

The Failure of Culture Jamming:
Resistance in a Post-social World
by
Pamela Brown

The Failure of Culture Jamming: Resistance in a Post-social World

A night sky is lit up by bright neon lights and video screens displaying products – first a camera, then a car, next a bank logo. The lights form letters and the letters form names of global corporations, two-dimensional images embodying multifaceted ideas, relationships and lives. A side of a building is painted with letters that connect us to an object, *something* we instinctively, reflexively desire. A square, once skirted by small shops, is now surrounded by big signs, logos, brands, global entities that dominate our public space. It is a city, it is a town, it is any day, and any where in the world. We find ourselves living amongst products, immersed in a world of objects, connected to things that have been animated by other things we call corporations. This shift to a world of objects coincides with a shift from an economy based on the manufacturing of products to an economy based on the manufacturing of brands. This shift in global mode of production has resulted in our immersion in global economic “realities” that seem to lead some toward extreme wealth, others toward extreme poverty, and still others toward life on the treadmill, constantly running to stay ahead in fear of falling into an abyss, but never getting very far.

Culture jamming has been the primary strategy to resist and slow what is widely perceived as a dehumanizing, and thus problematic, global trend. This strategy, which involves exposing that which is “behind the brand” (frequently labor exploitation), is based on re-representing logos (or signs) that conjure the brand with new and conflicting representations. Frequently viewed as an outgrowth of the philosophy of Guy Debord and the Situationists, culture jamming was initially viewed with optimism, but now appears to have failed to thwart global corporatization even remotely, and worse, it seems that jamming strategies are frequently co-opted by the brands themselves and used to attract the

subculture of resistance to the brand. While jamming strategies may have been successful in an economy based on human to human relations (between “subjects”), the progression to an economy based on relations between “subjects” and “objects”, and “objects” and “objects” necessitates a new strategy for social change.

The global phenomenon of branding coincides with Reagan era deregulatory practices, which led to the mergers and takeovers prevalent in the 1980s and 1990s. As companies gobbled each other up, and industries consolidated, the idea of producing brands instead of products took root. The potential synergy of conglomerate corporate structure could be realized most effectively by streamlining operations, reducing the number of factories and consolidating resources. “A consensus emerged that corporations were bloated, oversized; they owned too much, employed too many people and were weighted down with *too many things*.”¹ New trade laws allowed companies to acquire goods by contracting with manufacturers overseas. Instead of owning factories and employing people, companies began contracting with factories to produce goods for pennies on the dollar largely by exploiting foreign low-wage workers. By outsourcing production of goods to faraway places where the labor was cheap and the profit margins were high, companies could consolidate operations, shed factories, divest manufacturing resources, shrink the number employees on their payrolls, and spend all that savings on developing their brands.² Thus, production driven businesses faded and marketing driven corporations took over. And while companies were seemingly getting bigger and bigger, in actuality they were getting smaller and smaller; companies owned more and more brands, but needed fewer and fewer human resources to manage them.

¹ Klein, No Logo, 4

² Klein, No Logo, 4

In No Logo, Naomi Klein outlines three interrelated ways that the move to a mode of production based on the manufacture of intangible brands has changed human social life across the globe. First, the shift to an economy based on branding has modified our expectations of and experience in public space; second, it has created a lack of real consumer choice; and third, it has led to a lack of secure, well-paid work, here in the United States and abroad. As distinctions between products have narrowed, and competition between companies has become focused on brand identification, companies have found themselves engaged in a seemingly never-ending battle for consumer attention. Once a company is in the advertising game, there is no way out of this competitive cycle, for if one logo is not on the billboard, another one surely will be.³ As a result, the advertising industry has expanded rapidly, positioning itself as “culture” makers, and coming up with more and more creative ways to get a product’s message into the marketplace. From luxury brand logos in the holes on golf courses, to Smirnoff-themed parties, to campaigns that brand the feeling of a product with no relevance to what the product does or how it performs, the advertising industry has sold their service by claiming to create culture out of product identity. And as brand has become the dominant force of big business, public space has become more and more encroached on by private logos. What we once considered to be common space, owned and shared by the public, is now fair game for private companies; what used to be *public* culture is now *consumer* culture. And, as the unending competition for consumer attention has become more and more intense, more and more radical strategies are needed to command and control space.⁴ Consequently, public space has become privatized; and there is no city across the globe that is immune to this phenomenon.

