

Anti-Consumerism & American Identity:
*The Adbusters Media Foundation & Reverend Billy's
Church of Stop Shopping in the Late Twentieth Century*

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Introduction

In 1979, President Jimmy Carter spoke the following words in a speech that was nationally broadcasted during the energy crisis:

Too many of us now, tend to worship indulgence and consumption. Human identity is no longer defined by what one does, but by what one owns. But we've discovered that owning things and consuming things does not satisfy our longing for meaning. We've learned that piling up material goods cannot fill the emptiness of lives which have no confidence or purpose... This is not a message of happiness or reassurance, but it is the truth and it is a warning.¹

In this speech, the former American President did not raise a new topic, as the United States has been perceived by many as the epitome of a consumer culture. Scholar Lizabeth Cohen for example, states that mass-consumption goes hand in hand with American society of the twentieth century.² Still, for a US President to claim that American identity is defined by what the people consume is a serious statement. Moreover, to many other authors and critics Cohen is right. Peter C. Whybrow, for instance, argues that “the citizens of the United States have created a culture of unprecedented affluence.”³ He claims that American society, which is fully saturated with consumption, shows that “we humans have troubles setting limits to our instinctual craving.”⁴

In response to this consumerist behavior, several movements and activist groups have emerged that protest against consumption. This thesis will examine how several of these activist groups in the United States have been trying to actively resist consumerism and in doing so also trying to raise awareness among those who are the targeted consumers; the American people. With satire, (pop) culture, and various publications, many anti-consumerist movements have been appearing throughout the northern American continent. This thesis will look at two of these movements, the Adbusters Foundation and the “Church of Stop Shopping,” from the late 1980s on. How they have been operating and how they are being

¹ “Crisis of Confidence,” PBS: Public Broadcasting Service, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/primary-resources/carter-crisis/>

² Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 9.

³ Peter C. Whybrow, *American Mania: When More Is Not Enough* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc, 2005), 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

received by the public and the media. Moreover, this thesis will examine why there has been so much activism against consumerism in the US. Moreover, whether consumerism is debated in the context of American identity is a much debated topic. Although it is impossible and unrealistic to speak of “the” American identity as if there is one uniform identity for every American, it must be admitted that there are some true American core values that are reflected in the lives of many American people. Some examples are religion, individual freedoms like freedom of speech and freedom of choice, and one American foundational tradition; democracy. Some of these traditions are so important to many Americans that they have become embedded into the American way of life. Moreover, many scholars in the American Studies discipline have attempted to demonstrate how Americans have tried to define their own society around various core values. In other words, American identity is a highly complex concept that is debated in many different contexts, and also in the context of American consumerist society, which will be the focus in this thesis.

This relationship between the concept of American identity and consumerism also raises a different question that will address this thesis; namely what the relationship is between America and *anti*-consumerism. This thesis will analyze the extent to which American identity is debated in these anti-consumerist movements.

The main focus will be on two very different anti-consumerist movements that both use a rather different strategy, but some same tactics, in their protest against consumption. The first group is the Adbusters Media Foundation, founded in Canada that now has become a non-profit organization with an ad-free magazine, which is also called *Adbusters*. Although in current times the Adbusters are very much involved with “Occupy Wall Street,” this thesis focuses on their actions against consumerism in the United States. The second and very different group, which has similar goals is the “Church of Stop Shopping,” of Reverend Billy (Bill Talen). This satirical church has been operating since the late 1990s and spreads its anti-consumerist “gospel” throughout the United States. They have been protesting and rallying in several places where consumption is rampant, such as shopping malls, Las Vegas, and Disneyland. Something that unites the two groups is their involvement in the “Buy Nothing Day.” According to Adbusters “Buy Nothing Day has been about fasting from hyper consumerism – a break from the cash register and reflecting on how dependent we really are on conspicuous consumption.”⁵ Both Reverend Billy and the Adbusters organization have

⁵ “Occupy Xmas,” Adbusters Media Foundation, accessed May 15, 2012, <http://www.adbusters.org/campaigns/bnd>.

spread the “gospel” to buy nothing on November 25th; America’s biggest shopping day of the year, which is also called “Black Friday.”

This thesis focuses on these two groups because they both are quite large groups that reach a substantial audience. Moreover, both movements have been active in the same time frame; from the late twentieth century up until the present. The 1990s is an interesting historical period to examine as it is the era in which people started to consume more than ever, but it is also a “decade [that] brings a revival of older notions of consumerism.”⁶ In this post-cold war period the capitalist system experienced a serious peak, and which in return caused resistance against extreme and ever increasing consumerism in American society. A concept like environmental awareness started to gain more attention in this period. At the same time, big corporations like Wal-Mart made an enormous progress in penetrating in American society. The increase of both consumerism and *anti*-consumerism makes this an interesting period. Therefore, this thesis will focus on anti-consumerist movements in the late twentieth century in the United States.

According to Roberta Sassatelli consumerism is “a continuous and unremitting search for new, fashionable but superfluous things, which social critics have branded as causing personal discontent and public disengagement in advanced capitalism.”⁷ In other words, consumerism and especially over-consumption has instigated a critical reaction on how the American people have become consumers instead of producers. This critical reaction can be labelled as anti-consumerism.

Although many authors and scholars have attempted to define consumerism each of them approaches consumerism in a different way. Kim Humphery for example, professor at RMIT University in Melbourne Australia, even argues that consumerism is “not an abstract, [nor an] academic concept.”⁸ In his latest publication *Excess: Anti-Consumerism in the West*, he explains how consumerism currently is utilized as a “negative descriptor of a western – and increasingly global – *Zeitgeist*.”⁹ In other words, according to Humphery consumerism has become a concept that is understood as the embodiment of greed, wastefulness, indulgence and social disconnection. Moreover, consumerism is often connected to an “ethos of materialism,” that entails the “overvaluing of things and money.”¹⁰

⁶ Lawrence C. Glickman, *Consumer Society in American History: A Reader* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 7.

⁷ Roberta Sassatelli, *Consumer Culture: History, Theory and Politics* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2007), 2.

⁸ Kim Humphery, *Excess: Anti-Consumerism in the West* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), x.

⁹ *Ibid.*, x.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, xi.

Cultural historian Lawrence B. Glickman does not completely agree with Humphrey, as he argues that consumerism is not merely understood as wastefulness. Glickman states that consumerism has become a more plural concept than just excessive materialism. According to Glickman consumption is perceived “as moral danger, popular culture, economic policy, political activity, and as a symbol of modernity itself.”¹¹ In other words, consumerism remains a very complex concept to define in exact terms, and as Glickman notes, this complexity of consumption symbolizes the relationship the United States has with consumerism. Although he does not think that Americans are innately consumers and that consumption defines the American people, he does argue that “consumption has long been central to American identity, culture, economic development and politics.”¹²

It is clear that it is necessary to clearly define consumerism as a concept and the context in which it is used. Scholar Roger Swagler argues that the term consumerism experienced a continuous transformation in approximately the last fifty years. However, according to Swagler consumerism is currently mostly defined as “excess materialism.”¹³

One of the most important scholars in the discussion on American consumerism is Lizabeth Cohen, who is currently professor of American Studies at Harvard University. Cohen focuses in her influential book *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* on American consumerism in post WWII and connects consumption with citizenship. She argues that consumerism and citizenship are intertwined since the 1950s. This opposes a general perception of Americans as citizens *or* as consumers, however Cohen combines them into one as being a vital element of American identity from the 1950s on. According to Cohen, American consumers played a large role after WWII in the country's recovery. Cohen defines two consumer groups, the citizen consumers and the purchaser consumers. She explains that the first are those who were seen as “responsible for safeguarding the general good of the nation, for prodding government to protect the rights, safety, and fair treatment of individual consumers in the private marketplace.”¹⁴ The second group however, the purchaser consumers, were perceived as the group that contributed to American society and politics through their purchasing power rather than engaging on an actual political level. Cohen clarifies her argument by stating that America now lives with a “new post-war ideal of the consumer as citizen who simultaneously fulfils personal desires

¹¹ Glickman, *Consumer Society*, 1.

¹² *Ibid.*, 1.

¹³ Roger Swagler, “Evolution and Applications of the Term Consumerism: Theme and Variations,” *The Journal of Consumer Affairs* 28 (Winter 1994), 356.

¹⁴ Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic*, 18.

and civic obligation by consuming.”¹⁵ Drawing on Cohen’s argument, it can be argued that consuming is part of being a true American citizen. In post-war times purchasing and consuming became civic duties, to contribute to the country’s recovery. Therefore, consuming became part of the American way of life.

Someone who focuses on the same historical period as Lizabeth Cohen is historian Elaine Tyler May. She attempts to answer the question why consumerism has become an important part of American identity, and her focal point is on the 1950s. In this time period, consuming was a privilege in the United States, as every American was entitled to own a nice home, car and television, and only with those possessions the American Dream was within reach. According to May, consumerism “provided a means for assimilation into the American way of life.”¹⁶ In other words, the term consumerism mainly referred in its early years to a means of living the true American life. May describes how President Nixon was “selling” the American way of life with a perfect and all-American house to Soviet Premier Khrushchev in the famous “kitchen-debate” in 1959. This historical moment is very important since it shows how consuming became a vital element for American identity, as home-ownership ever since has been an essential part of living the true American life. Moreover, the home became also the place that displayed the family’s success “through the accumulation of consumer goods.”¹⁷ However, May argues that in this postwar period consumerism entailed much more than just having some luxury items in the home. Rather, consumerism included “important cultural values, demonstrated success and social mobility, and defined lifestyles.”¹⁸ In other words, the all-American home and the nice items for in the home went beyond as being merely commodities, as in the 1950s these elements of ownership became embedded in American identity.

Cultural sociologist Roberta Sassatelli attempts to clarify why consumerism has become a concept with a negative connotation. She argues that “in consumer culture, identity formation is no longer based on stable ideals maintained by the traditional family, but on the possibility of ‘presenting’ a convincing ‘saleable’ image of the self.”¹⁹ In other words, in consumer culture personalities become isolated and humans are no longer engaged in families or other social structures but merely with themselves and their “objects [that are]

¹⁵ Cohen, *A Consumers’ Republic*, 119.

¹⁶ Elaine Tyler May, “The Commodity Gap,” in *Consumer Society in American History: A Reader*, ed. Lawrence B. Glickman (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 306.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 300.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 313.

¹⁹ Sassatelli, *Consumer Culture*, 118.

interchangeable with other objects.”²⁰ Clearly, the term consumerism has turned into a negative concept. Drawing on Sassatelli’s argument, consumer goods have become very important in many people’s lives, and even defining in one’s identity.

Some argue that consumerism has become far too prominent in many western countries, and especially in the United States, and that this needs to be stopped. Therefore, various groups and subcultures have emerged in late twentieth century to protest against American consumer culture. “Culture jamming” is an example of active resistance against consumerism, but also against capitalism, big corporations and globalization. Both the Adbusters Media Foundation and the Church of Stop Shopping use culture jamming in their fight against consumerism. This form of activism entails among others the “practice of parodying advertisements and hijacking billboards in order to drastically alter their messages.”²¹ Kalle Lasn, one of the founders of the Adbusters Media Foundation, states in his book *Culture Jam: How to Reverse America's Suicidal Consumer Binge - And Why We Must* that culture jammers have given up on the American Dream, and that they feel that they need to stand up against the destructive regime that is called consumer capitalism.²² Another cultural critic, Mark Dery, made the term culture jamming known to the public. Dery explains in his pamphlet that culture jammers are “both artistic terrorists [and] vernacular critics.”²³ This thesis will analyze how the Adbusters Foundation and the Church of Stop Shopping use culture jamming in order to attempt to transform American society.

