



Public brands and the entrepreneurial ethics

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At a first glance brands would seem to be the opposite, or indeed the negation of ethics. Built on superficial sign values instead of substance; glitzy surfaces instead of depth, and vacuous promises *in lieu* of bounding commitments, brands are part of the edifice of post-modern consumer society that, as Zygmunt Bauman (2008) and many others before him have argued, tends to negate the very possibility of ethics. Brands target isolated ‘individuals and their families’ to use Margaret Thatcher’s terms, that operate in the absence of any ethically binding sociality, without any common values, exchanging, at the most, *quid pro quo*, on markets. From this point of view ‘ethical brands’ appear as the epitome of cynicism: They are an attempt to make loose and largely unsubstantiated and unverifiable claims to ‘do good’ in some vague sense in order to promote marketing goals. This way, ‘ethical brands’ mark yet one more step of the real subsumption of values and passions under the logic of capital.

This interpretation also makes sense from an empirical point of view, as corporate spending on ethical branding and CSR is consistently dwarfed by expenditure on the communication of such social responsibility and on publicizing ‘good deeds’. Conversely, studies show how ethical consumer choices are highly situated and at any rate such choices are mostly the result of institutional factors (i.e. consumers tend to buy *Fairtrade* coffee if supermarkets stock it (cf. Devinney et al., 2010)). So from this, conventional, point of view, the current focus on ethical brands seems to be a dead end.

But there is a different way in which brands might operate as ethical devices. In particular personal brands might play this role. Once again, personal branding, as it is taught by personal branding guru’s like Tom Peters (1999), is a manifestation of utmost cynicism. Or rather, as Tom Peters keeps pointing out,

cynicism keeps lurking under the surface, and to avoid it one must constantly motivate oneself — preferably by chanting self help mantras — into keep believing in the sanctity of one's own success. The cynicism is a clear and present danger that needs to be constantly exorcised. And how could it be otherwise if personal branding is a matter of devising and impersonating one's own authentic self, in order to cultivate an authenticity that in the end serves the purpose of packaging one's ever more generic skills and competences in ways that are, in themselves, generic and commonplace? The branded self needs to be distinct in its blandness, unique in its generic combination of values like 'success, trustworthiness, engagement, empathy, commitment, curiosity, interest creativity' etc. You need to stand out and be different while remaining compatible with everybody else. But there is interesting evidence that suggests that personal brands are evolving into something quite different. Personal brands are increasingly becoming public devices.

This transformation is linked to the on-going re-organization of knowledge work. Knowledge workers, from the start the 'self-branding class' *par excellence*, are delinking from the security and stability of corporate careers. In part this is driven by post-materialist motivations: it is surprising what people will risk for the opportunity to 'transform my passions into my profession' — a mantra of self help books since at least the 1980s, that continue to motivate managerial flight today. But mostly it is driven by the automation of knowledge work and the over-supply of educated knowledge workers, which, along with online connectivity and new kinds of digital platforms, leads to increasing outsourcing of knowledge work. Knowledge workers, and in particular the younger generation, are increasingly forced to 'go freelance' because steady corporate jobs are becoming much rarer, and even those who find a corporate career are forced to operate as if they were freelancers, maximizing their opportunities and their human and social capital, in order to pursue it. This has rendered knowledge work — both within and outside corporate careers — more precarious and more entrepreneurial. But precariousness and the turn to freelancing do not simply imply individualization and fragmentation of labor markets (although this is a prevalent tendency).

Recently freelancers have begun to devise new forms of self-organization. It is quite common that tasks and projects are resolved by temporary assemblages of freelance workers — what Alessandro Gandini (2014) calls 'networked modes of organization' — where different aspects of a project are outsourced to people with different skills. In some cases such temporary network organizations develop among people who know and trust each other (a prevalent example is found in the ever more prevalent, co-working spaces, where freelance knowledge workers rent desks in common offices with the promise to take part of a

common skills pool; a General Intellect that can add on to their own resources). But often this happens in the absence of trust, as freelance workers need to seek partners outside of their circles of strong ties, within a local scene connected by weak ties. In those cases the personal brand serves as a way to publicize one's skills, social competence and trustworthiness.

However contrary to Tom Peter's recommendations, the value of brands in these networked scenes is not primarily an effect of the skilful performance of personal authenticity. Rather such brands are valued by the public of peers that constitutes the scene in which the individual freelancer operates. This continuous peer-estimation of the public value of personal brands is facilitated by social media platforms that have become a default device for organizing such temporary formations of knowledge work. Social Networking Sites like Facebook, Linked-in and Twitter have the capacity to objectify one's impact in terms of both the quantity of likes, re-tweets and Klout scores. Indeed these platforms render compatible endorsements and positive or negative judgments that might originate from a wide variety of a diverse value horizons, transforming them into quantitative manifestations of a common 'substance' a new General Sentiment, which conveniently operates as the measurement of the General Intellect on which such freelancing scenes are built. The technological possibility of such constant peer judgment leads to an instrumentally oriented logic of sharing, according to which freelance workers feel obliged to share resources — their time, knowledge, advice, part of their work — with their peers, because they are aware that such sharing is a strategically suitable way for them to establish a valuable brand that will eventually give them better possibilities to land more lucrative jobs and projects (indeed, Gandini's research suggests that there is a direct link between such peer reputation and economic prospects in creative freelancer scenes). Here the brand operates as a public estimate of the value of individual freelancers that institutionalizes a direct link between their virtue as members of particular scenes, and their value as economic agents.

