Chapter Five of Naomi Klein's NO LOGO

Patriarchy Gets Funky

The Triumph of Identity Marketing

Let's face it, when you're a story line on Friends*, it's hard to keep thinking you're radical.*
- Jay Blotcher, AIDS activist, *New York* magazine, 1996

As an undergraduate in the late eighties and early nineties, I was one of those students who took a while to wake up to the slow branding of university life. And I can say from personal experience that it's not that we didn't notice the growing corporate presence on campus — we even complained about it sometimes. It's just that we couldn't get particularly worked up about it. We knew the fast food chains were setting up their stalls in the library and that profs in the applied sciences were getting awfully cozy with pharmaceutical companies, but finding out exactly what was going on in the boardrooms and labs would have required a lot of legwork, and, frankly, we were busy. We were fighting about whether Jews would be allowed in the racial equality caucus at

the campus women's center, and why the meeting to discuss it was scheduled at the same time as the lesbian and gay caucus — were the organizers implying that there were no Jewish lesbians? No black bisexuals?

In the outside world. the politics of race, gender and sexuality remained tied to more concrete, pressing issues, like pay equity, same-sex spousal rights and police violence, and these serious movements were — and continue to be — a genuine threat to the economic and social order. But somehow, they didn't seem terribly glamorous to students on many university campuses, for whom identity politics had evolved by the late eighties into something quite different. Many of the battles we fought were over issues of "representation" — a loosely defined set of grievances mostly lodged against the media, the curriculum and the English language. From campus feminists arguing over "representation" of women on the reading lists to gays wanting better "representation" on television, to rap stars bragging about "representing" the ghettos, to the question that ends in a riot in Spike Lee's 1989 film *Do the Right Thing* — "Why are there no brothers on the wall?" — ours was a politics of mirrors and metaphors.

These issues have always been on the political agendas of both the civil-rights and the women's movements and later, of the fight against AIDS. It was accepted from the start that part of what held back women and ethnic minorities was the absence of visible role models occupying powerful social positions, and that media-perpetuated stereotypes — embedded in the very fabric of the language — served to not so subtly

reinforce the supremacy of white men. For real progress to take place, imaginations on both sides had to be decolonized.

But by the time my generation inherited these ideas, often two or three times removed, representation was no longer one tool among many, it was the key. In the absence of a clear legal or political strategy, we traced back almost all of society's problems to the media and the curriculum, either through their perpetuation of negative stereotypes or simply by omission. Asians and lesbians were made to feel "invisible," gays were stereotyped as deviants, blacks as criminals and women as weak and inferior: a self-fulfilling prophecy responsible for almost all real-world inequalities. And so our battlefields were sitcoms with gay neighbors who never got laid, newspapers filled with pictures of old white men, magazines that advanced what author Naomi Wolf termed "the beauty myth," reading lists that we expected to look like Benetton ads, Benetton ads that trivialized our reading-list demands. So outraged were we media children by the narrow and oppressive portrayals in magazines, in books and on television that we convinced ourselves that if, the typecast images and loaded language changed, so too would the reality. We thought we would find salvation in the reformation of MTV, CNN and Calvin Klein. And why not? Since media seemed to be the source of so many of our problems, surely if we could only subvert" them to better represent us, they could save us instead. With better collective mirrors, self-esteem would rise and prejudices would magically fall away, as society became suddenly inspired to live up to the beautiful and Worthy reflection we had retouched in its image.

For a generation that grew up mediated, transforming the world through pop culture was second nature. The problem was that these fixations began to transform us in the process. Over time, campus identity politics became so consumed by personal politics that they all but eclipsed the rest of the world. The slogan "the personal is political" came to replace the economic as political and, in the end, the political as political as well. The more importance we placed on representation issues, the more central a role they seemed to elbow for themselves in our lives — perhaps because, in the absence of more tangible political goals, any movement that is about fighting for better social mirrors is going to eventually fall victim to its own narcissism.

