

Article

Selfie Politics: The Political Commodification of Yourself¹

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Abstract: This essay suggests that the purpose of political activity today, especially in the context of mass and social media communication, is not simply the promotion of political agendas, but often also, if not primarily, the construction of identity. It is argued that the public display of political action serves the curation of personal or collective profiles. The display of political attitudes contributes to the constitution of “proficiency,” a profile-based and post-authentic mode of identity. By means of an analysis of images posted on social media, the essay shows how political profile curation occurs on all sides of the political spectrum. Building on Naomi Klein’s critique of “branding,” the essay outlines how the profile has replaced the brand as a more dynamic type of identity symbol.

Keywords: proficiency, Naomi Klein, branding, identity politics

These two pictures² show both difference and sameness. They show two different and sometimes violently opposed political stances: A Trump supporter at a rally representing the right, and a protester against the G20 summit in Hamburg, Germany, representing the left. But they also show sameness: Two attractive people taking a selfie to display their political activism—selfie politics. Selfie politics is not simply a case of narcissism, as some have said, but an increasingly common, and effective, way of being political today—a kind of “political commodification of the self.”

¹ This was earlier published as part of *Metaporika Denkbild* (March 2021).

² See Alexi Bayer, “Donald Trump the devil?,” in *Kyiv Post* (23 July 2017), <<https://www.kyivpost.com/article/opinion/op-ed/alexei-bayer-donald-trump-devil.html>> and Don, “Riot Hipster,” in *Know Your Meme* (2017), <<https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/riot-hipster>>.

A third picture shows influencer Kris Schatzel.³ She was widely criticized for having posed for it at a Black Lives Matter protest. She defended herself against her critics by saying on Instagram: “I hope we can all focus on the true cause as to why we are all here.”⁴ Sure, Kris, let’s do that.

Political conflicts involve two moments: the conflicting “objective” political issues at stake, and the personal commitment of the political activists to them—their “subjective” identification. In Hegel’s language the first is the *in-itself*, and the second the *for-itself* moment of politics. For a conflict to arise, the mere existence of different political causes is not enough, people must make these causes *their own* to form competing factions. But which comes first and which comes second? Do I make the cause mine for the sake of the cause or for the sake of myself? Or are these just two moments of the same thing? In Hegel’s terms: Politics is both *in-and-for-itself*.

The degree of difference between conflicting political causes does not determine the level of intensity with which these conflicts are personally experienced. Relatively small political differences can still be personally experienced as huge. It seems clear that the political difference between the left and the right has considerably shrunk in recent history. In the 19th and 20th century the left and the right fought for radically different political and economic systems: The right once stood for monarchy and authoritarian rule while the left stood for a republic and democracy. Later, the right stood for private property rights and capitalism, and the left for a communist mode of production. Speaking in Marxist terms, the “base structure” was at stake: the economic and political foundation of society. Today, this is hardly the case anymore: Even mildly socialist reformers like Bernie Sanders or Jeremy Corbyn were sidelined by their own leftist parties as too radical. And the emblematic figurehead of the right used to be Donald Trump, the populist former TV host hardly able to formulate any meaningful ideological position in his twitter tirades which instead often consisted in petty personal attacks.

Today’s mainstream left and right, at least in the “West,” no longer fundamentally disagree on sociopolitical issues. They all embrace liberalism: a free-market economy and the political preference of individual over collective interests. Many find it difficult, for instance, to detect any significant political shift from the right to the left after the recent American election. And yet, political identifications are as intense as ever. On the personal level, the divide is viscerally experienced: I am sure that some viewers with strong political convictions will emphatically disagree with

³ TextThom Waite, “An influencer responds to backlash for a Black Lives Matter protest selfie,” in *Dazed* (6 June 2020), <<https://www.dazeddigital.com/life-culture/article/49469/1/influencer-responds-backlash-staging-photos-during-black-lives-matter-protest>>.

⁴ *Ibid.*

what I just said: They will perceive the shift from Trump to Biden as momentous—either as a sort of overdue liberation if on the left, or as a horrific setback if on the right.

Who is to say what the “right” degree of personal investment in political differences is? This lack of a fixed proportionality is exploitable: Any seemingly trivial political or ideological difference can result in tremendous personal differences. Just think about the relatively minor, sometimes apparently just “technical” differences between Protestantism and Catholicism, or between Sunni and Shia Islam—and the centuries of brutal bloodshed they resulted in.

