



Brands, welfare and welfare-cool*

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Introductory cool



Figure 1: Jerry, ICA. (<http://www.gladahudikteatern.se/ica-jerry/#.Uw34sfRg4Vk>)

What do brands have to do with the welfare state and ideas about welfare? More than one might think. With the remarkable omnipresence and activity of brands and advertisement in contemporary society where commercialized and commodified welfare today is a fact, indeed brands claim the role of protagonists in the world of social welfare. I mean brands do this by introducing and seducing us with what could be called *welfare-cool*.

Being experts of cool, brands turn to the territory of welfare where the logics of cool find new, virgin grounds. Elegantly, brands remake the welfare world and the welfare recipient by dressing them up in colorful outfits and contextualizing them in entertaining and educative commercials, giving welfare the fundamental quality of cool. Brands seem to be in love with welfare.

* I would like to thank the special issue editors for valuable help and comments

The purpose of this note is to address the emergence of what might be called brands' welfare-cool or brands' fabrication of welfare-coolness. I will begin with presenting and tentatively interpreting the case of a remarkable commercial televised in Sweden in 2009. After proceeding by suggesting ways of understanding the logics of brands' welfare-cool fabrication and hunt for it, this note will end with a short discussion contextualizing welfare-cool in today's welfare climate, which is predominantly shaped by a neoliberal and market-oriented welfare ideology.

A case of branded welfare-cool



Figure 2: Jerry, ICA (<http://www.sotochsnygg.se>)

In today's hyper-mediatized and advertisement-thick world, the notion that 'a picture says more than a thousand words' is somewhat of a cliché. Logically, the moving pictures we are relentlessly fed with, by means of commercials on-line or on TV, certainly reinvigorate McLuhan's famous 'the medium is the message'-thesis.

That commercial and corporate interest has colonized the life-world in general (cf. Deetz, 1992), but in particular our life-world of pictures, both still and moving, must today be seen as a huge understatement. Arvidsson (2005: 236) underlines this truism and points out how our everyday life is indeed packed with attempts from brand management to steer how we produce truth, beauty and utility around goods, paraphrasing the notion of the truth-regime in Foucault's works by suggesting the existence of a kind of brand-governmentality that frames our consumer behavior and consumer minds.

Commercials, ads and brands are literally everywhere; the commercial gaze is omnipresent and panoptic, as if it were the oxygen that our capitalist existences need to breathe.

On-line, on television, in the metro station, on the bus, well, in all public spaces, brands pontificate. The brand is what spearheads the message: about our need of the particular commodity, its price, and the beneficial effects on our identity as owner of the particular item, of being seen in and belonging to certain market-spaces and consumer cultures.

The brand, of course, also makes us feel connected to, and indeed sparks a feeling of certain *coolness*. Coolness is gold. Corporations and brand-empires desperately hunt, scout for cool and if possible fabricate it for their own interest (cf. Klein, 2000). And as corporate interests enter new fields and territories, it seems that we see the development and fabrication of new types of cool, as if coolness also could add to a product's and a corporation's legitimacy.

Creating welfare cool: Say hello to Jerry the trainee!

Please have a look at the pictures above. The pictures are taken from a very popular televised commercial aired in the fall of 2009 in Sweden, which was produced by one of Sweden's and northern Europe's largest food retailers (the logo and name of the firm is clearly shown in the picture, naturally) through one of Sweden's best and most renowned PR-firms (King.se). The commercial (a mini-series) was a tremendous success and stirred up huge public attention and even some controversy. Indeed, in a novel, original, humoristic and astute way, the company and ad-firm not only created a real and gigantic buzz around the brand, but also about the serious matter of the contemporary welfare state, a welfare state that seemed to need a remake, needed to be freshened up by the magical powers of a brand. How to do it? By engineering welfare-cool.

Yes, the person in the middle of the picture has Down's syndrome and is the main-character in the commercial. To Swedish viewers he quickly became 'Jerry the trainee' or 'ICA-Jerry'. The character of 'Jerry the trainee' or 'ICA-Jerry' became a star, a celebrity, and a kind of bearer and spreader of branded welfare-cool.

Please have a look at how welfare-cool takes the scene, welfare-cool in motion, fueled by and driven forward by brands. Here are the clips¹ starring 'Jerry the trainee'. The storyline is the following: the ICA store needs more staff and the manager (Stig) introduces a newcomer, a trainee. It is Jerry, and Jerry is quite

1 <http://youtu.be/RrYkX3ofHwA>

special. Jerry has a distinctive disability and will, in several eye-opening and charming ways, challenge the staff's, and us the viewer's, preconceptions of a person with a disability.

