Top: Scene from a "die-in" at a 1990 Act-Up rally. Bottom: Diesel 1995 print campaign showing two sailors kissing.

CHAPTER FIVE

PATRIARCHY GETS FUNKY

The Triumph of Identity Marketing

Let's face it, when you're a story line on Friends, it's hard to keep thinking you're radical.
-Jay Blotcher, AIDS activist, New York magazine, September 1996

As an undergraduate in the late eighties and early nineties, I was one of those students who took a while to wake up to the slow branding of university life. And I can say from personal experience that it's not that we didn't notice the growing corporate presence on

campus-we even complained about it sometimes. It's just that we couldn't get particularly worked up about it. We knew the fast-food chains were setting up their stalls in the library and that profs in the applied sciences were getting awfully cozy with pharmaceutical companies, but finding out exactly what was going on in the boardrooms and labs would have required a lot of legwork, and, frankly, we were busy. We were fighting about whether Jews would be allowed in the racial equality caucus at the campus women's centre, and why the meeting to discuss it was scheduled at the same time as the lesbian and gay caucus-were the organizers implying that there were no Jewish lesbians? No black bisexuals? In the outside world, the politics of race, gender and sexuality remained tied to more concrete, pressing issues, like pay equity, same-sex spousal rights and police violence, and these serious movements were - and continue to be - a genuine threat to the economic and social order. But somehow, they didn't seem terribly glamorous to students on many university campuses, for whom identity politics had evolved by the late eighties into something quite different. Many of the battles we fought were over issues of "representation" — a loosely defined set of grievances mostly lodged against the media, the curriculum and the English language. From campus feminists arguing over "representation" of women on the reading lists to gays wanting better "representation" on television, to rap stars bragging about "representing" the ghettos, to the question that ends in a riot in Spike Lee's 1989 film Do the Right Thing — "Why are there no brothers on the wall?" — ours was a politics of mirrors and metaphors.

These issues have always been on the political agendas of both the civil-rights and the women's movements, and later, of the fight against AIDS. It was accepted from the start that part of what held back women and ethnic minorities was the absence of visible role models occupying powerful social positions, and that media-perpetuated stereotypes — embedded in the very fabric of the language — served to not so subtly reinforce the supremacy of white men. For real progress to take place, imaginations on both sides had to be decolonized.

But by the time my generation inherited these ideas, often two or three times removed, representation was no longer one tool among many, it was the key. In the absence of a clear legal or political strategy, we traced back almost all of society's problems to the media and the curriculum, either through their perpetuation of negative stereotypes or

simply by omission. Asians and lesbians were made to feel "invisible," gays were stereotyped as deviants, blacks as criminals and women as weak and inferior: a self-fulfilling prophecy responsible for almost all real-world inequalities. And so our battlefields were sitcoms with gay neighbours who never got laid, newspapers filled with pictures of old white men, magazines that advanced what author Naomi Wolf termed "the beauty myth," reading lists that we expected to look like Benetton ads, Benetton ads that trivialized our reading-list demands. So outraged were we media children by the narrow and oppressive portrayals in magazines, in books and on television that we convinced ourselves that if the typecast images and loaded language changed, so too would the reality. We thought we would find salvation in the reformation of MTV, CNN and Calvin Klein. And why not? Since media seemed to be the source of so many of our problems, surely if we could only "subvert" them to better represent us, they could save us instead. With better collective mirrors, self-esteem would rise and prejudices would magically fall away, as society became suddenly inspired to live up to the beautiful and worthy reflection we had retouched in its image.

For a generation that grew up mediated, transforming the world through pop culture was second nature. The problem was that these fixations began to transform! us in the process. Over time, campus identity politics became so consumed fry personal politics that they all but eclipsed the rest of the world. The slogan '"the personal is political" came to replace the economic as political and, in the end, the Political as political as well. The more importance we placed o»n representation issues, the more central a role they seemed to elbow for themselves in our lives — perhaps because, in the absence of more tangible political goals, any movement that is about fighting for better social mirrors is going to eventually fall victim to its own narcissism.

