

The Birth of Subcultures and Countercultures: on the Ideal of Nation and the Struggle between the Alienated and the Hegemony

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Resumen

El presente ensayo explora el nacimiento de las sub y contraculturas en el marco de la teoría de nación. Proponemos que la construcción del ideal de nación, como una “comunidad imaginada” (como la llama Benedict Anderson), excluye y rechaza a su vez a quienes no encajan dentro de ese ideal hegemónico. Estos individuos excluidos y marginados pueden llegar a conformar grupos de personas que construyen subjetividades alternativas, que crean símbolos identitarios y que pueden incluso llegar a confrontar abiertamente al status quo, dando inicio a una batalla cultural sin fin de creación y apropiación de símbolos.

Palabras claves: hegemonía, subcultura, contracultura, nación, identidad

Abstract

This essay explores the birth of sub and countercultures in light of the theory of Nation. We propose that the construction of the ideal of nation, as imagined communities (as Benedict Anderson calls them), at the same time, excludes and rejects those individuals unfit to that hegemonic ideal. Those excluded and marginalized individuals might constitute groups of people with alternate subjectivities, who create identity symbols and who sometimes confront the status quo, initiating thus an endless cultural battle of creation and appropriation of symbols.

Keywords: hegemony, subculture, counterculture, nation, identity

Todo proceso de cambio genera crisis, ya que las estructuras prevalecientes se resisten ante la presencia de nuevos elementos que luchan por instalarse en el sistema.

María de Los Ángeles Palacios, Estado-nación y nacionalismo.

Las subculturas son, por consiguiente, formas expresivas; lo que expresan en última instancia, sin embargo, es una tensión fundamental entre quienes ocupan el poder y quienes están condenados a posiciones subordinadas y a vidas de segunda clase.

Dick Hebdige, Subcultura, El significado del Estilo.

Sub and countercultures are not isolated groups of young rebels and misfits that appear, from time to time, in the social scene to bring chaos and to strike at the foundations of the establishment in order to entertain themselves. On the contrary, they result from a constant natural process in every healthy society made up of a heterogeneous group of people. These groups or individuals who do not fit into the social, cultural, political or economic system struggle to gain acceptance and respect for their alternative views, lifestyles, ideals and values in order to validate their subjectivity. The birth of the subcultures is not gratuitous. It originates from a process of unification and rejection of given members of societies and nations. The purpose of this study is, on the one hand, to propose a connection between the the imposition of ideals of nation, which determine categories of appropriate, normal behavior, and the emergence of sub and countercultures.

We argue that nations, or “imagined communities” as Benedict Anderson calls them, determine a series of ideals of nation and citizens (standards of submission, behavior, morality, productivity, etc.) imposed by hegemonic groups, in which certain individuals and groups do not “fit.” The rejected groups and individuals, therefore, become the others: foreigners in their own land, exiles. On the other, we attempt at exploring the process of appropriation and reappropriation of sub and countercultural symbols and discourses by both the cultural hegemony and the subgroups. This study contributes to the current discussion on subcultures, subalternity, deviant subjects and marginalized individuals but through the lens of the project of a nation and cultural hegemony.

Nation as a Myth

Benedict Anderson explores the notion of the nation as myth, established by the hegemonies to unify people in a single feeling of communion and to transform them into productive work force, law abiding citizens and defensive military units under control. Anderson explains the conception of nations as imagined communities since “regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings” (1991, p. 7). These imagined comradeships generate a strong feeling of belonging within their members that pushes them to fight for

their mother-land, no matter the price. The word “fraternity” carries the idea of a brotherhood (not sisterhood) among the members of a nation. This idea imposes an obligation and a duty with the idealized figure of the (mother) nation. This brotherhood must respect and protect the nation as sons are expected to do with their mother: a cause that is, we are made to believe, even worth dying for.

