

## No Logo: A Conversation with Naomi Klein



Naomi Klein is the author of *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies*. Among other things, in this interview, she talks about the growth of the anti-corporate movement, some of the themes from her book *No Logo*, as well as briefly taking on what connections need to be made in order that the coalitions coming together around these larger events can become something larger than the sum of their parts.

### The Interview

Naomi Klein: When I wrote *No Logo*, there really wasn't an anti-corporate movement. I watched this movement materialize over the course of my research. I had a hunch that there were little pockets of anti-corporate activism, there were little pockets of adusting, little pockets of independent media, a lot of stuff going on on the web, but on a very, very small scale. It wasn't organized. The only people really interlinked when I started five years ago were the anarchists on line. And then there were a few anti-corporate campaigns, like the Nike campaign, the Monsanto campaign, the Shell campaign, but they weren't linked with each other. They weren't having big demonstrations where everybody was showing up.

And then I watched this converge and turn into what I believe to be the early stages of a mass movement. And that is to me what's happening in Los Angeles this week, and what happened in Seattle, [Washington, DC., Philadelphia and what's going to happen in Quebec]. And you see all the pockets come together. But once there is a real movement, in some ways I think, we lose sight of how important it is to keep communicating. Because when you're not in power and you don't feel strong, all you have is your ability to get your message out. To at least try. And I think that position of weakness at least for me personally encouraged me to try, to keep trying to find new ways to bring new people in. When you're feeling a little stronger, I think we have a tendency to get lazy, to be perfectly honest. And I include myself in that. Sometimes I become more rhetorical and sort of rely on buzz words rather than trying to explain it at a level that somebody who knows nothing could access.

*For people who haven't read your book No Logo, what are its basic themes and arguments?*

It's a book that starts from the premise that the next major political movement is going to be an anti-corporate movement. And then what it tries to do, besides documenting some of the early stages of that anti-corporate movement like Reclaim The Streets, the Nike campaign, the Shell campaign, lots of RAN-based campaigns (RAN = Rainforest Action Network), is to advance a thesis about why it is inevitable that the next movement is an anti-corporate movement.

The prism through which I look at this is the prism of branding, corporate branding. Because I think if we understand branding, we can get to a lot of issues that are driving people to the streets. I'm looking at this piece of corporate ideology which has gripped Wall Street for the past 15 years and has transformed the way corporations do business, which is if you want to be successful, you have to produce a brand not a product. That in a sense, products, sneakers, coffee, computers are incidental to the true product of any successful international company, which is the production of ideas, the production of meaning within our culture. So for instance, Starbucks will say, "we're not about coffee. Yes, we sell coffee, but we're about the idea of community. That's our brand meaning. And you get all kinds of silly rhetoric like this. "We're not about sneakers, we're about transcendence through sports." And there's a lot of people getting paid tremendous amounts of money to go into these corporate sweat lodges and figure out -- what's our meaning. It's very spiritual. And then they emerge and they say "we're a social lubricant," says Polaroid or something like that. And it seems like a very innocuous development in management. But what I'm tracking is that on the one hand, once you decide that you're about an idea and not a product, then your product is incidental.

First of all it transforms the culture because an idea without a place to express that idea is entirely meaningless. So what these idea-based companies do is they go out in the culture and they look for space to project their meaning. So that can mean getting their ads into schools or community centers. They are constantly looking for fresh ideas, new brand meanings. So brands have developed this very predatory relationship with youth culture where they are constantly looking for the new edge, and it can even be anti-corporate, whatever it is, it has to be fresh and cutting edge and resonate with the zeitgeist.

So we're seeing our ideas being coopted and our spaces being coopted. And also the idea of building a brand idea requires lots of different mediums to express that idea. So it's not good enough that you're just about coffee if you're Starbucks. So you have to have a lifestyle magazine to show your brand identity and maybe you have a line of furniture. And basically the idea behind branding is not to market a product, but to create a self-enclosed branded lifestyle which is encompassing enough that we can pack our stuff and move inside it. And the ultimate end point of this branding process is celebration in Florida, which is Disney's branded town, where you actually can pack up the

kids and the U-haul and move inside a brand and send your kids to a branded school and so on.

