Swedish Business and the Political Radicalism of the 1960s – the Case of Advertising

Introduction

The political radicalization of the Western World in the late 1960s and early 1970s has attracted significant attention in social and historical studies. Focus has been on the social and political movements whose emergence at the time is understood by many as being the starting point of a new political era. The refusal of these new collective actors to play by the rules of the established collective actors has led to a politics that is no longer decided by selected interest groups and political parties behind closed doors. Instead, politics is defined by a constant battle for agenda setting, using various communicatory strategies to influence public opinion. Actors now include not just the aforementioned political parties and interest groups, but social movements, international organizations and various individual “political entrepreneurs”.

The radical and social movements thus have contributed to new rules for political interaction, although the new rules of engagement do include a mix of “inside strategies” (lobbyism) and “outside strategies” (public opinion). According to Manin the era of “party democracy” has been replaced by one of “audience democracy”.1

An important aspect of gaining a deeper understanding of how these changes came about is historical analysis of key collective actors during this time of transition: how did the emerging new movements interact with the established ones, and, more saliently, what do we know of the views and strategies of these actors?

In the Swedish context this interaction has previously been studied from the perspective of the radical movements, using empirical sources pertaining to organizations and movements considered part of the radical environment. However, the established collective actors that reacted to and interacted with these movements have rarely been subjected to this type of study. This is particularly significant with regard to the collective Swedish business community.

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1 Offe (1987); Habermas (1981); Inglehart (1990); Kriesi et al. (2004), pp. 1–12; Manin (1997); Bjereld & Demker (2005); Klimke (2010).
With criticism of market oriented corporatist society being a key component of the radical movements’ ideals, the business community was a decisive actor in this process, whose views and strategies must be studied to understand how the conditions for political exchange developed. The chapter therefore aims to look closer at the views and strategies of the Swedish business community in relation to the radical social movements that surfaced in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and how these can be understood in a changing wider political context of weakened corporatist “party democracy” and emerging “audience democracy”.2

The chapter will single out one aspect of business that was subject to debate between it and the radical social movements – advertising. The debate on advertising offers a rich empirical material to analyze the interaction between the radical movements and the business community. As the most visible mechanism of the market economy and the subject of increasing social controversy as it accompanied the material affluence of the post-war years, it was perhaps no surprise that it caught the attention of the political radicals.3

As can be seen in the literature, business was at this time represented by organized interest groups active within the political economy. The new radical movements, on the other hand, were characterized, at least initially, by an outsider status. These different societal positions are points of departure for the theoretical concepts “old politics” and “new politics”, whereby the business community and other established collective actors of the political economy constitute the former category, while the radical movements are part of the latter. This dichotomy is similar, or at least related, to that of “party democracy” and “audience democracy”.4

According to Offe, “old politics” defined western societies during the period of 1945–1970. At this time, the main issues on the political agenda were, on the one hand, economic growth and distribution, and, on the other hand, social and military control. The freedom and security of private consumption and material advancement were central values, while the dominant mode of action was pluralist or corporatist interest intermediation by interest groups and political competition by parties within a liberal democratic setting. The main actors remained interest groups representing socioeconomic collectives.5

Offe sees politics subjected to a paradigmatic change during the late 1960s. Three specific transformations are highlighted: a rise of participatory ideals, an increased use of noninstitutional or unconventional modes of political action and an inclusion of issues into the political arena that until then were considered moral or economic. Taking the lead in this development were what Offe defines as New Social Movements (NSM), whose members were

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2 Salomon (1996); Östberg (2002); Hedén (2008); Ljunggren (2009); Bergman (2010).
3 The controversy of advertising continues into the present; see Pardun (2009).
4 Habermas (1981); Offe (1987); Inglehart (1990).
recruited from the new middle class, the old middle class and individuals outside or loosely attached to the labor market, such as students. From these movements emanated “new politics”. The issues of the “new politics” focused on universal human rights and ecological concerns. Its main values were personal autonomy and identity politics, opposing centralized power. Modes of action were informal and nonhierarchical collective protest politics in the public sphere delivered from an external societal position, based on denouncing the negative aspects of the status quo. The NSMs claimed not to act out of self-interest, instead declaring themselves to represent repressed social groups to whom they ascribed certain qualities. The NSM adopted an ideological nonnegotiable stance on issues, which was strengthened by the fact that they, unlike the formal interest groups of “old politics”, lacked anything to bargain with in return for concessions. This led to a dismissal of their demands by the representatives of “old politics” as ridiculous, politically ineffectual and a hindrance to progress.  

