

BLOWING UP

the

BRAND

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON PEDAGOGICAL CULTURE

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# Blowing Up the Brand

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## **“New Branded World” Redux**

Only about a decade ago, popular understanding of brands and branding was largely confined to the products and practices of the corporate enterprise. When journalist and cultural critic Naomi Klein wrote the bestseller *No Logo* in 2000, a searing critique of the “new branded world” (3) of industrial influence, the focus of her attack was on how corporations’ transnational reach, predatory methods, and tools of exploitation, exclusion, and censorship had impacted a wide range of social and political activities and institutions. The instant recognition and global penetration of “the swoosh, the shell and the arches” (Ch. 16) underlined Klein’s account of the creeping corporate encroachment of personal, public, and mental space. Aiming to chart the anticorporate activism on the rise to resist and transform these practices, *No Logo* fed a worldwide movement to foster awareness of “the brand bullies” and challenge their dominance of the status quo.

Even while this consciousness was on the rise, however, other forms of “brand awareness” were taking place. First, and surely disappointing for its author, *No Logo* came to serve not only as a bible for social justice movements, labor rights activists, and environmentalists, but also as a reference point for marketing and branding agencies themselves.<sup>1</sup> Second, in a striking reversal of *No Logo*’s lessons, many anticorporate activists and their causes themselves became “brands,” taking the rationalized logic of brand management to the heart of their organization (du Gay 1996; and, e.g., Bob 2002, 2005).<sup>2</sup>

This process mirrored a more general shift toward entrepreneurial forms of governance by a wide range of institutions starting in the 1970s. Transformations in the perceived requirements of organizations at the urban, regional, and national levels to be faster paced, more systematized, and globally competitive began to demand new forms of authority that were

more familiar with the requirements of the market (Harvey 2001: Ch. 16; Keating 2003). Crises of legitimacy and relevance in the public sector were met with claims of expertise and tried-and-tested solutions from the private realm. In this context adopting a brand was seen as a symbolic shorthand for market savvy, business acumen, and global competitiveness—whether for urban centers, transnational governance institutions, or nation-states. *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman put it bluntly: “As we move into a world where everyone has the same hardware and everybody is being forced to get the same software to go with it, a country’s brand, and the unique bond it can build with its foreign investors, becomes even more important” (1999: 244). In an article titled, “No Logo, No Future,” brand strategists Fiona Gilmore and Rebecca Rumens decried government aid to developing countries, advocating “brand surgery” instead—the transfer of brand-based training and skills to encourage more entrepreneurial approaches. “We must ask not only what our government can do to alleviate poverty in Africa,” they conclude, “but ask what our employers or favorite brands can do” (Gilmore and Rumens 2005; see also Anholt 2005). Overall, it came to seem as though the structures of private ownership and strategic management developed to capitalize products and services in the corporate world increasingly resonated with the renewed aims of a broad range of public, private, and governance institutions; even those hitherto immune from—or at least inured against—the requirements of global capital.

At present we are no longer surprised to hear the term “brand” applied to multiple forms of political, social, and cultural expression and organization: the professional identities of individuals and families—from Tiger Woods to Tyra Banks, Stephen King to LonelyGirl18, the Kardashians to the Novogratzes (Green 2009); politicians and political parties of every affiliation and stripe (Klein 2010; Greenberg 2008; Pasotti 2009); arts, civil society, and advocacy organizations (Wallace 2006; Stallabrass 2006); geographical spaces at multiple scales (Aronczyk 2007; Donald et al. 2008; Jansen 2008); ethnic and kinship groups (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009); philanthropies and charities (Bishop and Green 2008; King 2006; Stole 2008); sports teams and other large-scale entertainments and franchises (Rein et al. 2006); movements for social justice and human rights (Bob 2005); educational and healthcare facilities (Gould 2003; Waldby and Mitchell 2006); privacy and security regimes<sup>3</sup>; the military (Helmus et al. 2007); and religious groups (Einstein 2007). Aesthetic styles, from fashion to music to typography, claim their own brands.<sup>4</sup> Branding is on the agenda

of policy centers, transnational agencies, and think tanks, alternately investigated as a strategy for international diplomacy, a matter of public policy, and a source of institutional funding. In university settings it has spilled out of business departments and into the social sciences and media and cultural studies as both a course subject and a self-reflexive planning objective.

What has given rise to *these* new branded worlds? At one level, we can see this sudden brand mania merely as recent public awareness of changes that had been building in the corporate sector for decades. Brand managers, marketing professors, and other members of the professional “persuasive” class have for some time argued for the relevance of brand strategy to other aspects of large-scale organization (e.g., Kotler and Levy 1969; Olins 1979). In its insistence on “effectiveness,” “efficiency,” and “discipline,” branding is advocated as cure for the ailments of a vast range of groups and individuals, whether the ailments stem from financial, structural, or communicational complaints (e.g., Clifton 2003; Anholt 2005; Holt 2004). In a competitive global economy characterized by surfeits of information and hypermediation, and corresponding deficits of time and attention, brands are heralded as the “imaginative genre” (Poovey 2008) that can simplify, differentiate, and narrate a wide range of economic and social values. In the contemporary context, Klein’s portrayal of the “international rule of the brands” (2000: 446) resonates at an even greater frequency.