³ See *The Persuaders*: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/persuaders/>

⁴ See *The Persuaders*: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/persuaders/>

But strangely, with this proliferation of graphics and the proliferation of objects in our public space, there is only the illusion of greater choice. When multinational conglomerates decide to take over a market, they do so with the force of a lion crushing a mouse. Instead of just opening one storefront in a location, Starbucks uses its resources and a technique called “clustering” to open several at the same time.⁵ They use an “economy of scale” based strategy to drive small business owners, who cannot compete on this scale, out of business and take market share. Never mind if their own stores cannibalize each other, the ability to take choice out of the market is more important. Never mind if each store is profitable, profit is driven and defined by owning the market, and owning the market is based on limiting consumer choice. Of course, we have more latte flavors to choose from than ever, but the result is that small businesses that sell unique goods simply cannot compete or even risk entering the marketplace. As global conglomerates have taken over, consumers find themselves living in a world of objects that may vary in shape or color, but are ultimately all the same.

Ironically, due to limitations on available goods, American consumers have been forced to purchase products made by big conglomerates, thus supporting their growth, and consequently eroding job opportunities, as well as contributing to the exploitation of workers abroad (particularly women and children). This reduction in employees has led to insecurity for American workers, many of whom have been left behind by the global economy. Interestingly, this trend began in the car industry. For decades, the American car industry relied on the famous Ford business model that produced cars and paid high enough wages that factory workers could afford to purchase the cars they made. Producing jobs as much as cars, the Ford model relied on consistent production, and did not base production on

⁵ Klein, *No Logo*, 135

moment-by-moment monitoring of consumption. But, in the early eighties, Japanese manufacturers introduced high quality, less expensive cars with better gas mileage to the market.⁶ “Toyotism” shifted the production/consumption dynamic such that the goal became for factories to maintain zero inventory.⁷ By shifting to a consumption driven business model, factories streamlined operations and lowered costs by only producing what the market would consume. American consumers preferred these cars largely due to cost-savings, and down went the American car industry along with the stable, middle-income jobs associated with it.

The trend toward consumption driven business models meant that it no longer made business sense to employ full time workers, and that it made more sense to employ part-time, variable shift and temporary workers based on consumption needs. From The Gap to Starbucks to McDonalds, much employment has transformed from jobs that would support an individual working full time, to part time, “hobby” jobs that no one could possibly live on. At Walmart, thirty hours a week is full time, and at around \$7.50 an hour that totals just under 11K a year in income. At The Gap part-time hourly workers are required to be “on call” at certain times just in case they are needed for a particular shift last minute.⁸ A part-time worker must be available all the time. At Starbucks, Star Labor scheduling software allows managers to enter worker availability, a skill level number, length of employment, and customer purchasing trends to generate a worker schedule. Thus, often the shifts are only a few hours long.⁹ And even though workers may be permitted to buy into stock option plans, of course, they cannot afford to do so. Further, due to these elaborate scheduling techniques, many workers are assigned shift hours that total just an hour or two

⁶ Storper, *Lived Effects of the Contemporary Economy: Globalization, Inequality, and Consumer Choice*, 388

⁷ Hardt, M. and Negri, A, Empire quoted in Lury, Brands: the Logos of the Global Economy, 48

⁸ Klein, No Logo, 243

⁹ Klein, No Logo, 243-4

under what would qualify them for benefits.¹⁰ Wages are low, benefits are non-existent, and the work is insecure at best. The trend does not just stop with the service industry: from interns to temps to freelance to the “self” employed, global branding has resulted in poor employment opportunity across the board.

