

Adbusters and Occupy Wall Street What Does the Left Really Want?

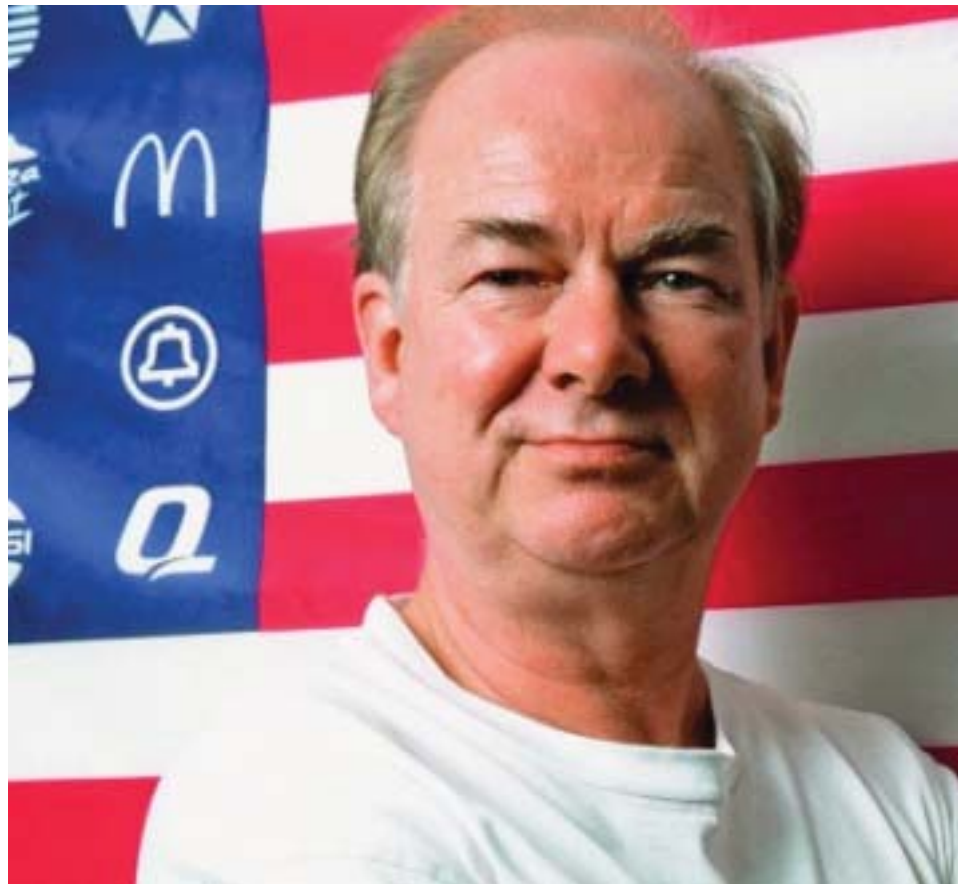
By Kirk MacDonald

Summary: Do you care that Adbusters Media Foundation is an obscure Canadian foundation run on a shoestring budget? That its magazine attacks “consumerism” and mocks capitalism and the advertising industry? That its founder dislikes the United States and Israel? How about that it’s behind the Occupy Wall Street movement?

It all started with a blog post. On July 13, a Canadian outfit best known for spoofing advertisements of high-priced luxury goods issued a call-to-arms for anyone dissatisfied with the capitalist system and dreaming of a new social order.

*On September 17, we want to see 20,000 people flood into lower Manhattan, set up tents, kitchens, peaceful barricades and occupy Wall Street for a few months...It’s time for **DEMOCRACY NOT CORPORATOCRACY**, we’re doomed without it.*

On the date specified, a quiet autumn Saturday, just 5,000 people would march through Manhattan’s financial district, chanting, waving signs, and beating drums. New York City police prepared for the “U.S. Day of Rage” protest by erecting barricades near the New York Stock Exchange and Federal Hall to protect these targets. But the police were unprepared for the idea inflaming the demonstrators’ imagination: a plan for a massive camp-out, an ‘occupation’ of the very heart of America’s financial system—what



Kalle Lasn, radical founder of Adbusters magazine, in front of his American “corporate flag.”

the blog post called the “financial Gomorrah of America.”

