

The Illusion of Resistance: Commodification and Reification of Neoliberalism and the State

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Published online: 6 October 2017
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Abstract While protests and acts of resistance are central to democracy and the potential for social change, what is often ignored is the usurping of resistance through commodification and consumption. Here we argue that it is important to remember that even acts of resistance, such as we have witnessed since the election of Donald Trump to the Presidency of the United States, that speak out against inequality and social harm are commodified and consumed within the spectacular domination of the State and capital, making resistance part and parcel of the neoliberal system that commoditizes in totality.

Introduction

The election of Donald Trump as President of the United States resulted in a barrage of responses including many protests and acts of resistance from general remonstrations of his election to antifascism demonstrations, black lives matter protests, women's marches, a day without women, a day without immigrants, an united voices rally, and the counter-protests, to name a few. Unlike other perspectives that have suggested that mass commodities can be sites for popular resistance and cultural innovation (e.g. Willis 1990) we suggest that in the era of our hyper-neoliberal capitalistic state, the commodification of resistance¹ serves to perpetuate the system. While we understand that protests and acts of

¹ We recognize the multifaceted dimensions of resistance (see also footnote 2) though we are suggesting that in the United States all aspects of resistance have been consumed by neoliberalism, negating the impact of it and reinforcing neoliberalism and the status-quo: from the brick throwers and looters to the purchasing of resistance products to traveling to Washington or elsewhere to protest.

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resistance are central to democracy and the potential for social change, what is often ignored or forgotten is the usurping of resistance through commodification and consumption.² Hayward and Schuilenburg (2014) rightly note that resistance today, in the West, should be considered as a ‘reactive gesture’ as it is not oppositional behavior in the sense that it does not represent a meaningful challenge to the existing status quo. Rather, they, as do we, see resistance today in the neoliberal United States to be more attuned with the term ‘attempted resistance’ (Hollander and Einwohner 2004) due to the usurping of it through commodification, consumption and the neoliberal status quo. We suggest that resistance, as discussed here, is reducible to neoliberal consumeristic logic rather than radical efforts to transform the existing structure of oppression and violence inherent in the capitalistic state (Hayward and Schuilenburg 2014).

As Baudrillard ([1970] 1988) suggested, capitalism is fueled by its very critique, which it internalizes and transforms through market logic. This is poignantly seen by the vast numbers of products sold as symbols or sign-value of one’s stance in resistance. Consider the vast number of t-shirts, mugs, bumper stickers, posters, hats, and other tangible goods that are linked to the ‘causes’ at hand. Additionally, often ignored is the vast capital expenditure by resisters necessitated by the confines of neoliberalism whether that be transportation to the sites of resistance, lodging, food, or other banal forms of consumption. Our goal here is not to critique the various positions and acts of resistance, their broader goals and agendas, nor their potential impact. Rather we are arguing that it is imperative to remember that even important acts of resistance that speak out against barriers to equal rights, inequality and social harm, as we have witnessed over the past several months, are commodified and consumed within the spectacular domination of the neoliberal capitalistic state (Debord 1988) making resistance part and parcel of the neoliberal system that commoditizes in totality. While our argument is not a new one, it seems worthwhile to us to revisit the critique that resistance has been consumed in the vortex of commodification and neoliberalism in an effort to reinforce the need to demystify the role of resistance and to refocus our attention on the inherent violence of the State and economy. Prior to discussing the commodification and consumption of resistance we first provide an overview of our theoretical frameworks guiding our argument.

Theoretical Frameworks

With this in mind, we draw on the Gramscian concepts of ideological and cultural hegemony and Baudrillard’s ideas of sign-value, commodification and consumption. For Gramsci (1971), ideological hegemony is where a particular ideology (neoliberalism) is reflected throughout society, permeating all institutions and social relations, making it appear innate. It becomes the only way it should be or what Gramsci would term common sense. Yet, common sense can be profoundly misleading, obfuscating or disguising a more heinous ‘truth’: the violence and harm of the system itself. This violence then becomes banal, disavowed, depoliticized and normalized through cultural hegemony and hegemonic discourse (Neocleous 2008, pp. 73–74). Gramsci also notes that ‘civil society’ is ruled through consent. Cultural hegemony refers to “the ‘spontaneous’ consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life” (Gramsci

² Our focus here is on the contemporary acts of resistance in the United States. We fully recognize that in other parts of the globe, specifically the Global South, political, cultural and economic resistance have different histories and resistance takes different forms.

