# REFRAMING THE SKILLED WORKER: THE PSYCHOLOGICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL ORIGINS OF THE GERMAN SKILLS MACHINE

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# ABSTRACT

In 1926, shortly after the German economy had emerged from the fog of post-World War I hyperinflation, the principle employers' groups, the National Association of German Industry and the Association of German Employers' Organizations, founded a Working Committee on Vocational Training. The establishment of this body represented a decisive turning point in the emergence of the highly skilled modern German work force. By standardizing vocational definitions, training schemes, and national qualifying exams, the Committee and its successors helped German apprentices and employers overcome previous disincentives to investing in worker training.

For young workers, the standardized vocational training system created portable, and hence valuable, certificates of the skills they had attained, thus making apprenticeships attractive. While employers still faced the risk that workers might leave the companies that had trained them, the collective agreement improved firms' incentives to engage in vocational training: the heightened interest of youths meant they were more likely to complete their apprenticeships; egregious free-riding by non-training poaching firms was discouraged; and the certificates of standardized skill-levels assured companies of the quality of the workers they hired. This solution to the incentives problem in vocational training proved successful over the next fifteen years—and beyond: the number of apprentices German companies took on each year rose from roughly 130,000 in the mid-1920s to nearly a million by the late 1930s. Employers' investment in human capital beginning in the 1920s and 1930s played an important role in Germany's dramatic economic recovery after World War II and its emergence as the world's leading exporter of high quality goods.<sup>2</sup>

Before implementing the newly standardized vocational training programs and national qualifying exams, German industrialists had to reframe their understanding of the workers. The simultaneous American development of distinctly different methods of production and human capital formation, namely, mass production and universal high school education, suggests that the Germans might have taken a different road. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, American and German employers faced similar challenges and options. The system emerging in America represented a possible alternative to the eventual German system, for German developments were a response to what was happening in America.

The first section of this study sets the stage for the organizational changes of the mid-1920s by explaining how German workers were trained in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in the midst of the second industrial revolution. Some of these developments, for example, the reestablishment of modernized artisanal guilds in 1897 and the spread of obligatory vocational schooling, contributed to the postwar emergence of a full-fledged German vocational system and can be counted among the origins of the German skills machine.<sup>3</sup> But employers' persistent ambivalence about the human factor in production prevented the widespread adoption of vocational training for industrial jobs until the mid-1920s.

Against this background, the second section of the study is a history of the establishment in 1926 of the Working Committee for Vocational Training and its creation of a modern German vocational training system. Of particular interest is the sudden gestalt-like change in thinking that enabled this crucial organizational step to be taken.

This account of the origins of the German skills machine challenges the assumption in the human capital literature that general schooling is the single best method of skills training.<sup>4</sup> Thus, it fits into the growing literature on varieties of capitalism,<sup>5</sup> a body of work that has, to date, paid insufficient attention to historical contingency<sup>6</sup> and the role of such non-institutional factors as psychological "frames."

# GERMAN VOCATIONAL TRAINING: SIGNIFICANT REFORMS AND TENTATIVE COMMITMENTS

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Germany's economy grew at an unprecedented, albeit uneven, rate, transforming the country. Between 1872 and 1913, the economy as a whole expanded by 2.8 percent per year on average, while industry and handicrafts grew by 3.7 percent and leading sectors of the second industrial revolution—chemicals, electrical products, and machine tools—by as much as 6 to 10 percent per annum. The former agricultural state was fast becoming an industrial state.

Economic growth and structural change posed challenges for employers seeking workers and for public authorities concerned about social order and national economic and strategic competitiveness. By the 1890s, large-scale emigrations of the rural poor to overseas destinations had given way to a massive internal migration, largely from the rural east, to industrial centers in Berlin, Saxony, and the Rhine-Ruhr area. Around the turn of the century it became clear that these sources of workers would not last forever. Employers were uneasy about the number of available workers and the quality of their training. Technological and legal changes complicated matters. Especially in the dynamic metalworking and manufacturing sectors that powered overall growth, capital deepening (the increased use of power-driven machinery) meant that workers' carelessness or inexperience, which damaged machinery or disrupted the workflow, were becoming increasingly costly. Shoddy German products at the 1876 World Expo in Philadelphia and other international exhibitions alarmed industrialists and officials in the Prussian Ministry of Trade.<sup>8</sup>

The growing gap between industrial and handicraft manufacturing was an obstacle to quality production as was the state of Handwerk itself. Industrial companies, many of which had begun as small handicraft enterprises, relied on Handwerk, with its apprentice-journeyman-master sequence, for their supply of trained workers. But industrial work that progressed beyond Handwerk required skills and a handiness with machines that could not always be taught on the job, so the gulf between the supply of and demand for skilled workers widened.9 Handwerk was experiencing an "apprenticeship crisis." The German Empire's liberal industrial code of 1871 had abolished the guilds, which, while already in decline, had nonetheless regulated apprenticeships and overseen certification of masters, however inadequately. Without authority to retain their apprentices at the end of a training period, masters were increasingly likely to exploit their charges as cheap labor. Apprentices, seeing few prospects in being trained and tempted by the initially higher wages and less onerous supervision in large industry, broke their contracts early, but industrial employers had few means of judging the skills of those they hired away from Handwerk. The incentive problems that plagued German vocational training until the mid-1920s appeared in the first decades of the Kaiserreich.

