

THE DISADVANTAGE OF A GOOD REPUTATION: Disney as a Target for Social Problems Claims

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Social scientists generally presume that a good reputation has advantages. Yet the Walt Disney Corporation, a firm that has long benefited from a reputation for producing wholesome popular culture, attracts more than its share of efforts to link it to various social problems. In particular, conservative moralists argue that Disney in fact produces morally questionable products, progressive critics claim that Disney's messages help preserve social inequities, and social scientists criticize Disney for fostering inauthentic and alienating entertainment. These claims are a form of blowback—negative reactions to the firm's positive reputation. While blowback makes it easier to construct social problems claims, a good reputation remains a significant resource in deflecting these criticisms.

Sociologists often note the costs of bad reputations. For example, individuals labeled as deviant experience enduring stigma (Goffman 1963), negative stereotypes are assigned to members of racial and ethnic groups (Gaertner and McLaughlin 1983), historical figures with "difficult reputations" are condemned to the roles of villains or fools in collective memory (Fine 2001), and so on. In general, bad reputations increase one's vulnerability to having opportunities blocked, to being subjected to tighter social control, to having one's future actions framed in terms of the reputation, or to other disadvantages.

Conversely, good reputations usually are thought to convey advantages; their holders receive the benefit of the doubt. Thus, psychologists speak of a "halo effect" shaping expectations (Thorndike 1920; Nisbett and Wilson 1977), and Merton (1968) argued that the "Matthew effect" made it easier for esteemed scientists to receive credit for additional work. Good reputations, codified in high grade point averages, impressive résumés, good credit ratings, and other track records of accomplishment, open doors for individuals that remain closed to those of more questionable repute. Similarly, organizations conduct public-relations campaigns to establish good reputations in hopes of warding off critics. In general, a good reputation is a resource that can be drawn upon to improve one's prospects, just as a bad reputation hinders advancement.

Reputations—good and bad—can be used to construct social problems (Spector and Kitsuse 1977; Loseke 2003). Claimsmakers compete in a social problems market-

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place, each seeking to arouse concern about particular issues from the press, the public, and policymakers (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988). In order to attract attention from these audiences, claimsmakers assemble claims that feature a variety of rhetorical elements—statistics, expert opinions, appeals to values, and so on—and, depending on the audiences' reactions, may revise and rework claims to make them more persuasive. This article considers some ways reputations can be incorporated in such claims.

At first glance, it might seem that social problems claimsmaking is particularly likely to target those of bad reputations, and this is often the case. Social problems claims frequently highlight typifying examples that illustrate the problem at its worst; describing particularly troubling incidents serves to direct attention to a problem's most disturbing dimensions so as to make it seem especially serious (Best 1990). These examples establish a problem's bad reputation by becoming rhetorical touchstones over the course of a claimsmaking campaign; references to well-known atrocity tales remind audiences that a problem is serious and demands attention. Moreover, once some condition has been constructed as a social problem, that problem's bad reputation can become the basis for further claims that expand that problem's domain or construct other, analogous problems (Best 1990, 1999). Thus, the construction of physical child abuse as a serious problem served as a foundation for claims not just about emotional abuse, sexual abuse, and other forms of child abuse but also about elder abuse, wife abuse, and other problems that could be categorized as types of "abuse."

Similarly, social movement activists often target those with bad reputations as a means of attracting attention to their cause. Thus, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) received many requests for Martin Luther King, Jr. to mount civil rights campaigns in different cities; the SCLC tried to pick locations such as Birmingham, where the white authorities had bad reputations and could be counted on to resist the demonstrations and produce newsworthy confrontations that would mobilize further support for the civil rights movement (Branch 1988). Drawing attention to the worst offenders helps frame the problem addressed by a movement in dramatic terms by giving a face and a reprehensible moral character to the opposition. Thus, within a given movement, particular organizations may become notorious for, say, unfair labor practices or irresponsible environmental policies; they emerge as familiar examples of whatever the movement opposes.

In short, there is a general presumption that bad reputations increase one's vulnerability to critiques by activists and other claimsmakers, while good reputations can help protect individuals and organizations from such criticism. However, there are scandalous exceptions, instances where individuals or organizations with good reputations stand revealed as involved in problematic behavior. Thus, Nichols (1997) examines how the Bank of Boston—a firm with a good reputation—became the typifying example for claims about money laundering. Although it was neither the first bank charged with money laundering nor the bank with the greatest number of questionable transactions, attention focused on the Bank of Boston precisely because it was newsworthy to hear that it was implicated in dubious practices. However, such scandals require particular conditions: An individual or organization with a good reputation is discovered to have

directly violated standards of propriety implicit in that reputation (e.g., a member of the clergy is exposed as involved in sexual deviance; an accounting firm allows clients to submit questionable financial statements).

This article examines another way good reputations can be used to construct social problems.¹ It argues that a good reputation can also make an organization or institution generally vulnerable to becoming the target of social problem claims. This is a form of *blowback*. Blowback refers to unanticipated, negative consequences of social action (Johnson 2004). While achieving a good reputation might be expected to produce benefits such as discouraging criticism, linking those with good reputations to social problems can be a useful rhetorical move in social problems claimsmaking.² Demonstrating that even those of good reputation are implicated in some social problem is a way of suggesting that the problem is surprisingly widespread and serious. We illustrate this point with a case study. We argue that the Walt Disney Corporation's close associations with what are widely considered positive moral values serve to make it an attractive target for a broad range of social problems claimsmakers.