Most importantly, this thesis tries to examine how two different movements are operating in their battle against consumerism in the United States. It will be discussed how “American” consumerism is and in what ways the national American identity is debated in anti-consumerist movements.

²⁰ Sassatelli, *Consumer Culture*, 118.

²¹ Naomi Klein, *No Logo* (London: Harper Perennial 2005), 280.

²² Kalle Lasn, *Cultuurkrakers*, trans. Willemien de Leeuw (Rotterdam: Lemniscaat, 1999), 123.

²³ Mark Dery, *Culture Jamming: Culture Jamming, Hacking, Slashing and Sniping in the Empire of Signs* (Westfield: Open Magazine Pamphlet Series, 1993), 6.

Chapter 1: Intellectual Origins of US Anti-Consumerism

Consumption is central to both the material and ideological components of American identity; it is simultaneously a concrete institution and a guiding myth.²⁴

As mentioned earlier on, consumerism is often perceived as a concept that is closely related to American national identity. One reason for Americans to get labelled as extreme consumers is because of the extreme availability of consumer goods that are displayed everywhere in the country. Moreover, the United States has the world's highest rate of obesity; more than 35% of the adults in America are obese and about 17% of the children.²⁵ In comparison to for example Canada and Italy; in 2009 only 16.5% of the Canadians were obese, and 10.3% of the Italians.²⁶ This shows that overconsumption in the United States not just relates to consumer goods, but also to food. In other words, it seems that the American people are being perceived as excessive consumers. This chapter explores in more details how consumerism is intertwined in American identity and why. Moreover, this thesis will also examine whether American national identity is exposed in anti-consumerism in the United States. This will be explored through focusing on the intellectual origins of US anti-consumerism; the predecessors and fellow activists of the Adbusters Media Foundation and the Church of Stop Shopping.

As consumerism in the United States is a much-debated topic, many authors have expressed their thoughts in the discussion on American culture and its controversial relation to consumerism. Authors such as Thorstein Veblen (1857-1929), David M. Potter (1910-1971), and Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007) are often cited by contemporary authors in the discussion on American consumerism. Veblen, an American nineteenth century social critic, was one of the first scholars who started to question people's consumerist behavior. His ideas on consumerism were revolutionary in that time, as the concept of a consumer culture in the United States had only just emerged. In his influential book *The Theory of the Leisure's Class* (1899) Veblen introduced the term "conspicuous consumption" which entails the display of wealth by the rich. According to Veblen, a person's social status depends on the goods you

²⁴ Glickman, *Consumer Society*, 2.

²⁵ "Overweight and Obesity: Facts," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, last modified April 27, 2012, <http://www.cdc.gov/obesity/data/facts.html>.

²⁶ "OECD Health Data 2011," Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, accessed May 24, 2012, <http://www.oecd.org>.

own. Moreover, Veblen was one of the first to point out that consuming revolved around social structures rather than around utility. In his book, Veblen gives an example of how rich people display their status; using handmade silver forks and spoons instead of regular machine made cutlery made out of less valuable material, although they might work the same or even better. According to Veblen, “the utility of articles...depends closely upon the expensiveness of the articles.”²⁷ Consumer goods are therefore consumed for their value rather than their usefulness. In other words, Veblen’s unconventional thoughts of that particular period reflect the contemporary general perception on what consumerism entails in present time.

The thoughts on consumerism of the French post-modernist Jean Baudrillard corresponded with those of Veblen. More than sixty years later, Baudrillard argued that the production of goods was replaced by merely the value of goods in relation to the value of other goods. He therefore also argued that social status depended on brands, or “signs,” as Baudrillard called them. Moreover, he perceived consumption in a social context, as consumption did not function for “individual satisfaction, but rather an infinite social activity.”²⁸ With this Baudrillard meant that a commodity no longer is consumed for what it can do for an individual, but merely what status it can give to that individual within a social structure. In other words, similar to Veblen only in a different period, Baudrillard provides a theory that entails that consumerism merely revolves around social meaning through the value of goods. According to Baudrillard, utility of goods have become trivial, as goods are merely consumed for their value in relation to the value of other goods. Moreover, Baudrillard perceived consumption as a “system of meaning, like language, or like the kinship system in primitive times.”²⁹ In short, this post-modernist thinker argued that consumption functions as the social system or language within a society.

American historian David Potter argued already in the 1950s in his *People of Plenty* that the American population was a “people of plenty.” According to Potter, the most important factor that shaped American national identity is what he calls “economic abundance.” With economic abundance Potter means “the unusual plenty of available goods or other usable wealth which has prevailed in America.”³⁰ Potter argues that the Americans

²⁷ Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* (New York: Macmillan, 1915), 126.

²⁸ Jean Baudrillard, “Consumer Society,” in *Consumer Society in American History: A Reader*, ed. Lawrence C. Glickman (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 43.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 48.

³⁰ David Potter, *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1954), xxv.

are innately consumers as they are constantly being exposed to an inexhaustible availability of goods that have turned the Americans into a people of plenty. According to Lizabeth Cohen, Potter's view on American abundance is the start of America as a "consumer's culture."

Some authors use the general term "the West" in the discussion of contemporary consumer cultures rather than concentrating on the United States. Roberta Sassatelli for example argues that most people that grow up in western societies are confronted with a "cornucopia of commodities and commercialized services."³¹ In that sense it can also be argued that the United States is merely a harbinger of all consumer societies.

Clearly, America being a consumer society is a much debated subject for a long time. Authors such as Veblen, Baudrillard and Potter are relevant in this discussion because they stem from different time periods and they provide foundational theories in the discussion on the United States and its complex relation to consumerism.

Defining American Consumerism

In attempt to define consumerism and its relation to the United States, it becomes clear that many authors approach the concept from different perceptions and angles. British social critic Raymond Williams is one of the most significant authors in the field of cultural studies in the 20th century. According to Williams the terms consumer or consumption are "the predominant descriptive nouns of all kinds of use of goods and services. The predominance is significant in that it relates to a particular version of economic activity, derived from the character of a particular system."³² Williams traces the use of the concept of consumption back to the 15th century. The term consumerism, however, was not used until the twentieth century. Since approximately the 1940s, consumerism means the protection of consumers and the independency and self-reliance of consumers.³³ In other words, only much later the term consumerism received its contemporary value-judgement of an excessive desire for material goods.

Some authors argue that consumers will never be satisfied with what they own as their desires are only fulfilled with new desires. An interesting perception on this and on American consumerist behavior in general are the findings of psychiatrist and author Peter C. Whybrow. His genetic and psychological research combined with a profound examination of American

³¹ Sassatelli, *Consumer Culture*, 1.

³² Raymond Williams, "Consumer," in *Consumer Society in American History: A Reader*, ed. Lawrence B. Glickman (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 17.

³³ Roger Swagler, "Evolution and Applications of the Term Consumerism: Theme and Variations," *The Journal of Consumer Affairs* 28 (Winter 1994): 348.

cultural history has resulted in some fascinating conclusions. Whybrow has come up with the argument that Americans have become unable to satisfy their desires, as every fulfilled desire creates another to be fulfilled desire. Moreover, according to Whybrow, no other society offers so much abundant choice as the American society, and clearly the Americans do not know how to handle this abundance. As Whybrow explains: “the material wealth and the abundant choice available in contemporary US society are unique in human experience. Never before in the history of our species have so many enjoyed so much.”³⁴ He claims that the search for happiness is replaced by a continuous craving for more. In other words, in spite of enjoying the affluence, Americans merely demand for more without even noticing their wealth and affluence. Moreover, Whybrow argues that the brains of the American people are unable to cope with modern consumerism, as they have become unable to set limits to their insatiable desires. However, the question then remains why this is so vital to *American* culture and why Americans are perceived as the most extreme consumers of the world. According to Whybrow it must be acknowledged that this rampant consumerism is also starting to emerge in many other industrialized countries. However, the reason why consumption is so very much visible in American culture is according to Whybrow the following:

because of America’s rare cultural mix of sophisticated technology, mass affluence, and the restless pursuit that derives from the émigré temperament. An exuberance of spirit remains one of the great assets of the American people. But in a deregulated commercial environment, that exuberance has no natural bridle...For those trapped in such addictive striving, more is never enough.³⁵

In other words, Whybrow suggests that since America is a country of immigrants, the national identity is still embedded with a continuous search for new and for more. And since America’s commercial availability is perpetual, this craving for new and more also remains perpetual.

Although the suggestion that the “émigré temperament” is connected to American consumerist behavior is merely a speculation, it is a useful theory in the discussion on America and its complex relation to consumerism. Whybrow’s argument does show that American culture is different from any other culture, due to the country’s extreme commercial conditions which results in extreme situations when it comes to consumerist behavior.

³⁴ Whybrow, *American Mania*, 1.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 107.

Anti-Consumerist rhetoric in the United States

American consumer culture also receives critical commentary. In the United States, anti-consumerist movements appear in all kinds of forms. These various sorts of anti-consumerism in America will be explored in this sub-chapter. First, it is necessary to define anti-consumerism, which is already done briefly in the introduction. Anti-consumerism is not merely a critical commentary on consumption, but also an opposition to western capitalism in general. Moreover, Kim Humphery perceives anti-consumerism rather as a “new politics of consumption” being an “oppositional discourse” that “informs a set of concrete responses to the conventional treadmill of work and spending.”³⁶

According to Roberta Sassatelli, consumption is criticized because some people are afraid that it would depersonalize consumers and destroy society as “all collective goods would be swallowed up by illusory private gratification.”³⁷ Furthermore, Sassatelli argues that advertising is one of the most important actors in letting consumer culture prevail. Although advertising used to focus merely on selling the product, advertisements currently promote complete lifestyles and even identities. Sassatelli links this to the phenomenon of “brands” which means that the brand not just refers to a product or company; “it is a symbol which evokes a series of meanings which serve as an interpretative and emotional frame.”³⁸ Moreover, many symbols that belong to a certain brand have become “self-referential signs,” which resulted in the fact that brands have become almost more important than the product itself.³⁹ A contemporary example would be computer brand Apple. Besides the fact that an Apple computer might be a product of good quality, the brand and its apple logo have become more important than the actual computer. In the second chapter the importance of advertising will be discussed in more detail.

Someone who also wrote about branding and consumerism is Naomi Klein. This influential Canadian author wrote one of the most famous works that focuses on globalization and anti-capitalism; *No Logo*. In this book Klein describes the development of brands, and how brands have become a global language. Through the process of branding people are being transformed into continuous consumers. Klein explains that advertisements have become “experiences” rather than simple messages about products. For example, Starbucks’ vice president of marketing, Scott Bedbury states that Starbucks needs to “establish emotional

³⁶ Humphery, *Excess*, 6.

