



Market(ing) Activism: Lush Cosmetics, Ethical Oil, and the Self-Mediation of Protest

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Abstract

In recent years, movements seeking social and environmental reform have turned from addressing the state to addressing the market, using campaigns designed to 'name and shame' corporate actors into adopting environmentally and socially responsible practices. In response, corporations have learned to turn their prosocial behaviours to their advantage, using corporate social responsibility as an opportunity to build their brands. One particularly noteworthy tactic in the latest wave of CSR is the adoption of activism, resistance and protest by corporate actors themselves. The deployment of social action as a marketable commodity forces us to reconsider what ought properly to be called contentious politics and what claims we ought to be able to make in its name. This article inquires into the co-optation of the concepts of activism and protest by commercial firms, with a particular emphasis on the self-mediated image activism of two corporate actors: the Lush Cosmetics company and the Ethical Oil lobby group. The primary argument is that the marketing of protest by corporate actors, regardless of the intention behind these practices, has the potential to weaken the role of protest and activism in attempting to bring about social change.

Contributor Note

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Introduction

The last twenty years have seen a distinct rise in 'market activism' – direct-action campaigns by a range of civil society stakeholders targeting objectionable activities by firms. These corporate campaigns adopt a variety of protest tactics, including letter-writing, boycotts, public demonstrations, and other public 'naming and shaming' approaches designed to pressure corporations to adopt more socially and environmentally sensitive practices. Set against the contemporary backdrop of worldwide social resistance and protest in the last decade – from the Arab Spring to Sovereignty Summer, the Tea Party to Occupy Wall Street, and from Bangladesh to Brazil – market campaigns have taken on even greater resonance as a challenge to the established order; a way for 'ordinary' members of civil society to bring principles of moral rightness to bear against the amoral profit motives and power structures of multinational firms.

As consumers, NGOs and other civil society actors take on corporate behemoths, using increasingly coordinated mechanisms to force corporations to adopt more ethical behaviours, it is hardly surprising that corporate owners have found clever ways to turn 'corporate social responsibility' (CSR) into an asset rather than a liability for the firm. Along with the rise in market activism has come an increase in 'strategic philanthropy' (Matten and Crane 2003), 'cause-related marketing' (Einstein 2012), 'enviropreneurialism' (Menon and Menon 1997), 'triple bottom line' accounting (Vogel 2005) and other innovative corporate practices that seek to embed a firm's social and environmental behavior into its financial calculations. If the early days of

corporate social responsibility saw business practices shifting in 'resistant adaptation' (Menon and Menon 1997: 53) to consumer and activist pressures, the 'new' CSR is devoted to 'internalizing a firm's negative externalities' (Auld et al. 2008) – or, as Michael Power (2007) puts it, 'bringing the outside in' – identifying social and environmental concerns so they can be absorbed into a corporation's brand.

One particularly noteworthy tactic in the 'new' CSR is the adoption of activism, resistance and protest by corporate actors themselves. Lush Cosmetics, a personal care retailer with headquarters in the UK and over 700 retail outlets in more than 40 countries, is exemplary of this. The company regularly partners with charities and NGOs to promote humanitarian, animal welfare and environmental causes. Its retail outlets are used as 'campaign centres' or 'polling stations' for consumers to sign petitions and write protest postcards to political figures or 'vote' for a regulation or policy change in their district. Storefronts are turned into galleries, displaying photographs of logged forests, open-pit mining, or other social or environmental concern; and employees embody the activist spirit by performing demonstrations in front of the stores, sometimes wearing costumes and wielding props. Proceeds from certain Lush products go to the partner organizations, and consumers are encouraged to donate directly as well.

If the seeming pursuit of social and environmental justice by firms is a way for them to 'bring the outside in', the ultimate aim of this corporate-led activism is then to push the inside back out: In order for the benefits of protest to accrue to the participating firm, the firm needs to find ways to narrate its actions

to a broader public beyond those participating in the event. Mediated self-representation – the independent creation and circulation of protest ‘artefacts’ (Cammaerts 2012) such as photographs, videos, posters and other evidence of the protest event – is one important way this takes place. In this article I present nine protest artefacts by opposing movements to demonstrate the powerful yet contextually flexible role of images in the management of protest.

Characterizations of this variety of corporate social responsibility range from abject cynicism and dire self-interest to, more optimistically, a pragmatic solution to global social and environmental problems, a form of ‘ecological modernization’ (Micheletti 2003: 8-9) amid the weakened effectiveness of state governance and national institutions in a globalized context. In the next section of this article I will discuss these perspectives more fully. Regardless of one’s political stance on the matter, however, one long-term and inevitable impact of this ‘commodity activism’ (Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser 2012) is to force a rethinking of not only the content but also the form that protest can and should take. When corporations act like social movements or non-governmental organizations, taking political stances on issues of global social and environmental concern, appealing to consumers via the ethical or moral rightness of an issue, the notions typically associated with these forms of collective action – protest, activism, resistance, radical politics, struggle – are made flexible, weak and contingent.

This is not to say that these terms have never been objects of struggle in and of themselves; or that they were not previously applied to diverse political and

social projects. At various times in its history, contentious politics has been characterized by labour and democratic mobilizations; by identity making and consciousness-raising; or by the power of ordinary citizens to effect change in their everyday lives. It has been applied to religious mobilization as well as to political and national movements. Popular projects are diverse and cannot be defined by a single laundry list of features. Nevertheless, threaded through the histories of contentious politics is the on-going recognition that ‘politics worthy of the name included contention over basic questions of inclusion and exclusion, the distribution of wealth and power, and the direction of social change’ (Calhoun 2012: 2).

