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Some preliminary conjunctural thoughts on countercultures

ABSTRACT. The article is devoted to analysis of various countercultures aspects. The Author hypothesizes that the forms of contemporary politics are the result of two fundamentally interrelated strategic vectors. First is built upon a politics of ressentiment, setting "ordinary" folks against the socio-cultural elite which constututed to the "new right" movement. Second vector is originated of counterculture of the 1960s. The author states that counterculture exists without a singular identity. It is a space of hybridity and heterogenity. On the other hand counterculture is related to the concept of contemporary ambivalence as well it transforms of affective experience of everyday life. Another feature of counterculture is connected with the conviction that counterculture stands against of dominant culture. Also the author puts counterculture movements against various aspects of new american modernity including reconstruction of the practice of the hegemony, as well as through popular culture and reconstruction of the „left" and „right" idelogy and practice.

KEYWORDS: counterculture, hegemony, „left," „right," popular culture, american modernity

Politics in the United States – I leave open questions of other places, and also the broader questions of global politics – have been strange for well over fifty years and they are getting stranger almost every week. Intermittently, during this half-century, they have also been very scary, and this (May 2010) is one of those moments I fear. I have been trying for some time to think about the uncanny nature of contemporary politics, and why it sometimes shades into the threatening, and how it is so powerfully articulated through and to the popular. I want to present here both a backward glance at some of my efforts and an early and tentative set of questions as I glance forward.

Any history of the present has to have multiple starting points, but regardless of what story one is trying to tell, one of the starting points has to be the 1960s, and it is not coincidental that, over the past years, comparisons of the present have increased dramatically: Obama and JFK, Iraq-Afghanistan and Vietnam, the Cold War and the War on Terrorism, and most controversially, the counterculture and the Tea Parties.

In fact, I might hypothesize that the forms and configurations of contemporary politics are the result of two fundamentally interrelated strategic vectors that "originated in the 60s: on the one hand, Nixon's invention and deployment (after his defeat by JFK) of a strategy built upon a politics of *ressentiment*, setting "ordinary" folks against the sociocultural elite (although it was the very ability to manipulate the distribution of the population into these categories that was the heart of this strategy).[1] This became, and has remained, a dominant political practice of at least some key fractions of the "new right."

And on the other hand, from the Left as it were, the politics of the past fifty years have been shaped by the vectors defined, set loose and precluded by the so-called counterculture of the 1960s. In fact, we can say not only that the new right emerges in part as a reaction against the counterculture and its consequences, but that it also has adopted, over the decades, a variety of countercultural strategies. In fact, the questions I want to explore involve the existence – on the right and on the left – of countercultures today. Or to put it differently, I wonder if the concept of a counterculture may not be useful in understanding key moments of U.S. politics over the past half-century, including the present moment.

But if that is the case, we have to think about what is at stake in the notion of a counterculture. The term was, after all, invented in the 60s, ostensibly to describe what its inventor, Theodore Roszak, thought to be a new phenomenon.[2] Yet, as insightful and popular as his original work may have been, I want to suggest that Roszak confused empirical description with conceptual invention. In Roszak's terms – and apparently, according to many of its current defenders who vehemently object to the term being applied to any right wing movements such as the tea parties, any counterculture would have to closely resemble that of the 1960s; but this seems to me to preclude any effort to use the concept to understand the specificity of the political assemblage in ways that might prove useful beyond the specific actualization in the 60s. That is, I want to think of countercultures both conceptually and conjuncturally. I do not

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[1] Obviously, it is not a matter of Nixon's authorship, but rather his ability to make such a practice viable over a span of decades. I am well aware that Nixon is often accused of having formulated a contemporary politics of race, and while this is also true, the uniqueness of his appeals to racism was precisely their articulation into this more general politics.

[2] There is some controversy about the origin of the term ... but the most common story supports Roszak's claim.

want to define it by the sixties, but rather, to define the 60s as one conjunctural actualization of a counterculture.

