

Review/Commentary: No Logo (Naomi Klein)

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Naomi Klein is the author of the recently-released book 'No Logo', a well-researched and engagingly written chronicle of branding, global commerce and anti-corporate activism.

I wanted No Logo. For weeks I eyed the book (and its higher-end price tag) at a bookstore, telling myself I'd buy it as soon as I finished my current reading and my grocery bill went down. "I've always been drawn to the shiny surfaces of pop culture," was the opening quote of the back-cover blurb, and that was enough to engage my interest, since I too have long been an informal and enthusiastic student of consumer culture and advertising. Flipping through the pages made it irresistible: chapter titles like 'Brand Bombing' and 'A Tale of Three Logos' whet my appetite so that when buying time came around I was as eager for No Logo as I would have been for a triple marshmallow mocha after a week's abstinence from caffeine.

I wasn't disappointed. I devoured the book in three days; I would have gone through it in a night, but every word and sentence called out for my attention so that I read it carefully, if voraciously. Here was my wish-list of reading topics realized: the changing relationships between brands and products in the marketing world, the effect of advertising on education and mass media, a history of recent attitudes to worldwide changes in corporate philosophy and much else more difficult to sum up in a sentence. All of the claims were expounded with clear and elegant writing, and supported with solid figures and a generous dollop of research by the author. This book was clearly written by someone who *cared*, someone who was willing to go find the facts for herself when they weren't already available.

This strength also proved to be the book's greatest weakness. As (perhaps) the first history of modern anti-corporate movements, as an excellent piece of expository journalism, as a pinch on the cheek of complacent consumers yet to be woken to the realities of modern production and marketing, this book succeeds admirably. Regrettably, the author falls into the classic anthropologist's trap: by closely analyzing and interacting with a culture, she identifies too much with it to be able to provide an objective analysis and evaluation of its goals and methods. I speak of the anti-corporate protestors, from Greenpeace to Reclaim the Streets and the Seattle rioters. Miss Klein is enthralled with the romantic world of anti-brand guerrillas and cheers them in their fights against the mega-corporations. And there *is* something satisfying in watching a giant, impersonal company bend to the wills of a few (hundred) persistent individuals. David slays Goliath has been a popular story since Biblical times. This should not detract

from scrutinizing the smaller party's goals and tactics: small should not be instantly equated with enlightened. It is *this* that is sorely missing. No Logo is able to sympathize unquestioningly with the protestors by applying North American standards to third-world conditions, and inexplicably fails to give more than a few sentences of lip service to existing cautions against such whole-hog acceptance of 'monomorality'. Miss Klein's magnificent work remains valid, but incomplete in its analysis. More attention needs to be paid to *what* is being protested, the tactics used to do so, and the realities in question. Though No Logo is far less offensive in this respect than other texts before it, it would be heartening to find more faith in the general consumer (rather than the devoted protestor) as more than a slave of Madison Avenue. If after a Devil's Advocate is allowed its say the original arguments retain their validity, so much the better for them. They are strengthened through tempering. However, I strongly suspect that there are several areas that would need to be reconsidered.

Four topics that stand out are those of a living wage, unsafe working conditions, public protest as the default form of activism and the need for workers to be able to afford the products they assemble. I will deal with them in turn.

Affordability

There is no *a priori* reason why assembly plant, or *maquiladora*, workers should be able to afford the products they produce, and especially no reason why they should be able to purchase them at foreign prices. A person who assembles a Rolex watch will probably not be able to afford one, but will likely be able to buy a standard digital watch without much effort. Likewise, though a *maquiladora* worker may not be able to afford the Pocahontas nightshirt she sews together at prices meant for a market with a per capita income many times that of her country, she is able to clothe herself, and to buy Disney knock-offs made locally. If someone were to say that all makers of luxury goods should be able to afford them, she would be dismissed with a chuckle, especially in areas (such as computer hardware) where the value added to the raw materials by manual labor is less than that added by machines. Part of the reason the argument is not seen as frivolous is that people have a hard time realizing that the definition of a luxury good varies from country to country. When McDonald's first opened in Mexico City, its fast food was a luxury good and its Happy Meal toys a status symbol even among the middle and upper classes. Price levels vary across countries, so that what the average American pays in Wal-Mart for simple clothes is many times higher than what similar (or higher-quality) items sell for in, say, Mexico's *Lagunilla* clothing market. Similarly, intricate handmade garments beyond the price range of most US blue-collar workers, when bought in North America, are quite affordable to the average Mexican or Peruvian labourer. This is a further example of international differences in the definition of a luxury good.

Living Wage

A main concern in the book is that workers assembling brand- name items in export-processing-zones (EPZs) are not being paid a 'living wage', this last being defined as an income enough to support themselves and possibly a family without taking on another job. EPZs tend to be located in developing countries.

