

LIBERATION MARKETING AND THE CULTURE TRUST

by Thomas Frank

Anybody who watches TV these days knows about the world-historical change that's on the way. Those who are optimistic about the change focus quite narrowly on the remarkably counterintuitive position that once we all own expensive office machines, then culture will become radically decentralized and the nightmare of the mass society, along with the age-old curse of elitism, will be ended for good.

But those of us who are concerned about the concentration of the media see the big change as essentially a negative one: the sky really is falling, civilization is wandering into a cultural catastrophe. Partially, of course, this is a predictable end-of-the-century sentiment, common to every year cursed with a nine as its third digit. But it's also a very real constellation of fears. We're "dumbing down." We've become incapable of judging. And nothing brings it home more concretely than the rise of culture trust, the group of media- moguls like Time Warner, Geffen, Disney, and Westinghouse who have fashioned a monopoly from American tastes. In formal terms what's happened looks like an almost literal realization of C. Wright Mills' classic definition of a mass society: ever fewer voices talking to an ever larger and an ever more passive audience.

Both doomsayers and cyberecstatics are talking about the same larger phenomenon, of which the rise of the "culture trust" is a central element. The defining fact of American life in the 1990s is its reorganization around the needs of the corporations, not just that we all work for them, and not just culturally, and not just in the sense that the only redemption anyone's hoping for is supposed to come through personal computers. The world of business, it seems, is becoming the world, period. The market is politics, the office is society, the brand is equivalent to human identity. *Fast Company*, one of the most prominent magazine start-ups of recent years, calls this "the business revolution" and trumpets itself as the "handbook." According to *Fast Company*, business culture is replacing civil society. "Work is personal" and "Computing is social" are points one and two in its manifesto for the corporate revolution. In one issue it proclaimed that the division of American business leaders into "cyber-libertarians" and "techno-communitarians" is "the real election," far overshadowing the obsolete battlings of Democrats and Republicans. If there's going to be any social justice in the world, the magazine argues, it will be because the market has decreed that there be social justice. One of the magazine's writers takes the argument all the way: "Corporations have become the dominant institution of our time," he writes, "occupying the position of the church of the Middle Ages and the nation-state of the past two centuries." A similar note is sounded in a recent *Newsday* article discussing the dramatic rise in popularity of management books: "The line between business and life are blurring a bit and work issues are becoming a 24-hour-a-day concern."¹

The words and images that describe what many of us believe to be happening are surprisingly easy to summon. It's going to be the triumph of gray, of hierarchy, of homogeneity, of spirit-killing order. Right? We're all going to be robots—automaton organization men. We'll have to listen to Muzak all the time. It's going to be like 1984, the most abused source of metaphors in metaphor history. It's going to be corporate feudalism like in Rollerball or one of those dystopic Schwarzenegger films. Right?

Wrong. The corporate takeover of life is coming; in fact, it's already happened. But what makes the culture of the businessman's republic so interesting is not that it demands order, conformity, gray clothes, and Muzak, but that it presents itself as an opponent to those very conceptions of corporate life. Those who speak for the new order aren't puritanical; they're hip; they're fully tuned in to youth culture; they listen to alternative rock while they work; they fantasize about smashing convention. Business theory today is about revolution, not about stasis or hierarchy; it's about liberation, not order. Business is "fast companies" questioning everything from job duties to pay scales to office furniture. Business is Sony Wonder, the brand-based amusement park at Madison and 54th Street. Business is "thinking outside the box," as anyone who's flipped through the latest management best-sellers must be tired of hearing. Business is tattooed executives snowboarding down K2 or parachuting in hurricane weather or riding mountain bikes in tornadoes or kayaking down lava flows or running shrieking down the halls of the great bureaucracies overturning desks and throwing paper. Business is adman Jay Chiat snipping off his clients' ties and "squash[ing] conventionality like ripe fruit"; it's Wieden and Kennedy, the ad agency that boasts of being organized after "a slime mold."

