

No Logo Book Report

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Discussion of *No Logo* by Naomi Klein

What are the strengths and weaknesses of the book?

Naomi Klein's *No Logo* is a strong journalistic inquiry into the history of branding through the mid- to late-twentieth century. The book takes a systems perspective, helping the reader make connections between seemingly disparate symptoms and global impacts of the expansion of mega brands. At the same time, it is important to note that the book takes a primarily US and Canadian-centric view, leaving the reader wondering about both the approaches of non-US based corporations and the impacts on cultures outside of countries where manufacturing has been outsourced. Also, while a forward adds new perspective from the ten years following the initial 1999 publication, the book is at times dated in its examples (e.g. referencing the impact of corporations like Blockbuster and Borders who have long ago gone out of business) and can leave the reader wondering about what impact the globalization and innovation seen in the 21st century has had on brands - as well as how brands have played a role in shaping the last twenty years.

What "spoke" to you?

The personal impact: As readers, it is easy to see how we may have been both willing and unwitting participants in the rise of brands that Klein describes. From the clothes we wear that are emblazoned with logos, to the sporting professionals we hold as personal heroes, we literally buy-in to the corporate brand strategies. We see brands everywhere, peppering neighborhoods and public spaces in both subtle and overt ways. Interestingly enough, one member of our book club worked in branding at an ad agency during their career where their focus was on helping organizations be authentic and live up to their brands, with a special focus on how the customer and company co-create the brand. There was a resonance between the personal experience of working in branding with Klein's descriptions of the motivations that drove many of the corporations in the book.

The duality of brands: So much seemingly positive innovation has stemmed from a move away from focusing on marketing products and towards marketing the brand. At the same time the rise of brands has led to the continued erosion of human rights and has had potentially irreversible effects on the environment. This creates a cognitive dissonance once one understands some other connected impacts the shift to brand marketing represents for the connected economic system.

The need for constant regeneration: Brands must continuously grow and regenerate, otherwise they die. A particularly poignant anecdote is shared of Levi Strauss, going from being the "coolest brand" around to an alarming slip in sale through complacency in their marketing strategies with competitors moving well ahead. Hence to survive, brands must spend large amounts of capital to be highly visible in almost every area of society to constantly connect with customers.

The collusion of corporations and countries: Klein discusses how multinational corporations have exerted influence on and been courted by a number of countries through foreign and economic policy. For example, multinational companies have outsourced manufacturing with devastating consequences on workers and taken advantage of “Export Processing Zones” that unfairly leverage workers by eliminating wages, labor laws, and union rights. While governments extend temporary economic incentives to corporations with the hope they will invest in building permanent infrastructure and thus fuel economic growth, Klein points out that these hopes are not being met as corporations instead build temporary structures that allow them to move their entire operation to a new site with only a handful of trucks.

What frustrated you?

In reading the book, we found ourselves frustrated by the real world impacts and consequences of branding and global corporatism that Klein describes.

Real world consequences: The consequences that systematic decisions have on real human beings elicited significant frustration for our group. Global corporatism results in primary companies viewing contract laborers as mere financial tools, and discounts human dignity in the process. Human experience is abstracted into an economic system that serves to completely hide reality. We feel that the exploitation of humanity cannot be justified under the guise of free-market principles such as externalization and minimization of costs to maximize profits.

We also experienced some frustration with regard to the book itself and the author’s approach, such as:

A revolution that never happens: Though there was some effort to provide scale and perspective, at times we felt that Klein was implying that an anti-branding revolution was imminent. Of course we now know, 15 years later, that no such major change was in the works.

The author bullying the brands: The author’s constant, insistent harping on Nike, and “the swoosh” mark in particular, sometimes felt snarky, excessive, and unnecessary, and made her seem somewhat less credible to some of us.

Consumers as victims: We felt that Klein often paints consumers as spineless, mindless victims of brand bullies. We had mixed feelings about this. To be clear, global citizens impacted by brand are spread across a broad spectrum of purchasing ability. Not all have the financial means to be consumers, and might be taken advantage of by the corporations. Additionally, many consumers at that time were likely not aware of sweatshops and abusive labor practices exposed by the book, and in that way, many of the author’s assertions are helpful.