Soon "outing" wasn't about AIDS, but became a blanket demand for gay and lesbian "visibility" — all gays should be out, not just right-wing politicians but celebrities as well. By 1991, the radical group Queer Nation had broadened its media critique: it didn't just object to portrayals of homicidal madmen with AIDS, but any non-straight killer at all. The group's San Francisco and L.A. chapters held protests against The Silence of the Lambs, objecting to its transvestite serial-killer villain, and they disrupted filming on Basic Instinct because it featured ice-pick-wielding killer lesbians. GLAAD (Gay and Lesbian Alliance

Against Defamation) had moved from lobbying the news media about its use of terms like "gay plague" to describe AIDS, and had begun actively pushing the networks for more gay and lesbian characters in TV shows. In 1993, Torie Osborn, a prominent U.S. lesbian rights activist, said that the single biggest political issue facing her constituency was not same-sex spousal benefits, the right to join the military or even the right of two women to marry and adopt children. It was, she told a reporter, "Invisibility. Period. End of sentence."

Much like a previous generation of anti-porn feminists who held their rallies outside peep shows, many of the political demonstrations of the early nineties had shifted from the steps of government buildings and courthouses to the steps of museums with African art exhibits that were deemed to celebrate the colonial mindset. They massed at the theatre entrances showing mega musicals like Showboat and Miss Saigon, and they even crept right up to the edge of the red carpet at the 1992 Academy Awards.

These struggles may seem slight in retrospect, but you can hardly blame us media narcissists for believing that we were engaged in a crucial battle on behalf of oppressed people everywhere: every step we took sparked a new wave of apocalyptic panic from our conservative foes. If we were not revolutionaries, why, then, were our opponents saying that a revolution was under way, that we were in the midst of a "culture war"? "The transformation of American campuses is so sweeping that it is no exaggeration to call it a revolution," Dinesh D'Souza, author of Illiberal Education, informed his readers. "Its distinctive insignia can be witnessed on any major campus in America today, and in all aspects of university life."

Despite their claims of living under Stalinist regimes where dissent was not tolerated, our professors and administrators put up an impressively vociferous counteroffensive: they fought tooth and nail for the right to offend us thin-skinned radicals; they lay down on the tracks in front of every new harassment policy, and generally acted as if they were fighting for the very future of Western civilization. An avalanche of look-alike magazine features bolstered the claim that ID politics constituted an international emergency: "Illiberal Education" (Atlantic Monthly), "Visigoths in Tweed" (Fortune), "The Silences" (Maclean's), "The Academy's New Ayatollahs" (Outlook), "Taking Offence" (Newsweek). In New York

magazine, writer John Taylor compared my generation of campus activists with cult members, Hitler Youth and Christian fundamentalists. So great was the threat we allegedly posed that George Bush even took time out to warn the world that political correctness "replaces old prejudices with new ones."

The Marketing of ID

The backlash that identity politics inspired did a pretty good job of masking for us the fact that many of our demands for better representation were quickly accommodated by marketers, media makers and pop-culture producers alike — though perhaps not for the reasons we had hoped. If I had to name a precise moment for this shift in attitude, I would say August of 1992: the thick of the "brand crisis" that peaked with Marlboro Friday. That's when we found out that our sworn enemies in the "mainstream" — to us a giant monolithic blob outside of our known university-affiliated enclaves —didn't fear and loathe us but actually thought we were sort of interesting. Once we'd embarked on a search for new wells of cutting-edge imagery, our insistence on extreme sexual and racial identities made for great brand-content and niche-marketing strategies. If diversity is what we wanted, the brands seemed to be saying, then diversity was exactly what we would get. And with that, the marketers and media makers swooped down, airbrushes in hand, to touch up the colours and images in our culture.

The five years that followed were an orgy of red ribbons, Malcolm X baseball hats and Silence = Death T-shirts. By 1993, the stories of academic Armageddon were replaced with new ones about the sexy wave of "Do-Me Feminism" in Esquire and "Lesbian Chic" in New York and Newsweek. The shift in attitude was not the result of a mass political conversion but of some hard economic calculations. According to Rocking the Ages, a book produced in 1997 by leading U.S. consumer researchers Yankelovich Partners, "Diversity" was the "defining idea" for Gen-Xers, as opposed to "Individuality" for boomers and "Duty" for their parents.

