
I like this book. I was prepared to be cynical and dismissive. After all, Naomi Klein has become an instant cause célèbre. No Logo has been discussed in national newspapers and magazines; its photogenic and youthful author interviewed on television and radio. Klein has even received celebrity endorsements from Gloria Steinem and Billy Bragg; both are featured on the back of the book. It is a slick-looking object, which has been criticized for imitating the values that it admonishes and for pandering to the youth market (Drainie, 2000).

After reading No Logo my skepticism has been replaced with intellectual admiration. Klein’s analysis of the “branding” phenomenon, the rise of a culture and economy centred on manufacturing corporate images, and her descriptions of the resistance to mega-corporations like Nike, Shell, and McDonalds is thorough, well-documented, and articulate. Based on four years of research, including analyses of trade journals such as Advertising Age, trips to economic free-trade zones around the world, and interviews with workers and activists, Klein makes sense of a variety of dispersed events that she connects under the rubric of “branding.”

Given the activities of the G-7 nations and the WTO to secure international trade agreements under the banner of a greater global good, and the spate of protests that have arisen against the activities of these organizations worldwide, No Logo is a timely analysis and intervention.

It is an ambitious book that tries to capture much under a single label, if I may use that pun. No Logo is structured into four major sections—“No Space,” “No Choice,” “No Jobs,” and “No Logo”—that repeat in visual and verbal form the catchy cover-title. These first three sections sketch out how the hegemony of branding has been achieved. “No Space” explains the concept of branding, describes its incursion into the public sphere, and questions the transformation of citizens into consumers. As examples, she looks at the appropriation of the style of African-American youth culture in the inner cities and the targeting of schools and universities. She tells how ambitious marketers have colonized public space by supplying schools with the hardware for pumping in news shows with their advertisements, or by securing exclusive contracts with institutions and paying a fee. An interesting sub-theme in this section is her discussion of the limits of identity politics and issues of representation as the focus of political debates in the 1980s.

In “No Choice,” Klein examines the strategies adopted by corporations to secure their hegemonic status along with how their profits have affected cultural production. In her discussion of franchising, mergers, and “the branded village” Klein provides “a big picture” that does not just dribble off into conspiracy theory — these capitalists are not all in collusion, but in competition with one another. The focus here is on the reduction of culture to the commodity form.

The third section, “No Jobs,” describes the effects of branding in North America and around the globe tracing how the flight of capital links the disenfranchised squeegee kids with the underpaid factory workers in economic processing
zones. Here she tells the familiar but still moving tales of the 1993 fire in a Bangkok toy factory, describes the conditions of work in the maquiladoras of Mexico, and captures the depressing horrors of retail work. It nicely brings the reader back to the beginning part of the book. Her thesis here is that the strongest brands are creating the worst jobs in the export-processing zones of the Philippines, Silicon Valley, as well as in the Malls. For these reasons, she says, it is no small wonder that Tommy Hilfiger, Reebok, and other brand name companies are finding themselves under attack.

The last and longest section of the book, “No Logo,” documents the new forms of activism—boycotting, culture jamming, skulking, and the use of the courts, the net, and the streets to protest and make public the less savory aspects of life in these branded times. This is the heart of the book and its most original contribution to scholarship. Klein goes back to the arguments and the promise of her opening chapter where she states that: “anti-corporatism is the brand of politics capturing the imagination of the next generation of troublemakers and shit disturbers and we need only look to the student radicals of the 1960’s and its versions in the movements of the 80s and 90s to see the transformative impact such as shift can have” (p. xix).

In her examination of some of the tactics adopted by activists—their use of the courts and the streets to garner media attention and to influence corporate practices—Klein does not glorify these movements or actors but instead considers the successes and the limitations of their strategies. Unlike the coverage found in Time and Newsweek, which emphasized looting and the destruction of property, Klein does not dismiss these protests as silly, violent, or totally random. She sees these as radical, rational forms of resistance and as meaningful struggles for citizenship and social change. She astutely evaluates various corporate responses to the backlash, such as Nike’s and Shell’s much-publicized codes of conduct, asking key critical questions like the following: “Who monitors these changes in safety standards and practices?” and “Who enforces policies of paid over-time?” She suggests that many of the publicized pay increases to employees in Indonesia, for example, are worthless given the rate of inflation, and implies that many of these corporate-initiated changes may be just more image-management if they are not carefully monitored over the long term.

Even though allied with those who resist, Klein’s arguments are persuasively and cleverly presented. While tales of sweatshops, environmental degradation, and the loss of public space have been told before, Klein is convincing and captivating because she personalizes her thesis, centres it on events, gives anecdotal and statistical details, and points out contradictions. She weaves in personal anecdotes of her own journey from teenage logo princess to journalist/activist without denying the compelling compulsion to engage in the fantasy worlds provided by corporate culture.