That said, some of us believe that unhappy *paying* customers are not held hostage, and that they can ultimately “vote with their feet” by going elsewhere. The customer, after all, actively co-creates the brand by what they do, say, feel, self-promote to others, and purchase. Klein, herself, eventually articulates toward the end of the book that consumers hold a lot of power—even those with little to no income.

What’s the motivation? Finally, we were disappointed that the author didn’t spend more time describing “the why” or the motivation behind these global forces at work. For example, why is branding so powerful, and what human desires does it tap into? What about money, power and greed? Klein never

seems to state the obvious. While this understatement might be intentional, we found it frustrating as readers.

What excited you?

Learning about the history of advertising and branding, seeing the corresponding shifts in the business world, along with the impacts and results--both positive and negative, excited us. We feel that this insight deepens our global CQ and equips us as OD practitioners to better relate to our clients around the world. Other aspects that excited us include:

- Reading and understanding more about the interconnectedness of several trends in the world such as the connection between business strategy and the impact on workers in the global labor pool.
- Insights around branding, tactics and strategies utilized in the business world, as well as the creativity evident in many of the campaigns described by the author.
- Branding's ability to tap into what is already out there. We found beauty in thinking about how young people are such an important element in figuring out brand strategy, such as marketers approaching groups of kids, watching what students are wearing, and so on. At the same time, it's important to recognize that as brands have sought to commercialize urban culture, their efforts have not led to increased integration--and potentially served to create even more divides in Western society.

What is the primary message of the book?

Since the 1980's, the influence of brands has grown tremendously on an international scale, resulting in a massive increase in the power, extent, and prevalence of brand presence that leaves little in the public sphere untouched. The global corporate motivation behind this growth in branding is systematically destructive in its internationalism, with a focus on symbolism over substance, and profit and greed over human dignity and wellbeing. This effect is mirrored throughout the U.S. government's systematic march toward global domination, as well as its unwillingness to regulate global business sectors. The veneer of "cool" heralded by logos, exploitative branding, and entertainment in places from Times Square to MTV hides a complex web of irresponsible trade practices that impact global finance and human lives. To save democracy and our planet, we must heed the author's warning and join the social movements that will set us all free.

What are the secondary messages? What is it "between the lines" that you pick up from the book?

The secondary messages that we picked up from the book include:

- **Shifting values:** Branding replaces inherent value with empty efforts at manipulation and corruption of said value. For example, while previous ad campaigns played to the value of American manufacturing, most mega brands now outsource all production.
- **The potential groundwork for ethical corporate behavior:** The business trend for corporations to focus on branding over production also contains the tool for good corporate behavior: besmirching

that brand with the actual behavior of the company. In other words, the lifestyle brands must actually live the lifestyle they proclaim.

- **Role of consumers:** Brands awaken the longing within people for something bigger than themselves, but seldom fulfill it. Social movements pick up where brands leave off.
- **Censorship in education and the arts:** The powers of brands has led to censorship, such as Blockbuster censoring the content of movies, and Walmart demanding censored music, both of which have led to artists having to create art that aligns with censorship standards. Textbooks feature branded products, and campuses are being sponsored by corporations, preventing free speech and protests against those brands.
- **Role of brands in poverty cycle:** Examples include the exploitation of urban culture in the fashion industry or the refusal to pay \$0.87 per hour—the living wage for parts of China in the 1990s—to workers in manufacturing plants. Also, the refusal of corporations to hire permanent or full-time workers has played a role in the erosion of the middle class. Although some workers—such as those in the tech industry—may choose to operate as freelancers, corporations have hid behind this idea as they increased their profits at the expense of their workers through systematically denying benefits and livable wages and undercutting the right to organize.

In what ways do you expect to see these issues manifest during the session? Generate a list of things you might look for during the week in China.

