

Reviews

Branding

Naomi Klein, *No Logo, Flamingo*, 490 pp., £8.99

This is a brilliant book about brands – Adidas, Barbie, Body Shop, Calvin Klein, Coca Cola, Disney, Gap, Heineken, Levi, Marlboro, McDonalds, Microsoft, Nike, Pepsi, Reebok, Shell, Starbucks, Virgin, Wal-Mart and many more. It's about how they get us to buy! buy! buy! theirs and only theirs. And how they respond to our resistance. But it's also a book about the sweatshops and destruction of communities and the environment where many of the goods are made. The story that Naomi Klein has to tell is one for the most part of avarice, insensitivity and ruthlessness that makes the exploitation of Victorian employers seem like compassion. But the message is that we are playing the game of the brand makers and if we wish to, we can stop them. More than that, she shows that here and there we are stopping them.

It's an interesting word – branding. It originally meant marking by burning with a hot iron, like the Nike swoosh tattooed on the sportsman's back. It's a mark that is supposed to last. So the brand is not just a product you buy, but becomes part of you; branding is an entry into a new way of life; your shoes and clothes, furnishings and cars give you self-esteem; what you drink reaches to all parts of you. The logo ceases to be just a label, it is a cultural icon. You're not cool unless you have the right gear. So gym shoes and sneakers become trainers. Pizzas and burgers are not a food but an experience. Drinks are not for your thirst but for your ego and your virility. The new car will get you the beautiful girl. Disney's cartoons turn into Disneyland. Shops are restyled as branded villages. And so it goes on. Perhaps it's not all bad. Anita Roddick, founder of the Body Shop, is quoted saying that her 'stores are not about what they sell, they are the conveyors of a grand idea – a political philosophy about women, the environment and ethical business.'

So, it's dangerous territory this; such claims like all the others can easily be ridiculed. People are not all so gullible. Catch them young is the admen's watchword, and Naomi Klein shows example after example of advertising and promotion in schools, of campus agreements on food and drink tenders, on computer installation and above all on sports sponsorship. Everywhere there is the influence of TV, and in 273.5 million households worldwide, we are told, that TV is MTV watched by 85% of US teenagers – 'an all-news bulletin for creating brand images'. Much of the attraction is in the folk heroes who show off the new gear. Famous athletes are paid vast sums to appear in the latest shoes or sports kit, thousands of times more than the women making the goods. When ridicule and opposition get too strong, the brand response is to accept the criticism and turn it round, as in jujitsu. It's cool to wear your jeans torn and faded; ok, we'll make them like that. They want diversity; we'll give it them. 'You can beat a brand to death' some critics say. So they extend the product range and the reach.

The political as political

Naomi Klein is engagingly self-critical about her years as a feminist against porn, as a champion of blacks and defender of gays and lesbians, fighting for

their recognition on the campus, in the work place, in the media, when all the time, she says, 'the 'personal as political' had come to replace the economic as political and, in the end, the political as political as well.' What she realised in the 1990s was that the admen found her and her friends interesting. The search for identity among the excluded in the 'identity politics' of the time could be worked on for street styles, edgy music, colourful pix in the ads, and for exploiting a new way out of social exclusion. A market for diversity could be widened from the white middle classes to poor blacks and Latinos in the US and out beyond that to Asia and Africa and the Americas.

The real tragedy opening out in front of the young Naomi Kleins was that everywhere in the world poor parents and whole families were scrimping and saving so that the kids could have the latest in T shirts, jeans and trainers and a Sony personal CD player. 'They prefer Coke to tea, Nikes to sandals, Chicken McNuggets to rice, credit cards to cash', as a senior US economist, Joseph Quinlan, was writing in the *Wall Street Journal* by 1997. The media grabbed stories of selling drugs, stealing and mugging to buy what came to be called 'disposable status wear', but, as Naomi Klein discovered, it was generally mother's minimum wage or welfare check that was going on buying the \$150 Air Jordans.

Beneath this development of branding into new products and new regions, two further threats were emerging to weaken American society and by extension others too. The first was that the power of the big brand companies to influence educational institutions and even governments was growing. Grants of money from these companies for hard pressed universities, schools, colleges, even states had become of great importance. Any criticism of this role could endanger staff tenure. Teaching and research increasingly followed lines which would not offend the donors. This became all the more important as the second threat emerged. This was the threat to American jobs. To supply the new mass markets, and to maintain the mass advertising that they implied, production costs had to be held down. More and more of the actual production of branded goods was transferred to Asia and Latin America.

