



# Part I

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# **The birth of counterculture**

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**Early on the morning of April 8, 1994,** the electrician arrived to start work on a new security system being installed at an upscale home overlooking Lake Washington, just north of Seattle. In the greenhouse, he found the owner of the cottage, Kurt Cobain, lying dead on the floor in a pool of blood. Cobain had taken a lethal overdose of heroin, but, for good measure, had decided to finish the job by blowing off the left side of his head with a Remington 20-gauge shotgun.

When the news of Cobain's death spread, very few were surprised. This was the man, after all, who had recorded a song called 'I Hate Myself and Want to Die'. As frontman of Nirvana, arguably the most important band of the 1990s, his every move was followed by the media. His previous suicide attempts were a matter of public record. The note lying beside his body didn't leave much room for interpretation: 'Better to burn out than fade away', he wrote. Nevertheless, his death generated a small cottage industry of conspiracy theories. Who killed Kurt Cobain?

In one sense, the answer is obvious. Kurt Cobain killed Kurt Cobain. Yet he was also a victim. He was the victim of a false idea – the idea of counterculture. While he thought of himself as a punk rocker, a man in the business of making 'alternative' music, his records sold in the millions. Thanks in large part to Cobain, the music that used to be called 'hardcore' was rebranded and sold to the masses as 'grunge'. But rather than serving as a source of pride to him, this popularity was a constant embarrassment. It fed the nagging doubts in the back of his mind, which suggested that he had 'sold out' the scene, gone 'mainstream'.

After Nirvana's breakthrough album, *Nevermind*, began to outsell Michael Jackson, the band made a concerted effort to lose fans. Their follow-up album, *In Utero*, was obviously intended to be dif-

ficult, inaccessible music. But the effort failed. The album went on to reach number one in the Billboard charts.

Cobain was never able to reconcile his commitment to alternative music with the popular success of Nirvana. In the end, his suicide was a way out of the impasse. Better to stop it now, before the last scrap of integrity is gone, and avoid the total sell-out. That way he could hold fast to his conviction that 'punk rock is freedom'. What he failed to consider was the possibility that it was all an illusion; that there is no alternative, no mainstream, no relationship between music and freedom, and no such thing as selling out. There are just people who make music, and people who listen to music. And if you make great music, people will want to listen to it.

So where did the idea of 'alternative' come from? The idea that you had to be unpopular in order to be authentic?

Cobain was a graduate of what he called the 'Punk Rock 101' school of life. Much of the punk ethos was based on a rejection of what the hippies had stood for. If they listened to the Lovin' Spoonful, we punks would listen to Grievous Bodily Harm. They had the Rolling Stones, we had the Violent Femmes, the Circle Jerks and Dead On Arrival. If they had long hair, we would have Mohicans. If they wore sandals, we would wear army boots. If they were into *satyagraha*, we were into direct action. We were the 'un-hippies'.

Why this animus toward hippies? It wasn't because they were too radical. It was because they were not radical enough. They had sold out. They were, as Cobain put it, the 'hippiecrits'. *The Big Chill* told you everything you needed to know. The hippies had become yuppies. 'The only way I would wear a tie-dyed T-shirt', Cobain liked to say, 'would be if it were soaked in the blood of Jerry Garcia'.

By the beginning of the '80s, rock and roll had been transformed into a bloated, pale imitation of its former self. It had become arena rock. *Rolling Stone* magazine had become a complacent corporate sales rag, dedicated to flogging crappy albums. Given his attitude, one can only imagine Cobain's embarrassment when he was asked to appear on the cover of *Rolling Stone*. His compromise: to do the shoot in a T-shirt that read 'Corporate rock magazines still suck'. Cobain persuaded himself that, in so doing, he was not selling out, he was

simply going undercover: 'We can pose as the enemy to infiltrate the mechanics of the system to start its rot from the inside. Sabotage the empire by pretending to play their game, compromise just enough to call their bluff. And the hairy, sweaty, macho, sexist dickheads will soon drown in a pool of razorblades and semen, stemmed from the uprising of their children, the armed and deprogrammed crusade, littering the floors of Wall Street with revolutionary debris.'<sup>1</sup>

One can see here quite clearly that, while Cobain and the rest of us punks may have rejected most of the ideas that came out of the hippie counterculture, there is one element of the movement that we swallowed hook, line and sinker. This was the idea of counterculture itself. In other words, we saw ourselves as doing exactly the same thing that the hippies saw themselves doing. The difference, we assumed, is that, unlike them, *we* would never sell out. We would do it right.

Some myths die hard. One can see the same cycle repeating itself in hip hop. The countercultural idea here takes the form of a romantic view of ghetto life and gang culture. Successful rappers must fight hard to retain their street cred, to 'keep it real'. They'll pack guns, do time, even get shot up, just to prove that they're not just 'studio gangstas'. So instead of just dead punks and hippies, we now also have a steadily growing pantheon of dead rappers. People talk about the 'assassination' of Tupac Shakur, as though he actually posed a threat to the system. Eminem claims his arrest for possession of a concealed weapon was 'all political', designed to get him off the streets. It's the same thing all over again.