That evening several hundred protesters set up a base camp in lower Manhattan’s Zucotti Park, which they renamed “Liberty Square.” Some were veteran radicals, others were ordinary folks who had lost their jobs in the recession. They pitched tents, opened sleeping bags and ordered pizzas. The next

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morning they were joined by several hundred reinforcements. The protesters soon began to set up kitchens and first aid stations. They published a broadsheet newspaper called the “Occupied Wall Street Journal” and began to call themselves Occupy Wall Street (OWS).

The New York City protest seemed to inspire similar protests in other cities across the country. Camps were set up in Washington, D.C., Oakland, Portland and dozens of other cities. All were using the “Occupy...” name.

Media outlets took notice and began reporting on the apparently spontaneous uprising and the possible creation of a new social movement. But the press failed to mention the prior preparations for the movement. It failed to mention that months before September 17 ACORN founder Wade Rathke had called for an “anti-banking jihad.” It also failed to mention that Stephen Lerner, a master organizer for the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), had vowed to “bring down the stock market” through a campaign of disruption. (See “Financial Attack: SEIU Plans Days of Rage Against Wall Street,” by

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Adbusters cartoon ridicules “consumerism.”

F. Vincent Vernuccio and Matthew Vadum, *Organization Trends*, July 2011.)

It was weeks before the press bothered to inquire whether ACORN and Big Labor were helping to organize and finance the emerging Occupy Wall Street movement and whether this might explain the movement’s embrace by the leadership of the Democratic Party, including President Obama and House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi.

The Zuccotti Park encampment was finally shut down by New York police on November 15 over concerns of unsanitary and hazardous conditions (including reported drug use and sexual assaults). At press time, some encampments are still going strong, while others were sent packing by authorities. The Occupy Oakland protest turned violent when police and protesters clashed on October 25. The police arrested over 100 people and many sustained serious injuries. Among the

wounded was Iraq war veteran Scott Olsen, who still has trouble speaking after he was struck in the head.

Not surprisingly, Occupy protests have become increasingly violent. As of mid December, 417 incidents involving Occupy supporters in New York and elsewhere have been reported, according to John Nolte of Breitbart.com. The incidents include shootings, rapes, assaults, theft, arson, attacks on police, defecation on police cars, and acts of overt anti-Semitism. Occupy protesters on the West Coast have called for a shutdown of the ports.

Who’s Behind the Movement?

The American mainstream media has yet to give credit where credit is due. Radical labor unions like SEIU are responsible for promoting Occupy Wall Street, and so are radical community organizing groups like ACORN. And let’s not forget the complicity of mayors

and city councils like those in Washington, D.C. who accepted \$400,000 in federal stimulus money to refurbish a city park and then let Occupy Wall Street campers trample and defile it. All are responsible for transforming what started as a one-day demonstration into what may become a full-fledged social and political protest movement.

There is one other largely unknown individual who deserves credit for Occupy Wall Street. OWS should be remembered as a crowning achievement for Canadian Kalle Lasn (pronounced KAL-luh LAS-en), the founder of *Adbusters* magazine.

Lasn is a 69-year old agitprop genius who has spent the last two decades generating public opposition to “consumerism” and “commercialism.” He has created such campaigns as “Digital Detox Week” (stop buying high tech products) and “Buy Nothing Day” (it’s the day after Thanksgiving). But none of his propaganda successes prepared him for Occupy Wall Street, which he says emerged from a brainstorming session at *Adbusters*, his Vancouver, Canada-based magazine.

“We were inspired by what happened in Tunisia and Egypt and we had this feeling that America was ripe for a Tahrir moment,” said Lasn, referring to Cairo’s Tahrir Square, a focal point of the Egyptian revolution a year ago. “We felt there was a real rage building up in America, and we thought that we would like to create a spark which would give expression for this rage.”

Political activists often don’t admit it when they appeal to “rage” and other ugly emotions, and one can only imagine what Egyptians and Tunisians would make of Lasn’s comparison of OWS to their struggles for democracy and human rights. But Lasn believes the political situation in Egypt is going to be a “slugfest for many years to come,” and he anticipates the same thing could happen in the United States. “There’s going to be a lot of grief, a lot of pain, possibly a lot of



violence, but somewhere down the road, I hope a new system will be born.”