*What about how the anti-corporate movement creates meaning for itself and the process for creating that meaning? And what does that mean for the movement when we're wanting to not just say no to things, but we want to say yes as well?*

It is a challenge because it means that we are competing. Anyone who is trying to get an idea out there is competing with these multinational corporations who are in the ideas business as well, which is why I think the challenge for the left is so great at this point.

But I also believe that the reason why so many young people are taking to the streets at this point is because of this process that I'm describing, they feel stalked by marketing. They are exhausted and burnt out by having every human interaction, by having their very identity, branded. They are told to become a brand called you or me, inc.; to think of themselves as a corporation -- forget seeing their entire culture turned corporate. So what I think people are looking for, yes they are protesting corporate abuses, but they are also looking for uncommodified experience. And I think that's what the Independent Media Center is a really big part of. I was just talking to some young video activists who are here and they were talking about how great it was to go to the Independent Media Center here in LA and to just trade video feeds. Like the idea that here is something that we have commodified and we have put a price on and that is always bought and sold, and we're just going to not sell it, we're going to decommodify it.

And so on the one hand you have this process of decommodifying human experience and Reclaim the Streets is part of that -- seizing a kind of privatized sphere, and turning it into a public sphere. And we also have branding defetishization. What all branding is about is fetishizing really very basic consumer goods and putting them up on a pedistal and making them stand for things that they just don't stand for. They don't deliver. And this is I believe what the anti-corporate has on its side. These companies can sell powerful ideas about rebellion when they are really selling sweaters and running shoe, because there is always a betrayal. That's why this longing that we have cannot be fulfilled through shopping cause we're constantly disappointed. We buy into an idea of something and we come home and it's just a laptop and it's kind of disappointing. So most people deal with that longing by going out and wanting to buy something else.

*Which is perfect for a consumer capitalist culture.*

Exactly. But I think if another force comes in and says "hey we're selling the real thing over here". That can be very powerful as well and I think that that's our task. Because I don't have a problem with marketing. I have a problem with the betrayal with this system I'm describing. If you're really selling independence, get out there and sell like hell;

don't be afraid.

We've been talking earlier about these events we've been seeing from Seattle to DC to Philadelphia and now here in LA. How do you see the difference between these convention events and the Seattle/DC events given their connection to the global culture?

I have very mixed feelings about it to tell you the truth. When I heard in Washington that the next Seattle -- there's been a lot of "next Seattles" as you know -- was going to be around the Democratic and Republican conventions, I was a little worried about it. Partially because there's a sense that this movement took off in Seattle, that it was created in Seattle. We talk about Seattle as the birth of this movement.

In fact, Seattle was the birth of this movement in the United States, it was not the birth of this movement internationally. Really what Seattle was about was American activists joining something that was happening in London, in New Delhi, that was happening all over the world. The Philippines. It was happening in Canada. We had massive demonstrations when we hosted the APEC Summit in Vancouver, and all the same police oppression. But it never made the American press. I'm not just talking about the mainstream press; it didn't make the left press. So the left didn't know about it. The left in the States was not part of this mobilization that was happening around the world.

Then Seattle happened and I thought that was wonderful. But I'm distressed by the kind of American centrism, because to me the strength of this movement is its internationalism. You know that slogan, being as transnational as corporation itself. What was exciting to me about Seattle was not teamsters and turtles, although that's exciting too, but it was maquiladora workers and steelworkers walking side by side. And it was Jose Bove from France meeting the head of the peasants movement for the Philippines. And I think we're losing sight of that and I'm very concerned about it. Let's face it, we know that American left and right, is prone to a kind of myopic parochialism, in my opinion. And it's hard not to be, this is a very big and powerful place and it's awfully interesting. But I don't think that's going to be the strength of the movement, I'm worried about losing the internationalism of it.

