

Selling Ourselves Out

(Why just “selling things” is inherently counter-revolutionary)

CrimethInc.

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Look at the hardcore community, from a distance—what do you see? The most visible signs of our existence, besides bands playing in basements and rented out halls, are the ‘zines and records we sell. And open up almost any one of those ‘zines, and you see advertisements for other ‘zines, other records, other products. In fact, aside from the advertisements, what are most of our ‘zines about? The record reviews, the ‘zine reviews, the top ten lists all deal with products to buy and sell. The photos of hardcore bands hopping around and shouting invariably feature kids dressed in certain styles (band shirts, tattoos, etc.), as if to indicate that these fashions, which are not too cheap, are an intrinsic part of being involved in hardcore.

And when you get more deeply involved in hardcore, you find that you really do spend quite a bit of time buying and selling products. You start going to more shows and buying the records and ‘zines you hear about. You buy some band shirts and maybe purchase some clothes, piercings, or tattoos that are similar to the ones your friends in the hardcore community have. You start a ‘zine of your own, and have to worry about how to buy the copies to make it, and—how to sell it. You start a band, and worry about making demos and selling them, about buying equipment and being paid to play shows; you start a distribution, and worry about how to sell all the things you order; you start a record label, and you worry about selling records, buying advertising, selling more records, more and more buying and selling. That seems to be one of the main themes of hardcore today, if not the main theme: economics. One of the main things that identifies a kid who is getting involved in hardcore is the records and ‘zines he buys; and the people who are more deeply involved usually spend even more time thinking about economics—worrying about money, about promoting their products, about sales and profits, since most of the projects we undertake in hardcore right now seem to be business enterprises. That’s the problem: most of the projects we undertake in the hardcore community right now seem to be business enterprises.

Of course we have to sell things to be able to make them and share them with each other at all, living as we do in a capitalist system where it’s difficult get anything for free. But if this is the case, we still should be more aware of the effects of the ways we conduct business, and also strive for alternatives so that we will not be limited to only one form of interaction. And if we truly are interested in transforming our lives in fundamental ways, rather than just going through the motions of being another youth subculture, buying and selling products should play a much smaller role in our community than it does. It should be extremely clear from looking at the corporate exploitation of the hippy subculture, the (pop) punk subculture, and a thousand other youth subcultures that any community/subculture that focuses primarily on products and image is vulnerable to being taken over by corporate interests. We can’t beat “the Man” by playing his own game. Besides, there are so many other kinds of interaction that are worth trying, that might be better for all of us.

SELLING THINGS IS NOT “PROGRESS”

First of all, and most importantly, we must remember that by itself selling things does not accomplish anything. Just because more kids bought hardcore records this year than ever before does not mean that the ideas on those hardcore records are going to affect more people in genuine ways. In fact, some methods of promotion and distribution that work to increase sales also work to distract attention (both the record label’s attention and the buyers’ attention) from the ideas that are addressed on the record, as we’ll discuss below.

Buying and selling goods and services is the foundation of our economy here in the U.S.A. and Europe, and consequently, it often seems to be the central focus of our lives. We spend half of our waking hours and most of our energy at our careers, and almost all the careers available have to do with selling things or services, or promoting those sales, etc. And where has that gotten us? The companies that sell the most useless products, like Coca Cola, achieve the biggest sales, because they can afford to spend the most money on advertising and promoting their pointless product. A number of large corporations are destroying the environment (McDonalds, Exxon, etc.) and animals (the meat and dairy industry), financing oppression of human beings (Pepsi, etc.), promoting products that destroy people (the tobacco industry, etc.), and mistreating or underpaying their workers (Nike and almost every other corporation I can think of)—all in the name of profit, because profit is the most important goal in this kind of economy. The corporations that will not sell things as ruthlessly as the others, that will not stomp over anything in their path to increase sales, die out, while the corporations that act with the least concern for the world in their quest for sales come to dominate the economy (and thus the world) when “selling things” is the main focus. The products that cater to the lowest common denominator (bad television shows, silly movies, etc.) achieve the widest sales in this system, and come to dominate our lives. Because our society treats “selling things” as an end rather than a means, we live in a world that is fucked up in a thousand different ways.

