

Insecure: The cultural politics of neoliberalism
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**Positioning Neoliberalism:
Towards a critical popular culture**

It would be a mistake to think that branding and neoliberalism are two separate phenomena that happened to develop simultaneously but parallel to each other. The co-evolutionary development of neoliberalism and branding is thus far underdeveloped in critical discourse and there is an urgent need for a critical theory of branding that tries to use branding to support the project of popular critical education. Generations of critics and social theorists have explored the tensions between the development of the culture industry, popular media and promotional culture and the cultivation of economic and political subjectivity, but it is only recently that the real subsumption of neoliberal social life under the brand form has begun to be understood. This paper demonstrates the co-development of branding and neoliberalism through a narrative of the competing influences of two antagonistic philosophies of communication, education and respect for human life that were developed in response to the same historical moment. The instrumentalist marketing philosophy called *positioning* explicitly advocates the development of promotional techniques that consciously avoid a target audience's rational faculties and instead attempt to trigger irrational emotional responses. Trout introduced this vision in 1969 and it is currently the hegemonic, unquestioned common sense of marketing theory generally and what has become brand theory, specifically. Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was first published in English in 1970 and argues for the respect and cultivation of people's ability to use their rational faculties to consciously intervene in their political, economic, cultural and social world. The tradition of critical education that Freire's work inspired has made the task of unveiling structural inequities and empowering individuals and communities to take action on their own

behalf central to the project of freedom and progress in human history. These bodies of thought and practice drew upon found knowledge to respond to changing historical conditions and have since been fundamental to the unfolding of history.

This paper suggests that the dominance of the brand form is not something that can be fought against by critical education but must instead be appropriated for its use. We are living in a moment of revolutionary upheaval and this paper aspires to be an intervention into this moment by using the concept of the brand to draw attention to the political struggles that are hidden behind its form and by offering a set of suggestions for a way to begin to “do” branding in a critical way that addresses our capacity for reason and opens up the possibility for critical thinking and enlightened intervention into history rather than circumventing that capacity by triggering affective responses from carefully targeted audiences.

Accurate counts of the number of Iraqis that have been killed by the American-led occupation of that country are notoriously difficult to find. Estimates range from just under 100,000 to well over 1,000,000. 3.9 million Iraqis have been displaced by the invasion including 40% of the middle class. The invasion of Iraq began with a branded event, “Shock and Awe,” that shares a close relationship with the Nazi blitzkrieg in its intention to use superior destructive technology, “to affect the will, perception, and understanding of the adversary to fit or respond to our strategic policy ends,” imposing this, “overwhelming level of Shock and Awe against an adversary on an immediate or sufficiently timely basis to paralyze its will to carry on . . . [to] seize control of the environment and paralyze or so overload an adversary's perceptions and understanding of events that the enemy would be incapable of resistance at the tactical and strategic levels” (Ullman & Wade pp. xxiv-xxv). The explicit intention was to destroy all of the basic services in Baghdad including water, sewage and power and to emotionally and physically cripple the 5.5 million civilians who were lucky enough to survive the three

straight days of bombing. Demonstrations against the war proliferated domestically as a million people hit the streets in the US alone to participate in large-scale, but tightly-regulated and police-controlled demonstrations across the US. The Bush Administration recognized this as a public relations issue and hired America's most influential marketing guru to engineer a consumer-friendly "March to War" that could drum up enough support both domestically and internationally to go ahead with the invasion.