Furthermore, Anderson adds that “[the nation] is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (1991, p. 6). Going back to the idea of brotherhood previously discussed, all members of a nation are taught to see other members of the nation as brothers, even people who live in the opposite side of the country, including those with different life styles, from different social classes and education, and who they will probably never meet. However, in the event of actually getting to know each other, all those social, cultural or economic differences would possibly separate them as foreigners. These differences regarding social class, ethnicity, gender, sexual preference, religion, and so on, are also highlighted strategically by the same state—the group or groups in power that are in charge of the economic, political, social, cultural administration of a nation—that wants to unify us in a fraternal community when needed. For instance, as Salman Rushdie states in “The New Empire within Britain,” the British government refers to the citizens as “we,” but that “we” is only directed to the Caucasian population. The author further

states that “[o]ne of the more curious aspects of British immigration law is that many Rhodesians, South Africans and other white non-Britons have automatic right of entry and residence here, by virtue of having one British-born grandparent; whereas many British citizens are denied these rights, because they happen to be black” (1992, p. 133). The states highlight the differences—in this case racial differences—among the citizens as long as they are unnecessary. Thus, we have the “bad,” the different, the dangerous individuals that must be kept at bay—otherwise, they will be punished or eliminated—, but who become brothers when the states need them (as cannon fodder); the “different” become equal, brothers, sons of the mother nation.

The state promotes the artificial union of its citizens by means of a series of images, symbols, and ideologies with the intention of controlling and utilizing them. It creates imaginary characteristics and relations of a particular country in a way that they seem natural, as something embedded in our genetic code. María de Los Ángeles Palacios argues that “it is inside the conjunction that takes place between the state and the nation that nationalism appears as the feeling of belonging to a community whose members identify themselves with a series of concrete symbols, beliefs and lifestyles and who manifest the will of deciding over their own destiny” (2004, p. 17; my translation). In this sense, citizens do not have a genuine opportunity to build their own destiny outside the nation because they are born in a system that trains and raises them—by means of these preestablished ideological symbols—as members of a particular nation,

to faithfully serve its purposes. For example, individuals born in Costa Rica will probably be (or consider themselves) “Costa Rican” all their life. Even if they no longer live in the country, they will identify themselves with “Costa Rican” traditions and customs, its soccer², certain values, and so on. As if by nature, they will belong to the group of people called Costa Ricans, although the link is not natural, but cultural and ideological.

Timothy Brennan, in “The National Longing for Form,” refers to the words of José Carlos Mariátegui about the nation as a myth: “the nation . . . is an abstraction, an allegory, a myth that does not correspond to a reality that can be scientifically defined” (1994, p. 49). Brennan adds to this idea that “[r]ace, geography, tradition, language, size, or some combination of these seem finally insufficient for determining national essence, and yet people die for nations, fight wars for them, and write fictions on their behalf” (1994, p. 49). As a result, the state is able to manipulate different people, from different contexts within the national context, under the terms of nationalism and patriotism: it is able to create an imaginary equality of rights and duties for all the members of the nation even upon those who have been denied other rights. As an illustration, Roland Barthes, in *Mythologies*, discusses a photograph in the cover of a *Paris-Match* magazine in which a young black soldier in a French uniform is probably saluting the French flag. Barthes explains what the picture signifies to the soldier: “that France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any colour discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and that there is no better

answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors” (1999, p. 116). As shown here, the state, in this case the French Empire, manipulates the images on the mass media and shows a colonized subject immersed in a patriotic and loyal act to “his” nation. He does not question the fact that it is an imposed nation that he believes to serve as a regular French citizen. What is not mentioned or reflected in the photograph is that, undoubtedly, the value of that black soldier probably lies solely in his duties, service, and personal sacrifices to the nation as a soldier, not in his rights as a French (though colonized) citizen.

