every person to enjoy the society's most significant pleasure, convenience, or benefit. The definition of the particular benefit fluctuated, of course; with each client who employed the parable. But the cumulative effect of the constant reminders that "any woman can" and "every home can afford" was to publicize an image of American society in which concentrated wealth at the top of a hierarchy of social classes restricted no family's opportunity to acquire the most significant products. By implicitly defining "democracy" in terms of equal access to consumer products, and then by depicting the everyday functioning of that "democracy" with regard to one product at a time, these tableaux offered Americans an inviting vision of their society as one of incontestable equality.

In its most common advertising formula, the concept of the Democracy of Goods asserted that although the rich enjoyed a great variety of luxuries, the acquisition of their one most significant luxury would provide anyone with the ultimate in satisfaction. For instance, a Chase and Sanborn's Coffee tableau, with an elegant butler serving a family in a dining room with a sixteen-foot ceiling, reminded Chicago families that although "compared with the riches of the more fortunate, your way of life may seem modest indeed," yet no one—"king, prince, statesman, or capitalist"—could enjoy better coffee. The Association of Soap and Glycerine Producers proclaimed that the charm of cleanliness was readily available to the poor as to the rich, and Ivory Soap reassuringly related how one young housewife, who couldn't afford a $780-a-year maid like her neighbor, still maintained a significant equality in "nice hands" by using Ivory. The C. F. Church Manufacturing Company epitomized this version of the parable of the Democracy of Goods in an ad entitled "a bathroom luxury everyone can afford": "If you live in one of those palatial apartments on Park Avenue, in New York City, where you have to pay $2,000 to $7,500 a year rent, you still couldn't have a better toilet seat in your bathroom than they have—the Church Semi-white Toilet Seat which you can afford to have right now."

Thus, according to the parable, no discrepancies in wealth could prevent the humblest citizens, provided they chose their purchases wisely, from retiting to a setting in which they could contemplate their essential equality, through possession of an identical product, with the nation's millionaires. In 1929, Howard Dickinson, a contributor to Printers' Ink, concisely expressed the social psychology behind Democracy of Goods advertisements: "With whom do the mass of people think they want to foregather?" asks the psychologist in advertising. "Why, with the wealthy and socially distinguished, of

4Chicago Tribune, Nov. 21, 1926, picture section, p. 2.
6American Magazine, Mar. 1929, p. 112.
course! If we can't get an invitation to tea for our millions of customers, we can at least present the fellowship of using the same brand of merchandise. And it works."

Some advertisers found it more efficacious to employ the parable's negative counterpart—the Democracy of Affliction. Listerine contributed significantly to this approach. Most of the unsuspecting victims of halitosis in the mid-1920s possessed wealth and high social position. Other discoverers of new social afflictions soon took up the battle cry of "nobody's immune." "Body Odor plays no favorites," warned Lifebuoy Soap. No one, "banker, baker, or society woman," could count himself safe from B.O. The boss, as well as the employees, might find himself "caught off guard" with dirty hands or cuffs, the Soap and Glycerine Producers assured readers of True Story. By 1930, Absorbine Jr. was beginning to document the democratic advance of "athlete's foot" into those rarefied social circles occupied by the "daintiest member of the junior set" and the noted yachtsman who owned "a railroad or two" (Fig. 1).8

The central purpose of the Democracy of Affliction tableaux was to remind careless or unsuspecting readers of the universality of the threat from which the product offered protection or relief. Only occasionally did such ads address those of the upper classes who might think that their status and "fastidious" attention to personal care made them immune from common social offenses. In 1929 Listerine provided newspaper readers an opportunity to listen while a doctor, whose clientele included those of "the better class," confided "what I know about nice woman." One might have thought that Listerine was warning complacent, upper-class women that they were not immune from halitosis—except that the ad appeared in the Los Angeles Times, not Harper's Bazaar. Similarly, Forhan's toothpaste and the Soap Producers did not place their Democracy of Afflictions ads in True Story in order to reach the social elite. Rather, these tableaux provided enticing glimpses into the lives of the wealthy while suggesting an equalizing "fellowship" in shared susceptibilities to debilitating ailments. The parable of the Democracy of Goods always remained implicit in its negative counterpart. It assured readers that they could be as healthy, as charming, as free from social offense as the very "nicest" (richest) people, simply by using a product that anyone could afford.

