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Pour une réévaluation du concept de contre-culture

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Reappraising « Counterculture »

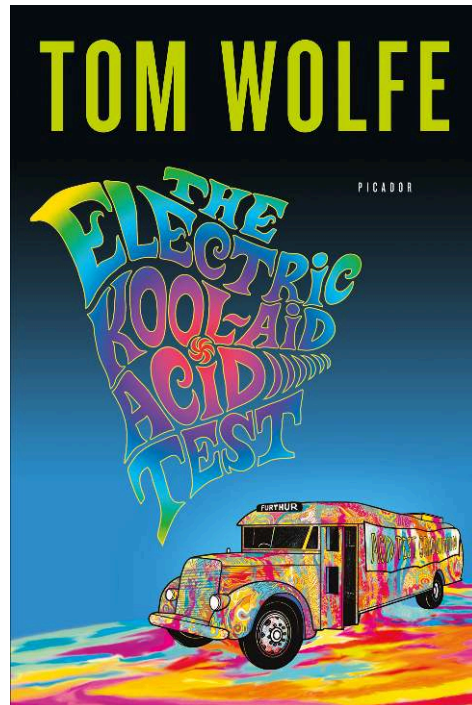
Pour une réévaluation du concept de contre-culture

Andy Bennett

EDITOR'S NOTE

This text was published in *Countercultures & Popular Music* (Farnham, Ashgate, 2014), while its French translation appeared in this issue of *Volume!* in 2012.

- 1 SINCE ITS EMERGENCE as a key socio-political term during the late 1960s, the concept of counterculture has reappeared periodically in literature, media and vernacular discourse as a means of articulating aspects of counter-hegemonic ideology, practice and belief. Generally speaking, 'counterculture' is used to denote a point of disjuncture between what are represented as *dominant* or *mainstream* values and alternative value systems that, although the purview of a minority, are articulated through various forms of media – music, writing, art, protest and so on; these serve to amplify the collective voice of a counterculture in such a way that a minority becomes a 'significant' minority. In terms of academic theorisation, counterculture has been dramatically overshadowed by the term 'subculture', the latter having become a key conceptual framework for the examination of counter- and anti-hegemonic practice, particularly among youth. Indeed, subculture has also become a subject of ongoing critical debate between theorists as to the validity – or not – of the concept, given its fixation around issues of class and social structure. At one level, such a perspective, it is argued, carries increasingly less significance in a social world characterised by reflexivity, fragmentation and cultural pluralism (see Bennett 2011). By and large, the concept of counterculture has remained beyond the ambit of such debates. Yet, as a conceptual framework, counterculture presents an equally potent series of questions, not least because of the way in which it has been applied to ongoing trends in socio-political action and thought – particularly in relation to new social movements and alternative lifestyles, but also on occasion in the context of other aspects of social life, such as organised religion (Elliott 1990) and racism (van Donselaar 1993).
- 2 The purpose of this introductory chapter is to critically revisit and re-evaluate the term 'counterculture' as a means of examining and explicating previous and ongoing instances of counter- and anti-hegemonic ideology, practice and beliefs. The chapter begins by looking at the emergence of the term 'counterculture' in the late 1960s, and its associations with the hippie movement. This is followed by a consideration of how more recent developments in sociological theory complicate and problematise the 1960s definition of counterculture, and also the way in which this definition has been redeployed in more recent decades in relation to other forms of cultural and socio-political phenomena. This is followed by an investigation of how new social trends and associated developments – notably in digital technology – provide an impetus for new understandings of counterculture. Finally, the chapter will examine some current examples of movements and groups that have been referred as countercultures, and consider new ways of positioning this concept.