What will result from the *Adbusters*’ July 13 call to arms? Americans may want to ask how much grief, pain and violence they are willing to stomach in order to create Lasn’s “new system”?

Origins of Adbusters and the “Media Carta”

Kalle Lasn was born in Estonia in 1942. He spent his early years in a German refugee camp until his family was relocated to Australia. Between 1965 and 1970, Lasn lived in Japan, where he married a Japanese woman,

founded a market research company and worked in the advertising industry. Japan’s modern commercial economy left its mark on him. After moving to Vancouver, British Columbia in 1970, Lasn spent the next two decades producing documentary films critical of Japan’s experience with capitalism. The documentaries were produced for the U.S. Public Broadcasting System (PBS) and Canada’s National Film Board.

The tipping point for Lasn came in 1988, when the British Columbia Council of Forest Industries produced a television ad that celebrated the accomplishments and benefits of logging. Canada’s environmental move-



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ment was outraged and Lasn and fellow documentary film-maker Bill Schmalz responded by crafting a public service announcement called “Talking Rainforest.” In it, an old tree tells a young sapling that “a tree farm is not a forest.”

The Canadian TV stations that ran the forest industry ad – including the government-owned Canadian Broadcasting Corp. (CBC) – refused to run Lasn and Schmalz’s response. And that prompted Lasn to form the Adbusters Media Foundation (AMF). AMF took after the commercial broadcasters by initiating what it called the “Media Carta.” This was a legal, lobbying and public relations campaign to demand that the government “make the public airwaves truly public, and not just a corporate domain.”

Over the years, Lasn and Adbusters filed suit against the broadcast networks of both Canada and the U.S., demanding that they broadcast Adbusters’ provocative anti-commercial advertisements. Most simply refused. CNN is the only U.S. network that has allowed an Adbusters “un-commercial” to be played on the air.

The ads typically ridicule the buying habits of the public. One Adbusters ad shows a man sitting in front of a television set with a bar code tattooed on the back of his neck. A voice-over explains: “Your living room is the factory ... the product being manufactured is you.” In another ad, a giant talking pig representing the United States wallows in over-consumption. The voice-over says the average American consumes 30 times more than the average Indian. It urges viewers to dedicate one day of the year to buying nothing.

Kalle Lasn demands the broadcast of his anti-commercials, but he is hardly a free speech advocate. Asked by *NOW* magazine, an alternative Toronto newspaper, if he would allow anti-gay rights advertisements, Lasn replied that there should be citizen review



boards at the networks, adding: “There are ways to keep kooks off the air.”

Adbusters: Mission and Funders

Adbusters Media Foundation was founded in 1989 as a not-for-profit, anti-consumerist organization. It has over 91,000 members who comprise what AMF describes itself as a “global network of artists, activists, writers, pranksters, students, educators and entrepreneurs who want to advance the new social activist movement of the information



age. Our aim is to topple existing power structures and forge a major shift in the way we will live in the 21st century.” Adbusters has sister organizations in France, Norway, Sweden and Japan.

While it’s based in Vancouver, AMF doesn’t focus on Canadian issues. “Everybody knows it’s here but it’s not a local magazine,” journalist David Beers told the *New York Times*. “[Lasn] isn’t a local figure. It’s not like he’s on the morning radio. You never hear about the guy unless he’s in a fight with someone.” Lasn recently complained that it took a month before Canadian activists began to replicate the OWS protests.

If AMF’s TV ads have failed to reach their intended audience, the same can’t be said of AMF’s print media campaign. Peruse the magazine section of your local Barnes & Noble and very likely you will see *Adbusters* magazine (circulation: 120,000). Printed on high-gloss paper and sold at \$8.95 per issue, it certainly doesn’t look like a left-wing rag. It publishes such left-of-center writers as Chris Hedges, Matt Taibbi, environmentalist Bill McKibben, science fiction writer Jim Munroe, media theorist Douglas Rushkoff, and Marxist academics Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, whose anti-capitalist magnum opus *Empire* is admired by every

progressive English professor. *Adbusters* calls itself “an ecological magazine” whose purpose is to get people “mad about corporate disinformation, injustices in the global economy, and any industry that pollutes our physical or mental commons.”

