

The look is not just physical appearance. Models attempt to become winners, and try to “work it” by perfecting their bodies and personalities, and learning to cope with rejections. They learn the norms in the process of “being watched, observed, scrutinized, and compared to one another” (103). As free-lance “aesthetic laborers” they are trying to create a “whole person” (13) to sell. Mears defines the look as “a system of meanings, such as a language or a code, tied to a social evaluation system” (7).

The actors are best described as operating simultaneously in two circuits - editorial and commercial - based on different principles. The commercial circuit is older and originates from fact-oriented messages about products. The editorial circuit emerged later, when advertising transformed into a “dream vehicle, crafting elaborate sets of emotional meanings and values around products” (33). In the former the norms of femininity and masculinity are rather standard, and bookers and clients are searching for “pretty” or “soft looks”. In the latter, there should be something distinctive about a model, a “contradictory twin imperative for sameness and difference, to simultaneously fit and stand out” (119).

Following Bourdieu, author argues that editorial fashion is not only the “economic world reversed”, but also the beauty world reversed (43). Paradoxically, as she shows, the “pretty” and well-paid model working in commercial circuit, for instance with the catalog, is out of the contest in the editorial prestige contest. “Edgy” looks are needed in this contest. They are not only more symbolic than commercial looks, but also has a potential to change the norms of the latter. An ultimate goal of every model and the secret of success in this trade is to pursue both: above average profits become possible by converting high editorial capital into high commercial by scoring a luxury-brand campaign.

Despite the “floating norms” that are used to evaluate particular candidates in the market, there are some defining standards that do not allow a large deviation in the looks. The social evaluation system of the modeling market is rooted in preexisting categories of race, gender, sexuality, and class. In this system “every deviation from a white bourgeois body is viewed with disdain” (195). It is not fashion producers who are selecting models according to racist or sexist agenda, it is “market-specific images of femininity and masculinity that relate to the class positioning of an imagined audience” (206). These imaginaries are reflected in looks as institutionalized arrangements and conventions, and free-lance models have to cope with

them. Consequently, there is a cult of white skinny female model, who, despite being objectified has chances to win it all. Those, who deviate too much (by gender, sexuality or skin color), will always take a risk of remaining in that segment of the trade where the models exit the business with negative balance. Acknowledging this, all market actors still keep to the “illusion of the game” (44), which, as they collectively believe, is “so much fun” (260).

As an endnote. The book could probably benefit from bringing more theoretical discussion back from the endnotes into the main text: a large number of references can be found there, as well as author’s statements about her theoretical and conceptual choices.

Book: Kalle Lasn /Adbusters (eds.), 2012: *Meme Wars. The Creative Destruction of Neoclassical Economics*. London: Penguin.

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A couple of years into the current crisis and an arsenal of responding policies later, many researchers remain puzzled by the continuous political strength of neoliberalism, or, as Colin Crouch has recently put it, its “strange non-death”.¹ One part of the story certainly is that its academic trailblazer, neoclassical economics, is alive and kicking. Despite numerous efforts from economic sociology, heterodox economics and other disciplines to rigorously pull apart the assumptions and prescriptions of the economic mainstream and its role in the financial disasters of the late 2000s, economics departments are, with exceptions, still dominated by the same thinking that has led to the current dislocations.

This is the setting for *Meme Wars*.² Edited by Kalle Lasn of Adbusters³ fame, its aim is, in the words of the subtitle, “the creative destruction of neoclassical economics”, and thus comes fittingly in the format of an agitprop coffee-table book. To begin with the design, the book takes visual cues from critical advertising and the whole repertoire of a do-it-yourself, collage-affine, anti-capitalist counterculture, making its aesthetics a part of its intervention in the academic debate. Just like in other Adbusters publications, illustrations of an alienated consumer society stand next to the imageries of Occupy and other social movements and their iconographic use of slogans. It is fair to say that the

book as a whole is visually fairly messy, which fits very well with its goal to abandon the clean model world of neoclassical economics. It is a self-proclaimed "real world economics textbook", setting out to break with the hegemony of economic knowledge that is canonized by the standard textbooks of the discipline. The way *Meme Wars* wants to revolutionize economic thinking *from within*, as Schumpeter's notion of creative destruction could be translated, is to address the next generation of economists, to equip young students at econ departments with alternative, off-curriculum approaches to economic analysis, to make a point for critical thinking and questioning, and fundamentally to call for action. But does it do a convincing job? And is this a worthwhile academic read?

