Book Review: Racist Trademarks: Slavery, Orient, Colonialism and Commodity Culture

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Since the beginning of commodity culture, products have been marketed with images reflecting racist concepts of otherness. Using the prominent examples of three companies – Uncle Ben's, Sarotti and Banania – **Malte Hinrichsen** *examines how racist trademark figures were established in the U.S., Germany and France and built on nation-specific processes of racial stereotyping.* **Bengi Bezirgan** *thinks this book might call the attention of anyone interested in various forms of racial exclusion.*

Racist Trademarks: Slavery, Orient, Colonialism and Commodity Culture. Malte Hinrichsen. LIT Verlag. January 2013.

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Based on his award-winning dissertation, Malte Hinrichsen's first book *Racist Trademarks: Slavery, Orient, Colonialism and Commodity Culture* is published as a part of the *Racism Analysis* research series on racial discrimination and its changing historical, ideological, and cultural patterns. As the name of the book suggests, Hinrichsen tracks the footprints of racist trademarks in advertising among different historical and contextual backgrounds. In order to indicate how racism and racial images are (re)produced and consumed within visual and discursive fields in commodity culture, the author examines *Uncle Ben's* in the United States, *Sarotti-Mohr* in Germany, and *Banania's Tirailleur Sénégalais* in France.

The motive for Hinrichsen's selection of these three trademarks is their employment of both visual and discursive racial stereotypes of black figures in the advertising campaigns. From the outset, Hinrichsen discusses how a visual language of superiority developed in conjunction with slavery, Orientalism and colonialism. Consequently universal but at the same time distinct, practices of commodity racism appeared in the first half of the 20th century. The trademark figures of *Uncle Ben's*, *Sarotti-Mohr* and *Banania* were created in 1947, 1928 and 1915 respectively. Racialised advertising is considered as an exemplary field to grasp the specific histories of racial representations in each country.

Chapter 2, 'Histories of Racial Stereotypes', scrutinises the racial characteristics and racial stereotyping of these three figures, the promoted products and their connection to historical events by adopting comparative perspective. As a methodological concern, Hinrichsen underlines "the ambiguity of racial stereotyping" and its relevance for his study due to the alleged distinction between "positive" and "negative" stereotyping where the concept of "black" turns out to be a "packaging" term. He also touches upon the standpoint of white stereotyping as involving active subjects in the process of racialisation. More importantly, in the analysis of the evolution of ideas of race and racism along with (pseudo) scientific explanations, the shared mind-set about the Black "others" and also distinct national discourses are situated at the centre of the arguments throughout the study.

During the times of slavery and colonialism and orientalist ideas, the two-faced idea of armed "Others"-Africans- in US bears resemblance to European perception of Africans that are presented as "either protective when kept in certain conditions or as a brutal criminal threatening white women" (p.37). Particularly the rape myth and sexualisation of black males in the United States, Germany, and France has led to the exoticizing of their otherness and attributes. However, one interesting finding about these countries is that thanks to their common history of racial theories and hierarchies, the United States and France managed to integrate "inland blacks through their belittlement in popular culture" but Germany proceeded to regard them as "a symbol of exoticism and distance, available just to elites and nobility" (p.46).

Following this claim, Hinrichsen draws our attention to the linkage between the black characters in advertising for products such as chocolate, cocoa, and coffee, and identification of their consumption with the social class and status of the consumer in a society. He supports this well-known inference by elaborating the geographical and historical effects on the perceptions of products and their racial connotations. In other words, consumption of particular products stands for different symbolic meanings and suggests the social class and status of the consumer depending on the dominant European and U.S. views about racial hierarchy and their commodification processes. In this case, the interplay between race and consumption in the U.S. is different from its counterparts in Europe because *Banania* in France and *Sarotti-Mohr* in Germany were launched in the markets as "supposedly exotic products" based on existing colonial fantasies, but *Uncle Ben* signifies an "everyday commodity which, in a different way, can be associated with the colour of his skin" (p.56).

The importance of Chapter 3, 'The Commodification of Racial Images', lies in its capability to demonstrate theoretical discussions on the simultaneously increasing of commodity culture/racism and racialised advertising discourse. Hinrichsen also explains in this chapter how various roles are ascribed to "otherness" and racial stereotypes are utilised to increase exchange and perceived value of products. In addition, the author seeks to answer the illuminating question of "whether and to what extent the figures' inherent racism contributed to the products' success" (p.79). Although these three figures transmit different messages to the consumers in their respective societies, the U.S. has always influenced the black representations and racial trademark stereotypes and consumption patterns of racialised products in other countries. Therefore, Hinrichsen approves Larry Greene's argument in his book chapter "Race in the Reich: The African American Press on Nazi Germany" that "the globalization of America's home-grown racism" has direct effects on European racial imagery and market of racialised products. In this reviewer's reading, the discussions on stereotypes, anti-racist, and anti-colonial movements since 20th century in conjunction with the reactions of companies to the criticisms directed at their racial trademark figures constitute the most inspiring part of the third chapter. Even if *Uncle Ben's* in United States, *Sarotti-Mohr* in Germany, and *Banania's Tirailleur Sénégalais* in France were obliged to rearrange their marketing strategies, and both the physical traits and symbolic subtexts of their figures, their so-called modifications and adaptations to the changing settings would remain superficial. Unsurprisingly the modification of these three figures depending on the social circumstances was again founded on "recognition-value of the original characters" (p.97).

Overall *Racist Trademarks* is an insightful book that brings theoretical analyses of racism, colonialism, slavery, and Orientalism together in an exploration of three influential trademarks within a comparative historical perspective. Another attention-grabbing aspect of this book is the use of 54 visual materials that enable the reader to comprehend the author's arguments easily and develop their own interpretations about the racialised figures in both visual and discursive ways. In the book, there are only five chapters including a short introduction and conclusion as well as bibliography. Chapter 2 and 3 cover the main topics and arguments accordingly offer compact information. Hinrichsen's critical thinking would have been strengthened by addressing the discourses of cultural racism particularly in Europe and a more in-depth inquiry about the relation between the (re)construction of commodity culture and political developments in respective countries. This book might call the attention of anyone interested in various forms of racial exclusion regardless of the context and their interaction with commodity culture and consumer societies.

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