The first clip (1) shows Jerry being presented to staff by the manager. Jerry reacts to the staff's very surprised faces displaying their (and our) intuitive reaction to employing a disabled person by asking: 'what are you staring at – have you never seen a *trainee* before?'

(2) Jerry is shown the ropes by one of the staff (Ulf). Ulf treats Jerry as if he were retarded (or an infant, a common phenomenon in the meeting between 'normal' and 'deviant'). Ulf speaks extremely slowly and loudly assuming Jerry is totally incompetent. Jerry goes to manager (Stig) and asks him: 'Hey Ulf, he is not quite all right in the head is he?' whereby Stig confirms this. This scene problematizes and turns up side down the notion of who is normal and not, and who has the power to decide it.

(3) Jerry is eating from the company products. Ulf tells him off, but Jerry responds that the manager Stig has agreed to this behavior, 'it is ok!' This makes Ulf set about doing the same thing with a smile on his face. Surprised by the infuriated manager, Ulf says 'but Jerry said it was ok!' Jerry, however is not to be seen. Ulf is severely criticized by the manager, Stig, for so dishonestly and cheaply 'blaming the trainee', in other words blaming a vulnerable, defenseless disabled person. Jerry himself underlines this by popping up behind manager Stig and saying, 'hey Ulf, you mustn't blame the trainee!'

On the logics of branded welfare-cool



Figure 3: Jerry, ICA (<http://www.gladahudikteatern.se/ica-jerry/#.Uw34sfRg4Vk>)

A simple question comes to mind: why is this such a seductive and indeed a cool spot²? Unmistakably, this particular company and brand (ICA) maximises its socio-cultural powers, its potentials and craft as a cultural activist (Holt, 2002; 2004). Impeccably this brand taps into and strikes a vibrant chord of social actuality, re-contextualizing an acute socio-political issue in the heart of contemporary welfare thought. Tapping into the classical problem of the welfare state, even its *raison d'être* – the care and integration of those who are deviant or different, the ‘vulnerable’ members of society – the brand elegantly and seductively infiltrates and co-opts the welfare idea. This brand is astute. It stakes out a grave question. The brand gives us, as consumers, a wake up call while laughing³. And the commercial is indeed well-crafted; truly a charming, funny and thought-provoking fusion of entertainment and commerce (Ritzer, 1999) with a powerful dosage of education. The brand wants to enlighten you.

As viewers, we follow the charming character of ‘Jerry the trainee’ as he so enchantingly handles reality in the supermarket – indeed a central institution of society, it is society – and we recognize ourselves as members of society, citizens of the welfare state, all of us having more or less embarrassing stereotypes about persons that don’t fit the norm, people with handicaps of some sort, persons in need of support, in need of our understanding, reflection, awareness, and compassion. Are we finally seeing the much-awaited coming of so-called compassionate capitalism, beautifully branding and re-commodifying welfare; replacing traditional de-commodified welfare thought?

Additionally, with the immense interest from mass media and the peculiar hype around persons with disabilities that has been seen over the last few years, one wonders – paraphrasing Marx’s intricate analysis of how the commodity in capitalist society gains a fetishlike quality (Marx, 1996) – if disability is being fetishized in the commercialized, commodified, branded welfare state. Welfare-cool today seems to love what just yesterday was the most uncool you could think of: disability.

2 Rendering the character of Jerry about 500 000 friends on Facebook while the actor, Mats Melin, has attained celebrity status and is invited to all kinds of talk shows etc. Merchandise with the logo ‘I love Ica-Jerry’ is also for sale (<http://icajerry.spreadshirt.se/i-heart-ica-jerry-vit-munktroeja-A11049064>)

3 *With* or *at* Jerry? Or both? Surely the edge is pointed at you the viewer, you should laugh at our own stupid prejudices (while feeling compelled to go to shopping at ICA).

What is (un)cool about welfare-cool?

There are of course a number of perspectives from which to continue analysing and interpreting this spectacle of the coming of a kind of subtle but powerful brandscape of welfare and brand-engineered welfare-cool. Putting the display of ICA-Jerry in a broad contemporary political context, branded and brand-engineered welfare-cool is a perfectly rational manifestation of the neoliberal zeitgeist of today. Today, welfare isn't primarily a right, but a technology of governance in the lean, market oriented, activating, and enterprising welfare state (cf. Bonoli and Natali, 2012; Considine, 2001). The growing presence of corporate brand logics in welfare, and in welfare discourse, mean greater manifestations of brands in welfare and welfare activity, like the one portrayed in this note⁴, which radically redefine our way of understanding the welfare state and the idea of welfare.