*So what do you suggest? We have [FTAA - A15 in Quebec City] coming up and the IMC has been having organizing on-line for quite some time for that.*

That's the sort of cynic in me speaking I suppose. But I also believe, just coming back to your initial question, that what I think is tremendously positive about what is happening here in LA this week, is that what all this anti-corporate activism really has been all about, is a recognition among a new generation of activists that corporations are more powerful than governments. They understand it, they're not paralyzed by it, and they're just saying fine, if the power has shifted, we're just going to go where the power is, we're going to do an end run around our own governments and we're going to go after the corporations directly. That's what the people thought who decided to go after Nike, Monsanto and Shell. And in fact, in many cases, activists ended up getting legislative

responses after they embarrassed the corporations. That's what happened in the anti-genetic engineering campaigns in Britain. First they went after the supermarkets and the brand name food companies and then the companies went clamoring to legislators saying this isn't fair, we're getting targeted, we're getting singled out, we need to develop a baseline, maybe it's labeling.

What I think is happening around the conventions, is it's coming back to politics. And it has to come back to politics. We're getting at the root cause of the reason why corporations are more powerful than governments. Really to me what these conventions are about and the way I think they will be remembered is they will be remembered as the conventions where money is outed. And all of this has been about following the money. The shadow conventions as well, but most of all the street protests. And I think there's been a kind of layered effect. It has pushed the mainstream media to cover campaign finance more. And I think it's getting at the root causes of the erosion of our democracy. Cause just going after corporations is by no means enough. It's a very short sighted political strategy. You don't change the world one corporation at a time, it doesn't work.

So I think what we're doing is we're following a logo all through the economy and the political system.

*When I think about how to build a global movement, what kind of tactics and strategy do you think we can have in this process of coming to alignment with a global movement?*

I think part of it has to do with a fear that exists that if you don't have another big protest really soon the whole thing is going to disappear. We're relying on protests too much. Part of it was that Seattle, it seemed to me from the perspective, from an outsider perspective, took the U.S left by surprise. What were they surprised at? That they even existed. That they actually could mobilize people, and it was so thrilling. It was like whoah, we exist, but that they almost didn't believe it, so they had to keep proving it. And I think it's possible that Washington, DC was chosen too quickly as the next protest site; that perhaps that wasn't the best strategic point because it wasn't that important a meeting, unlike the one in Prague.

The significance of Seattle was that it ended a new round of negotiations. There wasn't a similar significance in Washington -- it was more symbolic. And I think that what was important about Seattle was that it moved away from protest as simply symbolic act. My understanding is that the very essence of direct action is not protest as demonstration, but as achieving a direct result.

And I kind of got that feeling about the conventions a little bit. So all these resources, organization and creativity were poured into creating the next protest, and it gets covered like a sports game or something like that. Well how many people did you get out last time, it's sort of like a competition and people are saying, nope, the Seattle movement is dead, it's clearly in decline, which is insane, because the political significance

of the Seattle round of negotiations and the World Trade Organization is what mobilized those people. That's why they were there. It was an incredibly important meeting and they wanted to stop it. Now it's sort of like you want to get out there cause if you don't have as many numbers out morale is going to drop and you have to keep the momentum up. I'm not sure that's how you choose a protest site, you choose it for a very specific strategic political reasons. And that's where I think issues of internationalism get lost in the shuffle cause it's very hard to organize these things and I believe it's taking every little bit of resources we have.

What about Prague [and Quebec and Internationally] then? As a movement, this takes us to the bigger picture, we're no longer on US terrain.

It's possible that that will free up a lot of the creative people involved in the organization around Washington and LA and Philadelphia to think a little bit more of the big picture, to do a little bit more theory work which is really important.

Theory work is so damn important right now.

*Define theory work.*

I think that with any coalition the goal is to create something stronger than the sum of its parts, to come together and go to a next intellectual and political stage. And these protests are coalitions. The danger is that what you have is basically laundry list activism. Here's the list of all the things that we're against. So that's what I mean by the theory work, the intellectual work. I've compared the structure of the anti-corporate movement to the internet, the internet before its centralization and corporatization of course. It is a web and I think that the theory work that needs to be done is for everyone who cares about this movement to not just say that we can all meet on the same street corner and have a protest together, but really work to identify what are the threads of this web, what do they mean, what are the real connections? What's the connection between militarization around the world and the protestor repression here at home. Not just a laundry list of here's the things that we're against. But more intense intellectual work because I think that's what inspires people when they hear something and it clicks and they say "yes!" Not "oh those people are against what I'm against, I think I'll join them." People don't get inspired that way; they get inspired when there's a click of somebody saying something I hadn't thought of.