Land Of Desire Essay, Research Paper

Land of Desire:

Merchants, Power, and the Rise

of a New American Culture

William Leach

Random House; 1993

428 Pages

The transformations that America went through in order to become a

capitalist country were very significant and are sometimes looked past.

However, in the book Land of Desire, the author, William Leach extensively

goes into many of those things. There were many things that went into this

ranging from specific poeple and incidents to outside places and things. Leach

shows each individual ordeal and explains the personal effect that it had on the

industry, as well as how society accepted, or in some cases condemned such

things. All of this comes from his own education and understanding of the

situation. He shows the drift into a capitalistic country as being a gradual

change in one thing that then led to another, and to another, and so on. Not to

mention that many, many things took part in it. And that if such things had

not occurred, we would not be the country that we are today.

There isn’t a whole lot of information on William Leach, but he does

appear to be a very well-thought out man. This is not his only historical book

and he’s also done other things, including the book True Love and Perfect

Union: The Feminist Reform of Sex and Society, and editing The Wonderful

Wizard of Oz. That specifically shows up a number of times in Land of Desire.

He refers to L. Frank Baum (the author of The Wonderful Wizard of Oz)

throughout the book, as well as to the book itself. Other than that, though,

there’s not much else I know about him, too bad it’s not exactly the most

helpful information as far as why he thinks the way he does.

Leach broke the book up into 5 major parts. The first being the preface

and the introduction. These two parts laid out the main ideas of the book.

After that, Leach went into the three main sections of the book, which end up

being the three main steps in the transformation into capitalism. The first

entitled Strategies of Enticement, went into a little bit of history, as well as the

first recognition of capitalism and were it all began. The second section,

Circuits of Power, retold stories of how the public reacted to the whole thing.

It also dealt with the philosophical side of capitalism. The final major section

of the book, Managing a Dream Culture, displayed the managerial aspects of

capitalism and the poeple behind it. Then, the last pages illustrate how the

history in the book affected our country today, hence the its Legacies. It pretty

much sums up why what happened was important and the such.

“This book exhibits how this older culture was challenged and was

gradually superseded by the new culture,” (p8). That pretty much sums up the

first section of the book, Strategies of Enticement. Within this chapter you see

the clear path towards capitalism being chosen. It starts out with what led up

to the idea of capitalism, including the merchant John Wanamaker and the

retail wars. It sets up the most vital history to understanding the whole

transmission into capitalism.

The next step to the up and rising consumer industry was the elaborate

and aesthetically pleasing forms of advertisement that began. It all began with

the advertising cards and eventually led to billboards and electrical advertising.

This is also one of the first times that Baum is discussed, this time concerning

his manual on “the arts of decorating and display” (p56). This was really the

chapter of advertisement’s roots.

One of the last chapters of this section is about fashion and the effect it

had on the market. It also links the wants of the US consumers to the haves of

the European consumers, specifically France. The first of many fashion shows

begin arising here and the impact that foreign countries have on what is “in”

and “out” begin here. Later on, Oriental fashion shows up in a similar way.

The final chapter in this section goes into the detail of the first customer

services. It begins the linkage between capitalism and religion here due to the

fact that many of the ideals in customer services were similar to those ideals of

Christians. Despite the fact that “Americans had broken from their older

religious heritage, at their best they still retained the spirit of service” (p115).

And from there the hospitality in public places such as daycares, live music, etc

all began. It also touched on refunds and what we would now call credit cards.

The next few chapters wrapped into the section entitled Circuits of

Power, broadened on the effects of the growing consumer awareness and

capitalism. It discusses just how much of an impact capitalism and it’s

creations had on every day life for the poeple. Museums, restaurants, hotels,

and even educational systems among other things all changed their ways due

to the new ideas brought about by capitalism. Commercial art schools sprung

up in a number of places and the book even went into the fact that many

“furniture designers, and designers of wrapping papers, combs, labels, and

packaging visited the Brooklyn museum” (p170) as a way to expand their

minds and products. The new places had an impact on things like the

transportation even, “special subway stations were erected for the big

department stores and hotels” (p173). Things were changing in a big way.

This is also the section where religion is expanded upon, as well as the

philosophy of mind curing. The big debate concerning religion here is whether

capitalism and the consumer industry can grow and still stay moral. This is

something that seems t be argued about any change and the answer seemed to

be more so than anything, no. Wanamaker came up and was a prime model in

that area. He did many moral things for the community like set up youth

groups and the such, but when it came to business, his goals changed to

personal gratification. Although a few poeple still thought it possible, more

thought that the “split perspective reflected a division in public and personal

goals and undercut the ability of religion to deal with the crucial public issues

of the day” (p195). And so it usually went.

Mind curing started up soon after the rise of consumerism through

literature, mainly. It consisted of “common roots with both liberal and

evangelical Protestantism and carried to an extreme many of the most liberal

tendencies of in those faiths” (p 226). Such authors as L. Frank Baum and

Eleanor Porter supported and helped to spread the philosophy throughout the

country and it held onto a number of poeple for quite a while.