By the end of the 20th century, the Disney Corporation had emerged as one of a handful of giant media conglomerates. In addition to owning Walt Disney Pictures, the Disney theme parks in California, Florida, Paris, Tokyo, and Hong Kong, and various other enterprises that bear the Disney name, Disney controlled the ABC television network, ESPN, and other cable channels, movie production under the Touchstone, Hollywood, and Miramax names, and other subsidiaries. The other four largest media conglomerates are the News Corporation (Fox television network; numerous cable channels including FX and Fox News; 20th Century Fox and other movie production companies; extensive newspaper, magazine, and book publishing; etc.), Time Warner Company (HBO, CNN, and numerous other cable channels; extensive book and magazine publishing, including *Time*; Warner Brothers and other movie and television production firms; AOL; etc.), Sony (Sony, Columbia, and other movie production firms; extensive electronic products; music production; etc.), and Viacom (CBS television network, MTV, and numerous other cable channels, Paramount Pictures, etc.) (Columbia Journalism Review 2007). Probably few members of the general public have much sense of which conglomerates control which firms. Nor do Disney's rivals have clear moral reputations; they are, for the most part, mysterious, faceless entities that are not understood to stand for anything, so there is little reason for the public to be shocked by their actions. In contrast, the name Disney has become closely linked in the public mind with decent, family-oriented entertainment. This positive reputation, in turn, makes Disney an attractive target for all sorts of social critiques in a way that its rivals are not.³

Our analysis is inevitably selective. Disney has been attracting the attention of both popular and scholarly commentators, as well as fans and critics, for some 75 years. There is no practical way to identify the universe of social problems claims about Disney (or its media conglomerate rivals) or to draw a representative sample of those claims. Instead, we have chosen to examine relatively recent critiques of Disney from three very different sorts of claimsmakers—conservative Christians, political progressives, and social scientists. We chose these cases to demonstrate how a range of critics use Disney's good

reputation as a key element in their claimsmaking rhetoric. Obviously, there are other views of Disney; the corporation has its defenders as well as other critics—environmentalists, historical preservationists, consumer advocates, and others who have mounted anti-Disney campaigns. Our goal is not to somehow measure the distribution of claims about Disney but rather to document how some claims incorporate Disney's good reputation and to show that such rhetoric comes from very different claimsmakers.

Because our focus is on the rhetoric of claimsmaking, we are interested only in how claimsmakers use Disney's reputation to construct social problems (Best 1990; Ibarra and Kitsuse 1993). Although we argue that Disney has a generally good reputation, as evidenced by the many claims that link Disney to innocent, wholesome family entertainment, we offer no judgment about whether that reputation is deserved. Similarly, when we identify examples of critics using Disney's good reputation as an element in their claimsmaking, the accuracy of those claims is not at issue. The point is not that Disney is good (or bad) or that the critics' claims are correct (or wrong); rather, our point is that Disney's reputation can be and is used to support a variety of social problems claims. Further, we recognize that Disney evokes a range of responses: To say that some conservative Christians or some social scientists attack Disney is not to imply that all—or even most—people in those groups accept those claims. It is that some claimsmakers, belonging to very different sectors of society and making claims about very different issues, find themselves making parallel uses of Disney's reputation in their rhetoric that is of interest.

We begin by tracing the conditions that led to the Disney Corporation's good reputation. Then we illustrate the sorts of claimsmaking directed at Disney, looking at claimsmaking by both conservative and progressive activists, as well as more scholarly critiques. We conclude by reconsidering the relationship between reputation and claimsmaking.

THE MORAL CAREER OF THE DISNEY CORPORATION

Walt Disney was viewed primarily as an artistic and technological innovator in the years before 1950.⁴ He first attracted public notice with his short cartoons and then by successfully creating feature-length animated films beginning with *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937). Sometimes forgotten is that these early efforts were widely celebrated, even by intellectuals, for the risks Disney took (the motion picture industry did not believe that feature-length animation could find an audience and turn a profit), but also because Disney was seen as advancing animation as an art form and because many of the early movies incorporated either high-culture elements (*Fantasia's* use of a classical soundtrack performed by a symphony) or adapted traditional fairy tales (and thus seemed to celebrate folk art).

Disney began making films during a period when the movies were a genuine mass medium that attracted a large, heterogeneous audience including people of all ages. The motion picture industry sought to preserve this mass audience through self-censorship; it implemented the Motion Picture Production Code to constrain offensive content and

cooperated with the Roman Catholic Church's Legion of Decency. Animated short films emerged within this context; a typical theater program featured a cartoon as well as the feature film. Thus, Disney's short cartoons were designed to be shown to mass audiences, to entertain adults as well as children. Similarly, when *Snow White* and other feature-length animations began to appear, they were not seen as aimed solely at children, and reviewers judged them according to their broad appeal:

the name "Disney" had been a brand: the best in what seemed to be, oxymoronically, mass-produced folk art that appealed to everyone from sophisticates to innocents. Indeed, Walt had always pointedly insisted that his films were not made primarily for children or even primarily for profit, and few critics had treated them that way, at least until the postwar period. . . . (Gabler 2006:586)

