

The uncooling of Corporate America

I MISSED the fourth of July this year. I don't mean to say that I missed the fireworks. Or that I missed a cacophony of baton twirlers and an American Legion band. I didn't miss an event or a celebration. I missed the day itself.

I wasn't aware that the fourth had passed until some time on the fifth when I made an earnest effort to study a calendar, figure out the date and make plans to eventually snake my way up to Belize City in time to return to Buffalo during the following week. Once I hammered down the precise date, I muttered, "Oh, yesterday must have been the Fourth of July," a trivial fact that had little significance to me in Belize.

Meanwhile, back in Buffalo on the fourth of July, a friend stopped into an Elmwood Avenue shop to buy a bagel, picking up an abandoned copy of that day's New York Times while he was there. In it he found a full-page ad – a normal enough looking page of stock quotes with a large black spot sloppily scrawled over the top of the page. Below the blemish, appearing to be written by a felt tip pen, the ad read:

"July 4th – Because my country has sold its soul to corporate power. Because consumerism has become our national religion. Because we've forgotten the true meaning of freedom. And because patriotism now means agreeing with the president. I pledge to do my duty ... and to take my country back."

The black spot had made its way to the heart of the American corporate media and I missed it. I knew it was coming. It crept its way over here last spring, immediately after the Bush administration launched its illegal invasion of Iraq. Americans now know that the so-called evidence presented by the Bush crew to supposedly justify the attack was fictitious. The rest of the world knew it the day the war began. While we were watching

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flag-draped Fox "News" anchors bellowing on in Orwellian style about "Operation Iraqi Freedom," the rest of the world was learning of civilian casualties.

While the American corporate media, often with myriad connections to the arms industry, the oil industry and the Republican Party, extolled the supposed virtues of Bush's attack, most of the world looked on in horror. To them, the globe's sole superpower was acting out as a rogue state.

Coca Cola cool

That's when it began. Spontaneously, people the world over started rethinking their relationship with corporate America. Coca Cola cool, uncontested for half a century, was suddenly on the line. Saying no to America was saying no to war. And saying no to war was suddenly as easy (and healthy) as not walking into a McDonalds. Or not drinking a Coke or a Pepsi. The boycott was on. And since it was never organized in any formal way, there was no stopping it.

The London-based "Boycott America" website (www.boycottamerica.org), launched in the wake of the Iraq invasion, took the issue beyond Iraq and the Bush administration's military adventurism. They tout corporate America's threat to the environment, the result of its successful lobbying against protocols to curb climate change, and its threat to the world's food chain with the proliferation of genetically modified organisms, as additional pressing reasons for the boycott. They term their actions, "commercial disobedience," claiming that they are not targeting the American people, but are instead targeting American corporations tied to the Bush administration. Activists are organizing similar efforts in nations around the world.

Falling an empire

Kono Matsu, writing for the Canadian-based *Adbusters* magazine, cites Mahatma Gandhi's successful call to the people of India to boycott British cloth and salt – eventually leading to India's freedom and, debatably, contributing to the fall of the British Empire. Matsu hopes that a similar boycott could check the power of the world's sole superpower. But, he admits, it won't be easy, writing:

"We would have to adjust our lifestyle in sometimes painful ways; learn to live without foods and drinks we've loved since we were kids; find local alternative to brands we consume every day without thought; shut out corporations that we've dealt with for years. We have to politicize every purchase we make, constantly look for opportunities and take them, because our target is a power that surrounds us all the time. They call it American cool."

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Matsu termed the boycott, "a daunting project," which would need to develop its own logo, or "anti-logo, as well known around the world as the golden arches or the Nike swoosh." That icon, developed by Adbusters, is the painfully simple black spot, which with the twist of the wrist, threatens to turn any corporate logo against itself as an emblem of resistance.

Global de-swooshification

Multinational corporations no longer produce products. They are now solely in the image business. Nike produces nothing. Their primary goal now is to maintain the swoosh as an archetypical symbol of cool – in essence, the branding of the entire concept of sports. They contract production out to third world sweatshops, dancing across the globe in search of the lowest wages and costs. Their products pop forth out of the same hellhole factories as their competitors' products, except the Nike goods are swooshed with the coolest of logos.

Modern corporations have shed the precarious weight of factories and the liabilities associated with maintaining labor forces. Instead they've invested their energy in brand image development. They no longer build factories. Today they build advertising campaigns. Their capitol is not tied up in rusting machinery or weathered buildings. It's tied up in images. They fire employees while cultivating consumers. It's clearly unsustainable, but right now it's the only model out there – driving down living conditions around the world. And it's supported by consumers who have allowed their very bodies to be branded – emblazoned with names like "GAP" and "Abocrombie" ostentatiously printed across their chests and butts. The brand label, once a small mark to indicate who made the product, is now the product itself. Garments are mere vessels to carry the value-enhancing marks.

Coke and Pepsi typify the most successful of all the branders. Their assets rest on the sacred WTO protected synthesis of image and license. Currently there is no place I know of on earth where at least one of these logos isn't present. The formula is simple. Coke and Pepsi own an image – one that ultimately represents American cool. In nations around the world people manufacture their own Coke and Pepsi under license, using their own water and bottles, often using their own sugar. They then sell it to themselves, using their own distribution networks, sending most of the profits off to America. These two companies, which dominate the world's beverage market, in essence, also produce nothing tangible. They sell cool while vacuuming money up from around the world. In doing so they are spreading a toxic culture of obesity – the same culture that is killing us here in the American homeland, where soda pop consumption has doubled since the mid 1980s,

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contributing to a 50% rise in the obesity and diabetes rates during the same time span. The most sophisticated ads in media outlets around the world seduce people with the supposed normalcy of consuming liquid candy, with an average of eleven tablespoons of sugar per bottle. Developing nations are left to deal with the health consequences while Coke and Pepsi investors deal up the profits.

A black spot splattered on a Coke sign in France, a Sprite sign in Argentina, a Nike swoosh in Britain or a Texaco billboard in Australia, gives the logo a new meaning embedded in an instant counter-message. In a media-saturated world dominated by a shrinking handful of corporations, the black spot is viral communication. It's non-violent revolution, 21st century style.

Culture jamming revolution

The black spot isn't a revolution in the traditional sense – one that opposes a government. This revolution is about culture. It's called "culture jamming." It's a fight against that culture which is poisoning us and killing our planet, leaving people anxious and depressed, overworked and mired in debt. It's a revolution against consumer culture. It's a movement whose revolutionaries hail from diverse backgrounds, representing conservative fundamentalist Christians, Pagan anarchist punks, Greens, union workers, liberation theologians and all sorts of folks in between.

But make no mistake about it – successful or not, this is a revolution. Adbusters sums it up like this:

"In the end, the resistance was known for one thing – they simply would not participate. Not in the 24-hour economy, the 60-hour workweek, the flag-waiving parades, the media manias, the permanent fear, the cheers for the troops. And then there was their mark, of course. It crept into daily life, until it became a constant reminder that these really were bleak times. Until one day you no longer knew who was in control... the empire that was everywhere ... or the invisible revolution."

So far Black Spot ads have run in print in the United States in the New York Times and on TV on CNN. On the other hand, CBS, ABC, Fox, NBC and MTV have all refused to sell airtime to the Black Spot campaign. For more information about the campaign or to contribute money to run more Black Spot ads, see www.unbrandamerica.org. ●

For more information about corporate branding and sweatshops in the global economy, see Naomi Klein's excellent book, "No Logo." For detailed information about globalization, see William Grider's "One World Ready or Not."