All this makes for a very peculiar national culture, one marked by a strange coexistence of, on the one hand, extreme political apathy and, on the other, extreme commercial extremism. Politically speaking, dissent against the market order has never been more negligible. In terms of our presidential candidates and the people who make up Congress, we are living in a time of greater consensus and conformity than the fifties. But take a look at our advertising. Mainstream commercial America is in love with revolution and alternative everything to a degree not even attained in the sixties. Even the word "extreme" itself is virtually everywhere, from Taco Bell's "extreme combos" to Boston Market's "extreme carvers" to Pontiac commercials in which the company announces that it is "taking it to the extreme." Not only can the center not hold, the center ceased to hold about thirty years ago. And nobody cares. Certainly the traditional guardians of order don't care, and certainly the business community doesn't care.

Hip is how business understands itself today. If we're ever going to challenge the power of the culture trust, the first thing we're going to have to do is understand that capitalism is different now, especially in the media and advertising industries. And if you think that the problem with capitalism is that it forces people to conform or to march in lockstep restrain their appetites or something like that, then I've got news for you: you don't have a problem with

capitalism. You're going to do just fine in the corporate revolution.

If you talk about culture in the businessman's republic, sooner or later you have to talk about advertising. For all its recent complaints about difficult demographics and the demise of broadcasting, advertising remains the central ideological apparatus of the new capitalism. Advertising is the market's subsidizing mechanism, the free-enterprise version of the National Endowment for the Arts, the device through which any cultural enterprise succeeds or fails. Advertising is also the public face of capitalism, the device through which what Jackson Lears calls the "fables of abundance" are transmitted and elaborated; the language of the nation's management dreams and carnival fantasies. The people who make advertising are, in a very real sense, the ideologues of the corporate revolution: they are architects of dissatisfaction and of perpetual obsolescence. They are corporate Jacobins, businessmen who imagine the cultural slate wiped clean, with all nonbrand-oriented traditions and customs out the window forever. As Fortune magazine insisted back in 1951, the market is a place of permanent revolution, to an extent that Trotsky could never have imagined, and advertising executives are its permanent vanguard.

And though it is fun, and even vaguely "empowering," (to use the catch-all adjective of the businessman's republic) to talk about how oppressive and conformist consumer society is, if you look closely, you will notice that advertising, that society's paramount expression, is not particularly utopian. To be sure, here and there you will in fact find representations of families whose happiness is consummated by products, but by and large, the work of the cuffing-edge agencies is anti-utopian. Advertising, at least on its surface, does not regard the new world of total corporate control as a happy thing.

In fact, much of advertising today is not only anti-utopian; it's full-on critical. It speaks directly to the problems of media, power, and culture. It makes exemplary use of all those images to which I referred earlier: people in the workplace as robots, in uniform gray, trapped in boxlike elevators and cubicles, driven by sadistic bosses. I chose these images, in fact, precisely because of their familiarity through advertising. Advertising recognizes that consumer society hasn't given us the things it promised or solved the problems it was supposed to do: that consumerism is in fact a gigantic sham. It's lots of hard work for no reason. The rat race. The treadmill. The office as hell.

Call this species of advertising "liberation marketing" (to borrow a phrase from Tom Peters). It knows that the culture trust exists, and it knows that business has conquered the world. And it offers in response not just soaps that get your whites whiter, but soaps that liberate you, soda pops that are emblems of individualism, radios of resistance, carnivalesque cars, and counterhegemonic hamburgers. Liberation marketing takes the old mass culture critique—consumerism as conformity—fully into account, acknowledges it, addresses it, and solves it. Liberation marketing imagines consumers breaking free from the old enforcers of order, tearing loose from the shackles with which capitalism has

bound us, escaping the routine of bureaucracy and hierarchy, getting in touch with our true selves, and finally, finding authenticity, that holiest of consumer grails.

Liberation marketing can trace its roots back to the early 1960s, but its most important modern exposition was the famous TV commercial that introduced the Macintosh back in 1984, in which herds of people in gray were freed from the iron grip of Big Brother's propaganda telescreens. The ad was remarkable not only for the way it was filmed and the place it was shown (the Super Bowl, of course), but for daring to accept, and even endorse, the darkest vision of consumer society. We are a nation of look-alike suckers, it told us, glued to the tube, fastening intently on the words of the Man. That is, until Macintosh arrives. The commercial not only set the tone for future Macintosh advertising, but for the entire body of propaganda for the cyber-revolution which now deluges us every day: computers are liberating; they empower us; they let us mouth off at the Man. Not incidentally, the ad was made by Chiat/Day, the same people who told us how Reebok "lets U.B.U?" and who sent a gang of latter-day merry pranksters around the country for Fruitopia.

