The Polit-Brand and Blows Against the Empire: the Collectively Approved Brands of the New-New Left

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT - Is that a real Poncho, or is that a Sears Poncho? Frank Zappa and O'Guinn present theory and data regarding the Anew@, (actually the new-new, post-1972, U.S./Western Europe) political left's leitmotif of fighting market capitalism's Ahegemony@ through purchases (as opposed to boycotts of major brands from major corporations). In other words, the new left revolutionary revolts by buying things, but only those things that are deemed appropriate to their socio-political identity, and their socio-political agenda. These are the Apolit-brands@ of the new left. While the use of brands in Arevolution@ has been discussed elsewhere, most notably in Frank's (1997) Conquest of Cool, we offer a significantly different take on the dynamics and meaning of the phenomenon.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Is that a real Poncho, or is that a Sears Poncho?
Frank Zappa

O’Guinn and Muniz present theory and data regarding the “new”, (actually the new-new, post- 1972, U.S./Western Europe) political left’s leitmotif of fighting market capitalism’s “hegemony” through purchases (as opposed to boycotts of major brands from major corporations). In other words, the new left revolutionary revolts by buying things, but only those things that are deemed appropriate to their socio-political identity, and their socio-political agenda. These are the “politis-brands” of the new left. While the use of brands in “revolution” has been discussed elsewhere, most notably in Frank’s (1997) Conquest of Cool, we offer a significantly different take on the dynamics and meaning of the phenomenon.

Circa 1972 the old “new left,” for all intents and purposes, perished (Schulman 2001). It was replaced by a more individualistic and consumption ambivalent movement. Outside of university English departments, neo-new left-revolutionary politics increasingly play out in battles no longer about consuming or not consuming, but in discourse over the identification, sanctioning, and championing of which brands are the best vessel for one’s “alternative”, albeit comfortable politics. The emergence of the “new” political left of the 1990’s and beyond provides us with a particularly accessible opportunity to see the mixing of consumer culture and politics, right where they exist: in plain sight. The new left’s oft observed belief that they are somehow striking blows against the capitalist empire by purchasing major branded goods is particularly noteworthy in its oddity and paradox in the long stream of modal modernist market critique. Yet, rather than be essential-izing in our theory, and dismissive in our tone, we hold that these acts are not necessarily inauthentic, wrongheaded, uninformed, unimportant, or ineffective.

We like others, argue that not only is consumption inherently political, but always has been. This contrasts with the noted ahistoricism of critical theory. But, not desiring to be hoisted on our own designer petard, we just as quickly acknowledge the very prominent and prominent pastiche of blended branded-politics and branded-lifestyles in the contemporary consumer milieu. We further assert that it is high time to see and study these contemporary phenomena absent so much heavy-handed and bulky modernist baggage.

Modal modernist critical thought operates on the central assumption that market capitalism (and contemporary consumer culture) is problematic, and should be critiqued… and, not inconsequentially should reify/deify the cultural critic along the way. Traditional social theory assumes that in-authenticity and false consciousness typify the consumption modality. So, when critical theorists encounter the new left’s belief that by buying only “approved” brands they are social movers undifferentiated from sixties style radicals, these consumers are typically dismissed as duped, and the entire situation testament to the inescapable web of capitalist hegemony and consumption juggernaut (Frank 1997).

We believe that such totalizing formulations are inadequate for the task of understanding the phenomena before us. Sweeping dissimilars never allow a finer grained look at brands (or anything else for that matter), contextualized by their history, as politicized social constructions. Our paper reports both face-to-face and computer mediated data on several brands to sharpen this theoretical focus. We argue that notions of branding and their place in social thought have something to gain from the broadening border-crossing of brand and politics.

We take as given and obvious that brands are social constructions, are socio-political, and always have been. And like Frank (1997), we believe that consumers, particularly youth, play out many of their revolutionary impulses with branded products. Where we differ markedly from Frank (1997), and other critical scholars are (1) the assertion that these acts of marketplace social revolution are fundamentally inauthentic, merely fashion and the work of the duped and hegemon-ized masses; and (2) the assertion that they are fundamentally ineffective. We assert that one does not have to take a critical stance to either explain or appreciate this phenomenon. It is not necessary.

Polit-brand data are presented in the form of Apple, Ben and Jerry’s, Carhart, Diesel, MAC, REI, Tom’s of Maine, and most notably, Sweat-X. We discuss these brands in the context of “authenticity,” the “alternative” label, their trajectory, their role in resolving contradictions of self interest and fashion, brand social construction and “ownership,” and most importantly, achieving demonstrable and meaningful political goals.

References


Zappa, Frank and the Mothers of Invention (1968), We’re Only In It for the Money album cover.