Xers are starting out today with pluralistic attitudes that are the strongest we have ever measured. As we look towards the next twenty five years, it is clear that acceptance of alternative lifestyles will become even stronger and more widespread as Xers grow up and

take over the reins of power, and become the dominant buying group in the consumer marketplace.... Diversity is the key fact of life for Xers, the core of the perspective they bring to the marketplace. Diversity in all of its forms —cultural, political, sexual, racial, social — is a hallmark of this generation...

The Sputnik cool-hunting agency, meanwhile, explained that "youth today are one big sample of diversity" and encouraged its clients to dive into the psychedelic "United Streets of Diversity" and not be afraid to taste the local fare. Dee Dee Gordon, author of The L. Report, urged her clients to get into Girl Power with a vengeance: "Teenage girls want to see someone who kicks butt back"; and, sounding suspiciously like me and my university friends, brand man Tom Peters took to berating his corporate audiences for being "OWMs-Old White Males."

As we have seen, this information was coming hot on the heels of two other related revelations. The first was that consumer companies would only survive if they built corporate empires around "brand identities." The second was that the ballooning youth demographic held the key to market success. So, of course, if the market researchers and cool hunters all reported that diversity was the key character trait of this lucrative demographic, there was only one thing to be done: every forward-thinking corporation would have to adopt variations on the theme of diversity as their brand identities.

Which is exactly what most brand-driven corporations have attempted to do. In an effort to understand how Starbucks became an overnight household name in 1996 without a single national ad campaign, Advertising Age speculated that it had something to do with its tie-dyed, Third World aura. "For devotees, Starbucks' 'experience' is about more than a daily espresso infusion; it is about immersion in a politically correct, cultured refuge...." Starbucks, however, was only a minor player in the P.C. marketing craze. Abercrombie £t Fitch ads featured guys in their underwear making goo-goo eyes at each other; Diesel went further, showing two sailors kissing (see image on page 106); and a U.S. television spot for Virgin Cola depicted "the first-ever gay wedding featured in a commercial," as the press release proudly announced. There were also gay-targeted brands like Pride Beer and Wave Water, whose slogan is "We label bottles not people," and the gay community

got its very own cool hunters — market researchers who scoured gay bars with hidden cameras.

The Gap, meanwhile, filled its ads with racially mixed rainbows of skinny, childlike models. Diesel harnessed frustration at that unattainable beauty ideal with ironic ads that showed women being served up for dinner to a table of pigs. The Body Shop harnessed the backlash against both of them by refusing to advertise and instead filled its windows with red ribbons and posters condemning violence against women. The rush to diversity fitted in neatly with the embrace of African-American style and heroes that companies like Nike and Tommy Hilfiger had already pinpointed as a powerful marketing source. But Nike also realized that people who saw themselves as belonging to oppressed groups were ready-made market niches: throw a few liberal platitudes their way and, presto, you're not just a product but an ally in the struggle. So the walls of Nike Town were adorned with quotes from Tiger Woods declaring that "there are still courses in the U.S. where I am not allowed to play, because of the colour of my skin." Women in Nike ads told us that "I believe 'babe' is a four-letter word" and "I believe high heels are a conspiracy against women."

And everyone, it seemed, was toying with the fluidity of gender, from the old-hat story of MAC makeup using drag queen RuPaul as its spokesmodel to tequila ads that inform viewers that the she in the bikini is really a he; from Calvin Klein's colognes that tell us that gender itself is a construct to Sure Ultra Dry deodorant that in turn urges all the gender benders to chill out: "Man? Woman? Does it matter?"

Oppression Nostalgia

Fierce debates still rage about these campaigns. Are they entirely cynical or do they indicate that advertisers want to evolve and play more positive social roles? Benetton's mid-nineties ads careered wildly between witty and beautiful challenges to racial stereotypes on the one hand, and grotesque commercial exploitation of human suffering on the other. They were, however, indisputably part of a genuine attempt to use the company's vast cultural real estate to send a message that went beyond "Buy more sweaters"; and they played a central role in the fashion world's embrace of the struggle against AIDS. Similarly, there is no denying that the Body Shop broke ground by proving

to the corporate sector that a multinational chain can be an outspoken and controversial political player, even while making millions on bubble bath and body lotion. The complicated motivations and stark inconsistencies inside many of these "ethical" businesses will be explored in greater depth in a later chapter. But for many of the activists who had, at one point not so long ago, believed that better media representation would make for a more just world, one thing had become abundantly clear: identity politics weren't fighting the system, or even subverting it. When it came to the vast new industry of corporate branding, they were feeding it.