Cheap labour in the Third World could be combined with advanced machinery and computer controlled designs to undercut any producer in the United States. Even that was not enough. The young women employed had to work for long hours in appalling conditions as well as for starvation wages, and submit to sexual harassment, as the production processes were sub-contracted to local employers enriching themselves without local regulation. Export Processing Zones were promoted as steps towards the real economic development of poor countries. It hasn't happened. They didn't build factories there but only what a Philippine economist called 'labor warehouses'. And, if there was 'trouble', like swallows they flew away.

Sweatshop production in the mass markets for consumer goods began to be revealed early in the 1980s, but it took ten years for a movement of protest to grow worldwide to the point of the Seattle demonstration at the World Trade Organisation meeting in 1999. This mass gathering brought together student radicals rejecting their

teachers, trade unions whose members had seen their jobs taken away, and concerned consumers wishing to be able to wear clothes and eat food that had not been produced under inhuman conditions. Seattle was the climax of what Steven Greenhouse in *The New York Times* in March, 1998 is quoted by Naomi Klein as calling ‘the biggest surge in campus activism in nearly two decades’. ‘At Duke, Georgetown, Wisconsin, North Carolina, Arizona, Michigan, Princeton, Stanford, Harvard, Brown, Cornell and University of California at Berkeley’, she reports, ‘there were conferences, teach-ins, protests and sit-ins – some lasting three or four days.’

The gathering wave of protest

Naomi Klein ends on an optimistic note as she acclaims the gathering wave of protest against sweatshop manufacturing. The protesting crowds in Prague, in Nice, at Davos and wherever the rich and powerful meet to decide our fate, suggest that her hope is not misplaced. Her chapter on ‘Reclaiming the Streets’, however, reveals that there is a mindless violence in some elements of these crowds that is understandable enough, but will hardly widen their support. The best hope lies in the opening up of connections worldwide through the internet. Naomi Klein quotes information about Nike flowing ‘freely via e-mail between the US National Labor Committee and Campaign for Labor Rights; the Dutch-based Clean Clothes Campaign; the Australian Footwear Campaign; the Hong Kong-based Asian Monitoring and Resource Centre; the British Labour Behind the Label Coalition and Christian Aid; the French *Agir Ici* and *Artisans du Monde*; the German *Werkstatt Oekonomie*; the Belgian *Les Magasins du Monde*; the Canadian Maquila Solidarity Network – to name but a few of the players.’

There is still, however, a lack of an alternative on offer. What shoes and clothes and electronic equipment are *not* made with sweatshop labour? It would be good if the big brands would permit the workers who make their products to organise and thus to raise their wages and improve their conditions. But such a possibility seems remote. It would be good if some manufacturing industry was retained in the industrially developed countries, but such a possibility seems even more remote. The way forward through fair trade which has been pioneered with coffee and tea and chocolate is easier to establish with such primary commodities from the cooperatives of small-scale farmers than it is with goods from large scale manufacturing. But it is a way forward. As more consumers come to reject the output of the sweatshops as well as the products of plantation exploitation, the alternative will become more realisable. Producers and consumers will unite against their common enemy.

Michael Barratt Brown

The Last of Old Labour

Brian Brivati, *Guiding Light: The collected speeches of John Smith, Politico's*, 287 pp. £18.99

John Smith came into Parliament in June 1970, and made his maiden speech in

November. It was on family income, and made comparisons between the Speenhamland regime, and the Heath Government's policy on poor relief. The intervention was short, and to the point. As his editor says, it passed off 'successfully without making any discernible impact'.

Brivati has read through a million not dissimilar words in order to distil this book, and he succeeds in showing us a far more complex figure than that of mythology, which sees Smith only as 'a safe pair of hands', or a dependable right-winger.

Brivati succeeds in showing us a far more complex figure, committed to radical action in a number of fields. Although he was identified with the centre right, Smith had worked harmoniously with Tony Benn at the Department of Energy, and with Michael Foot at the Department of Employment. Foot had steered through the repeal of Edward Heath's legislation on industrial relations, so that Smith needed close and effective liaison with the trade unions. There does not appear to be any sign of friction during the course of this task. The centre right in the days before Tony Blair was sternly Old Labour. It understood the unions not only as power bases, but also with sympathy for their social objectives. Where it showed impatience this was frequently more to do with union conservatism than with any notion of trade union excess.

Brivati quotes an interview with David Frost on Clause IV:

David Frost Clause 4 – going through the various areas where people want to know answers – Clause 4, are you going to repeal Clause 4?

John Smith Well I don't think that's the heart of the matter actually, I think the important thing is the practical policies which the Labour Party will bring forward. We are a party of the mixed economy, we've always been a party of the mixed economy ...

David Frost Well why keep Clause 4?