Ernest Renan affirms that “the essence of a nation is that all the individuals have many things in common, and also that they have forgotten many things” (1994, p. 11). Members of nations forget (or are driven to forget) about bloody past events, repression and oppression they or their predecessors might have had to experience, and, especially, the differences between them, so that they will act in certain politically specific ways. For instance, the black soldier that Barthes alludes to has forgotten the colonization process in which the French Empire imposed its laws, culture and rules over his former culture. In times of war, during natural catastrophes, even in a soccer game, all the members of the country are addressed as brothers, and their differences, previously highlighted, are minimized and temporarily forgotten. But when it is necessary to keep the dissident voices under control, that is, when these citizens claim for equal rights, the state reminds its members of those differences that separate the “good”

citizens from the “bad” ones. Forgetting is a useful tool of manipulation and control employed by states to erase from and implant in the collective memory certain episodes that may drive people to upset the “order” (in the case of the dissidents,) or trying to gain control (in the case of the regular citizens). Rushdie, in “Imaginary Homelands,” quotes a line from Milan Kundera that reflects this situation and the position of the dissident groups: “The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting” (1992, p. 14). The state implements this forgetting-and-reminding strategy that manipulates the collective memory of the subjects by means of the Ideological State Apparatuses—the ideological structures that help to construct and sustain the national myth.

Louis Althusser, in “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” also refers to ideology as an imaginary creation to subject its individual. Ideology keeps the subjects working under its control. Althusser explains how the system manipulates the images of the productive and unproductive subjects by stating that

the subjects ‘work,’ they ‘work by themselves’ in the vast majority of cases, with the exception of the ‘bad subjects’ who on occasions provoke the intervention of one of the detachments of the (repressive) State apparatus [the police, the army, among others]. But the vast majority of (good) subjects work all right ‘all by themselves,’ i.e. by ideology (whose concrete forms are realized in the Ideological State Apparatuses [the family, the school, the church, and so on]). (1971, p. 181)

States create their own ideology and make their subjects work (for it) and believe (in it) as the natural order of things. Notwithstanding, some individuals clash with the concepts and symbols of the ideal citizen and nation. Some of them might feel excluded or even persecuted by the state and its apparatuses. The same ideology that pretends to unify people can also manifest its anger with the subjects (the renegades, the others) that contradict, confront or disobey its precepts. It deploys its repressive power to persecute, repress, and control them through intimidation or force. Luis Britto maintains that

[t]he marginalizing power determines, in a distressing manner, uniformity inside its own circle, while it exaggerates, at the same time, the difference of the marginalized, to the extent of constructing them as the other, the in-human, the inhuman, the pagan, the heretic, the slave, the pariah, the lumpen, the mentally ill, the dissident. Every system prone to experience failure, thus divides the universe in a conservative nucleus of righteous conformists opposed to an antihuman enemy constituted by deviant individuals over whom all forms of evil are projected. (1991, pp. 20-21; my translation)

Ideology unifies (and homogenizes) the nation’s ideal members and creates within them the feeling of being at home while at the same time it teaches them to hate, reject, and alienate the subjects that threaten the stability of their ideal lifestyle.

Britto also insists that the marginalized groups do not have the same

possibilities the hegemony has to alienate the opposer. They have to cohabit with the same people that reject them and to conform to the rules of the system that marginalizes them. This condition generates a clash of values, since the marginalized are “subjected to a constant assessment that results from following both the canon of [the mainstream] and their own” (1991, p. 21; my translation). They are thus conflicted with the collision between their own ideologies as a group and the ideology of the hegemony –after all, adapting to the ruling ideology represents social and economic survival. This phenomenon, of course, does not diminish the value of these groups; on the contrary, it manifests the negative domination of the hegemony that tries to eliminate any opposing action or ideology. The subgroups are then forced to reconcile with the hegemony and relinquish their fight, although this does not mean being accepted as equals but rather being absorbed, subjected and separated from within the system. In this way, the minorities, the marginalized, and the deviant are isolated from the dominant group either by force or by means of ideology; they are rejected by their “fellow citizens,” they are condemned by the church (often an important and helpful ally of the state), they are sometimes persecuted by the law: they become exiles in their own land.