Let me then try to define the specific discursive formation or machinic assemblage that constitutes the existence of a countercultural politics. For the moment, I do not assume that they are all necessary but I do assume that, taken together, they are sufficient for the existence of a counterculture. I would propose six characteristics:

1. A counterculture exists without a singular identity; it has no unifying value, politics, ideology, etc. It is rather a space of variation, hybridity and experimentation, whose practices, movements, formations and struggles are dispersed throughout the spaces of social institutions and everyday life.

That heterogeneity can be described in any number of different dimensions or cartographies including: (a) political (e.g. using Williams' distinctions between oppositional, alternative and independent on the one hand, and dominant, residual and emergent on the other); (b) normative – as a map of values and themes (the map of the 60s counterculture included central notions of love, experience, creativity, the present, authentic individuality, etc. as well as any number of contradictions, e.g., individual/community), but there are no guarantees what those values are or how they are differently configured; (c) pragmatic – as a map of the variety of practices, including political, spiritual, communal-lifestyle, and cultural; and finally, (d) a subcultural map, describing the dispersed space that, in the 1960s, would have included the political radicals, the new communalists (and spiritualists) and the more aesthetico-political groups such as the Yippies., with much of the space filled in by various – in fact the majority population – hybrid formations, groups and individuals.

2. If a counterculture is a space of diversity and multiplicity, it also occupies a unique temporality, which I will call a temporal ambivalence, which gives rise to a specific ambiguity about its own sense of agency and its place in time or, to put it differently, about the inevitability of change and hence, about its role or responsibility to that change. This was, in the 1960s, embodied in the very idea of the Age of Aquarius, which was coming whether we accepted it or not, although at the same time, the members of the counterculture assumed that they had a responsibility to usher in that new era, if not to bring it about. Perhaps more John the Baptist than Jesus, the very act of heralding change brings about the very change it announces.

3. A counterculture is lived by its population as a vital (and sometimes overwhelming) reality; it transforms the affective experience of everyday life, defining an integral and highly charged intensive part or dimension of shared life. While it is not necessarily lived as a visible subcultural identity (although it is for some, at least at certain times), it does provide a self-defining sense of one's place within the larger social spaces.

4. Despite number (1) above, a counterculture does have a sense of unity, which maybe constituted, as it was in the 60s, partly through shared map of values, but it is better characterized as an affective unity, lived as cartographies of orientations and mobilities. That sense of unity may be defined by a shared sense of opposition (see number 5) or, again as in the 60s, by a shared sociological identity (e.g. generational). More often than not, that unity is created from the outside (by the media) and depends on the central role of culture in countercultures (see no. 6).

5. A counterculture stands against the "mainstream/dominant" culture; its judgment is totalizing, rejecting the ground of fundamental structures, the ways of being, established and protected by the existing formations and practices of power. At least in the 60s, taken as a unity, the counterculture had no design on or desire to take over the institutions of power. In that sense, it was a revolution against the state itself as both a site of power and its possible solution. Seen from another angle, the counterculture can be understood to have stood against power itself, even if it seemed at times to want to change specific relations and institutions of power.

6. All of this both demands and is made possible by the centrality of culture in a counterculture. Culture is its pervasive environment. Countercultures work on, in, with and through cultural formations and practices; they are bound together through the popular – e.g., drugs, style and music – so that we can say that the counterculture produced the very culture that in turn constituted its very unity and gave expression to its totalizing judgment of the status quo. It is/was the culture that defines a field – a set of apparatuses – of belonging for its population. Culture defines not a shared identity (there are many identities, including some subcultural identities, possible within a counterculture) but a space and logic of identifications. And consequently, it simultaneously defines a system of vectors of attraction and movement into the counterculture (or what in more traditional terms might be described as mechanisms of recruitment).

