

THINK BEFORE YOU PINK

CULTURAL CAPITALISM, PINK RIBBONS INC, AND THE CORPORATE EXPLOITATION OF BREAST CANCER



'Excessive government spending, taxing, and regulating, no matter how well intended is a formula for disaster... With the same energy that Franklin Roosevelt sought government solutions to problems, we will seek private solutions.'
- Ronald Reagan, 1981

The Rise Of Breast Cancer.

In 1948 approximately 32.7 women out of 100,000 in New Zealand were documented as having breast cancer. By 1990 this had risen to 87.1, and by 2011 (the last year that data is available) this number had risen to 92.5. While it may appear that this rise can simply be explained away by the fact that we have an ageing population in New Zealand, that isn't the case here – these numbers are age adjusted according to World Health Organisation guidelines to overcome this problem. In other words, considerably more women today are being diagnosed with breast cancer than was the case 65 years ago, or even just 25 years ago.

This is troubling because, since 1994, the Pink Ribbon-fronted New Zealand Breast Cancer Foundation has contributed over \$3,000,000 alone in research to solving the breast cancer dilemma. And this figure is merely a drop in the bucket compared to the amount that has been spent by Pink Ribbon organisations worldwide since the early 1990s. Since its advent, the Pink Ribbon has become one of the most recog-

nisable international symbols, and it is loaded with significant fundraising clout and appeal worldwide. Because of this, there has been well over a billion dollars spent internationally from Pink Ribbon campaigns on trying to find a cure and/or significant treatments for breast cancer. Despite this spending however, the numbers keep steadily rising and we don't seem to be any closer to a readily available cure. It's not unreasonable then to consider the following – why are figures for breast cancer still rising, when at no point in human history has breast cancer been as much of a lightning rod for both public and corporate support as it is today?

Cultural Capitalism. Slovenian scholar Slavoj Žižek is known internationally as one of the world's pre-eminent cultural critics. A charming and roguish raconteur, Žižek's theories and ideas are both controversial and widely popular. One of his most popular lectures 'First as Tragedy, then as Farce' postulates the idea that at present we live in a time of 'cultural capitalism' – it is with this concept that we can start to evaluate our current situation in regards to breast cancer. According to Žižek, since 1968 things have radically changed in regards to how capitalism is organised both at the top and the bottom, and the ramifications of this reorganisation for charity are immense. Žižek claims that "charity is no longer just idiosyncrasy of some good guys here and there, but the basic constituent of our economy." What he means by this is that today we are part of a capitalism that includes our 'anti-consumerist duty' (selfless and meaningful activities such as philanthropy) within the act of consumption

itself – so philanthropy and buying things are now one and the same. Today we are not 'mindless consumers', as much as we are 'ethical shoppers'.

This incorporation of philanthropy into consumerism is great in theory as this binding of the two is conceivably more efficient, and more rewarding for the general populace. It has received support from neo-liberal political leaders internationally, including our own John Key, who has argued for the role of charities sponsored by the private sector to be at the forefront of solving New Zealand's horrific child poverty problem, in place of society as a whole taking responsibility for setting the standards for welfare.

But according to Žižek, this idea is problematic. Rather than giving more directly to those in need, or more importantly, rather than trying to 'reconstruct a society on such a basis that poverty will be impossible', we now simply buy our redemption for being consumers through the very act of consumerism itself. This means that we aren't actually doing a hell of a lot to change anything because we are not looking to remove the root of the problems we face. Instead, we are actually prolonging the problems by superficially covering them up with this new 'ethical consumerism'.

While Žižek is postulating a controversial critique of our overall society in regards to the more abstract concept of 'poverty', we can actually see the ramifications of this theoretical concept of combining consumerism with our ethical duty to solve social ills manifest itself in very specific ways. Case in point – the conundrum of breast cancer, and why all this funding and attention in the past twenty years hasn't really changed anything.

Pink Ribbons Inc. Samantha King, who is Associate Professor of Kinesiology at Queens University, has demonstrated this concept in relation to breast cancer, and how

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we in the West tackle this dangerous and tragic issue. What King presents in her work, *Pink Ribbons Inc*, is a living example of how this 'cultural capitalism' approach to fighting breast cancer is basically just a placebo designed to make breast cancer a more 'attractive' issue. The book, as well as Lea Pool's 2011 documentary of the same name, is a rousing expose of how the original breast cancer activism movements that formed in the early 1990s have been hijacked for the sake of corporate exploitation. The book and the film examine how breast cancer has become the poster child for a particularly cynical form of profiteering that King refers to as 'cause marketing'.

