

Lecture 08

No-Logo: Advertising and Promotion

Last week we discussed the *Society of the Spectacle* and the ideas of the Situationists. I argued that they mounted an extreme, some might say, a psychotic attack, upon the manner in which modern relations are lived through images over which we have little or no control – images which dictate how we see ourselves, how we form and express our desires, images that determine how we rank our priorities, and live our *lifestyles*. Although, their programme amounted to a kind of urban utopianism, the Situationists were an extremely active and revolutionary political movement committed to challenging what they regarded as the modern form of capital incarnated in the society of the spectacle. Consequently, they rejected the approach and the conventional radicalism of the communist, anarchist, and reformist left. This was because the Situationists thought that the conventional left confined or imprisoned the concerns of the proletariat within the parameters of battles over living standards and *managed* and *negotiated settlements* with capital; battles and settlements which did nothing to challenge the alienated rule of the spectacle.

In contrast to this tradition is the much more popular idea of ‘commodification’ in which it is argued that under capitalism human relationships are ‘commodified’ through the process of mass consumption and mass advertising. Within this tradition there is a similar hostility towards the spectacular aspects of life under capitalism but it is associated directly with manipulative advertising and promotion, and with an ‘inauthentic’ kind of life, and the ‘waste’ it promotes.

This view has a complex history and roots that extend back to nineteenth century criticisms of the vulgar and meretricious priorities of commercial society. It is a criticism that extends from fairly traditional or patriarchal ‘Tory’ ideas about community cohesion threatened by rampant commerce, through the trenchant attacks of liberal critics upon ‘Board School’ education and the popular press, to the oppositional politics of the socialists and anarchists. And these criticisms, criticisms that focused upon the dangers of commercialisation, were deepened and promoted in the work of authors as dissimilar as George Gissing, H. G. Wells, Sinclair Lewis, or Q. D. and F. R. Leavis.

So, when Vance Packard, published his book, *The Hidden Persuaders* in 1957 he was developing, with perhaps more rigour (and in more depth), a much older criticism of commercial society in which promotional literature and advertising was seen as a threat both to serious literature and to humane culture more generally. In the context of a comprehensive analysis Packard set out the case against advertising with series of rhetorical questions which encompass the full historical range of radical hostility towards the ad agencies of Madison Avenue and Mayfair:

- What is the morality of the practice of encouraging housewives to be non-rational and impulsive in buying the family food?

- What is the morality of playing upon hidden weaknesses and frailties – such as our anxieties, aggressive feelings, dread of non-conformity, and infantile hang-overs – to sell products?
- Specifically, what are the ethics of businesses that shape campaigns designed to thrive on these weaknesses they have diagnosed?
- What is the morality of manipulating small children even before they reach the age where they are legally responsible for their actions?
- What is the morality of treating voters like customers, and child customers seeking father images at that?
- What is the morality of exploiting our deepest sexual sensitivities and yearnings for commercial purposes?
- What is the morality of appealing for our charity by playing upon our secret desires for self-enhancement?
- What is the morality of developing in the public an attitude of wastefulness towards national resources by encouraging the ‘psychological obsolescence’ of products already in use?
- What is the morality of subordinating truth to cheerfulness in keeping the citizen posted on the state of his nation?¹

The anti-capitalist in the late fifties *and in the modern movements* would answer that it is the morality of the marketplace where profits are always put before people. They would argue, logically enough, that the drive to sell products leads to advertising and promotion of all kinds where short filmmakers, photographers, typographers, and graphic artists, engage in the wholesale distortion of reality in the pursuit of profit.

What is more they always attempt to endow their products with qualities and capacities that extend beyond the ordinary or manifest utility or use-value possessed by the good. As Vance Packard noted when discussing soap as ‘beauty soap’:

These motivational analysts, in working with the symbol manipulators, are adding depths to the selling of ideas and products. They are learning, for example, to offer us considerably more than the actual item involved.²

Accordingly, a pair of jeans are not simply cotton trousers but a garment loaded with semiotic significance which, depending upon the cut and style of the cotton trousers, is able to evoke the élan of revolutionary youth, the shambling gait of the ghetto, the sexiness of the ‘fashion victim’, the fulsome masculine appeal of the hardworking truck driver or steel fixer, and so on, and so on.