1971, p. 12). Given that hegemony is tied directly to capital accumulation—"the profit-seeking process at the heart of the world economy" and our "advanced consumer capitalism as a way of life"—consent is thus organized around commodification, consumption and consumerism (Carroll and Greeno 2013, pp. 122–124). Furthermore, hegemonic discourse represents the dominant ideology (neoliberalism, consumerism), justifying the social, political, and economic status quo while masking the violence of the system. The discourse is "intended to sustain the pre-existing modes of hegemonic dominance" (Pearce and Tombs 2006, p. 1). Furthermore, this violence is systemic, inherent in the social conditions of neoliberalism where all aspects of society are commodified and legitimated through hegemonic neoliberal discourse. In this sense, even the most 'radical' or 'anarchist' resistance, while framed as 'outside' is within the constraints of consumption and consumerism.

In addition, the value, or sign-value as defined by Baudrillard (1981) as the expression and mark of style, identity and standing, "becomes an increasingly important part of the commodity and consumption" (Kellner 2006, p. 3). Through the process of consumerism there is a conversion from the economic exchange value to sign value; value is no longer solely monetary rather it is associated with the status and prestige associated with a particular commodity (Baudrillard 1981). The commodity itself then becomes greater than its intended use, as its value is associated with what it signifies (identity, style and in this case position of resistance or cause). It has value beyond its devouring and is transfigured to hold ideological meaning through the signage itself. Economic power therefore, is reworked and continues to dominate but through the less overt process of sign production. As argued by Baudrillard (1981) "signs and culture appear enveloped in a "fetishism," a mystery equivalent to, and contemporaneous with that of the commodity" (p. 3). As such, the entire society is organized around consumption and the active displaying of commodities that, according to Baudrillard (1981) is organized under the "super-ideology of the sign" (p. 122). This includes resistance and tangible goods that convey resistance as a value, identity and status.

While Baudrillard ([1970] 1998) argues that the greater value and significance of the product allows the consumer to read the system of consumption (i.e. knowing what to consume and when) ultimately resulting in an inability to satisfy their want for commodities, we argue that the language of consumption and sign-value are useful to understand how even what is perceived as resistance to the status-quo is usurped into 'useful' commodified products reifying the neoliberal order of consumption, or as Lukács (1967, p. 83) suggests when the 'commodity structure penetrates society in all its aspects and remolds it in its own image'. The autonomization of the sign-value supports a broader hegemonic capitalist structure that is more subtle in the power it holds than overt forms of exploitation. It is through this structure that the sign becomes more than the rather idealistic and somewhat simplistic connection to the commodity itself, rather it "is an operational structure that lends itself to a structural manipulation compared with which the quantitative mystery of surplus value appears inoffensive" (pp. 121–122). The commodification of resistance then becomes another tool for the ongoing reification and normalization of the ideology or hegemonic discourse of commodification within an exploitative capitalistic system, thus reducing protest to spectacle.

The Illusion of Resistance Through Commodification

There are many examples of resistance being commodified, becoming something packaged then bought and sold within the neo-liberal economic market. While many resistance movements, independent of cause, originate at the grassroots levels, as they grow they become better organized and reach a larger numbers of people and their accompanying language and sign-use is capitalized on for financial gain. Many of these resistance movements have slogans or hashtags that transcend their initial messaging purpose and are sold in various forms by corporations and groups not affiliated with the original movement. For example, you can purchase from a broad variety of outlets mass produced t-shirts, sweatshirts, mugs, pins, tote bags, jewelry, scarfs, as well as many other goods that are advertised as a means to convey the language and messaging of a particular resistance cause that not only reinforce the neoliberal capitalistic machine of violence but gives our unknowing consent to the status quo.

This is evident with the commodification of the women's resistance movements. Consider sweatshirts that are promoted as demonstrating women's resistance to Donald Trump's actions. A common example displays an image of She-rah, an iconic cartoon character that fights evil and is presented in this context as being a strong, powerful woman. At face-value the ideological underpinnings of such a purchase would suggest an alignment with women's rights movements, female empowerment and resistance.

However, the purchase of this apparel does little to advance women's rights in an era of Donald Trump as there is no specific effort or resistance cause associated with owning it—it is signage for its own sake. The purchasing of the clothing is less about advancing an ideological cause or changing the inequalities of patriarchy, and more about an expression of status, identity and standing within a structure that recognizes materialism over all else. The commodity, and its value, is sold to the consumer as being representative of making a political statement or being part of a resistance movement as it signifies belonging to “communal groups, to the extent that they can be actively used to combat a sense of social powerlessness” (Miles 2014, p. 78). Economic value has been transfigured to hold ideological meaning. In this sense, the product becomes greater than its intended use, as its value is associated with what it signifies—its sign value—opposed to the resistance goals themselves and reproduces consent, knowingly or unknowingly, through consumption.