The primary argument in this article is that the marketing of activism by corporate actors, regardless of the intention behind these practices, has the potential to weaken the role of protest and activism in attempting to bring about social change. Activism-as-marketing, or ‘commodity activism’, the deployment of social action as a marketable commodity (Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser 2012), forces us to reconsider what ought properly to be called contentious politics and what claims we ought to be able to make in its name. The ‘privatization’ of participation in civil society throws into question what commitments to social movements actually entail – whether these commitments accurately reflect the interests of individuals or groups, or whether self-interest or political partisanship are stronger motivating factors, for instance (Walker 2009).

A common critique of commodity activism is that it is caused by, or a condition of, contemporary capitalism. In this refrain, formerly ‘left’ politics and

projects are 'co-opted' by the market, 'absorbed' into capitalism, 'taken over' by corporations who 'sell' our progressive ideas back to us (but see Littler 2009, chapter 4, for a strong critique of this approach). This view is both too simple and too sweeping. Critiques that paint these phenomena as symptom and effect of 'market fundamentalism' or 'neoliberalization' employ a causal parsimony that does not adequately reveal either the complex and messy ways that different corporate campaigns actually work in practice, or the historical means by which notions of protest have developed. The question, rather, is whether and how these new forms of protest can be classified as protest; and especially how these forms of protest contribute to organizing culture, to forming our 'images of society' (Williams 1961) and to orchestrating our reliance on them as putative solutions to global problems.

This article offers one redress to that overly causal frame through an analysis of self-mediation discourses and artefacts by two corporate actors engaged in simultaneous protests around the Canadian tar sands and their transnational counterparts (i.e., the Keystone XL pipeline project in the United States and the Fuel Quality Directive legislation in Europe). The corporate actors in question are the Lush Cosmetics retailer and a Canadian oil industry lobby group called Ethical Oil. Both groups present a challenge to the existing literature on market activism, both the critical literature and the promotional. Despite the antithetical stances each of these actors takes toward the social and environmental costs of tar sands exploitation, both groups employ classic protest tactics such as boycotts and public demonstrations as part of their quest for

visibility and legitimacy. Intriguingly, these two actors are mutual antagonists. Central to their goals is a drive to claim the realm of 'genuine' protest and resistance for themselves, simultaneously discrediting their opponent as hypocritical, inauthentic, and motivated solely by self-interest.

Self-mediation by protest movements – what the activist collective Indymedia calls 'being the media' (Cammaerts 2012: 125) – is typically understood in two senses. In the contemporary Western media environment of user-enabled information-and-communication technologies and infrastructures (ICTIs) (see Kubitschko forthcoming), self-mediation can refer to mediated self-representation – the drive for public recognition of a group or cause through the independent creation and dissemination of protest 'artefacts' (Cammaerts 2012) such as recordings of demonstrations or public statements; it can connote as well the networking, information-sharing and mobilization capacities of these technologies (e.g., Rohlinger and Brown 2009). In both these senses self-mediation is believed to 'challenge and complicate the analytical distinctions public/private and producer/user' (Cammaerts 2012: 118), offering distinctive structural opportunities and constraints that are not adequately dealt with by general perspectives on the relationships between (mass/mainstream) media and (grassroots) protest. Although it is critical to explore the relationship between protest and the media in terms of coverage (both quantitative and qualitative coverage) and with regard to its impact on public discourse and social change – or lack thereof (Bob 2005; Sobieraj 2011) a focus on media solely on the basis of coverage or content of activist projects misses the specific implications of self-

mediated practices. We can look at self-mediation as one arrow in the arsenal of framing and counterframing tactics available to issue and group identification without having to factor in the political-economic or ideological role of the mass/mainstream media in organizing protest logics. A focus on self-mediation enlarges our understanding of how mediation as *practice* – rather than media as industry – contributes to the pervasive mediatization of politics and the quality of public discourse.

Self-mediation is inherently performative. As a tactic of protest it is deemed to reinvigorate public acts of citizenship (Chouliaraki 2010), overturn dominant narratives, and fulfil a truth-telling function. It is important to conceptualize self-mediation more broadly, however, than in terms of the democratization of technology or the re-presentation of 'ordinary' voices (Chouliaraki 2010). While self-mediation may give voice to the voiceless, the case of Lush and Ethical Oil suggests that it also offers new techniques of amplification and legitimacy to those who have not historically had trouble being heard. If self-mediation blurs the lines between producer/user and public/private, it also challenges and complicates further analytical distinctions, such as those between grassroots and 'elite' representation. Indeed the ability by corporate actors to use the trappings of protest in order to appear as grassroots organizations, capturing the symbolic moral benefits that accrue to such civil society actors, is a key tactic in the case under investigation here.

I present nine protest artefacts – images of protest generated and circulated by Lush, Ethical Oil, and their intermediaries – to demonstrate the flexibility and contingency of the protest project. An

important (though by no means the only) objective of these actors is to promote 'the nonorganization of an effective counterimage' (Verdery 1995) by opponents. Verdery uses this phrase to characterize the Weberian formulation of legitimacy: for Weber, the attainment of legitimacy by a dominant group is predicated both on the installation of a vision of the social order that is accepted by many *and* on the lack of an alternative vision by those who do not accept the dominant imaginary. In the failure of the counterimage, the dominant view wins out. I appropriate this discussion of legitimacy here and take the image/counterimage distinction literally, exploring how visual signifiers of protest are powerful weapons in the battle by different groups of social actors over the legitimate right to act for political or social change.