By the 1950s, the movie industry was facing significant changes: Television spread widely and rapidly, and the postwar economic boom (and the end of wartime rationing) meant that people had more ways to spend their money. Many moved to the suburbs—farther away from theaters. Early television was very much a mass medium designed to have broad appeal and to avoid giving offense. As a result of these trends, the movie audience began to decline, and it became more homogeneous, as adolescents and young adults began to account for a growing share of the audience (Doherty 1988). Older people were going to the movies less often, and movie producers began to devise new tactics, ranging from big-budget epics or novel technologies (e.g., Cinerama, 3-D projection) designed to lure audiences back to theaters, to inexpensive films specifically intended to appeal to teenagers. The younger audience could be drawn to theaters with horror movies and other material that was *not* suitable for children (and therefore not available on television). By the mid-1960s, the Production Code was threatened by major filmmakers releasing films that contained profanity, nudity, or other previously forbidden material intended to appeal to adolescent and young-adult audiences. In 1968, the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) announced that it would begin rating movies; the assumption that every Hollywood movie would be suitable for every viewer no longer held. These changes led to vocal criticism, laments that many movies were no longer suitable family entertainment.

This postwar period also brought Walt Disney greater—and different sorts of—fame. The baby boom had created a vast family audience, and Disney began to develop three new enterprises designed to reach that audience. The first, of course, was the creation of Disneyland (designed to be a clean, wholesome amusement park that would attract families—in contrast with older parks and carnivals that were seen as seedy and grift-ridden). The second was television production including such early offerings as "The Mickey Mouse Club" (aimed at the after-school, children's audience) and "Disneyland" (an hour-long prime-time offering). The third was the production of feature films including nature documentaries and live-action movies, which again were intended to be suitable for family viewing. Disney used these new venues as vehicles of cross-promotion: Disney movies provided the themes for Disneyland rides; Disneyland rides became subjects of Disney television coverage; Disney TV shows touted Disney movies; and so on.⁵ By the mid-1950s, Disney had a catalog of several full-length

cartoons and began re-releasing these on a roughly seven-year cycle, so that while any child was between the ages of 3 and 10, there would be a chance to see *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, and so on in a theater (and each re-release could be celebrated at the park and on television). This system of cross-promotion meant that Disney became increasingly committed to “family” (i.e., suitable for children) entertainment because its films needed to be incorporated into the company’s park and its television programming. During the 1950s, this was a very profitable strategy. There was a demographic wave featuring unprecedented numbers of kids, and parents were encouraged to see the Disney brand as automatically suitable for their children: “Now the name ‘Walt Disney’ was synonymous with wholesome family entertainment that no one could possibly mistake for art, folk or otherwise” (Gabler 2006:586).

By the 1960s, the gulf between Disney’s films, with their child-centered content, and other producers’ movies was growing. With the establishment of the MPAA rating system, Disney’s commitment to suitable-for-children content made it an outlier. Critics of the new freedom in popular culture (which affected not just movies but popular music, popular fiction, television, comic books, etc.) increasingly pointed to Disney as a moral exemplar because the firm’s commitment to suitable-for-children entertainment made it a unique exception to a troubling trend.

This praise had an awkward aspect. Almost as soon as the MPAA ratings system was introduced, it became evident that adolescents and young adults—who had come to constitute the largest share of the medium’s audience—were reluctant to attend films with G ratings. Disney’s G-rated live-action films were becoming less competitive. In 1979, Disney released *The Black Hole*, a science-fiction movie with—what were for that time—sophisticated special effects that quite intentionally sought a PG rating (at one point, a character said “damn”). Disney—which had previously announced its commitment to all G-rated productions—came under fire for compromising its values. Thus, a dilemma: Profitable live-action films required non-G ratings, but protecting the Disney name demanded making G-only movies.

The solution was to sail under multiple flags. The Disney name would be preserved for animated features and live-action films aimed at children; however, Disney also began to produce other films aimed at more mature audiences and with more restrictive ratings, initially under the Touchstone banner. While Disney did not conceal its connection to Touchstone, neither did it see the need to announce it loudly. The Disney empire was expanding in other ways as well. Most notably, in 1971, Walt Disney World opened in Orlando, Florida—the centerpiece of what would become several Disney-owned amusement parks, water parks, and other attractions. These included EPCOT (an idea that had had Walt Disney’s enthusiastic support—the acronym stood for Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow), which was designed to appeal primarily to adults. Following the example of its competitors, Disney was beginning to target segmented audiences beyond children.

As the 20th century wound to a close, the Walt Disney Corporation had evolved to become one of a handful of major media conglomerates. News stories about Disney were increasingly on the business page, often as coverage of the maneuvers of high-profile

executives with gargantuan salaries. Yet while Disney had unquestionably become part of big business, it continued to be defined by the qualities associated with the Disney name. That name conjured up associations with decency and childlike innocence—and the avuncular personality of its founder—in a way that Time Warner's name did not. However much Disney as a corporation may have resembled other media conglomerates, its good public reputation continued to set it apart. It was held to higher expectations.

It is impossible to catalog all claimsmaking regarding Disney. In the sections that follow, we consider three diverse examples—critiques by conservative Christians, progressives, and social scientists—to illustrate how Disney's good reputation makes it a target for social problems claims.