Only a handful of the largest industrial firms, such as Siemens, could afford to establish in-house apprenticeship programs and take the risk of losing trainees.<sup>10</sup> During the *Kaiserreich*, the two most important efforts to address the problems of

vocational training were the work of public authorities. Industrial "continuation schools" (Fortbildungsschulen) targeted those who had just left the Volks, or common schools (14 to 18-year-olds), and, in a few hours of classroom instruction per week, aspired to supplement the attendees' work experience with refreshers in the three Rs (reading, writing, and arithmetic). Instruction in the schools emphasized patriotic and, occasionally, religious virtues and, increasingly, theoretical-practical skills for a trade. Usually set up by urban philanthropists or private associations, these Fortbildungsschulen later came under public control, though attendance remained voluntary; in a third and final stage, numerous municipalities and states made them obligatory for all 14 to 18-year-olds not attending other schools. Though Prussia did not make attendance mandatory, its Trade Ministry became a powerful advocate of the schools. Between 1885 and 1910 the number of industrial continuation schools in Prussia more than tripled, increasing from 664 to 2,162, and the number of attendees rose six-fold from 58,400 to 352,000. 12

Thus the vocational schooling in Germany's dual system of apprenticeships and classroom instruction was initiated during the *Kaiserreich*.<sup>13</sup> Yet the *Fortbildungs* school had been developed as a complement to the core of vocational training: an apprenticeship at the workplace. As long as whether and how youths would be trained there remained an open question, the spread of continuation schools alone would not solve Germany's vocational training issues. The second major development in these decades did bear on this core question. In 1897 a significant revision of the industrial code reestablished a modified form of handicraft guild at the regional level throughout Germany.

Modernized guilds were empowered to establish standards for training, supervise apprenticeships, write apprenticeship contracts, and certify the results of qualifying exams. Contrary to appearances and earlier interpretations, <sup>14</sup> the reestablishment of guilds was part of the German state's liberal economic strategy. The legislation was meant not to protect *Handwerk* from competition but to give artisans a chance of succeeding in the market. Standardized certification gave youths and handicraft masters the incentive to engage in vocational training. For young workers, the certificates were portable, and hence valuable, attestations of the skills they had acquired. For the masters, the certificate system, coupled with new apprenticeship contracts, meant that they could count on their apprentices not running away and that, even if they could not retain them after their exams, any journeymen they hired from outside would have a similar level of training.

The restoration of guilds thus helped overcome the disincentives to train and be trained inherent in a liberalized labor market.<sup>15</sup>

This model of collectively certifying training provided a blueprint for the future of the entire German vocational system, but its realization in 1897 was only a partial success. The law established a patchwork of regional guilds but no national framework for enforcing collective training standards. Gradually, however, the restored bodies forged broader associations, but the 1897 reforms only applied to handicrafts, not to industry. Thus, the main employer of skilled labor, and by 1907 the trainer of a third of all skilled workers, <sup>16</sup> played no role in collectively setting and certifying skill levels. <sup>17</sup> If the gulf between artisanal and industrial production continued to widen, and if handicrafts became less able to satisfy the quantitative requirements of industry for skilled workers, this lacuna of the legislation would become all the more important.

The proliferation of industrial continuation schools and the new forms of collective certification of artisanal skills reshaped the German vocational training system in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Nevertheless, until the reforms of the mid-1920s, German industry's ambivalence about its future forms of production and the kinds of workers it would need thwarted development of a comprehensive vocational training system.<sup>18</sup>

In response to growing competition from American firms in electrical, machine tool, and chemical industries, German industrialists around the turn of the century became increasingly interested in improving their physical and human capital. The proportion of apprentices being trained in industrial firms continued to climb. Though still small, the number of industrial companies maintaining their own training workshops and company schools for apprentices grew rapidly.<sup>19</sup> Companies experimented with strategies for keeping their core of skilled workers.20 The most important long-term development for industrial vocational training, however, was the founding in 1908 of the German Committee for Technical Education (Deutscher Ausschuss fuer technisches Schulwesen, DATSCH). The Association of German Engineers, several Prussian and Reich ministries, and leading industrial firms had set up DATSCH to establish and disseminate norms for engineers' education. Soon, however, the members had extended DATSCH's purview to include the entire vocational training system; in the absence of a public system like that set up for handicrafts, one of their main goals was to agree on clear vocational descriptions and uniform training methods. The first of DATSCH's "guiding principles" from 1912 expressed the organization's main task, as well as its motivation:

The mechanical industry is compelled to an ever greater degree, especially as a result of competition with foreign [industry], to perform high-value work. This requires constant progress in the education and training of young skilled workers. For this reason, it is one of the most important tasks of industry to ensure good training of a sufficient number of apprentices and to secure its influence over the shaping of apprentice training.<sup>21</sup>

DATSCH was the seed from which would spring the full-fledged industrial vocational training system—but only after a crucial decade and a half.

German industrialists' interest in improving their human capital was often overshadowed by the greater promise of rationalization: better materials, integrated mechanized production flows, improved organization, standardized parts, and mass production. American industrialists and engineers, who had faced the same shortages of skilled labor as the Germans, had pioneered rationalization, and many German manufacturers looked across the Atlantic to see the outlines of their own future. As early as the 1870s, Werner Siemens, the founder and head of the electrics giant, commented:

We have . . . assiduously been attempting since a year to make everything, as the Americans do, with special machines [i.e., those with more limited functions than general machines and hence suited for lower-skilled workers]. It has worked out brilliantly . . . Now we are all convinced that our salvation [Heil] lies in the application of the American work-methods and that we have to change our entire business practices accordingly.<sup>22</sup>

That the adoption by Siemens (and other companies) of American technology and techniques proceeded more slowly and haltingly than Werner Siemens had expected in no way belies the tremendous promise many German industrialists continued to see in rationalization; indeed, after the turn of the century the fascination with American technology and methods only increased. Enterprising engineers such as Georg Schlesinger—head of production at the Ludwig Loewe machine tool company and, from 1904, holder of the chair for machine tools and factory operations at the prestigious Berlin Technical University—played critical roles as conduits of innovation. They promoted new technologies, such as the "fast steel" developed by Frederick W. Taylor, which improved machining techniques; introduced more special-purpose machines; and established company "norming offices." Schlesinger's journal Werkstattstechnik (Workshop

Technology), launched in 1907, became the focal point of the German rationalization movement, disseminating new ideas about technology, norming, and factory organization.<sup>23</sup> "On the cutting edge of steel," Schlesinger aphorized, "sit the dividends."<sup>24</sup> Shortly before World War I, these engineers enthusiastically promoted Taylor's ideas about "scientific management," even if little as yet was implemented.<sup>25</sup>