I treat these self-mediated artefacts as politically charged statements, as 'dialectical images' in Walter Benjamin's sense, historical fragments which must be juxtaposed to reveal their significance in the present (Buck-Morss 1989). As Buck-Morss reminds us, the concept of dialectical images is 'overdetermined' in Benjamin's work. Space limits a fuller exploration of the subtlety of this methodological concept. For our purposes it will suffice to reproduce Buck-Morss's description of the concept's purpose, which is to juxtapose, through montage, such ideologically disparate images as to shock ('awaken') the viewer into consciousness. The key is to 'interrupt[...] the context into which it is inserted' and thereby 'counteract[...] illusion' (Buck-Morss 1989: 67). She writes,

Not the medium of representation, not merely the concreteness of the image or the montage form is

crucial, but whether the construction makes visible the gap between sign and referent, or fuses them in a deceptive totality so that the caption merely duplicates the semiotic content of the image instead of setting it into question. (Buck-Morss 1989: 67-68)

For Benjamin, it was the specific configuration of unlike or opposing symbols that would unlock and 'demystify' their ideological bases. My aim, too, is to 'denature' and 'demystify' these protest images, by juxtaposing the artefacts from two oppositional groups, Lush and Ethical Oil. In the process I aim to expose what these counteracting self-mediation strategies may teach us about the contemporary terms and functions of protest.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section reviews a range of position-takings on corporate social responsibility (CSR) and its mirror image, ethical consumption, both in business circles and among corporate critics. It then provides an overview of the tar sands issues and the activities of Lush Cosmetics in relation to these issues.

The fourth section examines the terms and conditions of the images and counterimages at play in the contentious politics over the tar sands, and evaluates their ability to accrue legitimacy for their protest project. A focus on how corporate actors conceive of and engage in protest can reveal a great deal about how protest and mediation currently interrelate. The article closes with further analysis and suggestions for future research.

Apprehending the Market for Virtue: Corporate Social Responsibility and Its Discontents

The rise of market campaigns and ethical consumption practices over the last twenty years is typically credited to three interrelated factors: 1) the increasing globalization of production and distribution systems, leading to international supply chains; 2) the ineffectiveness of state governments and national organizations to control and regulate all aspects of these production and distribution systems; and 3) growing corporate influence over governments to limit legislation or regulation that hampers business (Conroy 2007; Micheletti 2003; Vogel 2005). To this list we could add the increase in (or at least the increased awareness of) social and environmental problems that exceed state borders, further reducing the ability of state governments to resolve these problems (Auld *et al.* 2008). Indeed, some have suggested that the growth in number and legitimacy of global civil society actors in the last two decades has come about precisely because of the mounting recognition that states are not equipped to respond to problems at the global scale. Global civil society was needed for a new kind of global governance:

The budding power of NGOs such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth signaled the emergence of a new kind of cosmopolitan law – an attempt to govern post-nationally, or at least in a way in which nation-states were no longer seen as the major units of action or the only entities endangered by perceived problems. The world as a whole was affected by such problems as global warming and the hole in the ozone layer. These

(primarily environmental) problems were no respecters of national borders. (Kendall et al. 2009: 55)

In this context, a growing number of stakeholders have turned to the business community rather than to governments to help them address social and environmental concerns. A variety of tactics, including boycott or 'boycott' campaigns, shareholder activism, product and company labelling, and environmental certification (Auld et al. 2008; Micheletti 2003; Nicholls and Opal 2005) are brought into service to pressure corporate leaders to modify their production and distribution practices. Such 'supply chain ethics' (Nicholls and Opal 2005: 69) leverage public opinion against corporate reputation in order to, in the words of one environmental organization, 'turn the public stigma of environmental destruction into a business nightmare for any American company that refuses to adopt responsible environmental policies' (Rainforest Action Network). Media coverage of the more organized events, such as the infamous Nike sweatshop case in the late 1980s, helped further construct civil society protesters in the public imagination as virtuous Davids against corporate Goliaths.

If initially the push for firms to adopt socially and environmentally accountable behaviors was grudgingly accepted as 'mandated corporate responsibility' (Menon and Menon 1997: 53) it did not take long for corporate actors to recognize that the mounting pressure from NGOs and consumers could be transformed from a public relations nightmare into a massive competitive advantage – that there was indeed 'a market for virtue' (Vogel 2005) to be exploited. Increasingly, business manuals began to stress the benefits of corporate

social responsibility (CSR) or 'corporate citizenship' for the firm – the notion that doing good could equal doing well in the marketplace. CSR quickly became part of a proactive branding and marketing strategy, as terms like 'enviropreneurialism', 'green capitalism', 'ethical retailer', 'sustainability', and 'triple bottom line' entered the corporate lexicon.