The crowning of sexual and racial diversity as the new superstars of advertising and pop culture has understandably created a sort of Identity Crisis. Some ex-ID warriors are even getting nostalgic about the good old days, when they were oppressed, yes, but the symbols of their radicalism weren't for sale at Wal-Mart. As music writer Ann Powers observed of the much-vaunted ascendancy of Girl Power, "at this intersection between the conventional feminine and the evolving Girl, what's springing up is not a revolution but a mall... Thus, a genuine movement devolves into a giant shopping spree, where girls are encouraged to purchase whatever identity fits them best off the rack." Similarly, Daniel Mendelsohn has written that gay identity has dwindled into "basically, a set of product choices.... At least culturally speaking, oppression may have been the best thing that could have happened to gay culture. Without it, we're nothing."

The nostalgia, of course, is absurd. Even the most cynical ID warrior will admit, when pressed, that having Ellen Degeneres and other gay characters out on TV has some concrete advantages. Probably it is good for the kids, particularly those who live outside of larger urban settings —in rural or small-town environments, where being gay is more likely to confine them to a life of self-loathing. (The attempted suicide rate in 1998 among gay and bisexual male teens in America was 28.1 percent, compared with 4.2 percent among straight males of the same age group.) Similarly, most feminists would concede that although the Spice Girls' crooning, "If you wanna be my lover, you have to get with my friends" isn't likely to shatter the beauty myth, it's still a step up from Snoop Dogg's 1993 ode to gang rape, "It ain't no fun if my homies can't have none."

And yet, while raising teenagers' self-esteem and making sure they have positive role models is valuable, it's a fairly narrow achievement, and from an activist perspective, one can't help asking, Is this it? Did all our protests and supposedly subversive theory only serve to provide great content for the culture industries, fresh new lifestyle imagery for Levi's new "What's True" ad campaign and girl-power-charged record sales for the music business? Why, in other words, were our ideas about political rebellion so deeply non-threatening to the smooth flow of business as usual?

The question, of course, is not Why, but Why on earth not? Just as they had embraced the "brands, not products" equation, the smart businesses quickly realized that short-term discomfort —whether it came from a requirement to hire more women or to more carefully vet the language in an ad campaign—was a small price to pay for the tremendous market share that diversity promised. So while it may be true that real gains have emerged from this process, it is also true that Dennis Rodman wears dresses and Disney World celebrates Gay Day less because of political progress than financial expediency. The market has seized upon multiculturalism and gender-bending in the same ways that it has seized upon youth culture in general — not just as a market niche but as a source of new carnival-esque imagery. As Robert Goldman and Stephen Papson note, "White-bread culture will simply no longer do." The $200 billion culture industry —now America's biggest export —needs an ever-changing, uninterrupted supply of street styles, edgy music videos and rainbows of colours. And the radical critics of the media clamouring to be "represented" in the early nineties virtually handed over their colourful identities to the brandmasters to be shrink-wrapped.

The need for greater diversity — the rallying cry of my university years —is now not only accepted by the culture industries, it is the mantra of global capital. And identity politics, as they were practiced in the nineties, weren't a threat, they were a gold mine. "This revolution," writes cultural critic Richard Goldstein in The Village Voice, "turned out to be the saviour of late capitalism." And just in time, too.

Market Masala: Diversity and the Global Sales Pitch

About the same time that my friends and I were battling for better cultural representation, the advertising agencies, broadcasters and global brands were preoccupied with some significant problems of their own. Thanks to freer trade and other forms of accelerated deregulation, the global marketplace was finally becoming a reality, but new, urgent questions were being asked: What is the best way to sell identical products across multiple borders? What voice should advertisers use to address the whole world at once? How can one company accommodate cultural differences while still remaining internally coherent?