It had been more than 30 years since Jack Trout co-wrote a book called *Positioning: The Battle for Your Mind* when he was hired by the Bush administration to lead the "Brand America" project and to cultivate public opinion in the run up to the Iraq war. *Positioning* was an icon, read by everyone who practiced the craft of marketing. The administration brought Trout in to fashion strategies for State Department diplomats to garner support from overseas leadership and to make the war seem more necessary and less resistible to the opposition at home. The thinking among the message gurus at the time was that the war in Afghanistan was supported because the public had a clear notion of what American troops were doing there. Forget whether or not those notions were accurate reflections of real circumstances. So long as the reasons were clear, the audience would support it. But Iraq was a different story. There seemed to be many reasons to invade but none of immediate importance: Hussein was a dictator, there were possibly WMDs, the Middle East deserves democracy, Hussein supported the 9/11 conspirators. For Trout, neither the resistance from the masses nor the quality of the administration's decisions mattered: "The problem was not policy but presentation" (Paul 2003). And the nature of this particular conflict made its presentation particularly important. For one thing, the administration knew it was going to go to war long enough before it went to war that it could hire a marketing guru to consult on how to engineer the international and domestic response. For another, everyone involved in selling the war knew that there was no immediate cause for war, and without a glaring need for conflict neither the American public nor the international leadership would support the venture. "The need to

successfully "brand" the war... was particularly significant in this case, because of the long buildup before military action would be taken. No aggression or specific act of terrorism prompted action in Iraq, but rather a prolonged failure to play by the rules set forth by the United Nations" (Paul 2003).

Trout felt that the American brand needed some softening. "America had one idea attached to its brand. We presented ourselves as the world's last superpower," says Trout. "And that was the world's worst branding idea" (Jack Trout quoted in Paul 2003). On its way to softening its image while leading two foreign occupations, the Bush White House broke the commonsensical adage among communications strategists that you must never, ever let your strategy show. In April of 2008, the New York Times ran a front page story (Barstow 2008) detailing the use of administration spokespeople who did not identify themselves as such that included generals and variously titled experts as "message force multipliers" who appear on news programs and deliver seemingly impartial testimony that happens to coincide with the administration's PR strategy. This is not a revolutionary idea in public relations, but this incident revealed a fundamental contradiction inherent to the branding of politics: actual events in themselves that appear to people as spectacles do have a material existence in the world and the accuracy of the information people receive concerning it has consequences that matter to the development of human history; further, the fact of democratic participation in government and access to information, suggests that representations of events in themselves need to be correspondingly closer to the infinitely complex material reality of the event. In the same article, a Bush aide made the importance of this point explicit when he expressed his feeling that the administration itself did not operate in the same "reality-based" world as the rest of us because it had the power to change conditions on the ground more quickly than information about it could circulate. There seemed to be no moral or ethical ambivalence at all. The only thing that mattered was how to sell the war effectively, how to position it, how to "win the battle for your mind."

Neoliberal dominance over policy and the production of political subjectivity since 1970 could not have been achieved without the concomitant development of a suitably aggressive, flexible and profitable theory and practice of promotional culture. Neoliberalism represents the total subsumption of capitalist society under the brand form and social development after the crisis in neoliberalism will be disproportionately influenced by developments in branding. Adam Arvidsson argues that, “Media Culture and its close integration into everyday life can be understood as the completion of what Marx called the ‘real subsumption’ of society under capital” (Arvidsson pp. 30). As part and parcel to neoliberal development, brand management becomes, “a vanguard form of capitalist governance,” that deploys brands as “ubiquitous managerial devices by means of which everyday life is managed, or perhaps better, programmed, so that it evolves in ways that can potentially generate the right kind of attention (and hence, brand value)” (Arvidsson 2006; pp. 137, 7). Arvidsson points to the economic value of neoliberal brands that derives from their use-value as raw material for the social production of communities, identities and experiences (immaterial social labor from which surplus value can be extracted for private gain) while Lury & Moor make it clear that the act of measuring a brand’s value does as much to create that value as it does to measure it (as cited in Aronczyk & Powers 2010). Politically, the brand form has subsumed common sense as “strategies of ‘winning’, and indeed of ‘forming,’ public opinion... have become dominant over attempts to protect and use public space for the full deliberation of policy issues,” and “democratic elections are aligned closely in their communicative profile with commercial advertising” (as cited in Aronczyk & Powers, p. 65). The legitimacy of ideas and practices in politics and everyday life is measured according to the logic of brand management, which is itself the “enabling logic” of “informational capitalism” (Arvidsson pp. 8). At the same time, critical theorists like Henry Giroux and Stanley Aronowitz link neoliberal thought and practice to attacks on critical education and the

instrumentalization of both culture and schooling (Giroux 2004; Aronowitz 2008, 2010), questioning the ability of traditional institutions of public education to fulfill their mission of educating a politically-engaged, democratic public.