Positive assessments of CSR campaigns liken them to corporate and consumer 'plebiscites', 'giving business clients and final consumers a chance to vote their preferences with their purchasing expenditures' (Conroy 2007: 47) and in so doing 'civilize' global capitalism (Vogel 2005: 3). More critical accounts point to the use of social and environmental discourse by corporate firms as (mere) image building and/or as rankings and reputation drivers. These critiques condemn CSR on the basis that rather than take seriously the problems of society, CSR represents the most nefarious tendencies of the corporation to 'valorize self-interest and invalidate moral concern' (Bakan 2004: 28), a clever strategy of 'bringing the outside in' (Power 2007) to quell social uproar. The problem is only partly that 'there is no consensus on what constitutes virtuous corporate behavior' (Vogel 2005: 2), opening the door for companies to blur the distinction between, say, being 'green' and 'greenwashing'; a more serious charge is that the 'pragmatic environmentalism' (Micheletti 2003: 8) that allows economic growth and environmental concerns to be compatible ultimately maintains and perpetuates the damaging attitudes and practices that led to the problems in the first place (Prudham 2009). For Austin (2002), among others, partnerships between corporate and civil society actors are little more than PR campaigns, 'build[ing] ideological unity

between corporations and the public and allow[ing] for greater control over consumer behavior' (92). The pretence of global activism to solve global problems is reduced to 'Wal-Mart cosmopolitanism' (Pieterse 2006) – emancipation by a 'caring' corporation.

The ethical consumption or political consumerism movement was similarly inspired by the idea that global problems required direct action solutions; unsurprisingly, critiques of ethical consumption parallel those of the CSR paradigm. On the positive front observers propose that individual market transactions can be personally and politically meaningful (see Harrison et al. 2005). Micheletti (2003) writes that political consumerism is an interesting example of *phronesis*: 'virtues in action in everyday settings' (2003: 150) where consumers recognize that material goods are 'embedded in a complex social and normative context' (2-3).

Like CSR, ethical consumption is a very broad umbrella, encompassing a range of motivations (e.g., Portwood-Stacer 2012) and such diverse acts as buying organic, fairly traded, or animal cruelty-free goods; boycotts or buycotts; discursive action (e.g. letter-writing campaigns) and public demonstrations. For its critics, ethical consumption is little more than a kind of 'slacktivism' (Morozov 2011) where buying a product labelled 'green' or 'fair trade' absolves the consumer from taking more meaningful action to effect social or environmental change. Some have suggested that ethical consumption leads to a distorted version of global citizenship, what Jo Littler terms 'cosmopolitan caring consumption' (2009: 23-24).

Rise Up and Buy Our Shower Gel: Lush Cosmetics and the Activist Ethic

The case of Lush Cosmetics offers a clear illustration of the tensions inherent in CSR as well as its attendant claims of doing good while doing well. Lush Cosmetics is a UK-based personal care retailer manufacturing its own private products, currently operating over 700 stores in more than 40 countries (Hoovers 2013). Although it was founded in 1994 by husband-and-wife team Mark and Mo Constantine, it locates its origins as a 'campaigning company' (Lush) in 2006, the year Anita Roddick sold her company The Body Shop to the multinational cosmetics corporation L'Oréal. Lush, a former supplier to The Body Shop, publicly distanced itself from The Body Shop's decision (Guthrie 2007) and redoubled its efforts to promote itself as an independent, original and deeply ethical organization.

Lush employs a marketing strategy strongly integrated around transparency, fair trade, human rights, and justice. Knowing well that 'everything about an organization talks' (Kotler and Levy 1969), from its product design to its logo and store setting, Lush reflects its brand values through a combination of material and symbolic gestures. Its vegan, nonchemical soaps are displayed unwrapped and are shaped to appear 'artisanal' (Datamonitor 2008: 5)¹; natural product ingredients and sources are displayed on labels; its website advertises 'ethical' labour practices; its signage is designed to look like handwritten scrawl.² At the heart of the Lush brand is its activist orientation.

¹ See also Moor and Littler (2008) who note similar features of the American Apparel brand.

² Indeed the Lush typeface is apparently inspired by one of its employees' handwriting; see <https://www.lush.co.uk/content/view/1083>.

Lush regularly partners with charity groups, nonprofit organizations and NGOs to support a range of social and environmental causes. Its targets are mainly governments and industry groups. While the merging of corporate and civil society actors to promote major causes is not new, Lush widens the terrain of corporate activism by using its store windows, in-store and front-of-store retail space as the site of its sponsored protests.



Figure 1. Lush campaign poster calling on the Bush administration to release prisoners Binyam Mohammed and Sami al-Haj from the Guantanamo Bay prison.³

If the use of retail space as campaign centre complicates conventional understandings of protest, a further complication arises via Lush's use of employees as campaigners. Employees are regularly engaged to support causes

³ Source: <http://www.andyworthington.co.uk/2008/03/07/guantanamo-fair-trial-posters-censored-by-shopping-centre-in-reading/> (Accessed 16 July 2013)

on behalf of the company. Staff work semi-naked to protest excessive packaging (Datamonitor 2008: 8); dump manure in front of the European Parliament to challenge legislation allowing chemical testing on animals (Guthrie 2007); and go on hunger strikes in support of prisoners' rights (Reprieve 2008). Lush employees are frequently joined by activists from the partner organization during protests, making it impossible to distinguish them. The company's employees wield titles like Green Helper and Campaigns Assistant, and sometimes blog independently about their protest activities.