The Origins of Counterculture

- 3 While the precise origins of counterculture are unclear, the term acquired popular currency during the late 1960s when it became associated with the hippie movement. Taking some of their inspiration from the Beat era, the hippies created an alternative cultural milieu in which music, drugs, literature and lifestyle combined to create a series of perceived alternatives to the dominant capitalist society inhabited by their parents and other members of the 'parent culture' (Hall 1968). Music was undoubtedly an important driver for the separation that the hippies sought from the parent culture (Whiteley 1992). Building on generations of protest song, artists such as Bob Dylan, the Beatles and the Rolling Stones infused rock music with a level of social and cultural critique that was quickly acknowledged, emulated and developed by other emergent artists of the late 1960s (Bennett 2001). As Frith (1981, 1983) observes, such was the power of rock music in this respect that it began to bespeak notions of an alternative community that the hippies believed could be experienced and realised through the music itself. As Frith observes, such claims about the power of music to create a physical, alternative community were ill-founded and spurious. Nevertheless, signature events of the countercultural era, such as the Woodstock Music and Arts Fair (see Bennett 2004) and the emergence of rural communes (see Webster 1976), gave rise to a collective sense – albeit a short-lived one – among the hippies that a fully-fledged alternative lifestyle was possible. It was this mythical and romanticised notion of an alternative lifestyle, and thus the foundations of an alternative community, that provided the impetus for the countercultural ideology of the hippie movement.
- 4 Equally important in this respect was the global character of the counterculture. While most of the youth cultures and gangs of the 1950s and early 1960s – for example, the Teddy Boys – had been locally specific manifestations (Hall and Jefferson 1976), the hippie movement quickly established a presence throughout the Western world and also in some parts of South America, Asia and the former Soviet Bloc (see Easton 1989). Again, music was highly important in this respect. Utilising the possibilities of the then rapidly increasing global communications technologies, popular music artists of the day were able to communicate their music – and their message – across a wide geographic area in a single performance. A significant example of this was the Beatles' song 'All You Need Is Love', which was first aired as a semi-live performance by the Beatles as part of the *Our World* programme, the world's first live global television link-up. The programme was broadcast via satellite on 25 June 1967, and was viewed by an estimated 400 million people in 26 countries throughout the world.
- 5 Popular representations of the counterculture also interpreted it as a socio-cultural phenomenon with the potential to create a new cultural sphere, beyond and ideologically separated from the parent culture. Wolfe's (1968) *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* was a highly influential piece of writing in this sense. Documenting the road-trip of Ken Kesey and his 'Merry Pranksters' around the United States during the mid-1960s, Wolfe vividly portrays the use of LSD in multimedia events designed to create new levels of perception and awareness among participants (see Moore and Keister in this volume). Similarly, Thompson's (1971) *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, although published in the early 1970s, pays due homage to the countercultural legacy and its vision of a

new world deflected from the mainstream society's economic greed and obsession with technological growth.

- 6 Such matters also piqued the interest of a number of academic theorists during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Of particular significance and interest for many academic writers was the fact that the counterculture, unlike earlier examples of youth culture, appeared to focus on middle-class youth. Thus, as Clarke et al. (1976) observe in their introductory essay to the now seminal text on youth culture, *Resistance through Rituals*, the counterculture

spear headed a dissent from their own, dominant, 'parent' culture. Their disaffiliation was principally ideological and cultural. They directed their attack mainly against those institutions which reproduce the dominant cultural ideological relations – the family, education, the media, marriage, the sexual division of labour. (1976: 62)

In the United States, too, there was a sense amongst academic theorists that the counterculture was challenging the hegemonic hold of the middle class from within.

