

CORPORATE FACE OFF

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In *Lenin for your Library?* Yevgeniy Fiks undertakes a straightforward action: sending copies of *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* by V. I. Lenin to one hundred major global corporations (Gap, Coca-Cola, General Electric, and IBM among many others) along with an enclosed letter offering the book as a donation to their corporate library. Out of one hundred copies, fourteen were acknowledged with “thank you” letters and twenty were returned with letters stating various reasons for rejection (focus of library collection, policy of not accepting gifts or donations from private individuals, etc.). The fates of the other sixty six are, to date, unknown.

According to the popular book (and later film) *The Corporation: The Pathological Pursuit of Power* written by law professor Joel Bakan, corporations have been elevated to the status of individuals and endowed with even greater rights than those of actual citizens. Given this level of power and presumed sentience, it is interesting to inquire into the reading habits of such individuals. What corporations read besides their own mission statements and manuals is a good subject for analysis and, indeed, why not read Lenin, since his harsh critiques of imperialism are as relevant today as when he first wrote them down a century ago.

Yevgeniy Fiks’ project goes beyond politely engaging the corporation and analyzing their reading, however. With his controversial and ironic gesture he tests the very notion of corporate identity – whether or not it really exists and if there is really an individual behind the official persona projected in their letters.

Reading the letters is a fascinating lesson. No matter how the companies respond the letters are by turns funny and pathetic – some reject the book, some accept the gift and add it to their corporate libraries, some assure the artist that they will donate the book to a local school, some even offer a voucher to buy their products in a reciprocal gesture! Whatever their official response, what remains consistent in every letter is that they are all written in a legal voice, bereft of curiosity or any acknowledgement of the book’s content. The companies are at once unassailable and unwitting, and it is this fissure that Fiks cleverly reveals.

But the question remains: When the corporation answers Fiks, who is it that is responding? Can the identity of the correspondents be established based solely on this exchange? Defined by their attempts to demonstrate an upstanding moral philosophy, the rhetoric of the corporations’ policy declarations is clearly not aimed at connecting with

the correspondent but at avoiding responsibility and redirecting attention away from their malfeasance. The identity of the corporation is as undefined and dubious as their ethics. On the other hand, it meets the subjectivity assumed by the artist, who acts more like a prankster than a committed communist. It is the subjectivity of a provocateur who manages to involve the corporate bureaucracy in his monkey business – turning it, however symbolically, against its own nature. In this way Fiks' provocative gesture goads the corporation, inviting them to show off, Fiks sets a trap, catching them in their own slippery ideology. Take, for example, the letter from Amazon.com who hastily assure Fiks that they give money to charity. Or Walt Disney Co., who write in their rejection letter that their policy dictates that they are not to accept any ideas or creative material from individuals not solicited by the company, a tacit admission that they view the artist's gesture as hostile and competitive.

Below the surface of these often amusing letters Fiks poses an important question: Given today's current intellectual and political climate, what is the future of communist, and particularly, Lenin's, ideas in the global economy?

As Slavoj Žižek once noted, while Karl Marx, a poet of commodity and capitalism's dynamics, is included in the short reading list of even Wall Street businessmen, Lenin remains marginalized, left out of contemporary political discourse. This status is not only because Lenin embodies the failure of the practical applications of Marxism, but also because he is perceived as a radical, a dangerous revolutionary and a member of a party aggressively focused on class struggle and committed to the violent overthrow of capitalist governments. Unpopular and feared by Wall Street and Main Street for most of the twentieth century, Lenin's ideas are today controversial also among the Left, who fear revolution on the one hand, and feel the pressure to return to the legacy of his ideas on the other.

Is it this very conundrum that defines current discourse about alternatives to capitalism? Granted, alternatives are hard to imagine, as capitalism continues to hold its dominant position in the world, manipulating its categories and principles (replacing, for example, "class society" with the so-called "society of free choices" – a typical neo-liberal cliché – while still keeping its old logic and values). Since the fall of the USSR and Eastern European socialist bloc, socialism and communism are regarded as nothing more than a kind of experiment – a flag to be waved by media activists, internet communities, or Israeli kibbutzim (all forms of socialism conceived of and fully accepted within capitalism).

It is this identity crisis that Fiks' work poignantly frames by revealing

itself to be a gesture, purely symbolic, which points to the dilemmas and weaknesses of the Left rather than presenting another ideological attempt to undermine imperialism.

Lenin's call for immediate action in 1917 resonates with the Left's contemporary crisis and its ambivalence towards his logic of violent overthrow. The curator Chris Gilbert has spoken to this dilemma by pointing out that today, new subjectivity creates new forms of capitalism and new forms of denying its existence.¹

Can Lenin's vision be renewed? Gilbert's call for action echoes Julia Kristeva who has argued that since the Paris revolts of May 1968 the Left has lived through the end of the entire epoch of the progressive movement and radical thinking. It is this traumatic experience that has forced ideologists to re-discover the basic coordinates of their own project, though they are well aware that a century ago the same kind of experience led to the birth of Leninism. Over the past century Lenin's criticism of empire has been updated by much harsher opponents of globalization, but do today's radicals know what to do any more than he did? Is the enemy the same?²

Perhaps, one can find an answer to this question in the current activity of political parties and organizations such as Greenpeace, Doctors Without Borders, Amnesty International, and numerous feminist and anti-racism organizations, all of whom have a greater capacity and power to intervene and change the world than the Communist Party. How can Lenin's ideas be recognized in the work of artists and curators attempting to take on the Left's ideas and legacy, since, as Gilbert has stridently noted, their meaning is mediated by the art institutions operating inside the capitalist system and market economy? How do we build on Lenin's insights and activism when the word "revolution" is overused and its meaning abused by the market and political slogans? (When the fundamental meaning of revolution – to call things into question – is forgotten?)³

Yevgeniy Fiks' work does not answer these questions, but through his self-effacing action, using the mechanism of donation (an important tool in capitalist power play) he negates the system, and this negating gesture is a reminder of the possibility to act revolutionarily.