The last section of the book, Managing a Dream Culture, was a lot about

the accomplishment of stabilizing capitalism in the US. This is where the nitty

gritty of it all came out. The first chapter of it, was completely about how the

booming businesses were handled and who handled them. The loans and

credit businesses were also hot and so were problems with them. People were

cheaply taking advantage of things like return policies (much like they do even

now), doing things like returning whole sets of furniture after using them

solely for a single wedding (p301).

Another thing that came up again was the aesthetics of the marketing

and of the stores themselves. Elegance was very popular and accessories were

big, especially around Christmas time. Christmas time in the big New York

department stores was (and is still) a really big deal, it’s actually one of the real

reasons that there are toy departments at all. One of these chapters also went

through how the whole Santa at the mall thing came about, in the early 1900s.

It was all about marketing and making money, and due to it the popularity of

Christmas and Santa sky rocketed. There wasn’t any way of getting away from

the holidays and there still isn’t.

The final chapter, tells a how lot about Herbert Hoover and what he did

to guide the last parts of the transition. “Herbert Hoover was a major architect

of change” (p352) and Leach found him as a good man when it came to pushing

for the consumption system. He did a number of things including

strengthening the institutional structure and helping enable the environment

for economical development. This was another small part about who and what

handled the new system of capitalism in our country.

And then finally there is the section, Legacies, it pretty much tells you

how Leach thinks individual things that went on permanently changed society

for us today. And that the stuff that went on from 1880-1930 really made a

permanent difference, for the most part improvements, to our business and

marketing systems of today. America strives on this market and without it, we

would lose a big piece of our American heritage. Besides, “however flawed, the

capitalist concept of self, the consumer concept of the self, it is a reigning

American concept” (p386) and it is in this system that there is the freedom of

self expression and self fulfillment in a market with no boundaries.

This is a really well set up book, I think. The way Leach organized

everything in the different sections and then in chapters makes it very easy to

follow the history of capitalism. Although, sometimes it seems as though he

went a little far in explaining certain ideals, as well as exaggerating the

importance of some things. Overall though, it was very well done and after the

Prologue, it is a really interesting book.

Some of the conclusions that were drawn throughout the book were

obviously biased. Although most of the book is very informative without a

strong bias, at certain points you could very well see if or if not Leach agreed

with a certain quote or idea. You could also tell where his interests laid,

specifically when he spoke about literature. You heard a lot about Baum and

poeple that were connected with him, but other than that, no other authors

were discussed other than Porter, who had many similar ideals to Baum’s.

Another thing that was discussed a lot was religion, so I think that Leach has a

strong connection to religion, too. He always wanted to make it a part of the

topic being discussed, whether it was relevant or not, it sometimes seemed.

Other than those two things and Leach wrote quite impartially and stuck to

the facts very well.

As far as contradicting or supporting information I had already attained

on this topic, I would have to say that if anything, he agrees with it and added

some. He expanded on many topics a lot more heavily than we ever discussed

or read about in class. It did parallel some of the things that we learned such

as how capitalism came up and why it was so popular with the public. I think

it gives some very good information on those things, as well as how the new

system affected the growing country. It gives the perspectives of not only

Leach but of other historians through quotes and ideals in general. Leach used

a number of sources to create the point of view that he has, and he shared

those things so as to help us form an opinion as well. I find it a fairly valuable

book to my education because despite the fact that it went almost overboard

with some of the information, it still defined the topic really well. It shed light

on a lot of things that are normally not as deliberated.

Throughout the book, many conclusions and generalizations were made.

Many of which were well-informed, however, at the same time a few of them

were discreetly biased. He made some assumptions and said some things that

may not be agreed with by everyone. This sort of limited what he could teach

and at the same time, gave some outlooks that other historians could not have

given because they didn’t care about the topics as much as he. Religion and

Literature are good examples of that, Leach’s attachment to those two things

reflected in the way that he talked about them. This sometimes may have

blind folded him when it came to other topics that didn’t hold such a strong

feeling for but certainly helped out with those that he did.

I thought that the book was, in fact, very interesting and I learned a lot

from it. I understand exactly what went on and why when it came to the

consumer market switching into a capitalist gear. He didn’t leave very much

unclear and his explanations for things were very well thought out. The fact

that he talked about maybe a little more than he needed to get his point across

was both a blessing and a curse in that you learned and understood more, but

occasionally it just seemed to complicate things. He obviously has an extremely

deep knowledge about this topic and perhaps that’s maybe why he wrote a book

about it (duh), but over all, I think it is a very good book that was written with

even the least informed reader in mind. Leach made it so that anyone,

whether you knew a lot about the subject or not, could understand what went

on and why. Any ideas that needed to maybe be explained to the commoner

were explained and it was very helpful in understanding the book. I

appreciated that a lot, but I am not the most learned person and I don’t know a

whole lot on this subject or it’s background.

Bibliography

none, see above