Do we really want to mirror mainstream society in our own community by concentrating on that same kind of economic interaction? It seems possible that that system might have the same effects in hardcore that it does in mainstream society, if we’re not careful. That is to say—the labels and other hardcore businesses that have the least scruples, that care the least about the value of their products and the effects of the ways they sell their products, might come to have the most power and influence in a scene where selling things is the main focus... because though other labels might care more about the way they go about business, they won’t be able to compete with the marketing and business savvy of their ruthless, heartless competitors. And then, though some kids who have come to be concerned about issues like consumerism would choose to support the more independent/not-profit-motivated labels, the labels that were the most visible to the most people would be the ones who concentrated the most on pure sales alone and thought little about anything else.

In fact, if you look at hardcore right now, it’s not hard to see that very thing happening.

ADVERTISING

When you sell things, it’s necessary to let people know that that they are available from you, and so advertising has become a fundamental part of the way we do business today, both inside and outside of the hardcore community. This affects us in a couple of ways. First of all, “lowest common denominator” advertising, which de-emphasizes the important qualities of the product (assuming that it has important qualities to begin with) and can lead people to purchase things which are useless to them, usually is more effective than truly informative advertising; you can imagine what kinds of products and business practices this encourages. Second, in a more subtle way, advertising in the hardcore community can actually contribute to the feeling that just buying and selling things is accomplishing something.

I. Most of the big corporations that use advertising to sell their products don't give a fuck about their consumers.

Sales and profit are their chief motivations, so they will advertise their products in any way that will sell them, whether it is in the best interest of the buyers to buy them or not. Advertising of this kind boils down to low-level mind control: companies pay advertising agents (psychologists!) to figure out which images and rhetoric will sell a product most effectively. That's why car commercials have beautiful (so-called beautiful) women in them; that's why toothpaste commercials have meaningless statistics in them; that's why advertisements for soda and jeans are filled with things that have nothing at all to do with soda or jeans. These images, which have fucking nothing to do with whether the product will be useful to an individual viewing the advertisement, nevertheless make it more likely that the individual will buy the product. If you give a fuck about people at all, you can see how this kind of advertising is—dare I use this term?—unethical.

And unfortunately, these ads really are the ones that sell products the most effectively—even in the hardcore scene, it seems. Look in any hardcore magazine, and you see advertisements that have nothing to do with the products they are selling. Instead of using the space to tell you about the records that are for sale, what the music sounds like and what the themes are, these advertisements feature some catchy slogan and/or funny picture encouraging consumerism. A good example is a recent Trustkill advertisement featuring a little girl kissing a little boy and saying “My boyfriend bought me all the new releases on Trustkill!” That doesn't really tell you much about the records, but it uses silliness to stick in your head and maybe encourage you to buy Trustkill records—I guess the idea is that if you buy Trustkill records, you will instantly win the heart of the girl next door... just like the idea implicit in the car commercials featuring beautiful women is that buying a car will make you attract women (the image suggests that a pretty woman “comes with the car”). I hate to pick on a friend, but another good example is the latest Edison advertisement, which proclaims “the Grace of Brutality” across a photograph of crying Vietnamese children who have just had their clothes burned off by American napalm—that's fucking tasteless, using images of real human suffering inflicted by the last generation of American men just to sell the music made by their sons. It would make sense if any of the records being advertised actually addressed the issue of the Vietnam war, but they don't; instead they're just described as having “evil metallic riffing,” etc.

This is not to say that anyone is completely innocent of using image at the expense of content in advertisements. Right now, you have to, to get anyone's attention. But if kids would pay more attention to what an advertisement says, rather than how cute or fancy it is, and advertisers would make an effort to print ad's that would honestly inform people about the records without just trying to sell them at any cost, we could get away from some of the more negative qualities of advertising. There's just something stomach-turning about opening a hardcore magazine that is supposed to talk about changing the world, doing something positive with our lives, etc. and seeing nothing but record companies shouting “BUY OUR STUFF!!” at the top of their lungs. If you give a fuck about us, use your ad to tell us why we might want to buy it, rather than just trying to manipulate us.

II. But there's another issue to consider in our advertising as well.

The way these corporate-style psychological advertisements work is by selling images. For example: a soap commercial features an attractive mother cleaning her sweet, well-behaved children's clothes, while her handsome husband relaxes in the background. This ad isn't so much selling soap as it is selling the image of the "perfect American family"—that's why the soap itself isn't discussed at all. The silent suggestion is that if you buy the soap, it will bring with it the status of having a perfect family and a perfect household. This sounds sort of far-fetched, but it really works; otherwise the thousands and thousands of advertising agents across the U.S. and Europe would not use this technique over and over to get people to buy their products. Of course the truth is that when you buy the soap, you just get soap—a perfect family life is not included with it after all. But the suggestion still works to keep you buying it.