For certain corporations, until recently, the answer was simple: force the world to speak your language and absorb your culture. In 1983, when global reach was still a fantasy for all but a handful of corporations, Harvard business professor Theodore Levitt published the essay "The Globalization of Markets," in which he argued that any corporation that was willing to bow to some local habit or taste was an unmitigated failure. "The world's needs and desires have been irrevocably homogenized," he wrote in what instantly became the manifesto of global marketing. Levitt made a stark distinction between weak multinational corporations, which change depending on which country they are operating in, and swaggering global corporations, which are, by their very definition, always the same, wherever they roam. "The multinational corporation operates in a number of countries, and adjusts its products and practices to each — at high relative costs. The global corporation operates with resolute constancy — at low relative cost — as if the entire world (or major regions of it) were a single entity; it sells the same things in the same way everywhere.... Ancient differences in national tastes or modes of doing business disappear."

Levitt's "global" corporations were, of course, American corporations and the "homogenized" image they promoted were the images of America: blond, blue-eyed kids eating Kellogg's cereal on Japanese TV; the Marlboro Man bringing U.S. cattle country to African villages; and Coke and McDonald's selling the entire world on the taste of the U.S.A. As globalization ceased to be a somewhat kooky dream and became a reality, these cowboy-marketing antics began to step on a few toes. The twentieth century's familiar bogeyman — "American cultural imperialism" — has, in more recent years, incited

cries of "cultural Chernobyl" in France, prompted the creation of a "slow-food movement" in Italy and led to the burning of chickens outside the first KFC outlet in India.

Americans in particular have never been known for their cultural sensitivity and so, not surprisingly, the road to Levitt's global marketing is paved with cultural faux pas. The most serious of these took place after the collapse of European communism, when media moguls fell over one another to take the credit for freedom and democracy the world over —a claim they would pay for later on. "We put MTV into East Germany, and the next day the Berlin Wall fell," Viacom International chairman Sumner Redstone said. Ted Turner claimed the credit for CNN and the Goodwill Games. "I said, 'Let's try and undo this. Let's get our young people together, and let's get this cycle together and let's try to get some world peace going and let's end the Cold War.' And, by God, we did it." Rupert Murdoch, meanwhile, told the world that "satellite broadcasting makes it possible for information-hungry residents of many closed societies to bypass state-controlled television."

This post-Cold War bravado didn't go over too well in countries like China, where standing up to so-called Western values remains a sacrosanct political claim. Consequently, several Western media moguls —now hell-bent on penetrating all of Asia with their satellites-have gone to great lengths to distance themselves from their earlier freedom-fighter rhetoric and now actively collaborate with dictatorships to restrict the flow of information, a situation that I'll get to in more detail in Chapter 8.

It was in this minefield that "diversity" marketing appeared, presenting itself as a cure-all for the pitfalls of global expansion. Rather than creating different advertising campaigns for different markets, campaigns could sell diversity itself, to all markets at once. The formula maintained the one-size-fits-all cost benefits of old-style cowboy cultural imperialism, but ran far fewer risks of offending local sensibilities. Instead of urging the world to taste America, it calls out, like the Skittles slogan, to "Taste the Rainbow." This candy-coated multiculturalism has stepped in as a kinder, gentler packaging for the homogenizing effect of what Indian physicist Vandana Shiva calls "the monoculture" - it is, in effect, mono-multiculturalism.

Today the buzzword in global marketing isn't selling America to the world, but bringing a kind of market masala to everyone in the world. In the late nineties, the pitch is less Marlboro Man, more Ricky Martin: a bilingual mix of North and South, some Latin, some R&B, all couched in global party lyrics. This ethnic-food-court approach creates a One World placelessness, a global mall in which corporations are able to sell a single product in numerous countries without triggering the old cries of "Coca-Colonization."

As culture becomes increasingly homogenized globally, the task of marketing is to stave off the nightmare moment when branded products cease to look like lifestyles or grand ideas and suddenly appear as the ubiquitous goods they really are. In its liquid ethnicity, marketing masala has been introduced as the antidote to this horror of cultural homogeneity. By embodying corporate identities that are radically individualistic and perpetually new, the brands attempt to inoculate themselves against accusations that they are in fact selling sameness.