On the other side of the world, in places like Indonesia, Mexico, Vietnam, China and the Philippines, low-wage workers have the other end of the short stick.¹¹ Factories are typically located within so-called “free trade zones”, where corporations are exempt from taxes. Initially, these tax incentives were meant to be temporary, to be phased out after corporations came to rely on the country’s manufacturing capacities. But, conglomerates quickly found a way around the laws by closing down the corporation at the end of the “tax holiday”, only to set up another one. Local governments became trapped - if they tax corporations, then they will simply go elsewhere.¹² Workers live under constant threat that if they deny overtime they will be replaced, though conditions are commonly unhealthy and dangerous. A typical workday ranges from twelve to sixteen hours, and during busy periods workers often sleep under their sewing machines. Paradoxically, consumption encourages the exploitation of workers abroad, and the loss of better paying, more secure jobs at home, yet we need to consume to survive.

From space to choice to jobs, each of these arenas is ultimately impacted by the economies of scale inherent to global corporatization. Throughout Western Europe, North America, and the so-called “developing” world, income inequality has increased over this period. The “lived effect” of the global consumer economy is that the top 1% of U.S. income doubled since 1979, while the middle 60% stayed the same until the 1990s, when it dipped by

¹⁰ Klein, *No Logo*, 244

¹¹ Klein, *No Logo*, 202

¹² Klein, *No Logo*, 207

2%. And these numbers do not even factor in the effect of women entering the work force, creating “two-earner households”. Put another way, in 1979 “the ninety-fifth percentile earner received ten times as much as the fifth, but in 1995, the corresponding ratio was more than twenty five times.”¹³ The cyclical aspect of the changing economy can be perceived through these numbers. A decline in middle class income makes it more desirable to purchase less expensive items. Consumer demand for less expensive goods drives corporations to compete globally on price. This in turn drives wages downward, creating a “race to the bottom” effect. Further, as whole industries shrink, job displacement is on the rise worldwide. Workers have moved from what they perceived as secure, well-paid jobs to downward work in terms of skill and income, or unemployment.¹⁴ Further, neoliberal ideology has prompted the dismantlement the “welfare state” worldwide. This trend is felt particularly strongly in the United States where only 30% of revenue is devoted to public expenditure, whereas European countries invest 50% in public resources. So, the lived effect of the changing economy can be described in terms of an experience of lack of security, precariousness and ambivalence.¹⁵ It is an experience of increased competition for resources, individualization, anomie, and dehumanization.

Resistance to this new mode of production has mainly been in the form of “culture jamming” and other practices that intervene in the representational strategy of the brand or logo by interjecting new information into its narrative. Culture jamming attempts to intercede in the process of corporate representation specifically by highlighting the human toll of branding, and making an emotional, humanizing connection between the brand and the consumer. Developed within a critique of advertising that was largely focused on

¹³ Storper, *Lived Effects of the Contemporary Economy: Globalization, Inequality, and Consumer Choice*, 376-7

¹⁴ Storper, *Lived Effects of the Contemporary Economy: Globalization, Inequality, and Consumer Choice*, 395-6

¹⁵ The term “ambivalence” is meant as used by Paolo Virno in *The Grammar of the Multitude*

resisting the representation of women and minorities in consumer culture, culture jamming relies on a strategy of re-representing brands. So, "Joe Camel turns into Joe Chemo", and is pictured hooked up to an IV. Models in fashion ads are "skulled" to visually portray them as the face of anorexia.¹⁶ Often noted as based on the philosophy of Guy Debord and the Situationists, culture jamming uses the concept of "détournement" or taking "an image, message or artifact... out of its context to create a new meaning" to generate a different emotional response from the viewer.¹⁷ While the Situationists generally attacked the individual who conformed to corporate identity, culture jammers seek to attack the corporate institution itself.

Many would agree that culture jamming has been successful at détournement, however many also believe that ultimately it is an unsuccessful resistance strategy against global corporatization. In part, the problem stems from culture jamming's reliance on a semiotic approach to creating meaning, which rests on a theoretical perspective that views culture as contested a ground of representation and resistance. In Subculture: The Meaning of Style, Dick Hebdige describes this as follows:

The struggle between different discourses, different definitions and meanings within ideology is therefore always, at the same time, a struggle with signification: a struggle for possession of the sign which extends to even the most mundane areas of everyday life."¹⁸

For Hebdige, subcultures are frequently based around a response to consumption. For example, a particular style of dress frequently becomes the norm within a particular subculture, thus communicating identity through a commodity. However, the cultural process itself "returns" the new representation to "the place where commonsense would