Western brands in an eastern world: There are many possibilities for how aspects of *No Logo* might show up in China. On the one hand, we will likely encounter some Western brands that we are familiar with in China and it will be interesting to see how similar they are to the versions we know. Additionally, observing how locals feel about these brands could also be educational. Klein makes a point about how in China there are instances of four grandparents and two parents all using their financial capital to buy branded products for their one young child, even though they might be living in relative poverty.

Branding in China: Explicit government censorship in China, along with the country's known propensity to copy and imitate brands will likely result in a different brand landscape. It will be interesting to compare what we see in China to what we've experienced in other countries.

What are the impacts of outsourcing on China: A possible window on the world *No Logo* describes might be detectable if we find the flip side of the trends towards outsourcing that she describes companies as utilizing while they focus strictly on brand management. The outsourcing of manufacturing and production has to go somewhere and perhaps we will find a trace of it or an image of it during our time in China. If global companies are practicing outsourcing to China, then what is the business model that the contract manufacturers are following? What impact does this have on trans-org systems, if any?

Self-as-Instrument, personal values and the global consumerist paradox: The way business is done in China may present challenges to our own values systems. Whether we are considering our expectations of China's overt copyright violations, bribery, government censorship, or workers' human rights in factories that play a significant role in US companies' supply chains; there are likely elements of our client work in China that could present a new paradigm for business and work.

Additionally, from a CQ perspective, how will we maintain awareness of our North American biases and values regarding labor practices, censorship and intellectual property theft and take care in our conversations with clients? And how might we reconcile our personal beliefs and values as OD

practitioners with a business culture different than our own, while recognizing that U.S. multinational companies and our consumerism in America have played a significant part in shaping that culture?

How would your author react to the 2 videos you watched?

Video 1, *Ron Finley - Guerilla Gardener in South Central LA*:

Naomi Klein would not be surprised by Ron Finley's plight in South Central LA, especially with regard to the predominance of fast food chains amid what Finley's terms "a food desert." As Klein describes her view of modern business, only wealthy neighborhoods get unique, local, or boutique businesses, and poorer neighborhoods tend to be dominated by cookie-cutter franchises or chains. Furthermore, she would expect that these businesses in less fortunate neighborhoods would offer less healthy foods because in Klein's experience, efforts to standardize or reduce costs in search of profits is the norm for corporate brands. In addition, she would not be surprised to hear that the city initially came out in opposition of Finley's efforts, as Klein notes that cities or other institutions such as school boards usually align with corporate interests, rather than the public good.

We believe that the author would wholeheartedly support Ron in asserting his own interests and advocating for the needs of the community. She would appreciate his innovation and tenacity. She is a social movement activist, after all. Klein would no doubt applaud Finley for sticking to his beliefs in the face of an arrest warrant. We would like to believe that, as a journalist, Klein would join Finley in protesting the city's ironic attempt to deny volunteer efforts to create an oasis in a food desert, especially in the name of policing sidewalk easements and vacant lots.

Video 2, *Mike Rowe - Learning from Dirty Jobs*:

We believe that, in some ways, Naomi Klein might bristle at the premise of Mike Rowe's Ted Talk. She might say that his aggrandizement of work, and his honoring of manual labor could potentially serve as whitewash for the demeaning labor practices that global corporations consistently try to justify in an effort to standardize and reduce costs.

However, Klein might also find that the local, skilled crafts that Rowe highlights, offer a hopeful, shining contrast to the mass production of global corporatism. Klein would similarly honor the individuals who work hard as Rowe does. Rowe's admission of so frequently "getting it wrong" and operating on incorrect assumptions, might be refreshing for Klein, especially when compared to her perception of global corporate greed. We also believe that Klein would appreciate Rowe's storytelling talent, especially with regard to Rowe's skillful presentation to TED's Silicon Valley elite regarding how "imitation is necessary for innovation."

Agreement regarding individual contribution. Statement that everyone contributed to the dialog and the document.

Judy, Sammi, and Mike met to plan our project. Jeff created the structure for this document. All four contributed their comments to the structure of the document. All four met to discuss our findings and our write-up and collectively combined and edited it all together simultaneously into its final form.