That was in 1984. In France, Macintosh advertising was even more direct, announcing that "It was about time a capitalist led a revolution." Today, French advertising executive Jean-Marie Dru writes that Apple has secured its grip on the liberator image: "Apple is not simply a brand of technologically revolutionary products. It's an antiestablishment company." Ever since then, other computer brands have vied for Macintosh's enviable antiestablishment position, the most notable recent example being Packard Bell, whose commercials treat us to visions of modern consuming life that come straight out of Metropolis. But the approach is hardly limited to computer advertising, or even to the handful of hip ad agencies.

Nowadays, you'll even find liberation marketing in such odd places as ads for chewing gum. Doublemint, for example, abandoned its happy jingle of many years to tantalize us with a vision of the workplace as white-collar sweatshop and their own product as a glimmer of child-like innocence that can be enjoyed surreptitiously anywhere.

Cars have always been escape machines, but by embracing the old mass society critique advertising is now able to depict much more convincingly what they're allowing us to escape from. Cars, like computers, free us from the grinding routine of office and commute. Cars offer us a serious attitude adjustment and let us color outside the lines. Here are highlights from three of my favorite auto commercials.

First, Volkswagen, which is as straightforward an indictment of mass society as anything you'll find in the works of Hannah Arendt, and as evocative a celebration of counterhegemonic cultural practice as anything you'll read about in the works of John Fiske. Each installment in the "Drivers Wanted" series identifies some aspect of consumer society which Volkswagen enables you to

resist: fakeness, overwork, boredom, compartmentalization, hierarchy. Especially moving is the spot which describes the soulless glass-and-steel office blocks, in which you are imprisoned.

One of the curious subtexts of this species of advertising, of which the Volkswagen spots are such a wonderful example, is the way these commercials mirror contemporary management philosophy, specifically those philosophies favored by the sponsor, the advertising agency, or the target audience. This is done explicitly in another French Macintosh ad, which Dru narrates for us in his recent book:

a rich Italian businessman gives his son a resolute speech on the virtues of being authoritarian with his employees. He explains that the workers are there to carry out orders and not to think. Otherwise, they'd want to change things, and this does not i.e within the scope of their abilities. The voice-over of the ad concludes: "There are different ways of running a company. Here's one." The Apple logo appears on the screen. The voice-over continues: "Luckily, there are others."²

Volkswagen, of course, has been an anti-establishment brand since the late 1950s, and the "Drivers Wanted" commercials, whose victimheroes are always identifiably good citizens of the businessman's republic, seemed to be pitched to the sort of people who write glowing letters to the editors of *Fast Company*. The slogan seems to be a way of saying that, on the road of life, there are entrepreneurs and then there are hapless organization drones.

Saab commercials do the same thing, just a little more upscale. One spot in particular imagines its clearly upper-middle-class protagonist rising up against the various social conventions that bind him: He will grow his hair however he wants; he will do whatever he feels like doing with his time; he will disregard the ordinary politenesses of genteel party-talk. He will find his own road. There's even a golden moment when he shocks the bourgeoisie.

The ways of the stodgy corporation are strictly for the birds, and no one knows it better than the organization man himself. The cartoon animation in this spot is also significant: being yourself, speaking honestly—these are the dearest dreams of lifelong corporatrons, but they are only dreams, and must be rendered as cartoons.

Contemporary youth culture is, of course, the native tongue of liberation marketing, but it will also scour history for emblems of hip that are long dead, as in, of course, the Gap ads featuring Chet Baker, Monty Clift, and so on. Since the Beats are, apart from modern art, just about the earliest glimmering of the rebellion-through-style against mass society that defines liberation marketing, they and their works make up the revered canon of contemporary advertising. In one Volvo commercial, the only spoken words are lines from *On The Road*, the ultimate expression of this theme of car culture versus consumer culture.