These protest campaigns are crucial to Lush's extensive self-mediation strategies, complementing and vastly extending the now-standard practices of corporate 'self-mediation' (that is, branding and reputation management) via websites and social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and blog forums. Lush staff and members of their partner organizations extensively document the campaign protests and circulate them widely via their online networks.⁴ Lush generates additional online content in the form of spoof ads and videos on YouTube against target industries or governments, and publishes a twice-yearly product catalogue, Lush Times, that doubles as an activist pamphlet; its newspaper-inspired design carries regular features on the causes it is supporting. In one instance, the cover of

⁴ For instance, promotional texts and images detailing the Lush tar sands campaign were featured on Lush's Facebook, Wordpress, and Tumblr pages and its corporate websites in several countries. Partner organizations RAN, the Dogwood Initiative, and Corporate Ethics International gave ample online space to the Lush campaign and also promoted the campaign on the photosharing site Flickr and on anti-tar sands activist networks climateconnections.org and tarsandsolutions.org.

the February 2008 catalogue was blown up to poster size and displayed outside a retail store in Reading, a small town west of London, England (see Figure 1).

Employees, charities, NGOs, volunteers and consumers are the strategically selected intermediaries for the Lush brand. Rather than engage in conventional advertising, Lush incites these intermediaries to disseminate Lush's values along with their own. A savvy player in the market for virtue, Lush uses its ethical activities – its NGO partnerships, charity work, and cause-related campaigns – to confound the conventional binaries between morality and money, brand-building and society-building, corporate profiteer and civic do-gooder.

A telling example is found in a short article in *The New Statesman*, a British culture and politics magazine. The article's author, Clive Stafford Smith, is a regular columnist for the magazine and is also the director of Reprieve, a UK charity that worked with Lush to promote the human rights campaign in Reading (see Figure 1). When I initially came across the article, 'A fair trial is not a "brand issue"', I expected it to decry Lush's obvious self-interest in promoting the Mohammed/al-Haj cause. Instead, the column pilloried the shopping centre management, The Oracle, which houses the Lush retail outlet in Reading. The Oracle had requested that Lush take down the posters because of the management's policy to protect its brand by avoiding political bias. As the article's title suggests, The Oracle is the culprit overly focused on its brand, while Lush is apparently untainted by such base concerns.

Evoking the denial of human rights and censorship, Stafford Smith defends Lush as the victor in this morality play:

Human rights are trampled in unlikely places: a shopping centre in Reading is the latest example... The promotion of human rights by Lush is admirable, an example that should be followed by any ethical corporation... Most of the evidence the Bush administration would like to classify as secret involves the abuse of the prisoners in its global torture chambers. Now Lush is being gagged in the same way... (Stafford Smith 2008: 24).

The poster campaign on behalf of Mohammed and al-Haj was not the only effort by Lush to raise awareness of the prisoners' situation. Lush also produced one of its signature 'bath bombs', a spherical soap that fizzes and dissolves in water. Partial proceeds would go to the Reprieve charity to help support the campaign. With no apparent irony, Stafford Smith describes the bath bomb created for the human rights campaign:

Lush teamed up with Reprieve to produce a 'Guantanamo orange' bath ballistic that dissolves in hot water to reveal an image of Binyam Mohammed, a British resident, or of the al-Jazeera cameraman Sami al-Haj, and leaves a dove of peace lurking in the vicinity of your plughole at the conclusion (Buy one, set one free?) (Stafford Smith 2008: 24).⁵

Amber Day (2011) has written about the anti-corporate tactic of 'identity nabbing', a form of affect-based activism in which the protest group 'actively tak[es] on the identities of their enemies. It is a tactic

⁵ After Sami al-Haj was released from Guantanamo Bay and repatriated to Sudan, Lush created another product 'inspired by Sami', a perfume called 'Smell of Freedom'. See <https://www.lush.co.uk/product/5673/Oudh-Heart>.

which draws on irony as a means of reframing (or rebranding) political opponents, while it actively connects to those who already share many of the group's values, entertaining and engaging those potential allies' (163). Unlike the Yes Men or Billionaires for Bush, two prominent activist groups that effectively use identity nabbing to make corporations look bad (Day 2011), Lush uses this tactic to make itself look good. The company achieves a chameleonic quality, embodying both protest group and its object, simultaneously owning the roles of both protagonist and victim. Capturing the morality of protest while managing still to sell soap, Lush demonstrates a canny ability to enter and succeed in the market for virtue. As the next section will demonstrate, identity nabbing is a powerful tactic; and it is not only the province of classically activist causes. It will be taken to even greater levels as Lush advances its tar sands campaign. Before we proceed, however, it is necessary to provide some background information on the tar sands and their transformation from economic boon to environmental cause.

Picturing Protest: Tactical Subversions in Tar Sands Activism

Millions of years of geological processes have resulted in vast reserves of bitumen, a tarry substance embedded in the sand under the forest floor of northeastern Alberta, Canada. Native peoples once used the tar to seal canoes, and generations of explorers marvelled at the phenomenon, though none conceived of extracting the tar for any mass purpose. This began to change in the 1920s, when scientific and technical experiments demonstrated ways to extract oil from the sands. Today, production of the tar sands around the

Athabasca river averages approximately 1.5 million barrels of crude per day, with a projected increase to 5-10 million barrels per day by 2030 (Davidson and Gismondi 2011; Gosselin et al. 2010).