John Smith Well I don't think there's any great point in arguing about theology, I'm fairly relaxed about that. What I'm concerned about is ...

David Frost Don't tell me you're a local pastor, worrying about, talking about theology ...

John Smith Well I'm using it strictly in the sense of party politics in the sense, but you're quite right in the sense, one shouldn't be disparaging about theology at all and let me take that back, I apologise to theologians everywhere. But I believe the number of tasks we've got to do; let me just give three areas of policy which I'm very committed to ...

David Frost Yes alright, you do that ... I think you're underestimating the degree to which, though Clause 4 may not be, may not be a dead letter in your mind but it's a litmus test for people out there. Do they mean what they're saying, do they mean to modernise – why are they keeping that? I think it's a litmus test.

John Smith Well I've never heard anybody on the doorsteps, certainly not a wavering voter saying to me 'what about Clause 4?' Have you tidied that up yet? ... I don't really think that is where the matter ...'

With hindsight, we can see that Clause IV, 'theological' or not, served as a ratchet on public policy. It was Clause IV which made it possible for Tony Benn to think about 'the fundamental and irreversible shift in the balance of income and power'. The removal of Clause IV said plainly that in the fields of public ownership, enterprise, and service, anything was reversible. Anything (everything?) goes. It was all up for sale.

For this reason, Smith's speeches, cautious and moderate though they undoubtedly are, are light years removed from the actions of the Blair Government.

Brivati thinks that

'He might not have liked elements of the style of this Government; he would not have bought into the importance attached to the packaging and he would have been less interested in the way New Labour sometimes follows fashions, especially in the media, but he would have approved of the substance, content and consistency of purpose that the Blair government has so far demonstrated on the issues which mattered most to him: education, employment, health and, yes, the creation of an optimistic democracy.'

But, an impartial reader of the gospel according to John Smith would think that this is all far too kind. Consider Smith's judgement of what he called 'The Thatcher experiment' ...

'Not only do we have the economic waste of unemployment, we have an industrial economy which is smaller, receives less investment, produces less output, and has the most adverse – and deteriorating – balance of trade in our modern economic history. Even worse ... the technological base of British industry is disturbingly weak. We simply are not developing the new products and processes which can alone pioneer new industries for the future...'

In every one of these areas, Blair has equalled and surpassed the achievements of the Thatcher experiment. What was Smith's remedy?

'I join battle with enthusiasm with those on the right who believe that the only way is through unrestricted market forces and that the role of the State is minor.'

That is why Smith gave us speeches on the theme 'The Market is not Enough'. Gordon Brown may well examine other of Smith's dicta with some interest:

'The constitutional position of the Bank of England in relation to the Government is satisfactory at the moment. I see no reason why that should be changed. A wide range of powers is available to the Chancellor of the Exchequer and no Chancellor should willingly give them up. He certainly should not contemplate handing over power over key economic monetary issues to bankers who are not accountable to the British people.'

Did then, Smith establish the lines subsequently followed by New Labour in its priority areas?

The Blair administration has not even marginally advanced the education or health services, spending less than the Major administration in its concluding years. But it has begun a plague of initiatives to privatise schools and hospitals, mortgaging the

education and health services for years to come. Its employment policies have certainly been hyped to the high heavens, but they have been far removed from those of their predecessor. And the 'optimistic democracy' which we have evolved is about to reveal the highest rate of abstention/disgust seen in recent times.

Brivati thinks that the Blair administration has given Britain a stable economy: but Blair's continuation of the politics of Thatcherism have actually continued to undermine manufacturing, and to run up immense imbalances of trade and payments. Meantime, the rail system remains dangerous in the extreme, and has intermittently to close down altogether. The same dispensation is about to be extended to the London Underground. When the plague of foot and mouth hit British agriculture, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, deployed almost half as many vets as its forerunner in 1967, at the time of the last epidemic. Those public services which could not be sold had commonly been closed.

No, if Smith today offers us any guiding light, it can help illuminate the values of the past. Any possibility of a different future will depend on whether his Party can recover from the invasion which has subdued it, or whether it can be reinvented.

Ken Coates

The Politics of Corruption

Robert Williams et al, Four volume set, *Edward Elgar*, 2448 pp. Hardback £530.00

An extraordinarily broadly drawn collection of essays and analyses is combined in these four heavy volumes, to offer a remarkable overview of the politics of corruption, North and South, East and West. The interaction between private and corporate wealth, and the public power has always been prone to generate some tendencies to corruption. The evolution of neo-liberalism has opened a wide area of new possibilities in this field. Robert Williams and his colleagues have explored much of the literature of the last three decades, from a wide variety of academic disciplines.