After 1900 two schools of thought about Germany's industrial future and capital investments took shape. One emphasized the continuing, even growing, need for skilled workers and the importance of investments in human capital; the other placed its hopes, which often raced ahead of reality, in technology and rational management. The nearly simultaneous launch of Schlesinger's *Werkstattstechnik* in 1907 and the founding of DATSCH in 1908 symbolized the consolidation of each school. Though improving the nation's human and technological capital need not have been mutually exclusive goals, the emphasis on rationalization diminished the importance of the human factor in production. Advocates of scientific management increasingly saw the worker as a secondary element to be fitted to the physical capital and shaped to a norm.<sup>26</sup> In the rationalizers' visions of frictionless production, the worker risked becoming "sand in the gears." In 1920, Schlesinger, the doyen of the German scientific management movement, talked of the human factor largely as a potential disturbance to be minimized:

The most favorable separation of fundamentally different jobs means that the workshop of mass production makes do in far and away the majority of cases with semi-skilled workers, whose work-abilities depend little on experience and specialized knowledge and even less on high intellectual abilities. Rather, the sensory abilities of eye, ear and joints combined with a certain degree of attentiveness will suffice. The influence of attentiveness and of tiredness declines the more it becomes possible to remove the strain of humans in these regards by making the machine self-operating.<sup>27</sup>

# CREATING AN INDUSTRIAL VOCATIONAL TRAINING SYSTEM: A NEW VISION OF THE SKILLED WORKER

Why did German industry commit to creating an industrial vocational training system in the mid-1920s? Experiences during the war and its immediate aftermath played a role, but what proved decisive was German industrialists' shocked recognition of the new world they faced once inflation was harnessed and the curtain fell on Germany's prolonged war economy.

Wartime and postwar cooperation among employers extended a tradition of collective action dating from their earlier attempts to influence government policy and combat the growing power of the socialist unions. Cooperation with each other and with the government on wartime allocation boards and especially in the Central Working Group,<sup>28</sup> the condominium between the unions and industrialists, strengthened the trust among employers and facilitated agreement in the mid-1920s on a system of industrial vocational training. In the final years of the war and the first years of the peace, employers questioned the reliability of the many young unskilled workers who had replaced drafted older workers. These tyros were the main cause of the alarmingly high turnover rates,<sup>29</sup> and they were also far more likely than experienced or skilled workers to be politically radical.

Until 1926, neither the employers' strengthened mutual trust nor the growing unattractiveness of the alternative to skilled workers inspired German industrialists to create an industrial vocational system. If anything, the war had accelerated the drive to rationalize. In 1917, in response to the increased use of unskilled labor and the wartime demand for mass-produced armaments, the Association of German Engineers, industrialists from the metallurgical sector, and government officials had launched a major program of industrial rationalization and norming. After the war, rationalization became a large-scale movement and the object of great public hopes for a national revival. By one count, "600 private organizations, eighty-five state offices and sixty-seven state research and testing institutes" advanced rationalization.<sup>31</sup>

Germany did not convert to a peace economy until 1924. Loose monetary policies and the depreciation of its currency, which began during the war and accelerated afterwards, combined to cloak the condition of German industry. Demobilization policies, some of which remained in effect until 1924, prevented companies from releasing excess workers and perpetuated binding wage-mediation procedures. Until 1925, Germany remained cut off from the world market. Alfred D. Chandler, Jr., observed that "for almost a decade after 1914 German industrialists simply could not plan ahead."<sup>32</sup>

When German industrialists emerged from the fog of an extended war economy, the colossus across the Atlantic captured their attention. In a dozen years since the outbreak of war, the Americans had taken advantage of techniques of mass production and their access to foreign markets, from which Germany had been cut off, to extend their lead in industrial production. In one of Germany's most dynamic prewar sectors, the electrical, the American share of

global production had soared from 29 percent in 1913 to 49 percent in 1925 while the German share had fallen from 35 to 23 percent.<sup>33</sup> Even more dramatically, the Americans now produced nearly 100 times as many cars as the Germans did (3.5 million vs. fewer than 40,000).<sup>34</sup> From 1924 on, a stream of German industrialists and union leaders visited the stations of American success, including the mecca of Ford's Highland Park works, and upon their return they contributed to the growing discussion of *Amerikanismus*. Despite admiring the Americans' success, the Germans came back from America with a mixed message: clearly, German industry would have to adopt some important innovations from the pioneer of mass production, but owing to its particular circumstances—a much smaller domestic market, modest physical resources, and strong unions—Germany would also have to pursue its own kind of rationalization.<sup>35</sup>

In the burgeoning literature numerous references to German "quality work" suggest that the American system of production spurred the German industrialists to reconsider their relative advantages.<sup>36</sup> From the mid-1920s on, many German employers began to see their workers in a new light: workers were no longer potential sand in the gears, but were, because of their independence and mastery, a resource of great value for flexible, high quality production. Thus, at a June 1924 National Productivity Board meeting devoted to the "training of young workers in the broadest sense," Ernst Toussaint, professor at the Berlin Technical University and consultant to industry, assailed the view that developments in the mechanical industry would make the trained worker superfluous. Anybody familiar with the issue, he insisted, would recognize "the most thorough exploitation of the machine could only be guaranteed if a thinking *Facharbeiter* [skilled worker] used it."<sup>37</sup>

The new view of skiller workers' potential contributions spurred German industrialists to action. As detailed studies of German industry in the 1920s have confirmed, German manufacturers increasingly integrated measures of mass production and greater standardization with the strengths of a highly skilled work force.<sup>38</sup> Individual firms founded apprentice-training centers in record numbers.<sup>39</sup> More significantly, the relative suddenness of this reestimation of the value of the *Facharbeiter* contributed decisively to leading industrialists taking collective action to improve the country's industrial vocational training. In 1926 the major industrial associations joined forces with the Association of German Engineers, the Prussian Ministry of Trade, and other government ministries that had long advocated industrial vocational training to found the Working Committee on Vocational Training. The committee's journal, *Technische* 

Erziehung (Technical Education), soon became the central forum of the industrial training movement. In the inaugural issue, major industrialists and chairmen of the committee Ernst von Borsig and G. Liphardt explained the necessity of developing the nation's human capital:

The competitiveness of our industry depends not only on the technical and organizational perfecting of the production apparatus, but to no lesser degree on the best-possible use of the available human resources. Everywhere one recognizes that the most valuable good which Germany, robbed of so many natural resources, possesses is human labor power. It is not enough, however, that one uses most economically the people who are integrated into the production process; rather, it is above all necessary that the abilities of those who are to participate in the production process are raised to the maximum and developed in the most versatile way already before they enter the economic system.<sup>40</sup>

In the same issue, the director of the Working Committee emphasized the surge of interest in vocational training:

That the vocational training of the workers is closely related to the productivity of the economy has been recognized for decades, if only at first by small circles, and practically useful work has been derived from this knowledge. New is the sudden dissemination of these insights and the systematic way and energy with which these tasks are tackled, which have appeared so forcefully on the level of economic and social-political issues.<sup>41</sup>

German industry's turn to the skilled worker and to standardizing vocational training bears the marks, not of a gradual accumulation of evidence and shifting of views, but of a gestalt-switch or a reframing of thought. 42 Many industrialists and engineers took themselves to task for having focused too much on technological and organizational improvements. In 1925, the chairman of the Association of German Iron and Steel Industrialists, Albert Voegler, lamented that German employers had been ignoring the most important element in the production process: the worker. 43 The director of the Working Committee admitted that until recently "the vision in economic and firm life focused on the whole too much on drawing the material (physical goods and machine power) into the circle of business considerations, [while] the element that shapes the material,

namely the working human being . . . has been excessively overlooked."<sup>44</sup> And the head of the Association of German Engineers admitted his own profession's complicity: "We engineers, in particular, in the indefatigable work for economic-technical progress, for too long failed to make the fact clear to ourselves that we in our industry, based on this technology, can never dispense with man. Man and technology, man and machine belong insolubly together."<sup>45</sup>

As self-critical as these industrialists now were, their earlier views were understandable. Given the tremendous advances in materials and organization, it had been natural for them to see these as the areas of greatest promise and to adopt the habits of thought and outlook inculcated there, in other words, to adopt a particular frame. The dominant themes of the early rationalization movement-machine-productivity, calculation, and control-could not but influence German industrialists' views of the worker. If the early rationalizers thought of the human factor in production at all, they quite naturally transferred the patterns of thought from materials, technology, and organization to this other sphere.46 The worker could be seen at best as an accessory to the machine, at worst as sand in the gears. This view of workers had never held sway: in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, some German industrialists had recognized the continuing value of the skilled worker, even in increasingly mechanized factories, and had taken steps to secure a core of skilled workers. Yet this vision of the skilled worker had often been overshadowed by the promises of rationalization. Now, in the mid-1920s, in response to the American challenge of mass production, German industrialists took stock of their situation and reassessed their comparative advantages. They came to believe that skilled workers could make a great contribution to German industry's success. Indeed, they now saw them as the source and guarantor of German quality work.

The Working Committee for Vocational Training standardized vocational profiles, training regimens, and exams, effectively generating the elements of a collectively supported system of certification as the 1897 reform had allowed for handicrafts but now on a national scale and for the dominant sector of the economy. After the leading handicrafts organizations joined the Working Committee in 1927, thus burying decades-old differences with industry over control of vocational training, all the major employer groups were engaged.<sup>47</sup> After a suspension of work during the Great Depression, the employers and the *Reich* economics ministry in 1934 resumed, and even accelerated, the efforts to standardize German vocational training. Thanks to this creation of common standards for vocational training, by the late 1930s the number of apprenticeship

positions being offered by German industry and *Handwerk*—close to a million each year—exceeded the number of available workers to fill them.<sup>48</sup>

The German vocational system begun in the 1920s could be created in full only after problems of incentives, information, and collective action were overcome. But the key to the success of the system would be the industrialists recognizing their skilled workers as one of their greatest resources.

# **NOTES**

- 1. Reichsanstalt fuer Arbeitsvermittlung und Arbeitslosenversicherung, Zehn Jahre Reichsanstalt fuer Arbeitsvermittlung und Arbeitslosenversicherung, 1927–1937 (Berlin: O. Elsner Verlagsgesellschaft, 1938), 39.
- 2. Here no attempt will be made to assess the precise contribution of Germany's skills base to its post-1950 economic success.
- 3. In his masterful dissertation, "Caps and Gowns: Historical Reflections on the Institutions that Shaped Learning for and at Work in Germany and the United States, 1800–1945" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 1997), Hal E. Hansen argues that the reintroduction in 1897 of a kind of artisanal guild became the cornerstone of the modern German vocational system (p. 367). He acknowledges, however, that even after the 1897 law it mattered tremendously how the changes it introduced were extended or modified (p. 500). This disagreement over emphasis notwithstanding, Hansen would likely agree with the overall thrust and many of the particular points of this paper. A more detailed comparison with his views on the German vocational system must await another day.
- 4. It may have only been natural that the American pioneers of researching human capital looked to their own society's means of developing human capital as the standard one. The quantitative bent of their field (economics) and their interest in relating questions of human capital to macroeconomic growth rates in developing countries and to distribution perhaps predisposed them to favor easily measurable indices of human capital and hence to years of general schooling. See the seminal article by Theodore Schultz, "Investment in Human Capital," in American Economic Review 51 (March 1961): 1–17; Gary S. Becker, Human Capital: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis, with Specific Reference to Education (New York: NBER, 1964); and, more recently, Claudia Goldin, "The Human Capital Century and American Leadership: Virtues of the Past," www.economics.harvard.edu/~goldin/papers (1997).
- 5. See the editors' introduction to Peter A. Hall and David Soskice, eds., Varieties