Despite its rejection of some formal elements of a textbook (as displayed for instance by the lack of page numbers), *Meme Wars* has a chapter structure, and for the purpose of this review it makes sense to follow it. However, one can easily browse through the book, back and forth, as the narrative is less sequential than in ordinary textbooks and the layout additionally invites the reader to some sort of random access. The message of the first chapter, "Battle for the Soul of Economics", can best be summarized by a quote from the later depicted *Kick It Over Manifesto* that addresses the establishment of economics: "You claim to work in a pure science of formula and law, but yours is a social science, with all the fragility and uncertainty that this entails. We accuse you of pretending to be what you are not."⁴ This message is substantively underlined by an anthropological and historical approach to keywords of economic action, such as "gift", "money", "property", and "empire", and followed by an interesting piece by Michael Hudson on debt as a driving force of social and political change. The images used in the chapter make it clear that the textbook is not satisfied with a mere discussion of the under-socialized and ahistorical accounts of the economic mainstream, it implies that the battle for the soul of the discipline is embedded in social and political struggles over the future of our societies.

Correspondingly, the book proceeds to a more fundamental critique of Western thinking, its obsession with rationality and logic (and growth), and its belief in the Western economic model as the superior form of social organization. Thought-provoking in its visual presentation, this part of the book would surely have benefitted from a more concise and introductory discussion of how economic thought is embedded in the evolution of Western societies, and its notions of progress and rationality. As social and

environmental disintegration as the downsides of "progress" are introduced as the recurrent substantive theme of the book with chapter two and three, one could have asked for a broader foundation. References to the dialectical approaches of French and German Critical Theory, for example, would have made appropriate appearances here. Given that so much research in the humanities and social sciences is concerned with this theme, it is not evident why *Meme Wars* is leaving this to whom they call "mavericks" in the economics profession (chapter four). Here it is the illustrious names of Joseph Stiglitz, George Akerlof and Steve Keen who posit their by now well-known critiques of mainstream economic theory. Other authors, such as Julie Matthaei, Herman Daly and Lourdes Benería, cover the omission of power relations in neoclassical economics, its obsession with aggregate quantitative growth and its reduction of ecological distress to mere "externalities". By adding feminist and environmentalist perspectives they also present alternative approaches to teaching and research in economics. This is probably the most 'hands-on' chapter in the book, giving students an idea how diverse the discipline actually is (or could be). In combination with chapter eight, which presents some "early pioneers" of the soon-to-be-found new science of economics, readers are likely to make novel acquaintances with ideas and people, and this is certainly where the book is strongest. One can nonetheless be surprised by how little or no reference is made to thinkers in the Marxist tradition, such as Paul Sweezy and Harry Magdoff, to Keynesian contemporaries and Post-Keynesians from Kalecki to Robinson and Minsky, not to speak of the Social Structures of Accumulation and *Régulation* Schools, which partly developed out of a critique of the dominant equilibrium models. Of course, to ask for the inclusion of more and more facets of the discipline is, admittedly, a lame point of criticism. But a book that carries the outrage with the parsimonious and bigot character of neoclassical economics on every page should be expected to build a wider nest in social science and not omit giving credit to its intellectual lineage.