CLAIMS FROM THE CHRISTIAN RIGHT

Religious authorities often offer moral critiques of popular culture. During the late 1980s, the Disney Corporation became a frequent target for claimsmaking by the Christian Right; their campaign peaked in 1996 when the American Family Association (AFA) called upon its members to boycott Disney products:

For decades Disney was a name American families could trust. Disney meant wholesomeness. Disney meant laughter. Disney meant quality entertainment without the sex, violence and profanity. But more than anything else, Disney meant children. Sadly, "the times they are a changin'." (Wildmon n.d.:1)

These claims argued that while the Disney Corporation continued to produce some morally suitable entertainment, the audience that consumed that family fare was unknowingly helping the conglomerate to fund other, morally bankrupt activities:

Disney is making millions of dollars off their family fare and then sinking it into movies, television programs and printed materials that assail the very values of those same families. Disney hopes decent minded Americans never make this connection. AFA hopes and prays that decent minded Americans *will* make the connection. (Wildmon n.d.)

The AFA received strong support from the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), which in 1996 gave Disney one year to alter its pro-gay policies. After the title character on the ABC sitcom *Ellen* came out as a lesbian, the SBC voted in 1997 to join the boycott. On the "MacNeil/Lehrer News Hour" shortly thereafter, the conservative columnist John Podhoretz said,

Disney is an interesting target because you have—you have essentially—the accusation is that Disney is a front; that is, that Mickey Mouse and the Little Mermaid and Aladdin and Timon and Pumba are fronts for Miramax which produces *Pulp Fiction* and "Ellen." . . . So the idea is that hiding behind the Little Mermaid, using Little Mermaid as a screen, Disney is promoting serious—what we would have considered a generation ago—counter-cultural values, and that . . . you've got to go at it because it's a fatter target and a slipperier one. (MacNeil/Lehrer Productions 1997:4)

These critiques highlighted the Disney corporation as a media conglomerate by drawing attention to questionable cultural content produced by firms owned by Disney

but not promoted using the Disney name. The AFA, for example, criticized such “objectionable films from Disney subsidiaries” as *Priest* (“pro-homosexual”), *Dogma* (“asserts that Christian beliefs are little more than mythology”), *Chasing Amy* (lesbianism), *Pulp Fiction* (sex, violence), *Color of Night* (sex), *Clerks* (graphic language), *Chicks in White Satin* (lesbianism), *Lie Down with Dogs* (homosexuality), [and] *The House of Yes* (incest)” (AFA 1997). According to the Florida Family Association, “Disney-owned [television] channels account for the overwhelming number of erotic and pornographic network programs” (*AFA Journal* 2003). Disney, these critics argued, had tried to have it both ways—maintaining the Disney name as a family-friendly brand while using other brand names to produce morally questionable content.

In particular, the AFA attacked Disney for its “headlong rush to promote homosexuality as normal and to profit enormously from that promotion” (Vitagliano n.d.:2). In addition to critiques of the content of the corporation’s popular culture, Disney was criticized for employing homosexuals (including some in important management positions), for extending benefits coverage to partners of those employees, and for supporting gay-themed events at its parks:

FACT: Disney helped promote the 6th annual “Gay and Lesbian Day at Walt Disney World.” Disney has allowed the homosexual organizers to portray Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck as homosexual lovers; and Minnie Mouse and Daisy Duck as lesbians. (AFA n.d.)

One AFA-affiliated group “even had its spies ‘dress in gay garb’ and attend gay and lesbian events. ‘They found pro-homosexual material being handed out. They found a group discount ticket with a pink Mickey on it. They saw homosexuals in drag, chanting “If you’re gay and you know it, clap your hands” ’” (Svetkey 1995:42).

Other conservative critiques included claims that some Disney-produced material was too violent for children. After some of its members viewed an AFA-produced anti-Disney video, the Texas Board of Education in 1998 voted to sell Disney shares that had been purchased by the state’s educational fund. The board’s chair characterized Miramax films as “mentally nauseating” and explained, “I just don’t want any part of encouraging this type of explicitness and violence. I truly believe it influences children in a negative way” (*New York Times* 1998). Similarly, there were claims that Disney produced antireligious content. Evidence of Disney’s hostility to Christianity included hiring Martin Scorsese, director of controversial films including *The Last Temptation of Christ*; the movie *Priest*, which called into question the fidelity and celibacy of Roman Catholic priests (AFA 1997); and arguments that *The Lion King* and other feature films bearing the Disney name teach children to glorify “witchcraft and necromancy” (Garcia 2007). Conservative critiques, then, covered a range of topics: “The question must be asked, why does Disney feel it must produce the movies, books, television shows and music which promote a homosexual lifestyle, graphic violence and unrestrained immorality?” (Concerned Women for America 1997).

When the AFA called off its boycott in 2006, they claimed that they had achieved enough change to warrant ending their campaign. AFA president Tim Wildmon announced, “We feel after nine years of boycotting Disney we have made our

point. . . . Boycotts have always been a last resort for us at AFA, and Disney's attitude, arrogance and embrace of the homosexual lifestyle gave us no choice but to advocate a boycott of the company these last years" (AFA 2006:1). He noted that Disney had made several changes—most notably the upcoming departure of CEO Michael Eisner and the corporate "divorce" between Disney and its Miramax film production company—as evidence of the boycott's effect. A hopeful sign was Disney's decision to coproduce *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, C. S. Lewis's classic novel with Christian themes. An *Orlando Sentinel* journalist wrote that "In taking the step of marketing *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* to the Christian community, . . . , Disney may have disarmed much of the antagonism towards the company that led many evangelicals to boycott the company" (AFA 2006:2). Yet conservative Christians continued to denounce Disney even after the boycott ended (e.g., Garcia 2007).