According to Lasn, *Adbusters* is 95% funded by its subscribers, but the foundation also receives contributions. During 2001-2011, AMF received \$176,500 in grants from the Glaser Progress Foundation (created by



Rob Glaser, a member of George Soros’s Democracy Alliance) and \$309,773 from the Tides Foundation, the San Francisco-based clearinghouse for left-wing donors. Tides was founded by Drummond Pike, a close associate of ACORN founder Wade Rathke.

Many people suspect George Soros of providing funds to Occupy Wall Street protesters and *Adbusters*, but all parties have issued denials. In October, Soros spokesman Michael Vachon told reporters that Soros has not funded the protests “directly or indirectly.” For his part, Lasn stated: “I wish [Soros] would give *Adbusters* some money, we sorely need it ... He’s never given us a penny.” Soros’s Open Society Institute has

given \$3.5 million in grants to the Tides Foundation, but Vachon insisted that money was for “other purposes.”

However, Soros is a major backer of the Alliance for Global Justice, a left-wing group that funnels money to the Occupy Wall Street movement. According to its website the Alliance used to be called the Nicaragua Network in the 1970s and 80s when it was a Sandinista support group. But in 1998 it incorporated under its new name and began to undertake new projects. While solidarity with Nicaragua continues to be a “core project,” the Alliance website says it also acts as a fiscal sponsor for OWS.

“Fiscal sponsor” is a term used to describe tax-exempt nonprofits that manage contributions pledged to groups that have no administrative structure, formal incorporation, or IRS-approved tax-exemption. That certainly fits the motley communists, socialists and anarchists in lower Manhattan. News reports say that as of Oct. 19, OWS took in \$435,000 from all sources, including donations made by individuals online and in person. The Alliance for Global Justice website says it has given a tax-deductible \$285,000 to Occupy Wall Street.

Adbusters Anti-Consumer Campaigns

Adbusters has made its reputation among leftists by sponsoring campaigns that attack capitalism, commercialism, consumerism, and over-consumption:

* Buy Nothing Day: Celebrated on the day after Thanksgiving, the campaign urges Americans to refrain from shopping on “Black Friday.”

* Kick it Over: This initiative urges economics majors in college to challenge neoclassical economic theory and develop a “new economics” that takes human “needs” into account.

* One Flag: *Adbusters* readers were encour-



Adbusters ad parody.

aged to create a flag symbolizing “global citizenship.”

* Digital Detox Week: “Take a Zen moment” and cut back on cell phones, TV, video games, and MP3 players as much as you can for a week.

Adbusters campaigns have been called “culture jamming.” That means they are intended to expose and disrupt the supposedly secret mechanisms of commercial advertising that take positive symbols and images (e.g. admired individuals, religious and patriotic holidays, beautiful landscapes) and use them to induce people to buy things they don’t need and shouldn’t want. Obsessed by the idea of “false consciousness,” Marxists, socialists, and other left-wingers can’t abide the idea that human beings possess both reason and free will and can sort through sales information to make their own decisions.

Today popular left-wing writers such as Naomi Klein (author of *No Logo*) and Thomas Frank (author of *What’s the Matter with Kansas?*) are updating this old left-wing argument. They tell their young readers that ‘we buy stuff we don’t need because advertisers convince us it will make us cool.’



Critics of Adbusters

But times are changing. When *Adbusters* attacks shoppers in our over-commercialized society it seems increasingly out of step with current events. Criticizing “over-consumption” makes no sense to people who have lost their jobs and have no money, whose homes are foreclosed and whose businesses have declared bankruptcy. Telling consumers to cut up their credit cards as a revolutionary act makes no sense to people who can’t get credit to pay their bills.