The Global Teen

Of course not everyone is equally amenable to the idea of treating culture and nationality as fashion accessories to be slipped on and off. Those who have fought wars and survived revolutions tend to be more protective of their national traditions. The desolately poor, who constitute one-quarter of the world's population,16 also have a little trouble getting into the global groove, especially since cable TV and most brand-name products are still just a rumour in those parts of the developing world where a total of 1.3 billion people live on US$1 a day or less. No, it's the young people living in developed and semi-developed countries who are the great global hope. More than anything or anyone else, logo-decorated middle-class teenagers, intent on pouring themselves into a media-fabricated mould, have become globalization's most powerful symbols.

This has happened for several reasons. First of all, just as in the U.S. market, there are a lot of them. The world is crawling with teenagers, especially in southern countries, where the UN estimates that 507 million adults will die before they turn forty. Two-thirds of Asia's population is under thirty and, thanks to years of bloody warfare, about 50 percent of the population in Vietnam was born after 1975. All in all, the so-called global teen

demographic is estimated at one billion, and these teenagers consume a disproportionate share of their families' incomes. In China, for instance, conspicuous consumption for all members of the household remains largely unrealistic. But, argue the market researchers, the Chinese make enormous sacrifices for the young — particularly for young boys — a cultural value that spells great news for cell-phone and sneaker companies. Laurie Klein of Just Kid Inc., a U.S. firm that conducted a consumer study on Chinese teens, found that while Mom, Dad and both grandparents may do without electricity, their only son (thanks to the country's one-child policy) frequently enjoys what is widely known as "little emperor syndrome," or what she calls the "4-2-1" phenomenon: four elders and two parents scrimp and save so the one child can be an 1VITV clone. "When you have the parents and four grandparents spending on one child, it's a no-brainer to know that this is the right market," says one venture capitalist in China. Furthermore, since kids are more culturally absorbent than their parents, they often become their families' dedicated shoppers, even for big household items. Taken together, what this research shows is that while adults may still harbour traditional customs and ways, global teens shed those pesky national hang-ups like last year's fashions. "They prefer Coke to tea, Nikes to sandals, Chicken McNuggets to rice, credit cards to cash," Joseph Quinlan, senior economist at Dean Witter Reynolds Inc. told The Wall Street Journal. The message is clear: get the kids and you've got the whole family and the future market.

Diversity. Whatever. – Slogan for a1998-99 ad campaign for Eaton's department store, Cananda

Inflated by rhetoric like this, the image of the global teen floats over the planet like a euphoric corporate hallucination. These kids, we are repeatedly told, live not in a geographic place but in a global consumer loop: hot-linked from their cellular telephones to Internet newsgroups; bonded together by Sony Playstations, MTV videos and NBA games. The most extensive and widely cited study of the global teen demographic was conducted in 1996 by the New York-based ad agency DMB&B's BrainWaves division. The "New World Teen Study" surveyed 27,600 middle-class fifteen- to eighteen-year-olds in forty-five countries and came up with some resoundingly good news for the agency's clients, a list that includes Coca-Cola, Burger King and Philips. "Despite different cultures, middle-class youth all over the world seem to live their lives as if in a parallel universe. They get up in the morning, put on their Levi's and Nikes, grab their caps, backpacks, and

Sony personal CD players, and head for school." Elissa Moses, senior vice president at the advertising agency, called the arrival of the global teen demographic "one of the greatest marketing opportunities of all time."

But before the brands are able to sell the same products in the same way all around the world, the teens themselves must identify with their new demographic. For this reason, what most global ad campaigns are still selling most aggressively is the idea of the global teen market — a kaleidoscope of multi-ethnic faces blending into one another: Rasta braids, pink hair, henna hand painting, piercing and tattoos, a few national flags, flashes of foreign street signs, Cantonese and Arabic lettering and a sprinkling of English words, all over the layered samplings of electronic music. Nationality, language, ethnicity, religion and politics are all reduced to their most colourful, exotic accessories, converging to assure us, as Diesel president Renzo Rosso does, there is "never an 'us and them,' but simply one giant 'we.'"