David Harvey (2005; 2010) situates the roots of neoliberalism in the co-evolutionary response to the crisis in capitalism that occurred in the early 1970s and suggests that, just as the potential for neoliberal structural and subjective adjustments existed within the pre-neoliberal relations of production, so the possibilities for co-evolutionary social change through the crisis in neoliberalism already exist within neoliberal society and subjectivity. For Harvey, neoliberalism is a project to restore and consolidate the social power of the capitalist class and constitutes a direct reaction to the blockage of capital accumulation experienced in the early 1970s and, “in the same way that neoliberalism emerged as a response to the crisis of the 1970s, so the path being chosen today will define the character of capitalism’s further evolution” (Harvey 2010 pp. 11). The social crisis of the 1920s and 1930s was re-directed by the welfare state and war, but the resultant high cost of labor and regulatory regimes cut into the rate of return on capital investment and by the 1970s capital was experiencing a crisis of accumulation that was diverted through the neoliberalization of the global economy. The power of labor to make demands of capital was undermined through a variety of means including immigration policy, technological innovation, monopolization, state power, criminalization of restive populations and expansion to overseas labor and consumer markets (Harvey 2010 pp. 12-20). The successful assault on organized labor led to the social and economic immiseration of the working and middle classes as wages froze and effective demand had to be stimulated through the accrual of massive personal debt. So, capital solves its labor issue but creates an effective demand issue; that obstacle to accumulation is circumvented with credit and the proliferation of unregulated and fiction-based financial products thereby creating a private debt crisis that collapses the fiction-based market that, as it turns out, was ultimately predicated on the circulation of

untenable private debt (Wolff 2010; rdwolff.com).

Neoliberal political-economic and social policies would not be possible without the part played by branding as the lingua franca of neoliberal cultural politics and as a structuring element of neoliberal everyday life. The connection that an audience has to a brand and the position a brand occupies in the mind of a prospect is built and maintained through intensive research into the economic, social and psychological makeup of a specifically targeted audience.

The idea that “positioning is not what you do to a product, positioning is what you do to the mind of the prospect” (Trout & Ries pp. 2) becomes a real force in history when it is accepted as a naturally self-evident fact by people who spend their working lives creating culture. Naomi Klein’s two important examinations of brand culture (*No Logo* 2000) and the neoliberal reliance upon social and psychological crises for the implementation of policies that would be resisted if the populations subject to them were critically informed and free to take action (*Shock Doctrine* 2008) *can be read together as an analysis of that historical force*. Klein demonstrates what *positioned* brands are and how they work and how crises are fabricated and manipulated but does not separate *positioning* from branding as such. Because she does not see an alternative to *positioning* she properly separates branding as such from neoliberalism—to make the connection without an alternative to *positioning* would be to abandon branding to corporate control because the act of branding would always be in the interests of neoliberalism. In other words, Naomi Klein could not offer a clear alternative to *positioning* because she conflated it with branding as such. The problem is demonstrated by the instrumentalization of Klein’s own work. Ideas are a material force in history when gripped by the masses, but by the time your idea gets to the masses it may not be your idea any more. Klein’s *No Logo* is a foundational work in the critique of neoliberal culture and is a celebration of the anti-corporate resistance and yet it also won recognition by business organizations as the best marketing book of the year and, I can tell you from

direct experience, appeared on the bookshelf of brand strategists across the US and Europe so it could be mined for functional insights.