¹⁶ Klein, No Logo, 282, 286

¹⁷ Klein, No Logo, 282

¹⁸ Hebdige, Subculture: the Meaning of Style, 17

have {it} fit.”¹⁹ In other words, the re-representation is “recuperated” by being incorporated into “mass-produced objects” or redefined by the “dominant group”. The culture jamming subculture seems to prove the veracity of this claim. More and more the style and aesthetic of culture jamming is used in advertising to attract niche markets that identify with an anti-consumerist message. In fact, brands such as Whole Foods, The Body Shop and American Apparel, are based on the very idea of resisting the effects of consumerism. *AdBusters*, the subscriber-based Vancouver magazine, which prints culture jams and promotes culture jamming, is in and of itself a commodity. Kalle Lasn, *AdBusters*’ founder and the public face of culture jamming, who actively espouses “green” consumption practices, has now even started his own sneaker company, which he promotes with the claim that they are taking a bite out of Nike’s bottom line and “reinventing” capitalism.²⁰ Ironically, not only have brands sprouted around culture jamming styles and ideologies, but even the face of culture jamming itself, *AdBusters Magazine*, has been recuperated into the system it stands against. Unfortunately, the strategies of culture jamming quickly tend to be recast within the consumerist vision they are trying to attack.

In *Privatized Resistance: AdBusters and the Culture of Neoliberalism*, Max Haiven argues that culture jamming is not only an inadequate strategy, but also is ultimately complicit with the ideology it claims to stand against.²¹ By contextualizing *AdBusters* within the paradigm of neoliberalism, Haiven is able to draw important parallels between the two belief systems. A fundamental tenet of neoliberal ideology is the freedom of the self-interested individual to act within the free market. This belief in the individual establishes the “subject” as separate from a community. It is this formulation that is the ideological basis for the dismantlement

¹⁹ Hebdige, *Subculture: the Meaning of Style*, 94-5

²⁰ Carducci, *Culture Jamming: a Sociological Perspective*, 124, Haiven, *Privatized Resistance: AdBusters and the Culture of Neoliberalism*, 86

²¹ Haiven, *Privatized Resistance: AdBusters and the Culture of Neoliberalism*, 86

of social welfare programs and the deregulatory economic theory, which are the hallmarks of neoliberalism. Within this model, the individual is divested from a role as a citizen in the public sphere, and is transformed into the consumer in the private market.²²

Similarly, the philosophy of culture jamming favors the individual. Culture jamming strategies are designed to raise individual awareness, create an individual emotional response – yes, to generate a revolution, but one person at a time. Thus, within the ideology of culture jamming, the individual is transformed into a different kind of consumer, one who buys the right products. As opposed to attempting to reclaim the public sphere or restore citizenship, culture jamming does not address the collective. *AdBusters* does not seek to restore non-commercial public space, but rather seeks to place a more critical (better) consumer in the privatized space. As a result of this individualistic philosophy, culture jamming fails to cut to the heart of the problem of globalization, which seems more related to the loss of the public, than the representation of an individual. Consequently, culture jamming is not only ineffective at addressing the big picture problem, but by espousing the neoliberal individualistic subject, it is also complicit in the dominant ideology that it seeks to stand against. So, on the one hand the culture jamming strategy fails as a challenge to representation, and on the other hand culture jamming fails to serve as a challenge to the larger neoliberal ideology of which global branding is inextricably a part.

While both of these criticisms may certainly be true, exploration of what function a brand performs and how this orients us socially may reveal another reason for the failure of culture jamming-type resistance strategies, and may also shed light on what sorts of strategies may work for the future. The rise of neoliberal capitalism and the heightened individualism that seems to come with it, may also involve an “object-centered sociality”. In