No doubt this is why *Adbusters* advocacy campaigning has refocused on the Occupy Wall Street movement. OWS represents a shift in *Adbusters* political strategy. Instead of attacking the foolishness of consumers, OWS condemns the selfishness of corporations. It will be interesting to read future issues of *Adbusters* to see if there is a comparable shift in the magazine’s editorial policy: Less ridicule for purchasing luxury goods, more sympathy for those who can’t buy essentials.

Writing in *The Tablet*, a magazine of Jewish thought and culture, Michael C. Moynihan offers a different criticism of *Adbusters*. He objects to its “apocalyptic vision ... in which the ravages of capitalism and corporate power compete only with Zionism to cause

the most harm to planet Earth.” Moynihan is referring to the frequent *Adbusters* attacks on Israel and defenders of Israel. One *Adbusters* article began with the chilling headline, “Why won’t anyone say they are Jewish?” Written by Lasn, it lists 50 influential neo-conservatives and notes that “half of them are Jewish.”

University of Toronto professor Klaus Jahn has criticized Lasn’s article, comparing his list to blacklists during the McCarthy era: “Such list-making has always produced pernicious consequences.”

Lasn vehemently denies charges that he is anti-Semitic, but *Adbusters* has angered the Jewish community on more than one occasion. In a November/December 2010 article and photo montage, *Adbusters* attacked Israel’s embargo of the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip, comparing it to the Warsaw Ghetto during World War II. The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum was so outraged that it tried unsuccessfully to have photos of the Warsaw Ghetto removed from the magazine’s website. (They were in the public domain.) Canada’s Shoppers Drug Mart chain removed *Adbusters* from its magazine stands, and in

an op-ed representatives of the Canadian Jewish Congress wrote that *Adbusters* had “become infected with plain, old-fashioned bigotry.”

What Does the Left Really Want?

The Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement is frequently criticized for being unclear about its political and policy goals. However, its rhetoric is typically harsh in tone and radical in content. One of the official Occupy Wall Street websites (www.occupywallst.org) claims to represent the “99 percent that will no longer tolerate the greed and corruption of the 1%,” and it calls for “a general assembly in every backyard, on every street corner because we don’t need Wall Street and we don’t need politicians to build a better society.”

Despite these radical overtones, the Occupy movement has generated substantial public support. An October 12 NBC/Wall Street Journal survey found that 37% “tend to support” the Occupiers, while 18% “tend to oppose it.” An October Quinnipiac University poll of New York City voters found that 67% approved of the Occupiers, while 23% disapproved. That’s not bad for a group that



sounds eerily Marxist when it proclaims: “the only solution is World Revolution.”

Many people expect the Occupy movement to fizzle out as temperatures drop and snow begins to fall. However, some analysts compare the Occupiers to Tea Party conservatives, arguing that the new movement will play a growing role in U.S. politics. On October 6, President Obama tried to curry favor with those who sympathize with the movement when he observed that it “expresses the frustrations the American people feel, that we had the biggest financial crisis since the Great Depression, huge collateral damage all throughout the country ... and yet you’re still seeing some of the same folks who acted irresponsibly trying to fight efforts to crack down on the abusive practices that got us into this in the first place.”

Interestingly, the Occupy movement has elicited understanding from among some right-leaning politicians and pundits. Republican presidential candidate Gary Johnson, a former New Mexico governor, met with protesters on October 18 and expressed sympathy with their frustration, saying: “corporatism is alive and well in this country.” Libertarian columnist Steve Chapman has written that he understands why so many Americans resent the wealthy and want to punish them. But he describes OWS demands as comparable to honking your horn when you’re stuck in traffic: “It makes a lot of noise without getting you anywhere.”

More typical are the reactions of Herman Cain, who quit the presidential race in early December, and Newt Gingrich, whose campaign is surging. Cain: “Don’t blame Wall Street, don’t blame the big banks, if you don’t have a job and you’re not rich, blame yourself.” Gingrich: “Go get a job right after you take a bath.”

The Future is Now

Accusations of bigotry and anti-Semitism are usually the kiss of death for politicians and

activists, but the success of the Occupy Wall Street protests suggests that Kalle Lasn and *Adbusters* have not lost their influence. Lasn freely admits that he does not call the shots in determining the next moves in the Occupy campaign. Occupy protesters proudly assert that their movement is leaderless. But Lasn’s magazine helped spark a movement that could cause a political firestorm.