A pair of questions comes to mind at once: who is to define the appropriate living wage, and how are they to do it? To claim that foreign intervention is necessary to tell a country how much its workers must earn is as insulting as it is implausible. What of domestic determination of the living wage? The obvious choice for an agent is the local government, and indeed, most countries already perform this function by specifying a minimum legal wage. This minimum wage is usually chosen to be a payment for unskilled labor that is neither burdensome to industry nor unfair to workers, insofar as it is sufficient to cover their basic needs.

At times No Logo makes the puzzling claim that EPZ wages are below subsistence level. That the workers receiving the wage are alive is counter-proof enough. That they are alive and *working* further stacks the evidence. A starving worker, as Industrial Revolution English capitalists learned, is nearly as good as no worker at all. To be brutally candid, a minimum caloric intake is needed to make the bother of hiring a worker worthwhile. It is both cheaper and more productive to hire one worker at wages that will allow her to work as expected feed herself properly than to pay for a series of underfed laborers who stagger into work, make half-hearted attempts at operating machinery on an empty stomach and die of starvation a few months later. It is simply not good business to pay a worker anything less than a subsistence wage, particularly since subsistence tends to be extremely cheap relative to the cost of other factors of production in the EPZ host countries. When one is under a strict production deadline (No Logo documents 48-hour work marathons to fill a contract in time) workers fainting from hunger at their machines are a costly setback.

Suppose for a moment that the wage for workers assembling Nike shoes in Indonesia was below subsistence. Given the long hours for this sort of work (as documented in No Logo), holding a second job is highly unlikely. What kind of person would stay at such a job - one with long hours, that does not pay enough to eat? Masochists aside, a rational worker would vote with her feet and refuse to work at the Nike plant, and those that stayed would shortly die from lack of food. Which brings us to a related point.

It is further noted in No Logo that many of the assembly plants in EPZs find ways around paying the legal minimum wage. This is indeed a serious problem, and one that deserves to be dealt with by appealing to the government in question (this is one case where worker protests could possibly be highly effective). The minimum wage in a country is the local embodiment of the notion

of fair pay, and those contractors who go below it should be dealt with accordingly. Is this as serious a concern as Miss Klein would have us believe? Let's take one of the companies in question. This company is paying less than the minimum wage which, presumably, non-EPZ local companies are forced to pay. Given the harsh working conditions at these plants (dealt with below), and assuming that these conditions are worse than those at other employers in the country, *any* non-EPZ job would be preferable to one in the company in question. That the *maquiladoras* have a full staff show that either no jobs are available elsewhere, or that the bundle of pay and working conditions is at least as good as that in other companies. Miss Klein noted and brushed off Paul Krugman's comment that the alternative to these 'bad jobs' was 'no jobs'. She should not have been so hasty.

Working conditions

The same argument applies to the dismal working conditions described so eloquently in the book. Long working hours, no benefits, no possibility of unionization and mandatory pregnancy tests are just a few of the items listed. Again, I ask: given that conditions are so bad, why are all the spots filled?

Workers are either forced to work, or work of their own will. If they are forced to work then it is a matter of slavery and there are avenues in place for dealing with such a situation more effective than those being used against *maquiladoras*. (Not to mention which, especially in the US, 'slavery' is a bigger rallying-cry than 'sweat shop'.) China has at times been suspected of using forced labor. That this has not been closely looked into is due to two factors: a) at any given time, forced labor must be a very small component of total Chinese export processing to avoid general notice in this age of journalism, and b) being the world's most populous country has its privileges - the Chinese government can throw its weight around. Any other (developing) country is likely to suffer severe international reprisals from disclosure of such a practice. Humanitarian concerns aside, no Western elected government that wishes to stay in power can afford to even tacitly endorse slavery.

If, on the other hand, the laborers work of their own will, then it is because the *maquiladora* or EPZ job is more appealing than any other available job. All that is needed to reach this conclusion is the assumption that when choosing a job, a potential worker will compare the pay and benefits of all the jobs available to her and pick the one for which the total is highest. That's all. It is telling that the worst punishment inflicted upon a worker in No Logo is getting fired. The writing implied that the conditions at EPZs are not only bad, but worse than elsewhere. Being fired should be a blessing, allowing the worker to get a higher-paying job with benefits and the possibility of unionization elsewhere. Instead, the ease with which a job may be lost at a *maquiladora* is among the bitterest complaints of the workers interviewed. No forced labor here, surely.

