THE UNNATURALNESS OF MASS PRODUCTION

The "Gospel of Simplification" in WWI and the 1920s

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Abstract of paper to be presented at the Business History Conference, Miami, FL, June 26, 2015

How did everyday commodities come to be standardized? Ca. 1920, manufacturers made beds in 78 sizes. By 1930, they made four standard bed sizes, and outlets and plugs had been completely standardized. How did this transformation happen—and happen so rapidly? The historical literature yields no good answers, for historians, surprisingly, have not posed these questions directly. At best, historians leave us to assume that the standardization of everyday products was somehow a natural step in the rise of mass production, most likely the outcome of a learning process. As the benefits of mass production became widely appreciated, in other words, individual manufacturers presumably limited their product lines, individually and voluntarily, in order to reap the benefits of mass production techniques. But, as this paper shows, the standardization of everyday commodities was not the outcome of market forces. Quite to the contrary, manufacturers were under too much competitive pressure to unilaterally disarm when product differentiation gave them an essential competitive advantage. The rapid standardization of everyday commodities in the 1920s was the result of determined intervention—a big "nudge"—by the federal government in the 1920s. Building on WWI efforts, the Department of Commerce launched the "Division of Simplified Practice" to persuade and enable manufacturers to pursue standardization collectively. Out of its work came the standardization of a host of everyday commodities, including bed sizes. The last paragraphs of the paper ponder briefly the implications of this story for our understanding of consumer society in the 1920s, the Great Depression, and the place of government in the history of American capitalism.