- 7 In his book, *The Making of a Counter-Culture*, Roszak (1969) takes the argument a step further, arguing that the counterculture was not simply opposed to the hegemonic power of their parent culture but also to the technocracy the parent culture had created. By technocracy, Roszak refers to the increasing reliance upon technology and rational-scientific reasoning. During the late 1960s, the atrocities of Nazi Germany and the horrific realisation of the destructive power of the atomic bomb were disturbing facets of a recent past, while the Cold War and the escalating conflict in Vietnam served as current reminders of the highly pathological aspects of the technocratic society (see A. Bennett 2005). Roszak describes the counterculture as 'technocracy's children' – disaffected middle-class youth who wished to break away from the bourgeois and technocratic world of their parents. Thus, observes Roszak,

By way of a dialectic Marx could never have imagined, technocratic America produces a potentially revolutionary element among its own youth. The bourgeoisie, instead of discovering the class enemy in its factories, finds it across the breakfast table in the person of its own pampered children. (1969: 34)

- 8 In *The Greening of America*, Reich (1971) advances the notion of a countercultural, middle-class youth breaking away from the social and cultural bonds of the parent culture and simultaneously challenging its authority through his concept of Consciousness III. For Reich, this describes a new level of consciousness and being that encapsulates the potential for social change through achieving a new level of experience and understanding in which individuals work collectively for the good of the community and the well-being of future generations. This involves a rejection of the values of capitalism, which fosters an individualistic and short-term set of goals through its emphasis on the accumulation of wealth tied to individual comfort and security. According to Reich, the counterculture provided a platform for youth to subvert such dominant, received ideology and supplant it with a new series of values relating to sustainability – social, economic and environmental.

Problematizing Counterculture

- 9 It was observed earlier in this chapter that some of the basic tenets of the countercultural ideology – notably its emphasis upon alternative notions of community based around common investment in musical taste – amounted to a relatively idealist

and romanticised notion of social change. Arguably, a significant element of such romanticism also taints much of the writing about counterculture published during the late 1960s and early 1970s. In this writing, counterculture is held up as a model for social change, a perspective informed by a wider body of work grounded in critical theory and cultural Marxism. By naming middle-class youth as the key drivers of a countercultural revolution, a new means is found of explicating the transformation of class consciousness as a way of subverting the oppressive class relations seen to underpin capitalism. In this sense, there are some parallels between ‘counterculture’ and ‘subculture’ in that both concepts have been taken up and used in academic writing as a means of addressing the inequalities underpinning class relations and the potential for social change.

- 10 The application of both counterculture and subculture presupposes a class-based ownership of a specific mode of style-based youth identity in which music, fashion, drugs and associated resources are deployed homologically in the pursuit of a singly defined expression of counter-hegemonic action against the institutions of the ruling hegemony. This approach is typified in Willis’s (1978) study, *Profane Culture*. Thus Willis’s ‘working-class’ bikers and ‘middle-class’ hippies – although they occupy different social strata – are both engaged in a symbolic show of resistance against a common enemy: the dominant, middle-class society.
- 11 In certain respects, the problems inherent in the concept of counterculture are similar to those that have been identified with subculture. A number of writers have previously criticised subcultural theory for its neat equation of subculture with working-class youth, the contention being that this produces a self-serving argument linked to a cultural Marxist critique of late capitalism (e.g. see Redhead 1990; Muggleton 2000). This is supported by a further level of critical debate, which argues that little empirical evidence exists to suggest that the early examples of youth subcultures were exclusively working class, while in the case of later subcultures, such as punk and goth, it is clear that memberships have been cross-class (Bennett 1999). A similar case can be made in relation to the term ‘counterculture’, in that sweeping assumptions are made about its class composition and consequent ideological intent.
- 12 There are two main problems with the way in which the late 1960s counterculture has been conceptualised in previous writing. First, there was a clear disjuncture between the forms of social change that the counterculture envisaged and those social theorists at the time envisaged. Certainly, there were highly political elements within the counterculture, but the movement was not uniformly politicised in a way that dictated that the only way forward was to overthrow the capitalist system by whatever means. Indeed, there was, in many ways, an inherent contradiction in this understanding of the counterculture, in that the very foundations of countercultural ideology were based on products and resources made possible through mass media and mass consumption – the latter both representing significant arms of late capitalism. Furthermore, within the hippie rhetoric itself, there were clear and inevitable inconsistencies in the way in which the countercultural aesthetic was understood and expressed. For example, at two of the ‘great’ countercultural music events, the Woodstock Music and Arts Fair in 1969 and the Isle of Wight Festival of 1970, while there was much discussion of music being part of the counterculture and of youth having a right to freely access music, this only became a reality after failed attempts to ticket both of these events.