³⁷ Sassatelli, *Consumer Culture*, 117.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 127.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 127.

ties” with their customers through providing a real “Starbucks experience.”⁴⁰ In other words, the brand has become a concept that is incorporated into a branded lifestyle.

Furthermore, Klein is relevant to the subject of this thesis as she attempts “to analyze the forces opposing corporate rule, and to lay out the particular set of cultural and economic conditions that made the emergence of that opposition inevitable.”⁴¹ In her observation, the more people are being exposed to logos, or brands, the more resistance it will cause. In the last chapter of *No Logo* Klein suggests that contemporary activism is “sowing the weeds of a genuine alternative to corporate rule.”⁴² In other words, taking Klein’s argument into account it could be stated that extremes on one side cause extremes on the other side as well. In other words, as the capitalist and corporate world has become so dominant today, resistance can be perceived as a natural reaction.

However, despite Klein’s significant contribution to the anti-capitalist and anti-globalist movement she does not really address American culture and its relation to consumerism explicitly. Klein rather focuses on the global discussion on capitalism and the corporate world. Still, she writes from within an American setting, which could imply that she does perceive the United States as the prime example of being a consumer society.

Moreover, Klein’s ideas are adopted by many different contemporary authors, which makes her a very influential author of present times. Furthermore, Klein describes that since the 1990s there has been an enormous growth in brands, and similarly the number of anti-corporate movements has been expanding along. Many of these movements have one thing in common, which is to expose inaccuracies that are going on behind the corporations’ closed doors, and to provide an alternative lifestyle to the corporate and capitalist world.

Although Klein does not really express it explicitly, she seems to imply that the United States are indeed the epitome of being a consumer’s culture. Moreover, it can be stated that Klein is the godmother of the ideas behind contemporary activism against the corporate and consumerist-saturated world. Her opinion on the Adbusters Foundation will be discussed in the next chapter.

Forms of Anti-Consumerism in the United States

One form of anti-consumerism that needs to be addressed in this chapter is “simple living,” which entails living a simple lifestyle voluntarily. This form of anti-consumerism is

⁴⁰ Klein, *No Logo*, 20.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, xxi.

⁴² *Ibid.*, xxi.

significant, as it exemplifies how people can actively resist consumerism with living an alternative lifestyle.

Simple living is also known as downsizing, downshifting or simplifying. The most common organization that engages with simple living is The Voluntary Simplicity Movement which is “a diverse social movement made up of people who are resisting high consumption lifestyles and who are seeking, in various ways, a lower consumption but higher quality of life alternative.”⁴³ In other words, simple living is a form of activism that explores living an alternative and immaterialist lifestyle. Moreover, this lifestyle resists complying with the general mainstream lifestyle that is saturated with consumption. Simple living moreover means being self-reliant, in the sense of cultivating own products so that one becomes less dependent on commercial goods and products.

Scholars Alexander and Ussher (Simplicity Institute) perceive The Voluntary Simplicity Movement as a “post-consumerist social movement” that offers a transition to a “just, sustainable and flourishing human civilization.”⁴⁴ According to the authors, overconsumption is the most important factor for causing “environmental degradation; global poverty; uneconomic growth; peak oil; and consumer malaise.”⁴⁵ Therefore, simple living is needed in attempt to reduce these serious global problems. In their research however they found out that consumers are locked into their consumerist lifestyles, which makes it very hard to step out of it and change your life so radically. Nobody knows how many people exactly live a “simplified life,” but between 1990 and 1995, according to the Merck Family Fund, more than 60 million Americans “voluntarily reduced their income and their consumption in conscious pursuit of new personal or household priorities.”⁴⁶ Moreover, the people who do decide to get rid of the consumerist lifestyle are often also active in political organizations that are related to their lifestyle. Therefore it can be argued that simple living can be perceived as a true form of activism against consumerism, or overconsumption, as Alexander and Ussher call it.

Besides movements like The Voluntary Simplicity Movement, or the Adbusters Foundation and The Church of Stop Shopping that will be discussed in the next chapters, there are many other forms of anti-consumerism in the United States. Naomi Klein could be an example of being a person or even an icon, who expresses her ideas on capitalism and

⁴³ Samuel Alexander and Simon Ussher, “The Voluntary Simplicity Movement: A Multi-National Survey Analysis in Theoretical Context,” *Journal of Consumer Culture* 12 (2012): 66.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁴⁶ Michael Maniates, “In Search of Consumptive Resistance,” in *Confronting Consumption*, ed. by Thomas Princen, Michael Maniates, and Ken Conca (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 200.

globalization. Other examples of contemporary and well-known critics on American consumerism are filmmaker and political activist Michael Moore, and anarchist John Zerzan. Thanks to his successful films, Michael Moore managed to reach a large audience. His films do not really deal with American consumerism in particular, but rather with big corporations and capitalism and their inescapable consequences to American society. In his latest film *Capitalism: A Love Story* Moore focuses on the latest financial crisis in the United States and scrutinizes the country's economy and capitalism in general. He ends his film with the following quote: "I refuse to live in a country like this, and I am not leaving."⁴⁷ Then he asks his audience if they want to join Moore in his activism. The filmmaker clearly uses his films to make people aware of everything that is going on in the United States and in the rest of the world, and he hopes that people will actively participate in resisting the current dominant system. Moore is an example of being a famous activist who has the possibilities to gather a large group as he belongs to the world's 100 most influential persons, according to *Time* magazine.⁴⁸

American anarchist John Zerzan has a rather extreme notion on taking action against American consumer culture. In the documentary *Surplus: Terrorized into Being Consumers* Zerzan states that non-violent protests against the capitalist system are useless. He explains that "the will to consume terrorizes you. We're terrorized into being consumers [and] we have the freedom to choose about brand A and B and C that's about it for freedom."⁴⁹ And the only way to get rid of consumer culture, Zerzan claims, is with "targeted property damage or property destruction."⁵⁰ In other words, in order to stop the excesses of consumerism targets like banks and corporation buildings need to be destroyed, or else we will never be able to ban extreme consumerism out of our daily lives. After the system will be destroyed, Zerzan aims for the world to become a hunter-gatherer society, and go back to primitivism. Zerzan's extreme notions are idealist, unrealistic and dangerous. Many of Zerzan followers took action in setting all sorts of things on fire, like for example SUVs and Chevrolets.⁵¹ Moreover, Zerzan claims that once the system is finally destroyed, everyone can turn to primitivism and peace will return to earth. As this is not very likely to happen anytime soon, it seems even more pointless to set buildings and cars on fire.

⁴⁷ *Capitalism: A Love Story*, directed by Michael Moore, Overture Films, 2009.

⁴⁸ Joel Stein, "Michael Moore: The Angry Filmmaker," *Time* (2005).

⁴⁹ *Surplus: Terrorized into Being Consumers*, directed by Erik Gandini, Sweden: Atmo Media Network, 2003.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Margot Roosevelt, "In Oregon, Anarchists Act Locally," *Time* 158 (2001).

Many scholars and thinkers offer their ideas on American consumerism. Some do not see consumerism as something that is necessarily bad like David Potter, who thinks that consumerism just belongs to the national identity of the American people without stating whether that is a good or a bad thing. Others see consumerism as waste and as a destructive system that dehumanizes and destroys society. The question whether consumerism is truly embedded in American identity remains unanswered. Still, it is undoubtedly true that Americans are consumers; many Americans even are extreme consumers. As Jimmy Carter said in 1979, Americans are now defined by what they own instead of what they do. With his warning, Carter also tried to make the American people aware of the fact that natural resources can not be acquired perpetually. It was a warning that his people had to put a halt to their consumerist behavior. In other words, American people seem to live in an extreme form of a consumer culture.

In regards to anti-consumerism in the United States, it is clear that there are many people that try to actively resist consumerism. Not just scholars, but also filmmakers and other critics protest against the contemporary notion of consumption in American society. Some try to resist consumption by raising public awareness, others want to take more extreme measures to “overthrow” consumer society. The anti-consumerist groups that are most active on the streets are interesting to this thesis. They make people aware in order to try to change the world as much as possible. Many of these groups are American, but then again, how is American identity debated in these American anti-consumerist movements? With two upcoming case studies this thesis attempts to answer this question in the next chapters.

Chapter 2: The Adbusters Media Foundation American Anti-Brand?

We [the Adbusters] are a global network of artists, activists, writers, pranksters, students, educators and entrepreneurs who want to advance the new social activist movement of the information age. Our aim is to topple existing power structures and forge a major shift in the way we will live in the 21st century.⁵²

This is how the Adbusters Media Foundation describes itself on their website. It shows who they are, what they do and what their goal is. Although the Adbusters Foundation was established in Canada, their activism chiefly occurs in the United States and is aimed at American corporations, government and culture. The Adbusters have become quite famous, as they are the initiators of the “Occupy Wall Street” movement. These issues of this particular movement are the greed of American banks, economic inequality and the power of big corporations. Before occupying Wall Street the Adbusters already organized a few significant campaigns, which will be discussed in this chapter. Most importantly, with their anti-consumerist activism they try to recover American identity that is now dominated by commercialism and consumption. Therefore, this chapter examines how the Adbusters, with their activism in the United States, debate American national character. In other words, to what extent are the Adbusters addressing American identity?

History and Overview of Adbusters Media Foundation

The Adbusters Media Foundation was founded in 1989 by Kalle Lasn and Bill Schmalz, and is based in Vancouver, Canada. They describe themselves as a “not-for-profit, and reader supported organization,” that protest against corporate and capitalist America, and the country’s culture that is saturated with consumption.⁵³ In short, the Adbusters “battle the commoditization of culture.”⁵⁴ Their activism is expressed through several public campaigns and a bi-monthly ad-free magazine, called *Adbusters*. Currently, the Adbusters are especially known for their contributions to the Occupy Wall Street movement. However, besides

⁵² “About Adbusters,” Adbusters, <http://www.adbusters.org/about/adbusters>.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Marilyn Bordwell, “Jamming Culture: Adbusters’ Hip Media Campaign against Consumerism,” in *Confronting Consumption* ed. By Thomas Princen, Michael Maniates, and Ken Conca (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 238.

occupying Wall Street, the Adbusters have several other noteworthy campaigns, which will be examined and analyzed further on in this chapter.

The Adbusters' very first action is a good example of how they have been operating since. In 1989 Lasn and Schmalz created a television commercial that told the environmentalist side of a huge campaign by the British Columbian logging industry. This multimillion-dollar ad, called "Forests Forever," showed the Canadian people that their trees were in good shape and were well preserved. Lasn and Schmalz thought that this was a romanticized and untrue story, and when they attempted to buy airtime no television station wanted to air their responsive commercial. The two men were upset that an environmentalist message did not get any chance to be broadcasted, whereas the forest industry had hours of airtime. That is how their first campaign started. After organizing hundreds of people to complain at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), the "Forest Forever" ad was cancelled by the CBC.⁵⁵ After this success, Lasn and Schmalz decided to form an actual movement; the Adbusters Media Foundation.