Miss Klein has regrettably been blinded by the dazzle of 'humanitarian' activism, and mistakenly applied North American working standards to areas where they are simply not relevant. Though the working conditions at most EPZs are dismal, it is how these relate to the working conditions elsewhere in the host economy that is the proper guideline. 'Treat your workers as their countrymen treat them' should be the rallying cry, not 'A living wage and American-style benefits'. Forcing EPZs to pay workers wages and benefits far above the local levels would create a two-tiered system of labor (high-pay foreign jobs, lower-pay domestic jobs) and encourage either corruption ('selling' the limited spots at the highly-paid *maquiladoras*) or the abandonment of all other non-essential local work in favor of the generous foreigners' jobs. If there is to be an improvement in the laborers' lot, it must come from within the country: payment of the minimum wage must be enforced, and the workers must pressure their governments to pass laws demanding more amenable working conditions. International intervention would not be unwelcome in many cases, particularly where unionization is illegal and the government's usual response to workers' demands is to send out the army - but lobbying should be directed at the government, the bearer of legislative power, rather than at multinationals who are required to do nothing more than follow the guidelines set down by that power.

Effective Protest

At several points during the book, mention is made of a town protesting the construction of a superstore outlet in their area. Much to her credit, Miss Klein points out that the result is often merely the exchange of one perceived 'evil' for another, since the same group of people who march and hold placards against Wal-Mart are quite happy to allow K-Mart in, and vice-versa. The idea of such a protest strikes me as silly, unless the building's construction destroys some valued part of the environment or spoils the urban aesthetic. If a community *truly* does not want a Wal-Mart in their area, they can vote with their purses. While the superstore is being built it provides employment for local construction companies and others, pumping money into the community. Once it's finished, no one is *forced* to shop there. No one is *forced* to buy. If no one bought at the store, then the store would close. That the stores *don't* close shows that people are buying enough to make expansion a worthwhile endeavor (if not an immediately profitable one). That they are buying enough to make the expansion worthwhile shows that consumers in general find these stores useful and desirable.

If you feel that independent booksellers are far better than the big chains, patronize them. Give them your money and deprive the hypermarkets of your dollars. If Starbucks is offensively uniform, go to a small coffee shop. In the merchants' game, consumers hold all the cards.

Well... most of them.

Granted, there are many cases where large companies will directly or almost-directly force the closure of small competitors by non-competitive means - the buying of leases and such. *These* are the events that should be protested against, exposed and taken to court, since they unfairly reduce the number of choice of merchants available to consumers. (A fair reduction in the number of merchants would be one in which a store closed because of insufficient business due to consumers deciding that another store was better suited to their needs.) The US in particular has an excellent web of laws designed to punish anti-competitive acts, and organizations that will handle the prohibitively expensive prosecution. All that needs to be done is to bring the cases to the attention of said organization. In many cases merely focusing the public spotlight on the problem will be enough. Bad press for a company lowers the number of people who will buy from it, and in the age of mass media what once would have been a small local stain can spread into a worldwide blotch with drastic financial companies for the target corporation. Here, then, is an appropriate arena for public protest. But more important than these is the more enduring antidote to branding and Neal Stephenson's blinding *log/o*: education.

No Logo's depiction of the branding of education is one of the book's high points - illuminating, in-depth and well thought-out. It's surprising that with this much paper (well-) spent on the problem, little is spoken about a viable solution. But it *is* there. Just not as prominent as was to be expected. Passages about high school coaches holding awareness sessions about the production of the school team's Nike gear, of student-led poster campaigns against corporate sponsorship and the ilk show the counter-venom to a branded monoculture: information. If elementary students have to measure the diameter of an Oreo cookie, learn about Nike's 'environmental' production techniques and design Coca-Cola's next ad campaign in class, let them also have a Civics class in which counter-arguments are presented. Teachers may there hand out articles on third world working conditions, on dolphin slayers and child exploiters. I've strolled past one of the placard protests specifically described in No Logo and never knew what it was about, despite the gigantic plastic rat parked in front of a Manhattan store. Big and loud events may attract the media, but they do little to *inform*. Marches and demonstrations have their place in the anti-corporate arsenal - but they are not the be-all and end-all. They are the crying of a baby, good for bringing instant attention and instant stock solutions. For more enduring and relevant change a more grown method is needed: teaching, spreading information in coherent and consistent blocks rather than in sound bites, slogans, shouts, raves and bizarre getup. Shout 'Nike: Don't do it' at a child, and he won't buy Air Jordans for a week. Have a one-week study unit on working conditions at a Nike assembly plant, and the effects will last longer.

In summary, No Logo is an excellent, groundbreaking work that suffers from a bit of tunnel vision: its remarkable author has allowed herself to be taken with the object of her research to the extent of failing to explore other relevant points of view. Not a lethal failing, merely an unfortunate one. As it stands, No Logo is

half of an essential work on the effect of media, branding and modern corporate practices on Western consciousness. With luck, someone will play the Devil's Advocate and write the second half.

-Chris Willmore
Coventry, May 2000