²² Haiven, *Privatized Resistance: AdBusters and the Culture of Neoliberalism*, 90

other words, the other side of individualism could be perceived as a trend toward human relationships with objects. Put another way, the breakdown of human-to-human bonds that results in greater individualism may be mirrored by an increase in human-object relations. In *Sociality with Objects: Social Relations in Postsocial Knowledge Societies*, Karin Knorr Cetina presents the possibility that instead of perceiving a loss of social relationships, we might perceive the heightening of a different human relationship and experience with objects. As we have moved away from the Fordist model of collective production, we have come to value individual knowledge and expertise. Scientific experts, for example, commonly develop social relationships with the objects of their studies. As such they form “post-social knowledge societies” whose practices become incorporated into society as a whole. Knorr Cetina advocates for a new, expanded vision of sociality, which considers these “object worlds” and perceives “an increasing orientation towards objects as sources of the self, of relational intimacy, of shared subjectivity and of social integration.”²³

In *Brands: the Logos of the Global Economy* Celia Lury, applies this insight to branding, theorizing the brand as a form of object. Although a brand lacks the tangibility of a typical object, it is still, in some sense, material. It is a “set of relations between products or services.”²⁴ It is a “platform for the patterning of activity, a mode of organizing activities in time and space.”²⁵ Brands are the means by which products interact with individuals, thus blurring the distinction between “objects” and “subjects.” For Lury, the brand acts as an “interface” for an exchange of information between consumers and producers, which is not only quantitative, but also incorporates “affect, intensity and the re-introduction of

²³ Knorr Cetina, *Sociality with Objects: Social Relations in Postsocial Knowledge Societies*, 9

²⁴ Lury, *Brands: the Logos of the Global Economy*, 1

²⁵ Lury, *Brands: the Logos of the Global Economy*, 1

qualities.”²⁶ In this way, the brand mediates relationships that fall outside of the quantifiable, incorporates the sensory, and intercedes in traditional relationships between “subjects” and “objects.” Thus, the brand changes the way in which “subjects relate to objects – and objects relate to subjects.”²⁷ And as a result, brands have become the basis for a changed relationship between production and consumption.²⁸ Consumers become involved in production via marketing tools such as the logo, and thus become so-called “prosumers,” seamlessly engaged in the processes of consumption and production simultaneously. It is the brand that mediates this new dynamic of production and consumption, and changes the relationship between objects and individuals, creating a new “post-social” dynamic. In a post-social world, the brand becomes an important object, a medium that establishes social and economic dynamics. This development represents a shift from a “logic of representation to a logic of things,” and “from culture as a regime of representation to culture as a *system of objects*.”²⁹ Thus, resistance strategies such as culture jamming, which rest on re-establishing subject-subject or inter-human relationships, fail to resonate within the dynamics of a post-social world.

Once branding is contextualized within the larger developments of neoliberal ideology including the consequences of deregulation and a global economy, ideas about the relationship of the individual to the public, and the possibility of a new object-centered sociality, it seems hard to imagine hitting the rewind button or getting the genie back into the bottle. Yet, this is the conversation around culture jamming and representational resistance techniques. In *Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy*, Arjun Appadurai perceives the new global society as nodal and “rhizomic”, decentralized and

²⁶ Lury, *Brands: the Logos of the Global Economy*, 7

²⁷ Lury, *Brands: the Logos of the Global Economy*, 131

²⁸ Lury, *Brands: the Logos of the Global Economy*, 46-7

²⁹ Lash & Lury, *Global Culture Industry*, 181

“deterritorialized.”³⁰ Global cultural flows circle and overlap, creating the need for new theory that relies on images of “flow”, “uncertainty” and “chaos”, rather than “order, stability, and systematicness.”³¹ It is the brand that mediates these “flows of disjuncture and difference.”³² Perhaps, within this decentralized network lies the possibility for a new form of power that is based on “interactivity.”³³ In this new world, perhaps power is something that flows. Perhaps, in this new reality, the public is no longer relevant. And perhaps, instead of a public, we are now a “multitude.”³⁴ Perhaps, that multitude flows over the disjunctures, and perhaps it is within this new realm that we will develop new strategies to resist.

