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Marxism Commodified: “We Are All Workers” Analyzed

In a late-stage capitalist society, one in which the neoliberal policies set forth by leaders like Reagan and Thatcher now reign supreme, anything that can be commodified will end up being so, even when it becomes twisted and hollow from what it once was supposed to mean. Thus, it ends up being no different – and thus, no surprise -- when brands such as Levi’s twist Marxist ideas like all labor having value to suit an advertisement in a post-depression era. As discussed by Banet-Wiser (108), this campaign strove to make Americans feel both unique in a global landscape and together on a national level, but in doing so, it ignores the fact that the 2008 recession was a global phenomenon caused by the very same forces that had then went on to make, design, and direct these advertisements and movies to try and make Levi’s seem like they were an everyman brand that wasn’t worth five billion dollars. **In designing their advertising campaign and directing their movies to try and stir a feeling of togetherness and American uniqueness, Levi’s highlights a commodification of ideals that are directly contrary to the neoliberal society that they strive better in, and in doing so, the company exemplifies a trait of late-stage capitalism in this advertisement campaign.**

The ideal that all labor has value, of course, is almost hilariously ironic when it is commodified by a billion-dollar brand, especially in the case of a brand that originates most of the labor in making their clothes from exploited workers overseas such as Levi’s. As a product of late-stage capitalism, they thrive in the latest renditions of classical liberalism, such as neoliberalism, in which the government is as “hands-off” of the economy and of the companies as possible, trusting free-market capitalism to regulate itself as much as possible. It is an ideology that works best free of Marxist and leftist ideals, which is the very exact thing that Levi’s was branding themselves with at the time of this campaign to appear both socially responsible and relatable to the consumer. Through the appropriation of these Marxist ideals, they obscure and twist them, and in doing so, Levi’s attempts to instead make this idea relatable to try and sell a product.

This process of obscuration is what makes these advertisements persuasive as what Fiske (89) considers myths, and it is what makes them powerful:

This points up the fact that myths are actually the product of a social class that has achieved dominance by a particular history: the meanings that its myths circulate must carry this history with them, but their operation as myths makes them try to deny it and present their meanings as natural, not historical or social. Myths mystify or obscure their origins and thus their political or social dimension.

Through the process of commodification, these myths lose their original, Marxist meaning, and instead are appropriated as a tool by Levi’s to encourage consumerism of their brand under capitalism. They achieve this role by trying to paint themselves as a trustworthy, relatable company, suffering alongside the average American citizen – even as their CEO made almost six million dollars as entire families lost their entire livelihoods. By trying to call upon their credibility and relatability to the average consumer, as pointed out by Banet-Wiser (109), Levi’s tried to put the onus on consumers to strive towards a better future “together” through this advertising campaign and series of short films, which itself is a hilarious twist of what had happened during this crisis and of the words they use to try and sell their jeans.

Neoliberalism is the exact mechanism that had lead to the financial recession in 2008 that would then go on to be the cause of advertisements like this, designed to be relatable and thus more trustworthy to consumers, and we are able to even see just how unchanged our main modes of advertisement have thus remained in the lights of other crises. Advertisements like this one by Levi’s attempt to promote themselves as somewhat socially aware and try to paint themselves as struggling alongside consumers in these “trying times”. Even ten years later, in the light of perhaps one of the most damaging pandemics in recent history, we see an echo of advertisement campaigns like this that are too a product of an unchecked land of free-market capitalism: as people struggle with a loss that has a still-unknown total cost, advertisements now again attempt to paint themselves as struggling alongside the consumers. Even if the specific wordings have changed in the past decade, the same myth of these companies struggling alongside our society and thus our society must be sure to be strong to help one another in our time of uniquely-American need, even if there were ways that this could have been prevented if, truly, all labor is valuable.

The idea presented by Levi’s of a struggling company supporting Americans, which itself denotes the idea that supporting this brand will then go on to support more Americans, highlights how much of American marketing tries to appeal to a sense of social security that relies on the togetherness of fellow Americans. Through slogans like “we are all workers” and “everybody’s work is equally important”, Levi’s as a brand tries to build themselves up as a brand of the everyman and tries to relate themselves to the often-discredited blue-collar fields of work, but in doing so, they twist ideals often discussed in Marxist literature to instead better fit the dominant ideology held by neoliberal corporations in a free-market capitalist landscape. In doing so, it denies the corporate responsibility for the economic crisis in 2008 and all the other ways that these corporations could have helped then; in ten years, the only thing that post-crisis advertising has changed is the slogan. What was once “we are all workers” now exists as “in these trying times, we are all together”, but the myths and ideology behind both are one in the same.