This wouldn't be so important if it were confined to the world of music. Unfortunately, the idea of counterculture has become so deeply embedded in our understanding of society that it influences every aspect of social and political life. Most importantly, it has become the conceptual template for all contemporary leftist politics. Counterculture has almost completely replaced socialism as the basis of radical political thought. So if counterculture is a myth, then it is one that has misled an enormous number of people, with untold political consequences.

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The idea that artists must take an oppositional stance toward mainstream society is hardly new. It has its origins in 18th-century Romanticism, a movement that went on to dominate the artistic imagination throughout the 19th century. It found its highest expression – and most enduring commercial success – in Giacomo Puccini's *La Bohème*, a celebration of alternative 'bohemian' lifestyles in Paris. In those days, 'real' artists had to die of consumption (tuberculosis, that is), not heroin overdoses or drive-bys. But you get the idea.

The key to understanding early Romanticism is to appreciate the impact that the discovery of the New World, and in particular the Pacific Islands, had upon European consciousness. Before these encounters, Europeans simply assumed that humans had lived, throughout all of history, in hierarchically organised class societies. Kingship, aristocracy and class domination were simply a part of the natural order. St. Thomas Aquinas summed up the received wisdom when he wrote, back in the 13th century:

*Everything that happens in nature is good, because nature always does what is best. The standard form of government in nature is the rule of one. If we consider the parts of the body, we see that there is one part that moves all the rest, namely the heart. If we look at the parts of the soul, we find that there is one faculty that rules the rest – reason. The same is true of bees, who have but one queen, and of the universe as a whole, which has only one God, who has created and governs all things. This is not without reason, since a plurality is always derived from a unity. Since the products of art imitate the works of nature, and since a work of art is the more perfect, the more closely it resembles the works of nature, the best government for a people is necessarily the government of one.<sup>2</sup>*

Five hundred years later, Jean-Jacques Rousseau could agree with the first line of this passage – that everything in nature is good – but disagree with all the rest. Thanks to the discovery of the New World, thinkers like Rousseau knew that there were people who lived without social hierarchy, without landed aristocracy or monarchy, and

sometimes even without settlements or cities. It didn't take long to infer that this was in fact the 'natural' condition of mankind, and that the major world civilisations, with their elaborate social hierarchies and systems of privilege, represented a terrible distortion of the natural order.

Thus Rousseau concluded that all of society was a giant fraud, a system of exploitation imposed upon the weak by the strong. The emergence of civilisation, he argued, 'gave new fetters to the weak and new forces to the rich, irretrievably destroyed natural liberty, established forever the law of property and of inequality, changed straightforward usurpation into an irrevocable right, and for the profit of a few ambitious men henceforth subjected the entire human race to labour, servility and misery.'<sup>3</sup>

As far as sweeping indictments of society go, this one is right up there. After reading it, Voltaire was moved to write to Rousseau: 'I have received your new book against the human race, and thank you for it. Never has such cleverness been used to show that we are all stupid. One longs, upon reading your book, to walk on all fours. But as I have lost that habit for more than sixty years, I feel unhappily the impossibility of resuming it. Nor can I go off in search of the savages of Canada, because the illnesses to which I am condemned render a European doctor necessary to me.'<sup>4</sup>

Yet despite the broad scope of his claim, Rousseau's intention was not actually to condemn 'the human race' or to recommend a return to savagery. As his work on the social contract made clear, he was not opposed to social order itself, or to the rule of law. He was opposed to the specifically hierarchical form that this order had taken on in his own society. It was the perversion of the natural order into class domination that angered him.

In other words, despite the sweeping nature of his indictment, Rousseau's critique was directed against a specific class enemy – the aristocracy. Furthermore, he regarded the general population – the masses – as a natural ally in the struggle. The social upheavals that his thought inspired, up to and including the French Revolution, were not anarchic uprisings against society at large. They were aimed quite specifically at the ruling classes. (Which is why, by the end of the

18th century, almost the entire French aristocracy was either dead or in hiding.)

Even 19th-century anarchists were not really anarchists in the modern sense of the term. They were not opposed to social order, nor were they individualists. In many cases, they did not even want to smash the state. They simply opposed the coercive imposition of social order and the militarism of the early modern European nation state. Mikhail Bakunin's 'Revolutionary Catechism', one of the founding documents of political anarchism, calls for nothing more radical than voluntary federalism as the principle of national organisation, along with universal suffrage of both sexes. Bakunin, the famed anarchist, was actually one of the first to call for the creation of a 'United States of Europe'.<sup>5</sup>

So while society may have been roundly condemned as a rigged game, no one was in doubt about who had rigged it against whom. The goal of radical political activists and thinkers in the 18th and 19th centuries was not to eliminate the game, but to level the playing field. As a result, radical politics throughout the early modern period had an overwhelmingly populist character. The goal was to turn the people against their rulers.