The Adbusters mission is on the one hand quite expansive, but in general they have two clear missions. The first is protesting against mass media and marketing that colonizes the public space and sphere, and the second one is against the corporate world that has transformed the American people into continuous consumers, but also destroyed the natural environment.⁵⁶ Via their website and magazine the Adbusters reach thousands of people who are interested in their messages. The most notable feature of the magazine is that it is completely ad-free. It is full of ideological and activist messages and pictures that depict criticism towards politics, environmental issues, and cultural subjects. The magazine is created by its readers and supporters that come from all over the world, as the magazine asks its reader for submissions.⁵⁷ This interactive and participatory readership makes the *Adbusters* a rather unconventional magazine, as it breaks down "the tired modernist distinction between audience and author and opening a new space for novel political participation."⁵⁸ However, the magazine does have very libertarian, left-wing and anarchistic characteristics, and therefore the magazine has a specific target group of readers and supporters. Nevertheless, the Adbusters claim that they have nearly 100,000 subscriptions worldwide.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Bordwell, "Jamming Culture," 243.

⁵⁶ Jennifer A. Sandlin, and Jennifer L. Milam, "'Mixing Pop (Culture) and Politics': Cultural Resistance, Culture Jamming, and Anti-Consumption Activism as Critical Public Pedagogy," *Curriculum Inquiry* 38 (2008), 328.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 331.

⁵⁸ Max Haiven, "Privatized Resistance: AdBusters Max and the Culture of Neoliberalism," *The Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 29 (2007), 88.

⁵⁹ "Adbusters Magazine," Adbusters, <http://www.adbusters.org/magazine> (7 May, 2012).

The Adbusters website is even more interactive than their magazine. There are numerous critical posts, blogs, and videos that are either submitted by the Adbusters editors or by visitors, and everyone can give comments on each other. As “Occupy Wall Street” is still very much going on while writing this thesis, there is obviously a great amount of material on the activism regarding this global protest. For example, there are activists that post videos of their personal experiences in the Occupy-movement. The website furthermore provides a very attractive preview of the *Adbusters* magazine with a persuasive request to subscribe to the magazine and to donate money. However, the most interesting form of communication the Adbusters use is culture jamming, which makes use of existing images and symbols that mostly stem from advertising.

Advertising

The Adbusters claim that advertisements “shape desire, structure consciousness, and clutter the landscapes of daily life.”⁶⁰ In other words, advertising promotes certain identities and what belongs to having that certain identity. Moreover, advertising turns people into passive consumers, and this is what the Adbusters try to overthrow. The aim of all of their activism is to raise awareness and to let the passive consumers become active citizens and become aware of how advertising dominates people’s lives and public sphere. Furthermore, Sassatelli argues that “advertising overall promotes consumption as a way of life, but it also accommodates a plurality of images of what consumption is and does to people and the world.”⁶¹ In other words, advertisements reflect real life as it shows to what extent consumer goods play a role in people’s daily lives.

The Adbusters argue that in America’s consumer culture, advertising turns people into branded individuals. Bordwell uses Wal-Mart as an example, where people are “encouraged to identify wholly with the store and the act of consuming.”⁶² One of the store’s advertising slogans captures this identification well: “I am a Wal-Mart shopper.”⁶³ In other words, brands and consumer goods not just satisfy needs, they have become essential in people’s way of life. Moreover, according to Sandlin and Callahan, advertisements draw on people’s emotions, and

⁶⁰ Bordwell, “Jamming Culture,” 238.

⁶¹ Sassatelli, *Consumer Culture*, 117.

⁶² Bordwell, “Jamming Culture,” 241.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 241.

due to the involvement of personal emotions it gets easier to get attached to the product that the ad is promoting. Advertisements thus connect “emotion to consumption.”⁶⁴

There are several methods of how advertising is communicated to the people. However, the most significant one is television, as every American watches television 2.7 hours each day.⁶⁵ Advertisements are no longer merely found in commercials; in almost every show, film, and even in the news ads appear. American cultural critic Mark Dery states that America has become an “Empire of Signs,” as America is a “TV democracy” in where reality has replaced by a virtual reality.⁶⁶ In a virtual reality, as Dery argues, consumers are unaware of the commercialization of information, as the information that is communicated to the people is empty; “signs that once pointed to distant realities now refer only to themselves.”⁶⁷ Bordwell agrees with Dery who states that the consumer gets swallowed by the television, as she argues that “advertising consumes us as we consume it.”⁶⁸

It is clear that advertising is the most important factor in maintaining consumerism. Moreover, as “advertisements [themselves] are consumed,” it is these messages to the people that the Adbusters need to use in order to tell their own alternative story to the consumers, also known as culture jamming.⁶⁹

Culture Jamming

Culture jamming “aims to liberate the mental environment from the powerful grip of market-structured consciousness by reclaiming airwaves and public spaces to propagate ideas instead of plugging products.”⁷⁰ In short, culture jammers transform the original commercial message into a completely new idea. The term “cultural jamming” was first used by a college band called Negativland in 1984. They used it to describe “billboard alteration and other forms of media sabotage.”⁷¹ The Adbusters are presumably one of the largest groups that actively use culture jamming to send their message to the public. Humphery refers to culture jamming as a cultural politics of consumption that is “focused on challenging the ideology of consumerism purveyed through advertising.”⁷² Indeed, advertising is arguably the most important factor in

⁶⁴ Jennifer A. Sandlin and Jamie L. Callahan, “Deviance, Dissonance, and Détournement: Culture Jammers’ Use of Emotion in Consumer Resistance,” *Journal of Consumer Culture* 9 (2009), 83.

⁶⁵ “Bureau of Labor Statistics,” United States Department of Labor, last modified June 22, 2011, <http://www.bls.gov/>.

⁶⁶ Dery, *Culture Jamming*, 2.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁶⁸ Bordwell, “Jamming Culture,” 242.

⁶⁹ Sassatelli, *Consumer Culture*, 131.

⁷⁰ Bordwell, “Jamming Culture,” 238.

⁷¹ Dery, *Culture Jamming*, 6.

⁷² Humphery, *Excess*, 50.

the process of culture jamming as it is the language of consumer culture. Therefore, advertising is the most important factor in the Adbusters' battle against the commodification of American society and culture.

Kalle Lasn (Adbusters Media Foundation) states that culture jammers have given up on the American Dream, and that they feel they need to stand up against the destructive regime that they call consumer capitalism.⁷³ Mark Dery made the term culture jamming known to the public. In his pamphlet *Culture Jamming*, Dery explains that culture jammers are “both artistic terrorists [and] vernacular critics,” and that they “intrude on the intruders, they invest ads, newscasts, and other media artifacts with subversive meanings; simultaneously, they decrypt them, rendering their seductions impotent.”⁷⁴ In other words, culture jammers express their critique towards a brand or company by using the company's own advertisements, only completely modified.

“Subvertisements,” parodies of advertisements, have become the Adbusters' distinctive mark together with their “uncommercials” that are broadcasted on television. One famous example of a subvertisement made by Adbusters is an image of the American flag where the stars are replaced by brand logos such as Apple, Starbucks, Nike, and many more. This image represents the commoditization of the United States. Another example of a subvertisement is an advertisement by Shell where the letter “S” is replaced by the dollar mark “\$,” which makes the ad say “\$hell.”

Since the Adbusters often use the exact same logo and colors the ad seems very similar to a real one, which makes the subvertisements successful messages. The reason why these “unadvertisements” work is because they strike the eye right away, since one will recognize the icon immediately. At the same time, the distortion in the icon or logo also stands out instantly. As Jennifer A. Sandlin and Jennifer L. Milam argue; “Adbusters' subvertisements operate like vaccines or antidotes to memes, as they shake us out of consumer trances and refocus our attention on messages that run counter to dominant media ideology.”⁷⁵ Memes are cultural transmissions from one brain to another.⁷⁶ In other words, culture jammers use the power of brand logos, since these icons are already printed in consumers' consciences and therefore recognized instantly by the public. Whoever uses these

⁷³ Lasn, *Cultuurkrakers*, 123.

⁷⁴ Dery, *Culture Jamming*, 6.

⁷⁵ Sandlin and Milam, “Mixing Pop (Culture) and Politics,” 332.

⁷⁶ Lasn, *Cultuurkrakers*, 135.

existing and powerful logos and icons has the power in getting the attention, and therefore “Adbusters fight fire with fire.”⁷⁷

The tactics the Adbusters employ are often called “guerrilla” warfare, or “guerrilla” semiotics. Their subvertisements and uncommercials are far from being subtle or abstract messages. Most images are confronting, sometimes shocking and often irreverent. For instance, on one picture created by the Adbusters, it presents a mother breast feeding her baby. The baby’s entire body is completely covered with brand logos such as Nike, McDonald’s and Coca-Cola. It is implied that the logos are tattooed on the baby’s skin, which sends the message that everyone from birth on is already imprinted with the dominant brands. Moreover, it implies that from day one these brands dominate everyone’s life, which makes it almost impossible to get out of the system.

Another profound example of a “guerrilla” subvertisement is one where Joe the Camel, the cartoon character of cigarette brand Camel, has turned into “Joe Chemo.”⁷⁸ In one version the camel lays in bed looking very ill while getting chemo, and in the other version he is dead and lays in an open coffin. These two examples show how the Adbusters use “guerrilla” tactics in order to let people pay attention to what the Adbusters call the destructive regime of consumer capitalism.

Buy Nothing Day

The most significant campaign in the Adbusters’ battle against consumerism and overconsumption is their involvement in “Buy Nothing Day.” The first day to buy nothing was originally organized in 1992 by Canadian artist Ted Dave, and later promoted by the Adbusters. Although Buy Nothing Day has become an international event; more than a million people “celebrate” the day in countries all over the world, the main focus is on the United States. Since Buy Nothing Day is held on the Friday after the American holiday Thanksgiving, the busiest shopping day of the year in the United States, it is clear that the Adbusters mainly aim at the American consumers and their extreme shopping behavior on the day where shopping peaks more than ever.

From the beginning, according to the Adbusters, Buy Nothing Day “has been about fasting from hyper consumerism – a break from the cash register and reflecting on how dependent we really are on conspicuous consumption.”⁷⁹ Every year the Adbusters turn Buy

⁷⁷ Bordwell, “Jamming Culture,” 238.

⁷⁸ The Ad Game, *Adbusters*, <http://www.adbusters.org/spoofads/ad-game>.

⁷⁹ “Occupy Xmas,” *Adbusters*, <http://www.adbusters.org/campaigns/bnd>.

Nothing Day into a huge event. In order to make the event known to the public the Adbusters distribute campaigning material such as posters and uncommercials. The most famous uncommercial is the one in which a fat pig represents America and says at the end: “Give it a rest, America. Tomorrow is Buy Nothing Day.”⁸⁰ Although CNN has broadcasted this uncommercial several years, many other commercial television stations declined because they were afraid that their advertisers would not have been too pleased about airing it.

In 2011 Buy Nothing Day “married” the Occupy Wall Street Movement, meaning that the messages of both movements became intertwined. Hence, that year Buy Nothing Day became known as “Occupy Xmas.” According to Lauren Bercovitch, the production manager at Adbusters Media Foundation, “the Occupy movement talks about a systemic change and a huge cultural paradigm shift, and for the holidays, it’s the same kind of thing we need to be thinking about.”⁸¹ Bercovitch does not necessarily want people not to buy gifts, rather to buy them locally to support local economies or to make the gifts yourself. In other words, she wants people to reassess American consumerist behavior in combination with reevaluating Christmas. In short, Buy Nothing Day (and Occupy Xmas) aim at many different goals that all come down to make people consume less.