To some extent this is corrected in chapters five and six, when readers are pointed to the concepts of "Bionomics" and "Psychonomics". The chapter on the first is essentially about the workings of our ecosystem and the ignorance of neoclassical economics regarding environmental issues. The images, slogans and short essays that evolve around the madness of GDP measurement as defining progress and economic well-being, are nowhere in this book as aptly aligned as in this chapter. It makes one wonder how ridiculous as well as socially and environmentally costly

some of our modern economic practices actually are. Paradoxically, the argument appeals to the very logic that is criticized in chapter two on Western rationality. How can it be that shipping a box of crackers halfway around the world is supposedly more efficient, i.e. cheaper, than a different form of economic organization? Would it still be if ecological deterioration was more than a mere externality? One wonders whether some of the book's criticism would dissolve if economics simply updated its notion of efficiency. As much as bionomics calls for an inclusion of the ecosystem, psychonomics seeks to get rid of the "rational utility maximizer" as the ubiquitous actor in mainstream economic analysis. Criticizing the discipline's micro-foundations is far from new, but the twist that comes from *Meme Wars* is that *homo oeconomicus* will not ever lead a happy life. On the contrary, if people continue to perform the utility maximizer they will rather end up depressed, alienated, and possibly drugged in the setup of "consumer capitalism". It is not difficult to be sympathetic with the authors' approach to happiness and economic action, but their proposition to get "our people off concrete, glass, mechanization, isolation and steel" has a cabin-in-the-woods recluse taste to it that adds a tablespoon of *reactionary* to the process of *creative destruction*.

Having outlined its major points of criticism and introduced a number of alternative approaches to mainstream economics, the book finally moves on to its practical agenda in chapter seven, *Meme War on Campus*, when it proclaims:

"we have to move beyond our academic comfort zones and become meme warriors ... we have to occupy our school's economics department: Disrupt lectures, walk en masse out of classes, post a never-ending stream of posters and provocations in the corridors, nail manifestos to our professors' doors. We have to ridicule their theories in campus newspapers and on campus radio. We have to organize teach-ins and, in front of campus-wide audiences, demand to know how they factor forests, fish, climate change and ecosystem collapse into their macroeconomic models."

In the midst of this call to action, the reader becomes familiar with the French movement for Post-Autistic Economics, with its supporters from Cambridge, and with walkouts in Harvard. This chapter once more highlights the practical implications that supposedly should follow from the theoretical discussion of neoclassical economics. Its underlying premise is that academic argument and debate alone will not drive the paradigm shift, but only the tools of protest

movements will eventually facilitate a spill over to pressing issues such as financial regulation. This part of *Meme Wars* is optimistic and encouraging in its approach, and it nicely connects to its foundations at *Occupy Wall Street*. In my view it would have made an excellent closing chapter of this book that so interestingly, if not always successfully, oscillates between profound criticism of the state of economics and the demands of current anti-capitalist social movements. However, some of its images are too bold and simple, and their suggestions too disputable to let them stand without elaboration. In this sense I had wished for more text in this "alternative textbook". This could have also helped to speak to a wider group of students, not only those who are already sympathetic with the book's political positions.

That said, I cannot find much in the existentialist, spiritualist closing chapters that ooze with pathos and are hooked on the *Great Crash*, the ultimate economic and environmental breakdown. Certainly, the dramaturgy of the book and its political agenda play with – and probably need – the ubiquitous possibility of catastrophe that will catapult our affluent, consumption-and-technology dependent societies into a new dark age, to which the authors respond with a colorful new aesthetics. But to remind them of a lucid theoretician of advanced industrial society who would have possibly agreed with the general intention of *Meme Wars*, impending doom is an unlikely catalyst for paradigm change: *"Perhaps an accident may alter the situation, but unless the recognition of what is being done and what is being prevented subverts the consciousness and the behavior of man, not even a catastrophe will bring about the change."*⁵

Endnotes

¹Colin Crouch, 2011: *The Strange Non-Death of Neoliberalism*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

²A 'meme', according to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, is "an idea, behavior, style, or usage that spreads from person to person within a culture".

³<https://www.adbusters.org>, last accessed on 16 May 2013.

⁴<http://www.kickitover.org> is also the name of a supplementary website to *Meme Wars* that compiles the slogans, manifestos and images of the book and makes them available for download and, most importantly, print out. Last accessed on 17 May 2013.

⁵Herbert Marcuse, 2007 [1964]: *One-Dimensional Man*. Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society. London/New York: Routledge. p. xlv.