It's significant that the people in this spot are visibly middle-aged. Anybody can read Kerouac; in fact, almost everybody still does. But it's important to Volvo that we understand that these are original beats, not some latter-day fakers, that they are true to the spirit of Kerouac, not just the image. This is established in a longer version of the commercial that shows the book's cover, which identifiably dates from the fifties. In the campaign's print ad the book is further detailed: "Always the romantic, John remembered to bring *On The Road*. Not one of those new printings he'd seen in the bookstore at the mall, but the original one that he had stored away in the attic." Even advertising is down on mall culture! Find the authentic item in an attic somewhere, and hang it from the rear-view mirror in your Volvo.

Here's the Kerouac passage that is read in the commercial: "the only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing." It's a virtual declaration of postmodern consumer desire: the hunger to consume everything at once; to defy the commonplace stuff that other people consume or that we consumed yesterday; to be "mad" rather than logocentric. It's a line that could be applied to virtually any product; a line that every copywriter should paste above his door; a line that belongs in the Norton Anthology of great consumer fantasies.

When I say that this is an age of conformity on a level that far exceeds that of the 1950s, I'm not saying that there is no cultural dissidence in America. In fact, we have a superabundance of it. Even oldsters who drive the sensible Volvo recognize that the "only ones" are the "mad ones," not the gray flannels, not the organization men, but the people whose craving for authenticity and escape can never be assuaged. And look around at media other than advertising: we are an immensely cynical people when it comes to the culture trust. Media workers, their bosses, and suits in general are stereotypical villains to the point of cliché in contemporary mass culture. Nobody except Newt Gingrich likes Rupert Murdoch. Thanks to Vance Packard and William Whyte, we all know about planned obsolescence. According to a study done by Ogilvy & Mather (and reported by James Twitchell in *Adcult USA*),³ 62 percent of us believe in subliminal ads, believe that advertising works through some sort of Cold-War-style conspiracy of subconscious manipulation. We are willing to believe the worst, even when it's not true. We know bad things are happening to our political and social universe; we know that business is colonizing ever larger chunks of American culture; we know that the boss believes "Work is personal" and "Computing is social," even if we don't; and we know that advertising tells lies. We are all sick to death of the consumer culture. We know it's a fraud; we know it's a fake; we know it's all wrong. We all want to resist conformity. We all want to be our own dog.

And yet we do nothing. Congress just gave away another enormous chunk of the broadcast spectrum with only a whisper of dissent.

I want to suggest that our apathy has a very specific relationship to liberation marketing. The market works not only to redefine dissent, but to occupy the niche that dissident voices used to occupy in the American cultural spectrum. Among people who write critically about advertising, there's always been a sense that advertising and politics are somehow negatively connected; that there's an inverse relationship between the prevalence of advertising and America's political apathy. Even Marshall McLuhan pointed this out back in 1947, telling a story of how

an American army officer wrote for Printer's Ink from Italy. He noted with misgiving that Italians could tell you the names of cabinet ministers but not the names of commodities preferred by Italian celebrities. Furthermore, the wall space of Italian cities was given over to political rather than commercial slogans. Finally, he predicted that there was small hope that Italians would ever achieve any sort of domestic prosperity or calm until they began to worry about the rival claims of cornflakes or cigarettes rather than the capacities of public men. In fact, he went so far as to say that democratic freedom very largely consists in ignoring politics and worrying about the means of defeating underarm odor, scaly scalp, hairy legs, dull complexion, unruly hair, borderline anaemia, athlete's foot, and sluggish bowels...⁴

The point that I'm trying to make is not that advertising somehow tricks us into ignoring our problems, but that the culture of consumerism has undergone an enormous change. Dissidence has become a function of the marketplace; existential nausea is becoming just as powerful an element of brand loyalty as the twelve ways in which Wonder-bread built strong bodies ever were. When we talk about nonconformity, we're increasingly talking about those particularly outspoken entrepreneurs who are detailed in Wired magazine; when we talk about breaking the rules, we're talking about the people who stay up all night to work at their firm but listen to alternative rock while doing so. This is a point that Dru makes explicitly: every brand must have an identity, and the most effective identities are found when a brand takes on the trappings of a movement for social justice. Writes Dru:

The great brands of this end of the century are those that have succeeded in conveying their vision by questioning certain conventions, whether it's Apple's humanist vision, which reverses the relationship between people and machines; Benetton's libertarian vision, which overthrows communication conventions; Microsoft's progressive vision, which topples bureaucratic barriers; or Virgin's anticonformist vision, which rebels against the powers that be.⁵

The Body Shop owns compassion, Nike spirituality, Pepsi and MTV youthful rebellion.

