



Chapter I

TrickE-Business: Malcontents in the Matrix

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the phenomenon of hacktivism in the context of globalization debates and the evolving nature of new social movements. It explores the historical trend by which capitalism has become increasingly more immaterial in its appearance but powerful in its effects. Using examples of specific hacktivist groups, hacktivism is shown to be an inventive response to this trend and represents an imaginative re-appropriation of the Web for spider-like anti-capitalist protest. The paper concludes with a summary of the hacktivist philosophy that seeks to reassert the origins of the marketplace as an agora for the people rather than just big business. Hacktivism is shown to represent a rationale diametrically opposed to e-commerce.

INTRODUCTION-

ALL THAT IS SOLID MELTS INTO AIR...

Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social relations, everlasting uncertainty and agitation, distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier times. All fixed, fast-frozen relationships, with their train of venerable ideas and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become obsolete before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned. (Marx & Engels – The Manifesto of the Communist Party¹)

The Robespierre of this revolution is finance capital ... As the Jacobins learned during the French Revolution, it is the most zealous, principled advocates of new values who are ultimately most at risk in a revolutionary environment. (Greider, 1997: 25, 26)

The purpose of this chapter is to describe from a 'Devil's Advocate' stance the cultural context to the rise of various online activities that oppose the general values of e-business. In the new digital times, Marx's description of capitalism's iconoclastic qualities has been enthusiastically re-appropriated by business gurus on the opposite side of the political spectrum. His criticism of disorienting change has been swamped by a tsunami of techno-enthusiasm. The perennial pertinence of Marx's poetically-charged analysis of the socially transformative power of capitalism's increasingly immaterial form is illustrated in a spate of such recently evocative titles as: *Living on Thin Air*, *The Empty Raincoat*, *Being Digital*; and *The Weightless World*. Such New Economy tracts can even make Marx's florid language seem relatively understated - to the extent that it has been described as the 'deranged optimism' and 'corporate salivating' of 'business pornography' (Thomas Frank 2001). In this atmosphere of revolutionary rhetoric, however, Greider's above quotation hints at the dangers that can await those at the vanguard of change. We will see later in this chapter that just as Marx argued that capitalism contained its own fatal internal contradictions, so various writers are beginning to argue that the technological infrastructure of e-commerce may provide the fertile grounds for oppositional forces.

The dot.com revolution has produced dot communists, and in addition to the recent slowdown in the revolution's own internal momentum, the information superhighway now has speed bumps in the form of online political activists known as hacktivists. Together, hacktivists and anti-corporate theorists are creating a groundswell of opinion that may mitigate future growth in e-commerce and the dream of abstract friction-free capitalism.

THE MANIFEST DESTINY OF FRICTION-FREE CAPITALISM

Now capital has wings – (New York financier Robert A. Johnson)².

For how many eons had insurmountable geography impeded man's business? Now the new American race had burst those shackles. Now it could couple its energies in one overarching

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