Not everyone in the United States is as excited about one day without shopping as the Adbusters and their supporters are. It seems that the freedom to consume is so embedded in American national character that one day buying nothing is even perceived by some as “an unpatriotic act.”⁸² On an online discussion forum on Buy Nothing Day one person says that an American is “being unpatriotic if you spend less than you are able.” A different person states the following: “in the wake of September 11th, Buy Nothing Day might seem unpatriotic. In America’s New War, our leaders are encouraging us to spend, spend, spend, in hopes of helping along a lagging economy.”⁸³ This shows that consuming is perceived by some Americans as a civil duty; a personal contribution to their country. It seems therefore that some Americans consider an event like Buy Nothing Day as unpatriotic in the United States.

Besides this accusation of being unpatriotic, Buy Nothing Day also receives much more critique. Lasn says for example that the Adbusters office receives many phone calls around Buy Nothing Day, with reactions like “Why don’t you get the hell back to China, you Commie pinkos!” or “How dare you suggest I not buy what I please with my hard-earned

⁸⁰ “Occupy Xmas,” *Adbusters*, <http://www.adbusters.org/campaigns/bnd>.

⁸¹ Keeton Wilcock, “An Occupied Christmas: Occupy Movement Turns its Focus to Holiday Consumption,” *The Fulcrum* (December 2011), <http://thefulcrum.ca/2011/12/an-occupied-christmas/>.

⁸² Bordwell, “Jamming Culture,” 250.

⁸³ Juliana Pearson, “Buy Nothing Day Especially Relevant this Year,” *The Lasso* (November 21, 2001), <http://www.fccps.org/gm/archive/lasso/archive/2001-2001/commentary/NoBarriers11-20.htm>.

dollars?”⁸⁴ Clearly some Americans feel that they have the *right* to shop, and see consuming as something they are entitled to being an American citizen. It possibly could be stated that with organizing Buy Nothing Day, the Adbusters violate American national identity, as freedom and the right to choose are vital elements of American identity. It is therefore inappropriate to ask the American people to not spend their money, as personal choice is such an important part of American national identity.

Adbusters & American identity

In his book *Culture Jammers*, Lasn offers an interesting perspective on the United States and the country's history. Everyone knows that contemporary America originated after the revolt against Great Britain. However, Lasn suggests that the American colonists not just revolted against the British monarchy, but also against companies. According to Lasn, companies like the Massachusetts Bay Company, the Hudson's Bay Company and the British East India Company were extremely powerful, and as dominant and prominent as companies are in contemporary America. Perhaps in this sense history only repeats itself, as the large companies, now called corporations, have become so dominant again that the people resist it and revolt against them, just like two hundred years ago. This is obviously an unconventional perception on American history, yet Lasn does make some valid arguments. Since the United States is a country that needed to revolt in order to become independent, it seems plausible that resistance against big dominant powers is still embedded in America's national character.

Lasn relates his personal vision on America's repeating history to the presence of these big corporations in the lives of the American people. As mentioned earlier, people come in contact with brands continuously which has resulted that even the individual is “branded,” and therefore transformed into continuous consumers that have become unable to even notice it as the entire society has become branded as well. According to Lasn, people lost control over their own lives, since companies have more rights, freedom and power than people currently have. However, Lasn also mentions that the American people have accepted this status quo, as the “revolutionary mentality” has been suppressed.⁸⁵ Therefore, Lasn feels that something or someone is needed to revoke this mentality again, in order to stop America's decline. He compares the situation to Rosa Parks, the first African-American woman that came into action against racism in the United States: now he hopes that a new Rosa Parks will stand up and starts boycotting “buses” again. Lasn presumably implies that the Adbusters

⁸⁴ Bordwell, “Jamming Culture,” 249.

⁸⁵ Lasn, *Cultuurkrakers*, 84.

should start a new civil rights movement, but this time against the dominant commercial powers.

Adbusters as Anti-Brand?

As we have seen, the Adbusters have given up on the American Dream and they feel that a huge change is needed to break down the contemporary state of mind; a mind that is saturated with consumerism. With their subvertisements and uncommercials the Adbusters managed to send a critical message to the American consumers. However, it can be argued that the Adbusters Media Foundation maybe has become too big, as it sometimes seems that they have become what they are fighting against.

Since the Adbusters website and magazine are very democratically organized in the sense that the readers can contribute and send in what they want, Max Haiven argues that the Adbusters employ a “relatively steadfast dedication to basic principles of freedom of speech.”⁸⁶ In other words, the Adbusters Media Foundation can be perceived as an organization that appeals to American identity, as freedom of speech is a significant element to American national identity.

However, taking a closer look one can also find elements that seem to undermine the Adbusters’ initial goal. According to Naomi Klein, the Adbusters have become too popular and therefore they have turned out to be in a somewhat more mainstream segment than rather in the actual radical part of society. Furthermore, it seems contradictory for the Adbusters to sell their own merchandise products. Most strikingly is that they even sell shoes with its own brand name; “Blackspot.” In other words, the Adbusters have become something that they accuse the corporate world for being saturated of; a brand. However it must be noted that the Adbusters’ shoe is produced completely different than for example a Nike shoe. According to the Adbusters website the “Blackspot shoes are made with hemp, recycled tires, vegan leather and produced in fair-trade factories. We also sell only to independent retailers worldwide in order to cycle money back into local economies.”⁸⁷ In other words, the Blackspot shoe serves as an alternative to commercial shoe brands that make the most money out of the cheapest labor.

Nevertheless, Haiven indeed argues that the Adbusters Foundation has become an “iconic brand of cultural resistance.”⁸⁸ Klein admits that trying to “‘market’ an anti-marketing

⁸⁶ Haiven, “Privatized Resistance,” 88.

⁸⁷ “Blackspot Shoes,” Adbusters, <http://www.adbusters.org/about/adbusters>.

⁸⁸ Haiven, “Privatized Resistance,” 85.

movement is a uniquely thorny dilemma.”⁸⁹ Arguably, an advertisement promoting a product could be observed as being the same as an anti-advertisement that promotes an idealist message. Still, this remains a complex discussion, as a subvertisement or an uncommercial do promote the opposite of what a commercial advertisement promotes and therefore a subvertisement or an uncommercial can be perceived as fundamentally different from real ads.

However, Klein also argues that for example an uncommercial on television does not have the effect that the Adbusters want it to have; to startle people and make them rethink their consumer society. On the contrary; “in these information-numb times, we are beyond being abruptly awakened by a startling image, a sharp juxtaposition or even a fabulously clever détournement.”⁹⁰ In other words, since the Adbusters employ the exact same tactics and the same shape as their corporate enemies, it seems that they are not being perceived as an alternative to corporate brands, instead they have been incorporated into the branding and advertising system themselves.

Moreover, where culture jamming used to be a very radical style, it currently has become so popular that it can be found on numerous t-shirts, stickers, badges and more mainstream accessories. Some commercial brands have even adopted culture jamming for some of their products. Nike for example used in a 1997 campaign the following slogan: “I am not/A target market/I am an athlete.”⁹¹ Another corporate example stems also from 1997, when the beer brand Miller Genuine Draft asked the band Negativland, who coined the term culture jamming, to make the music for a new commercial. Although they turned the offer down, for Mark Holser, one of the band members, it was a “rude awakening” that they had attracted opposite forces.⁹² In this sense it can be speculated that resistance and opposition gets incorporated into the commercial and corporate system as well. Sandlin and Milam in fact claim that capitalism has the ability “to commodify dissent,” and that “capitalism removes the possibility of resistance from artistic creations, through turning them into commodities and effectively co-opting them.”⁹³ Still, although the Adbusters might have become a brand themselves, it does not mean that their messages are not heard. Especially if one takes a look at what the organization is doing today, occupying Wall Street, one can not ignore that the Adbusters have put words into actions.

⁸⁹ Klein, *No Logo*, 296.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 296.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 298.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 298.

⁹³ Sandlin and Milam, “Mixing Pop (Culture) and Politics,” 346.

Conclusion

It turns out that in their battle to bring down consumerism in capitalist America, the Adbusters are not able to escape the branding system themselves either. In order to let their voices here the Adbusters need to use the same tactics as corporate brands, which makes their anti-corporate and anti-consumerist activism somehow dubious. However, it can also be argued that in order to let consumers consume less, the Adbusters' activism needs to be consumed first. It seems that since in the United States everything is branded, everything gets consumed as well, just like advertisements *and* un-advertisements. In other words, in America even anti-consumerist activism needs to be branded in order to be heard.

The best example of Adbusters' "branding" process is their shoe "Blackspot" which they sell as an anti-brand to Nike. According to Lasn "Blackspot" serves as a way of "kicking Phil Knight's ass;" the co-founder and chairman of Nike.⁹⁴ However, Klein argues that an anti-brand is not any different from a regular brand, as it is yet another brand that fills the public sphere which should be protected by critics like the Adbusters Media Foundation. Lasn does admit the irony of marketing their own shoe brand and making deals with investors, however he also claims that it is necessary in order to change current consumer society. As Lasn states:

Old leftists like Naomi Klein hang on to an old, "pure" activism that hasn't had any success for 20 or 30 years... There are a lot of people now who want to jump over the dead body of the old left. We've decided to stop whining about Nike; why not make \$10 million and use it to run a media literacy campaign instead? I'm really sick of the whiners.⁹⁵

Clearly Lasn is aware of his contradictory tactics, but his "problem is with top-down corporate consumer culture. This way of activism is one way for people to take back their culture."⁹⁶ In other words, the Adbusters Media Foundation is an American organization that in spite of its activism is incorporated into American culture, as the Adbusters comply with corporate strategies in their battle to bring consumerism down.

In attempt to answer the question to what extent American identity is debated in the Adbusters Media Foundation and its activism, it has become clear that the Adbusters employ

⁹⁴ Julian Sanchez, "Anti-Consumerist Capitalism: Culture Jammers, Sneaker Peddlers," *Reason* (November 2003), accessed on June 4, 2012, <http://reason.com/archives/2003/11/01/anti-consumerist-capitalism>.

⁹⁵ Sanchez, "Anti-Consumerist Capitalism."

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

one true American ideal which is freedom of speech. Since their magazine has an interactive readership it could be stated that the Adbusters Foundation is a democratic organization, which belongs to the foundation of the United States. However, on the other hand, the Adbusters are also accused of acting “unpatriotic” for asking people not to buy one day. It seems that not only freedom of speech is important to American identity, but also the freedom to decide for yourself what to do, or what to buy.

Still, it is presumably not the Adbusters’ goal to act “unpatriotic” with their activism, they rather want to prevent American identity to become completely dominated by consumerism and commercialization and therefore they feel that they need extreme measures to resist it.