To apply the logic of the brand to these previously unbranded organizations, sites, and forms of subjectivity is not merely to call attention to the thorough marketization and commodification of everyday life. We suggest that the globalized, self-reflexive use of brands and branding to describe and structure these multiple and varied spheres is both symptom and cause of a series of shifts in how social relations, subject positions, and political programs are organized, governed, and articulated.

*Blowing Up the Brand* represents an attempt to account for these shifts. The fourteen chapters in this volume do not seek to make epochal claims but rather to draw examples from a variety of sites to magnify the ways in which brands have become structuring elements of our everyday lives. Its authors address the contradictory character of brands as forms of self-expression; the “utility of fiction” in political branding; the rise of a “brand-managerial” class of cultural experts, entrepreneurs, and intermediaries; and the extension of brand models along previously unbranded horizons, whether geographic, conceptual, moral, or biopolitical. In this introductory chapter we try to account for some of the changes that have taken place to

create these newer contexts of organization and expression. To “blow up” the brand in this book is not necessarily to explode or destroy its structuring logics—though our tools of inquiry are purposively sharp. Rather our aim, as the subtitle of the book suggests, is to develop an arsenal of critical perspectives that can target what is at work in these branded contexts.

We call the ensemble of these contexts *promotional culture*, building in many respects on the insights developed by Andrew Wernick in his seminal volume, *Promotional Culture: Advertising, Ideology and Symbolic Expression* (1991). For Wernick, promotional culture resulted from an environment in which capitalist forms of exchange came to dominate all other forms of exchange; and in which a widening range of cultural phenomena whose primary function was to communicate a promotional message had become “virtually coextensive with our produced symbolic world” (182). These phenomena extend far beyond the obvious category of advertising to encompass 1) “the whole universe of commercially manufactured objects (and services), in so far as these are imaged to sell” (182); 2) the systems of commercial media which constantly link nonpromotional to promotional messages (akin to Raymond Williams’ ([1974] 1990) notion of television “flow”); 3) all other communicative activities of not only private but also public institutions, either due to their commodification (as in the case of higher education) or to their analogous relationship to the market form (as in the case of electoral politics); and 4) the commodification of labor power, which engenders “dramaturgical” behavior by individuals via self-promotion and careerism. To this last category Wernick adds related phenomena such as the promotional function of consumption more generally (per Veblen’s observations about consumption and status over a century ago); and the strategies of self-presentation and promotion that accompany the “mate/companion/friendship market”—a prescient observation in 1991, before the emergence of the MySpaces, YouTubes, and Facebooks of this world. The circulation of these promotional phenomena over deeper and broader terrain resulted, for Wernick, in a set of historical conditions by which promotionalism infected “all the circuits of social life,” becoming the dominant symbolic language, the “communicative substance,” of contemporary capitalism (1991: 188).

Though these features are clearly still in play twenty years on, it is equally clear that there have been a number of modifications of these phenomena that require renewed attention if we are to account for the current phase of promotional culture as well as the role of the brand as its emblematic cul-

tural form and structuring element. In what follows we attempt to identify and describe some of these changes as well as account for and integrate recent critical attempts to define the boundaries of the brand.

### **Putting Communication to Work: Reputation, Value, and the Fact/Fiction Continuum**

Though the imaging of commodities for promotion and sale has arguably been part of industrial capitalism since its beginnings (Wernick 1991; Moor 2007) and though scholars have long recognized the role of consumption in meaning-making as well as status, class, and identity formation (and contestation) (Veblen [1899] 1994; Cohen 2003; Fox and Lears 1983; Liechty 2003), the increasingly central role of brands in contemporary culture considerably alters established relationships between identification, commodification, and acts of consumption.

A key change underlying these new relationships lies in the realm of brand valuation. In the late 1970s, corporate brand owners began to seek ways to account for their brands as assets on their balance sheets, over and above the physical assets of the company (Lindemann 2003; Madden et al. 2006). The recognition that the value of such “intangible” or “reputational” capital could match or even exceed the value of material and territorial capital was made poignantly clear by the “zero-risk globalization” maneuvers of corporate firms in the 1980s and 1990s: outsourcing, downsizing, and other strategies of vertical disintegration which encouraged organizations to divest themselves of accountability for their products and forms of production while focusing on their brand images and marketing efforts (Klein 2000). This understanding has become especially relevant in the contemporary context of finance capital, characterized largely by dematerialized, deterritorialized, speculative units of exchange. Among the flexible accumulation strategies of postindustrial capital, in which labor processes, markets, products, and consumption patterns are subject to constant commercial, technological, and organizational change, brands emerge as the ideal rhetorical device to smooth and soften the impact of such change. In the context of market volatility, product failure, or other forms of risk, the brand can be “leveraged” or repositioned to maintain its image and equity among consumers.

In this light it is perhaps not surprising to observe the expansion of branding models to a wide range of previously noncorporatized institutional