Exiles are individuals who leave their homeland due to political, religious or cultural persecution. They settle in a foreign country that offers safety; a place where their lives and freedom are no longer blatantly threatened. In “Reflections on Exile,” Edward Said discusses the feelings of the exiles. The critic explains that “[n]ationalisms are

about group, but in a very acute sense exile is a solitude experienced outside the group: the deprivations felt at not being with others in the communal habitation” (2003, p. 177). A similar experience is felt by the alienated in their own land, as they might feel that they no longer belong to the same group as the rest of their “fellow citizens.” In this sense, they undergo an internal exile. Douglas Kellner refers to a similar situation in regard to the conflicts of the creation of identity in modern society. He explains that “the experience of modernité is one of novelty, of the ever-changing new, of innovation and transitoriness... One’s identity may become out of date, or superfluous, or no longer socially validated. One may thus experience anomie, a condition of extreme alienation in which one is no longer at home in the world” (1995, p. 232). Identity, as consequence of imaginarily being a member of a particular group or nation, is constantly confronted by changes –usually imposed by the dominant group based on economic and political motives– that must be adopted in order to continue being part of the group. This phenomenon might generate different reactions from the marginalized (the exiles in their own land): while some might conform and submit, others might create forms of resistance in order to minimize the hegemonic power, or at least to find a decent position within the social structure. The false “equilibrium” imposed by the hegemonic groups staggers, and the subgroups become a dangerous malady in the power relations.

Nations, thus, are not stable entities but are actually in a state of constant conflict with these subgroups. Anderson points out that “many

‘old nations,’ once thought fully consolidated, find themselves challenged by ‘sub’-nationalisms within their borders—nationalisms which, naturally, dream of shedding this subness one happy day” (1991, p. 3). These subgroups attempt to free themselves from a sub-ordinated position, as they find in themselves the qualities to be considered first-class citizens, to have access to the same rights as the people who belong to or sympathize with the hegemony, and also to express and celebrate their differences instead of hiding them. The symbols that hegemony creates in order to perpetuate the national myth become ineffective for these groups. They are not as willing to fight for as they are to fight against a country that does not recognize their rights because of being different or not conforming. Thus, from these “sub-nationalisms,” the minorities, the dissidents, and the sub and counter cultures emerge in an attempt to vindicate their position as valuable members of society. So the struggle begins.

Sub and Countercultures

Subcultures and a countercultures are subgroups separated from the main social or cultural structure. They represent the exiles of the world, the excrescence of society, the ones to be nullified or exterminated—even if that represents the decline of the social apparatus. Nevertheless, in spite of sharing this marginalized condition, the differences between these two groups are quite remarkable. On the one hand, subcultures separate themselves from (or are separated by) the main culture in order to look for their own lifestyle,

while, at the same time, they try to be accepted and recognized as part of that same culture—differences and all. On the other hand, the countercultures are far more aggressive groups. Luis Britto affirms that “when a subculture reaches an irreconcilable level of conflict with the dominant culture, a counterculture is produced: a battle between models, a war among world views that is nothing more than the expression of discord between groups that are neither integrated with nor protected by the unit of the social body” (1991, p. 18; my translation). Countercultures, then, are subcultures that rebel and attack, through various means, the cultural hegemony that alienates them and denies their legitimate existence as members of society. The dominant culture reacts to these attacks by appropriating the differences that characterize these groups, then exaggerating and using them to alienate or neutralize the subgroups as a menace to the stability of the (imposed) social apparatus and the status quo. In this respect, Britto affirms that “culture transforms itself through the progressive generation of subcultures, which constitute attempts to register a change in the milieu or a new differentiation of the social organism... Those processes are essential for survival... an unalterable culture produces the decadence and the extinction of the social organism” (1991, p. 17; my translation).