With its constant talk of liberation, of radical new officing techniques, the advertising industry is filling a very specific niche in the cultural spectrum of the businessman's republic. As business replaces civil society, advertising is taking over the cultural functions that used to be filled by the left. Dreaming of a better world is now the work of business. We used to have movements for change; now we have products. As American politics become ever more deaf to the idea that the market might not be the best solution for every social problem, the market, bless its invisible heart, is seeing to it that the duties of the left do not go unfilled.

According to the attack on advertising made by the critics of mass society, Madison Avenue was the nerve-center of conformist evil. But while the mass society critique has largely disappeared from the academia where it was first spawned, it has been taken up by none other than its old arch-villain, Madison Avenue, and transformed into a sort of American permacritique. It never goes away, no matter how it is refuted, and no matter how out-of-date its economic appraisal becomes. Advertising will go on telling us that the problem with society is conformity, and that the answer is carnival, as long as there remains a discretionary dollar in the last teenager's allowance. If our famously-fragmented society has anything approaching a master narrative, it's more of a master conflict, like during the Cold War: now we are in constant struggle not with the Communists, but with the puritanical, spirit-crushing, fakeness-pushing power of consumer society; and we resist by dancing, or by watching Madonna videos, or by consorting with more authentic people thanks to our Sport-Utility vehicle, or by celebrating the consumers who do these things.

Daniel Bell once declared that the conflict between the enforced efficiency of the workplace and the hedonistic blow-off of our leisure time was one of capitalism's most devastating "cultural contradictions." But now we know better: the market solves for the market's problems, at least superficially. Criticism of capitalism has become, in a very strange way, capitalism's lifeblood. It's a closed ideological system, within which (at least symbolically) criticism can be addressed and resolved.

If the problems of capitalism are things like lack of authenticity and soul-deadening conformity, well, then capitalism can solve its own problems very effectively, and it has been solving them since the 1960s. If, on the other hand, your idea of capitalism's problems swings more heavily towards social problems like labor practices and improverishment and union-busting, then you're talking about something else altogether. This is a critique that advertising will never embrace. No matter how hard up Reebok gets, it will never use the fact of Nike's Indonesian sweatshops to improve its position; no, it'll just keep talking about how its shoes let U. B. U. Like about thirty other products do.

Not that advertising doesn't try to address concrete social problems. In fact there have been a spate of ads lately in which various get-rich-quick schemes are sold as solutions to unemployment.

Perhaps most egregious is the Pizza Hut commercial that addresses the increasingly undeniable incidence of—gasp—labor discord. Entitled (believe it or not) “Bad Break,” the ad juxtaposes a group of generically angry workers stomping around outside a factory with a group of generically concerned executives. As tension mounts, a truck pulls up and delivers pizza to the striking workers, who drop their picket signs and smile gratefully at the white-collar figures up above. And so, thanks to the management team, a century of labor struggle has been swept away.

So we're back to where we started: the world of business is the world, period. There's nothing outside of it; it's a closed universe. Get as mad as you want, just be sure the pizza trucks are standing by.

Notes

- 1 John Mahoney, an editor at Times Business publishers, quoted in *Newsday*, Sept. 22, 1996, p. F9.
- 2 Jean-Mane Dru, *Disruption: Overturning Conventions and Shaking Up the Marketplace* (New York: John Wiley, 1996), p. 106.
- 3 NY: Columbia University Press, 1996, p. 116.
- 4 Marshall McLuhan, “American Advertising,” in Rosenberg and White, *Mass Culture*, 1957, (NY: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1957) 435.
- 5 Dru, p. 214.