But in the second half of the 20th century, radical politics took a significant turn away from this pattern of thought. Instead of treating the masses as an ally, the people began to be regarded, to an ever-increasing degree, as an object of suspicion. Before long, the people – that is, 'mainstream' society – came to be seen as the problem, not the solution. Whereas the great philosophers of the Enlightenment had railed against 'obedience', as a slavish disposition that promoted tyranny, radicals began to view 'conformity' as a far greater vice. The story of this remarkable reversal provides the key to understanding the origins of the myth of counterculture.



With the so-called bourgeois revolutions of the 18th century, there was a gradual elimination of aristocratic privilege in Europe and, above all, in the United States. But rather than abolishing class domination altogether, the effect of these revolutions was primarily to replace

one ruling class with another. Instead of being peasants, ruled by an aristocracy that had control of all the land, the masses were gradually transformed into workers, ruled by capitalists who controlled the factories and machines. As the nascent market economy began producing wealth on an unparalleled scale, money quickly became more important than either land or lineage as the basis for privilege.

There could be no mistake about the hierarchical nature of this emerging society. In the 19th century, capitalism seemed to be clearly in the process of dividing society into two antagonistic classes. The division between rich and poor was as stark as it is in many underdeveloped countries today. Most people had to work for a living. This meant a life of dangerous toil under unbearable conditions in the factory, combined with grinding poverty at home. Then there were those who lived off the work of others, enjoying fabulous returns on their invested capital. There was not much in between.

Yet while it seemed obvious to contemporary observers that the masses had traded one form of exploitation for another, there was one key difference between the form of class domination that emerged out of the bourgeois revolutions and the aristocratic hierarchy that preceded it. Unlike the peasants, who were literally coerced into staying on the land and working for its lord, the working classes were formally free to do whatever they wanted. They were no longer tied to the land; they were free to move as they liked, to live where they liked and to take any job that was available or that appealed to them. Thus the class domination that existed in capitalist societies appeared to have an entirely voluntary character. When workers were injured at the factory or in the mine, the owner could evade responsibility by saying, 'Nobody forced them to take the job. They knew the risks when they signed up.'

There was no shortage of critics lining up to condemn the exploitation and suffering caused by early capitalism. But these critics were forced to confront a fundamental problem. If conditions were so terrible, why did the working classes tolerate them? Revolutionary socialists began arguing that workers should simply seize control of the factories where they worked. Yet the working classes were surprisingly reluctant to do so. This required some explanation. After all,

since it seemed to be clearly in the *interest* of the working classes to take control of the means of production, what was stopping them?

This is where Karl Marx stepped in, with his famous critique of 'ideology'. The problem, Marx argued, was that the working class was the victim of an illusion, which he referred to as 'commodity fetishism'. Rather than perceiving the economy as a set of essentially social relationships between individuals, the market gave it the appearance of a system of natural laws. Prices and wages moved up and down, seemingly at random. Losing your job seemed to be a matter of bad luck, like getting caught in a rainstorm. The ups and downs of the market were determined by forces completely outside anyone's control. So if wages dropped or the price of bread went up, there appeared to be no one to blame.

In Marx's view, this objectification of social relationships had gone so far that workers had become alienated from their own activity. They saw their own labour as merely a means to the attainment of other ends. Capitalism had created a nation of clock-watchers. Marx argued that the working classes were unwilling to engage in revolutionary politics because they were completely caught up in this nexus of false ideas. Commodity fetishism and alienated labour provided the ideology of capitalism. All of this was wrapped up in a bow by traditional Christian religious doctrine, which promised workers paradise in the afterlife, on the condition that they behaved themselves here and now. Thus, religion was the 'opiate' that kept the imposed suffering from becoming unendurable.

Given this diagnosis of the problem, the role of the Marxian social critic was not necessarily to get directly involved in the organisation of the working class. Communists and socialists were often greeted with suspicion on the factory floor. The workers needed to be 'radicalised' before they could be organised – through the cultivation of class consciousness. This meant freeing them from the grip of bourgeois ideology. The mindset of the workers needed to be changed, *so that they could come to see where their own interests lay*. Only when freed from the mental cage in which they were imprisoned could they begin to saw away at the bars of the real cage that society had constructed around them.

The working class, unfortunately, turned out to be a terrible disappointment. Rather than agitating for the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism, workers tended to focus more on incremental gains, such as higher wages and medical benefits. From the Marxist perspective, this sort of 'reformism' didn't address any of the fundamental issues; the workers were just redecorating the cage in which they were imprisoned. But once they came to see their situation more clearly, they would inevitably rise up.

Yet as the 20th century wore on, this diagnosis of the problem became increasingly unpersuasive. For example, the initial reluctance to give workers the vote was based upon the assumption, universally shared among the ruling classes in Europe and America, that if you let the people vote, the first thing they would vote for would be the dispossession of the propertied classes. In other words, they would use the vote to seize the property of the wealthy. Yet this is not what happened. Workers voted for reform, not revolution.

