

Roopali Mukherjee and Sarah Banet-Weiser, **Commodity Activism: Cultural Resistance in Neoliberal Times**, New York: New York University Press, 2012, 303 pp., \$75.00 (hardcover), \$26.00 (paperback), \$9.99 (e-edition).

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Scholarly discussions about commodity culture tend to sort themselves out into two well-defined traditions. The more academically ubiquitous of the two—the critical tradition—argues, quite simply, that the commodity is something to be criticized on a whole range of fronts: aesthetic, cultural, economic, and political. It was Karl Marx (1976) who laid the foundations for this critical school in volume one of *Capital*, in his very first chapter on the commodity. There, in an imaginative section entitled “The Fetishism of Commodities and its Secret,” Marx reveals that “a commodity appears, at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” (p. 163). In a word, the commodity is “mysterious” (p. 163). For Marx, the mystery of the commodity lies in its ability to take on roles, meanings, and attachments that transcend the mere materials and labor from which it is made. Indeed, the materials and labor that make up the commodity disappear; its “real” history is erased and replaced by a fantasy. An automobile is no longer a composition of metal, rubber, and glass assembled by workers; instead, *Pontiac builds excitement!* The commodity, Marx points out, becomes akin to a god. Like a god, we create it, then give it the power to create us. “It is nothing but the definite social relation between men which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things” (p. 165).



Marxist scholars like Theodor Adorno then carried this critical conclusion to its pessimistic extreme. In essays like those collected in *The Culture Industry*, Adorno argues that, as the commodity form has been raised to the level of ideology, human subjectivity and agency have been annihilated. The result is a totalizing consumer society where all expressions of agency lead inexorably back into the system. But even in this pessimistic gloom, there is a ray of hope: the possibility of autonomy. For Adorno, this glimmer is the artistic avant-garde; for others who preceded and followed him, it could be seen among the proletariat, the counterculture, the Third World, criminals, or the insane—people and places magically immune to the siren song of consumer culture. It is the utopian dream of a world *outside*. Commodity criticism possesses a conservative tradition as well, beginning with Matthew Arnold, whose *Culture and Anarchy* was first published the same year as Marx’s *Capital*, and stretching out to the present to include conservatives like William Bennett. Although less theoretically developed, here, too, the commodity is identified as an agent of depravity, and here, too, salvation is to be found in a realm—usually culture and tradition—outside of consumer culture.

The opposing school of thought on the commodity, represented less prominently in the academic world, though far more widely in greater society, is what might be called the populist tradition. Here, the argument goes something like this: Since the populace seems to like commodities, there must be something about commodities to like. (It's an offshoot of the old broadcast debate about "public interest." Q: What's in the public interest? A: Any programming that interests the public.) This tradition, too, has its radical and (neo)conservative wings. For a contemporary scholar like James Twitchell, who leans to the right, the "triumph of consumerism is the triumph of popular will" (p. 285). In his jeremiad for the market, *Lead Us Into Temptation* (2000), Twitchell argues that we, the people, acting upon our true desires and through our rational actions, have willfully raised the commodity to its all-encompassing position. If our society defines choice primarily in terms of commodity purchase, so be it—that's what the people have chosen. Populists on the left, like John Fiske (1989), tend to agree with Twitchell that people express genuine desires through the marketplace. But for Fiske, these popular longings are not necessarily in sync with the status quo. Women, for example, do not simply shop because they love the commodities they are purchasing (though they may), but as a way of expressing their autonomy and power against the dependency and powerlessness they feel within a patriarchal world.

These two opposing perspectives on commodity culture, each with their left and right flanks, share, however, a fundamental premise: Consumption, for ill or for good, has replaced political engagement. The critics fear that consumerism has sublimated political agency; the populists applaud consumerism *as* political agency. From both perspectives, citizens have become consumers. In an excellent collection of essays, Roopali Mukherjee and Sarah Banet-Weiser challenge this accepted assumption by reversing the equation, asserting through *Commodity Activism: Cultural Resistance in Neoliberal Times* that consumers have become citizens.

Commodity activism is acting politically within and through commodity culture. This practice challenges the facile assumption that consumerism has eclipsed politics, for commodity activism, as the authors argue in this volume, is a strategy *of* political engagement. It is not a pure politics acted out in a mythic netherworld free from the circulation of commodities, nor a sublimated politics whose only expression is the act of purchase, but an activist politics that recognizes the monumental significance of the commodity within our society and realizes that this is one of the fields upon which politics must be played. Commodity activism is *realpolitik* for consumer society—which does not, however, make it unproblematic.

Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser sensibly situate their project between the binaries of "commodity activism as corporate appropriations" and "commodity activism . . . as innovative creative forms [and] cultural interventions" (pp. 2, 3). Commodity activism is, of course, both, and the editors make a good case for understanding it as such. In grappling with both these positions, *Commodity Activism* not only intervenes in the conversation about commodities and politics, but it also provides material with which to explore wider questions of political autonomy vs. complicity, as well as insider vs. outsider strategies of action. The introduction of the collection does what an introduction should do, and does it well. It lays out the debates in, and theories of, the field; situates the citizen-consumer within a broader historical context; and positions commodity activism within the landscape of contemporary neoliberal capitalism. By choosing to introduce the individual essays within each section, the main introduction flows smoothly and feels

more like a substantive overview than an annotated table of contents, which can sometimes be the case with introductions in collections such as this.

Nearly all the essays in *Commodity Activism* are based on a case study. This organizing principle serves the volume well, as it gives specificity and groundedness to what otherwise could be ephemeral musings on the topic. It also ties the essays together—which is sometimes difficult to do in an anthology—and gives the book a sense of coherence. This is good, because the essays themselves cover a wide range of practices: from Dove's Real Beauty campaign to "green" products, from food politics to "sex positive retail activism," from corporate philanthropic activities cum branding initiatives like ABC's Better Community and Avon's Walk for Breast Cancer campaigns to the celebrity-activist phenomenon known as Brangelina (disaggregated into two articles). There are better essays and worse ones, but there isn't a single dud. All of them navigate between the poles of "selling out" and "resistance" with more or less sophistication, though most veer toward the dangers of cooption, rather than possibilities of resistance. While most of the essays adhere to the case study model, one or two essays do not, and they suffer for it, primarily because, in moving away from the case studies, they sacrifice their instructive particularity and read, less productively, like generalized theoretical engagements with other media theorists against a broad backdrop of historic developments. Nevertheless, all the essays included in the collection are informative, smart, and refreshingly readable.

My only substantive criticism with the volume concerns the frequently employed term "resistance." It is such a troublesome word. What does it mean? What does it mean within a neoliberal consumer context where "resistance" is desired as an expression of individualized dissatisfaction, often to be catered to with a new product? Does "resistance" parasitically tie the person who resists to the parent culture they are resisting? Following from this, does resistance actually lead to change? And finally, if resistance doesn't lead to change, then what is its function, and how do we need to (re)understand it? The editors grapple with this issue in their introduction, but I wish more of the individual contributors had done so, as well. This, however, is my particular bugbear, and it does not detract from the usefulness of the collection.

And *Commodity Activism* is eminently useful. Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser's collection is an important intervention into what had become a tired debate about political agency and consumer culture. It is also a very timely anthology, helping us better understand the practices of a current generation of activists who recognize that the terrain upon which they struggle is not some idealized land of pure politics outside the influence of consumer culture, but instead, a challenging topography of brands and logos, style and story, celebrity and spectacle. They may be consumers, but they are also citizens.

References

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