In other words, claimsmakers who saw themselves as defenders of traditional morality and family values attacked Disney for betraying the moral principles that the corporation once seemed to represent. This perception of betrayal by critics on the right contrasted with another set of charges coming from the left.

CLAIMS FROM PROGRESSIVES

Just as conservative moralists professed themselves shocked that a company with a reputation for morality might produce popular culture with questionable moral content, progressive critics have challenged Disney's reputation as an exemplar of decency. Their critiques focus on Disney's failure to support various forms of social justice.

Disney has long attracted criticism from the labor movement, beginning with a bitter animators' strike in 1941. Disney's resistance to unionization and the working conditions at its theme parks have attracted considerable attention from labor activists. In addition, a review of Web sites critical of Disney (Martin and Yecies 2004) notes a substantial cluster of critiques by labor rights organizations focused on low wages in Third World factories producing Disney products. These charges are part of the broader campaign against Third-World working conditions, but Disney's good reputation may make it especially vulnerable to such charges. In 2008, Disney was inducted into the "Sweatshop Hall of Shame"; the announcement juxtaposed Disney's idealistic publicity with the harsh conditions under which its goods were produced:

This year marks Disney's "Year of a Million Dreams" celebration. But for workers in China who make children's books and toys for the entertainment giant, it's been a year of a zillion labor law violations. . . . So far, Disney has refused to address these serious allegations of worker abuse and exploitation. (SweatFree Communities 2008)

Many large corporations' labor records can be questioned, but such challenges may be particularly embarrassing for a company with a good reputation.

Even more than labor issues, Disney's progressive critics tend to target what they define as conservative messages promoted by Disney's popular cultural content. In *How*

to *Read Donald Duck* (Dorfman and Mattelart [1971] 1975), two Chilean academics argued that while Disney invites “us all to join the great universal Disney family, which extends beyond all frontiers and ideologies, transcends differences between peoples and nations, and particularities of custom and language” (p. 28), Disney comic books in general—and the character of Scrooge McDuck in particular—presented thinly veiled messages endorsing capitalism and imperialism. American critics have tended to focus on Disney’s willingness to present racial and gender stereotypes and on its presentation of a sanitized version of American history. For instance, Barbara Ehrenreich (2007; see also Bell, Haas, and Sells 1995; Hoerrner 1996) charges that the Disney Princess “product line . . . is saturated with a particularly potent time-release form of the date rape drug.”⁶ Her argument is that Disney’s female characters are portrayed as relatively passive figures and that these products encourage girls to accept traditional gender roles.

Such arguments presume that Disney’s products reach large numbers of impressionable children and that the content of those products is harmful. (This is in contrast to Disney’s conservative Christian critics discussed in the preceding section, who, while they attack the larger corporation’s willingness to market morally questionable content through various subsidiaries that do not use the Disney name, largely concede that movies and other products bearing the Disney label feature content appropriate for children.) But progressive critics argue that it is precisely this “decent” content that deserves criticism, in that its messages promote a hegemonic, uncritical acceptance of traditional values, so that children exposed to Disney learn to accept capitalism, racism, sexism, and so on. Again, parallel critiques might be leveled at most major media firms, but these claims argue that Disney’s good reputation discourages a careful analysis of the values it promotes. If many parents view the Disney label as a guarantee that popular cultural content will be appropriate for children, they may fail to recognize—and therefore unwittingly expose their children to—harmful messages implicit in Disney products. Progressive critics insist that even as Disney’s content eschews extreme violence and graphic sexuality, other sorts of objectionable messages permeate its products.

CLAIMS FROM SOCIAL SCIENTISTS

In addition to the moral critiques of conservatives and the social-justice criticisms of progressives, Disney has attracted a good deal of critical attention from social scientists. Often, their focus has been the Disney theme parks (Gottdiener 1982; Bryman 2004). When the parks opened, they struck analysts as something new: Customers entered an all-encompassing, purposefully designed environment within which they would be entertained. While all sorts of businesses (one thinks of restaurants or department stores) seek to create environments that will appeal to customers, the Disney theme parks displayed a more calculated, overarching concern with design. And critics argued that this was a troubling development, that the parks offered an artificial, inauthentic experience.⁷ There was the implication that the parks purported to offer fun, but that in

fact they constrained and controlled behavior, so that while customers might imagine they were enjoying the experience, they were in fact participating in a degraded, emotionally stunted variety of leisure activity.

In particular, the critics deconstructed the methods used to convey the theme park experience. The parks proved to be the product of a dense system of rules and regulations, beginning with the vocabulary used by Disney to define the principal roles. The people who paid to enter were not customers, let alone the “marks” who visited carnivals; rather, Disney insisted that they be referred to as “guests.” Similarly, the people working in the parks were not employees but “cast members.” Critics viewed such linguistic conventions as deceptive in that they ignored the parks’ underlying economic transactions (customers paying for entertainment, employees working for wages). Even the language used to describe what happened in the parks was artificial and inauthentic.

Consider a trivial example. Employees at the Disney theme parks operate under fairly detailed codes governing dress and behavior; they are, for example, required to smile at the customers, er, guests. The Disney parks sometimes use the slogan “The Happiest Place on Earth.” Not surprisingly, low-paid service workers oftentimes do not enjoy their work—including this emotion work—all that much, and they may not always feel like smiling. Thus, there is an opportunity for a Goffmanic backstage revelation: Many of those working—and smiling—at the “happiest place on Earth” are not actually happy! Analysts then go on to detail employees’ forms of resistance, such as smiling excessively, so that the customer/guest realizes that the smile is not sincere. The argument can then be extended to challenge the overall legitimacy of Disney’s claims about the parks as a happy experience (e.g., see Bryman’s [2004] chapter on “Performative Labour”).