After the Russian Revolution, it became increasingly difficult to dismiss this peculiarly altruistic behaviour on the part of workers as the effect of 'commodity fetishism'. How could the workers possibly believe that capitalism was natural and unalterable when the development of the Soviet Union showed quite clearly that it was optional? The Russians had proved that workers, if they wanted, could get rid of the capitalist system and replace it with one of their choosing. Furthermore, until the '60s it was still very much unclear which economic system would prove to be more efficient. The early history of the Soviet Union convinced many people that communism might produce more wealth than capitalism. So what could explain the passivity of the European and American working classes?

Capitalism had proved to be a much tougher nut to crack than many on the left had suspected. In order to avoid the conclusion that workers might actually *like* capitalism, Marxist theorists began to retool the theory of ideology. In the '20s, for instance, Antonio Gramsci began arguing that capitalism created false consciousness in the working classes not by inspiring particular false beliefs about the operations of the economy, but by establishing a complete cultural 'hegemony', which in turn reinforced the system. He suggested, in

effect, that the entire culture – books, music, painting – reflected a form of bourgeois ideology, and so needed to be discarded before the working class could achieve emancipation. He argued therefore for the ‘necessity of creating a new culture’.<sup>6</sup>

Initially this argument fell upon deaf ears. Marx’s claim that the state was merely the ‘executive committee of the bourgeoisie’ already smacked of paranoia. The idea that the bourgeoisie could be controlling the entire culture seemed even more far-fetched. How could the whole culture be nothing but a scam? It seemed hard to believe that a fraud could be perpetrated on such a scale.

It got a whole lot easier to believe, however, after the rise of Nazi Germany.

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It is impossible to understand the way history unfolded in the 20th century without grasping the massive impact that the Nazi regime – and, more importantly, the Holocaust – had upon political thinking in the West. What happened in Germany reminded everyone that when politics goes wrong, it has the potential to produce much more than just bad government. It can create a living nightmare.

This is something that the ancient Greeks and Romans knew quite well. They believed that absolute power provoked a special sort of madness in the tyrant. Plato argued in *The Republic* that tyranny reveals a part of the soul that is usually only awakened in sleep, when the rest of the soul – the reasonable, gentle and ruling part – is slumbering ... Then the beastly and savage part, full of food and drink, casts off sleep and seeks to find a way to gratify itself. You know that there is nothing it will not dare to do at such a time, free of all control by shame or reason. It does not shrink from trying to have sex with a mother, as it supposes, or with anyone else at all, whether man, god or beast. It will commit any foul murder, and there is no food it refuses to eat. In a word, it omits no act of folly or shamelessness.<sup>7</sup>

Yet what Europeans saw in the Nazi regime was far more chilling than these ancient forms of tyranny. Whereas the madness in antiquity was confined to the ruler himself, and perhaps his inner circle, in Ger-

many the entire country seemed to have gone mad. Nazism had all the appearances of mass psychosis. How else to describe a society in which bureaucrats in the concentration camps kept meticulous files, recording such details as the number of ounces of gold extracted from the dental fillings of the inmates who were being systematically exterminated?

People have always known that mobs can be dangerous. When swept away in a riot, otherwise law-abiding citizens may begin to loot and steal. Mild-mannered people may cry out for blood and vengeance when they are caught up in a crowd calling for the same. Human sentiment is highly contagious. Being in a crowd full of people who are laughing makes everything seem more funny. Being in a crowd full of angry people has a parallel effect. As a result, individuals often behave a bit 'crazy' – or at least contrary to their own considered judgments – when they find themselves in a crowd.

Furthermore, it is extremely difficult to go against the judgment or sentiment of the group. Crowd psychology imposes conformity. One need only look at the tyranny imposed by the audience of a typical TV talk show. Only certain ideas, expressed in a certain way, meet with the approval of the mob. All participants fall under intense psychological pressure to fall into line. As Charles Mackay wrote in his 19th century bestseller *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*: 'Men, it has been well said, think in herds; it will be seen that they go mad in herds, while they only recover their senses slowly, and one by one.'<sup>8</sup>

In the second half of the 19th century, Europeans had been fascinated by these forms of mass behaviour. Books such as Mackay's and Gustave Le Bon's *The Crowd* were enormously popular. Yet for all this, it was also generally thought that group 'madness' was transitory. Popular delusions took the form of 'fads' and 'enthusiasms'. An emotion passes through the crowd but then fades away as quickly as it came. People may act intemperately but, not long after, they begin to regret their actions.<sup>9</sup>

What Nazi Germany appeared to exhibit was crowd psychology; not only on an unprecedented scale, but also sustained over an extraordinarily long time. According to one prominent interpretation, the Nazis were able to achieve this – something unparalleled in

human history – because for the first time they had at their disposal the instruments of mass media. Broadcast radio, in particular, had allowed Nazi propaganda to reach millions of homes.

