

To boycott or not to boycott

BY CHRIS BENJAMIN

Recently I embarked on what should have been an easy task — the purchase of a new winter jacket. My old one was tattered, torn and out of style. I looked at about 30 models in fifteen stores in six malls in three towns. Finally, I found a hot little number at Mark's Work Warehouse in Bedford. It was navy blue (my colour), plaid inside, nice big warm hood and mighty stylish, all at a reasonable price. As I brought it to the counter, almost as an afterthought, I checked the tag to see where it was made. Indonesia. The nation whose military is slowly committing genocide against the peaceful people of East Timor, who ask for nothing more than freedom.

Reluctantly I put the jacket away and resumed my search, eventually settling for my second choice, a nice jacket with a nylon hood which is about as useful for fighting the wind as fishnet. The jacket I chose was made in Korea, not as nice as the other one and more expensive. But worth the sacrifice, I thought, to ensure that my money would not be used for the purchase of ammunition and guns used to kill the innocent. Later I learned that other Asian nations, such as the Philippines and Korea, are allegedly providing military aid to Indonesia to assist its repression of the

East Timorese. So much for the great boycott.

The experience made me wonder if it was really worth boycotting at all. I was mulling over questions such as: "Can boycotting really help?" "Who if anyone should be boycotted?" and "Are there any companies or governments which aren't guilty of some ethical violation?" Human rights, animal rights, the environment — and the list goes on. I know the answers to these questions are largely a matter of personal choice but here is some information that may help you make your shopping decisions.

The answer to my first question is, yes, boycotting is an effective tool for social change, when used correctly. According to sources (Rainforest Action Network (RAN), Greenpeace (GP), INFACT and the International Wildlife Foundation (IWF)), the key is to focus on a vulnerable target which is a leader in ethical violations, and communicate directly with that organization. For example, RAN combatted the use of beef raised in the rainforest by targeting Burger King (BK), a company very sensitive to public image, and according to RAN, a large user of rainforest cattle. RAN used extensive networks of members to influence conscientious consumers through the use of large-scale communication efforts such as Adbusters cam-

paigns. As a result, BK ceased using rainforest products, and McDonald's and Wendy's immediately followed suit. RAN attacked the most vulnerable competitor first.

In regards to who should be boycotted, the list is long, and for many different reasons. Based on the websites of RAN, GP, INFACT, and IWF, here is a short list of companies that are allegedly in violation of human, animal, or environmental rights:

- Nestle for selling infant formula banned in the US to-African nations;
- All tuna distributors for harming dolphins;
- Maritime tourism for hunting seals;
- PepsiCo (which includes such brands as KFC, Taco Bell, Pizza Hut, Frito-Lay, 7-Up, Dr. Pepper, Ocean Spray, East Side Mario's, Liptons), Eddie Bauer, NorthWoods and Liz Claiborne for doing business with human rights violators;
- Kraft, Maxwell House, Oscar Mayer, Kool-aid, Miller, General Foods, Post, RJR Nabisco (including Fig Newtons, Oreos), Ritz, Planters and Del Monte), the entire tobacco industry, Carnation, Libby's, MJB, Perrier, Chase and Sanborn, Ralph Lauren, Gloria Vanderbilt, L'Oreal, Friskies, Taster's Choice, Coffeemate, Advil, Anacin, Robitussin, Chef

Boy-ar-dee, Jiffy, Black Flag, and Easy-off for Health and Welfare violations;

- Adidas, Browning, Florsheim and Puma for threatening endangered species;
- Blockbuster Video for censorship;
- CIBC and Mitsubishi/Mitsubishi for supporting unsustainable timber interests;
- Gillette and P&G for animal testing;
- California Grapes (including United Farm Workers, La Paz, and Keene) for poor wages and poor working conditions;
- LL Bean for attacks against women's and minorities' rights;
- the entire meat industry for environmental, human and animal rights violations. Keep in mind that this is only a short list.

This "short" list is what leads me to my third question, "Is it safe to buy anything from anyone?" Consider the products you use every day. You wake up, you eat breakfast. Coffee, who makes it? Eggs, what chicken suffered and what third world nation was deprived of grain? You shave, what animal was tested first? You dress, who was enslaved so you could keep warm? Even the place we live is considered a tourism faux pas because our own government, which we consider so advanced by world standards, has failed to ban the utterly unnecessary seal

hunt. So what are we to do? We have to eat, we have to live somewhere, we have to keep warm, and shaving is recommended if not essential.

The answer, as I have said, is all about personal choice. The first step is to know your values. What is most important to you, and what offends you the most? Is it censorship? The environment? Human rights? The second step is to be aware. To make a conscious effort to know what companies and what governments are doing what. When someone violates your values, they violate you. The third step is to not give these organizations one iota of your business. Finally, communicate and negotiate with the organization. Write a letter, make a phone call, explain why you have chosen not to buy products from certain organizations. And for those who are most dedicated to their causes, join an organization which can help magnify the effectiveness of your boycott by making it a national issue.

Through being socially aware and joining with others who are also aware, a strong force can be created to make social change, and force powerful and rich organizations to behave in an ethical and sustainable manner. Only through such efforts can the environment, its animals and its people be protected.

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