While this theory has been criticized for having a leftist political bias, both in empirical selection and normative interpretation, and similar movements are said to have appeared before in time, the dichotomy of “old politics” and “new politics” is a useful concept in this analysis. Firstly, the study focuses on the time period of the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the radical movements arguably were new collective actors without an established societal position, with students constituting a major part of their ranks. Secondly, the debate on the societal role of advertising exhibits arguments from the two opposing actors that appear to fit in quite well with this dichotomy. But the characteristics of Offe’s model will be tested against the empirical material, with the concepts used more as ideal types than as descriptive definitions of the overall attributes of the business community and the radical movements.

Within the context of the Swedish social and historical setting, research on the response of the business community to 1960s radicalism has been scant. Ullenhag’s analysis of the influential business think tank Studieförbundet Näringsliv och Samhälle (SNS) is an exception. She shows that SNS sought to directly engage with these movements. SNS initiated panel debates between radical students and CEOs of major Swedish firms, and published two debate books on the societal criticism of business, where these movements’ views on the business community were discussed and analyzed. SNS also presented arguments counter to those of the movements, defending the principles of a market economy and liberal democracy.

SNS saw political radicalism originating in student circles, and concentrated on confronting the views in this milieu. SNS also recommended business representatives to actively engage the radicals in the public sphere. As these

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7 Weir (1993); Pichardo (1997); Tarrow (1988); Tarrow (1996).
individuals in the near future would comprise the political, bureaucratic and media elites, ignoring them was not an option. This contrasted with the absence of a forceful public reaction to leftist radicalism from the larger Swedish business associations, such as the Employer’s Association (SAF), whose awakening to the wide-ranging possibilities of using public opinion to further goals of business did not occur until the early 1970s.9

The radical movements and criticism of advertising

The new radical left included criticism of advertising as part of an overall critique of the post-war consumer society, based on writings by international intellectuals such as Marx, Adorno and Horkheimer, Marcuse, Galbraith and Packard, as well as by their Swedish counterparts. The radical left saw advertising through a predominantly Marxist perspective. Advertising was attacked for its negative social and economic effects. To the NSMs, it was a manipulative tool of capitalists, used to induce consumers into increasing private consumption to guarantee rising profits. This created illusory happiness and alienation from “true human needs”, as well as ecological strains and a waste of economic resources better spent on public goods. These views were vented in public demonstrations, media appearances, debate books and press articles, theatre plays and direct political actions. The movements’ lack of access to established channels of political power was compensated through an innovative and daring use of both old and new media. The success of these movements has been tied to the emergence of a “communications society”, where symbolic images and messages in the public sphere have acquired increased political impact. The intellectual background of many of the movements’ leaders – some of them had or would obtain strong positions in academia or mass media – also helped them hone their rhetorical powers, something SNS admitted was a problem when confronting them.10

Furthermore, the advertising criticism of the radical movements blended with that of consumer activists and more established intellectual critics who had debated advertising since the 1950s. Both new and old critics of advertising claimed it increased the price of products, lacked relevant consumer informa-

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tion and was used in the creation of costly competition between brands. The main difference between the criticism of the 1950s and that of the late 1960s was that the radical movements contextualized their criticism of advertising within a larger ideological critique of the whole socio-economic order. This type of criticism had initially been presented in the 1957 publication of Sven Lindqvist’s controversial book *Reklamen är livsfarlig* (Advertising is lethal), which accused advertising of being a tool to ensnare people in an unhealthy materialistic life style, devoid of true feelings and civic duty. However, as the author noted in a foreword in the 2001 edition of the book, the Marxist criticism of advertising that became “all the rage ten years later” stated that his book “was much too tame and politically unaware ... what it attacked, they suggested, was only the symptoms of capitalism, not its central core.”

A wider ideological critique also developed inside the politically influential labor movement, which went through a radicalization in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This was reflected in its views on the relationship between advertising, consumption and the market economy, which was defined as inherently problematic: advertising helped shift resources from public to private consumption, it was stated. This equated with waste, as the market was defined as incapable of satisfying the basic and primary needs of a democratic society. Thus, stronger state control over the consumer market was put forward by the labor movement. Under the auspices of the governing Social Democrats, an extensive state regulatory regime was launched in 1971 to handle both producer competition and consumer rights issues. The negative position that the radical movements had on advertising was thus part of a societal trend, which included both powerful collective actors of “old politics” and individual critics.