Ironically, the cartoon character She-rah is scantily clad, wearing limited clothing that eroticizes and sexualizes the character, promoting hegemonic ideals of heteronormative beauty standards, effectively reaffirming patriarchal understandings of womanhood. Therefore, the product being sold as a tool to resist the policies of the Trump presidency that marginalize women, contains within it imagery that supports a system that oppresses women—the message being that strong women are also slim, sexually provocative, white, blonde, and wear little clothing. Furthermore, the ‘commonsense’ message being consumed here is the conveyance of greater autonomy for women which is also equated with increased agency for women. Women are encouraged to think of themselves as fighters for a cause, advocates for equality and social justice yet they do not have to engage in nonconformity, dissent and resistance that achieves such equality. This commodity feminism (Goldman 1992) embraces women as neo-liberal subjects as they purchase corporate approved ideals of gender-equality. These ideals still require judgment and self-monitoring of one's own emotional state, as women exercise their purchasing power in support of a greater cause (i.e. the gimmicky mugs displaying messages of equality). However, such purchasing decisions also necessitate women's consent to engage in the ideological and

material consumption of post-feminist neoliberal consumerism. They buy into the advertisers efforts to 'reincorporate the cultural power of feminism' (Goldman 1992, p. 130) and in doing so nullify or depoliticize the goals of feminism (Murray 2012). Here the use of sign-value not only undermines the very ideological message intended, but also subtly manipulates the consumer into supporting the very structure they are attempting to resist.

In a similar manner, in the 2017 Women's March, hundreds of thousands of women took to the streets of Washington clad in 'pink pussy hats' that were quickly adopted by the corporate profiteers including the fashion industry. While this commodification is problematic, the symbolism of the 'pink pussy hat' reinforces a patriarchal vocabulary that serves to cloister sex and sexuality behind a curtain of negativity when you unblur the image and examine the historical context behind the language and the use of pink and 'pussy'.

Here again, the purchase of this commodified product is supposed to symbolize resistance to, and outrage of, Donald Trump's attitude towards women, as noted by the now famous interview where he claimed he could just grab a woman by 'her pussy.' The product does little to advance women's rights in an era of neo-conservative efforts to reign in many of the rights females have fought for over five decades. Instead it serves to reify and legitimate the patriarchal status quo. The language and symbolism behind the 'pink pussy hat' serves to reinforce the stereotype and the sexual negativity of vaginas while simultaneously fortifying neoliberalism and the violence behind the history and contemporary devaluation of females. Furthermore, the promotion of the 'pink pussy hats' in the New York fashion show simultaneously undermines the intended resistance message by incorporating the hats as mere fashion items, something to be worn with other 'trendy' apparel that can be purchased in high-end boutiques and department stores. The capitalist corporate system is not only coopting the popularity of the imagery (sign-value) and meaning (commonsense meaning) of the pink hats to maximize profit, but also is selling the female consumer their brand/designer as being for women's rights. Contrary to direct forms of exploitation, here again the method is more subtle than direct exploitation, the violence and harm still remains. Particularly, in addition to the aforementioned patriarchal vocabulary, the irony being that the fashion industry promotes many practices that are detrimental to women such as exploiting adolescent girls, holding unrealistic standards of beauty (i.e. being blonde, very thin, and young), as well as promoting body images that have been associated with eating disorders (Hesse-Biber et al. 2006).

The black lives matter resistance movement has also been commodified with various products sold. A quick browse of the internet results in a slew of products that tout the same phrase or language that can be associated with the movements goals "white silence equals white consent, black lives matter". Many of the products are sold by companies, groups and individuals that have nothing to do with the organization itself beyond the appropriation of its language and the profiteering of the resistance organization. The availability of these goods, coupled with their banality, equates making a political statement with consumerism, divorcing efforts for substantive change from the neo-liberal economic system that sustains the hegemonic status quo.

Furthermore, at the instance of purchase, individual resistance becomes less about the cause and more about the status and identity of the individual doing the purchasing. As argued by Williamson (1978) they are "selling us something else besides consumer goods: in providing us with a structure in which we, and those goods, are interchangeable, they are "selling us ourselves" (p. 13)." Resistance here is a commodity and consumers can purchase a resistance identity, but it is one that consumes activism within the neoliberal economic marketplace. The product itself has been positioned by the corporation as

holding an antiestablishment scenario/motif that appeals to the consumer as they can use their purchasing power to buy into a form of resistance that then “translates the possibility of agency to the privatized act of buying goods rather than engaging in forms of self- and social-determination” (Giroux 1994, p. 18). The sign and cultural value are enveloped not only in the identity of the consumer, but are also fetishized as being equal to or having the same meaning as the commodity itself (i.e. wearing a t-shirt or drinking from a mug bearing a slogan is equated to being a black lives matter activist).