These transformations are necessary for a culture and a society to develop and to renovate itself. Culture is not static; it is a living organism in constant change. Therefore, the ideal response of the dominant culture would be to adapt itself to the social, political, environmental, cultural, and

economic changes of the world; however, that is not always the case. Britto refers to three different processes a culture can undergo when dealing with subcultures: evolution, revolution and decadence. A first instance appears when the dominant culture adapts itself to the new patterns: “[t]he adapting processes occur with a minimum cost and at the ideal time: it is what we call evolution” (1991, p. 18; my translation). The second process corresponds to what Britto calls revolution. This occurs when the culture responds too slowly or too late to the social changes, which leads to “a violent destruction of institutions and ideologies that have become deficient” (1991, p. 18; my translation). Revolution still permits the social survival of the different groups, but with deeper social and political consequences. The last and more damaging process is decadence. It ensues when the main culture decides to ignore the changes that are taking place: “[c]ulture may tamper with its perceptive mechanisms in order to block the alarm signals, or it could paralyze its decision centers, or disable its response mechanisms in such a way that would avoid this [evolution] to happen” (1991, p. 19; my translation). In this instance, the dominant culture responds to the subgroups with denial strategies, nullifying and obliterating them. There is neither cultural benefit nor learning; on the contrary, according to Britto, this scenario presents no possibility for cultural evolution.

Considering, for instance, the process of globalization, one of the strategies adopted by different countries in order to unify the markets is to standardize the cultures as a way to ensure similar needs and tastes in the population, reducing in that way the possibility

of local cultures interfering with the capitalist economic development. This is what Nestor García Canclini calls “a process of multinational assembly, a flexible articulation of parts, a setting up of traits that any citizen, from any country, religion or ideology could read and use” (1995, p. 16; my translation). This desire for uniformity leads to an ideological attack in order to suppress the local cultural differences and, to a greater extent, the subcultural differences, and to impose a more universal, less particular culture. Moreover, the cultural hegemony possesses the power and resources to spread and impose – by indoctrination or by repression– the dominant ideology and culture. Marx and Engels, in *The German Ideology*, refer to this phenomenon:

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas; hence of the relationships which make the one class the ruling one, therefore, the ideas of its dominance.

In addition, Dick Hebdige refers to the role of mass media in the imposition and dissemination of an ideology

—the dominant ideology—and the strategically restricted access to those same means for the opposing groups:

As little as we might think of it, we will realize that the access to the media that broadcasts the ideas in our society (that is mainly, the mass media) is not the same for all the classes. Some groups have more access decision making and voice, more options to set norms, to organize meaning, while for others, the situation is less favorable, as they have less power to produce and impose their definitions to the world” (2004, pp. 29-30; my translation).

The minority groups, the lower economic classes, or the dissidents, among many others, do not have either the economic or political power to access the means of communication (usually owned by the very same hegemonic groups). Even with today’s public access to social media, which empowers groups of every sort to freely broadcast their world view, the hegemony employs different techniques to discredit their discourse as, for instance, fake, worthless, unprofessional, even as mere conspiracy theories: consider what Donald Trump has recently done in the United States with the information coming from both established and alternative sources of information opposing him, categorizing them as “fake news”. Therefore, the watching population receives the ideological message of the most powerful side, and, since the counterpart is silenced, minimized or discredited, they take the former as the only truth.

In “Censorship,” Salman Rushdie affirms that the practice of censoring

certain discourses, as part of media domination, “can deaden the imagination of the people. Where there is no debate, it is hard to go on remembering, every day, that there is a suppressed side to every argument. It becomes almost impossible to conceive of what the suppressed things might be. It becomes easy to think that what has been suppressed was valueless, anyway, or so dangerous that it needed to be suppressed” (1992, p. 39). The hegemonic discourse becomes the discourse of common sense, the natural order of things, while the opposing discourses are forgotten. Catherine Belsey explains that “Ideology is inscribed in discourse in the sense that it is literally written or spoken in it; it is not a separate element which exists independently in some free-floating realm of ‘ideas’ and is subsequently embodied in words, but a way of thinking, speaking, experiencing” (1980, p. 5). Therefore, the voice of the cultural hegemony, through mass media, reaches the population which takes it as the voice of common sense. The voices of the dissident groups are minimized, their discourse is regulated and censored, and their ideological message is interrupted, blurred, edited or discredited.