The business view on advertising and on the radical movements

Organized business interests identified criticism of advertising as one main grievance of the radicals. This was one of the points made in a SNS book published in 1969 on students’ views on business. In the book, a referred survey on student attitudes to business showed that at least half of the students had a negative view on advertising. While up to a third of the students were critical of advertising regardless of political sympathies, those with socialist leanings registered higher, with 60–70 percent of those favoring the largest communist

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party adopting a critical stance. A similar survey aimed at more diverse social groups ordered by the Federation of Swedish Industries in 1969 garnered similar results, with negative attitudes on advertising prevailing.14

The business position, as voiced by several associations, individual business leaders and some academics, was that advertising was a necessary component of a functioning market economy. Mass production made possible lower prices, and advertising was thus the most efficient way to inform consumers of market choice and foster market competition. The consumer market was also demand driven, with advertising merely a reflection of producers responding to the whims and wants of consumers. There were no all-encompassing “true needs”; instead, needs were heterogeneous, something a capitalist market was best at satisfying. Advertising contributed to a dynamic market economy that drove product development and economic growth and resulted in higher standards of living, it was asserted. As part of the market economy, business argued, advertising was a mechanism that helped uphold a democratic society, with freedom of choice a central tenet. The business community also maintained that advertising was more truthful than news media or politics, as it received immediate and crucial response from consumers, who would not buy products that did not live up to expectations.15

The criticism of the radical movements was usually dismissed as either based on uniformed opinions on how the economy actually worked, or proof that the critics had a socialist agenda, wanting to replace the regulated market of the corporatist state with an undemocratic planned economy, turning Sweden into a sort of China or Cuba. While these undeveloped rural countries might benefit from socialist rule in their effort to modernize, an already modern country such as Sweden would become dysfunctional under such a regime. The radicals were described as pampered youths who had been removed from the harsh realities of life thanks to the peaceful and prosperous times they had grown up in. However, individual representatives of the business community voiced concerns that some of the radical criticism, although exaggerated and deformed, was based on real problems. The alienation of youth from reality was an unfortunate effect of the development of the advanced post-war society which could not be blamed on the youths themselves, one critic noted. Economic growth and material gains had come at the expense of ecological strains, and the onslaught of modern communications, of which advertising played no small part, had generated information overload and intrusion of privacy, another wrote. The low quality of some advertisements in combination with their pervasiveness was also, according to one influential writer, to blame for the low standing and controversial societal position of advertising

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in Swedish society. The CEO of the Marketing Association suggested in an article published in 1968 that an antagonistic educated middle class youth, termed “a new establishment”\(^\text{16}\) had to be approached on their terms, i.e. with dialogue and a measure of respect for opposing views. If demands were placed on business to acknowledge its faults, business had to answer instead of ignoring the issue. Thus, business opposition to radicalism was to a degree tempered with an acceptance that something had gone amiss in the fabric of corporatist Sweden.\(^\text{17}\)

Strategies of business – looking for support in “old politics”

Business tried to offer an alternative interpretation of advertising, linking it to economic growth, consumer choice and democracy. The business associations representing the ad agencies, the advertisers, the media carriers and general marketing issues were especially active.\(^\text{18}\) However, business leaders often felt that their message did not get a warm reception in the public sphere. Swedish radio and TV was generally perceived by business associations at the end of the 1960s as increasingly biased towards the critics of business and the political left.\(^\text{19}\) The major tabloids were also accused of harboring left-leaning opinions, and siding with the radicals. SNS released a string of books that discussed what was seen as a strong impact of radical views on media treatment of business issues. Historical research has acknowledged that public service TV, particularly with the advent of a second channel SVT2 in 1969, became at this time part of the radicalized environment and produced programs that not only attracted the ire of business but also angered Social Democracy.\(^\text{20}\)

Research has shown that Swedish media in the 1960s made a transition from adopting a courteous approach towards figures of authority to a more

\(^{16}\) Den svenska Marknaden 7–8/1968.


\(^{18}\) The associations were The Advertising Association of Sweden (ad agencies), The Association of Swedish Advertisers (advertisers), The Associations of Swedish Publishers (media carriers), The Swedish Marketing Association (general marketing issues) and the Association of Swedish Industries. Björklund (1967); Carlberg, (1999), pp. 96–97.

\(^{19}\) As commercial television and radio at this time was banned by law, public service had a media monopoly on broadcast media; see Hadenius (1998).

critical and investigative stance. Combined with the participatory ideals and antiauthoritarian stance of leftist radicalism, the new public arena turned into a hot spot for established societal actors. This change caught both politicians and business leaders off guard, and contributed to the difficulties of business leaders in shouldering a public role where they were forced to defend their actions within a political and moral context.  