No Logo can be read instrumentally, as a description of a totally branded world where there is only pockets of Luddite resistance to the inevitable branding of everything. This is an unfair and simplistic reading of the book, but it is left undefended from that interpretation because she does not confront the dominant instrumental thinking with critical possibilities—she does not directly oppose the *positioned* brands to the possibility of *critical* brands. This amounts to naturalizing the assumption that all brands must be *positioned*, that they can not and should not be critical. The solution to the branded world of neoliberalism is neither an unbranded world, nor a world of positioned brands that happen to champion progressive causes. The solution is a critically branded world and the advantage to offering this positive alternative is the opportunity it provides to throw common sense into sharp relief. If all brands are assumed to be naturally *positioned* then there's no moral line drawn in the sand, merely a political one. Whether progressive or reactionary in my disposition, I go about branding my cause in the same way, by positioning it in the mind of the prospect. Not so, once an alternative appears. Now, regardless of the cause you are promoting or its political bent, if you use the techniques of *positioning* you are choosing the manipulative, stultifying affecting method and concomitantly you are consciously not choosing the critical method. This is a moral and ethical decision and, given an alternative, a brand strategist has no choice but to choose.

The 1950s and 1960s witnessed a cultural turn in marketing theory that proposed to shift attention off of the well-educated middle class writers that were the creative force behind advertising and on to the lives and minds of carefully targeted consumer markets. While there was consensus in the industry that promotional messaging should be simple, direct and memorable, a discursive struggle broke out between professionals who thought that promotional culture should make directly emotional appeals to its audience and those who felt that product attributes should take center stage (Arvidsson pp. 53). The

“emotional involvement” current of thought won out and, paired with neoliberal theory, achieved global hegemony. The “emotional involvement” discourse took a step toward hegemonic dominance in 1972 when, in explicit response to economic and social crises that David Harvey identifies as the beginning of the neoliberalization of social life, Trout and Ries formulated their systematic method of winning consideration for any product, service or person based explicitly on the circumvention of critical thought.

The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction is Walter Benjamin’s seminal contribution to the critical understanding of politics, art and consciousness and is often instrumentalized and read to discover ways to use media effectively, to effectively aestheticize politics, rather than politicize art. In its state of technological reproducibility the authentic, original work is no longer possible, its aura is lost. This is lamentable in that the history and knowledge that constitute the web of tradition that contextualizes the authentic work is lost and cannot be reproduced. But if art is left to ritual, if it is left in its context of tradition and exclusion, the minds of the people, of the masses, might be robbed of any experience of art at all. This matters to Benjamin because he recognizes a profound connection between the culture of a people, political awareness and the possibility for human freedom. Free people can't be produced just by revolutionizing the economic base of society—the art of a people and the way they perceive their world has to change as well. The work of art is changed in the process of reproduction so that authenticity is impossible to experience, but for the masses that would otherwise be entirely excluded from experiencing the work at all, an aura-less reproduction turns out to be a productive and fungible resource for political thought. Benjamin writes that, “the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice—politics” (Benjamin 2007, pp. 224). For Benjamin, the mode of human perception is changing and its changing for reasons that are contingent and historical, not simply natural or predetermined and the democratization of art has the potential to serve

the forces of fascist domination as well as it can serve the interests of communist emancipation.

Benjamin recognizes that by the late 1930s art is being deployed by fascists to keep the masses in a state of distraction because a distracted people are more likely to continue to participate in the uncritical reproduction of their own domination. But Benjamin is unwilling to take the step that his friend Theodor Adorno was often willing to take to declare that the “distracted” and unreflective masses are more or less condemned to stupefied domination partly because of their distracted reception and partly because of the commodified nature of the reproduced work of art. Reception in a state of distraction is a fact for most people taking in reproduced art that exists undeniably in the commodity form, but, for Benjamin, that does not seal the fate either of the work of art nor of the masses.