We can learn about how to exploit trivial technical differences for constructing huge personal differences from capitalist marketing. Apple’s “Get a Mac” campaign is a good example. Some viewers may still remember this advertising campaign which helped Apple to gain a substantial market share at the expense of Microsoft. The ads did talk about technical differences between Apple and Microsoft products, but in a highly personalized manner. Two actors represented Macs and PCs, and the ads consisted mainly in contrasting them. At the beginning of each ad, the actors would say: “I am a Mac” and “I am a PC” declaring personal identification with the products. The Mac character was a good-looking and laid-back progressive guy, and the PC character a boring, conservative nerd presented as less attractive. The message of the ads to computer buyers could not have been clearer: Make no mistake: The difference between Macs and PCs is not just about technology— it is about your personality. Along with a computer, you’re buying a personal profile. The purchase of a PC will make your profile dork-like. If you buy a Mac, though, you’ll get a cool profile boost.

The Get A Mac campaign was a major step in the history of profile-oriented advertising. Computers became a personal profile marker to an extent they hadn’t been before. After the Mac campaign it was no longer possible to buy a computer without reflecting on the consequences that this decision has on one’s persona. It attached to a relatively minor technical difference—after all people do more or less exactly the same things with Macs and PCs—a distinctive personal difference. The technical became personal.

The Mac campaign not only shows how the technical became personal; it also shows how brands became profiles.

The brand is an old-fashioned concept. It goes back to the branding of livestock by human owners ages ago. Later on, the logic of a brand changed. It indicated no longer an owner of something, but its manufacturer. Ford or Buick were brands of cars made by the company of a Mr. Ford or Mr. Buick. The effect of such brands was to create a certain prestige—they represented the reliability of a product by attaching it to the personal name of the maker who thereby vouched for its quality. The brand added a quality

sign to a product which increased its market value. In turn, this quality sign—and this is the essence of the brand—became a *status symbol*. A *symbol* is a sign that matches or corresponds to something. A status symbol is a sign that matches and publicly expresses social status. Brands turned products into such status symbols. People were willing to pay more for a brand-name car because it was not just good for driving, but also for representing, as a symbol, one's social status. The logic of the brand is that it is attached to a commodity to transform it into a status symbol.

The logic of the profile in marketing is different. It is more immediate, more direct. It functions as a short cut to the buyer and avoids, at least to an extent, the detour via the thing. When the actor in the Get a Mac campaign says, "I am a Mac," he impersonates not so much the computer, but its buyer. As a profile marker, "Mac" refers less to the qualities of what is bought and more to the qualities of who buys it.

Crucially, the profile does not function as a symbol—in the strict sense of this term as a *matching* sign. It does not seek to complement a social quality—a status—people already have, like a Buick which was marketed to people already in a certain class. Instead, the profile functions more like a *signal*. A signal, like a fashionable shirt, *makes* you fashionable. You weren't fashionable if you wouldn't wear it. Unlike a symbol which matches a quality you already have, a signal gives you this very quality. The difference between a Mac and a PC owner is not a status difference—it's a difference in personality. Apple is not a brand symbolizing class status, it's a profile signal producing individual coolness. Nike expresses the logic of profile marketing perfectly: "Make yourself!" Instead of your shirt, you become the commodity.

This being said, brands have by no means disappeared. In China for instance, a country where hundreds of millions of people have emerged from poverty in recent years, they are in great demand. Luxury brands are highly successful here. They serve the desire of many to symbolically match and represent their newly acquired middle- or upper-class status.

To the contrary, in countries like the U.S.A. where the economic trend goes in the opposite direction, where the younger generations is now often poorer than the older, and where the middle-class is in decline, the economy of the traditional brand no longer makes much sense. There, Apple or Nike do not symbolize upward social movement—there simply isn't that much such movement—but are curated as marketable signals of, for instance, being sufficiently progressive or socially conscious. The old-fashioned brand served class status—and is now of little use when products need to be marketed to people whose class status, along with their real wages, has been stagnating or declining. Instead of status symbols, however, you can sell these people valuable profile signals which, quite miraculously, make them more attractive despite getting poorer.

In her book *No Logo*, first published in 1999, Naomi Klein offered an excellent critique of the contemporary economy. She showed in great clarity, how corporations in advanced capitalism are no longer primarily concerned with producing and marketing things. Instead, they manufacture and curate logos, and through these they deal in personal lifestyles. Thereby, they *commodify personhood*—especially for younger consumers *No Logo* in fact describes the shift from traditional branding to modern profiling—but Klein did not use this terminological distinction. For her, the logo is just another word for brand. Today, however, we may regard the logo as indicating a more intense and invasive commodification of identity that follows the logic of the profile rather than the old logic of the brand.