Chapter 3: Religious Anti-Consumerist Activism

The Church of Stop Shopping

Let's talk about the Devil. Corporate Commercialism has sped up to a roar, virtually unopposed. Consumerism is normalized in the mind of the average person, sometimes we even refer to ourselves as consumers forgetting that we are also citizens [and] humans.⁹⁷

The Church of Stop Shopping, led by Reverend Billy, is an anti-consumerist theatrical movement that aims to make Americans aware of their extreme consumerist behavior. The satirical church was found in 1999 by Bill Talen in New York City. This “post religious church” protests against American consumerism by singing its own songs with their 40-person choir and 5-person band.⁹⁸ Their activism entails among others touring the country and preaching at places where consumerism is extreme. Before Bill Talen started the Church of Stop Shopping, he lived in downtown Manhattan and saw “Times Square turning into a mall” rapidly.⁹⁹ Moreover, as Talen explains; “I had been feeling overwhelmed by Consumerism, lonely, and I went down to the vortex of logos in Times Square and began to shout.”¹⁰⁰ This was Talen’s reason to start a movement, and since he noticed that the sidewalk-preachers on Times Square reached a substantial audience, he decided that his movement had to have a religious shape. That is how his Church started.

The Church of Stop Shopping is a combination of theatre, satire and religion that hold “services” wherever possible such like parks, churches, community centers, but favorably in shops and malls. The church members also employ some unconventional strategies including “cash register exorcisms, retail interventions, cell phone operas combined with grass roots organizing and media activism.”¹⁰¹ In other words, Reverend Billy and his church members use religious references to get the American consumers “a conscience about shopping.”¹⁰² Moreover, Reverend Billy predicts that “the Shopocalypse is upon us [the United States],” with which he means that shopping, and thus consumerism will eventually destroy

⁹⁷ “About Us,” Reverend Billy, <http://www.revbilly.com/about-us>.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Bill Talen, in *What Would Jesus Buy?* Directed by Rob van Alkemade. Warrior Poets Releasing, 2007.

¹⁰⁰ Savitri D. and Bill Talen, *The Reverend Billy Project: From Rehearsal Hall to Super Mall with the Church of Life After Shopping* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2011), 201.

¹⁰¹ Reverend Billy, “About Us,” <http://www.revbilly.com/about-us>.

¹⁰² *What Would Jesus Buy?*

America.¹⁰³ Furthermore, in his book *What Should I do if Reverend Billy is in my Store?* Reverend Billy asks himself the following question: “What will happen to the American consumer when the consuming stops; [this] is a fascinating question.”¹⁰⁴ Clearly Reverend Billy considers American consumerism as a destructive force that needs to be stopped. In order to find out to what extent religious anti-consumerist activism appeals to American identity this chapter examines how American identity is discussed in Reverend Billy’s Church of Stop Shopping and its activism.

One of Reverend Billy’s favorite places to hold a service at is a Disney Store or Disney World. According to the Reverend, Mickey Mouse is the Antichrist since the Disney Company is the “high church of retail.”¹⁰⁵ Besides Disneyland, he likes to use for example places like Starbucks, Wal-Mart and Victoria’s Secret as a “stage” to preach his activism. From the beginning on, Reverend Billy has been notorious for his “retail interventions.” At such an intervention Billy enters a shop and starts preaching and shouting. He jumps on the counter and tries to put his congregational members to lay their hands on the cash register in attempt to “exorcise” it. He shouts at customers that God wants them to stop shopping and that they should leave the shop. One time at an intervention at Starbucks in its first years of activism he shouted: “This is an abusive place, children! It has landed in this neighborhood like a space alien! The union-busting, the genetically-engineered milk, the fake bohemianism! But we don’t have to be here, children! This is the Good News!”¹⁰⁶ This example represents Reverend Billy’s actions very well. In 2000 Starbucks even sent out an internal memorandum to all the Starbucks stores in New York City, which was called “What Should I do if Reverend Billy is in my Store?” to instruct employees for a possible encounter with Reverend Billy again.

New York Times journalist Jonathan Dee provides the most ironic, and iconic example of one of Reverend Billy’s retail interventions at the Disney Store at times Square. The store’s manager got so uncomfortable with Reverend Billy’s presence that he shouted: “Anyone who isn’t here to buy something will be arrested!”¹⁰⁷ It captures the Church’s issue on American culture and society in one short sentence quite perfectly.

¹⁰³ Bill Talen, in *What Would Jesus Buy?*

¹⁰⁴ Bill Talen, *What Should I do if Reverend Billy is in my Store?* (New York: The New Press, 2003), xv.

¹⁰⁵ Sandlin and Milam, “Mixing Pop (Culture) and Politics,” 332.

¹⁰⁶ Jonathan Dee, “Reverend Billy’s Unholy War,” *The New York Times* (August 2004), accessed 1 June 1, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/08/22/magazine/>.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

(Religious) Activism

According to American historian Jonathan Kalb, Bill Talen mocks evangelism, probably because Talen's character Reverend Billy is a caricature of American televangelist preachers and he looks in particular very similar to the famous televangelist Jimmy Swaggart. Talen even calls Swaggart his "reverse mentor."¹⁰⁸ Moreover, Reverend Billy acts like a southern, evangelical, and conservative priest, and shouts a lot of "Hallelujahs" and "Amens" during his sermons.

It is not surprising that Bill Talen chose religion for his social movement. Although he could have just formed a "regular" protest anti-consumerist movement, he presumably made a smart decision to establish a church. In a highly religious country like the United States, 83 percent of the Americans are religious of which 78,4 consider themselves Christian, Talen appeals to the American people merely in his appearance as a priest alone, without having said anything yet.¹⁰⁹ It is when people start to listen to Billy's choir when some people become startled hearing lyrics like in the following song "How can you Raise a Child?:"

The products meet in the children's' ward
What do you think they're waiting for
The new consumer, the baby king
The one who will buy anything

Superman takes baby's hand
Up in the sky to the ATM
Remove your cash the fun begins
We just spend and we spend and we spend
and we spend and we spend again¹¹⁰

The lyrics of this song show how Talen and his clearly satirical Church try to awaken the American people with their confronting thoughts on how the United States has become a country where everyone is born a consumer.

It is interesting to take a closer look at Bill Talen and his personal experiences with religion. He was raised by Lutherans and Dutch Calvinists from the Dutch Reform Church,

¹⁰⁸ Talen, *Reverend Billy*, 57.

¹⁰⁹ The Pew Forum, "U.S. Religious Landscape Survey," accessed June 1, 2012, <http://religions.pewforum.org/reports>.

¹¹⁰ Bill Talen, "How can you Raise a Child?," <http://www.revilly.com/work/music/songs/how-can-you-raise-a-child>.

where he experienced a traumatic religious education.¹¹¹ Talen explains that in this strict and sober church preaching never occurred, as a Protestant reaction against the Catholic Church. It was neighbor and Reverend Sidney Lanier who introduced Talen to preaching in combination with radical activism. With the help of Lanier, Talen became “a new kind of preacher” for a new kind of purpose.¹¹²

With his unconventional services, sermons and appearances, Reverend Billy offers new religious experiences. As some would argue that Billy is merely parodying religion, others argue that he truly believes in something. Jennifer A. Sandlin for example, who published several studies on Reverend Billy and his Church, says that Billy’s services are “a reaffirmation, in a ritualistic setting, of a common core of spiritual values and are becoming increasingly indistinguishable from real church services.”¹¹³ Still, Reverend Billy is not a real priest, although Kalb argues that this does not make him less inspiring than a real preacher.

Like the Adbusters Media Foundation, the Church of Stop Shopping also promotes the American people to (at least) not buy one day each year on “Buy Nothing Day.” On this day, Reverend Billy and his church members organize a “Buy Nothing Parade” which stops at several stores to do cash register exorcisms and retail interventions. In 2008, Reverend Billy’s church extended Buy Nothing Day to a five day action plan. Their website explains that there were “five days of rituals to help you get local and back away from the product! It all builds to our Union Square Dance Your Debt Away Party, celebrating buylessness and the 1st Amendment in public space!”¹¹⁴

Interesting about Reverend Billy and his involvement in Buy Nothing Day is that he does not necessarily want people to buy nothing, only to buy their products locally. Like the Adbusters and “Occupy Xmas,” Reverend Billy wants the American people to change their focus onto their local communities rather than supporting the large corporations that often destroy local economies. Besides the transformation of the word “Hallelujah” into “Changellujah,” Reverend Billy also often shouts “Locallujah,” to make the audience aware of the importance of supporting local communities and local economies.

As Buy Nothing Day has become a large event, the Church of Stop Shopping has a bigger and international stage to make people aware of overconsumption and how it destroys not only the United States, but the entire world. The core problem Reverend Billy has with

¹¹¹ Bleuwenn Lechoux, “Non-Preaching Activism in New York: The Theatrical Militancy of Billionaires for Bush and Reverend Billy,” *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* 23 (2010), 178.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 178.

¹¹³ Jennifer A. Sandlin, “Learning to Survive the ‘Shopocalypse:’ Reverend Billy’s Anti-Consumption ‘Pedagogy of the Unknown’,” *Critical Studies in Education* 51 (2010), 301.

¹¹⁴ Reverend Billy, “Buy Nothing Day,” <http://www.revilly.com/campaigns/buy-nothing-day-2008>.

consumerism is that it dominates the lives of many Americans, even at a governmental level. According to Reverend Billy:

Consumerism is normalized in the mind of the average person, sometimes we even refer to ourselves as consumers forgetting that we are also citizens, humans, men, women, animals. We forget that we share many resources, public spaces, libraries, information, history, sidewalks, streets, schools that we created laws and covenants and governments to protect us, to support us, to help us... The subjugation of these resources and these laws to the forces of the market demands a response.¹¹⁵

This clearly shows that Reverend Billy feels that American culture has submitted to the power of consumerism, as he claims that not only the American people, but also governments are yielded to the demands of the corporate world. In other words, Reverend Billy's problem with consumerism is that it has penetrated into the lives of the American people, which also in consequence affects American national identity.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, advertisements draw on consumers' emotions and this is one of the most important factors in order to appeal to the public. Reverend Billy also draws on people's emotions, only with his religious activism. According to Sandlin and Callahan, Billy Reverend uses emotion "as the catalyst to turn around popular mindsets."¹¹⁶ His emotional sermons are very similar to evangelical services that are also known to be very emotional and tempestuous. Presumably Reverend Billy chose to co-opt this form of preaching in order to let the public become emotionally attached and therefore be most effective in letting people become aware of American consumerist society. Sandlin and Callahan describe how amazed and confused people can be when hearing Reverend Billy shout in for example a Disney Store: "The unexpected and emotionally jarring experience of seeing and hearing a 'preacher' preaching inside a retail space leads audience members outside of cognitive rationality and into the realm of emotion."¹¹⁷ In other words, the combination of a preacher in a commercial environment is so unconventional that it truly startles people and that is what Reverend Billy wants, as these moments are small possibilities of change.

¹¹⁵ Reverend Billy, "About Us," <http://www.revbilly.com/about-us>.

¹¹⁶ Sandlin and Callahan, "Deviance, Dissonance, and Détournement," 100.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 102.