But this is not simply a matter of the instrumentalization of sharing; the subsumption of some pristine peer-to-peer logic to the iron law of markets and profits. At the same time, the public nature of brands supports the emergence of common values: In some scenes this is more pronounced: Among social entrepreneurs, for example, the ability to create the perception that one is a person who has 'an impact' is a precondition for actually arriving in a position where it is possible to really have an impact. For example, in order to attract funding for one's 'changemaking' enterprise one needs to already have established a reputation as a 'changemaker' (Bandinelli and Arvidsson, 2013). Consequently, a lot of work needs to be put into appearing to have an impact. This work is, to no little extent a matter of what Gabriela Coleman (2005) has

called ‘ethical labour’ – an expression that would have made Hannah Arendt cringe. Ethical labour is the ‘labour’ of adapting oneself to the expectations of one’s peers, in order to become a virtuous individual in the eyes of the *polis* in which one operates and to contribute to its strength and good fortune by helping others, socializing new members, resolving conflicts and disputes and generally sharing one’s generic competences. In other scenes this ‘ethical’ dimension might be less pronounced, but there is still a strong sense of common norms; of not being a disloyal competitor, of not infringing on other people’s possibility for livelihood while pursuing one’s own legitimate profit motive. Such public virtue combines with excellence in the technical exploitation of common resources – the virtuosity (Virno, 2004) that is a precondition for developing a distinct service, a flexible response or a product that, while technically similar to others still stands out as distinct and inimitable – as a parameter for establishing public recognition of one’s value as an actor in a specific scene.

Social media presence is marked by a similar ethics: in order to have a successful online presence it is important to operate as an excellent curator — to keep procuring content that is interesting and useful for one’s public. But at the same time it is important not to infringe on other people’s ability to do this: not to steal or copy, and to give other people reasonable opportunities by, for example, ‘liking’, re-posting or re-tweeting their messages in the same way that one likes to be liked, re-tweeted or re-posted oneself.

While still fragile and overshadowed by an overwhelming impetus towards what Illana Gershon (2011) has called ‘neoliberal agency’, this ethics of the (personal) brand might point towards a new economic ethic. This would be an ethics of sharing and balanced competition where the market imperative is counteracted by a sort of entrepreneurial solidarity – a solidarity between small entrepreneurs, each exploiting a common set of shared skills and competences and each eking out a living on the margins. In a certain sense this ethic approaches Adam Smith’s concept of *prudence*, a quality of the pre-corporate market actor who, while caring for his own well being in competition with others, nevertheless behaves with *propriety* so as to conserve the respect and admiration of his peers, knowing well that this respect and admiration is what allows him to partake in the market game in the first place. The difference is that now ‘respect and admiration’ is objectified, quantified and rendered publically visible and comparable in the form of a personal brand, which at the same time acts as a direct determinant of the value of a subject and his actions. This means that, in contrast to the prudence and propriety of pre-corporate entrepreneurs, who operated with a backdrop of communitarian values and norms – think of Max Weber’s example of pre-modern wool merchants – the contemporary freelancer operates with a publically visible brand that objectifies his value in terms that are

globally valid (a prominent twitter profile is worth just as much in Europe as in Asia, among Christians as among Muslims). As William Davis has suggested in the case of what he calls neo-communitarianism, the publicity of data enabled by the digital remediation of social relations points beyond the neoliberal paradigm in that it renders the illusion of atomized market actors impossible: the post-neoliberal subject is visibly embedded in social relations, and from a point of view of government ‘human beings must be understood as social learning animals, whose behaviour reveals certain common patterns and flaws’ (Davies, 2010: 775). Public brands operate according to this principle. They visibly embed entrepreneurial actors in relations of affect and appreciation, which immediately presents them as situated subjects, with a history and a potential. And since this history and potential also influences their economic value, the publicity of brands necessarily invites prudence and propriety in conduct.

It would seem that the atomized entrepreneurial subject of neoliberalism is on its way to becoming re-socialized within a new social, based on the technical affordances of social media. This new social comes with an embryonic new solidarity, which is different from both the pre-modern ‘mechanic’ solidarity and the modern ‘organic’ solidarity in that it does not so much act as a counterbalance to the market, but rather emerges from and is intimately fused with market action. It is a solidarity that is intrinsic to a new kind of ethical economy (Arvidsson and Peitersen, 2013) where value and virtue coincide.

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