It is difficult to imagine this sort of argument having much punch with other targets. The airline flight attendant and the McDonald’s counter worker, but also the faculty adviser, and other people providing services frequently engage in more-or-less scripted emotional work that involves insincere pleasantries. Imagine a sociologist interviewing faculty about their frustrations with students who add a course weeks after the semester has begun, attend erratically, come to class late, and seem less worried about intellectual content than about what will be on the test. Our analyst might find that college, too, is a site for emotional labor—efforts to remain calm, professional, even pleasant in the face of frustration. Would this analysis be received as a telling revelation about the underlying dishonesty of university life, the stuff that might serve as the keystone for a series of semiotic texts about despair and disenchantment in postmodern, globalized education? Probably not.

Social scientists offer a broad range of parallel critiques. Bryman’s (2004) book-length attack on “Disneyization” accuses Disney of trivialization, sanitization, homogenization, simplification, standardization, globalization, glocalization, manipulation, hybrid consumption, surveillance, and control. Such social forces affect not just Disney’s employees working under corporate rules but the customers who presumably sacrifice genuine experiences when they submit to the Disney treatment; ultimately, both workers and customers become alienated.

In addition, there are numerous social scientific content analyses of Disney products. Analysts justify their research by noting the broad acceptance of Disney products and the possibility that exposure to these works may prove influential:

The Disney animated classics are well known to millions of children across the world because of their family-oriented topics, marketing, availability, and success in the home-viewing market. . . . [How] older people are represented in Disney animated films [is of concern because of] the cultivating effect that negative stereotypes of older individuals and the marginalizing of older women and minority groups may have on young children. Disney films may not be the primary source of children's negative perceptions of older people; however, there is evidence that the media do influence children's perceptions. (Robinson et al. 2007:203, 209–10)

Once again, Disney's visibility attracts critics—this time from academia. In early 2008, a search of *Sociological Abstracts* produced 128 hits for articles that mentioned "Disney" in their abstracts, 45 for "Disneyland," even 8 for "Mickey Mouse." In comparison, searches for "Warner Brothers" generated 4 hits, "Universal Studios"—0, "Six Flags"—1, and "Bugs Bunny"—0. While crude, these searches confirm that Disney has attracted far more social scientific attention than its competitors. In general, social scientists have been critical of Disney as a corporation, as lines of products, and even as social trends (Holbrook 2001). Often, the analysts' rationale for focusing on Disney is the need to debunk its good reputation. Thus, in "Challenging Disney Myths," Wasko (2001) argues that although there is "the tendency by many to think of 'Disney' as something sacred and special and not as a commercial, profit-based endeavor" (p. 246), "the Disney organization has always been a profit-motivated company . . ." (p. 245), and that although "Disney-branded products . . . are assumed to be wholesome, safe, and pure, as well as ethical, virtuous, and unprejudiced" (p. 250), "Disney products include definite and often unmistakable themes and values that are not always wholesome and unbiased or innocent" (p. 252). Playing off Disney's good reputation allows academics to be shocked—shocked!—when revealing that a major media conglomerate places profit-making above other goals.

DISCUSSION

We have sketched three sets of social problems claims about the Disney Corporation: conservative Christians' complaints that Disney (and particularly its subsidiaries) promote homosexuality and morally questionable values; progressives' complaints about Disney's unfair labor practices as well as sexism and other disturbing positions fostered by the firm's popular culture content; and social scientists' critiques that Disney theme parks promote an artificial, alienating ethos and that its content conveys negative messages. In each case, these claims gain much of their rhetorical power by linking Disney's good name to social problems.

This is by no means the full range of anti-Disney claimsmaking. Disney has attracted other critics including (1) environmentalists who charge that the Florida operations in particular threaten a vulnerable regional ecosystem and who have fought proposed

developments in California; (2) urban planners who have found fault with the Disney-designed communities established near Orlando; (3) historic preservationists who successfully blocked a proposed Virginia amusement park for being too close to a Civil War battlefield; (4) a wide range of French critics who denounced the creation of the Euro-Disney facility as cultural imperialism (Asia seems to have been more receptive to Disney theme parks); (5) consumer advocates who indict Disney for the relentless cross-promotions that teach children to become eager consumers; and so on. In sum, Disney has become the target of a broad range of claims and of far more claimsmaking than its media rivals.

This reveals the importance of Disney's good reputation as a moral exemplar. In part, of course, the Disney name is simply familiar—associated with well-known, well-branded products; one suspects that a very large proportion of the population knows that Mickey Mouse and Disney World come from the Disney corporation. (This is not to suggest that many people have much understanding of the full range of Disney's media empire—probably relatively few associate the Disney name with the ABC network, and fewer still do with ESPN or Miramax films.) But compared with other large corporate entities—say, Proctor and Gamble or Beatrice—Disney offers a relatively familiar profile: We think we understand what the company is about because we have had experiences with Mickey Mouse or Disney World and we understand those corporate connections. (At least for baby boomers and older Americans, Disney is also personified by the friendly figure of Walt Disney, whose face and voice became well known through hosting television programs that bore his name.) Disney is unusual in the way it combines brand familiarity with corporate awareness. Many people who have been using the same brand of toothpaste for decades probably do not know whether that brand is a Proctor and Gamble product, but they readily associate Donald Duck and Snow White with Disney. In other words, while few people understand the full extent of Disney's domain, there remains a sense that the corporation is not just familiar but clearly associated with at least some of its products. This familiarity makes news about Disney more interesting than news about, say, Time Warner.