If for some the tar sands represent the last, best hope for the reterritorialization of North American oil production, for many others the tar sands represent a limit case in ecological and social degradation. 'The largest industrial project in history' (Davidson and Gismondi 2011: 1) involves massive inputs of water and energy to extract the bitumen from the sands. In addition to the landscape degradation and habitat disruption caused by mining, deep well drilling, and deforestation, waste products include greenhouse gases and tailings ponds. The area's remoteness has long allowed industry supporters and indeed the general public to ignore the direct impact on the indigenous communities residing in the region. In the last decade, however, opposition to the tar sands has been mounting. One reason for the rise in protests is surely growing international awareness prompted by the nationalization and transnationalization of the tar sands resource via the proposed Northern Gateway and Keystone XL pipelines (toward China and the U.S. respectively), as well as revisions to the European Union's Fuel Quality Directive, which mandates oil specifications for fuel suppliers.

Davidson and Gismondi's (2011; 2012) visual history of the tar sands is a powerful portrait of the evolution of mediated narratives about the social, political-economic and cultural role of this resource. Indeed, as they point out, the remoteness of the Athabaskan region means that mediation has long been crucial to its social imaginary. Until

relatively recently, images of the tar sands were not images of protest nor of environmental concern but rather representations of a vast frontier ripe for discovery and exploitation. One reason for this lies in the intentions of those wielding the tools of mediation. 'Under the dual gaze of commerce and government, territory became constructed into a commodity frontier, understood in terms of deposits of natural resources, relationships to markets, and obstacles to extraction for human use' (Davidson and Gismondi 2011: 48). These mediations served both to make visible and to render thinkable the industrial development of the tar sands. For the most part, the images generated were devoid of human subjects, retaining the culture/nature distinction preferred by the energy industry. When people were visible in the frame, these were geologists, surveyors, pioneers and scientists whose technical interventions would harness this vast wilderness for the good of Canadian society (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. An image of the tar sands by G.B. Dowling of Geological Survey of Canada, circa 1892. Pictured are the tar sands deposits lying along the Athabasca River in Alberta, Canada. As Davidson and Gismondi write, the image 'suggests the enormity of the resource, its potential, and the apparent

easy availability of the tar sands resource' (2011: 3).⁶

For the latter half of the twentieth century, the Albertan government and pro-tar sands organizations maintained a monopoly on the representation of the tar sands in the public imagination, fuelled by a steady stream of promotional efforts largely directed at Albertan residents and largely without contest (Davidson and Gismondi 2011). In the last decade, however, there has been a growing wave of national and international opposition to the tar sands and considerably more sophisticated transnational collective mobilization. Along with the increase in protest has come an increase in images of tar sands-related degradation to offset the dominant oil narrative. These images take multiple forms, including documentary film (e.g., Szeman 2012) and photography (e.g., Peter Essick's photographs for the *National Geographic* magazine), artistic projects (e.g., Edward Burtynsky's photographic works of industrial transformation) and scientific imagery (e.g., earth-observing satellites whose images from orbit show the large-scale environmental impacts of bitumen extraction) in addition to the content generated by civil society organizations and activist groups.

Lush began its anti-tar sands campaign in June 2010, in partnership with the San Francisco-based environmental organization Rainforest Action Network (RAN). Well known for its market and media campaigns, RAN considers itself a grassroots consumer education and mobilization group that explicitly targets objectionable corporate behavior. Partnering with Lush was not, however, seen

⁶ Source: Davidson and Gismondi (2012), <http://www.csj.ualberta.ca/imaginings/?p=3600> (Accessed 16 July 2013)

as anathema to RAN's principles; RAN maintains a Business-Friends-of-RAN program that promotes companies with social and environmental commitments (in exchange for financial or in-kind support of RAN).

The first act of the campaign consisted of a two-week protest in June 2010 engineered simultaneously at 210 Lush stores in the U.S. and Canada. Shop windows displayed images of open-pit mining and deforestation, and passersby were invited into the stores to write postcards to U.S. President Obama and Canadian Prime Minister Harper protesting tar sands exploitation. With the stores as campaign centres, Lush retail employees were the visible campaigners. Stripped down to their underwear, staff paraded in front of the stores wearing oil 'barrels' that read, 'Time for an Oil Change or We'll Lose It All', and handed out leaflets promoting RAN (see Figure 4).



Figure 3. Lush Cosmetics, the Rainforest Action Network, and other organizations demonstrate against the tar sands on Parliament Hill in Ottawa, Canada. Note the Lush shopping bags lining the steps. Source: Global Justice Ecology Project.⁷

A couple of months later, in September 2010, Lush and RAN staged a protest on

⁷ Source: Ben Powless, <http://climate-connections.org/2010/09/08/photos-tar-sands-protest-nancy-pelosi-visit-ottawa-september-8-2010/>. (Accessed 16 July 2013)

Parliament Hill in Ottawa, Canada, timed to coincide with a visit by members of U.S. Congress. Activists dressed as TransCanada executives (TransCanada is one of the companies backing the Keystone XL Pipeline project) poured a thick black liquid over a woman sitting on the Canadian flag (see Figure 3). Representatives from the Indigenous Environmental Network and the Polaris Institute also joined the protest performance. In March 2011, as the European Parliament debated whether to pass a ban on fuel derived from tar sands oil, the campaign expanded to the UK, where Lush took the opportunity to introduce a molasses-based shower gel of bitumen-like consistency whose partial proceeds would go to the UK Tar Sands Network.