The centrality of culture may help to explain the crucial importance of education (and the university) in the 1960s. But the result of the structuring dominance of the popular as affective realm to the counter-culture's sense of itself and its position against the dominant culture was that it left the "enemy" largely undefined (the system, the man, Catch-22) and under-analyzed, so that many different groups understood it differently. In an odd sense, the fact that the core of the counterculture is located in the popular means that it is always more likely that its attention will be focused on forms of differencedfrom (and even resistance –broadly defined – to) the mainstream, rather than on researching and theorizing that mainstream.

Understanding the emergence of such a cultural-political machine requires locating it within its conjuncture, in this case at least, post WWII United States, characterized by: on the one hand, the hegemony of a particular set of institutional structures and compromises, combining specific forms of capitalism, democracy, difference and exclusion, social mobility, cold war politics (nuclear and containment militarisms), etc.; and on the other hand, a particular complex and contradictory structure of feeling constituted by, at the very least, a demand for conformity and consensus based on a sense of accomplishment, relief, comfort (economic boom) and superiority, a powerful experience of anxiety (the bomb, communism), the celebration of expertise on the one hand and youth on the other. Articulated together, these shaped the fragile establishment, the apparent victory, of a certain way of being modern, a certain understanding of "America," although it had been in the making for at least fifty to seventy years, comprising what I have called "liberal modernity."

But this is an insufficient conjunctural story, for just as this formation was becoming hegemonic (or at least appeared to be), it was also being resisted, attacked and sometimes just ignored as a way of living and as a way of being modern. What is really interesting is that such struggles against the mainstream came from all directions, from all sides and aspects of the political, social and cultural life of the nation. It is in this context that I understand the emergence of the particular configuration of youth and popular music/culture that I have called the "rock formation." Refusing for the most part (except at very specific moments, often as much by the mainstream as by those in the formation itself) to be articulated to either ideological or institutional politics, it offered an affective politics aimed against the dominant structure of feeling and its

lived expression in everyday life.[3] It defined a different kind of politics (I am not claiming that it was historically new or unconditioned), refusing the reification of the political and its demand for unities.[4] The counterculture emerged out of this quotidian and affective formation, as the result of a series of events and articulations.

After thirty years of attacks from the right and the left, from various identity formations and even various capitalist formations, the liberal modern mainstream has become little more than a veneer. In fact, it has been supplanted by a series of less stable, less confident scenarios, constituted by a continuously morphing struggles, as a variety of temporary settlements among various fractions and alliances, seeking to establish a new dominant and within it, perhaps less necessarily, perhaps less obviously, a new mainstream, which taken together would again define a new American modernity, a new way of being modern and American. This new structure of feeling, however difficult to pin down, is characterized by an increasing sense of anxiety and insecurity (brought on largely through government deregulation, allowing risk to be moved down the economic scale), a sacralization of markets as defining both freedom and morality, a sense of national decline with an almost paranoid sense of superiority and/or inferiority, and a growing partisanship and refusal not only to compromise but to grant any respect to the other side (cutting across politics, culture and knowledge) and characterizing a growing array of social, cultural and political positions. I might suggest that if the liberal modernity of the post war formation established everyday life as the primary plane on which people defined their lives (and power struggles appear to be waged), the contemporary conjuncture has at the very least made everyday life increasingly precarious, and might even be in the process of dismantling everyday life itself.

That means that, increasingly but beginning after the Second World War, politics is being played out on the plane of affective, quotidian politics, the plane on which first the rock formation and then the counterculture were established. Raising the question of counterculture today is then not a matter of nostalgia (although there may be positive moments of nostalgia involved) nor a question of judging when and if some au-

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[3] I use everyday life here not as equivalent with daily life but as a specific historical possibility, following Lefebvre and my own writings on the subject.

[4] This is not the same as an alliance politics, which is based on a series of compromises between various unities.

thentic counterculture has been "co-opted,"[5] either by the right or the left. In the contemporary context, the question of countercultures raises – in no uncertain terms – the problem of the popular and the cultural side of the problematics of capitalism on the one hand and democracy on the other (against all vanguardisms).[6] It makes visible – almost unavoidable – questions about how one mobilizes people's affective alienations – dissatisfactions, anger, uncertainties, collapsed dreams – and expectations, hopes, and dreams, with the state of society, into new forms of political practice and agency. It returns us, albeit read differently, to Gramsci's understanding of hegemony as working on and through the popular and to a reformed problematic of political agency: how one mobilizes people affectively into or away from political projects.