Further, the Disney name is associated with childhood, family, innocence, and other positive values. The corporation has carefully protected the name by using it to market only the sorts of general-audience, nonthreatening, noncontroversial material that is widely understood to be Disneyesque. Parents assume that they can take small children to a Disney movie or a Disney park without worry—that the experience would not be too frightening or otherwise disturbing. Note the enduring controversies over the sad bits in *Dumbo* or *Bambi*; when Disney has pushed the edge of the envelope, it has come under criticism. Intellectuals may criticize Disney for offering bland popular culture, but the corporation is under countervailing pressures from audiences who object to material that is too intense. The result is a sort of idealization: Disney is associated with standing for what is good, decent, and appropriate in a way that few other corporations are.

This imagery creates a recipe for blowback claimsmaking. One simply argues that (1) everyone knows that Disney is associated with what is good; (2) X is good

(X being whatever the claimsmakers want to promote: environmentalism, heterosexuality, fair labor practices, sexual purity, gender equality, patriotism, tolerance, the list is endless); but (3) Disney's actions can be seen as somehow inconsistent with X. Therefore, Disney stands accused of hypocrisy, bad-faith, and other problematic shortcomings.

These critiques are so common that it is difficult to recognize just how peculiar they are. Disney is, after all, a large corporation; as such, it does many of the things we expect corporations to do: It tries to maximize its profits by selling as much as possible, at the highest profit margins possible, to minimize costs, to attract repeat business from the largest possible customer base, and to continually develop new products and markets in order to maintain profitability into the future. In short, the logic of capitalism leads Disney to try all sorts of tactics to reduce risks and maximize profits. None of this is very surprising. We might anticipate similar behavior from pretty much everyone engaged in commerce.⁸ The news that Megagoliath Corporation acts to maximize profits (often in troubling ways) may not be all that surprising; however, its peculiar history and good reputation make Disney an extremely attractive target for social problems claimsmaking of all sorts. Precisely because Disney evokes associations with an innocent ideal, its shortcomings seem more remarkable, more troubling than those of its competitors.

Attacking Disney offers claimsmakers several rhetorical advantages. There is the element of *surprise*—claiming that a firm with Disney's good reputation is associated with some social problem seems incongruous and therefore interesting. Disney's reputation—and the fact that many people can identify several of its popular characters (e.g., Mickey Mouse) and its products (e.g., *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, Disneyland)—make it easy to devise *newsworthy rhetoric* such as marveling that Mickey might be implicated in this or that social problem. Claims that Disney has fallen short of its own publicly avowed moral principles open the corporation to charges of *hypocrisy*. Also, because many people are familiar with Disney products (and because purchasing those products are discretionary expenses), it is relatively easy to *call for action* in the form of some sort of boycott. In all of these ways, Disney must seem like an attractive target to claimsmakers.

Still, while it is relatively easy to construct critiques of Disney, the company seems relatively impervious to most of those claims. For instance, Youngman (2003) offers an ethnography of Operation Rescue's (OR) Orlando effort to mount protests at Walt Disney World and Barnes & Noble bookstores in addition to abortion clinics. The protestors "referred to their targets as 'the triple gates of hell,' insisting that they were merely different aspects of a secular movement to destroy children and remove Christianity from American life" (p. 523). The short-lived campaign backfired:

[Disney and Barnes & Noble] are generally considered respectable (as well as large and influential businesses that provide useful goods and services to families). Police and local officials in the Orlando area were not willing to let OR blockade or otherwise disrupt any of the businesses in question, leading one [abortion] clinic director to comment, "It's nice to be treated like a legitimate business like Barnes & Noble and Disney for a change." (P. 537)

Similarly, the Southern Baptists and other conservative Christians eventually ended their boycott of Disney; there was little evidence that their campaign had had much impact. In spite of the long history of critiques of Disney, the corporation seems to have been little affected.

Why have anti-Disney claims not had more effect? In part, Disney may benefit from its *familiarity*. Virtually all Americans—and much of the world's population—have been exposed to Disney's products. This means that people can weigh claims that Disney fosters one social problem or another and choose which items they wish to consume. Disney also has adopted tactics to *deflect* some claimsmaking. For instance, *Song of the South* (a 1946 film that combined live-action sequences featuring Uncle Remus with cartoons about Brer Rabbit) probably contains the most overtly offensive content of any Disney feature film, given its portrayal of plantation slavery as a paternalistic, benevolent system. The Disney corporation has withheld the film from theatrical re-release since the mid-1980s and has not made it available for home video in the United States, thereby deflecting some critics. In addition, of course, Disney has long used subsidiaries to market to various *segmented markets*, generally restricting the Disney name to those products most likely to be seen as suitable for children. This forces critics such as the AFA to first educate the public about the extent of Disney's corporate domain; unless the links between Disney and its subsidiaries are made visible, it is more difficult to mobilize outrage against the larger corporation.