The advertising debate had its own poignant example in the controversy following the airing of a social commentary TV-program _Storforum_ in 1968. The topic of one episode was advertising and consumption. In the show, a number of invited business leaders were “ambushed” by young angry radical students, who not only criticized them, but also heaped scorn and insults on business in general. Shocked by what they perceived as a capitulation of the principle of public service neutrality, several business association leaders discussed a concerted major media offensive against critics of advertising. However, this finally came to naught, as some members got cold feet realizing that an openly confrontational political display by business risked pitting them against the radicalized labor movement, further weakening an already damaged corporatist consensus.

Largely failing to make an impression in the public sphere, business associations concentrated on internal efforts and insider strategies (lobbying) to mobilize against the critics. Some business associations sought the public support of members of the Swedish parliament, while others contacted leading members of Social Democracy who were not perceived as part of radicalization, such as the Department of Finance. While they usually received support for a regulated market economy and a general denouncement of the radicals’ view of corporatist society, they seldom got the same endorsement for advertising. As powerful finance minister Sträng put it in 1969 to one delegation; “The advertising business shouldn’t need help to advertise advertising.”

One effect of the unsuccessful public relations efforts was that both SNS and the Swedish Market Association in the early 1970s instituted internal media training programs aimed at making business representatives better at deflecting and facing public criticism of business. Newspaper campaigns were also launched by some associations, defending advertising. In addition, a number of paperback debate books and information folders were produced by business representatives and business associations in the late 1960s and early 1970s that analyzed and countered the arguments of critics. Perhaps most interesting was _Reklam och näringsliv svarar sina kritiker_ (Advertising

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and Business Answers its Critics). It was published in 1969, and was based on research commissioned by the associations involved in the failed attempt at launching a media offensive against the critics of advertising. The book was divided into two parts, with the first containing interviews with critics of advertising, and the second the answers to this criticism by business leaders. The young radicals had a prominent place in the book, and were generally dismissed as impossible to talk to, as they did not agree upon the basic premises of a democratic society, i.e. a free market and liberal party system. As stated earlier, a number of direct panel debates also took place, although business preferred to discuss with established critics rather than radical students. Most debates ended with both parties in agreement that they did not agree upon anything.  

It is unknown what impact these efforts of the business community had on the public and political discourse on advertising in Sweden, but the general mood of the associations and the advertising industry indicates that they were dismayed at the difficulty of strengthening the business position on advertising in public. Comments in the trade press reveal some satisfaction with the new state regulatory regime, launched in 1971, as it was hoped that it would lead to a quieting of the radical criticism of advertising, as many of these critics had called for state intervention. Business thus expected that moving the issue from the public sphere into the established corporatist political arena would enable it to use intermediary contacts with other established collective actors to manage the situation, far away from the troublesome public sphere.

However, many of the government commissions of the late 1960s and early 1970s, such as the Consumer Commission, the Advertising Commission, and new consumer bodies such as the Consumer Board were criticized in the trade press for excessive market criticism. Business expressed fears that the messages of the radical movements had influenced actors inside the political economy, particularly the labor movement, who wielded much influence in government and the policy process. Some of these commission reports also caused major public debates. Thus, the transition of the issue of advertising into the political arena did not dampen the public debate, only changing its focus. The main difference was that it was business and liberals that now stood for much of the debate and criticism. As the mid 1970s approached, the influence of radicalism appeared to wane. The last report of the Advertising Commission was delivered in 1974 in the midst of the first major economic crisis of the post-war era and a year after the Social Democrats almost lost the government after decades of power. While previous commission reports had


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supported the views of commission representatives that were critical of advertising, such as Sven Lindqvist, and successfully supported a tax on advertising in 1972 and a no to commercial television in 1973, this one backed the views of its pro-advertising business representatives. It stated that advertising was part of a free market, which in itself was a natural part of Sweden’s political economy, and refuted Lindqvist’s ideas of introducing a production cap on advertising volume, tax breaks for “ethically approved advertising” and mandatory corrective advertising.  

“Old politics” vs. “new politics” – the whole picture?
The ideal types of “old politics” and “new politics” seemingly fit quite well with the debate on advertising between the business associations and the new radical movements. Advertising was defended by business as part of a free and democratic society, guaranteeing economic and material gains. It was jointly criticized by the radical movements as nourishing a manipulative capitalism that hurt society’s citizens, as well as the ecological environment. The two groups did not agree upon much. The lack of understanding or mutual agreement can be attributed to the political and practical incompatibility of the two concepts suggested by Offe and others. This falls in line with Offe’s definitions of “old politics” and “new politics”, with business representing the former and the new radical movements the latter. However, the views and strategies of the business community regarding radical criticism of advertising cannot be fully explained by this model.