As a result, sub and countercultures confront the dominant ideology with a counter-ideology, the moral standards and values with anti-values and immorality, and, in some cases, the law and the police with crime and violence (or war with manifestations of peace and love). Hebdige affirms that “subcultures [and countercultures] of spectacle express their forbidden content (awareness of class and difference) in forbidden forms (transgression of the codes of conduct and etiquette,

law infringement, etc.). These profane expressions are often significantly censored as ‘antinatural’” (2004, p. 127; my translation). The hegemonic ideology contrasts its own discourse as true and natural with the “antinatural” discourse of the alienated, as a way to invalidate and nullify their countercultural power. Thus, the counter groups identify themselves with other minorities that share a similar feeling of alienation and that fight for similar rights in order to create stronger alliances and a more powerful voice. As Britto affirms, “Countercultures, as we will see, always talk about a concrete human being, defined by a particular feature: young, woman, black, Chicano, Puerto Rican, aborigine, homosexual, alienated. And they do it not to invite them to dissolve into an abstract and impersonal humanity, but to exhort them to manifest that difference: to emphasize it to an aggressive extent” (1991, p. 44; my translation). The discourse of the counterculture is aggressive and, instead of hiding the traits that differentiate it, it exalts and shows them proudly to the world as the elements that make up their cultural existence; moreover, the counterculture exhorts other minorities to grasp their diversity and to exhibit it. Otherwise, it would fall into the same alienating discourse it attempts to subvert: the discourse of universality and uniformity in which difference is punished with exclusion.

The hegemony creates a series of symbols –such as national symbols (the flag) for instance– in order to control and manipulate its “subjects.” As a result, the dissident groups must substitute them with their own symbols of rebellion and difference. Sub and countercultures adopt their own cultural

symbols (music, clothing, language, and so on) which represent their “differences” and their position in the cultural life. Hebdige explains that

the most trivial objects—a safety-pin, a pointed shoe, a motorcycle, objects that obtain... a symbolic dimension and end up becoming sort of stigmas, evidence of a self-inflicted exile... [E]veryday objects endowed with a double meaning: on one hand, they warn the “normal” world of the danger of a sinister presence—that of the difference—and attract towards themselves vague suspicion, uncomfortable laughter, “vicious and mute rage.” On the other hand, for those who erect them as icons and wield them as gospel or anathema, those objects become signs of a forbidden identity, sources of valor (2004, p. 15; my translation).

The different scares and shocks the “normal” because it represents the prohibited standards of behavior, the evil, the anti-aesthetic violation of all norms, the use of common things in uncommon situations. The effect: repulsion, hate, discomfort, annoyance, although sometimes tainted with admiration and envy due to the courage needed to adopt this position; after all, prohibited things are very attractive, but “normal” people are afraid of the social or legal punishment. The idea of a “self-inflicted exile,” mentioned by Hebdige, may seem confusing since we have been discussing the situation of the sub and countercultures as rejected by the hegemony. However, what the author suggests is that these groups exalt the same differences that the hegemony uses to alienate them as tools to state their position in society.

In the case of the subcultures, as mentioned earlier, they separate themselves and try to live a parallel life to that of the main culture, while countercultures use their differences as tools of rebellion and as a counter discourse with the purpose of subverting the ideology of the hegemony and forcing, to a certain extent, a cultural evolution (in other words: a revolution.). This leads to a separation or exile that partly comes from the hegemony and partly from the counterculture. What the subgroups (in general) want is not uniformity without differences, but rather acceptance of those differences. Britto adds that the importance of the countercultural symbols lies in that, "Countercultures showed that different movements of social classes –defined by age, sex or ethnic origin– can become agents of social change, as long as they are able to create suprestructural symbols that define their identity, their values and their objectives" (1991, p. 211; my translation). These symbols become part of the culture of the marginalized groups and, therefore, become symbolic aggressions against the main culture and its own established symbols. Moreover, these symbols represent a need for any subgroup that wants to make a statement, to propose a change and to be heard, to be made visible and taken into account. By means of representative symbols, a group creates its identity –it stands out from the crowd and explores its own experience as a living part of culture that is not ruled (though pressured) by hegemony.

