

# BLUEPRINT FOR

A CRITIQUE OF THE POLITICS OF ANTI-CONSUMERISM, 'NEME

THE REVOLUTION WILL NOT BE RIGHT BACK AFTER A MESSAGE  
ABOUT A WHITE TORNADO, WHITE LIGHTNING, OR WHITE PEOPLE.  
YOU WILL NOT HAVE TO WORRY ABOUT A DOVE IN YOUR  
BEDROOM, A TIGER IN YOUR TANK, OR THE GIANT IN YOUR TOILET BOWL.  
THE REVOLUTION WILL NOT GO BETTER WITH COKE.  
THE REVOLUTION WILL NOT FIGHT THE GERMS THAT MAY CAUSE BAD BREATH.  
THE REVOLUTION WILL PUT YOU IN THE DRIVER'S SEAT.

THE REVOLUTION WILL NOT BE TELEVISED, WILL NOT BE TELEVISED,  
WILL NOT BE TELEVISED, WILL NOT BE TELEVISED.  
THE REVOLUTION WILL BE NO RE-RUN BROTHERS;  
THE REVOLUTION WILL BE LIVE.

-GIL SCOTT-HERON THE REVOLUTION WILL NOT BE TELEVISED 1974.

currency of *Adbusters* magazine and the promotion of its "new" ideology of "anti-consumerism".

Arguing that we have reached new limits in terms of the corporate commodification of all aspects of our lives, *Adbusters* has published very important social criticisms of the tight media control exercised by corporations and the decadence of Western consumer society. But unfortunately, while denouncing the excesses of consumer capitalism, the social criticism and political activism of *Adbusters* has fallen far short of the kind of penetrating vision and struggle

based politics needed to challenge the status quo and to build mass movements of resistance to corporatism.

In recent issues of their magazine, *Adbusters* seems to have made some moves to recognize the importance of "revolutionary politics" to change the world. Perhaps goaded on by the Asian economic crisis and the near revolutionary situation in Indonesia, the Fall 1998 issue of *Adbusters* magazine is

Last week on Nov 27th, our university campus saw the staging of a campaign for 'Buy Nothing Day', a campaign sponsored by *Adbusters*, a publication of the Media Foundation. For many on the left, the Media Foundation, it's quarterly publication *Adbusters*, and it's campaigns around 'International Buy Nothing Day' and 'TV Turnoff Week' are basically where it's at in terms of resistance to the corporate takeover of our society. Indeed, the last several years have seen great improvements in terms of the slickness, circulation and political



# REFORMISM:

WARFARE' AND 'CULTURE JAMMING' IN ADBUSTERS MAGAZINE.

BY TOM KEEFER

## Adbusters

CULTURE JAMMERS HEADQUARTERS

entitled "Blueprint for a Revolution" and is filled with "revolutionary" prescriptions for social change.

Yet despite adapting revolutionary rhetoric and repackaging glossy pictures of Indonesian student protests, the liberal politics of *Adbusters* have come shining through as exemplified by their near total contempt of the power of ordinary people create revolutionary change. There are three main parts to the analysis that has led *Adbusters* to this political dead end: their privileging of resistance in the individual act of consumption over the collective organization of production, their view of revolution as consisting of a purely subjective and highly individualized 'mindshift', and their insistence that the "revolution" will be made on behalf of the masses by a small group of "culture jammers".

One of *Adbusters*'s main responses to the corporatization of our planet and the rapid destruction of the life-giving resources of the natural world has been to call for people to abstain from consuming. Hence, a major part of *Adbusters*' "radical" activism has been the organizing of an "International Buy Nothing Day" to serve as a "moratorium on consumer spending" which could bring capitalism to its knees. The power of this day, *Adbusters* explains, is that several hundred activists are taking anti-corporate messages to the streets and malls of North America and Europe, and that an "estimated one million people world wide fail to consume".

Now, I don't doubt the sincerity of the folks or-

ganizing Buy Nothing Day, but the idea that this day is somehow "radical" and "revolutionary" needs some serious examining. For most of this century and the last, we've had what are in effect, countless "Buy Nothing Days" that have involved hundreds of millions of people, but which have left capitalism untouched. These Buy Nothing Days are called 'Sundays', and although they happen every week who could seriously claim that they bring the revolution any closer?

Another problem of the politics of "Buy Nothing Day", is that it appeals primarily to the affluent sons and daughters of the middle classes who seek to assuage their liberal guilt by not throwing away their money that day. Other than rubbing

middle class privilege into the faces of the poor and downtrodden for whom "buy nothing days" aren't exactly causes of celebration, *Adbusters* ignores the crucial fact that power in any society comes from the point of production- where society is constantly being created and re-created.

Capitalist production disciplines, unites and organizes an ever increasing number of workers from all races, genders, sexualities, and nationalities, and by its increasingly irrational manner makes obvious how much we need a democratically planned and free society. Capitalist consumption on the other hand, individualizes, divides, and isolates working people, all the time reinforcing the oppressive values of the status quo.

"... ADBUSTERS SEEMS TO HAVE MADE SOME MOVES TO RECOGNIZE THE IMPORTANCE OF "REVOLUTIONARY POLITICS" TO CHANGE THE WORLD..."

To get a sense of the power that can be exerted by direct action at the point of production, one just has to look at something like the last GM strike in North America, where literally a few hundred workers striking at a single plant were able to force one of the largest corporations in the world to the bargaining table and made them lose hundreds of millions of dollars. The power of working people to take control of their lives and use their political power for positive change can also be seen in how dock workers around the world refused to load goods destined for South Africa during the Apartheid years, or more recently in the massive strikes and factory occupations which have swept South Korea over the last several years.