- of Capitalism: The Institutional Foundations of Comparative Advantage (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) for a helpful introduction to this school of research.
- 6. Peter Swenson, Capitalists against Markets: The Making of Labor Markets and Welfare States in the United States and Sweden (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) and Kathleen Thelen, How Institutions Evolve: The Political Economy of Skills in Germany, Britain, the United States, and Japan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), as well as Hansen, are valuable exceptions.
- 7. Walther G. Hoffmann, Das Wachstum der Deutschen Wirtschaft seit der Mitte des 19. Jahrhunderts (Berlin: Springer Verlag, 1965), 13.
- 8. Herwig Blankertz, Bildung im Zeitalter der grossen Industrie: Pädagogik, Schule und Berufsbildung im 19. Jahrhundert (Hanover: Schroedel, 1969), 103-4.
- 9. Gerhard Adelmann, "Die berufliche Ausbildung und Weiterbildung in der deutschen Wirtschaft, 1871–1918," in Berufliche Aus- und Weiterbildung in der deutschen Wirtschaft seit dem 19. Jahrhundert, ed. Hans Pohl (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1979), 19.
- 10. Ibid.
- 11. Derek S. Linton, "Who Has the Youth, Has the Future": The Campaign to Save Young Workers in Imperial Germany (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 73–97. Despite his careful empirical work, Linton views the continuation schools, as well as the other efforts to address the youth, largely through the lens of social control, leading him too often to downplay their economic role.
- 12. Ibid., 77.
- 13. After World War One, Prussia would make attendance at an industrial continuation school obligatory for all 14 to 18-year-olds not in other schools. In 1938 the National Socialists promulgated a similar law for all of Germany.
- 14. According to the once dominant *Sonderweg* paradigm in German history, this restoration of ostensibly protectionist guilds was part of the triumph of reactionary forces, such as *Handwerk*, eager to stave off inevitable demise, over progressive liberals. See, for example, Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *The German Empire*, 1871–1918, trans. Kim Traynor (Dover, NH: Berg, 1985). Even revisionist historians, who by now have themselves become dominant, describe the 1897 law as nothing but empty political gesturing meant to mollify the restive crafts movement. David Blackbourn, *The Long Nineteenth Century: A History of Germany*, 1780–1918 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 348.

- 15. For this reassessment of the purpose and impact of the 1897 law, see Hansen, 313–94.
- 16. Adelmann, "Die berufliche Ausbildung und Weiterbildung in der deutschen Wirtschaft, 1871–1918," 19.
- 17. Hansen explains industry's non-inclusion in terms of the mistrust between handicrafts and industry (pp. 363–64).
- 18. Because of the dearth of research into what industrialists, managers, and engineers of this period thought about their main business of producing and selling, only tentative suggestions can be made here.
- 19. Linton, "Who Has the Youth," 88. In 1912, for example, five of eighteen major machine-tool firms with numerous apprentices had their own training workshops.
- 20. Some of these strategies included encouraging company unions and extending company welfare policies. For the illuminating case of Siemens, see Heidrun Homburg, Rationalisierung und Industriearbeit: Arbeitsmarkt-Management-Arbeiterschaft im Siemens-Konzern Berlin 1900–1939 (Berlin: Haude und Spener, 1991).
- 21. Adelmann, "Die berufliche Ausbildung und Weiterbildung in der deutschen Wirtschaft, 1871–1918," 30.
- 22. Conrad Matschoss, Werner Siemens, 354, cited in Jürgen Kocka, Unternehmensverwaltung und Angestelltenschaft am Beispiel Siemens, 1847–1914: Zum Verhaeltnis von Kapitalismus und Buerokratie in der deutschen Industrialisierung (Stuttgart: Klett, 1969), 126.
- 23. Günter Spur, *Produktionstechnik im Wandel* (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1979), 11–23.
- 24. Ibid., 17.
- 25. Ibid., 184–90; Heidrun Homburg, "Anfaenge des Taylorsystems in Deutschland vor dem Ersten Weltkrieg," in Geschichte und Gesellschaft 4 (1978); Gabriele Wohlauf, "Moderne Zeiten—Normierung von Mensch und Machine," in Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der Psychologie und der Psychotechnik, ed. Horst Gundlach (Munich: Profil, 1996), 147–65.
- 26. Wohlauf, Moderne Zeiten, 153.
- 27. Georg Schlesinger, Psychotechnik und Betriebswissenschaft (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1920), 92–93.
- 28. The Zentralarbeitsgemeinschaft lasted from November 1918 until January 1924.
- 29. Homburg, Rationalisierung, 335-43. In 1913 annual turnover of the work

- force in the Berlin metal industry was 50 percent; by 1925, turnover had risen to 150 percent.
- 30. Ibid., 256-63.
- 31. Hans Motteck, as reported in Mary Nolan, Visions of Modernity: American Business and the Modernization of Germany (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 133.
- 32. Alfred D. Chandler, Jr., Scale and Scope, The Dynamics of Industrial Capitalism (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1990), 503.
- 33. Thomas von Freyberg, Industrielle Rationalisierung in der Weimarer Republik: Untersucht an Beispielen aus dem Maschinenbau und der Elektroindustrie (Frankfurt: Campus, 1989), 50.
- 34. Nolan, Visions of Modernity, 37-38.
- 35. See, for example, the most influential book on the American challenge, Das Wirtschaftliche Amerika (Berlin: V.D.I. Verlag, 1925), by Carl Koettgen, general-director of Siemens and vice-president of the National Productivity Board.
- 36. See, for example, the opening comments at the National Productivity Board meeting on June 21, 1924, by the head of the German Association of Engineers, Conrad Matschoss, who explicitly contrasted American "Fordist" and German methods (as reported in *Arbeit und Beruf* 17, September 10, 1924, 329); or those of psychology professor Hans Rupp writing in the cover story of the January 1928 issue of *Technische Erziehung*: "In rationalization of work, of the firm, of sales organization, other countries, especially America, are equal to or, thanks to the far greater company capitalization, partly superior to us. In terms of quality of the work and of the workers, in contrast, we need fear no competition. However, other countries are already striving to catch up, and we must devote the greatest attention to the thorough and economic training [of young workers]."
- 37. Arbeit und Beruf 17 (September 10, 1924).
- 38. Homburg, Rationalisierung; Freyberg, Industrielle Rationalisierung in der Weimarer Republik, 50; and Nolan, Visions of Modernity.
- 39. The number of apprentice workshops, which could be afforded only by the largest concerns, climbed from just thirty-nine in 1919 to sixty-seven by 1926, and there were significantly more workshops by the end of the decade. Wolfgang Muth, *Berufsausbildung in der Weimarer Republik* (Stuttgart: F. Steiner Verlag, 1985), 336–37.
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- 42. "Framing" alludes to the important role of conceptually organized contexts in decision making as analyzed by Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahnemann. See their seminal article "Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases," in *Science* 185 (1974): 1124–31.
- 43. Alin Gladin, "Berufliche Bildung in der deutschen Wirtschaft, 1918–1945," in Berufliche Aus- und Weiterbildung in der deutschen Wirtschaft seit dem 19. Jahrhundert, ed. Hans Pohl (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1979), 62.
- 44. Technische Erziehung 1 (January 1929): 4.
- 45. Technische Erziehung 6 (June 1928): 55.
- 46. For a similar case in which technological and organizational advances strengthened the tendency to view all problems as amenable to planning and calculation, see Martin van Creveld's chapter on military thinking in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century machine age, in Creveld, *Command in War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 148–88.
- 47. The reason for handicrafts' newfound willingness to cooperate with industry was the national government's draft of a vocational training law that *Handwerk*, like industry, deemed unsatisfactory. See Muth, *Berufsausbildung in der Weimarer Republik*, 337. Additionally, the industrial employers' obvious determination to cooperate on vocational training may have suggested to handicrafts that compromise was now the best option.
- 48. For a more detailed history of this "great cooperative endeavor," including its culmination under the National Socialist regime, see David Meskill, "Human Economies: Labor Administration, Vocational Training and Psychological Testing in Germany, 1914 to 1964" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2003).