The gap left by the withdrawing traditional public welfare logics is enthusiastically filled by corporate brands and is commonly styled like the equally fashionable and cool trend of Corporate Social Responsibility (which we could call a kind of responsibility-cool).

This is perhaps not that peculiar; a society that has given more and more welfare responsibility and welfare tasks to the market is a society that expects the corporate world to show welfare awareness. We expect corporations do what they do the best: scout for cool and cool ways of packaging and branding what they want to sell back to us. After all, why on earth should we buy the product, the service or the idea of a commercialized welfare state, if it isn't cool?

Commercially, welfare-cool is cool based on a simple basic fact of consumer conduct – that we are what we have (Belk, 1988). In a consumer society, there is no way of ducking a brand that so elegantly taps into such a central and potent idea as the idea of our social welfare. Or, as Arvidsson (2005: 248, emphasis in original) returns to, 'it is not the brand in itself that counts, but what you can do with it, what you can *be* with it'.

Disturbing however, and utterly uncool, is the fact that brands today take the liberty of being kind of novel welfare experts; prominent welfare educators with a self-imposed duty to make us aware; to teach us something acute, something relevant about our society, how to treat fellow human beings that happen to be

4 Corporation ICA means business and launched a campaign called, 'We can do more' to offer persons with disabilities trainee positions in their stores. This makes me think that our economy indeed needs its 'epsilon-persons', made famous in Huxley's 1932 dystopia, *A brave new world* (1969). But this is another story.

different and need support from the welfare system. This brand tells us, because it knows, because it has authority on the question of how the welfare state should be, look, work and cost. These commercials, these brands embracing welfare and deviance, which in some sense depict an ideal-society in miniature, are in fact striking expressions of the brand, the corporation, and the market, *being* the welfare state. The branding of welfare could also be seen as a sharp and updated expression of the unmasked *political entrepreneurs* (Crouch, 2011; Lazzarato, 2007; 2009; Palmàs, 2011) taking new leaps into and colonizing new territory: the territory of welfare. Brands today seem very confident (and cool) in suggesting an ideal welfare future; the perfect and harmonious welfare state, a colourful, happy, where-we-all-are-shopping kind of welfare state. A funny, branded welfare state decorated with price-tags and liberated from prejudice because, as we all know, the market has no prejudice, the market is free. And what is cooler than freedom?

Brands in the world of welfare do what they always do, what they are designed to do: they frame and sell us a sense of freedom, at least a feeling of freedom. If not a ‘Starbuck-moment’ (Klein, *Ibid.*) then, as in this case, a cool ‘enlightened welfare-moment’. Freedom from the uglier sides of our personalities; freedom from our prejudiced minds; freedom from the colourlessness of the traditional welfare state’s way of addressing welfare problems – so urgently un-cool and un-branded. The ICA brand-make-over makes welfare seem to be a very cool endeavour. It makes us be cool, feel cool, about the reality of disability and disabled fellow citizens. In a sense, ICA makes even disability per se seem cool. Lazzarato’s (2007) analysis of brand logic and publicity – like Benetton’s (in)famous commercials – reveals the political entrepreneur’s strategy to not just provide information about, but to constitute the market. In line with Lazzarato’s analysis, brands infiltrating welfare constitute the market through a powerful interactive relationship with the consumer, addressing her needs and above all her (our) desires; our desire to be part of a open, inclusive and good, well-functioning and just welfare society.

Cooling down

Brands don’t ever stop scouting for new profitable territories to decorate and remake, it is all about making reality appear as much as possible like a welcoming, seductive and shining brandscape. By reflecting upon the popular commercial by Swedish food-retailer ICA, addressing, and indeed penetrating, issues of social welfare and disability, this note has suggested ways of interpreting the emergence of corporate brands scouting for and fabricating *welfare-cool*.

In a neoliberal, market-oriented society where traditional welfare is minimized, looked down upon and seen as obsolete, it is no surprise that political entrepreneurs, market-actors, corporations, ad-gurus and brands are playing energetic roles as the new welfare creators and welfare experts and are generating unexplored linkages between brands and welfare. In order to feed off the world of welfare (and its inhabitants, like Jerry) and still maintain legitimacy and grow in popularity, brands need this to be an utterly cool thing – that’s why brands need welfare-cool.

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