Figure 4. Lush staff wield oil barrels, postcards, megaphones and soaps in front of the Lush store in San Francisco as part of its anti-tar sands campaign, 9 June 2010. Source: Rainforest Action Network.⁸

Lush pursued its anti-tar sands activism by collaborating with other grassroots organizations and campaigns, developing more self-promotional content in the process. With Corporate Ethics International, another market campaign-oriented organization, they produced a

⁸ Photo credit: Jonathan McIntosh, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/rainforestactionnetwork/4686085771/in/set-72157624116743837/lightbox/> (Accessed 16 July 2013) (See this link for additional images of the campaign.)

three-minute video called 'Tar Sands Blow: Lush Remix', a combination of music video, anti-tar sands rhetoric, and corporate advertisement. With Dogwood Initiative, a British Columbian nonprofit, Lush set up 'polling stations' in their stores for consumers to vote against pipeline traffic across the province (the Northern Gateway pipeline project). Lush also created a spoof television ad mocking an advertisement created by the pipeline's backer, Canadian energy company Enbridge (see figures 5 and 6).

Join the Conversation

It's a path to...



Figure 5. A screen shot from an infomercial by North American energy supplier Enbridge, advertising the proposed Northern Gateway pipeline.⁹

Ethical Oil: Counterimages of Protest

The Lush/RAN campaign might have continued along these lines had it not been for the entrée of an unlikely opponent: the Ethical Oil lobby group. Though its exact affiliations and funding sources remain a matter of some speculation, multiple sources identify Ethical Oil as an industry-friendly front group for the sitting conservative government in Canada. The moniker is a

⁹ Source: <http://www.northerngateway.ca/join-the-conversation/>. (Accessed 16 July 2013)

direct outgrowth of the book, *Ethical Oil: The Case for Canada's Oil Sands* (Levant 2010), which advocates Canadian tar sands as the 'ethical' solution for North Americans to liberate themselves from foreign dependence on oil. Its author, conservative lawyer and political strategist Ezra Levant, is co-founder and primary spokesperson for the lobby group, a position that is amplified via his television show on the Sun Network (Canada's version of the notorious Fox Network in the U.S.) as well as his industry background (he has held positions at the Fraser Institute and the Charles G. Koch Institute) and experience in government (as former communications director for the Canadian Alliance political party and parliamentary aide to the Reform Party in Canada).



Figure 6. A screen shot from the Lush spoof of the Enbridge infomercial.¹⁰

Ethical Oil's structure and strategy are predicated on a series of subversions (Aronczyk and Auld 2013). As a countermovement to the tar sands activist movement, Ethical Oil's goal is to wield the same argument structures, legitimacy techniques, and tactics as the movement, but in a way that is meant to lead to the opposite normative imperative. A review of Ethical Oil's 'activism' promoting the tar sands illuminates this strategy.

¹⁰ Source: <http://tarsandssolutions.org/visuals/a-path-to-a-canada-no-one-will-recognize>. (Accessed 16 July 2013)

In August 2011, two women wearing black niqabs and hijabs appeared in front of Lush's retail store in the tourist-friendly ByWard Market neighbourhood in Ottawa, Canada, handing passersby leaflets bearing the Lush logo superimposed over a woman's limp hand covered in blood. Underneath the logo were the words, 'Lush attacks Canada's oilsands yet does business in Saudi Arabia'.¹¹



Figure 7. *Ethical Oil leaflet condemning Lush's 'hypocrisy'.*¹²

The Ethical Oil website furthered this antagonistic position, accusing Lush of 'ethical hypocrisy' and characterizing the Lush tar sands campaign as an attack against Canada's liberal democracy:

Ethical Oil from Canada's oilsands is the Fair Trade choice in oil. People, businesses, and governments have a choice to make: Ethical Oil from Canada, its oilsands, and other liberal democracies or Conflict Oil from regimes like Saudi Arabia.

A subpage devoted to Lush on Ethical Oil's website featured a one-minute

¹¹ The nomenclature 'tar sands' (used by protesters) versus 'oil sands' (used by industry) is itself part of the symbolic battle (see Aronczyk and Auld 2013).

¹² Source: <http://www.ethicaloil.org/news/lushs-ethical-hypocrisy-exposed-in-ottawa/>. (Accessed 16 July 2013)

video advancing the same argument, with the tagline, 'Throwing Stones in Canada. Silent and Submissive in Saudi Arabia', and inviting viewers to sign an online petition to 'tell Lush their hypocrisy stinks as bad as their soap'. This perspective was echoed in print and online publications (Daifallah 2011; Foster 2010; Morningstar 2011; Stirling-Anosh 2012), paralleling the network formation Lush had created with its army of intermediaries.¹³ Completing the subversion of tactics and networks was the semiotic and symbolic transformation of the Lush logo (Figure 9).



Figure 8. *Ethical Oil representatives handing out anti-Lush leaflets in front of the Lush retail store in Ottawa, Canada.*¹⁴

The question at stake in these artefacts of protest is what they can teach us about the relationship between self-mediation and legitimacy. The contest underway between Lush and Ethical Oil is not at root about the tar sands. If we consider together these companies' corporate missions, the symbolic wars being waged through the images

¹³ Michelle Stirling-Anosh is a Research Associate at the Frontier Centre for Public Policy, a pro-industry Western Canadian think tank. Ezra Levant, co-founder of Ethical Oil, is a former editorial board member of the *National Post* newspaper.