While today Breast Cancer campaigns are inextricably tied to optimism and positivity, they initially formed from an outburst of anger. Starting in the early 1990s, groups such as the Massachusetts Breast Cancer Coalition were protesting the complete lack of government and health care action on the rising epidemic of Breast Cancer. Other groups such as the Toxic Links Coalition in San Francisco demanded more research into the environmental effects of chemical pollution in the city and were aggressively confronting apathy and ignorance in America. One of the things that emerged from this protest was the original ribbon, designed by grassroots activist Charlotte Hayley.

When Hayley designed the first Breast Cancer awareness ribbons, they were a peach colour and they were attached to postcards five at a time to demonstrate how only 5 per cent of the National Cancer Research budget went to Breast Cancer. The aim was for people to flood their legislators with this image and for the public to demand change. When a fashion magazine and Estée Lauder heard about it though, they knocked on her door to see if they could use it. Hayley said no, because she knew that what they wanted was a commercial campaign. However, Estée

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Lauder would not let something as small as consent stop them, so they simply changed the colour of the ribbon to bright pink and took the idea anyway.

It was from this moment that the explosion of the Pink Ribbon iconography was born. By 1994 the Pink Ribbon had exploded internationally, and had spread its way to New Zealand. That year the New Zealand Breast Cancer Foundation was founded and became the local Pink Ribbon HQ in this country. They still are the pre-eminent breast cancer awareness and research body in New Zealand today. To be fair, they do some excellent work and are dedicated

organisation. Komen signed off on the campaign despite the message coming from the Foundation *themselves* that poor diet was a considerable risk factor for breast cancer.

Probably the most cynical campaign that activists in the film highlight though came unsurprisingly from American Express. AMEX bragged that the more dollars people put on their AMEX, the more they'd give to Breast Cancer Research. It turned out that no matter how much people spent on each purchase, AMEX were giving literally 1c of their purchase to Breast Cancer Research.

This trend of corporate unity with the issue of breast cancer isn't just unique to North America though. There are litanies of Pink Ribbon products that occupy the consumer sphere in New Zealand too. Dove, who has courted criticism in some circles for some of their (arguably well intentioned) marketing initiatives, has been a long time backer of Pink Ribbon in New Zealand. At present you are able to buy a variety of Pink Ribbon skincare products, including deodorant that contributes \$1.00 to the Breast Cancer



compassionate people – they are just arguably part of a larger, more problematic by-product of our 'cultural capitalism'.

The Corporate Takeover.

After taking Hayley's symbol, corporations knew they were onto a good thing. Today thousands of products, including alcohol, toilet paper, boxing gloves, guns, and golf carts are branded with the familiar pink ribbon, somehow without having reached oversaturation in the market. King and Pool both highlight how hypocritical companies like Estée Lauder (who continued using carcinogenic chemicals in their cosmetics) and KFC jumped on the bandwagon of marketing Pink Ribbon products to women. The example of KFC is particularly flabbergasting. In one campaign, KFC offered to give 50c from each bucket of fried or grilled chicken to the Susan G Komen Foundation for the Cure – the world's largest Pink Ribbon

Foundation. While this may seem like a rather small amount, it is positively gargantuan compared to the contributions of Symbio yogurt, who give an insultingly low 20c from a six pack of their pink ribbon yogurt to the cause.

And like in America, companies involved in the manufacturing of carcinogens have leapt onto the Pink Ribbon bandwagon too. Estée Lauder does a huge amount of sponsorship and sells a variety of products that give 20 per cent of the RRP to breast cancer, despite the fact that the same criticisms that apply in America apply here too. Bridgestone tyres contributed \$300,000 in the space of four years thanks to the sales of pink tyre caps that had 100 per cent of the proceeds go to Pink Ribbon. They have yet to comment about the fact that the production of tyres is one of the most harmful and carcinogen-laced industries in recent history, and exposure to the chemicals and carcino-

Did You Know?