Nazi Germany, in other words, marked the dawn of what came to be known as ‘the mass society’. The power structure in ancient tyrannies usually involved only the elites. The majority of the population was simply encouraged to mind its own business and obey the leaders. The modern totalitarian state, by contrast, mobilised the masses. The people themselves were swept up in the enthusiasm, becoming a tyrannical force in their own right. This was made possible by the invention of broadcast media, which, when combined with modern propaganda techniques, allowed the state to cultivate and reproduce the kind of fanaticism and conformity that we see in small groups but on the scale of an entire society. Thus mass society was born: the bastard child of broadcast media and groupthink.

In order to see how the media can facilitate the mass contagion of sentiment, one need only turn on the television or listen to some talk radio. The classic sitcom has a laugh track, and talk shows have a studio audience, precisely because hearing other people laugh itself provokes laughter. The effect works in the same way regardless of whether people are in the same room or the laughter is simply being broadcast through the media. Similarly, talk-radio stations employ a well-known formula for cultivating anger or outrage. The pattern of exchange between the host and the callers is especially effective at generating and sustaining the shared emotional response.

Nazism, of course, presented a rather extreme variant of the genre. But in the Soviet Union, Stalin demonstrated quite clearly how propaganda techniques could be used in the service of a different ideology. In 1984, George Orwell sketched out a somewhat gentler version of this totalitarian nightmare – suggesting that a society might use more psychological control, and much less overt violence, in order to indoctrinate the masses. Many others thought that totalitarianism would insinuate itself into daily life in even more subtle ways.

These concerns were dramatically amplified in the United States by the anticommunist hysteria of the 1950s. In 1951, after the defection of twenty-one American POWs to the North Korean side, jour-

nalist Edward Hunter coined the phrase 'brainwashing' to describe the processes of mind control and 're-education' supposedly imposed by communist regimes.<sup>10</sup> The concept proved extremely popular, and was extended back 'retroactively' to describe the techniques used by the Nazis in Germany. Thus William Sargant, in his 1957 classic *Battle for the Mind*, argued that Hitler had used 'organised excitement and mass hypnotism' to rally the masses.<sup>11</sup>

It was not long before the US military and the CIA got interested. CIA director Allen Dulles took a particular interest in the subject, commissioning a special report on Chinese and Soviet brainwashing techniques. The CIA also began to conduct experiments – using both Korean POWs and unsuspecting volunteers – in order to perfect brainwashing techniques of their own. Since it was common knowledge that this sort of research was being conducted, it was not long before critics of American society began to suspect that these techniques were being used against the domestic population as well as the enemy. Vance Packard's 1957 attack on the advertising industry, *The Hidden Persuaders*, was rooted in precisely this culture of paranoia. Packard's assertion that consumers were being exposed to 'subliminal advertising' fed into popular fear of mind control.<sup>12</sup> People were so disturbed by the suggestion, it took more than three decades for the myth to be finally debunked.

Thus the net effect of anticommunist hysteria was to make people in the victorious Allied nations even more anxious about the possibility of creeping totalitarianism. It is easy for us to look back and claim that these concerns were overwrought. There was certainly no long-term erosion of basic liberties in these nations. But at the time, it was very far from obvious that this would be the outcome. In particular, the fear of propaganda, and of the psychological manipulation that it was thought to make possible, was easily translated into a fear of advertising and the mass media. Even setting aside television, the incorporation of visual elements, such as drawing, photography, logos and design, into print advertising appeared to be intended, just as Hitler's propaganda had been, to bypass the reader's rational faculties and appeal to him or her directly on an emotional level. The potential for manipulation and control seemed ominous.

Many people therefore saw a continuum between modern capitalism and fascism. (After all, Nazism was the 'demon child' of European culture and society. It was hardly outrageous to suggest that the same forces that had led to the emergence of fascism in Germany and Italy might also be exercising more subtle effects in England, France and the United States.) Many people came to see Western democracies as simply more subtle variants of the basic fascist state apparatus.

The outline of this critique was already in place well before the war. In 1932, Aldous Huxley published *Brave New World*, which sketched out a dystopian society in which perfect happiness had been achieved through total manipulation. Set in 632 AF (After Ford), Huxley imagined a world in which genetic manipulation ensures that the working classes are perfectly satisfied with the menial tasks to which they are consigned. The idle upper classes are fed a steady diet of soma, a drug that dulls their senses, creates a diffuse sense of well-being and prevents them from asking too many questions. Individuality is suppressed both literally and figuratively: everyone in the society is a clone.

In the post-war era, it seemed to many people on the left that an explanation for the lack of revolutionary agitation on the part of the working classes was to be found in manipulation of this type. Unlike religion, which promised paradise after death, advertising promised paradise right around the next corner: through purchase of a new car, a suburban home or a labour-saving appliance. Consumer goods had become the new opiate of the people – real-life 'soma'. To Marxists, it seemed that advertising was not just promotion for specific goods, it was propaganda for the capitalist system. It created what came to be known as 'consumerism' – a kind of conformist groupthink transmitted through the mass media. Consumerism produced a simulacrum of happiness, but only by enslaving individuality and the imagination, making it impossible for the working classes to see how much more there could be to life, or to imagine a better world.