# FROM SATIRE TO SELLING: STAN FREBERG'S VENTURE INTO ADVERTISING

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# ABSTRACT

Satirist, standup comic, cartoon voice actor, lyricist, writer, radio and television broadcaster, recording artist, pioneer advertising man—Californian Stan Freberg has been all of these. A household name in the 1950s, a recognized genius during the 1960s creative revolution in advertising, Freberg is now obscure. Nevertheless, a cult following remains and prominent, more recent artists such as George Carlin, Weird Al Yankovic, and the Beatles have considered him a strong comedic influence. Moreover, Advertising Age included him in their list of the top 100 advertising people of the twentieth century. From Satire to Selling outlines Freberg's career and shows how he changed advertising from the 1950s hard sell to the whimsical, sophisticated, yet effective methods of the 1960s.

Advertising is cyclical. According to Stephen Fox, "as a later history would repeatedly show, the public grew used to a certain style of advertising, stopped responding to it, but perked up when shown a new fashion."<sup>4</sup>

During the 1950s, advertising was in one of its hard-sell phases. Although many ad agencies relied on research, one major player, the Ted Bates agency, had little regard for the motivation research dominant at the time. Bates, under the influence of Rosser Reeves, focused on the Unique Selling Proposition (USP). The USP featured a single thought or theme hammered home by repetition. As a result, the era spawned slogans that reverberated in consumers' minds for decades. Among the Bates agency's famous (or infamous, depending on one's taste) slogans were "M&Ms melt in your mouth, not in your hands" and "Wonder Bread helps build strong bodies 12 ways." Reeves admitted that one Bates agency creation, the Anacin television commercials were "the most hated commercials in the history of advertising." Those advertisements featured animation and showed three boxes inside an outline of the human head. In one box was a pounding hammer, in another a coiled spring, and in the third a bolt of electricity. In the ad, Anacin stops the hammer, the spring, and the electricity.

- 41. Ibid.
- 42. "Framing" alludes to the important role of conceptually organized contexts in decision making as analyzed by Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahnemann. See their seminal article "Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases," in *Science* 185 (1974): 1124–31.
- 43. Alin Gladin, "Berufliche Bildung in der deutschen Wirtschaft, 1918–1945," in Berufliche Aus- und Weiterbildung in der deutschen Wirtschaft seit dem 19. Jahrhundert, ed. Hans Pohl (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1979), 62.
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Despite their lack of aesthetics, the triple-box Anacin commercials tripled the product's sales in eighteen months.<sup>6</sup>

The 1960s brought an incursion of sophisticated, creative advertising—the era of the soft-sell Volkswagen campaigns, the work of Mary Wells, and more.<sup>7</sup> But before that remarkable advertising work of the 1960s, there was Stan Freberg.

The son of a Baptist minister, Freberg was born in Southern California in 1926. On a whim during the summer after his graduation from high school, Freberg took a bus to nearby Hollywood and became an overnight show business success. Talented with a remarkable ability to do impersonations, Freberg was directed by a small talent agency to Warner Brothers where he worked with Mel Blanc, the legendary cartoon voice actor. Freberg also worked at other cartoon studios, did network radio acting, and ended up on the then-new medium of television as a voice actor and writer for *Time for Beany*.<sup>8</sup>

Beany was a unique, even revolutionary, children's show with humor that appealed to children and adults alike. Beany captured 70 percent of the television audience and, according to Freberg, Albert Einstein was among its viewers.<sup>9</sup>

Besides *Beany*, Freberg did work that presaged his 1950s satire. He wrote novelty songs that other performers used in their acts. So skillful was Freberg as a lyricist that he was invited to write the lyrics for a musical starring Marilyn Monroe. Contractual obligations to *Beany* forced him to decline the invitation. Freberg regrets that missed opportunity.<sup>10</sup>

In 1951, Freberg launched his career as a satirist. Mocking radio soap operas, he did both voices of what was supposed to be a couple going through a wide range of emotions while saying each other's names. The record, *John and Marsha*, became a major hit and gave Stan Freberg a national reputation.<sup>11</sup>

