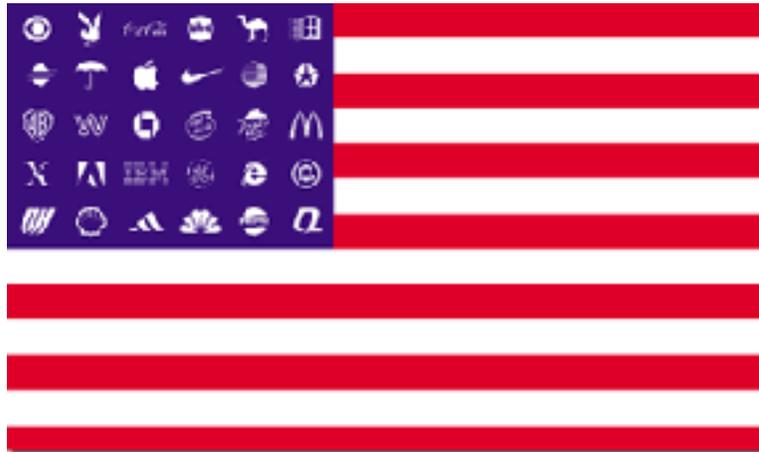


# The Logo as Fetish: Marxist Themes in Naomi Klein's *No Logo*

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Naomi Klein's publication of the work *No Logo* in 2000 sparked a massive public and critical response. Critics were not only impressed with the considerable sophistication and aesthetic quality of Klein's writing. *No Logo* stands as a valuable compendium of data on the "new economy", informed by four years of her own "hands on" research in both the first and third worlds. As such, as *The Financial Times* noted, it reads as something of an anticorporatist, antiglobalisation "manifesto and call to arms". Klein's aim in the work was indeed explicitly political, as she states in the "Introduction":

The book is hinged on a simple hypothesis: that as more people discover the brand-name secrets of the global logo web, their outrage will fuel the next big political movement, a vast wave of opposition squarely targeting transnational corporations, particularly those with very high name-brand recognition. [Klein, 2000: xviii]

In the broad sense that Klein is clearly interested in trying to forge a link between theoretical reflexivity and political practice, then, *No Logo* can be read as a neoMarxist tome. In this essay, though, I want to suggest that Klein's work is (knowingly or not) deeply Marxian in its argument, in more senses than just this. It is just one more of the considerable virtues of the work that Klein "favors informality and crispness over jargon" [Andy Beckett, *Guardian*], and that (as such), she feels no need to draw authority from Marx's name.

My guiding idea is this. It struck me as I reflected on *No Logo* that its structure could be read as an exemplary operation in Marxian defetishising critique, on the understanding that the logo be read as the newest form of commodity fetish. The work's first two parts, "No Space" and "No Choice", which focus on the first world, could then be read as documents in the analysis of the phenomenal appearances of this new wave of capitalist fetishisation. The work's third part, entitled "No Jobs", would then logically follow, as an uncovering of the effective material forms and changed relations of production undergirding and concealed by the shimmering logos. Finally, the fourth part (significantly called "No Logo"), which documents recent forms of anticapitalist protest, would represent something akin to a contemporary version of the part of *Capital* Marx never wrote, concerning class struggle.

In this paper, I focus on the first part of Naomi Klein's *No Logo*. The thesis that I defend is that the logo is the latest, and I am tempted to say, the *purest* form of commodity fetishisation. In arguing this, I will centrally draw on the remarkable first chapter of Marx's *Capital*, but also Baudrillard's early works on consumerism and "the system of objects".

### *i. The Appearance of the Logo*

What is a logo? In *No Logo*'s first chapter, Naomi Klein answers this question through undertaking a genealogy tracing the evolution of contemporary advertising strategem. The brand packaging of products appeared towards the end of the nineteenth century as an attempt of capitalists to save their profit-making endeavours in an age of machinised mass production. As Klein says: "Competitive branding became a necessity of the machine age -- within a context of manufactured sameness, image-based difference had to be manufactured along with the product". [Klein, 2000: 6] Yet the first wave of branding was only a dim approximation and anticipation of the types of logo-centred advertising that appeared in the 1990's. The first ads remained formulaic, and -- above all -- subordinate to the *products* which they aimed simply to differentiate from their rivals, in order the better to sell *them*. In the words of one 'adman' Klein cites from this period, which she would have us read metaphorically as well as literally: "an advertisement should be big enough to make an impression but not any bigger than the thing advertised". [at Klein, 2000: 6]