Soon "outing" wasn't about AIDS, but became a blanket demand for gay and lesbian "visibility" — all gays should be out, not just right-wing politicians but celebrities as well. By 1991, the radical group Queer Nation had broadened its media critique: it didn't just object to portrayals of homicidal madmen with AIDS, but any non-straight killer at all. The group's San Francisco and L.A. chapters held protests against *The Silence of the Lambs,* objecting to its transvestite serial-killer villain, and they disrupted filming on *Basic* Instinct because it featured ice-pick-wielding killer lesbians. GLAAD (Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) had moved from lobbying the news media about its use of terms like "gay plague" to describe AIDS, and had begun actively pushing the networks for more gay and lesbian characters in TV shows. In 1993, Torie Osborn, a prominent U.S. lesbian rights activist, said that the single biggest political issue facing her constituency was not same-sex spousal benefits, the right to join the

military or even the right of two women to marry and adopt children. It was, she told a reporter, “Invisibility. Period. End of sentence.”

Much like a previous generation of anti-porn feminists who held their rallies outside peep shows, many of the political demonstrations of the early nineties had shifted from the steps of government buildings and courthouses to the steps of museums with African art exhibits that were deemed to celebrate the colonial mindset. They massed at the theater entrances showing mega-musicals like *Showboat and Miss Saigon,* and they even crept right up to the edge of the red carpet at the 1992 Academy Awards.

These struggles may seem slight in retrospect, but you can hardly blame us media narcissists for believing that we were engaged in a crucial battle on behalf of oppressed people everywhere: every step we took sparked a new wave of apocalyptic panic from our conservative foes. If we were not revolutionaries, why, then, were our opponents saying that a revolution was under way, that we were in the midst of a “culture war”? ‘The transformation of American campuses is so sweeping that it is no exaggeration to call it a revolution,’ Dinesh D’souza, author of *Illiberal Education* informed his readers. ‘Its distinctive insignia can be witnessed on any major campus in America today, and in all aspects of university life.’

Despite their claims of living under Stalinist regimes where dissent was not tolerated, our professors and administrators put up an impressively vociferous counteroffensive: they fought tooth and nail for the right to offend us thin-skinned radicals; they lay down on the tracks in front of

every new harassment policy, and generally acted as if they were fighting for the very future of Western civilization. An avalanche of look-alike magazine features bolstered the claim that ID politics constituted an international emergency: “Illiberal Education” (*Atlantic Monthly*), “Visigoths in Tweed” (*Fortune*), “The Silences” (*Macitan’s*), “The Academy’s New Ayatollahs” (*Outlook*), “Taking Offense” (*Newsweek*). in *New York* magazine, writer John Taylor compared my generation of campus activists with cult members, Hitler Youth and Christian fundamentalists. So great was the threat we allegedly posed that George Bush even took time out to warn the world that political correctness “replaces old prejudices with new ones.”

The Marketing of ID

The backlash that identity politics inspired did a pretty good job of masking for us the fact that many of our demands for better representation were quickly accommodated by marketers, media makers and pop-culture producers alike — though perhaps not for the reasons we had hoped. If I had to name a precise moment for this shift in attitude, I would say August of 1992: the thick of the “brand crisis” that peaked with Marlboro Friday. That’s when we found out that our sworn enemies in the “mainstream” — to us a giant monolithic blob outside of our known university-affiliated enclaves — didn’t fear and loathe us but actually thought we were sort of interesting. Once we'd embarked on a search for new wells of cutting-edge imagery, our insistence on extreme sexual and racial identities made for great brand-content and niche-marketing strategies. If diversity was what we wanted, the brands

seemed to be saying, then diversity was exactly what we would get. And with that, the marketers and media makers swooped down, air-brushes in hand, to touch up the colors and images in our culture.

The five years that followed were an orgy of red ribbons, Malcolm X baseball hats and Silence = Death T-Shirts. By 1993, the stories of academic Armageddon were replaced with new ones about the sexy wave of "Do-Me Feminism" in *Esquire* and "Lesbian Chic" in *New York* and *Newsweek.* The shift in attitude was not the result of a mass political conversion but of some hard economic calculations. According to *Rocking the Ages,* a book produced in 1997 by leading U.S. consumer researchers Yankelovich Partners, "Diversity" was the "defining idea" for Gen-Xers, as opposed to "Individuality" for boomers and "Duty" for their parents.

> Xers are starting out today with pluralistic attitudes that are the strongest we have ever measured. As we look towards the next twenty five years, it is clear that acceptance of alternative lifestyles will become even stronger and more widespread as Xers grow up and take over the reins of power, and become the dominant buying group in the consumer marketplace. ... *Diversity is the key fact of life for Xers, the core of the perspective they bring to the marketplace.* Diversity in all of its forms — cultural, political, sexual, racial, social — is a hallmark of this generation [italics theirs] ...