Reverend Billy compares American consumer culture to a religious institute and he is convinced that the American people are all converted to the Church of Consumption:

The most powerful church in the world is the Church of the Stupefied Consumer. This is a fundamentalist church run by famous televangelists. Recent leaders include Jerry Falwell [a famous evangelical televangelist], Michael Eisner [chief executive Walt Disney Company], Thomas Friedman of the *New York Times*, and David Knight from Nike. Children, we're in this church and we don't even know it! That's how fundamentalist it is... Oh, stop shopping!¹¹⁸

With this “sermon” Billy Reverend points out what he considers is wrong with American consumer culture, and he uses religion as a metaphor in order to appeal to the American public, as many of the Americans take religion very serious. Moreover, he indicates that rich businessmen rule the United States, instead of American individuals through democracy, which is how Reverend Billy would define the concept of American identity. As discussed earlier, some would argue that freedom in the United States nowadays entails merely the freedom between brand A and brand B, as corporations dominate the entire public place. Therefore, Reverend Billy feels that American identity must be guarded for the preservation of true personal freedom, which will be completely defined by that commercial domination.

Clearly Reverend Billy chose a conventional American value that is part of American identity to use it for an unconventional mode of activism. Drawing on Sandlin and Callahan's argument that Reverend Billy uses religious references in an emotional way to get the public's attention, it can be argued that the reverend challenges American identity because he uses a vital element of American tradition in sending his activist message.

Culture Jamming

Just like the Adbusters Media Foundation, Billy Reverend and his Church of Stop Shopping use culture jamming in their activism against American consumerism as well. To define the term in short again, culture jamming is “the act of resisting and re-creating commercial culture in order to transform society [and it] holds potential to connect learners with one another and to connect individual lives to social issues.”¹¹⁹ This definition can be applied to the way Reverend Billy tries to transform a dominant commercial ideology in American

¹¹⁸ Talen, *Reverend Billy*, 49.

¹¹⁹ Sandlin and Milam, “Mixing Pop (Culture) and Politics,” 323.

culture. According to Reverend Billy his church and his members are “taking two great organized religions [Christianity and the “Church of Consumerism”] and grinding them together and trying to confuse people so they can think in a new way. . . . I want the symbols and meanings to fly away.”¹²⁰ In other words, similar to what the Adbusters do, the Church of Stop Shopping uses existing symbols to create a complete new perception on American consumerist society.

One element that differs completely from Adbusters’ way of using culture jamming is that the Church of Stop Shopping always uses religion in the altered messages. For example, during their retail interventions Reverend Billy and his church members walk with big wooden crosses with “crucified” stuffed animals on them; often Mickey and Minnie Mouse. As Sandlin and Milham argue:

Reverend Billy thus causes these memes to take on new meanings as they are incorporated into new, unexpected counterhegemonic cultural scripts. Mickey Mouse morphs from the Disney-sanctioned symbol of everlasting childhood and nostalgia to the leader of the evil, child-labor-sweat-soaked empire of Disney.¹²¹

Naturally, not everyone seems very pleased encountering Mickey on a large cross. It could be offensive in two ways; for those who admire Disney characters, for example children, it can be quite disturbing. On the other hand, some religious Americans can also perceive it as offensive, like a man who reacted as follows after seeing a crucified Mickey Mouse: “Take the mouse off the cross! Because I’m a Catholic and I find that very, very offensive—that you’re taking a symbol of my religion and putting a friggin’ toy on it like it means nothing. It is very, very offensive.”¹²² Some people are clearly not able to see the distinction between a true offense and merely a parodying message for a completely different purpose.

On the other hand, it can also be argued that in order to be effective as culture jammer, one must make sure that the message startles people to get people’s attention. Many scholars and writers argue that Reverend Billy is an example of utilizing playful and interactive tactics of anti-consumerist activism. Political sociologist Bleuwenn Lechaux for example states that the Church of Stop Shopping is effective due to its participatory form of activism. According to Lechaux, such kind of interactive activism invites people to join in the protest, which is the ultimate goal of anti-consumerist movements. In order to raise awareness, people need to be

¹²⁰ Sandlin and Milam, “Mixing Pop (Culture) and Politics,” 332.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 333.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 343.

involved into the process, which they are in encountering one of Reverend Billy's sermons.¹²³ Kalb gives an example of what exactly is meant with Reverend Billy's participatory activism:

Flooding the halls he performs in with an astonishing torrent of righteous words about the spell of consumer narcosis, he ends up offering hundreds of hard-core artsy skeptics (often in their twenties) their first chance ever to shout "Hallelujah!" and engage in Pentecostal call-and-response. In so doing, they find themselves possessed of a precious community that is not accessed via flickering screens.¹²⁴

In other words, Reverend Billy's tactics aim to involve the consumers in his activism, in attempt to let them change their consumer habits.

One of the most important elements in communicating to the audience is through the Church of Stop Shopping website. Billy Reverend frequently posts updates on their events and other related happenings. Visitors can sign up for a newsletter and join events. Interesting is how Reverend Billy provides guidelines for how to do for example a retail intervention by yourself, or how to deal with buying less or nothing. Moreover, the website gives tips on how to reduce the amount of commercial products in your house, by explaining for example how to use vinegar as a cleaning product instead of chemicals. Again like the Adbusters, the Church of Stop Shopping let the audience play along instead of merely being protest observers.

In observation of the concept of culture jamming, it is clear that both the Adbusters and the Church of Stop Shopping employ culture jamming in their anti-consumerist activism, yet each in their own way. The Adbusters send their message wrapped in a serious, sometimes shocking form, and the Church of Stop Shopping spreads its gospel in a rather humorous and theatrical performance.

Reception

It is questionable whether humorous and satirical street theatre is indeed an effective form of activism in the United States. This question is relevant to this thesis as it is important to know to what extent anti-consumerist movements actually appeal to the American public, and if the

¹²³ Lechaux, "Non-Preaching Activism in New York," 185.

¹²⁴ Jonathan Kalb, "The Gospel According to Billy," *Theater* 31 (2001), 164.

Americans listen to the messages of these activist movements at all. Moreover, the effectiveness of movements like the Church of Stop Shopping is relevant because if this church does appeal to American identity it is important to examine how the public reacts to a movement that discusses their national identity.

Scholar Lechaux already argued that due to its participatory activities it lets the audience reflect on their own consumerist behavior. And although the Church of Stop Shopping is distinctly full of satire and parody, it sends out a serious message. Despite the fact that Billy Reverend does grab American culture by one of its core values, which is religion, this form of activism does appeal to many Americans. There are many people that want Billy Reverend to baptize them instantly on the street; even babies get baptized by the reverend with consent of the parents. It is therefore interesting to see that many people indeed take Billy Reverend's message very serious.

Reverend Billy has now become one of America's most famous anti-consumerists. In 2001, Bill Talen even ran for mayor in New York City for the Green Party. This indicates that many American people do believe that Billy Reverend has a sincere message that needs to be heard. Jonathan Dee perceives Reverend Billy and his church more as guerilla theater than as true activism. However he also argues that this is a modern form of (political) grassroots movements which he calls "politically motivated pranksterism."¹²⁵ Moreover, Reverend Billy has become more than just a character, namely a "mode of expression [and] one that people will pay attention to."¹²⁶ It seems that despite his theatrical performances Reverend Billy does manage to impress some Americans with his untraditional combination of activism and preaching which resulted in a new mode of expression.

According to Guardian journalist Brian Logan the Church of Stop Shopping is "ridiculous and persuasive at the same time - just like the televangelists Talen satirizes."¹²⁷ Logan argues that Reverend Billy evolved from being a humorous character into a true church leader; the leader of the anti-consumerist church. In other words, journalists like Dee and Logan agree that Reverend Billy's activism is serious, however untraditional in the sense that the reverend sends out his serious message in a rather theatrical mode.

¹²⁵ Dee, "Reverend Billy's Unholy War."

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Brian Logan, "'Changellujah!,'" *Guardian Online* (May 2009), accessed June 1, 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2009/may/20/reverend-billy-comedy-religion-uk-tour>.

Church of Stop Shopping & American identity

What becomes clear in examining anti-consumerism in the United States is that this activism is not just about stopping consumerism or spending less money. It is also about the preservation of a country that once started with community-based politics, self-reliance and a continuous urge to head west. Already mentioned earlier on, public space in the United States is now dominated by commercial logos, which is resisted by the Adbusters. The Church of Stop Shopping however also protests against the omnipresence of commercial brands in the lives of the American people, which therefore also influences American national identity in the sense that people's daily public life is now dominated by commercialization. Bill Talen's wife, Savitri D. Talen, who is director of all of the Church's performances, states that their "fight for public space is the fight for democracy itself."¹²⁸ As in the United States commercial brands have become more powerful than ever before, activists like Bill and Savitri Talen see consumerism as a threat to democracy. The public sphere is commercially dominated and therefore "undemocratically" organized. This means that American public life is also dominated by commercial corporations, and present in the lives of every American individual.

According to contemporary history professor Kevin Mattson public space and democracy have a crucial relationship. Mattson argues that the most important example of the domination of public space would be the shopping mall. Since the mall officially does not belong to public space and has a private status, the mall does not need to obey freedom of speech or choice.¹²⁹ Therefore the shopping mall is a place where advertising and commercialism is omnipresent, and undemocratically organized. Moreover, in contemporary American society the shopping mall has replaced public space, as many Americans meet and gather in shopping malls, and less in parks and on public squares. In other words, drawing upon Mattson's argument, public life relocated from public and democratically organized places to commercial and private places that are ruled by commercial corporations. And since freedom of speech and choice is vital to American tradition, places like shopping malls are a threat to American democracy. In this sense it can be argued that the Church of Stop Shopping battles for the preservation of American democracy in order to prevent national identity to become fully commercialized as well.

¹²⁸ Savitri D. and Bill Talen, *The Reverend Billy Project*, 112.

¹²⁹ Kevin Mattson, "Reclaiming and Remaking Public Space: Toward an Architecture for American Democracy," *National Civic Review* 88 (June, 1999), 135.

Humphery argues that Reverend Billy and his church members are “parodying both the saccharine religiosity of US Christian fundamentalism and the consumer fundamentalism of North American society.”¹³⁰ According to Humphery, anti-consumerist activism at a level of street theatre is the most confronting and humorous form of activism. It can be argued that this combination of confrontation and humor is an excellent combination for effective activism. As Humphery states, “the portrayal of [the American] people as duped consumers works as useful communication.”¹³¹ In other words, since Reverend Billy touches upon two American traditions; religion and consumerism, it results in a confronting portrayal of American national identity. However, Billy Reverend creates this confrontation in a playful mode, which makes it enjoyable for many Americans.

However, the fact that the Church of Stop Shopping actually mocks with religion and evangelism in particular, can also be considered as “un-American,” as religion is truly embedded in American identity and therefore some Americans find Reverend Billy and his theatrical sermons offensive. Lechaux for example states that Reverend Billy’s “theatrical performances draw on American religious references—one playwright underlines the fact that a preacher giving a sermon, is a very familiar show to us—whilst adopting an irreverent attitude towards the Church.”¹³² In other words, the church of Stop Shopping does refer to the American religious tradition, but in a very unconventional and sometimes offensive way. When Reverend Billy was asked if he believed in God he answered: “We believe in the god that people who don’t believe in God believe in.”¹³³ In other words, Reverend Billy and his church aim at twisting the thoughts of mainstream America in order to transform the consumerist state of mind. And the reverend utilizes religion to reach that.