This is not in any way isolated to black lives matter, as there are many products that take language and imagery that are broadly associated with resistance more generically and then are packaged and sold under the guises of being representative of a cause. For example, consider the language of counter-movements/groups that emerged in response to the black lives matter movement such as “white lives matter,” “all lives matter” and “police/blue lives matter.” Many of these groups also have products, social media sites, and messages that not only capitalize on advancing their own agenda through material consumption, but also on the consumption and commodification of an identity that specifically objects to the sign value associated with black lives matter. The messaging of white lives, blue lives, and all lives matters ignore the central tenants of the black lives matter campaign as being one associated with calling attention to racialized police practice that disproportionately impact persons of color. For example, in the case of white lives matter it calls on racist ideologies by promoting neo-Nazi white supremacy (Southern Poverty Law Center 2017). By co-opting the same language in their branding of the group (i.e. changing the “black” in the recognizable slogan “black lives matter” to “white”) they capitalize on the familiarity of the tagline while subverting the sign value associated with the black lives matter movements’ cause. By purchasing products such as t-shirts, the individual can claim collective action and identity grounded in a particular political, racial, and social ideology that simultaneously, and quite directly, initiates an attack on the legitimacy of the original movement. To consume then, extends beyond the purchasing of a singular material good to include a sense of identity bestowed on the consumer through their engagement with the economic market.

The same argument can be applied with all lives and blue lives matter, where the implication is that the original social movement through their message of calling attention to the injustices perpetrated against one group, ignores the experiences of other groups—they are not worthy of equitable attention. However, this again co-opts the perceived intended message of black lives matter, and capitalizes on misinformation, former prejudices, and emotionally charged outrage, to market the requisite material goods necessary for demonstrating group cohesiveness and identity as well as the ideologies of the requisite groups.

While we are not endorsing the ideology of these counter groups in any way, they serve to remind us of the power of the neo-liberal capitalist market, as independent of the legitimacy of the social politics undergirding the different group’s causes, their message and related products are consumed in the same manner as those of the original resistance movement from the right and alt-right to the radical left. This illustrates that neoliberalism has no conscience. As Haiven (2014) reminds us, “All social, moral, ethical, and personal values are subordinate to the value of money” (p. 2). The system is predicated on the needs of the market at the expense of all other considerations. Capitalism, specifically neoliberalism, and the processes of commodification not only usurp resistance causes, but also commandeers efforts that are made to counter or *resist* the resistance as the vast capital expenditure necessary to garner group legitimacy membership is predicated on consumption. However, the consumer operates under the falsehood that resistance is somehow

free from the seductions of the neoliberal capitalist consumer culture (Winlow and Hall 2007). Even those who are the most marginalized in society believe they are “immune from the homogenising tendencies of consumer culture” (Miles 2014, p. 82). Albeit in a different context to that being discussed here, Winlow and Hall (2007) question this dominant assumption,

Can genuinely oppositional counter-values constantly recreate themselves among marginal groups in an industrialized West whose channels of communication are dominated by consumer values that now permeate every nook and cranny of everyday life? Are young people really subverting the metaphors of capitalism and stamping their own identity on their world because they appear ‘creative’ when reworking and ritualizing the symbolism of corporate goods? (p. 395)

This speaks directly to our argument here, where we would answer these questions with a resounding “no.” As independent of the resistance goals, even if the message is that of usurping capitalism itself, the resistor through their consumerism, merely enacts a form of individual level symbolism that reproduces the spectacle that is the consumer society; albeit it a more subtle way than directly supporting overt exploitation. This leads to their inadvertent undermining of any serious efforts at real structural change (Miles 2014). In addition, the very act of engaging resistance through consumerism reinforces class structures as it excludes those without expendable income from participating. As argued by Miles (2014) “in consumer society, ‘normal’ is the ability to consume” (p. 80). Bauman (1998) argues those who are poor have an inability to consume in a manner that has been classified as “normal”—they become “flawed consumers” unable to participate in ‘happy life.’

In a society of consumers, it is above all the inadequacy of the person as a consumer that leads to social degradation and ‘internal exile’. It is this inadequacy, this inability to acquit oneself of the consumer’s duties that turns into bitterness at being left behind, disinherited or degraded, shut off from the social feast to which others gained entry. (Bauman 1998, p. 38).