Lasn claims efforts to close the Occupy camps are simply the end of “phase one.” He speaks of a “spring offensive” to come in 2012. The conventional wisdom is that the Occupy movement can’t succeed because it lacks articulate leaders and a coherent policy agenda. But Lasn foresees OWS rallying around a single issue—a “Robin Hood tax.” This would be a tax on the richest one percent, on currency exchanges, and on financial transactions.

Already, the concept of a financial transactions tax has been endorsed by many labor unions, by the governments of France and Germany, and by Bill Gates and the Vatican. A bill to impose a less than one percent tax on financial transactions has been introduced in Congress by Sen. Tom Harkin (D-Iowa) and Rep. Peter DeFazio (D-Ore.).

If the Occupy Wall Street movement gains wider acceptance, American capitalism could be hobbled just as it’s beginning to get back on its feet. For that, thank Kalle Lasn and Canada’s *Adbusters Media Foundation*.

Kirk MacDonald is a Canadian freelance writer. He is the author of “Wal-Mart Goes Left: Why Is It Pandering To Blue State America?” which appeared in the August 2007 issue of Organization Trends.

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Many thanks.

Terrence Scanlon
President

PhilanthropyNotes

Billionaire hedge fund manager **George Soros** announced that criminal justice expert **Christopher Stone** will head his mammoth philanthropic network starting in July. He replaces **Aryeh Neier**, who is retiring at age 74 after serving as the **Open Society Foundation's** president since 1993. Stone is a professor at **Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government**. "He has a passion for changing things and great vision and an understanding of how to build institutions and reimagine them so they endure," said **Barry C. Scheck**, co-director of the **Innocence Project**.

A new study shows contributions to Roman Catholic congregations fell at more than half of parishes from 2008 through 2010, the *Chronicle of Philanthropy* reports. Donations at about one fifth of parishes remained flat. Donations at 13 percent fell at first and then came back while 10 percent of parishes experienced increasing giving. The study was conducted by the **Center for the Study of Church Management** at **Villanova University** and the **Cooperative Congregational Studies Partnership**.

Volunteerism advocate **Wendy Spencer**, President **Obama's** choice to run the **Corporation for National and Community Service**, was approved by the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee. The nomination now moves to the full Senate. Spencer would replace **Patrick Corvington** who quit unexpectedly in May. Corvington was a senior official at the left-wing **Annie E. Casey Foundation** of Baltimore, Md., which granted funding to ACORN and other radical groups during his tenure.

More than half of donors age 60 and older are likely to make their donations online, according to a surprising new survey by fundraising company **Dunham + Company** of Plano, Texas. Although younger donors are more likely to give via the Internet, 51 percent of respondents 60 and up said they had made a least one contribution of \$25 online in the previous year. Those older donors even gave more often than younger donors making an average of 14 donations online compared to just 11 for those under 40. "This study blows some holes in the conventional thinking about older donors and online giving," said researchers who said older donors need to be reassured that giving money online is safe and secure.

Goldman Sachs WATCH

Goldman Sachs alumnus Jon Corzine is facing nine lawsuits over the collapse of the MF Global Holdings Ltd. Corzine is a former New Jersey governor and former CEO of the company which filed for bankruptcy after making losing investments. About \$1.2 billion is missing from commodity customers' accounts. Corzine said he doesn't know where the missing money is.

Goldman Sachs Group Inc. disclosed that it spent \$800,000 in the third quarter of 2011 to lobby the federal government on rules for implementing the Dodd-Frank Wall Street reform law and on other financial services-related issues. That is 2.5 percent more than the \$780,000 it spent in the same quarter the year before. The company lobbied lawmakers, the Federal Reserve, the Securities and Exchange Commission and the Commodities Futures Trading Commission.

Fitch Ratings has downgraded the long-term credit rating of Goldman Sachs, lowering it one notch to A from A+, Bloomberg News reports. "It's hard to take anything positive from this; it speaks to the sentiment overall on global financial firms right now," said Michael Nix of Greenwood, S.C.-based Greenwood Capital Inc.