Film, for Benjamin, is industrial society's best hope for connecting with the distracted public's newly minted perceptual apparatus. In an uncompleted work on the development of mass culture Benjamin intended to appropriate, “the new techniques of film so that it could meet the distracted public halfway, in order to expose to them how and why reality became composed of illusions in the first place” (Buck-Morss 1983, pg. 214). Whether or not the film as an art form is always already a commodity and therefore too much a part of the system to contribute to critical awareness, or whether the mass audience is critically educated or attentively focused can not be the criteria for determining whether or not revolutionary politics should engage with film as an object of study and as a means of expression. Whether or not this is the perfect material for the perfect audience doesn't ultimately matter because this is the material at hand and this is the social and cognitive world we are confronted with. The same is true of promotional culture in 2011. Benjamin draws the distinction between Fascist and communist art, once art is torn from its ritualistic traditional context and thereby made political, as the difference between aestheticizing politics versus politicizing art. Benjamin recognizes

that, “its [Mankind] self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order. This is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic. Communism responds by politicizing art” (Benjamin 2007, 242). It is instructive to keep in mind Benjamin’s notion that the aestheticization of politics must eventually lead to war when considering the role that branding played in the lead up to “Shock and Awe” and the invasion of Iraq. If the common sense practice in political communications is aligned with Jack Trout’s advice, then there can be no doubt of the accuracy of Benjamin’s thesis. Insofar as politics is treated like a marketing exercise, as though nothing more important is at stake than which side has the more popular messaging strategy, there can be no other way to solve intractable issues than by taking up the gun because the opportunity for rational discourse is obliterated by *positioning*. This is exactly the situation as we find it in 2011.

Political communication has been dominated by brand theory for at least a generation as the seminal work, *The Selling of the President* (McGuinness 1968), on the marketing techniques employed by the Nixon campaign, outlined a generation ago. Ronald Reagan was the most successful pitchman in the history of that profession before getting into politics and Hal Riney, a well-known advertising executive, is popularly credited with winning the 1984 election for Ronald Reagan with the “It's Morning in America” spot, branding Reagan as a proud, hopeful and inspiring candidate while pushing his policies and positions into the background. The effectiveness and fallout of the campaign are impressively summarized by Henry Giroux:

“Ronald Reagan's infamous "it's morning in America" slogan, used as part of his 1984 presidential campaign, paved the way for a set of market-driven policies that historians faithful to the human record will be compelled to rename twilight in America to signal a historical crisis fueled less by a spirited hope for the future than by a shocking refusal to be held accountable to and for it. The policies that informed Reagan's neoliberal agenda have given way to the intense assault now being waged by his more extremist governmental descendants on all vestiges of the democratic state. This brutal evisceration includes a rejection and devaluing of the welfare state, unions, public values, young people, public and higher education; and other political, social and economic institutions and forces in American life that provide a counterweight against the political power of mega-corporations, the rich and the powerful” (Giroux, truth-out.org 03.08.11)

While I can not quite suggest that a successfully *positioned* brand necessarily leads directly to 30 years of neoliberal dystopia, it is becoming clear that *positioning* is a theory and method with deeply reactionary, and yes, blatantly fascist roots which means it should come as no surprise that a social world constructed according to the demands of successful brand positioning would be hostile to critical education, direct democracy and the public use of reason to interrogate dogma and conventional wisdom.

Those are the circumstances that demand a return to the historical development of branding into the dominant structuring element of neoliberal social life so that a new, critical approach to promotional culture can be fashioned in opposition to the old instrumentalist approach.

Writing in the early seventies, Trout and his co-author Al Ries were trying to sell their services to a capitalist world that was experiencing a deep economic and political crisis. This is how Trout and Ries saw it: “The average mind is already a dripping sponge that can only soak up more information at the expense of what’s already there. Yet we continue to pour more information into that saturated sponge and are disappointed when our messages fail to get through” (Trout pp. 7). So, the problem they see for advertisers is that decreasing sales are the result of the public’s inundation with information—a condition that we know is taking place because they are no longer responding to advertising as efficiently as they used to. The solution is to provide a service to the public by stripping out any and all useful information about the actual thing in itself that needs to be advertised. “Who,” they ask, “is trying to help the prospect cope with complexity that so overwhelms the mind that the average reaction to the wealth of information today is to tighten the intake valve? To accept less and less of what is so freely available? *Communication itself is the communication problem*” (Trout pp. 7 italics added). So, again, the problem is not that an enthusiastic public with increasing access to informational resources is making a rational decision to resist marketers, the problem

must be that marketers are giving the poor, overcommunicated people too much information about the products that are available.

