EUROPEAN IMPORTS? EUROPEAN IMMIGRANTS AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF AMERICAN CONSUMER CULTURE FROM THE 1920S TO THE 1960S

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Few things defined the United States at the middle of the twentieth century quite like consumer goods and consumer culture. Streamlined cars and refrigerators embodied the “American way of life” both at home and abroad. Increasingly sophisticated corporate marketing promised a “modern” world of affluence and abundance. Domestically, they helped reinforce a social compromise centered on economic growth and an expanding middle class. Internationally, enticing product designs and new marketing techniques became tools in Cold War efforts to spread the reach of what Victoria de Grazia has called America’s “irresistible empire.” Europeans in particular frequently discussed the “Americanization” of their societies in light of new advertising and consumption patterns.

Such a conception of a new, quintessentially “American” consumer culture remaking the postwar world, however, ignores the genuinely transnational and transatlantic origins of this phenomenon. In the key areas of industrial design and professional marketing, for example, European influences and exchanges with European artists and academics have played a formative role since the interwar era. As American businesses recovered after the shock of the Depression, they frequently looked to Europe for inspiration and innovation. A wave of immigrants and émigrés, fleeing the totalitarian regimes of the 1930s, came to play a prominent part in an exchange process about consumer marketing and design that continued well into the postwar era. Taking the work and careers of prominent European immigrants to the United States as a lens, this project aims to trace the impact of their concepts on American mass consumption and their role as “translators” between American and European consumption between the 1930s and 1970s.

One case study I explore in the field of marketing is the so-called Vienna school of market research. The group, spearheaded by Paul Lazarsfeld, had formed during the 1920s around research at the intersection of sociological surveys and commercial market studies. Their interest in both consumer motivations and empirical analysis
was eagerly received in the United States. While American companies had long paid attention to advertising psychology, the European newcomers helped make this nascent interest an essential part of the marketing profession. They added new qualitative and quantitative approaches, popularized methodological innovations, and can be credited with preparing the way for both segmented marketing and the “cognitive turn” in consumer research.

Industrial design similarly emerged as a new profession during the 1930s. While the streamlined styling of the era came to be seen as typically American, many of its prominent proponents, such as Raymond Loewy and Otto Kuhler, were European immigrants who consciously drew on European modernism or French Art Deco. The functionalist designs of the Bauhaus found an audience in the United States even prior to the arrival of such émigrés as Herbert Bayer, Walter Gropius, or Marcel Breuer. While the artistic visions of many of the émigrés stood in tension with the more pragmatic demands of corporate production, Bayer and others were quite willing to reconfigure the role of the artist designer in a world of commercial mass production and consumption.

What contemporaries perceived as a post-war “Americanization” of Europe amounted in some ways to a retranslation of marketing and design concepts that had genuine transatlantic roots. The European migrants played a crucial role in this postwar process as networkers, government emissaries, entrepreneurs, or visiting academics and artists. They frequently understood themselves as mediators regarding differences between American and European consumption. Despite in many cases having backgrounds in the socialist and social reform movements of interwar Europe, they - in various ways - had come to terms with the American consumer economy. There were prominent exceptions, of course, such as the design critic Bernard Rudofsky, or the Frankfurt school theorists of consumption including Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, or Erich Fromm. They frequently critiqued in their writings the very elements of “consumer engineering” that their fellow émigrés (with whom they often stood in contact) had helped to develop. Both as critics and proponents, then, European immigrants to the United States played a crucial role in the transatlantic dialogue about mid-twentieth century mass consumptions.