

[Back to index](#)**Thomas Frank****The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism****(Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1997).****by Matthew Hilton
(University of Birmingham)**

In 1965, an advertisement appeared in America promoting Booth's House of Lords Gin. It featured a tie with the words 'Protest against the rising tide of conformity' written along its length, in a style vaguely familiar with the anarchic, drug-inspired aesthetic of the 1960s counterculture. Despite gin being a very conservative, conformist drink, this new advertisement encouraged consumers to feel different, individualistic and alternative in their consumption; a kind of anti-consumerist consumerism. For many, this is a classic case of co-optation, of how business appropriated the radical forms of an emerging subculture, diluted its message, and thus brought into the capitalist mainstream those trends initially set up in opposition to it..

In his history of American advertising and fashion in the 1960s, however, Thomas Frank polemically disagrees. Over and over again he forcibly argues that a 'Creative Revolution' took place within the advertising industry so that new agencies emerged which not only consciously rebelled against 'the men in the grey flannel suits' of 1950s Madison Avenue, but which were filled with young, talented, vibrant, advertising 'artists' who were as much a part of the counterculture as the very people to whom they tried to bring into their consumerist world. According to Frank, 1950s advertising agencies had become stuck in a homogenous rut, replaying the messages and scientifically calculated practices of an earlier era. But through the development of new agencies - self-consciously 'hip' against the older 'square' - advertisements began to move away from the promotion of the utopia of progressive American consumerism, and towards a more reflexive, ironic, individualistic style which deliberately positioned products as the means by which to break away from the stultifying monotony of the mass society of the 1950s. In their anarchic reactions to conformity, in their celebration of individual creativity and in their struggle for difference, these new advertisers were part of the same general cultural revolution of the 1960s which deliberately set itself up in opposition to the perceived conservatism of the earlier decade. According to Frank, then, business and culture should not be viewed as two separate entities, but as related aspects of wider social changes. Advertisements did not try to 'co-opt' - or follow the lead taken by - the counterculture to serve the ends of business. Instead, the advertisements of agencies such as Doyle Dane Bernbach and Papert Koenig Lois actually coincided with, and sometimes even prefigured, 1960s counterculture.

It is a point worthy of merit, and Frank provides a detailed analysis of these new agencies and their eventual impact on the larger, older, institutions, such as J Walter Thompson. But the book also misses much that one would think necessary in such a study. The most glaring omission is of quantitative evidence of any kind. The prevalence of so-called 'hip' advertising in *Ladies Home Journal* and *Life* magazine is recorded in a sparse appendix, but there is nothing on other magazines, nor on the effectiveness of these advertisements, either on sales, profits or consumer behaviour. Further, Frank too readily assumes the explosive impact these smaller agencies had on the industry as a whole and does not explore the reasons why the larger agencies copied their advertising styles. Surely, here, there is room to suggest that these economically more powerful bodies were deliberately and cynically co-opting trendier styles to serve their own interests, thus providing an alternative explanation for the successful influence of the minority 'Creative Revolution'. In his almost whiggish celebration of the new style gurus, Frank perhaps deliberately overplays the influence of the hip, the young and the creative both as a means to demarcate the 1950s from the 1960s and to emphasise the important relationship between business and culture. And in doing so, he offers his own 'hip' version of business history, full of hyperbole and quirky mannerisms of style, familiar to the readers of journalistic cultural commentary but less so to more orthodox academic histories. Yet, have some patience with this book and indulge him in his exaggeration, his verbosity and his premature fanfare, for there is a basic point about the relationship between the economy and culture that those interested in the history of business would do well to consider.