

Naomi Klein, *No Logo*
 Flamingo: London 2000, £14.99 paperback
 490 pp, 0 31220343 8

TOM MERTES

AFTER SEATTLE

Naomi Klein has issued a bracing call to arms. Her immediate target is conveniently splashed on most consumables—the ubiquitous logo. Has she hit a bulls-eye? A young Canadian reporter, Klein devotes the first part of her book to the sleek insignia of postmodern corporations. Branding devices themselves have, she notes, been long-standing accoutrements of capital. Some of the most famous logos today go back to the first decades of the twentieth century—Michelin, Coca-Cola, Mercedes-Benz—when their original function was to offer visual emblems of quality: symbols of a reliable or desirable product. What's new about today's logos, that warrants militant campaigns against them? Klein's answer is three-fold. Nowadays logos typically transcend individual products, floating free from particular articles to project lifestyles identified with the nimbus of the maker itself. As she puts it, the new 'wave of brand mania has come [with] a new breed of businessmen, one who will proudly inform you that Brand X is not a product but a way of life, an attitude, a set of values, a look, an idea.' Television commercials for Nike may carry no product in them at all—though the company markets a vast range—but simply celebrate the swoosh that represents a sporting life. In earlier decades luxury goods and financial institutions were occasionally advertised in this way, as signifiers of what was so discreet and exclusive that no commodity or service had to be mentioned. Mass consumption is a new field for this sort of 'hyper-branding' which, Klein shows, took off on a big scale as recently as the nineties.

At the same time, two other developments—spatial and cultural—transformed the role of branding. Advertising skipped out of the boardroom with spray-can in hand, promoting products and lifestyles no longer just in print, tele-

vision and movies, but with omnipresent graffiti across cityscapes, playgrounds, concerts, sports arenas and schools (fast-food lunches, team sportswear, TV in class, computer rooms, even textbooks); and youth culture was transformed into a vast catwalk of fashion, in which designer labels became badges of teenage identity and conformity—branding in the all-too-literal ranching sense—at every social level, from the fanciest schools to the bleakest wastelands. Schools were no longer just educating consumers, they were testing grounds and birthplaces of style. In the US, the inner-cities themselves did not escape. Klein reports ‘cool hunters’ sent to observe black youth and hip-hop culture, appropriating ‘ghetto cool’ to pump up sales at suburban malls. The very people who are victims of the prison-industrial complex may act as unpaid designers and popularizers of lines hotly sought after by more affluent consumers. Conversely, nowhere is the power of the logo so potentially devastating—in gang wars, young men can die for the shoes they are wearing.

Klein’s depiction of the expanding universe of brands is graphic, literate and level-headed. This is the best panorama of contemporary commodification we now have. The power of the book, however, lies in its linkage of the new patterns of metropolitan consumption with the outsourcing of physical production. Behind the brands that crowd the malls are no longer integrated enterprises on the old hierarchical model, where a product was researched, developed, designed and produced by a corporation with its own extensive labour- and sales-force. Instead, firms like Hilfiger or Nike contract out all manufacturing operations to dispersed local producers, typically in Third World countries with rock-bottom wages and working-conditions. Very low costs of production then allow ‘brandmasters’ to lavish huge budgets on promotion—hot-air balloons that can float away from national governments and domestic workforces, with their vexatious regulations and impossible wages. Klein brings these operations down to earth with effective exposés of the sweatshop compounds and Export Processing Zones to which they are tethered in poor countries—places like Cavite in the Philippines, where girls and young women barely make enough money to support themselves, and are fired for refusing overtime, becoming pregnant or participating in union activities.

The logic of this out-sourcing is obviously the elimination of traditional jobs in the same product lines in the developed countries. Klein gives a sharp picture of this process, too. ‘One of the main reasons black urban youth can get out of the ghetto only by rapping or shooting hoops’, she writes, ‘is that Nike and other multi-nationals are reinforcing stereotypical images of black youth and simultaneously taking all the jobs away.’ In looking at these trends, she extends her focus to the predatory business practices of mega-retailers like Wal-Mart or specialized chains like Blockbusters or Starbucks. Wal-Mart uses its buying power to force the lowest prices from producers who themselves are using *maquiladoras* and EPZs. It holds down wages and fends off unions through

use of part-timers, and cuts costs by constructing huge hangars on inexpensive property in suburban and exurban spaces, and then underselling the local competition. Klein points out the symbiosis of this brutalization with more *bijou* marketing in logo-land:

As the big boxes expanded into seas of concrete on the edge of town, they generated a renewed hunger for human-scale development; for an old-fashioned town square, for public gathering places . . . for a kind of retail with more interaction and more sensory stimulation. In other words, they laid the groundwork for Starbucks, Virgin Megastores and Nike Town . . . Where the big boxes had swapped a sense of community values for a discount, the branded chains would re-create it and sell it back at a price.

