



Volume 6. Weimar Germany, 1918/19–1933
Ernst Lorsy, “The Hour of Chewing Gum” (1926)

After the German economy had stabilized, the Chicago chewing gum manufacturer Wrigley tried to establish a presence in the German market. To that end, he spent around 2 million Reichsmark to build a factory in Frankfurt. The factory was completed in June 1925. In the following text, Ernst Lorsy uses chewing gum consumption as an occasion for ironic reflections on the would-be Americanization of Germany. According to Lorsy, the success of chewing gum was based on the “power of advertising” to suggest needs. Like several other German commentators, Lorsy mixed superficial astonishment over America’s incontestable industrial-technical and economic achievements with a certain European arrogance vis-à-vis American “mass society.”

The Hour of Chewing Gum

When the great [William] Wrigley opened his chewing gum factory in Frankfurt am Main in 1925, some predicted failure. Granted there had always been chewing gum in Germany, but it could never become a proper item of mass consumption. And now, after one year, it is apparent that the battle will be won. Divided in the popular referenda, the Germans appear to want to become for Wrigley a united nation of gum chewers. Perhaps no other item enjoyed such a rapid increase in turnover during the stabilization crisis as chewing gum. The Fordson tractor lags far behind Wrigley’s Spearmint. Chewing gum is the cheapest way to Americanize oneself, and that is why the Germans of today, who harbor an intense yearning for America, have chosen it. That is, they have been selected and effectively dealt with by the lord of chewing gum as a predestined people. And today they are ripe for chewing gum.

That a shelf-warmer could become a fashion item, that a quiet little sect sticking inconspicuously to its old habits could grow into a mass movement convinced of the novelty of its rite, testifies more than anything else to the power of advertising. The history of chewing gum is the history of its publicity and presents the most compelling example of the way needs are inspired by advertising. For the moment it likely remains true that no one who does not want to has to chew gum. Nevertheless in America the number of people who can help themselves from chewing gum is already small. Just wait until the German chewing gum advertisements, today still in the infancy of half-finished texts from across the sea, reach the level of the American ads, not in their insane scale but quite likely in their sense of certainty and their ability to enforce conformity: then it will be hard not to chew gum.

The path by which chewing gum makes its inexorable advance on the soul of the modern masses took its cue from strategy in the World War: enormous, purely quantitative accumulation. Long before Joffre, the Broadway strategists of the illuminated billboard knew of the irresistible effect of a barrage from which there is no escape. The big city becomes a battleground on which the public, with its necessarily weakened nerves, succumbs in accord with the proven expectation of the billboard Hindenburgs. The big-city dweller has had to become accustomed to a few things, his temptation threshold continues to rise visibly, but he will never become as dulled as the little Wrigley man who has no nerves at all. The little Wrigley man, whose sly, gnomish gaze has confronted Americans for years now, is a nocturnal acrobat on the lighted roofs of their avenues. A stroller drops his eyes from one of them, and his comrade springs into view. The number of little Wrigley men amounts to a battalion ready for war, and the master of these troops, the man Wrigley, is a powerful commander.

It was not Wrigley who invented chewing gum. If he had, he would perhaps be the genius the humorists credit him with being. He did, however, invent the gigantic chewing gum advertisement, and ultimately what is most essential about chewing gum is the advertisement, with Wrigley now exercising an influence over the American people through his ads as few since Lincoln have. If the citizens of the States want to visit Capitol Hill in their nation's capital, then they have first to pass by a little Wrigley man. At night the Capitol is dark, and broad Pennsylvania Avenue, which leads directly to it, is thoroughly dominated by an oversized little Wrigley man blinking away in a yellowish glow. The little Wrigley man actually consists of those thick arrows that are the Wrigley's trademark. Chomping excitedly, it persuades America that it must chew Wrigley's gum to calm itself. "Pleasant and refreshing," says the illuminated ad, "the aroma lingers," it proclaims, "perfumes your breath," it screams, "aids digestion," it bellows, "preserves your teeth," it puffs, "chew it after every meal," it advises, admonishes, orders, threatens, extorts. America cowers and chews.

In a sensational trial it recently was made known that Wrigley invests fifty percent of his pure profits year after year in advertising; it is worth it. Wrigley's fortune is estimated at 140,000,000 dollars. His business tower on Lake Michigan is a Chicago landmark. He competed with the powers of fate to help shape the face of America and the faces of Americans. He boasts that he brought the famous hardness to that face, which happily occupies the midpoint between a profile of Caesar and that of a ruminant, and the possession of which is thought by the average American to be an honor. [Leon] Trotsky credits Wrigley with yet another world-historical service. By teaching the workers of America to chew gum, he and his competitors erected a barrier in the path of proletarian revolution. Due to the continual movement of the jaw, they never got to thinking, to contemplating their class position, the regulation of work, or the goal of life. Wrigley must, when he reads these sentences, do something that all American multimillionaires are inclined to do: he must consider himself a benefactor to mankind.

[. . .]

Source of English translation: Ernst Lorsy, "The Hour of Chewing Gum" (1926), in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, edited by Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg. © 1994 Regents of the University of California. Published by the University of California Press, pp. 662-63. Reprinted with permission of the University of California Press.

Source of original German text: Ernst Lorsy, "Die Stunde des Kaugummi," *Das Tagebuch*, no. 26 (June 26, 1926), pp. 913-15.