A similar effect can take place in hardcore advertisements that, like the ones CrimethInc. sometimes makes, tout how "revolutionary" the products being sold are. These advertisements can sometimes work the way the soap advertisement I just described works: they can create the impression that by buying the record or 'zine, the revolution will come with it, when that is simply not the case. Worse than that, when they are used to advertise records revolutionary thinking and slogans become just another marketing tool to encourage kids to buy things rather than to actually cause change. "Smash the State," which used to mean "vigorously strive to overthrow the government and the oppressive power structures built into our modern society," now comes to mean "buy the new record by Chokehold!" Thus what was once a desire for real revolution is subverted into a motivation for consuming products and keeping the wheels of the present system turning. To sum up: Are you using your band to "sell" revolution, or are you using "revolution" to sell your band?

In regards to this problem, it's up to the buyer to remember that just buying a hardcore record or political pamphlet, etc. is not, by itself, going to accomplish anything. That's common sense, but advertising can sometimes obscure the issue. And it is up to the labels to resist the temptation to make advertisements that seem to suggest that buying their records will accomplish anything by itself. Labels should make sure that it is clear in their advertisements that they are only selling tools for revolution, not revolution itself.

HOW BUYING THINGS AFFECTS THE BUYER

Besides the pitfalls of advertising, there are other possible drawbacks to selling things in the hardcore community. One of the biggest of those is that the money to buy them has to come from somewhere. The more records, 'zines, band shirts, etc. a hardcore kid buys, the more money he needs to buy them. And not everyone can live off of a distribution/label/tattoo parlor, you know. So the more records kids buy, the more money they have to earn—the more they have to work for some employer to earn the money! Elsewhere in this issue and the last one, the unpleasant qualities of modern day employment are discussed. That's not something we want to encourage.

Because it's not even like kids are buying hardcore records instead of the usual products from objectionable corporations. In the hardcore community, we sell luxuries, not necessities. No matter how many records, 'zines, band shirts, etc. you purchase, you still have to pay for food, for rent, for health care. So our countercultural businesses only contribute to the problem of

people having to work jobs they don't like, by making it necessary that they earn more money to pay for our hardcore products as well as everything else. And no matter how independent and D.I.Y. our labels are, they still aren't actually fighting against big business, because those big businesses have a complete monopoly on the goods and services we need to survive. It doesn't matter much whether your CD has a bar code on it when your food, your rent, your every other need is supplied by the companies that use bar codes on CD's.

So selling things like records and 'zines, at least right now, helps to perpetuate the status quo in which everyone has to work at jobs they wish they could quit. This is not to say that it's not worth doing, if the value of the records and 'zines outweighs their negative effects on people's lives. But it's worth keeping in mind. It might be more worth doing to try to figure out a way to liberate ourselves permanently from the employment system, rather than spending our energy on selling luxuries like records while most of our lives must still revolve around wasted time and wasted potential...

HOW SELLING THINGS AFFECTS THE SELLER

When you have to concentrate on selling things, as anyone working within the confines of today's exchange economy must, it's easy to get caught up in it and forget about whatever other goals you started with. In order to function at all in spreading your releases, no matter how good your intentions are, you have to worry about being at least profitable to survive—and thus, to some degree, you have to worry about making the things that you sell marketable. The ones who are willing to compromise more to make their products sell better usually do end up selling them more effectively, so the products that reach the most people are often the ones that are the most watered-down, the least genuine.

You must compete for sales with others who may have the same goals as you, which can create unnecessary animosity, and makes people work against each other (just to survive and keep functioning) rather than together, which might be more effective in accomplishing things. This competition makes you have to think about selling competitively, and it becomes easy to associate increased sales with making progress, when in truth the things you have to do to attain these sales increases may work against the goals you originally started with.

If you started out selling things to try to spread ideas of some kind, you find that you have much less time to think about the ideas, to talk about them with others, to work on nourishing their development. Instead, you have to always be working on practical concerns. There's no time for reading books, because you have to answer mailorders or buy advertisements. You spend more time arguing with distributors than you do brainstorming with others who might have valuable ideas to contribute. Pretty soon sales are all you think about, all you have time to think about, and it becomes hard to stay focused on your original goals, or even to really remember them, through the haze of practical business concerns.