The emergence of advertising in the 1950s thus gave a new lease on life to the Gramscian theory of 'hegemony'. Prior to the war, the claim that culture was entirely orchestrated and planned by the bour-

geoisie had the whiff of a conspiracy theory. How exactly does the bourgeoisie accomplish all this? But now the answer seemed clear: by bombarding the working classes with advertising, brainwashing them into thinking that cheap consumer goods could make them happy. Suddenly, the idea that the whole culture might be a system of ideology began to seem more plausible. After all, the Germans had been completely brainwashed by the Nazis. Why not us? And if we *were* the victims of total brainwashing, how would we know?

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In the early 1960s, Yale psychology professor Stanley Milgram conducted a series of experiments that, in many people's minds, confirmed the worst fears about the relationship between fascism and modern democracy. As the name of his project suggested, Milgram was interested in 'Obedience and Individual Responsibility'. His goal was to determine just how pliable the average citizen might be in the face of a regime of power and authority. He set up a fairly simple experiment: two people came to his lab, ostensibly to take part in a study on memory and learning. One of them was designated the 'learner', the other the 'teacher'. The learner was put in a room and strapped into a chair, where an electrode was attached to his wrist. Meanwhile, the teacher was seated before a large machine called Shock Generator, Type ZLB. On the front of the machine was a series of switches designated, from left to right, 'Slight Shock', 'Moderate Shock', 'Strong Shock', all the way to 'Danger: Severe Shock', and two final switches, simply but ominously labelled 'XXX'. The learner was then told that he would be asked to memorise lists of word pairs and that every time he made a mistake, the teacher would deliver a short, sharp shock of increasing intensity.<sup>13</sup>

The experimental design was in fact an elaborate setup. The true subject was the 'teacher', and the point of the experiment was not to test the effect of punishment on memory, but rather to see how far the average person would go in a situation in which he or she was asked to inflict pain on an innocent and protesting victim. The learner was a plant, and the shocks were faked.

The results were rather extraordinary. Despite the fact that the learner often gave clear evidence that he was in pain (screams of agony, complaints about his heart), the teacher continued to ask questions and administer shocks, often in the face of complete unresponsiveness on the part of the learner (who was actually an actor). Even Milgram himself was astonished: more than half of the residents of New Haven, Connecticut, appeared willing to electroshock a fellow citizen into unconsciousness, even to death, simply because a man in a white lab coat instructed them to do so.

When the results of the experiment were made public, many people were outraged, in part because there were (and still are) legitimate questions as to how ethical the experiment was. But beyond that, Milgram delivered a 'severe shock' to our standard assumptions about human nature and the character of evil. He drew the following conclusion from his tests: 'Ordinary people, simply doing their jobs, and without any particular hostility on their part, can become agents in a terrible destructive process. Moreover, even when the destructive effects of their work become patently clear, and they are asked to carry out actions incompatible with fundamental standards of morality, relatively few people have the resources needed to resist authority.'

This is very much the same conclusion drawn by Hannah Arendt in her 1963 book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, which contains a series of extraordinary observations about the mindset of Adolf Eichmann, the Nazi bureaucrat responsible for implementation of the 'final solution'. While covering the trial of Eichmann for *The New Yorker*, Arendt came to the conclusion that the prosecution's attempt to portray Eichmann as a sadistic monster was fundamentally mistaken. Eichmann was simply a boring, meticulous bureaucrat who sat at his desk, pushing paper, carrying out his orders. He was, in other words, a conformist. Milgram had conceived of his experiment as a way of testing Arendt's thesis about what she called the 'banality of evil'.<sup>14</sup>

At the time, Arendt herself was subjected to considerable scorn for daring to suggest that a Nazi like Eichmann was anything but evil incarnate. Milgram's experiments did an enormous amount to silence this criticism, and to make the 'banality of evil' a part of the received understanding of human nature in our culture. Milgram also

lent considerable plausibility to the parallels that many people were drawing between fascism and the 'mass society' of the United States. Conformity quickly became the new cardinal sin in our society.



Mass society is indelibly associated, in the popular imagination, with the United States of the 1950s. It is a world of perfect families, white picket fences, shiny new Buicks and teenagers 'going steady', yet it is also a world of complete conformity, where happiness is achieved at the expense of individuality, creativity and freedom. It is a world in which, as the Dead Kennedys put it, the comfort you have demanded is now mandatory.

The movie *Pleasantville* dramatises this critique of mass society through a rather quaint cinematic affectation. In the film, two teenagers from the present are magically transported into the world of a 1950s television show. On the surface, everything is perfect: the sun always shines, the home team never loses and there is no poverty, crime or corruption. Everything is pleasant, all of the time. Yet this happiness is achieved at the expense of total uniformity. Inhabitants of the town are blissfully unaware of the existence of a world beyond their city limits. The books in the library are all blank. Everyone eats meatloaf for dinner, every night. Nothing ever changes; the entire world is in stasis.