The response of the dominant culture is to attack these groups with ideology: an ideological war whose purpose is to neutralize the dissident groups. As Britto explains, the hegemony "must

then held an ideological offensive, a special kind of attack destined to devour its own children, to deny its own capacity of transformation" (1991, p. 16; my translation). The strategy is to falsify the symbols in which the identity of these groups is based on and turn them into marketable products. For instance, Britto holds that "by appropriating the jeans of the manual worker, the music of the black, the desires of the sexually repressed groups, the irrationality of the mentally ill and the drug of the declassed, [the hegemony] promoted them by means of graphic techniques of advertising and the comic book, spread them with the methods of industrial marketing and assimilated them as glorifications of mass consumption" (1991, p. 58; my translation). Formerly rebellious symbols are appropriated by hegemonic groups and transformed into massively consumed products. Consequently, countercultures are transformed into pop culture. Britto points out that "pop was nothing but the massive appropriation of a system of deviant symbols by a culture of machinery: the conversion of a counterculture into a consumerist subculture" (1991, p. 36; my translation). The symbols that formerly represented a special group with a certain ideology and a particular world view are turned into products for the masses: the differentiation is no longer a dissident discourse but a trend or fashion. It is essential at this point to clarify that every product, whether countercultural, subcultural, or pop is a commercial product. The difference lies in the market the product aims for, the symbolism it carries, and in those in charge of commercializing it. The pop market receives an "empty" product that will

match the needs of all and none of the consumers at the same time. As Britto explains it, “[i]f the market has then to prevail in all aspect of life, it is obvious that it should reduce the aesthetics of a product stripped of any coherent discourse, set by the technical complexity needed to attract the demand and the uncritical eclecticism as to cover the widest possible range of tastes” (1991, p. 222; my translation). If the product does not carry a particular ideology, people will accept it as universal and representative of their reality. Nevertheless, pop products are not totally empty of ideology; actually, they hide the ideology of the cultural hegemony: consumerism, capitalism, chauvinism, and so on. However, this ideology is not openly stated but hidden in a façade of teenage issues, beautiful women, expensive cars, smart phones, and the ideal American lifestyle. These sensory elements fit the desires or the actual lifestyle of many people, and the pop industry does not usually deal with controversial topics regarding politics or social issues unless they can be properly commercialized and accepted by a majority (a light approach to women’s rights and sexual liberation, hunger, poverty, to name a few). And if it does address these issues, it presents them in a way that the hegemony is not directly addressed: it comments on the issue without proposing a viable solution.

Britto views no problem in a product being consumed by the masses, the problem lies in the appropriation of those symbols by a structure whose goals “are not aesthetic, but commercial” (1991, p. 34; my translation). This commercialization and massification of the symbols of sub and countercultures

neutralize their social and cultural function and transform them into a mere product (1991, p. 33). In that way, the jeans (mentioned previously as one of the best examples of the appropriation of a symbol by a market), once the symbol of the laborers and of the rebellious youth of the 60’s, is now transformed into a new product that can be worn also by the upper classes:

In the same way as the pair of jeans bought by an adolescent in the sixties denotes the intention of acquiring cheap, practical and hard-wearing clothes that symbolically assimilates him to an excluded group (youth); while the pair of branded blue jeans bought by the cultural heroin of the jet set at the store of an exclusive designer, denotes the economic influx and the artificial anti-conventionalism of the parasitic class (1991, p. 62; my translation).