- 13 The other problem inherent in academic renderings of the counterculture is the assumption that it wholly or mainly comprised white, middle-class youth. Such an interpretation depends very much on the particular argument rehearsed with reference to the counterculture. Indeed, according to Clecak (1983), the equation of counterculture with a white, middle-class, hippie movement is an inherently narrow interpretation. According to Clecak, not only were there people from a variety of social and cultural groups involved in the counterculture, but the term 'counterculture' itself was an umbrella term for an amorphous range of activities and ideologies that, for a brief period at the end of the 1960s, found a common voice. Indeed, observes Clecak, the counterculture enabled a wide range of different groups and individuals 'to find symbolic shapes for their social and spiritual discontents and hopes' (ibid.: 18). These groups included:

(1) The civil-rights movement, beginning with blacks but quickly encompassing such other racial minorities as American Indians, Hispanic Americans, and Asian-Americans; (2) the young, especially college students and disaffected intellectuals; (3) the peace and anti-war movements; (4) the poor; (5) women; (6) the human-potential movement; (7) prisoners and other 'outcasts'; (8) gays and lesbians; (9) consumers; (10) environmentalists; (11) the old; and (12) the physically different (the disabled, the very fat, the very tall, the very short). (ibid.: 18)

- 14 A similar point is made in a more recent study by Eyerman and Jamison (1998) who, in their own analytical evaluation of the counterculture made some 15 years after Clecak, suggest that:

During the 1960s youth not only gained self-consciousness, it became the model and set standards for the rest of society in many spheres of culture, from the most superficial like clothing and hair-styles, to the most deeply rooted like the basic social interactions of men and women and blacks and whites. (1998: 113)

- 15 The respective observations of Clecak and Eyerman and Jamison, are significant for several reasons. First, they both point to the essentially diverse, heterogeneous nature of both the individuals and socio-political and cultural ideologies that either merged or coexisted within the countercultural movement of the late 1960s. Second, and in association, these accounts each portray the counterculture not as a specific socio-cultural entity, but rather an entity with a significant degree of fluidity such that it could incorporate diverse groupings, and thus manifest itself differently at specific times and within specific places, depending on local socio-economic, cultural and demographic circumstances. While these issues have been explored thoroughly in relation to 'subculture', largely through the critical work of post-subcultural theorists such as Bennett (1999), Miles (2000) and Muggleton (2000), there has been far less engagement with the limitations of counterculture when used as a rigid concept for denoting relatively narrow forms of style-based social action at the expense of a detailed consideration of the impact of local circumstances on the nature of countercultural practices and processes.

Re-theorising Counterculture

- 16 As the above observations suggest, although counterculture has evaded many of the criticisms levelled at subculture over the last 20 years, in many respects it is no less problematic a concept. Indeed, it can be argued that counterculture suffers from many of the problems associated with subculture. Most significant in this respect is the fact

that counterculture, like subculture, emerges from a specific set of theoretical concerns embedded in sociology and cultural studies, which seek to render social conflict and struggle visible through mapping them on to contemporary cultural practices grounded in particular forms of leisure, consumption and lifestyle. As noted earlier, the form of homological interpretation that results from this produces characteristically rigid forms of explanation that do not necessarily sit well with the actual ways in which such cultural practices play out in everyday life. The 'cultural turn' in social and cultural theory during the early 1990s brought with it a new range of perspectives for understanding how socio-cultural identities – both individual and collective – are made and remade in ways that may reference but do not directly reflect the social structure. Giddens' (1991) notion of reflexive modernity is particularly important in this respect, as it offers new ways of understanding how identities are reflexively constructed by individuals with reference to the cultural commodities and resources with which they engage and that they appropriate in the course of their daily lives. According to Giddens, such is the impact of reflexive modernity on the individual that identity can no longer be considered a given. Rather, it is contingent upon a range of individual life experiences and the interface between the individual and the plethora of objects, images and texts made available through the cultural industries.