¹⁴ Source: <http://www.ethicaloil.org/news/lushs-ethical-hypocrisy-exposed-in-ottawa/>. (Accessed 16 July 2013)

presented here, and the nature of their antagonism, it seems clear that the social issue itself is not the central purpose. Another social or environmental justice issue – indeed, another issue entirely – could be substituted for the tar sands in this image activism. The legitimacy contest here is not over who has the right to speak out about the pernicious behaviour of the oil industry; it is about who has the right to claim and represent the category of protest.



Figure 9. 'Lush Dirty Oil-Soaked Cosmetics'.¹⁵

Self-mediation is theorized most prominently as a normative good; the capacity for the marginalized or oppressed to gain their share of visibility, recognition, and legitimacy in the public sphere. But publicness for its own sake has 'demotic' as well as 'democratic' dimensions (Turner 2010; see also Chouliaraki 2010). The self-mediation that takes place in commodity activism is ultimately geared more toward *self-promotion* than toward political action. Such a self-interested approach has the strong potential to create a culture of apathy and scepticism toward these organizations. More problematic still, *it privileges mediation over action*; it becomes more important to represent the action taken than to pursue the action itself. When the primary motivation of protest – its capacity to bring about transformation or justice – is subordinated to a second-order

¹⁵ Source: <http://climatesoscanada.org/blog/2011/06/20/lushs-dirty-laundry/>. [Accessed 16 July 2013]

motivation of status and representation, the dialectical function of image activism is abandoned.

In Walter Benjamin's world, dialectical images had a critically interruptive function, the ability to bring history to a standstill so we might better observe the players and the play; but also so that we might better understand civil society's radical potential. When such images of protest become historical artefacts, will they speak to new generations of their earlier capacity for massive social change and offer us a 'revolutionary inheritance' (Buck-Morss 1989)? Or are these images instead representative of stasis, of business as usual and protest as masquerade; fragments of the ruins?

Conclusion

Corporations, social movements, and nonprofit organizations all have at their disposal the same cultural toolkit with which to make meaning of their activities and impact their audiences. The argument that capitalism (or its more damning of-the-moment buzzword, neoliberalism) has co-opted protest and resistance, depriving these concepts of their 'true' or 'authentic' functions, is neither accurate nor helpful for researchers to make sense of the implications of these acts. Accounting for the complexity of these cases also requires us to recognize that these groups – corporate firm, NGO, media company, charity – are not monolithic entities but dynamic networks across which institutional actors can easily travel, simultaneously or sequentially occupying multiple roles across organizations with different mandates. This is especially apparent when organizations collaborate or partner on issues. Rather than seeking to distinguish

protest from propaganda or money from morality, we might do better to recognize that these terms are themselves part of ongoing power struggles over connotative fields of reference. Clifford Bob's (2005) perspective on the role of the market in civil society networks is valuable here. Setting out to explain why some causes and social movements receive international funding and why others do not, Bob reveals that regardless of the worthiness of the cause or the neediness of its primary actors, market exigencies and organizational needs play a determining role:

The term 'global *civil* society' is often used to counterpose a realm of principle and morality against one marked by self-seeking, profit, and power. Yet this view, reflecting one aspect of transnational relations, obscures as much as it illuminates. For academics, it furnishes few analytic tools for explaining why some challengers excite major support while others, equally if not more worthy, remain orphans. More broadly, it misrepresents the underlying realities. The organizations and individuals composing networks are certainly motivated, in part, by high principles. But questions of organizational maintenance and survival also permeate NGO decision-making. Viewing NGO motivations as fundamentally different from those of other international actors is therefore problematic.... [W]ithout challenging the increasing role of advocacy networks and NGOs in world politics, the marketing approach places it in a different light. (Bob 2005: 194-195)

It is important to remember that public-private partnership networks that connect activists, nonprofits and corporate executives are not automatically democratic; nor are they necessarily made up of equally powerful participants, as the 'network' metaphor might suggest (Roelofs 2009). At the same time, as Roelofs has argued, 'philanthropy networks illustrate the dependency of almost all civil rights, social justice, and environmental organizations on corporate and foundation funding' (1997), and this too needs to be taken into consideration.¹⁶ For some, this interdependent network structure has led to a 'nonprofit industrial complex' in which grassroots and astroturf movements are indistinguishable (Stauber 2013). Edward Walker's research on the proliferation of grassroots lobbying firms – part of 'an expanding population of private organizations that subsidize public participation' (2009: 100) – reveals that the kind of citizen participation incited by such firms is uncoupled from the acquisition of civic skills and social capital.

These perspectives remind us of the limitations of binary qualifications and exhort us to look instead to the internal and external structural constraints that regulate organizations' activities and contribute to how these various organizations 'get what they want' (Manheim 2011). At the same time they offer clues as to how multiple and diverse organizational networks might be formed to actually effect social and environmental change. This said, further research must help us understand whether the increasing isomorphism of these tactics under the aegis of the market dilutes their overall impact (e.g.,

¹⁶ See Barker (2009) for a critique of the Rainforest Action Network along these lines.

Nickel and Eikenberry 2009) or results in productive tensions (Sanders 2012).

Another productive line of inquiry could be to empirically investigate the social impact of activism-as-marketing; the impact both on the employees enjoined to participate and on the audiences it is designed to reach. We might pay more attention to the careers of protest

artefacts as they circulate (Appadurai 1986), and to the way that symbolic visual cues are deployed in social action (Zubrzycki 2013). A full-blown understanding of the political impact of activism-as-marketing must assess the motivations of the social actors involved as well as the interrelations among symbol and action.

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