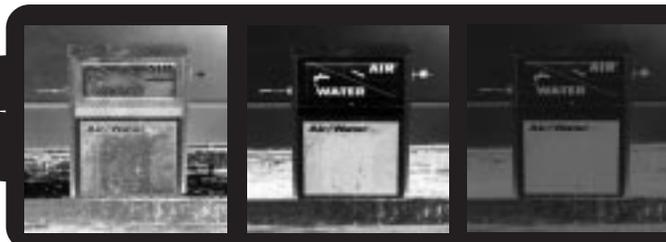
*Adbusters* has some funny ideas about what a revolution is and how “revolution” is made. Forget the old cliché of the unwashed masses rising up in all their millions and



**"YOU DON'T NEED A MILLION PEOPLE TO START A REVOLUTION... A GLOBAL NETWORK OF 500 JAMMERS COULD PULL THE COUP OFF" -ADBUSTERS**

running things for a change. Revolution *à la Adbusters* is one in which the squeaky clean, upwardly mobile, middle class techno-yuppies will liberate us all by deploying their “macromemes and metamemes” (according to *Adbusters*, these memes are “the core ideas without which a sustainable future is unthinkable”.) From the Spring 1998 editorial:

“You don’t need a million people to start a revolution. You just need a passionate minority who sees the light, smells the blood, and pulls off a set of well-coordinated social marketing strategies... By being ready, waiting for the ripe moments and then jamming in unison, a global network of 500 jammers could pull the coup off...”



So is this what their vision of revolution comes down to? Not a revolution in which millions of people rise up and recover their humanity by organizing together to retake what is theirs, but a ‘well-coordinated social marketing strategy’ spoon-fed to the masses by a network of “500 jammers”? I can’t imagine that the students and workers currently being shot down in the streets of Jakarta would take too well to this statement, but then again, maybe they’d have a fundamental disagreement with *Adbusters* about what constitutes a “revolution”.

For *Adbusters*, “the next revolution: -WWIII- will be waged inside your head. It will be as Marshall McLuhan predicted a guerrilla informational war... Meme Warfare- not race, gender or class warfare- will drive the next revolution...” So any of you out

of the 6 billion people out there who think that your lousy situation in the world might have to do with the neo-colonialism, imperialism, poverty, racism, homophobia or sexism of capitalist society, you’re wrong. You see, according to *Adbusters*, the real war is actually going on in our heads, or more exactly in the heads of a handful of mostly white, mostly middle or upper class men manipulating glitzy anti-ads in the richest and most well off countries of the world.

While *Adbusters* appropriates the Situationists’ view of capitalist society as a ‘spectacle’, they fall right back into the trap of just providing another “cool” spectacle for people to consume. Now, a revolutionary ‘meme’

message on TV that pokes fun at the broadcasting of the corporations is all fine and well, but it does nothing without the mass organization and direction of the people themselves. A major project of *Adbusters's* Media Foundation has been to buy airtime to run anti-consumer ads on the major TV networks in North America. When all is said and done, the multi billion dollar media conglomerates have little problem taking the tens of thousands of dollars that it costs for *Adbusters's* thirty seconds of fame. The corporate elites gain by having the activist resources of *Adbusters* going to their pockets and not to the cash strapped grassroots movements organizing for change, and they know that as long as they control the airways they can easily cancel or subvert the anti-ads should matters get out of hand.

If "revolutionary" politics don't actively challenge the control that the ruling elite has over the means of social and ideological production in our society, (i.e. by physically taking over and democratizing the factories, offices, and mass media institutions) they are not in fact revolutionary. We should not underestimate the corporate power structures ability to subvert and expropriate symbols of resistance. One only has to look at the Body Shop's "Activist™" perfume, Bell Canada's "student power" saving plan, the Che Guevara Soda Pop, or Nike's commercials featuring the "ground activist" to see how corporations are able to appropriate even the minimal amount of resistance going on today. Should it be proven to increase sales, there's no limit to the levels of 'revolutionary hipness' corporations will sink to.

The contradictions of *Adbusters* show themselves in other ways than just trying to buy advertising from the corporations they claim to de-

spise. In a section of their "Blueprint for a Revolution" entitled "the souless corporation" *Adbusters* state "trying to rehabilitate a corporation, urging it to behave responsibly is a fool's game". In typical contradictory style their next sentence reads "the only way to change the behavior of a corporation is to recode it; rewrite its charter; reprogram it..." ie they have just suggested the reform of corporations- the "fool's game" they denounced but one sentence earlier.

To "recode", "rewrite", or "re-program" a corporation is to try and reform it, and it is profoundly non-revolutionary in its long term results. We need to realize that the exploitation and oppression caused by corporations are irreconcilably linked to the capitalist system which is destroying our world. In conjunction with an international revolutionary movement for social justice, human rights, and democratic control over all productive forces of society, corporations should be recognized as incompatible with human freedom and abolished, not reformed or rehabilitated.

*Adbusters* is a well produced and slick magazine that effectively reveals the destructive impact being made upon our world by corporate elites. However, as a guide to the kind of action needed to overcome those elites and lay the foundations of a new society based on human liberation and social justice, *Adbusters* fails to do anything but provide a blueprint for top down reformism under a thin veneer of hip phraseology.

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