The film depicts the compromise at the heart of Pleasantville by filming the entire '50s world in black and white. Yet as the teenagers from the present inevitably 'contaminate' the peace and harmony of Pleasantville, by introducing new ideas and new forms of behaviour to the inhabitants, bursts of colour begin to show up in that world: a red rose, a green car, a brightly coloured painting. One by one the inhabitants of Pleasantville themselves begin to change into full colour, as they free themselves from their mental shackles. They become liberated from an existence that is, quite literally, dull and grey.

Here we can see the idea of counterculture in its fully developed form. What people need to be liberated from is not a specific class that oppresses them or a system of exploitation that imposes poverty

upon them. People have become trapped in a gilded cage, and have been taught to love their own enslavement. 'Society' controls them by limiting the imagination and suppressing their deepest needs. What they need to escape from is conformity. And to do so, they must reject the culture in its entirety. They must form a counterculture – one based on freedom and individuality.

According to Theodore Roszak (whose 1969 book *The Making of a Counter Culture* introduced the term 'counterculture' into general usage), society as a whole has become a system of complete manipulation, a 'technocracy'. The discipline of the machine and the factory floor has been extended to encompass every dimension of human life. In such a society, 'politics, education, leisure, entertainment, culture as a whole, the unconscious drives, and even ... protest against the technocracy itself: all these become the subjects of purely technical scrutiny and of purely technical manipulation.'<sup>15</sup> Under such circumstances, nothing short of a total rejection of the entire culture and society will suffice. In Roszak's view, traditional leftist parties – not to mention communists and trade unionists – have become the stooges of technocracy: 'This brand of politics finishes with merely redesigning the turrets and towers of the technocratic citadel. It is the foundations of the edifice that must be sought.'<sup>16</sup>

It is important to see what a profound reorientation of radical politics this critique represents. Traditional leftist concerns, such as poverty, living standards and access to medical care, come to be seen as 'superficial', in that they aim only at institutional reform. The counterculture, by contrast, is interested in what Roszak calls 'the psychic liberation of the oppressed'.<sup>17</sup> Thus the hipster, cooling his heels in a jazz club, comes to be seen as a more profound critic of modern society than the civil rights activist working to enlist voters, or the feminist politician campaigning for a constitutional amendment.

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Stepping back for a moment, it should be obvious that there is something strange about this form of countercultural critique. After all, the traditional objection to capitalism – certainly Marx's primary

objection – was that it exploited the working classes, creating poverty and suffering. In other words, the problem with capitalism was that it deprived workers of material goods. ‘The immiseration of the proletariat’ was what Marx called it.

In this context, it is somewhat odd to turn around and say that the workers have sold out and that the abundance of consumer goods is merely an opiate that pacifies them, preventing them from seeing where their true interests lie. It’s like saying that when you give a child something to eat, it doesn’t really feed him, it merely ‘placates’ him so that he forgets that he is hungry. It was precisely the failure of the capitalist system to provide the workers with goods that gave them the reason to overthrow the system in the first place. Thus the critique of consumerism comes perilously close to criticising capitalism for satisfying the workers *too much*. They’re so stuffed, they can’t be bothered to go out and overthrow the system anymore. But this poses the question: why would they want to?

Roszak in fact criticises the students in the Paris 1968 uprising for having tried to form an alliance with French workers. The workers, he claims, are an unreliable ally, since they have a vested interest in the system of industrial production. ‘The touchstone of the matter would be’, he argues, ‘how ready are the workers to disband whole sectors of the industrial apparatus where this proves necessary to achieve ends other than efficiency, productivity and high consumption? How willing are they to set aside technocratic priorities in favour of a new simplicity of life, a decelerating social pace, a vital leisure?’<sup>18</sup>

One can see here how the traditional interests of the working class have been downgraded to the status of a ‘technocratic priority’. Yet Roszak is in danger of simply taking the class interests of intellectuals and students – freeing the imagination, finding a ‘new simplicity of life’ – and imposing them upon the rest of the population (on the grounds that anyone who disagrees is a victim of the technocracy). The problem with assuming that everyone is the victim of a total ideology is that it becomes impossible to state what would count as evidence for or against this thesis.

In the end, workers didn’t seem all that interested in having their imaginations freed. Rather than flocking to art galleries and

poetry recitals when given the chance, they continued to show an unhealthy interest in sports, broadcast television and malt beverages. This naturally fed the nagging suspicion that the public at large might actually *like* capitalism, that they might genuinely *want* consumer goods. It suggested that the failure of capitalism to satisfy the 'deeper needs' of the people might not be a problem, simply because *the people have no deeper needs*. Perhaps the students had simply mistaken their own class interests for the general interest – assuming that 'good for me' is the same as 'good for society'. (They would certainly not have been the first to do so!)