To achieve this state of oneness, global teens must sometimes be pitted against traditional elders who don't appreciate their radical taste in denim. For instance, a TV ad for Diesel jeans shows two Korean teenagers turning into birds after they commit double suicide, finding freedom only in the total surrender to the brand. In these ads, the ultimate product — more than the soft drinks, ice creams, sneakers or jeans —is the global teen, who must exist as a demographic in the minds of young consumers worldwide or the entire exercise of global marketing collapses. For this reason, global youth marketing is a mind-numbingly repetitive affair, drunk on the idea of what it is attempting to engineer: a third notion of nationality —not American, not local, but one that would unite the two, through shopping.

Standing triumphant at the centre of the global teen phenomenon is MTV, which, in 1998, was in 273.5 million households worldwide — only 70 million of which were in the U.S. By 1999, MTV's eight global divisions broadcast in 83 countries and territories, fewer than CNN's 212-country reach, but impressive nonetheless. Furthermore, the New World Teen Study found that the single most significant factor contributing to the shared tastes of the middle-class teens it surveyed was TV —in particular, MTV, which 85 percent of them watched every day. Elissa Moses called the station "an all-news bulletin for creating

brand-images" and a "public-address system to a generation." This sort of programming reach has been unprecedented since the 1950s when families gathered around the TV set to watch the Ed Sullivan show. Global teens watch so much MTV per day that the only equivalent shared cultural experience among adults occurs during an outbreak of war when all eyes are focused on the same CNN images.

And the more viewers there are to absorb MTV's vision of a tribe of culture swapping, global teen nomads, the more homogeneous a market its advertisers have in which to sell their products. According to Chip Walker, director of the New World Teen Study, "Teens who watch MTV music videos are much more likely than other teens to wear the teen 'uniform' of jeans, running shoes, and denim jacket... They are also much more likely to own electronics and consume 'teen' items such as candy, sodas, cookies and fast food. They are much more likely to use a wide range of personal-care products too." In other words MTV International has become the most compelling global catalogue for the modern branded life.

In-Fighting While the Global House Burned Down

The global economy's embrace of Representation Nation suggests that my generation's campus identity politics boiled down, in the end, to a set of modest political goals that were frequently (and deceptively) cloaked in immodest rhetoric and tactics. This isn't a P.C. mea culpa — I'm proud of the small victories we won for better lighting on campus, more women faculty members and a less Eurocentric curriculum (to dig up a much-maligned phrase from my P.C. days). What I question is the battles we North American culture warriors never quite got around to. Poverty wasn't an issue that came up much back then; sure, every once in a while in our crusades against the trio of 'isms, somebody would bring up "classism," and, being out-P.C.-ed, we would dutifully add "classism" to the hit list in question. But our criticism was focused on the representation of women and minorities within the structures of power, not on the economics behind those power structures. "Discrimination against poverty" (our understanding of injustice was generally construed as discrimination against something) couldn't be solved by changing perceptions or language or even, strictly speaking, individual behaviour. The basic demands of identity politics assumed an atmosphere of plenty. In the seventies and

eighties, that plenty had existed and women and non-whites were able to battle over how the collective pie would be divided: would white men learn to share, or would they keep hogging it? In the representational politics of the New Economy nineties, however, women as well as men, and whites as well as people of colour, were now fighting their battles over a single, shrinking piece of pie - and consistently failing to ask what was happening to the rest of it. For us, as students, to address the problems at the roots of "classism" we would have had to face up to core issues of wealth distribution - and, unlike sexism, racism or homophobia, that was not what we used to call "an awareness problem."

So class fell off the agenda, along with all serious economic-let alone corporate — analysis. Certainly there were those in the ID ranks with revolutionary goals. Like the sixties counterculture radicals who thought they were shaking the foundations of Western civilization by dropping acid, there were a handful of professors and students of identity politics who believed that "great blows are being struck against capitalism in the realms of theory," as critic Gayatri Spivak put it. And Dinesh D'Souza and his ilk couldn't resist calling the P.C.ers "nee-Marxists"-but in fact, nothing could have been further from the truth. The prospect of having to change a few pronouns and getting a handful of women and minorities on the board and on television posed no real threat to the guiding profit-making principles of Wall Street. "The real guilt of P.C....," wrote SUMY professor of literature Tim Brennan in 1991, "is not its supposed intolerance or rigidity, but that it is not political enough — that it is impersonating political struggle."