Starbucks offers a prime example of this process. Its outlets purport to offer more than just coffee—they supply a mood or feeling, a commonality of customers, a ‘spiritual/designer object’. The soulful ambience ill-conceals the predatory reality. Starbucks is notorious for its saturation policy, seeking out competitors in the urban space and building in close proximity to them. Even as its competitors are driven from the field, crushed by its economies of scale, Starbucks will continue to build until its accountants determine that saturation has been reached and superfluous stores are closed. Like Wal-Mart, it hires part-timers who are kept on call, working drastically abbreviated shifts several times a day. It was practices like these that triggered direct action against the chain in Seattle.

Klein is careful to note that the inflation of brands has come at the expense of both small business and labour. But perhaps competition, the very heart of changing capitalism, is not given quite as much salience as it needs in Klein’s analysis. The huge sums sloshed about for advertising and design could not possibly be expended without some commensurate profit in the long run. In oligopolistic markets, advertising becomes a key to maintaining market share, but if it far exceeds competitors then decline will follow. The processes of flexible specialization and use of EPZs allow CEOs and corporate bureaucracies to concentrate their attention on marketing and development; traditional company workforces become increasingly redundant, as iconographic success determines profits. In this setting competition between brands intensifies, with huge expenditures on their projection.

In the final part of her book, Klein surveys the forces of opposition to the ‘new branded world’. Here she gives an excellent account of the different kinds of resistance that have sprung up in the recent period to logo-capital: post-situationist ‘culture jamming’ of billboards and other forms of advertising, post-anarchist demonstrations ‘reclaiming the streets’ of big cities, neo-environmentalist and anti-corporate activism, brand-targeting campaigns and boycotts of every kind. She writes with lively sympathy and good sense about all of these, neither exaggerating nor understating their impact. Noting that there is a long

tradition of ad-busters, logo-morphers and other tweekers of the tyranny of commercial icons, she is careful to document corporate spin and counter-measures to neutralize them—manoeuvres that can include playful appropriation of attacks and turning of advertising against itself, as in the ‘Thirst is Everything’ campaign by Sprite, as well as blunderbuss attempts at legal repression, as in the McLibel case brought by the fast-food colossus against a couple of London activists, which proved a fiasco.

Klein has good things to say about more radical styles of activism, but regards boycotts as the most effective force for corporate reform to date—where necessary extended to secondary boycotts as well. The reforms these can hope to achieve, she argues, include labour and production codes, negotiated with workers and independently monitored; just as campus militancy can force university divestiture. Klein is aware of the limits of single-action campaigns, and does not conceal the perverse outcomes to which they can lead. *No Logo* lays out the campaign against Shell Oil in Nigeria with verve and poignancy. It shows that when Shell lost business from boycotts after the state assassination of Ken Saro-Wiwa, Chevron stepped forward to take its position—using company helicopters to fly in the same soldiers to gun down local protestors. Klein concludes: ‘it is sadly ironic that Chevron has undoubtedly benefited from the fact that activists have made a strategic decision to focus their criticism on Shell, rather than on the Nigerian oil industry as a whole. It points to one of the significant, at times maddening limitations of brand-based politics.’ In effect, without wider and more stringent obstacles to the mobility of capital, exploitation of labour and degradation of the environment, targeting particular corporations or logos may simply displace their operations to other firms. Klein notes that there are occasions when exemplary victories over one firm can force its rivals into line, but it would be wrong to suggest she is starry-eyed about this as a general prospect. A more significant blind-spot would seem to be uncritical acceptance of the selective Western roster of regimes where corporate activities are to be held up for opprobrium: Burma and China are predictably singled out, Saudi Arabia or Gabon never mentioned. In this case more radical strands of activism, from the Ruckus Society to Rainforest Action Network to Amazon Watch, have recognized from the start that the problem is not one company nor one military junta, but the oil industry itself, whose bloody trail—which has given us massacres and wars, as well as smog-choked cities and suburban sprawl—Klein would have done well to follow.

The structure of consumption itself, however, lies outside the ambit of *No Logo*. So, too, does the real distribution of corporate power in today’s world. Most of the corporations featured in Klein’s account are at the light end of the consumer goods sector—textiles, sportswear and fast-food figure most prominently—or giant retailers. These are, by any standard, major commercial and cultural forces. But their weight in the overall system is still relatively modest. A

quick glance at the *Global Fortune 500* yields few brandmasters. The neo-liberal order that has laid the ground-work for the phenomenon Klein writes about, by reducing the power of all states save one, is ignored. Political economy in the wider sense is absent from these pages. But no book can do everything. Logos may not be the nerve-centre of global capital, but Klein's suggestion that they could be an Achilles Heel shows a cool tactical intelligence. Just because brand-recognition is so widespread, campaigns against brands can catch fire more quickly than any other. There is a jujitsu logic to mobilization against the magnetism of the logo, that Klein explains very well. *No Logo* is a remarkable achievement for an author still in her twenties when it was finished—spirited, outspoken and wide-angled. Its nearly five hundred pages, artfully designed and interleaved with a striking series of photomontages, are admirably timed. This is a book to galvanize the resistance that began at Seattle.