Two dominant forces in 1950s satire were Freberg and *Mad* Magazine. <sup>12</sup> Freberg's records sold in a steady stream. He did spoofs of the Cole Porter classic *I've Got You under My Skin* in 1951, Mitch Miller's *The Yellow Rose of Texas* in 1955, and Elvis Presley's *Heartbreak Hotel* in 1956. The tune *Cry* by the immensely popular singer Johnny Ray received the Freberg treatment in 1952. Initially Ray was miffed by the satire but later credited it with adding five to ten years to his career. <sup>13</sup> Freberg's spoof of Harry Belafonte's *Banana Boat (Day-O)* spawned catch phrases ("I come through the window"; "Man, like it's too piercing") which lasted long beyond the record's 1957 release. <sup>14</sup> According to Stephen Thompson, "Spike Jones wrote song parodies before him, but Freberg satirized music's style and performers, influencing countless comedians and song writers and selling millions of copies of everything from songs to miniature audio dramas." <sup>15</sup>

# FROM SATIRE TO SELLING

Freberg's records took satirical aim at the then-new medium of television. His 1953 St. George and the Dragonet and Little Blue Riding Hood satirized the popular police drama Dragnet and are credited with lifting Dragnet from number two to number one in the television ratings. Another target was The Lawrence Welk Show, a program that continues to air on public television years after the demise of its host. Freberg's 1957 record spoofs Welk's accent and diction, and the program's trademark champaign bubbles that rise from behind the orchestra.

While Welk took Freberg's kidding in stride,<sup>17</sup> Jack Webb, producer of *Dragnet* was enthusiastic. He allowed Freberg to use his orchestra to provide authentic theme music for the Freberg takeoff.<sup>18</sup> However, not all of Freberg's work was appreciated: Capitol Records refused to release his satires of two of the 1950s most powerful television personalities, Ed Sullivan and Arthur Godfrey. The recordings were not made public until 1999, years after the targets had died.<sup>19</sup>

In 1956, Freberg was attracted to advertising by Howard Gossage, creative director of the Brisacker-Wheeler & Staff agency in San Francisco.<sup>20</sup> Gossage, considered a genius of unconventional advertising,<sup>21</sup> hoped Freberg could help with a client problem. Freberg recalled the question put to him by Gossage:

"Have you ever done any advertising?"

"No."

"Good. Just the man I want."22

Gossage was commissioned to make Contadina tomato paste competitive with Hunts'. Freberg made Contadina tomato paste radio advertising cutting edge. It fit Gossage's anti-advertising philosophy and applied Freberg's skills in dialogue and lyric writing. Instead of using the hard-sell advertising technique common to the era, Freberg boldly downplayed the sponsor's name until the end of the commercial, where it was inserted in a way that seemed almost reluctant.<sup>23</sup>

Executives were reluctant to use Freberg's radical sketch, but a Contadina owner, Marty Marrici, gave his approval for its airing. The unique presentation attracted disc jockey chatter and multiplied the advertising impact of Freberg's work. Within months, Hunts was forced to cut prices and increase promotions to remain competitive.<sup>24</sup>

Reflecting on his first incursion into advertising, Freberg later said, "I was the most amazed guy in the world when I realized the success of the Contadina ad, but it turned out that millions of other people were entertained, too. I thought 'Boy oh boy, people are waiting for some honesty in advertising and for someone not to treat them like they're morons." Advertising Age called the campaign one of the two best marketing efforts of the year. 26

Freberg continued to work with Gossage after the latter's move to Cunnigham & Walsh.<sup>27</sup> Despite Gossage's support, Freberg said others at Cunningham & Walsh had difficulty grasping what he was doing: "How could it be *real* advertising? It seemed too much like entertainment. And, yet, it worked."<sup>28</sup>

One of Freberg's more unusual advertising efforts was for Butter-nut Coffee, a Midwestern company seeking entrance into the Southern California market. Admitting to getting carried away with the project, Freberg wrote a six-minute and thirty-five-second radio commercial entitled *Omaha!*, a takeoff on the extravagant production style of the musical *Oklahoma!* Freberg, playing a quivery-voiced character named Biff speaking to a stranger in Omaha, spoofed the tendencies of musicals to segue from dialogue to song.

Where was Freberg to find a radio station that would air the 395-second Butter-nut commercial? Station KMPC agreed to run the ad every afternoon after Dodgers baseball, prime afternoon drive time. Freberg purchased newspaper ads to announce the airing of *Omaha!* and it was promoted during the baseball game. Butter-nut sales quadrupled.<sup>29</sup>

In 1959 Freberg developed a strategy for selling Kaiser Aluminum Foil. Young & Rubicam advertising agency hired Freberg as a consultant to help them increase Kaiser's 5 percent market share. Reynolds Wrap enjoyed 80 percent of the market and Alcoa 10 percent. Kaiser's sales were so small that retailers denied them shelf space. Freberg created radio and animated television commercials about the trials of Clark Smathers, a Kaiser Aluminum Foil salesman, consigned to poverty because cruel grocers refused to stock his product. The ads featured a quasi-patriotic theme: Kaiser had the right to compete on store shelves with other brands. Freberg mailed to stores a "Grocer Survival Kit" complete with cardboard mallet to fend off overzealous salesmen from Kaiser. Along with other items of trade promotion, coupled with the advertising, the campaign yielded 43,000 new stores for the brand, increased morale at Kaiser, and nabbed a feature story in *Newsweek*.<sup>30</sup>

Freberg did not sacrifice his comedy career for advertising. He continued to produce hit records, and in 1957 CBS hired him to host a fifteen-week summer radio comedy show as a replacement for his hero, Jack Benny. Freberg's show was part of network radio's last gasp before succumbing to television. Although Freberg's program was popular, it was a commercial failure because Freberg declined spot advertising in favor of sponsorships and refused to allow interested tobacco companies to buy the program.<sup>31</sup>

Freberg was not afraid to turn his satire on his new profession of advertising.

#### FROM SATIRE TO SELLING

In 1958 he released a Capitol record entitled "Green Chri\$tma\$" that criticized the commercialization of Christmas.

In 1961, Freberg released a comedy album, *Stan Freberg Presents the United States of America, Volume I.* Besides developing a cult following that has lasted over forty years,<sup>32</sup> the album was referred to by musicologist Barry Hansen (known professionally as syndicated radio host Dr. Demento) as "the greatest history album in comedy or the greatest comedy album in history." It satirizes events in American history, including the landing of Columbus from a Native American perspective, pleas by liberal Thomas Jefferson to persuade conservative businessman Benjamin Franklin to sign the Declaration of Independence, and creative differences between George Washington and Betsy Ross over the appearance of the American Flag.