The Sputnik cool-hunting agency, meanwhile, explained that .youth today are one big sample of diversity" and encouraged its clients to dive into the psychedelic "United Streets of Diversity" and not be afraid to taste the local fare. Dee Dee Gordon, author of *The L. Report,* urged her clients to get into Girl Power" with a vengeance:, "Teenage girls want

to see someone who kicks butt back"; and, sounding suspiciously like me and my university friends, brand man Tom Peters took to berating his corporate audiences for being "OWMs — Old White Males."

As we have seen, this information was coming hot on the heels of two other related revelations. The first was that consumer companies would only survive if they built corporate empires around "brand identities." The second. was that the ballooning youth demographic held the key to market success. So, of course, if the market researchers and cool hunters all reported that diversity was the key character trait of this lucrative demographic, there was only one thing to be done: every forward-thinking corporation would have to adopt variations on the theme of diversity as their brand identities.

Which is exactly what most brand-driven corporations have attempted to do. In an effort to understand how Starbucks became an overnight household name in 1996 without a single national ad campaign, *Advertising Age* speculated that it had something to do with its tie-dyed, Third World aura. "For devotees, Starbucks' experience" is about more than a daily espresso infusion; it is about immersion in a politically correct, cultured refuge. ..." Starbucks, however, was only a minor player in the P.C. marketing craze. Abercrombie & Fitch ads featured guys in their underwear making goo-goo eyes at each other; Diesel went further, showing two sailors kissing; and a U.S. television spot for Virgin Cola depicted "the first-ever gay wedding featured in a commercial," as the press release proudly announced. There were also gay-targeted brands like Pride Beer and Wave Water, whose slogan is

“We label bottles not people,” and the gay community got its very own cool hunters market researchers who scoured gay bars with hidden cameras.

The Gap, meanwhile, filled its ads with racially mixed rainbows of skinny, childlike models. Diesel harnessed frustration at that unattainable beauty ideal with ironic ads that showed women being served up for dinner to a table of pigs. The Body Shop harnessed the backlash against both of them by refusing to advertise and instead filled its windows with red ribbons and posters condemning violence against women. The rush to diversity fitted in neatly with the embrace of African-American style and heroes that companies like Nike and Tommy Hilfiger had already pinpointed as a powerful marketing source. But Nike also realized that people who saw themselves as belonging to oppressed groups were ready-made market niches: throw a few liberal platitudes their way and, presto, you're not just a product but an ally in the struggle. So the walls of Nike Town were adorned with quotes from Tiger Woods declaring that “there are still Courses in the U.S. where I am not allowed to play, because of the color of my skin.” Women in Nike ads told us that “I believe ‘babe’ is a four-letter word” and “I believe high heels are a conspiracy against women.”

And everyone, it seemed, was toying with the fluidity of gender, from the old-hat story of MAC make-up using drag queen RuPaul as its spokesmodel to tequila ads that inform viewers that the she in the bikini is really a he; from Calvin Klein’s colognes that tell us that gender itself is a construct of Sure Ultra Dry deodorant that in turn urges all the

gender benders to chill out: “Man? Woman? Does it matter?'

Oppression Nostalgia

Fierce debates still rage about these campaigns. Are they entirely cynical or do they indicate that advertisers want to evolve and play more positive social roles? Benetton’s mid-nineties ads careered wildly between witty and beautiful challenges to racial stereotypes on the one hand, and grotesque commercial exploitation of human suffering on the other. They were, however, indisputably part of a genuine attempt to use the company’s vast cultural real estate to send a message that went beyond “Buy more sweaters’, and they played a central role in the fashion world’s embrace of the struggle against AIDS. Similarly, there is no denying that the Body Shop broke ground by proving to the corporate sector that a multinational chain can be an outspoken and controversial political player, even while making millions on bubble bath and body lotion. The complicated motivations and stark inconsistencies inside many of these “ethical” businesses will be explored in greater depth in a later chapter. But for many of the activists who had, at one point not so long ago, believed that better media representation would make for a more just world, one thing had become abundantly clear: identity politics weren’t fighting the system, or even subverting it. When it came to the vast new industry of corporate branding, they were feeding it.