The issue of the advertising controversy was not isolated to these two collective actors. A continuing debate on advertising had existed since the 1940s, including on the critical side trade unions, cooperative movements, intellectuals, academics, consumer activists and journalists. At the end of the 1960s, advertising criticism had thus been an established societal issue in the public sphere for decades. This was also contextualized within a wider criticism of rising modern leisure consumption, and the risks of households’ spending on supposedly unnecessary luxury or low-quality products. Aléx and Husz have shown that a strong normative discourse on the “true needs” of the household permeated households, social movements, consumer activists, women’s organizations and education facilities in 20th century Sweden. Advertising was regarded as suspicious and manipulative, by default placing business in the role of “bad guy” when advertising was debated in public.  

Research has also shown that the normative view of the consumer in policy circles in Sweden shifted in the late 1960s from seeing the consumer as an

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independent market actor in need of just additional consumer information to a weak actor in the hands of the producers, leading to demands for state control over the consumer market in order to strengthen consumer power. Social Democracy had a crucial role in this changing perspective, as key representatives of the labor unions pushed for this shift in various commissions on consumer matters. The leftist radicalization of parts of Social Democracy also helped to legitimize the message of the radicals – the market could not fulfill all the needs of the citizens, and the state needed to step in to do so. Although the labor movement wanted to do this within a corporatist context that the radicals condemned, they united in their pressure on business. The criticism of consumer activists and journalists added to this weight.

With several societal groups being critical of advertising, including powerful players in the “old politics”, it became hard for business to win the debate against the radicals, as some of the arguments and views of the radicals were shared by other established actors. Adding to the difficulties was the admission by some business representatives that some inherent fault in contemporary society was partly to blame for the appearance of radicalism, and that the radicals could not be ignored due to their future place in the political and social elites. The attempts by SNS and advertising industry representatives to discuss advertising in live panel debates with the radicals can also be seen as an attempt by business to initiate, however futile, some kind of intermediation. Thus, the clear line of conflict between the collective actors of “old politics” and those of the “new politics” postulated in Offe’s model is not supported by the empirical evidence. Instead, the views and strategies of the business community must be seen with regard to fundamental changes in the wider political context.

As stated by Fulcher, corporatist theory does a good job explaining the actions of Swedish Social Democracy up until the early 1960s, but from the late 1960s until the mid 1970s, a more radicalized Social Democracy is better understood through the labor movement theory, also referred to as the power resources theory, emphasizing the power struggle between labor and capital. Pressured by member dissatisfaction with working conditions and wage level distribution, Social Democracy partially abandoned intermediation and consensus for a Marxist inspired policy, using political power to curtail business influence and increase that of trade unions and the public sector. Business was suddenly in conflict with its previously reliable partner.

Thus the quick response of advertising industry associations to the advertising criticism coming from the 1960s radicalism can be explained by the...

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28 SAP-LO gruppen i prisfrågor (1968); Konsumentutredningen (1969); Konsumentutredningen (1971); SAP–LO:s konsumentpolitiska arbetsgrupp (1972); LO/TCO (1972).
combined pressure that was exerted on the advertising industry from various collective and individual actors. The changing political landscape favored the critics not only in the public arena, but risked doing so in that of policy as well. The progress of the debate on advertising can be interpreted as an example of how “party democracy” in the late 1960s and early 1970s was starting to give way to “audience democracy”.

In this changing political climate, the main fear of business was not the small radical movements themselves, but rather their ability to use public opinion to influence powerful political actors within “old politics” to adopt their ideas and turn them into policies restricting advertising. With factions of Social Democracy championing consumer policies as part of the new regime of “Democratic Socialism”, this was perceived as a real threat. This in turn explains the “outside strategies” of confronting the radicals on their own turf, the public arena, and at the same time trying to compensate the poor results of the “outside strategy” with “inside strategies”, by hoping to convince Social Democracy of the irrelevancy and danger of the radicals’ ideas. While “inside strategies” were part of the old regime of policy politics, the importance of “outside strategies” in the public arena had suddenly become an acute issue for business and its interest groups. The initial success of the radicals and the failure of business in agenda setting were augmented by the boldness and rhetorical skills of the radical movements’ representatives, as well as the critical attitude to business that had developed inside much of media and the outdated media strategies of business representatives. By realizing the growing power of public opinion, preparatory compensatory actions were set in motion by mainly business associations. These included media training, strategic analysis, public debates as well as the production of debate books, pamphlets and newspaper campaigns. Although these appears to have had limited impact on public opinion, the advertising debate was an early opportunity for Swedish business interests to become acquainted with and adapt to the new political landscape that in the coming years increasingly would be shaped by the power of the media and those strong enough to wield it.
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