Henry Giroux holds out hope for the possibility of critical education inside the formal system of schooling, but he also recognizes the rapid growth in the pedagogical importance of everyday life itself, “public pedagogy,” the prominent educational role played by what Raymond Williams might call the total “structure of feeling,” but what we know to be a neoliberal social life that has been entirely subsumed by branding generally and *positioned* brands specifically. Giroux holds fast to his faith in institutions of formal education and their role in producing democratically-capable citizens, but neoliberal dominance has produced an environment that would be unrecognizable to the tradition of critical education theorists that studied the pre-neoliberal world and, “had no way, in their time, of recognizing that the larger culture would extend, if not supersede, institutionalized education as the most important educational force in the developed societies” (Giroux 2004 pp. 109).

Elsewhere, Giroux vividly describes the densely textured web of pedagogical culture that frames and fills neoliberal everyday life:

“Mass-produced images fill our daily lives and condition our most intimate perceptions and desires. At issue for parents, educators, and others is how culture, especially media culture, has become a substantial, if not the primary, educational force in regulating the meanings, values and tastes that set the norms that offer up and legitimate particular subject positions—what it means to claim an identity as a male, female, white, black, citizen, noncitizen. The media culture defines childhood, the national past, beauty, truth and social agency... The American Medical Association reports that the ‘number of hours spent in front of a television or video screen is the single biggest chunk of time in the waking life of an American child.’” (Giroux 2010 pp. 3)

If media culture is indeed our society’s primary pedagogical tool, efforts to connect the dots between the consumer of culture, the cultural product as presented and the underlying processes which motivate the creation and shape the construction of that product must be relentlessly pursued, rigorously researched and effectively communicated to both an intellectual and popular audience. Giroux (Giroux 1993) points

the way in a 1993 article where he specifically focuses on cultural workers as occupying key positions in the production of a promotional culture that holds the potential to be deployed on behalf of a critical public pedagogy and the empowerment of an engaged democratic population. Cultural workers are in a position to deeply influence the way culture is done in the neoliberal context and, because the branded culture of everyday life is constitutive of neoliberalism, to change the historical course of neoliberal development by initiating a critical renaissance in branding. Consider that Giroux, while speaking at the opening of the Paulo And Nita Freire International Project for Critical Pedagogy at McGill University in March 2008, said that neoliberalism is, “not just about the concentration of wealth but it’s also about a public pedagogy, a massive teaching machine that extends from CNN to Fox television to right-wing radio stations that’s endlessly pumping out the presupposition that this is it: that’s all there is-- the market is the measure of anything and... profits are the essence of democracy. The real question now becomes how do you begin to link these forces?”

The link, by now, should be clear. Branding is the cultural dominant of neoliberalism and it is the keystone that holds together the entire apparatus of neoliberal subject production. The way branding has been done up to now, *positioning*, has developed co-evolutionarily with neoliberalism and branding done critically can appropriate the neoliberal brand apparatus toward the purpose of supporting an engaged and participatory democratic population. Instead of trying to find out what kinds of hopes and fears already exist among a target audience and then position your brand next to their hopes and your competing brand next to their fears, a critical brand theory has to start from a different set of questions and has to employ the brand toward a different set of goals. Critical branding needs to begin with an honest evaluation of the current conditions under which most people have to live out their lives.

The root of the issue is not branding itself. Branding is ultimately a technology of public communication that functions admirably in the contemporary environment to

communicate information to a mass audience that is [free from](#) the traditional limits of time and space. The root of the issue is the conflation of *positioning* with branding as such. The solution is to clearly state critical branding's opposition to *positioning* thereby de-naturalizing *positioning* while offering cultural workers (and in 2011 every neoliberal citizen is also a brand strategist) an alternative, critical method for building a brand.

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