At the same time, it has to be said that, if I am right to suggests that the conditions of hegemonic struggle, as well as the structures of feeling, have changed so much, then the terms of analysis with which one might have understood the "rock formation" are unlikely to work today, although I do not mean to suggest that the rock formation does not continue to have an affective presence and force at least at some social sites. But it no longer describes the most powerful logics and articulations of the popular. This is not to say that popular culture – or popular music – does not matter to its fans, but that it does not matter in the same way, for very complex reasons, including the changing affective place of "youth" and the increasing importance of both technology and economics as sites of popular insecurity and investment.

Let me now return to the question of the continuing presence, emergence, articulation and re-articulation of contemporary countercultures. One has to, following on what I have said here, ask what formations, what struggles, what spaces emerging and existing today can or even should be described as countercultures or whether they are, despite superficial similarities, something else conceptually. Here I can only begin to speculate and offer some observations about the right and the left (recognizing that these terms do not work as effortlessly and seam-

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[5] After all, the 1960s in the U.S. was a moment in which largely commercial popular culture (origins do not after all determine one's place in an economic system) was, in a variety of ways, articulated to the political. This was the source of at least some of both its weaknesses and its strengths.

[6] In that sense, the US counterculture of the 1960s is more useful at this moment than the intellectually and politically more interesting European versions, whether in France or Italy, in the 1960s.

lessly as they were thought to in the past, and that many people would refuse such binary designations).

I want to suggest that that the contemporary left is in fact characterized by just the sort of space of differences and creativity that is the beginning of a countercultural formation. This includes: the anti- and alterglobalization movements; new and long-standing communalist groups, sometimes referred to as the "social and consciousness movement" (see the work of David Korten's Great Turning, Paul Hawken's Blessed Unrest, and Paul Ray's Cultural Creatives, as examples); some versions of social entrepreneurialism; new spiritualisms; techno-utopians; various progressive political struggles; certain popular music formations (e.g., techno-nomads); and various groups committed to a variety of cultural, performative and aesthetic practices of politics. In fact, this explosion of diversity and creativity far exceeds anything in the 60s, so that it can sometimes seem like there are just too many groups, too many issues, etc. This is partly explainable because of the increasing global awareness and operation of such groups juxtaposed to their often increasing localism, the increasing tendency to organize in terms of single-issue struggles (even if they do understand that everything is connected) and the increasing sense of the possibilities for struggle (and hence for more pragmatic strategies) within "the mainstream" itself.

Many of these groups and formations overlap. All of them (according to Hawken, they number literally in the millions) believe in alternative futures, alternative worlds, alternative economies, although they may mean different things by such terms. For many of the participants in these many groups and practices, these struggles are vital and constitutive elements of their lives without constituting a simple or single identity. And yet, while all of this suggests the existence of something we might want to call a counterculture, at least two interesting and significant elements seems to argue against it. First, even while some of these groups do see themselves as part of a "movement of movement," more often than not, that space of diversity is limited to their own formation. Many of these groups and formations simply do not know that the others exist or, just as problematically, they do not acknowledge a commonality with each other. For example, too often, the splits that emerged in the 60s between hippies, yippies and politicos (an artificial distinction since most countercultural participants existed in the hybrid spaces between these formations), have become even more reified as different political strategies (independent, alternative and oppositional – but now one

would have to add yet another category for resistance within the mainstream).