That failure has turned out to be immeasurably problematic because the economic trends that have so accelerated in the past decade have all been about massive redistribution and stratification of world resources: of jobs, goods and money. Everyone except those in the very highest tier of the corporate elite is getting less.

And what is striking in retrospect is that in the very years when P.C. politics reached their most self-referential peak, the rest of the world was doing something very different: it was looking outward, and expanding. At the moment when the field of vision among most left-wing progressives was shrinking to include only its immediate surroundings, the horizons of global business were growing to encompass the whole globe. While CEOs dreamed of Big Macs in Russia, Benetton in Shanghai and logos projected on the moon, the political

lens for far too many activists and theorists was narrowing so dramatically that with the exception of a brief period during the Gulf War, foreign and economic policy were off the radar screen. In North America, even the fight against free trade was all about protecting Canadian or American workers and resources, not about the possible effects of the trade agreement on Mexico, or the effects other rapid liberalization measures were having in the developing world. When the free-trade debate was lost, the left retreated even further into itself, choosing ever more minute disputes over which to go to the wall. This retreat reflected a broader political paralysis in the face of the daunting abstractions of global capitalism - ironically, the very issues that should have been most pressing for anyone concerned with the future of social justice.

In this new globalized context, the victories of identity politics have amounted to a rearranging of the furniture while the house burned down. Yes, there are more multi-ethnic sitcoms and even more black executives -but whatever cultural enlightenment has followed has not prevented the population in the underclass from exploding or homelessness from reaching crisis levels in many North American urban centres. Sure, women and gays have better role models in the media and pop culture —but the ownership in the culture industries has consolidated so rapidly that, according to William Kennard, the chairman of the U.S. Federal Communications Commission, "There are fewer opportunities of entry by minority groups, community groups, small businesses in general." And though girls may indeed rule in North America, they are still sweating in Asia and Latin America, making T-shirts with the "Girls Rule" slogan on them and Nike running shoes that will finally let girls into the game.

This oversight isn't simply a failure of feminism but a betrayal of the feminist movement's own founding principles. Although the gender politics that I grew up with in the eighties were concerned almost exclusively with having women equally represented in the structures of power, the relationship between gender and class have not always been so casually overlooked. Bread and Roses — the rallying cry of the women's movement — has its origin in a slogan on a banner in the 1912 walkout of textile workers in Lawrence, Massachusetts. "What the woman who labours wants," explained historic organizer Rose Schneiderman in a 1912 speech, "is the right to live, not simply exist." And March 8, the date of International Women's Day, was selected to mark the anniversary of a 1908

demonstration in which "women garment workers marched through the streets of New York, protesting dreadful working conditions, child labour, 12-hour working days, minuscule pay." The young women who grew up reading The Beauty Myth, and who saw eating disorders and low self-esteem as the most harmful by-products of the fashion industry, tended to forget those women when we marched on March 8, if we ever knew about them to begin with.

As we look back, it seems like wilful blindness. The abandonment of the radical economic foundations of the women's and civil-rights movements by the conflation of causes that came to be called political correctness successfully trained a generation of activists in the politics of image, not action. And if the space invaders marched into our schools and our communities unchallenged, it was at least partly because the political models in vogue at the time of the invasion left many of us ill-equipped to deal with issues that were more about ownership than representation. We were too busy analyzing the pictures being projected on the wall to notice that the wall itself had been sold.

If that remained true until recently, however, it is no longer so. As we will see in Part IV, a radical new political culture is emerging in high schools and on college campuses. Rather than calling attention to the house of mirrors that passes for empirical truth (as the post-modern academics did), and rather than fighting for better mirrors (as the ID warriors did), today's media activists are concentrating on shattering the impenetrable shiny surfaces of branded culture, picking up the pieces and using them as sharp weapons in a war of actions, not images.