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BOOK REVIEW

NO LOGO

NAOMI KLEIN, *NO LOGO: TAKING AIM AT THE BRAND BULLIES*. New York: Picador, 1999. viii + 490 pp.

*Reviewed by Robert Howse**

This best-selling book has become a manifesto of the anti-globalization movement, and is essential reading for anyone seeking to understand the movement's sensibility, strategy, and tactics.

Klein identifies the dominance of consumer markets and common cultural space in developed country economies by a small group of multinational corporations through "branding" as the decisive economic, social, and political phenomenon of our times. In *NO LOGO* this phenomenon is linked to a wide range of ills and injustices—from sweat shops in third world countries to the decline of community and public spaces in the developed world to the relative impotence of governments to advance social justice everywhere—and even to the increasing prevalence of contingent, temporary employment in advanced economies.

Klein is a shrewd observer of the contemporary world, and she writes eloquently. Unfortunately, she lacks the analytical tools that would be required to connect these phenomena in a rigorous fashion. But as Klein herself suggests, early on in the book, her main aim is not to paint an adequate picture of the ills of the contemporary globalized economy but to understand and advocate the means for opposing these ills. In so doing, she reveals a great deal about the people one often sees in anti-globalization or anti-WTO protests, for example, and also provides significant insight into why their groups are increasingly commanding public attention.

Since Klein is generally understood as a left wing critic of capitalism, when one reads *NO LOGO* carefully it comes as something of a surprise that she begins the book with a blistering critique of the "cultural politics" of the left wing environment in which she came of age, where progressive people seemed obsessed with issues related to image and lifestyle, while relatively unconcerned with real oppression and class politics. Klein actually places significant blame on the cultural left for contributing to the ascendancy of the "brands," which multinational corporations easily adapted to politically correct sensitivities, for example, by featuring ethnically diverse models or slogans about gender equality

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in their ads. Klein seems to suggest that the corporations understood all too well the extent to which political correctness is really about image.

The complexity of the situation is suggested by Klein's important insight that globalization has itself given the movement the characteristic tools it uses for effective activism—the Internet, and other information technologies that transmit information about working conditions in the third world to activists in the first in real time. The very visibility of the global “brands” has allowed activists to make consumers feel responsible for sweatshops in the third world when they buy products in their own communities. As Klein notes, resistance to globalization is itself transnational. Thus, Klein displays a dimension of the globalization movement that is not nationalist, protectionist, or parochial, i.e. not about any kind of longing to re-establish the primacy of the domestic or national over the global. To me, once one recognizes that this is an important strain of the anti-globalization movement, one sees that even the name “anti-globalization” itself is misleading—to an important extent the movement is not so much opposed to globalization per se as it is opposed to the pre-eminent role of multinational corporations in setting globalization's terms and conditions. Here, Klein and the movement with which she associates herself have a much too simplistic view of the multinational firm—as a monolith capable of seamlessly coordinated action on a global scale, if not a step ahead of governments than at least able to avoid being brought to heel by them.¹ Be that as it may, it becomes apparent that—for all the interest in alternative communities and lifestyles, exorbitant body piercings and tattoos, and other distinguishing marks of apparent radicalism—what the anti-globalization movement that Klein evokes is really up to, by and large, is simply trying to create, in contemporary global economic conditions, the kinds of checks and balances on capitalism and its supposed excesses that national governments and trade unions were able to offer in the past.

Klein certainly doesn't propose any alternative form of social and economic organization to that of the market economy. Despite the occasional Marxist flourish in her rhetoric, what she seems to regret most is the passing of an era where effective unions enabled working people in the developed world to make a relatively secure and decent living in factories and shops, and where (she suggests, however plausibly) corporations themselves demonstrated a greater sense of social responsibility and less rank profit-seeking egoism. As for sweatshops and economic oppression in the third world, she wisely avoids asserting that

1. On the inaccuracy of such a view, see PAUL N. DOREMUS ET AL., *THE MYTH OF THE GLOBAL CORPORATION* (1998).

there was any “golden era” for workers in the developing world prior to the arrival of multinationals and export processing zones.

The most striking feature of Klein’s intellectual universe is how little room there is in it for government. She is largely dismissive of electoral politics as a means of reform, and she discusses her movement’s disappointment that even social democratic governments seem to be preaching the gospel of corporate-driven globalization. She makes the larger (and mostly unsupported) claim that governments themselves have become impotent before multinationals, unable to control their behavior. Yet she believes that where governments have failed or would be doomed to fail, transnational civil society’s means of resistance will succeed. These are the tools of shaming, boycotts, and peaceful (albeit intentionally disruptive) public protest (admittedly, she also advocates using courts to hold corporations responsible for their wrongful acts, such as environmental harm). In other words, largely voluntarism.

Oddly enough, Jagdish Bhagwati and other traditional pro-globalization economists (who are blistering in their comments about the anti-globalization movement) aren’t really opposed to voluntarist approaches to issues like labor and environmental standards.² Their criticism of the anti-globalization crowd derives instead from the view that the latter is mostly interested in pressing governments to be protectionist, or to impose various kinds of trade or other economic sanctions on developing countries. Yet as the World Bank and other pro-market institutions are increasingly recognizing the importance of “governance” to development and social equity, the anti-globalization movement (at least as defended by Klein) appears to be giving up on government altogether. Democracy, though, can’t be reduced to community activism, whether at a local or transnational level. Klein and her supporters have their reasons for being frustrated by governments and the way they act when they negotiate in fora like the WTO and the IMF, some of which are understandable. But saying farewell to the political with neither a clear analysis of what ails the political process in the mature liberal democracies, nor an inquiry into the prospects for politics in newly democratizing countries, is a lazy cop-out. Street protests, as she suggests, are fun—something like a party—and boycotts aren’t really that painful, but rather are a way of showing one’s moral superiority and “coolness.” Real politics are tough and demanding on the human soul. But I for one would not rest easily with an outcome where battles and bargains between corporate executives and street protesters decide the fates of third world societies and the distribution of global resources.

2. See, e.g., Jagdish Bhagwati, *Afterword: The Question of Linkage*, 96 AM. J. INT’L L. 126 (2002).