Traffickers usually exploit the most vulnerable populations. Cambodia, for example, is a key destination country with 36 per cent of inhabitants living under the poverty line.

gens from tyre production has probably been linked to cancer in many of those that have worked in this industry.

There is probably little doubt that the people involved in making these decisions are really good people, legitimately looking for ways to help a cause that they believe in, and have been told will change the world. But the donation figures are obscenely low at times, and when money is apportioned out to the various avenues, it's hard to see how much of the yogurt you have bought will actually benefit anyone with breast cancer ever. As long-time breast cancer activist and organiser Barbara Benner states, it would be more productive to simply write a cheque and give it to a hospice or somewhere that actually takes care of those who are suffering from breast cancer, as opposed to donating through a corporation whose bottom line skyrockets with the exploitation of public sympathy for dying women.

Wasted Research.

Perhaps the most startling revelation to come from the book is how much money is wasted on pointless research that doesn't really do anything. Brenner is understandably scathing in her criticism and states that "if people knew what was going on they'd be pissed off. And they should be".

The work of King and Pool paints breast cancer(s) as a bit of a medical mystery because that's the reality. In the documentary, Dr Olufunmilayo Olopade, Director of the Cancer Risk Clinic at the University of Chicago states that "the most important risk factor for getting breast cancer is simply being a woman" and this is the general consensus of the assembled experts. There is no real concrete understanding of how breast cancer forms, why it attacks women particularly, and why it is that it has grown so rapidly over the past century.

Despite this lack of understanding, King and

Pool highlight how hundreds of millions of dollars are thrown at uncoordinated efforts that overlap each other to try and find a cure for something where the initial development and manifestation isn't very clear. The film reveals that, in America, only about 15 per cent of the money goes to looking at breast cancer prevention – so literally hundreds of millions of dollars is blown on fruitless and repetitive research that helps nobody.

Even in New Zealand where the numbers are much smaller, the current research seems to be more treatment oriented than prevention based. If you look at the New Zealand breast cancer Foundation's current research on their website, you can see that there are only three out of ten pieces of research that they



are helping to fund that look at preventative issues. This seems particularly depressing when you remember that the point of the original ribbon campaign was to encourage the government to actually allocate more resources to breast cancer prevention.

Shiny, Happy, Breast Cancer.

In Pool's documentary, the most heart-breaking segments are the interviews with stage four breast cancer sufferers in a support group called the 'I.V League'. They talk about their fears, and anger with the card they have been dealt, while discussing how alienating the corporately sponsored terminology such as

'fighting' and 'surviving' can be. They explain how it implies that if you can't do anything about cancer, you're losing the battle and you haven't 'fought hard enough'.

These scenes are intercut with fun races and parties, with thousands of brightly dressed, dancing people celebrating the Pink Ribbon movement. It's a jarring juxtaposition and it's a haunting way of demonstrating how the Pink Ribbon lust for life really isn't reflective of the reality. One group member succinctly states that the Pink Ribbon marches and movements exclude them because the Pink Ribbon people are "learning to live and you're learning to die". And when you see reps from Yoplait and ice tea companies bragging about the samples they are giving away to a captive audience at a breast cancer fundraiser, it leaves a particularly foul taste in your mouth.

The reality of breast cancer is that it's an ugly, vicious, unfair, and brutal disease, as anyone who has lost someone to it will tell you. And the simple fact of the matter is that no matter how many products with a Pink Ribbon emblazoned on them people buy, it's probably not going to actually help one of the unfortunate souls that gets struck down with this vile

illness, as much as they hope or think it will.

There are so many people doing incredible work in helping people with breast cancer, particularly those grassroots organisers and volunteers who work for Pink Ribbon fronted campaigns. But this approach to solving the issue hasn't worked and the problem is simply getting worse. The issue isn't about the people that work within the system who are kind hearted, empathetic, and selfless in what they do to try and change the world – the issue is the framework these people are working in. As long as breast cancer is presented as a tool for profit, and as long as our focus is on presenting a fictitious depiction of the disease that alienates those that suffer from it, we are not only no closer to solving the problem – we are in fact making things worse. Until we look to eliminate the problem itself at its core, all the money, all the fun runs, and all the products won't stop a disease that has stubbornly spread and grown while the corporate sector has profited from it.

BEVAN MORGAN

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