³⁰ Appadurai, *Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy* in Media and Cultural Studies Keyworks, 585, 587

³¹ Appadurai, *Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy* in Media and Cultural Studies Keyworks, 600

³² Lury, Brands: the Logos of the Global Economy, 73

³³ Lury, Brands: the Logos of the Global Economy, 131

³⁴ Virno, A Grammar of the Multitude

Bibliography

- Appadurai, Arjun. "The Thing itself." Public culture 18.1 (2006): 15.
- Appadurai, *Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy* in Media and Cultural Studies Keyworks, 584
- Brace-Govan, Jan, and Helene de Burgh-Woodman. "We do Not Live to Buy: Why Subcultures are Different from Brand Communities and the Meaning for Marketing Discourse." The International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy 27.5-6 (2007): 193.
- Callahan, Jamie, and Jennifer Sandlin. "Deviance, Dissonance, and Detournement: Culture Jammers' use of Emotion in Consumer Resistance." Journal of consumer culture 9.1 (2009): 79.
- Carducci, Vince. "Culture Jamming: A Sociological Perspective." Journal of consumer culture 6.1 (2006): 116.
- Celia Lury. Brands : The Logos of the Global Economy. London ; New York: London ; New York : Routledge, 2004.
- Cetina, Karin Knorr. Sociality with Objects: Social Relations in Postsocial Knowledge Societies. Vol. 14., 1997.
- Crockett, David. "Marketing Blackness: How Advertisers use Race to Sell Products." Journal of consumer culture 8.2 (2008): 245.
- Dick Hebdige. Subculture, the Meaning of Style. London: London : Methuen, 1979.
- "frontline: the persuaders | PBS." 5/25/2009
<<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/persuaders/>>.
- Haiven, Max. "Privatized Resistance: AdBusters and the Culture of Neoliberalism." The review of education, pedagogy, and cultural studies 29.1 (2007): 85.
- Hari, Johann. "How to Beat the Adman at His Own Game." New Statesman 131 (2002): 22.
- Humphreys, Ashlee. "The Consumer as Foucauldian "Object of Knowledge"." Social Science Computer Review 24.3 (2006): 296.
- Ilmonen, Kaj. "The use of and Commitment to Goods." Journal of consumer culture 4.1 (2004): 27.
- "Kalle Lasn: Clearing the Mindscape | Adbusters Culturejammer Headquarters." 5/23/2009
<http://www.adbusters.org/blogs/adbusters_blog/kalle_lasn_clearing_mindscape.html#comments>.
- Khan, Rimi. "Reading Cultural Studies, Reading Foucault." Postmodern culture 15.1 (2004) .

- Kulynych, Jessica J. "Performing Politics: Foucault, Habermas, and Postmodern Participation." Polity 30.2 (1997): 315-46.
- Maguire, Jennifer, and Sharon Zukin. "Consumers and Consumption." Annual Review of Sociology 30.1 (2004): 173.
- Media and Cultural Studies : Keywords. Ed. Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas Kellner. Malden, Mass.: Malden, Mass. : Blackwell Publishers, 2001.
- Naomi Klein. No Logo. New York: New York : Picador, 2002.
- Paolo Virno 1952-. A Grammar of the Multitude : For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life. Los Angeles, CA : Cambridge, Mass.: Los Angeles, CA : Semiotext e ; Cambridge, Mass. : Distributed by MIT Press, 2004.
- Pickett, Brent L. "Foucault and the Politics of Resistance." Polity 28.4 (1996): 445-66.
- Proust, Françoise, and Penelope Deutscher. "The Line of Resistance." Hypatia 15.4, Contemporary French Women Philosophers (2000): 23-37.
- Scott Lash. Global Culture Industry : The Mediation of Things. Ed. Celia Lury. Cambridge, UK ; Malden, MA: Cambridge, UK ; Malden, MA : Polity, 2007.
- St John, Graham. "Counter-Tribes, Global Protest and Carnivals of Reclamation." Peace Review 16.4 (2004): 421.
- Storper, Michael. "Lived Effects of the Contemporary Economy." Public culture 12.2 (2000): 375.
- Theodor W. Adorno 1903-1969. The Culture Industry : Selected Essays on Mass Culture. Ed. J. M. Bernstein. London ; New York: London ; New York : Routledge, 2001.
- Urs, Bruegger, and Knorr Karin. "Global Microstructures: The Virtual Societies of Financial Markets." The American journal of sociology 107.4 (2002): 905.
- . "The Market as an Object of Attachment: Exploring Postsocial Relations in Financial Markets." Canadian journal of sociology 25.2 (2000): 141.