In 1961 Raymond Williams denounced this process. Raymond Williams, the socialist critic and founding author of modern cultural studies and of the theory of ‘cultural materialism’, denounced advertising in his seminal essay: ‘Advertising: the Magic

¹ Vance Packard, *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957) Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1961, pp,109-110.

² Vance Packard, *The Hidden Persuaders*, p.15.

System'.³ He held the view that advertising promoted irrational illusions in the capacity of products to bring benefits beyond their manifest utility. 'It is clear', he argued, 'that we have a cultural pattern in which objects are not enough but must be validated, if only in fantasy, by association with social and personal meanings':

The short description of the pattern we have is *magic*: a highly organized and professional system of magical inducements and satisfactions, functionally very similar to magical systems in simpler societies, but rather strangely coexistent with a highly developed scientific technology.⁴

[Here he seems to be alluding to the fetish discussed by anthropologists as much as that by Freud]

What Williams did with the notion of *magic* in this essay was inadvertently (I think) to compound the confusion that has arisen between Karl Marx's idea of the 'fetishism of commodities' and a the more Freudian psycho-sexual conception of fetishism extended from fur, feet, rubber, to the fixing of our desire upon *must-have* advertised objects and, of course, to the activity of shopping itself.⁵

Marx's idea of the fetishism of commodities has nothing at all to do with advertising, our entrancement within the spectacle, or of our desire for particular products. In the section of *Capital* entitled 'The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret thereof' Marx is discussing the mysterious manner in which commodities, because they only express their value in exchange, appear actually to possess that value and quality, 'as an objective character of the products themselves', independent of the social labour that went into producing them.

So, although every commodity is the product of co-operative human labour, it appears that the *goods themselves* – as they are bought and sold – are actually engaging in a social relation. As Marx puts it:

There . . . is a definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things.⁶

Marx continues:

In order, therefore, to find an analogy, we must have recourse to the mist-enveloped regions of the religious world. In that world the productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life, and entering into relation both with one another and the human race. So it is in the world of

³ Raymond Williams, 'Advertising: the Magic System' (1961) in *Problems in Materialism and Culture*, (1980) London: Verso, 1997.

⁴ *Ibid.* p.185.

⁵ Sigmund Freud, 'Fetishism' (1927) in *On Sexuality: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality and Other Works*, Penguin: London, 1987, pp.351-357.

⁶ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Volume 1 (1867), (English Translation 1887), Lawrence & Wishart: London: 1983, p.77.

commodities with the products of men's hands. This I call the Fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour, so soon as they are produced as commodities, and which is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities.⁷

Here, Marx is explaining one of the ways in which the things that we produce come to rule over us as if they had *a life of their own*. He is drawing our attention to the uncanny fact that commodities, things, goods, produced by us, come to dominate us.

There is, of course, a direct connection between commodities and advertising, which is fundamental to the development of mass consumption, and mass advertising. However, the idea that advertising is in some sense *avoidable* or *unnecessary* is I think wholly incorrect.

Advertising is not epiphenomenal [merely on the surface of economic relations] or parasitic upon production; it is an essential and spontaneous development once capitalist relations have reached a certain stage or density.

[Early in the system when large-scale production is focused upon raw materials and capital goods advertising does not really arise – however as the system develops and the focus of large-scale manufacture begins to broaden from the production of raw materials and capital goods to include ordinary items of consumption then advertising begins to become important.]

In Britain, after the middle of the nineteenth century, with improvements in productivity and rising living standards the production of goods for consumption by retail customers came to dominate capitalist production. The market for the producers' goods grew exponentially both in volume and value and the supply of goods to the final consumers, instead of being channelled and mediated through a relatively small number of agents — fellow industrialists, the state, merchants, and other traders — had to be organised across a mass market comprised of tens of thousands (and later millions) of *individual* customers.