Yet by the late 1940's, Klein reports, an awareness has at least begun to spread amongst advertisers that a brand need not be duty bound to its product, but that a *company* as a whole could and *did* have a "brand identity" of its own. A progenitor of this new insight was Bruce Marton, who already in the 1920's had asserted that the "GE" of general electronics ought to be sold by admen as "the initials of a friend". "Institutions have souls", Barton already preached at this time, "just as men and nations have souls". [at Klein, 2000: 7] In the 40's, this evolutionary idea was taken up by such ad critics as Randall Rothman, as companies undertook to spend capital on psychological and anthropological research into markets, to discover "what brands mean[t] to culture and to people's lives". [Klein, 2000: 7] Once more the idea here was derived from the insight that, in an age of mass-manufacturing where quality difference between different

companies' products were increasingly being minimalised, while "corporations may manufacture products, what consumers buy are brands". [Klein, 2000: 7]

In other words, the awareness was beginning to emerge that products needed to be "conceptual value-added" if they were to sell *at all*, with all that that implies. [Klein, 2000: 14] Klein's argument in *No Logo*, however, is that it was not until the late 1980's that the manufacturing world underwent a radical paradigm shift away from the conception that its central business was production, and that the primary source of value of its products were their useful qualities. [Klein, 2000: 7] The key moment, Klein suggests, was when Philip Morris bought not Kraft-the-company, but "Kraft" the signifier for 12.6 billion dollars, six times what the company was ostensibly worth on paper. [Klein, 2000: 7] As Klein remarks:

"Of course Wall Street was aware that decades of marketing and brand bolstering added value to assets and total annual sales. But with the Kraft purchase, a huge dollar value had been assigned to something that had previously been abstract and unquantifiable -- a brand name". [Klein, 2000: 8]

It is only when brand names cease being mere signifiers of products, but also (like "Kraft") become in themselves products to be brought and sold, that Klein will speak of logos. You could think of Klein's argument here concerning the difference between brands and logos, that is, as broadly parallel to that which Marx makes about producers versus proletarians. All ages have had laboring classes. The emergence of the proletariat only occurs when the universalisation of capital has produced a class of laborers who own *nothing* but their own bodies, and labor-time. Equally, commodities have been branded for over a century. It is only when the brand itself becomes a product selling *itself* as much as its product, that it has become a logo.

The immediate significance of the sale of "Kraft" was that advertisers could concretely claim that money spent on advertising was not just money spent on sales strategy. It was also an investment "in cold hard equity". The immediate result of Philip Morris' purchase of "Kraft" was the "brand equity mania" of the late eighties and early 1990's. Companies begun to compete primarily not at the sales counter, but in hiring advisers to dream up new ways and mediums in which to pitch their brands, and to investigate the lifeworlds of consumers to discover which brand "essence" would most appeal to the target demographic. [Klein, 2000: 8] This, for Klein, inaugurated or constituted what I will call the age of the logo proper.

On my reading, there are at least three major and interrelated characteristics of this "age", whose span is roughly from 1988 to the present.

Firstly, the age of the logo is one characterised by the increasing visibility of advertising virtually *everywhere* in physical-, tele- and cyber-space. Only the most outrageous instantings of this tendency are such phenomena as the mobile phone companies in Scandinavia which offer free long-distance calls to consumers, providing

they are willing to have their conversations interrupted periodically by adverts [Klein, 2000: 9]; or the whole towns in America which have been appropriated as living or "live-in" advertisements by private companies which have "bought" them. [Klein, 2000: 152 ff.] As Klein's title to chapter 2 reads, the brand has a propensity to *expand*, once it has morphed into a logo. All of the world becomes the logo's oyster, or the canvas on which it can be intrusively splayed.

This already points towards the second characteristic of the logo which has become more and more manifest in the 1990's. The second characteristic of the age of the logo is the increasing abstraction of the logo from its product. The logo *sui generis*, as I said, is a signifier that names a company and not its products. Because of this, after the "Kraft" sale, it has been able to "ascend and become glorious", taking on *itself* the value of a form of capital. Yet this is not all there is to the logo's metaphysical complexity. If the logo brands a company, what is *signified* by the logos are less objects than "concepts" that intercede between the buyer and the products, and which are supposed to facilitate their ready and amiable interaction. The logo is "the brand as experience, as lifestyle", Klein notes. [Klein, 2000: 21] She cites the Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz, talking of how his consumers are less consumers of coffee than of "the romance of the coffee experience, the feeling of warmth and community people get in Starbucks stores". [Klein, 2000: 20] Nike, Klein remarks, at some point in the 1990's changed from one sports outlet amongst others to an advertiser, as it were, of *sport* itself, aiming to keep "the magic of sport alive", as its CEO Philip Knight has proclaimed. [at Klein, 2000: 23] In an important passage, *No Logo* sums:

The old paradigm had it that all marketing was selling a product. In the new market, however, the product always takes a back seat to the real product, the brand, and the selling of the brand [in turn] acquired an extra component that can only be described as spiritual. Advertising is about hawking product. Branding, in its truest and most advanced incarnations, is about corporate transcendence. [Klein, 2000: 21]

Again, this mediation enacted by the logo, which places patented images of experiences between the consumer and his products, points to the third feature of the age of the logo. This is that the market for consumer goods has increasingly become *one* market. Because today's companies are competing primarily for the appropriation of affirmative cultural images, there is no reason why their competitors should only be those companies who happen to produce the same final commodities as they do. Since *anything* can be branded, as Klein says, logo branding:

is, at its core, a deeply competitive undertaking in which brands are up against not only their immediate rivals (Nike vs. Reebok, Coke vs. Pepsi, McDonald's vs. Burger King, for example) but all other brands in the mediascape, including the events and people they are sponsoring. [Klein, 2000: 36]

The other reason for this universalisation of the retail market is simply that, if the primary thing that unifies companies is now (in good Lacanian fashion) the *sign* of their logos, auratic brands can take to manufacturing just about *anything*: Caterpillar tractors, for example, can produce a line of clothing and accessories, and Kraft can brand a watch. [Klein, 2000: 25, 272] Equally, big names can simply contract out all production of different lines of goods to different manufacturers. In the age of the logo it becomes possible for individuals like Tommy Hilfiger to thus assume the mantle of veritable latter-day Hegelian monarchs, trading "in the business of [only] signing their name[s]". Like in the joke about how Marxism took from capitalism the exploitation, from feudalism the inequality, from primitive societies the scarcity, and from socialism only the name, all "Tommy Hilfiger" directly contributes to the production process is the magical signifier "Tommy" itself, which yet somehow changes everything. [Klein, 2000: 24]

## *ii. The Actuality of the Logo*

At the 1988 U.S. Association of National Advertisers meeting, the chairman of a leading agency addressed the assembled executives in the following terms:

"I doubt that many of you would welcome a commodity marketplace in which one competed solely on price, promotion and trade deals, all of which can be readily duplicated by competition, leading to ever-decreasing profits, decay and eventual bankruptcy". [Klein, 2000: 14]

The strategic argument was that the switch from product-centrism, to a focus on logification, was necessary to save the big corporations' concrete economic privilege from being "levelled". Its metaphysical ground, accordingly, is a sharp distinction between commodities and logos. As Klein cites Tom Peters' *The Circle of Innovation*, one of the central texts of the new corporate consciousness:

"[There are two distinct types of companies]. The top half -- Coco-cola, Microsoft, Disney, and so on -- are pure 'players' in brainware. The bottom half [Ford and GM] are still lumpy-object purveyors, though automobiles [e.g.] are much 'smarter' than they used to be". [Klein, 2000: 22]

My argument in this paper is, however, that this corporate consciousness, in its sharp distinction between objects and logos, is a false consciousness. My reason is that I think that "lumpy" commodities have yet always been their own images. Indeed, I take it that this is what the Marxian critique of commodity fetishism in *Das Capital* exactly discloses.

Chapter 1 of Marx's *Capital* is on "the fetishisation of commodities". It is a difficult and rich text. Following Eagleton, though, I suggest that we can read its complexity as arising from how Marx conceives the commodity as a kind of *doppelganger* of the truly aesthetic artefact, in which universal and particular would be authentically harmonised. [Eagleton, 1998: 208] Eagleton's suggestion is that the commodity, for Marx, embodies at

once *a false particularity*, that veils the truly universal process of human labor that underlies it; and *a false universality*, insofar as it appears as the bearer of a purely quantitative exchange value, in a way which blinds us to its particular sensuous qualities. [Eagleton, 1998: 208-9]

I will return to how the logo is in Klein's *No Logo* a falsely fetishized material particularity in concluding. I want primarily to focus on how, for Marx, the advertising execs' distinction between "lumpy" objects and quasi-Platonic logos would be a false one, which occludes the metaphysical revolution already enacted in the universalisation of exchange value in earlier capitalism. As Marx comments, with typical rhetorical panache, in *Capital*:

If commodities could speak, they would say: "Our use-value may interest human beings; but it is not an attribute of us, as things. What is our attribute, as things, is our value. Our own interrelations as commodities proves it. We are related to one another only as exchange values". [Marx, 1951: 58]

The commodities' point here is that, as Eagleton writes, each of them individually is a kind of "schizoid, self-contradictory phenomenon, a mere symbol of itself, an entity whose meaning and being are entirely at odds". [Eagleton, 1998: 209] In our terms, the reversal that Klein notes concerning the logo -- that its products come to be as it were the bearers and sellers of the signifiers that were originally intended to sell *them* -- is thus already a reversal operative in the *internal* structure of each product, according to Marx. The material body of the commodity, and its use, are entirely contingent to its value. One ghetto blaster is worth about as much as a flight to Sydney, which is equivalent again to an in principle unlimited myriad of unrelated things. Indeed, this material body of the commodity "exists only as the contingent bearer of its extrinsic form". [Eagleton, 1998: 209] To quote *Capital*:

the existence of things *qua* commodities, and the value-relation between the products of labor which *stamps* them as commodities, have absolutely no connection with their physical properties and with the material relations arising therefrom. [Marx, 1951: 45]

So Marx would not be surprised at many of the apparently *bizarre* phenomena Klein adduces, such as advertising execs Sam L. Hill, Jack McGrath and Sandeep Dayal teaming up to write a didactic essay on "How to Brand Sand". For him, it would be perfectly intelligible that "Intel Corp", a computer company who make computer parts, could have "transform[ed] its processors into a fetish brand with TV ads featuring line workers in funky metallic space suits dancing to 'Shake Your Groove Thing'". [Klein, 2000: 25]

In *The System of Objects*, Baudrillard's 1968 work, Baudrillard indeed sought to sophisticate Marx's analysis of the commodity by drawing on contemporary semiotics and Lacanian psychoanalysis. Whereas Marx's analysis still privileges production,

Baudrillard's attention from the start was on what is called "consumerism". When does an object become an object of *consumption*, Baudrillard asks? In the background is the post-Marxian distinction between mere *use* of an object as a "traditional object-symbol (tool, furniture, even the house)", and its *consumption*, which is something specific to developed capitalism. When an object is merely *used*, as in any period of history, Baudrillard argues, it is always "actualised through its relation of interiority or transitivity with the human gesture or fact (collective or individual)" of its use. However, Baudrillard specifies: "*In order to become object of consumption, the object must become sign*" [Baudrillard, 1988: 22] *Qua* object of consumption, the object is not only a tool within a given lived relation of the individual to others, or to the object world, he explains. *It is consumed instead as a signifier of that relation.* [Baudrillard, 1988: 22, 24] Consumption has "no longer anything to do (beyond a certain point) with the satisfaction of needs, nor with the reality principle", Baudrillard says. [Baudrillard, 1988: 25] For him, instead: "consumption [is] a systematic and *total idealist practice*, which far exceeds our relations to objects and relations among individuals, one that extends to all manifestations of history, communication, and culture." [Baudrillard, 1988: 24] What he means is that (e.g.) when one buys deck chairs, one is actually buying the possibility of long summer evenings with friends, wine, and good conversation. Equally, when one consumes a mahogany bookshelf or desk, what one is buying are a set of connotations: profound thought, long nights spent reading or in pensive meditation, and so on. [cf. Baudrillard, 1988: 23-24]

I want to make two points about this in this essay. The first is how obviously prescient of Klein's observations concerning the logo as a signifier of an immaterial experience or "vibe" Baudrillard's position on consumption is. Yet Baudrillard's *The System of Objects* predates the Kraft sale by two decades, and deals with consumer goods *per se*. If you like, his retort to anyone still shocked that signs could be bought and sold, would be that we have been buying signs all along, and that this tendency has only become "for itself" in the age of the logo.

The second point is that, if Baudrillard anticipates Klein, he *draws* from Marx. Indisputably, there is something saliently *new* about his position on consumer goods. Yet I would stress that it is a position articulated in the space opened by Marx's distinction between "the two factors of a commodity: use-value and value". [Marx, 1951: 3] Indeed, Baudrillard explicitly avows that his argument concerning the gap between the object as usable and as consumable is formally parallel to Marx's argument concerning how, whether it *appears* as though the exchange value of an object is a merely contingent feature of its identity, it is in *actuality* what is essential to the object *qua* commodity. [Baudrillard, 1988: 24] According to Baudrillard, to repeat, the object *qua* consumer good is, beneath appearances, the mere bearer of the connotations it produces in the minds of its consumers.