The crowning of sexual and racial diversity as the new superstars of advertising and pop culture has understandably created a sort of Identity

Identity Crisis. Some ex-ID warriors are even getting nostalgic about the good old days, when they were oppressed, yes, but the symbols of their radicalism weren't for sale at Wal-Mart. As music writer Arm Powers observed of the much-vaunted ascendancy of "Girl Power", "at this intersection between the conventional feminine and the evolving Girl, what's springing up is not a revolution but a mall ... Thus, a genuine movement devolves into a giant shopping spree, where girls are encouraged to purchase whatever identity fits them best off the rack." Similarly, Daniel Mendelsohn has written that gay identity has dwindled into "basically, a set of product choices. ... At least Culturally speaking, oppression may have been the best thing that could have happened to gay culture. Without it, we're nothing."

The nostalgia, of course, is absurd. Even the most cynical ID warrior will admit, when pressed, that having Ellen Degeneres and other gay characters out on TV has some concrete advantages. Probably it is good for the kids, particularly those who live outside of laser urban settings — in rural or small-town environments, where being gay is more likely to confine them to a life of self-loathing. (The attempted suicide rate in 1998 among gay and bisexual male teens in America was 28.1 percent, compared with 4.2 percent among straight males of the same age group.) Similarly, most feminists would concede that although the Spice Girls' crooning, "If you wanna be my lover, you have to get with my friends" isn't likely to shatter the beauty myth, it's still a step up from Snoop Dogg's 1993 ode to gang rape, "It ain't no fun if my homies can't have none."

And yet, while raising teenagers' self-esteem and making sure they have positive role models is valuable, it's a fairly narrow achievement, and from an activist perspective, one can't help asking, Is this it? Did all our protests and supposedly subversive theory only serve to provide great content for the culture industries, fresh new lifestyle imagery for Levi's new "What's True" ad campaign and girl-power-charged record sales for the music business? Why, in other words, were our ideas about political rebellion so deeply non-threatening to the smooth flow of business as usual?

The question, of course, is not Why, but Why on earth not? Just m they had embraced the "brands, not products" equation, the smart businesses quickly realized that short-term discomfort whether — it came from a requirement to hire more women or to more carefully vet the language in an ad campaign — was a small price to pay for the tremendous market share that diversity promised. So while it may be true that real gains have emerged from this process, it is also true that Dennis Rodman wears dresses and Disney World celebrates Gay Day less because of political progress than financial expediency. The market has seized upon multi-culturalism and gender-bending in the same ways that it has seized upon youth culture in general — not just as a market niche but as a source of new carnival-esque imagery. As Robert Goldman and Stephen Papson note, "White-bread culture will simply no longer do." The $200 billion culture industry — now America's biggest export — needs an ever-changing, uninterrupted supply of street styles, edgy music videos and rainbows of colors. And the radical critics of the media clamoring to be "represented" in the early nineties

virtually handed over their colorful identities to the brandmasters to be shrink-wrapped.

The need for greater diversity — the rallying cry of my university years — is now not only accepted by the culture industries, it is the mantra of global capital. And identity politics, as they were practiced in the nineties, weren't a threat, they were a gold mine. "This revolution," writes cultural critic Richard Goldstein in *The Village Voice,* "turned out to be the savior of late capitalism." And just in time, too.

Market Masala: Diversity and the Global Sales Pitch

About the same time that Try friends and I were battling for better cultural representation, the advertising agencies, broadcasters and global brands were preoccupied with some significant problems of their own. Thanks to freer trade and other forms of accelerated deregulation, the global marketplace was finally becoming a reality, but new, urgent questions were being asked: What is the best way to sell identical products across multiple borders? What voice should advertisers use to address the whole world at once? How can one company accommodate cultural differences while still remaining internally coherent?

For certain corporations, until recently, the answer was simple: force the world to speak your language and absorb your culture. In 1983, when global reach was still a fantasy for all but a handful of corporations, Harvard business professor Theodore Levitt published the

essay “The Globalization of Markets,” in which he argued that any corporation that was willing to bow to some local habit or taste was an unmitigated failure. “The world’s needs and desires have been irrevocably homogenized,” he wrote in what instantly became the manifesto of global marketing. Levitt made a stark distinction between weak *multinational* corporations, which change depending on which country they are operating in, and swaggering *global* corporations, which are, by their very definition, always the same, Wherever they roam. “The multinational corporation operates in a number of countries, and adjusts its products and practices to each — at high relative costs. The global corporation. operates with resolute constancy — at low relative cost — as if the entire world (or major regions of it) were a single entity; it sells the same things in the same way everywhere. ... Ancient differences in national tastes or modes of doing business disappear.”