The market and money become the language through which we comprehend and engage everyday life even when materialism is diametrically opposed to the very message being supported (Haiven 2014). This same argument can be narrowed to the resistance market. Consider for example the anarchist and anti-fascism resistance movement where ‘members’ struggle against an ideology built upon violence that can be described as an oligarchical environment where the state, that is inherently violent, is entrenched in and promotes neoliberalism and corporatism: a trend towards fascism or authoritarianism. Simply, both are broadly anti-capitalist and anti-authoritarian frameworks.

Yet, the commodification and consumption of the products sold as symbols of and commitment to an alternate ideology only serve to reinforce the violence of neoliberalism and the State. Moreover, the symbolism of the products are more of an expression of status and identity as a resistor to current and historical conditions and legitimate the status quo of materialism and consumption more than serving any function of resistance. In this sense, these resistance groups are part and parcel of a consumer culture linked to resistance (Hayward and Schuilenburg 2014). They have adopted a resistance lifestyle involving the use of ‘radical iconography’. As we have previously noted, the purchases of these commodified products of resistance support the spectacular domination of the State and capital.

The commodification of resistance is not restricted to the selling and purchasing of tangible goods. Rather, the consumption of resistance includes behaviors that include

liking and circulating memes and gifs on social media platforms. It is also worth mentioning that corporate capitalization on messages of resistance was very evident in the half-time television commercials aired during the 2017 Super bowl, including companies such as Airbnb, Budweiser, Expedia, It's a 10 haircare, Google, Audi, to mention a few (Super Bowl Commercials 2017). However, it was the 84-Lumber advertisement that received considerable attention in the days following the game as the short film focused on a Mother and daughter from Mexico making an arduous journey to the United States-Mexico border, only to be confronted by a towering border wall. The duo find a door in the wall constructed by 84 Lumber and their entrance into the US is accompanied by the slogan "The will to succeed is always welcome here" (84 Lumber 2017). While heralded for being a timely critique of the immigration policies of Donald Trump, as well as being deemed too political by Fox who rejected the first version of the advertisement that was proposed, the advertisement generated considerable controversy and attention for the lumber company (O'Reilly 2017). While the merits of the political messaging in this advertisement were being debated, what is often forgotten is that the advertisers, in efforts to appeal to a market that identifies as being counter-hegemonic, have appropriated the populism of cultural messages of resistance for the purpose of capital accumulation. As argued by Nicholson (1997) these images "while viewed as "resistant" by some because of the manner in which it is presented, merely pumps capital back into the system the agent wishes to resist" (p. 179). There is a general failure to recognize that engaging in consumerism to protest or resist does not place them outside the capitalist system, rather resistance in the context discussed here, represent individual and lifestyle choices within the existing consumer society—just another way of engaging the neoliberal market (Pine and Gilmore 1999).

While we could continue with more examples of the State and neoliberalism usurping resistance through commodification and consumption, we believe we have demonstrated that we are so engrained within a materialistic culture and the commodification of all things that products of opposition serve to reduce protest and resistance to spectacle.

Concluding Thoughts

We want to reiterate that our purpose here is not to deny the importance of resistance to the State, Donald Trump, racism, classism, sexism, current immigration policies, neocolonialism, and other forms of inequalities and oppression as we believe these are important and necessary to challenge the power of the elite and to arrive at a society that views the essence of all things as equal. However, we see the commodification and consumption of resistance as another avenue that legitimates the violence and inequalities of neoliberalism. More specifically, what appears as a form of resistance or 'detournment' can be viewed as how the neoliberal system responds and the market reacts, making resistance appear as 'successful.' We suggest if we accept these types of resistance in the United States as 'resistance' we only reproduce the depoliticized side of hegemonic control in the current state of neoliberalism. As such, we are suggesting that it is only when the visualization and demystification of the commoditization of resistance becomes a staple of critique that meaningful resistance can occur. As Ewen and Ewen (1982) emphasize in *Channels of Desire*:

The politics of consumption must be understood as something more than what to buy, or even what to boycott. Consumption is a social relationship, the dominant relationship in our society – one that makes it harder and harder for people to hold

together ...To establish popular initiative, consumerism must be transcended – a difficult but central task facing all people who still seek a better way of life (p. 51).

The purpose of demystifying the commodification of resistance, to us then, is not to critique resistance or the consumption of resistance, but to unmask the inherently unequal and violent structure of the economy and State. Perhaps then resistance will not be focused on various numbers of issues but on the State and neoliberal order. After all the root of the problem is what needs to be resisted and changed otherwise we remain consenting, consuming while resisting some aspects of inequality and ideologies rather than moving towards a unified uprooting of the status-quo, capitalism, and the inherently violent State.

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