Her analysis of global capital personalizes the effects of abstract structural forces and conditions. In a chapter dedicated to three major firms that have been under scrutiny—Nike, Shell, and McDonalds—Klein re-tells the story of Ken
Sara-Wiwi, the Nigerian poet and writer. Sara-Wiwi was killed in Nigeria in 1995 as a result of his protest against Shell Oil’s devastation of the traditional lands of the Ogani people and the impoverishment that had resulted.

Klein retains my interest by avoiding finger-pointing moralism. She lays out the risks involved in refusing to take corporate hand-outs when public-sector funding is being squeezed, and she provides statistical evidence on the decline of tax revenues from corporations as a means of substantiating her political argument. She uses statistics presented in compelling visual display to advantage. Graphs show the phenomenal increase in spending on advertising, and the decrease of taxation levels in North America. Pie charts indicate the numbers (and ages) of people employed in retailing as opposed to manufacturing, and the increase in the number of employees engaged in “temporary” work (that is actually a permanent condition). Tables furnish the locations, wages, hours, and conditions of brand-name factories around the globe.

Klein is careful to let the examples of the culture jammers, boycotters, demonstrators, hacktivists, and media activists speak her politics for her, thus giving her support of their position credibility. No Logo gives one hope that one can indeed know what is going on and can do something; although it does not provide a blueprint, it provides case studies of different strategies. In its use of Canadian examples, she brings her politics home. In other words, Klein uses journalistic conventions of balance, objectivity, quotation, and sources to ethical and political advantage. This is an extremely savvy way to undercut the “common sense” war of propaganda put out on a regular basis by think-tanks such as the Fraser Institute. In this ability lies Klein’s genius. But as with any choice, there is a price to be paid for the choice to write in a populist and more journalistic voice and to emphasize recent events.

Klein is at her best when she is writing about the present, the real focus of her research. For example, in her first chapter, branding is described as a phenomenon of the 1980s and she centres her story around the demise of the Marlborough Man. It is an interesting and appealing example, but it overlooks the earlier historical roots of the production of lifestyles and not just products. As early as the 1960s, marketing theorists and consultants like Robert Keith, Theodore Levitt, and Ernest Dichter were advocating that companies market their products to consumers, whose dreams, desires, and lifestyles needed to be tracked. This shift from selling and advertising a product to marketing an image of the product is the precursor of branding, and the conceptual and historical relationship of similarities and differences between branding and marketing warrants more attention.

Klein stretches her analysis to make everything fit the main thesis of the book —branding. While she documents the transformation of subjects from citizens to consumers throughout, she ignores—perhaps too quickly—other significant changes in the structure of capitalism, such as the rise of small investors and mutual funds that now implicate citizen/consumers as shareholders. These may be equally important trends to watch. She does travel intellectually outside the scope of the brand in this book. Despite her admiration for those who oppose brand cul-
ture, one of her last chapters dwells on the limits of a “brand”-centred politics. As she notes, environmental destruction, abysmal working conditions, lack of steady employment, and the rising costs of food and shelter are not about to be solved by street protests or by spray-painting signs. She argues that changes in the workplace, initiated and monitored collectively by those who are most affected by them, are necessary. However the point of the book is to identify and attribute new forms of agency in the 1990s and the next millennium; this she does with aplomb.

In summary, No Logo is an excellent example of critical journalism—the muckraking sort championed by the late Jessica Mitford. I do not mean this as a slight. I stress No Logo’s journalistic quality for I have long felt that the writing practices of critical journalists like Linda McQuaig, Lisa Jones, and Robert Fiske should be taken more seriously in academia. Klein articulates complex issues in a comprehensible way that does not sacrifice and substitute elegant and stylish prose for a simplistic analysis. While not overtly theoretical, it is informed through and through by political economy. In its bringing together of the culture of consumption with production practices, I would argue that it is of interest to those in cultural studies. Finally, I disagree with Bronwyn Drainie’s criticism of the book’s aesthetics. The snappy black, white, and red book design (these were the colours of the socialist anarchist movement after all), its layout, and its use of images are commensurate with her media-wise politics and the visual codes familiar to her potential readers.

In the 1960s, C. Wright Mills advocated that cultural workmen, journalists, artists, academics, and scientists identify and engage with the major issues and trends of the day so that they could be debated rather than left to fate. More recently, Edward Said (1996) has talked of the responsibility of intellectuals to “speak truth to power.” Naomi Klein’s No Logo exemplifies these aspirations. Even if one does not always agree with her every conclusion, it is hard not to be moved emotionally and intellectually. While she eschews labels that might position her as a spokesperson for a generation, Klein’s ethical and political point of view is prescient given the recent spate of activism and, I think, positions her admirably as an important public intellectual. No Logo is smart, hip, and socially relevant. Perhaps it is overly optimistic. So what. It is a welcome and refreshing antidote to the despair, anguish, and gen-X cynicism of the 1990s.

References

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