Another example of this process of appropriation is clearly depicted in the Punk culture. Since its birth during the 70’s, Punk culture created a completely different way of confronting society. Their music and language represented their rebellious ideology and their discomfort towards the establishment. However, their way of dressing, that distorted all the patterns of “decency” and “good taste,” was (and is to a certain extent) the most shocking aspect of this counterculture. This new style exaggerated certain symbolic elements that identified them with the lower social classes. Punk anti-aesthetic was considered shocking by the hegemony and the “normal” citizens who view it as an aberration. The strategy used by

the hegemony in order to neutralize the shocking effect of the Punk style was to modify their symbols so that they can be accepted by and sold even to higher social classes and to the masses of apolitical consumers. By turning them into fashionable items representing “youth” rebellion, but empty of any political discourse (rebellion for the sake of rebellion) Punk symbols are distorted aesthetically and ideologically. They do not represent the lower working class anymore; on the contrary, they become expensive signs of status for the wannabe rebellious yuppies oblivious of any political or social cause.

Hebdige also refers to the hegemonic portrayal of these ex-countercultural symbols: “The style, especially, provokes a double response: it is alternatively exalted (in the fashion magazine) and attacked and ridiculed (in the journals that define the subcultures as social problems)” (2004, p. 129; my translation). On one hand, the hegemony promotes these symbols as a fashion in order to profit from them; while still presenting them as (light) rebellious icons to encourage those who identify with their countercultural origin and, therefore, turning them into costumers. It is the popularization of the punk style. There are specialized punk-Gothic stores where costumers can buy all the characteristic clothes and accessories to be part of these subgroups. Ironically, the prices of these formerly low class items are not longer accessible for the lower classes. The immersion of the countercultural symbols in the commercial machinery eliminates its subversive potential: “the creation and diffusion of new styles,” Hebdige affirms, “is indissociably linked to the process

of production, publicity and image that will inevitably lead to the deactivation of the subversive power of the subculture” (2004, p. 131; my translation). The symbols are emptied of their countercultural message and inserted into the list of marketable products for everybody. “By means of this constant process of reclamation,” Hebdige explains, “the fractured order is repaired, and the subculture is integrated as entertainment inside the dominant mythology from where it emanates: as “folk devil”, as Other, as Enemy” (2004, p. 130; my translation). The main culture steals the subversive significance of the symbols and creates a new one that fits into normality. Thus, a former ideological symbol of rebellion which reflected the identity of a subgroup degenerates into an empty product of mass consumption (empty of its subversive power, but full of the hegemonic ideology). Fighting against this appropriation of symbolism of sub and countercultures, groups still strive to create a variety of forms, concepts, and aesthetics that continue to challenge the hegemonic groups. They evolve as a group in an attempt to survive and to avoid being absorbed by the main culture. As Britto explains,

a whole new series of aesthetics based on tradition, locale, nostalgia and intimate experience become cultural responses to the threat of the end of History, Globalization and the end of the Subject; thus, conceptual art, performance, Land Art, and other ephemeral and hardly marketable experiences become a form of resistance to the fetishization and commercialization of the creative work (1991, p. 223; my translation).

The sub and counter groups develop new strategies and adequate old ones to confront the constant appropriation of their symbols and lives. Every day, the response of the counterculture becomes more and more aggressive, shocking or disgusting to the “normal,” and the hegemony develops new techniques to transform these new shocking symbols into pop products.

Nations wage a constant war not on foreign threats, but on domestic grounds. As previously discussed, the cultural war arises from the imposition by the dominant culture of a paradigm of nation and citizen which not all members are able to fulfill. Moreover, the imaginary brotherhood that a state builds as a tool of domination and a call to action in favor of the mother nation proves fragile when adapting to the needs of all its members. Equality is advertised in times of (state) need, but dismissed in the better days; the result, as in any other war, is violence, rejection and exile. We argue that these exiles in their own land, being rejected due to particular characteristics that turn them into undesirable subjects (age, culture, race, gender, religion, behavior, among many others), might organize into subgroups that share similar discourses, codes of behavior and values. These subgroups contest the dominant culture by creating their own cultural symbols as representations of their alienation. The reaction of the cultural hegemony to this confrontation determines whether it evolves naturally with them, ensuring a healthy social structure, or decays by denying the subgroups their space in the cultural scenario and appropriating and nullifying their symbols as mere merchandise.

Too often, it seems, the latter prevails, and the cultural battle continues in an endless process of creation-appropriation- and re-appropriation of symbols and identities.

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