Another variation of the parable of the Democracy of Goods employed historical comparisons to celebrate even the humblest of contemporary Americans as "kings in cottages." "No monarch in all history ever saw the day he could have half as much as you," proclaimed Paramount Pictures. Even

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9Los Angeles Times, July 6, 1929, p. 5.
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Key the parable's negative connotations contributed significantly to the discovery of new products. For example, “Body and soul,” “banker, baker, or the boss, as well as the dirty hands or cuffs,” from True Story. By 1930, the advance of “athletic daintiest men” owned “a railroad or

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p. 33: True Story, June 1929.
15 Jan. 28, 1928, p. 7; Photo-

n Magazine, Feb. 1930, p. 110;

reigning sovereigns of the present, Paramount continued, would envy readers

for their “luxurious freedom and opportunity” to enter a magnificent, bedazz-

ling “palace for a night,” be greeted with fawning bows by liveried atten-

dants, and enjoy modern entertainment for a modest price (Fig. 2). The

Fisher Body Corporation coined the phrase “For Kings in Cottages” to compli-

cement ordinary Americans on their freedom from “hardships” that even kings

had been forced to endure in the past. Because of a lack of technology,

monarchs who traveled in the past had “never enjoyed luxury which even

approached that of the present-day automobile.” The “American idea,” epit-

omized by the Fisher Body Corporation, was destined to carry the comforts

and luxuries conducive to human happiness into “the life of even the hum-

blest cottages.”

FIGURE 2 Of course, real kings had never shared their status with crowds of other "kings." But the parable of the Democracy of Goods offered a brief, "packaged experience" of luxury and preference.

Even so, many copywriters perceived that equality with past monarchs might not rival the vision of joining the fabled "Four Hundred" that Ward McAllister had marked as America’s social elite at the end of the nineteenth century. Americans, in an ostensibly conformist age, hungered for exclusivity. So advertising tableaux celebrated their ascension into this fabled and exclusive American elite. Through mass production and the resulting lower prices, the tableaux explained, the readers could purchase goods formerly available only to the rich—and thus gain admission to a "400" that now numbered millions.

The Simmons Company confessed that inner-coil mattresses had once been a luxury possessed only by the very wealthy. But now (in 1930) they were "priced so every Woodbury’s Soap is arrival within a selector touch" had been "the beauty right of..." other social and material provisions in this unique promise confines largely to the masses. They may provide absolute freedom seemed that the rest, not the.. but the same several ones as did the most.

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11Saturday Evening Post, Chicago Tribune, May 8, 1927, p. 3
12American Magazine,
were "priced so everybody in the United States can have one at $19.95." Woodbury’s Soap advised the "working girl" readers of True Story of their arrival within a select circle. "Yesterday," it recalled, "the skin you love to touch" had been "the privilege of one woman in 65," but today it had become "the beauty right of every woman." If the Democracy of Goods could establish an equal consumer right to beauty, then perhaps even the ancient religious promise of equality in death might be realized, at least to the extent that material provisions sufficed. In 1927 the Clark Grave Vault Company defined this unique promise: "Not so many years ago the use of a burial vault was confined largely to the rich. . . . Now every family, regardless of its means, may provide absolute protection against the elements of the ground." If it seemed that the residents of Clark vaults had gained equality with the "400" too belatedly for maximum satisfaction, still their loving survivors could now share the same sense of comfort in the "absolute protection" of former loved ones as did the most privileged elites.

The social message of the parable of the Democracy of Goods was clear. Agonistic envy of the rich was unseemly; programs to redistribute wealth were unnecessary. The best things in life were already available to all at reasonable prices. But the prevalence of the parable of the Democracy of Goods in advertising tableaux did not necessarily betray a concerted conspiracy on the part of advertisers and their agencies to impose a social ideology on the American people. Most advertisers employed the parable of the Democracy of Goods primarily as a narrow, nonideological merchandising tactic. Listerine and Lifebuoy found the parable an obvious, attention-getting strategy for persuading readers that if even society women and bankers were unconsciously guilty of social offenses, the readers themselves were not immune. Simmons Mattresses, Chevrolet, and Clark Grave Vaults chose the parable in an attempt to broaden their market to include lower-income groups. The parable emphasized the affordability of the product to families of modest income while attempting to maintain a "class" image of the product as the preferred choice of their social betters.

Most advertisers found the social message of the parable of the Democracy of Goods a congenial and unexceptionable truth. They also saw it, like the other parables prevalent in advertising tableaux, as an epigrammatic statement of a conventional popular belief. Real income was rising for nearly all Americans during the 1920s, except for some farmers and farmworkers and those in a few depressed industries. Citizens seemed eager for confirmation that they were now driving the same make of car as the wealthy elites and serving their children the same cereal enjoyed by Livingston Ludlow Biddle III. Advertisers did not have to impose the parable of the Democracy of Goods.

Goods on a contrary-minded public. Theirs was the easier task of subtly substituting this vision of equality, which was certainly satisfying as a vision, for broader and more traditional hopes and expectations of an equality of self-sufficiency, personal independence, and social interaction.

Perhaps the most attractive aspect of this parable to advertisers was that it preached the coming of an equalizing democracy without sacrificing those fascinating contrasts of social condition that had long been the touchstone of high drama. Henry James, writing of Hawthorne, had once lamented the obstacles facing the novelist who wrote of an America that lacked such tradition-laden institutions as a sovereign, a court, an aristocracy, or even a class of country gentlemen. Without castles, manors, and thatched cottages, America lacked those stark juxtapositions of pomp and squalor, nobility and peasantry, wealth and poverty that made Europe so rich a source of social drama. But many versions of the parable of the Democracy of Goods sought to offset that disadvantage without gaining James's desired "complexity of manners." They dressed up America's wealthy as dazzling aristocrats, and then reassured readers that they could easily enjoy an essential equality with such elites in the things that really mattered. The rich were decorative and fun to look at, but in their access to those products most important to comfort and satisfaction, as the magazine Delineator put it, "The Four Hundred" had become "the four million." Advertisers left readers to assume that they could gain the same satisfactions of exclusiveness from belonging to the four million as had once been savored by the four hundred.