### ***Conclusion: Defetishising the Logo***

My argument is that the logo is then less the "revolution" that advertising executives claim it is, than a development in what is even the elementary "metaphysical" cell of the

capitalist matrix. As Žižek remarks, Marx's gripe with capitalism was never solely the quasi-Weberian lament that it introduces instrumental rationality into regions of life where this should properly have no place. His concern, certainly in the early chapters of *Das Capital*, is that capitalism's ruthless undermining of all inherited and religious value systems generates a quasi-religious spectrality of its own: the realm of commodities, or "real abstraction". What is the logo but the latest and even the *purest* level of this abstraction? This is my question. Surely we witness in the logo's absolute subordination of use value to its fetishistic aura, the as it were most *commodified* of all commodities, on a par even with money itself?

I want to close by making one more argument to support my reading of Klein's *No Logo* as a latter-day rendition and contemporisation of *Das Capital*. I said above that it is not only the false universality of exchange value that arouses Marx's ire in *Capital*. He is also concerned about the spurious auratic sheen of these neatly prepackaged objects. His concern is that our fetishisation of these appearances will draw attention away from the *source* of their exchange value, which is simply the historical conditions of their production by living human beings. A defetishising critique is accordingly one that lifts the veil of the fetish, to unveil the material conditions under which the commodities have been produced. It will thus bring to our attention the conditions under which the producers of the goods have labored, and particularly the way that their labor has produced goods whose value far exceeds what they are being paid in exchange for their labor. [cf. Marx, 1951: 169-193]

My contention that *No Logo* is an operation in Marxian defetishising critique can then be supported by the following observation. This is that, while Klein insists in chapter 5 that her book shouldn't be read as the *mea culpa* of an ex-identity politician, it nevertheless stands as a very forceful critique of what is often called postmodernism. Klein's argument in the chapter "Patriarchy Gets Funky" is simply that, while the campus radicals of the early 1990's might have outraged older-style conservatives, their emphasis on "difference" did nothing to upset the hip new generation of advertisers being employed by Nike and like-minded corporations in order to more "democratically" respond to the needs of their target markets. For example, in 1997, Yanchelovich Partners, one of the United States' leading consumer research groups, advised that "diversity" was the "defining idea" which today's "gen-Xers" "bring to the market place", as "individuality" had been for the baby boomers, and "duty" had been for earlier generations. [at Klein, 2000: 111] Accordingly, as Klein comments:

The prospect of having to change a few pronouns and getting a handful of women and minorities on the board and on television posed no real threat to the guiding profit-making principles of Wall Street. [Klein, 2000: 122]

Just as Nike chose Kenyan runners as the embodiment of sport *per se*, so Benetton turned itself into the champions of multiculturalism, and companies like Diesel Jeans started openly featuring gay couples in their ads. This is why Klein argues that "the victories of identity politics have amounted to a rearranging of the furniture while the house burned down". [Klein, 2000: 123] Her critique of postmodernism is not simply a moralistic

gripe, or a call like: "One more effort, postmodernists, if you want truly to be postmodern!" *No Logo* may as well have explicitly cited Marx's call for the defetishising of commodities, when she comments of the "politically correct" multiculturalism of the early 1990's: "We were too busy analysing the pictures being projected on the wall to notice that the wall itself had been sold". [Klein, 2000: 124]

It is not that Klein isn't absolutely disgusted at the colossal cynicism of a system that can lead to people selling cola through commodifying the revolutionary aura of Che Guavara, or the hard-won authenticity of gay men and women. *No Logo's* point is just that if we spend *all* our time focusing on this level of the phenomenal appearance of capitalism in the first world, we will miss the changes in its global economic substructures. And, of course, this is what she then analyses in detail in Part III of *No Logo*, entitled "No Jobs". [Klein, 2000: 195-275] As Klein writes at the conclusion of "Patriarchy Gets Funky":

That failure [of the politics of identity and symbolic representation] has turned out to be so immeasurably problematic because the economic trends that have so accelerated in the past decade have all been about massive redistribution and stratification of world resources: of jobs, goods, and money. [And] everyone except those in the very highest tier of the corporate elite is getting less. [Klein, 2000: 122]

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