In trying to answer the question to what extent the Church of Stop Shopping debates American identity, it can be stated that Reverend Billy attempts to redefine values that are significant in shaping American identity. Kalb also argues that dominant commercial brands like Disney play “the outsized role... in shaping American values and determining who is seen as an American to the general debasement of a democracy that now defines freedom as consumer choice.”¹³⁴ In other words, national identity is in a way debated in Reverend Billy’s church that it tries to redefine those American traditions that are now overshadowed or even eliminated by the commercial domination in American society.

¹³⁰ Humphery, *Excess*, 52.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 225.

¹³² Lechaux, “Non-Preaching Activism in New York,” 178.

¹³³ Sandlin, “Learning to Survive the ‘Shopocalypse,’” 301.

¹³⁴ Kalb, “The Gospel According to Billy,” 164.

Moreover, Dee claims that “the reason he [Reverend Billy] condemns Starbucks or Wal-Mart as “evil” doesn’t have so much to do with labor practices (though he mentions those), or any other tropes of the left, as with the destruction of place.”¹³⁵ As discussed earlier, it has come to a point that in American society consumption has even penetrated public space, which resulted in the fact that the American people are not able anymore to avoid consumerism. In this sense Reverend Billy does discuss American identity, as he attempts to prevent American identity from becoming completely dependent on consumerism. Therefore, according to Reverend Billy, American society needs a radical transformation.

Conclusion

According to Reverend Billy “shopping is the cornerstone of modern American life.”¹³⁶ However besides shopping, religion could also be considered as a cornerstone of American society. In other words, Billy Reverend grabs American culture at a sensitive spot; one of the core values of the American tradition and uses it to spread its anti-consumerist “gospel.” Furthermore, Reverend Billy and his Church of Stop Shopping mock with some American traditions rather than embodying them. However, he does not do this because he does not like America, but because he wants to save his country from the approaching “Shopocalypse.”

It seems that Reverend Billy’s definition of the concept American identity entails values like freedom of choice, freedom of speech, and democracy. According to the reverend freedom of choice is limited because the people can only choose between different brands, and democracy is in danger because big commercial corporations dominate public sphere and life. Moreover, Reverend Billy wants the American people to refocus on local communities and local economies instead of supporting corporations like Wal-Mart or Starbucks. However, one traditional value that is important to many Americans and in that sense vital to American national identity is religion. Reverend Billy on the one hand appeals to American identity as he employs religion in his activism, but on the other hand he ridicules this significant traditional American value. Therefore, the Church of Stop Shopping seems contradictory in debating American identity, as it both uses and mocks one foundational American tradition that is very much significant to American identity.

In other words, it seems that Reverend Billy has a distinct perception on how American national identity should be defined, and he uses one traditional value in attempt to redefine the contemporary status of the concept of American identity. In this process of

¹³⁵ Dee, “Reverend Billy’s Unholy War.”

¹³⁶ Talen, *Reverend Billy*, 50.

redefining traditional American values Reverend Billy does seem contradictory as he also ridicules one of those traditional values. Nevertheless, the reverend and his activist church members do try to redefine particular values like freedom of speech and individual choice and therefore they certainly discuss American national identity, only in an unconventional and sometimes contradictory way.

Conclusion

When examining two American anti-consumerist movements it becomes clear that their activism in general is not necessarily aimed against American culture, but against what consumerism has done to American culture, society, and national identity. According to some authors, the American people have become unaware of the fact that their lives are dominated by brands and corporations that have transformed them into continuous consumers and constantly crave for more.

The question whether consumerism is an important element to American identity led this thesis to examine to what extent *anti-consumerism* appeals to American national identity. Both the Adbusters Media Foundation and the Church of Stop Shopping value some true American traditions like freedom of speech, and the freedom of individual choice. What these movements have in common is that they both try to prevent American democracy from falling apart. Although some would not agree with them, the Adbusters and Reverend Billy's church believe that democracy is disappearing as large corporations have become very dominant and dominate the lives of the American people. Despite American anarchist John Zerzan's violent warning against anti-consumerist activism, he does have a valid argument in stating that the American consumers in present time do not enjoy the freedom that they ought to have. The only freedom the people have is the freedom to choose between brand A and B. This is an example of how anti-consumerist movements consider consumerism to be a destructive force to the lives and freedom of a population, or even to a country's democracy.

When analyzing The Adbusters Media Foundation and the Church of Stop Shopping and their anti-consumerist activism, it seems that in order to reach the American public it is impossible to stay away from American traditions or American practices that are familiar to the American population. For the Adbusters this means that they needed to become part of the branding and advertising system in order to fight against it effectively. As for Reverend Billy and his church, they have used one of America's most valuable and foundational traditions, religion that is, in order to appeal to the American people. This is one of the remarkable similarities between both movements.

The reason why there are substantially large anti-consumerist movements could be that revolt and resistance belongs to the foundation of the United States and thus to the American people's character. Drawing upon Kalle Lasn's argument of the American people revolting against the British monarchy *and* large companies at the end of the 18th century, it could be argued that the American people still and will always have a revolutionary mentality

which only needs to be revoked by a revolutionist leader. Since the United States originated after revolt and resistance the American people still could have an urge to resist against large powers. Similarly, expansion or manifest destiny are also foundational American concepts that still seem to be part of the American tradition. Whether this analysis is correct will remain unanswered, but it could clarify why there are such large movements that protest against dominant ideologies, like big commercial powers, that have penetrated into American culture. Perhaps this is a possible subject to be explored in the future. It could be an interesting study to find out whether the urge to resist and revolt against dominant powers is still somehow embedded in the American national character.

Going back to the two case studies that were examined in this thesis, the Adbusters Media Foundation initially battled for the freedom in public space that became dominated by big corporations and brands. According to American author Judith Levine, in the United States all public spaces have become commercial spaces where Americans are either buying or trespassing in their car.¹³⁷ This is what the Adbusters started their battle against. Over twenty years later the Adbusters have become a very popular movement, and their supporters come from all over the world. However, as argued in the second chapter, the Adbusters have maybe grown too big in their attempt to battle consumerism and capitalism. In their resistance against brands, the Adbusters Media Foundation is now often perceived as a brand itself. Despite the fact that their own shoe is manufactured without exploitation of laborers and created with organic material, the Adbusters seem not so different anymore from a “real” brand. In other words, the Adbusters fight fire with fire, but arguably this is needed in order to let their activism be effective. Therefore, the Adbusters let themselves become incorporated into the American branding system to reach as many people as possible. In other words, in their battle to restore American culture and identity, the Adbusters need to act according to customs and traditions that the American people are used to in order to let their messages be heard.

Drawing upon that last argument, it could be stated that Reverend Billy’s Church of Stop Shopping also became incorporated as an American church, only a quite untraditional church. Although there are some Americans who find Reverend Billy’s church offensive, other Americans are interested in what the reverend and his church members have to say. As discussed earlier on, religion plays a very important role in the lives of many Americans, and therefore Reverend Billy appeals to the American people with his religious movement.

¹³⁷ Judith Levine in *What Would Jesus Buy?*.

Possibly, if the Church of Stop Shopping would be an “ordinary” movement like for example a “Movement of Stop Shopping” it would maybe not be as appealing as it is being a church. Therefore the reason that Billy Reverend reaches so many people with his “anti-consumerist sermons” would be his use of religion. Although Reverend Billy’s activism is perceived as a parody of American cultural and religious society, it also does attract the attention of many Americans. In other words, since Reverend Billy discusses American identity with his use of religious references, he appeals to many American people.

It must be noted that it is very difficult or even impossible to measure how many people actually support movements like the Adbusters Media Foundation or the Church of Stop Shopping, and therefore it is not easy to find out to how many people these movements actually appeal. We do know that, according to the Adbusters’ website, they have almost 100,000 subscriptions world wide, but it remains unknown how many people support the Adbusters in the United States. Still, since the Adbusters campaigns have become very popular and famous all over the world it can be concluded that the Adbusters indeed have grown into a significant movement, and maybe even the largest and most popular anti-consumerist movement.

Moreover, it is also unknown how many people support the Church of Stop Shopping, but since Reverend Billy has become a famous American reverend that even marries people and has baptized over sixty children in the United States, it can be stated that his religious movement is also fairly popular. Moreover, since Reverend Billy and his church members are a remarkable group of people with a remarkable form of activism, they have gained a lot of attention. A lot of academics and press have written about the church, and there are even several documentaries made about Reverend Billy and his church. This all contributed to get the reverend a large stage for his anti-consumerist activism. On the church’s website it is revealed who their “friends” are; several small grassroots movements and other alternative organizations cooperate with the church in their anti-consumerist activism. In other words, Reverend Billy reaches a lot of people with remarkable activism and his wide network of joint activists.

To come back to the question to what extent American identity is debated in these anti-consumerist movements, it has become clear that both movements have adopted certain traditions and practices that appeal to the American public. Moreover, both the Adbusters and Reverend Billy seem contradictory in their appeal to American identity, as they both on the one hand value one specific tradition that is important to the national identity, but on the other hand also offend some Americans with their activism. For the Adbusters Media Foundation

this means that in regards to the discussion of American identity they employ freedom of speech and choice in their activism and they are democratically organized. However, the Adbusters also complied with some of the practices of branding in order to let their messages be heard to the American public, which seems to oppose their own anti-consumerist ideology. As for the Church of Stop Shopping, they appeal to an important American value with their religious references but they also ridicule religion which makes them somehow contradictory in the discussion on American identity.

Despite this dubious discussion of American identity, both movements are eager to reach their goal with their anti-consumerist activism. The Adbusters have become an anti-brand with fair means and goals, and with true marketing and true branding, and the Church of Stop Shopping uses religion in order to let their anti-consumerist messages be heard by the American public. Perhaps due to the fact that Reverend Billy combines one fundamental element of American identity with an unconventional mode of expression, it results in an unconventional yet effective and interesting form of activism.

In this sense, it can be argued that an activist or protest movement should not be too radical or too alternative in order to appeal to the public. If a movement really wants to change society and transform a national mindset, it needs to address certain values or practices that belong to national identity, like Reverend Billy and his church do. As for the Adbusters, they use freedom of speech in order to let the American public participate. Furthermore, in attempt to overthrow it, the Adbusters make use of the current system of advertising and branding that plays a dominant role in American culture.

As discussed earlier, both the Adbusters and Reverend Billy are trying to restore the American country and national identity rather than being against consumption or against the United States. It is what consumerism has done to the American mindset and the national character that the two movements try to change. Furthermore, the national identity is debated in Adbusters' activism and Reverend Billy's church, as both movements try to redefine those American traditions that are now overshadowed or even eliminated by the commercial domination in American society. It has become clear that American identity is a concept that is defined with traditional values that shape American national character and culture. For the Adbusters these values are predominantly freedoms of the individual like freedom of speech and choice. With their unconventional magazine, the Adbusters encourage their supporters to speak out loud and make their personal decisions in public life. As for Reverend Billy and his church, American identity is defined by traditional values that entail reviving local communities and a democracy in which every American individual can participate. Through

their activism, these movements attempt to redefine these values in order to let their vision on American identity be restored.

In other words, American identity is what the Adbusters Media Foundation and the Church of Stop Shopping try to recover, and to prevent that it is only defined by what Americans buy and own rather than what they do, like Jimmy Carter warned the American people for already in 1979.

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