Before the last quarter of the nineteenth century the producers of commodities communicated with customers *indirectly* through shop keepers, peddlers, inn keepers, market stall holders, and the like. Consequently, in the early phase of the development of commercial or capitalist society advertising largely took the form of relatively simple public notices in occasional newspapers and handbills, aimed as much at merchants and shopkeepers, as at the final or *retail* customers.

However, as the prosperity of the lower middle class and of the mass of workers began to rise a really mass market began to develop for tea, soap, cocoa, chocolate, sauces and relishes, newspapers and periodicals, books and proprietary medicines and cures, and bottled beer. Consequently, by 1900 the manufacturer of many of these

⁷ *Ibid.* p.77.

commodities had to address as directly as possible these potential retail customers: individuals scattered throughout urban and rural areas in many countries across the world. This trend, despite economic catastrophe, wars and revolutions continued to grow throughout the opening decades of the twentieth century reaching new levels of intensity in the USA during the forties, fifties and sixties, and in Britain during the fifties, sixties and seventies. These societies, together with Japan, Australasia, Canada and Western Europe, constituted the so-called 'affluent society'⁸

Because, the value of commodities is only finally determined, and realised by their sale in the market it is essential that they be sold. Consequently, with the proliferation of customers – the necessity of appealing to millions of final customers rather than simply to merchants and middlemen - market research and advertising became essential tools in the hands of capitalists to ensure that they could sell the goods (i.e., the 'use values') that they produced. For without a sale, the value and surplus value generated during the production process cannot be realised.

So, from this perspective, advertising is a spontaneous and integral aspect of commodity production once capitalism has moved into the stage of mass consumption where the vast majority of the population is drawn into the central economic relations implied by the production, circulation, and consumption of commodities.

However, since the early sixties opposition to advertising predicated upon the idea that it is manipulative, deceitful, wasteful, and a key means of celebrating capitalist ideological commitments to growth and consumption, has been fairly general upon the left. Indeed, although socialists have never, of course, opposed rising living standards they have tended to be suspicious of advertising because of its brazen celebration of material prosperity. In contrast socialists and the left more generally have preferred always to focus upon themes of war, insecurity, poverty or exclusion.

Insofar as the broader anti-capitalist movement has engaged with the subject of advertising the focus has been upon deception and upon the way in which the deception practiced by advertisers can be related to the favoured themes of war, insecurity, poverty, and exclusion.

In this sense the work of Naomi Klein is of great interest. Working broadly within the tradition established upon the left which charges advertising with deceit, manipulation, waste, and the sowing of illusions in capitalist prosperity she has chronicled the movement from *products* to *brands* and, of course, to the consequent fetish of company logos which stand both for a range of different products and services, *and possess the capacity to confer upon their customers the cachet or prestige of being their customers.*

Indeed, this is the importance of the logo – it has to be conspicuous – because it is a badge of belonging to the group of people clever enough, fashionable enough,

⁸ For discussion of the affluent society see Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man: Studies in the ideology of advanced industrial society*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964.

prosperous enough, to consume the products and services of the favoured company. In this way, the brand is an expression of qualities which extends not merely beyond the particular pair of cotton trousers or the particular pair of shoes, but beyond the particular kind of apparel to apparel in general, or to apparel and accessories, and cosmetics, in general – or in the case of Virgin from mobile phone services to rail journeys, to flights, to condoms and cola, and most recently to gyms and health clubs.

Naomi Klein has focused her attention upon this kind of extension from the product to the logo and it has enabled her to catalogue the kinds of resistance that this kind of company – product – services – and lifestyle identification has aroused throughout the world.

In her discussion of campaigns against Nike, McDonalds, and Shell she has been able to show high levels of sustained commitment in analysing and criticising the behaviour of these companies. She has worked on Coca Cola the Gap and she might just as easily have worked on Nestles or Next. The analysis and the focus is much the same. These companies in the struggle to retain and to gain customers are engaged in a daunting process of cultural homogenisation, which is apparently damaging to the customers and to their societies alike.