Disney's good reputation, then, has proven attractive to claimsmakers who imagined that attacking Disney would gain attention. On the one hand, this tactic works: Anti-Disney campaigns often attract media coverage, just as scholarly critiques of Disney seem to have little difficulty finding their way into print. On the other hand, Disney's good reputation seems to have protected it from suffering much damage from these various attacks. Perhaps some parents decide to protect their children from what they become persuaded are pro-homosexual or antiwomen messages in Disney's popular cultural products, but large numbers of parents continue to have confidence in the Disney brand (or at least have not found the various calls for action compelling), and families continue to flock to the Disney parks. In a sense, these findings are paradoxical. Far from insulating Disney from criticism, the firm's good reputation attracts a broad range of social problems claimsmakers. Yet although the company becomes a target for all manner of claims, it seems relatively impervious to this criticism.

This suggests some limits of blowback claimsmaking. We take it for granted that some enterprises are deeply morally contaminated. The Nazis are the obvious example; decades later, debates rage over how we should view the accomplishments of the filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl, the philosopher Martin Heidegger, the physicist Werner Heisenberg, the poet Ezra Pound, popes old and new, and Volkswagen—all reputations tainted by associations with the Nazis. Really bad reputations can infect much of what they touch; not surprisingly, they offer fodder for claimsmakers.

Reputations, good and bad, are available to anyone interested in assembling claims. Like typifying examples or statistics, they can be used to make claims more compelling, more competitive in the marketplace for media or public attention (Best 1990).

However, there is a key difference. Railing against the corrupting effects of popular culture is a familiar claim, but charging that Disney—a name long associated with wholesomeness—has such corrupting effects is relatively startling and newsworthy. This is important because contemporary media are thoroughly segmented, targeted at audiences defined by age, gender, ethnicity, and so on. Much claimsmaking and social movement activity is directed at those already committed to the cause, as when social movement organizations solicit additional contributions from their members. Many conservative Christians are already deeply suspicious of secular popular culture, just as many labor activists are well aware of conditions in overseas factories, and many social scientists assume that media messages contribute to stereotypical thinking. Few in these groups are likely to view Disney as the only—or even the most—problematic case of the problem at hand. Whereas claimsmakers are likely to arouse concern by choosing typifying examples that illustrate especially awful instances or statistics that portray problems in the most disturbing terms, targeting those with good reputations involves choosing not the worst but the most surprising examples as a means of reaching an audience beyond those already committed.

The best reputations for these rhetorical purposes are those—like Disney's—that are relatively consistent and widely understood. Thus, opposition to Columbus Day celebrations have attracted considerable attention precisely because they argue that Columbus, long viewed as an unambiguously heroic figure, should be implicated in slavery, colonialism, and genocide (Kubal 2008). There may be relatively few such targets. Studies of collective memory reveal that many reputations are contested, that an individual may be celebrated in some circles and denigrated in others (Fine 2001), and claims targeting those with ambiguous reputations are likely to attract less attention. Examining how claimsmakers incorporate reputations—good or bad, consistent or ambiguous—offers a way of extending the analysis of social problems rhetoric.

NOTES

¹Reputations can be incorporated in claimsmaking in still other ways. Most obviously, claimsmakers may themselves have reputations, perhaps as respected experts or as individuals with a track record for activism. Thus, celebrities who become claimsmakers attempt to leverage their reputations to promote claims (Meyer and Gamson 1995).

²Gary Alan Fine (1985) describes a related phenomenon: the “Goliath effect”—the tendency for contemporary legends about merchants’ misdeeds to ascribe them to the most prominent firm (e.g., tales about contaminated hamburgers usually involve McDonald’s). When he was president of the Society for the Study of Social Problems, Fine made blowback the theme for its annual meeting.

³Newspaper coverage offers a crude measure of this effect. A search of the Lexis-Nexis database from 1990 to 2007 using the search terms “disney and (boycott or protest)” produces 7,465 hits. In contrast, searching for “(aol or time warner) and (boycott or protest)” produces only about half as many hits—3,770. Analogous searches for News Corporation and Viacom generate much smaller numbers of hits. Such searches are obviously imperfect because corporate entities shift (AOL and Time Warner combined in 2001—hence the need to search under both names), and

not all stories about controversies will include either “boycott” or “protest.” Still, among the giant media conglomerates, Disney seems to be the target of more protests (or at least protests against Disney receive more media coverage).

⁴There is a massive literature on Walt Disney, the Disney Corporation, and the significance of Disney movies, parks, and so on (e.g., Schickel 1997; Watts 1997). We have drawn most heavily on Gabler’s (2006) recent, substantial biography.

⁵As early as the 1930s, Disney had recognized the potential of cross-promotion for increasing profits by using licensing agreements for products featuring his animated characters (e.g., Mickey Mouse watches) (Gabler 2006).

⁶This is an allusion to late 2007 news reports that some toys—although not Disney product lines—made in China used a glue that, when ingested, broke down into GHB—a so-called date-rape drug (Bradsher 2007).

⁷The social construction of authenticity became an important theme in debates over 20th-century popular cultural content (Peterson 1997; Grazian 2003). Thus, *Snow White* and other Disney animated features came to be criticized for presenting inauthentic versions of classic folk tales.

⁸We find analogous practices among cultural critics. For example, Ritzer’s (1993) *The McDonaldization of Society*, originally published in 1993, has gone through four revisions, as well as generating other related texts, readers, and articles (e.g., Bryman 2004). The organization of the contemporary textbook market encourages the creation of marketable concepts, frequent revisions, and the publication of interrelated works—even by authors critiquing manipulative capitalism.

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