In a new introduction to the 10th anniversary edition of *No Logo*, Klein hints at the implications of her economic critique for politics: Politics, too, she points out, now increasingly functions like what she conceives of as “branding.” She called President Obama the first political “superbrand.”⁵ Maybe we can say: Obama is, if not the first, then at least, an outstandingly successful political “superprofile.” Political election campaigns use the same campaign strategies as commercial advertising, employ sometimes the very same people, and pursue the same aim: making profiles. These days, as Niklas Luhmann put it, “politics *essentially* consists in arranging how one is seen by public opinion—so that one is observed more favorably than the competition.”⁶

The ideological difference between the mainstream left and right today may be not much more decisive than the technological differences between Macs and PCs. But just as marketing campaigns have succeeded in establishing significant personal profile differences between the owners of Macs and PCs, political campaigns have succeeded in establishing remarkable profile differences between those who identify as left and as right. In marketing, the shift from the brand to the profile cut the detour over the product short and aimed right at the identity of the buyer. Similarly, selfie politics is weak on political theory and instead zooms in on the identity of voters. The difference between left and right, like the difference between Macs and PCs, is not so much a difference of the object, or the “in-itself”—but of the subject—the “for-itself.” The difference is you.

The two photos of the Trump supporter and G20 protester show: Both on the right and on the left, political activism is often inseparable from profile work. In the liberal societies of the West, politics is in a more or less constant election mode. Permanent political campaigns advertise different

⁵ Naomi Klein, *No Logo*, 10th Anniversary Edition with a New Introduction by the Author (London: Picador, 2009), xix.

⁶ Niklas Luhmann, *Introduction to Systems Theory* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press), 115. (translation modified)

personality styles, different gestures, different vocabularies, different attitudes that enable their supporters to stand out, and to be more attractive to one another. In the age of the profile, politics, too, is about increasing profile value.

To make even small political differences personally relevant, and what is more, to make them emotionally appealing, politics employs a rhetorical tool proven to be most effective over millennia: outrage. It may be difficult to point out what exactly is so dramatically worse about the other side's politics (especially, if, as it seems the case with the current Biden administration, there is no desire to change much when taking over political power). However, if outrage is politically utilized, amplified, and publicly validated it creates political loyalty—like brand loyalty. Protest selfies show that protests are highly photogenic—at least as much as pop concerts, parties, or holiday trips.

In the old days of the brand, marketing was based on producing class-related status symbols. Similarly, political differences tended to reflect differing class interests. In the age of the profile, liberal marketing and politics woo a middle class that has lost hope of getting richer any time soon but craves being more visible and more interesting. Politics today, like marketing, produces an endless supply of self-profiling opportunities. No wonder then that at political protests, the very same people who display their political cause, tend to display their fashion profiles at the same time. Where there is Black Lives Matter, Nike isn't far away—that's "political commodification."

The slogan "the personal is political" was coined by the feminist activist Carol Hanisch at the end of the 1960s.⁷ Hanisch pointed out that many of the seemingly personal problems experienced by women—especially psychological and sexual problems—were actually effects of the problems of a patriarchal society that systematically oppresses women. They were, in fact, political problems and not personal problems at all. Thus "the personal is political" for Hanisch meant: The personal is not the issue—the real issue is the political.

Much to Hanisch's dismay,⁸ the slogan took on a completely different meaning when identity politics as we know it today emerged in the 1970s. Identity politics tended to regard personal identity—especially race and gender identity—as the essential foundation of political action. From this perspective, personal identity is not only the source but also the point of

⁷ Carol Hanisch, "The Political Is Personal," in *Notes from the Second Year: Women's Liberation* (8 March 1970), 76-77.

⁸ Carol Hanisch, "Introduction," in *Writings by Carol Hanisch* (2006), <<https://webhome.cs.uvic.ca/~mserra/AttachedFiles/PersonalPolitical.pdf>>.

politics. Politics is supposed to be all about the personal—so that the real political issue, contrary to what Hanisch meant, *is* indeed the personal.

Today, under conditions of prolificity, identity is formed through the curation and validation of profiles, Hanisch's slogan can now be understood in a third sense: The political is personal because politics can boost personal profiles. In the age of the profile, politics is not so much a symbolic expression of what we already are—of our class status for instance. Instead, it can be a signal we send out to “make ourselves.” It is through the political performance, that a genuine political identity is created and achieved. When you identify with the cause in the age of the profile, the cause is, also, your profile.

In liberal democracies, political parties and movements often operate similar to corporations. They manufacture and advertise differing personal profile signals. This is effective. Profile synergies emerge between parties, movements, and voters. People can become more attractive by displaying political signals. This is the “political commodification of yourself.” Political parties are busy exploiting such commodification potentials. Arguably, in times of prolificity, it is actually their core business.

Afterword

A day after we posted our first video on Philosophy Tube,⁹ the presenter of that channel came out as trans woman, declaring that she's presenting her real self. A day after the first draft of this script was written, Intel published an ad, titled “Justin Gets Real” where Justin Long, the actor who previously claimed, “I am a Mac” declares “I am Justin, just a real person doing a real comparison between Mac and PC.” There's difference and sameness in these declarations about being a real person. The point of the notion of prolificity is to understand them.

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⁹ See <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC2PA-AKmVpU6NKCGtZq_rKQ>.

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