Freberg teamed up with producer David Merrick to put *United States of America* on the stage but abandoned the project over creative differences. It was not until the 1990s that he released volume 2 of the album and moved on to volume 3.

In the 1960s, an era of sophisticated creativity in advertising, the Leo Burnett agency (Jolly Green Giant, Pillsbury Doughboy, Tony the Tiger, and the Marlboro Man) from the Chicago school of advertising featured "simplicity, clarity, and people-talk. Straightforward without being flat-footed. Warm without being mawkish. The lighter the touch, the heavier the wallop." The 1960s brought David Olgivy, the legendary self-styled advertising classicist who built his reputation in the 1950s with landmark ads for Rolls Royce ("At 60 miles an hour the loudest noise in this new Rolls Royce comes from the electric clock") and the eye-patched, distinguished middle-aged "Man in the Hathaway Shirt." Doyle Dane Bernbach launched soft-sell sophisticated ads for Volkswagen Beetles, the Avis "We Try Harder" motto, and the campaign for a New York bakery that gained national attention by running beneath the headline "You Don't Have to Be Jewish to Love Levy's." Also influential in this era was "the richest, most celebrated woman in the history of the business," Mary Wells, a stunningly beautiful actress-turned-advertising executive, who moved from copy and new-products work at Doyle Dane Bernbach to her own agency, Wells, Rich, and Greene (Braniff Airline, Alka-Seltzer, and Benson & Hedges).34 The creative revolution was the ideal world for Stan Freberg.

During the 1960s, Freberg created work for various clients. While his ads were funny, they did not include humor for its own sake. The object, according to Freberg, was to sell the product: "Humor is such a fragile thing. Humor in advertising is like a gun in the hands of a child." Among his efforts were radio

commercials for an exterminating company. Freberg asked, "How can you make an exterminating company entertaining? I thought, 'Why not look at this from the termite's point of view? Has anyone ever given an insect a personality?'"<sup>36</sup>

Freberg frolicked through the creative revolution nipping the hand that fed him. He did a food ad in the stylistic language and production values of a typical car commercial of the day: "Look at the way she handles. In the bottom can: independent vegetable suspension, and in the top can—where the action is—over 27 cubic inches of succulent Chun King sauce, loaded with high performance chicken." Yet he also promoted advertising that the Radio Advertising Bureau called "probably the most famous radio commercial ever done." 38

MAN: Radio? Why should I advertise on radio? There's nothing to look at, no pictures.

FREBERG: Listen, you can do things on radio you couldn't possibly do on TV.

MAN: That'll be the day.

FREBERG: All right. Watch this. Okay, people, now when I give you the cue, I want the 700-foot mountain of whipped cream to roll into Lake Michigan, which has been drained and filled with hot chocolate. Then the Royal Canadian Air Force will fly overhead, towing a 10-ton maraschino cherry which will be dropped into the whipped cream to the cheering of 25 thousand extras. All right, cue the mountain.

SOUND: RUMBLING, SLIDING DOWN WAYS, HUGE SPLASH.

FREBERG: Cue the air force.

SOUND: DRONE OF LARGE NUMBER OF PROPELLER-DRIVEN BOMBERS OVERHEAD.

FREBERG: Cue the maraschino cherry.

SOUND: WHISTLE LIKE A BOMB DROPPING, ENDS IN GIANT SQUISH SOUND.

FREBERG: Okay, 25 thousand cheering extras.

SOUND: CROWD CHEERS.

FREBERG: Now. You wanna try that on television?

MAN: Well . . .

FREBERG: You see, radio is a very special medium because it stretches the imagination.

MAN: Doesn't television stretch the imagination?

FREBERG: Up to 27 inches, yeah.<sup>39</sup>

#### FROM SATIRE TO SELLING

Freberg had critics. Some charged that his advertising was more for Freberg than it was for his clients. At one time, *Advertising Age* had a "stop Freberg" campaign, <sup>40</sup> and some television producers were concerned about their programs looking bland when compared to the Freberg ads contained within them. <sup>41</sup> In the 1950s Freberg pitched CBS on the idea of a comedy television show that featured creative, well-executed commercials as well as program content. He was told in no uncertain terms that he was not commercial enough for the network's tastes, and even though he had sold millions of records he did not know how to move products to consumers. <sup>42</sup>

The creative revolution in which Freberg flourished was in full bloom by the late 1960s, but it evaporated almost as quickly as it had appeared. Again, the cyclical nature of advertising took hold.

The pendulum was reaching the limit of its swing. During the first seven months of 1969, nearly one hundred new agencies were launched. Most of them quickly disappeared. So many creative awards were being given out by so many bodies that they lost any meaning . . . By the time *Newsweek* got around to putting the creative revolution on its cover, in August 1969, it was stale news. $^{43}$ 

Freberg continued in advertising for decades, but his productivity dropped off after 1970. In many respects the 1970s advertising landscape became more like that of the 1950s. "Hard sell became appropriate for the tighter economic climate at the start of the decade. Creative awards no longer guaranteed jobs and promotions. Agencies instead sought marketing MBAs, people who understood the nuts and bolts of pricing, distribution, and packing."

Although Freberg was not the first to use humor in advertising, he has been called the Father of the Funny Commercial.<sup>45</sup> At a time when advertising was irritating and insulting, Freberg created witty ads that respected the consumer and zeroed in on the client's marketing issues. And he was in the right place at the right time: the forefront of the 1960s creative revolution. In the course of his career, he has won three Emmys, one Grammy, the Radio Advertising Bureau's Orson Welles Award, and the Venice Film Festival's Grand Prix. His advertising has won twenty-one Clios, and he has a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.<sup>46</sup>

Freberg's involvement in advertising has chilled since the creative revolution, but he remains active doing comedy work for NPR and the BBC,<sup>47</sup> along with a radio commentary series. Currently he is working on a third volume of *Stan* 

Freberg Presents the United States of America, and he can be heard on the syndicated radio program "When Radio Was."

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