Second, and perhaps even more importantly, the enormous diversity of the counterculture not only in terms of values, definitions of "the enemy," strategies and practices, and groups, has resulted in enormous social diversity as well. This is no longer a generationally centered counterculture, but one dispersed across all the possible social categories, including generations, nationalities and ethnicities, class, etc. It is not surprising, therefore, that there is no common culture, but I think, the current potentiality of a counterculture (or of a multiplicity of countercultures) is constrained by the absence of any cultural forms or practices capable of constituting an affective space of belonging together, a space of identification and, as I have already argued, a space by which people can follow vectors into the counterculture. This largely explains the paradox: if the potential counterculture is as large and active as I have suggested, why is it so invisible? The question is: Is it possible to have a counterculture without a popular discourse, "without a song"?

The situation on the right is even more difficult, and I must admit that I have only begun to try to understand the landscape. I have argued before that the success of the New Right (with and following the rise of Ronald Reagan, etc.) depends in part on its ability to appropriate and rearticulate a variety of countercultural strategies from the rock formation and the 60s counterculture. The "tea party movement" – however frightening it may be – poses interesting and real questions for anyone interested in contemporary cultural and political struggles. Yet, the left continues to tell the same stories and dismiss such popular movements as based in false consciousness, or ignorance, or even bigotry. Such decisions to ignore "where people are" and to refuse to engage with the popular hopes, fears, languages and logics of calculation – as well as with the strategies of other political positions engaged in the same struggle over the imagination of the coming modernity is one of the very reasons that the various articulations of a new conservatism continue to reassert themselves in sometimes very successful and influential ways. After all, bad stories make bad politics! If nothing else, the left, it seems to me, has failed to see or take seriously just how polarized the political culture of the United States has become, and how various left fractions have themselves contributed to many of the dimensions of this polarization.

The tea party movement is ambiguously placed in relation to traditional party politics – both inside and outside. Defining themselves

somewhere between the political (against big government and taxes) and the cultural (nationalism, constitutionalism, often religion), the tea parties were called into existence at the intersection of George W. Bush's failed presidency (failed because, retrospectively – and only retrospectively – it failed to meet the expectations and hopes of certain conservative fractions and values) and the election of Barack Obama (and the apparent resurgence of liberalism that it expressed). It is, without any doubt, a populist movement, without any obvious leaders – although they do have a variegated and even contradictory set of expressive spokespersons taken from various public domains, each speaking to some sub-set of groups. The movement is a space of diversity – and yes, even creativity and experimentation – with some groups leaning toward party and electoral politics (strategizing to get rid of incumbents and even, perhaps, take back the Republican Party through involvement at the precinct level[7]), others threatening violence (and explicitly forming alliances with the militia movement) and still others more ambiguously expressing dissatisfaction with the political and social direction of the country and engaging in often more cultural forms of protest. It has even proved to be difficult to get a demographic portrait of the movement, presumably because it is impossible to define membership or even a strictly representative event. Instead, in terms of values, practices or politics, the tea party movement is an emergent formation without a center.

That the movement is affective is rather obvious, because their "ideological position" is so visibly contradictory. It is an anti-democratic war waged in the name of democracy. It is willing to defend the constitution at all costs, including violating the most fundamental principles and articles of the constitution. In the name of the people, it attacks the popular. And in the name of the popular, it attacks the people who would dare assert their values over that of the market or the movement. But if we try to understand it ideologically, we will fail – because what drives it is less a coherent political position, or a set of values and principles, but a loosely configured chaos of responses to a profoundly troubled and deeply felt affective dissatisfaction or alienation; it is the expression of widely felt fears – in a context of norms and hopes that are no longer possible to actualize. And consequently, these movements enact their politics in and through cultural forms rather than the more tradition and

[7] Which is how Goldwater's supporters first took over the Republican Party.

obvious political tactics. They are, much like the left, fighting the wrong battle with the wrong strategies and tolls. But unlike the left, they speak to a sense of immediacy and frustration that is both deeply personal and deeply historical. It comes not from a position of ethical judgment (or an economy of abstract political sympathy) but from a sense of the lived impossibility of the current conjuncture. And because it speaks of and through the popular, in cultural terms that are widely accessible, it has the potential to have a profound impact. At the very least, we need to take seriously the possibility that it is, in significant ways, a countercultural movement that has to be taken seriously.