The sneaking suspicion that the public might be genuinely satisfied by capitalism is reinforced by the observation that countercultural rebellion didn't seem to do anything. Unlike *Pleasantville*, where the transformation of society is instantaneous, radical and highly visible, in the real world 'freeing the imagination' doesn't seem to galvanise the proletariat, much less cure injustice, eliminate poverty or stop war. Furthermore, the ideological system that sustains capitalism did not seem to be too troubled by acts of countercultural rebellion. The sort of conformist mass culture caricatured in *Pleasantville* is supposed to be very rigid – such that the slightest display of individuality represents a mortal threat. Nonconformity must be stamped out, we were told, or it would destabilise the entire system.

So the first-generation hippies did everything they could to violate the dress code of 1950s society: men grew their hair long and wore beards, refused to wear suits and ties; women adopted mini-skirts, threw away their bras, stopped wearing makeup – and so on. But it wasn't long before these items and clothing styles started showing up in advertisements and on mannequins in shop windows. Soon department stores were selling peace medallions and love beads. In other words, 'the system' seemed to regard the hippies less as a threat to the established order than as a marketing opportunity. Punk rock was received in exactly the same way. Designer safety pins were on sale in fancy London shops long before the Sex Pistols even broke up.

How to explain this? The countercultural rebels believed that what they were doing was genuinely radical, that it represented a pro-

found challenge to society. Their rebellion was felt to be an especially potent threat to capitalism, which relied upon an army of docile, pacified workers, willing to submit themselves to the soul-destroying discipline of the machine. And yet 'the system' seemed to take this form of rebellion in its stride. This lack of discernible impact presented a serious threat to the countercultural idea. After all, according to the countercultural rebels, the problem with traditional leftist politics was that it was superficial. It aimed at 'merely' institutional change. Countercultural rebels, on the other hand, were supposedly attacking oppression at a deeper level. Yet despite the radicalism of their interventions, it was difficult to see any concrete effects.

At this point the countercultural idea might have been in serious trouble had it not been for a singular stroke of genius: the theory of 'co-optation'. According to this idea, the 'repression' imposed by the system turns out to be more subtle than, say, the Spanish Inquisition. At first, the system tries merely to *assimilate* resistance by appropriating its symbols, evacuating their 'revolutionary' content and then selling them back to the masses as commodities. It thereby seeks to neutralise the counterculture by piling on substitute gratifications so high that people ignore the revolutionary kernel of these new ideas. It is only when this initial attempt at co-optation has failed that overt repression must be employed, and 'the violence inherent in the system' is revealed.

With this theory of co-optation in place, the counterculture itself becomes a 'total ideology', a completely closed system of thought, immune to falsification, in which every apparent exception simply confirms the rule. For generations now, countercultural rebels have been pumping out 'subversive' music, 'subversive' art, 'subversive' literature, 'subversive' clothing, while universities have been packed full of professors disseminating 'subversive' ideas to their students. So much subversion, and yet the system seems to tolerate it quite well. Does this suggest that the system is perhaps not so repressive after all? 'On the contrary', says the countercultural rebel. 'It shows that the system is even more repressive than we thought – look at how skilfully it co-opts all of this subversion!'

Back in 1965, Herbert Marcuse coined a term to describe this peculiar sort of repression. He called it 'repressive tolerance'.<sup>19</sup> It's an idea that makes about as much sense now as it did then.

## Notes

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- 3 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 'Discourse on Inequality,' *The First and Second Discourses*, ed. Roger D. Masters, trans. Judith R. Masters (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1964), 160.
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- 5 Mikhail Bakunin, *Bakunin on Anarchism*, ed. and trans. Sam Dolgoff (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1980), 104.
- 6 Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 276.
- 7 *The Republic*: Plato, *Republic*, trans. G. M. A. Grube rev. C. D. C. Reeve (Cambridge: Hackett, 1992), 242.
- 8 Charles Mackay, *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds* (1841; New York: Harmony, 1980).
- 9 Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1926).

- 10 Edward Hunter, *Brainwashing in Red China* (New York: Vanguard, 1962).
- 11 William Sargant, *Battle for the Mind: A Physiology of Conversion and Brain-Washing* (London: Pan Books, 1957), 142.
- 12 Vance Packard's 1957 attack: Vance Packard, *The Hidden Persuaders* (New York: Pocket Books, 1957). The subliminal scare was resurrected in 1973 by Brian Wilson Key in *Subliminal Seduction: Ad Media's Manipulation of a Not So Innocent America* (New York: New American Library, 1973). It is Key who is responsible for the idea that one can find hidden images in the ice cubes of liquor ads.
- 13 Stanley Milgram, *Obedience* (videorecording), ed. Christopher C. Johnson (New Haven: Yale University, 1965).
- 14 Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1977).
- 15 Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 6. All citations used by kind permission of the University of California Press.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 55.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 65.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 68.
- 19 Herbert Marcuse, 'Repressive Tolerance,' *A Critique of Pure Tolerance*, ed. Robert Paul Wolff (Boston: Beacon, 1969).