Their four volumes are grouped as follows: the first, edited by Williams himself, seeks to provide an overview and explanation, featuring papers on the theory of corruption and its victims under different political systems. The second volume, under the aegis of Professor Williams and Professor Theobald, concentrates on the phenomenon of corruption in the developing world, and ranges over Latin America, Africa and Asia. There are two papers on corruption in the Peoples Republic of China, but otherwise the volume draws its evidence from former colonial territories.

A third volume, compiled with the help of Jonathan Moran and Rachel Flanary, covers corruption in the developed world, and the development of clientilism and organised crime. There are four chapters on different aspects of the problem in the United States, and twice as many on West European

corruption. But corruption in Italy is the subject of four further papers, which are, perhaps misleadingly, separated from the area of Western Europe, and grouped under the heading of Southern Europe.

Britain provides a case study on the corruption of British politics and public service, and a further essay on lobbyists. There are three papers on Russian corruption, drawn from a rich field which might easily have generated a volume of its own.

The final volume, edited jointly with Professor Doig, concerns the remedies for corruption, from codes of conduct through to legal sanctions. The oldest study in the book dates from 1961, and concerns the theorism of the experience of corruption in former British West Africa. A number of other studies date only from 1999, so that these volumes contain a good deal of strictly contemporary material.

This is a timely collection, unfortunately: and there is a great deal of evidence that it will need to be updated from a rich seam of new materials, before very long.

Meantime, these volumes belong in every decent library of political science and economic development.

James Smith

E=mc²

David Bodanis, *E=mc² A Biography of the World's Most Famous Equation*, Macmillan, 2000, 324pp, £14.99

David Bodanis's book gives a very readable and comprehensive background to the famous equation $E=mc^2$. At the same time, it provides an accessible account of radioactivity and radiation. The author explains how the universe is full of radiation, and also why the Earth should not be. Radioactivity occurs naturally. But, since 1945, the sometimes reckless contributions of human beings have led to radiation catastrophes. These include high level radiation incidents such as the A bombs and Chernobyl, but also the low level incidence of radiation such as that demonstrated by the radioactivity of post-1945 steel. The author also explains the dangers associated with uranium and plutonium, which is especially topical during the current scandal concerning depleted uranium.

Pamela White

The Great Sell-Out

Dexter Whitfield, *Public Services or Corporate Welfare*, Pluto Press, 2001, pp.314

Dexter Whitfield is the founder of the Centre for Public Services which has for 30 years been developing strategies for trade unions and local communities in the

UK and many other countries including Australia, New Zealand and the USA. On the basis of this wide experience he has now written what must become the basic text for all those concerned with the takeover by capital of the welfare state as we have seen this unfolding through the neo-liberal economic onslaught and the so-called Third Way reforms. The book provides detailed statistical and documentary evidence of the whole process of what Whitfield calls Corporate Welfare taking over from the universal provision of the Welfare State. If you want to find the facts of what has been going on, you will find them here, all carefully referenced and simply and easily explained for the general reader as well as for those more expert in this field.

This book is, however, more than a textbook of the current development of the welfare state. Its sub-title is *Rethinking the Nation State in the Global Economy*, and the study of the translation of welfare from the state to corporate control is set in a world-wide perspective. Whitfield is careful not to suggest that the state is disappearing under the onslaught of capital, but that it is being transformed in a new partnership of state and capital in which capital becomes increasingly the dominant partner. Collectivity is replaced by individual responsibility and welfare is narrowed down to benefits for the needy and excluded in place of universal public provision. Whitfield shows how great is the loss, but also what can still be done to save what has been built up in social solidarity over the years.

MBB

E. P. Thompson

Dorothy Thompson (Ed.), *The Essential E. P. Thompson*, Merlin, 498 pp. £15.95

This anthology from the writings of Edward Thompson will whet the appetites of new students, and warm the hearts of many far older students (and agitators), who came under the great man's spell. Dorothy Thompson must have found it very difficult to make the choices embodied in this book: but it must be said that they are good choices, and they will rekindle our awareness of the breadth of Edward's vision, and the purity of his commitment.

Four extracts from *The Making of the English Working Class* start the book with a bang, and lead it on through a treatment of Mary Wollstonecraft to excerpts from William Morris. This section of the work is given the title 'Politics and Culture', and to emphasise this view, it concludes with an excerpt from Thompson's study of the relationship between Edward Thompson the elder, and Rabindranath Tagore. The second and third sections concern Law and Custom, and History and Theory. They are capped off by two items on the reading and writing of history.

Dorothy Thompson has done her husband proud, and this book will ensure that new generations of admirers will swell the ranks of the old.

KC