While parables of consumer democracy frequently used terms like "everyone," "anyone," "any home," or "every woman," these categories were mainly intended to comprise the audience of "consumer-citizens" envisioned by the advertising trade, or families economically among the nation's top 50 percent. Thus the Delineator had more in mind than mere alliteration when it chose to contrast the old "400" with the new "four million" rather than a new "one hundred and twenty million." The standard antitheses of the Democracy of Goods parables were "mansion" and "bungalow." Advertising writers rarely took notice of the many millions of Americans whose standard of living fell below that of the cozy bungalow of the advertising tableaux. These millions might over hear the promises of consumer democracy in the newspapers or magazines, but advertising leaders felt no obligation to show how their promises to "everyone" would bring equality to those who lived in the nation's apartment houses and farmhouses without plumbing, let alone those who lived in rural shacks and urban tenements.

In the broadest sense, the parable of the Democracy of Goods may be interpreted as a secularized version of the traditional Christian assurances of ultimate human equality. "Body Odor plays no favorites" might be considered

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14 Printers Ink, Nov. 24, 1927, p. 52.
a secular translation of the idea that God "sends rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matt. 5:45). Promises of the essential equality of those possessing the advertised brand recalled the promise of equality of access to God's mercy. Thus the parable recapitulated a familiar, cherished expectation. Far more significant, however, was the parable's insinuation of the capacity of a Democracy of Goods to redeem the already secularized American promise of political equality.

Incessantly and enticingly repeated, advertising visions of fellowship in a Democracy of Goods encouraged Americans to look to similarities in consumption styles rather than to political power or control of wealth for evidence of significant equality. Francesco Nicosia and Robert Mayer describe the result as a "deflection of the success ethic from the sphere of production to that of consumption." Freedom of choice came to be perceived as a freedom more significantly exercised in the marketplace than in the political

FIGURE 3 Advertising such as this encouraged Americans to pursue consumption-oriented lifestyles.

"Jones Must Be Broke"

When you paint with DEVOE, you get the same high-quality results you'd get on any other job, no matter how big. Our paints are made to be compatible with any product, and they're designed for easy application and perfect coverage. That means you can get the job done right, and do it fast. It's what makes DEVOE Paint and Varnish Products the best choice for professional painters everywhere. The smarter choice for all your painting needs.

DEVOE
Paint and Varnish Products

Paints, stains, finishes, paints, varnishes, and more. For the best in quality and performance. The smarter choice for all your painting needs.

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area. This process gained momentum in the 1920s; it gained maturity during the 1950s as a sense of class differences was nearly eclipsed by a fascination with the equalities suggested by shared consumption patterns and "freely chosen" consumer "lifestyles."\(^{15}\)

**Reading the Text**

1. Summarize in your own words what Marchand means by the "parable of the Democracy of Goods" (para. 2).
2. What does Marchand mean by claiming that "the parable of the Democracy of Goods may be interpreted as a secularized version of the traditional Christian assurances of ultimate human equality" (para. 14)?
3. What is the "Democracy of Afflictions" (para. 5), in your own words?
4. According to Marchand, why were the 1920s an especially ripe era for the success of the advertising strategies that he describes?

**Reading the Signs**

1. Does the parable of the Democracy of Goods work to make society more egalitarian, or does it reinforce existing power structures? Write an essay arguing for one position or the other, focusing on particular ads for support.
2. Bring to class a popular magazine of your own choosing. In groups, study your selections. In which magazines is the myth of the Democracy of Goods most common? Do you find any relationship between the use of this myth and the magazines' intended readerships?
3. Obtain from your college library an issue of *Time* dating from the 1920s, and compare it with a current issue. In what ways, if any, have the social messages communicated in the advertising changed? Try to account for any changes you identify.
4. **Connecting Texts** Compare and contrast the myth of the Democracy of Goods with the frontier myth that Laurence Shames describes in "The More Factor" (p. 86). Consider how the two myths shape our consuming behavior; you may also want to show how the myths appear in some current ads.

When You Come Home

When You Come Home

"...and
Pyrene
Saved
Us"

THE first news compels a shudder.
Your home has been visited by fire,
that terrible destroyer that so often leaves everlasting sorrows.
The thought of what might have happened, is followed by a
deep gratitude for what did happen, because the Pyrene Fire
Extinguisher, which you placed on the wall within easy reach,
put scientific readiness between your dearest possessions and
possible disaster.

PYRENE MANUFACTURING CO., 1209 Broadway, N. Y.

THEORY OF CONSUMPTION

The
"Vistas of Classlessness:
D. Reichard
in
Reichard: American Society
(Columbus, Ohio,

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