And that is why there are so many businesses in the hardcore community that started out with good intentions and were completely transformed by the years of competition and worrying about sales. Now many of them care about nothing but making money, at any cost. Selling things can do that to you—it can strip away all your ideals and dreams, until you can only focus on profit. And those who focus only on selling things for profit will never be able to change anything for the better in this world.

OTHER CONCERNS

Some people think that the problems that an exchange economy (an economy which revolves around buying and selling things) creates for human beings are insoluble inside of such a system. This analysis suggests that as long as people only have access to the goods and services that they can trade their own goods and services for, human beings will always be in danger of being forced to spend their lives doing things they don't enjoy or care about in order to have the resources they need to survive. The thinkers who consider this flaw to be intrinsic to the exchange economy suggest instead a "gift economy," where things are shared rather than exchanged.

This aspect of this discussion is really complicated, and cannot be treated in detail here. If you are interested in it, an in-depth consideration of the "exchange economy" versus the "gift economy" is scheduled to appear in the second issue of Harbinger, a free CrimethInc. propaganda tabloid, in December of this year. [If you want one, just write any of the CrimethInc. addresses and ask for one—the most dependable one is still probably the Atlanta address]

TO CONCLUDE: TWO SUGGESTIONS

First of all, we should consider all the other things there are we can do together in hardcore besides just imitating the businessmen of mainstream society by selling each other things. Despite its silly name, Food Not Bombs, which I mention elsewhere in this issue, is a great example of a way people in the hardcore community can work together in ways that are positive and productive for everyone. If you want to be active and involved in hardcore, there are a million different things (more useful things?) you can do besides starting a label, or writing a 'zine, or working on something else you have to worry about selling. You could organize fliering/propaganda troops, political action groups, sports or exercise groups, book reading clubs, self-defense (anti-police) vigilante squads, try starting a squat, arrange a hostel space for traveling bands and punk rockers, write articles for other people's magazines, try new mediums of expression (artwork, etc.). Of course, in order to have time and resources to work on projects that you don't earn money from, you'll need a supportive community around you, but that topic is addressed elsewhere in this issue. Similarly, rather than just buying records, there are a million other things that a person who has only been involved in hardcore punk for a little while can do to participate. Corresponding with hardcore punk kids from far away is already common, and offers a lot of possibilities. Make mix tapes for each other. Come up with your own creative fashions, that you can wear cheaply or free, rather than paying for overpriced styles that have already been prefabricated for you. Break into abandoned buildings and go exploring, organize a walkout from your school or workplace, hitchhike around the world, sit up late at night trading stories and arguing about stupid Inside Front articles, go crazy. After you've broken out of traditional patterns of action and interaction, the sky's the limit.

And, second, we should certainly not give up on selling things like records and 'zines that cost money to make. Until some hardcore punk commando unit seizes a record pressing plant and starts making vinyl for free, we have to finance those records somehow. But we should always keep in mind the limitations of selling and advertising things—that these activities by themselves won't accomplish anything. We can buy and sell things without betraying ourselves, if we stay focused on our real goals. But in order to do this, we must be aware of the ways that selling and

advertising things can compromise the power and quality of the things being sold—and even of the people being sold to. In this article I tried to describe some of those dangers, but each of us should think about the topic individually.

Last March, while my band was in the studio, I made some notes on the back of a lyric sheet for a “footnote” I’d like to put in every advertisement for CrimethInc. records:

Please do not buy this product because it looks attractive or because all your friends have one. For your sake, don’t waste your money on it unless you know what it is you’re purchasing and think that it really might be useful or meaningful to you. Please do not think that merely purchasing this product is going to do anything to change the world, or to improve your life or anyone else’s. Right now, we can’t effectively distribute these ideas and music without selling them, but just selling them is not our goal; it is only a means to an end. We try to sell these records in a way that does not compromise the power of their content—we want to sell them like we would sell any other kind of weapon against the status quo, with the emphasis upon their usefulness in making people feel alive and aware, making people dangerous.

You should buy a CrimethInc. product like you would buy a bomb—to use it, dangerously!

Endnote: This article is not a criticism of anyone in particular so much as it is a self-criticism of the hard core community in general. Of course Inside Front partakes in the same things we are criticizing here as much as everyone else does—we’re NOT claiming innocence, but we are suggesting that we should all consider this issue and perhaps try to move forward.

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