There is a broad assumption that big companies engaged in marketing a diverse range of goods and services across a number of different countries and markets is a bad thing. Why it is a bad thing is not discussed. It just is. Don't ask why we should hate big companies. . . . Just Do It! And, in this respect, Naomi Klein is a fluent and able representative of the outlook of the contemporary anti-capitalist movement.

That many of these big logo companies pay lousy wages, operate positively dangerous factories, processes and workshops, employ people on rotten insecure terms or non-existent contracts is evidently true. However, whether they are operating at the minimum wage end of the labour market in rich countries or operating sweatshops in poor countries Klein adduces no evidence for believing that they are worse than small employers in equivalent labour markets. It appears to be only their large size, their corporate identity, and their conspicuous role as the producers of retail goods and services that are important.

The reason for this is fairly evident. If your focus is always upon organising consumer campaigns and consumer boycotts then it is essential for campaigning purposes that you should focus upon household names and upon goods and services, which are directly consumed, by the mass of retail customers in rich countries.

Klein makes an interesting observation in her discussion of 'Secondary Boycotts' – the Japanese pulp-and-paper giant Daishowa Marubeni-International had no public profile – so when campaigners wanted to campaign against the company's logging operations because they violated the interests of the Lubicon Cree they had to resort to the threat of secondary boycotts against Pizza Pizza and Woolworths – companies using paper products produced by the unknown and obscure logging and paper company, Daishowa Marubeni-International.

This difficulty in which one may only mobilise against household names demonstrates the severe limits to anti-corporate campaigning. Klein herself is evidently aware of the difficulty when she says:

There is no doubt that anticorporate activism walks a precarious line between self-satisfied consumer rights and engaged political action. Campaigners can exploit the profile that brand names bring to human-rights and environmental issues, but they have to be careful that their campaigns don't degenerate into glorified ethical shopping guides: how-to's on saving the world through boycotts and personal lifestyle choices. Are your sneakers "No Sweat?" Your rugs "Rugmark?" Your soccer balls "Child Free?" Is your moisturizer "Cruelty-Free?" Your coffee "Fair Trade?"⁹

Klein appears to understand the paradox of her analysis and the paradoxical situation in which the wider movement finds itself. The specific campaigns against child labour, terrible wages, seriously dangerous working conditions and the denial of a wide range of basic rights, are (so long as they are conducted as consumer boycotts) restricted to the principal high street firms. Furthermore, they can only build really widespread support upon the basis of moral appeals for 'fair trade' shopping.

And, of course, 'fair trade' shopping campaigns provoke subtle and complicated responses from the firms involved in which they set about meeting the criticisms by limited reforms and improvements, which undermines the campaigning effort often without addressing the fundamental grievances.

Another problem is that campaigns against the bad working conditions in poor countries are often mobilised in order to defend jobs in the rich countries.¹⁰ The struggle against the freer movement of capital and labour is often complicated by situations in which employers and employees in rich companies can establish a working unity around defeating the competition from low-wage economies. In fact, Klein notes the extension of this kind of argument to the unemployed parents of Nike customers in the USA who might apparently have jobs if production hadn't been shifted to the Philippines:

It is inner-city youth who have most directly felt the impact of Nike's decision to manufacture its products outside the U.S., both in high unemployment rates and in the erosion of the community tax base (which sets the stage for the deterioration of local public schools).

Instead of jobs for their parents, what the inner-city kids get from Nike is the occasional visit from its marketers and designers . . .¹¹

⁹ Klein, *No Logo*, (2000) London: Flamingo, 2001, p.428.

¹⁰ Klein, *No Logo*, pp.369-371; 392.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

Evidently, if the real target of the anti-capitalist movement is super exploitation in poor countries, child labour, the uncontrolled use of dangerous chemicals and processes, starvation wages, and so on, then a policy framed around the need to extend democracy – freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, freedom of organisation – *i.e. the best conditions for the building of effective trade union movements and social democratic politics* – demands a move beyond the focus upon advertising. And, we shall be looking at just such an attempt next week.