- 17 Chaney (1996, 2002) makes a similar range of arguments concerning the way in which individuals and groups are empowered through their engagement with cultural resources. For Chaney, there are two salient points emerging from such engagement. First, individual appropriations of specific cultural resources give rise to what he terms lifestyle sites and strategies. The latter bespeak the physical appropriation and symbolic inscription of cultural resources within the context of everyday life in such a way that the latter come to represent specific meanings in specific local contexts. Second, such is the plurality of lifestyles in late modern society that it becomes inherently difficult, and therefore largely impractical, to insist on sub-/dominant binaries when talking about the cultural forms and practices that characterise contemporary everyday life. Considering this in relation to the concept of subculture, Chaney offers the following observation:

[I]f values, relationships and identities are being constructed in the manipulation of vocabularies of style, then material culture becomes the terrain – albeit an unstable, relative terrain – through which social order is constituted. This, it seems to me, is one of the most important aspects of the rise of lifestyles as 'sites and strategies' for new forms of affiliation and identification ... that is, culture becomes more clearly a resource than an inheritance. Thus, what were once described as subcultures could now be regarded as collective lifestyle statements, which reflexively negotiate rather than directly mirror the experience of social class. (2004: 41–2)

- 18 Chaney's notion of the cultural terrain of contemporary everyday life comprising a diverse series of lifestyle sites and strategies, in which aspects of class, race, gender and sexuality may converge just as much as they may be held separate from each other, signifies an important shift in our understanding and interpretation of the term 'counterculture'. Indeed, just as Clecak (1983) suggested that the late 1960s counterculture was in fact an umbrella term for a range of different and highly diverse social groupings, so the physical manifestations of many 'so-called' countercultures in a contemporary context are no less diverse in terms of their socio-economic and demographic composition.

Countercultures as Lifestyle Sites and Strategies

- 19 Following the theoretical arguments of Giddens and Chaney regarding the increasingly complex array of reflexive lifestyles that characterise late modern society, there is a case for arguing that the term 'counterculture' – despite its seductive resonance as an aesthetic and ideological term of opposition – actually denotes a contemporary social process through which the cultural fabric of everyday life is diversifying in ever more rapid cycles of change. The terrain of everyday life in late modernity is such that a variety of different lifestyle sites and strategies emerge and coalesce into collective forms of social life, each embodying specific sets of aesthetic and political sensibilities through which groups and individuals articulate their sense of 'difference' from others who occupy the same urban and regional spaces and places. Such articulations embed a range of ideological positions in which aspects of, for example, personal taste, political, religious, sexual and ethnic identity are imbricated in myriad ways, fashioning collective identities that resonate sharply with specific local, trans-local and, increasingly, global circumstances.
- 20 In relation to this latter point, the time-space compression created through digital communication technologies and the more ready global flow of information plays a significant part. Through the latter, groups and individuals from different places around the globe are able to form critical alliances and coordinate trans-local or global forms of collective practice and/or action aimed towards specific outcomes. Likewise, such trans-local and global connections may also facilitate entirely passive forms of interaction – mundane, unspectacular, yet equally significant in their underscoring of the diverse pathways and objectives that mark the ways in which groups and individuals in contemporary societies negotiate everyday life and create physical and symbolic nodes of meaning. Equally important here is the global flow of people, goods and resources; this adds a further layer of possibilities for socio-cultural connections to be made between groups and individuals with similar lifestyle orientations and sensibilities.
- 21 The concept of lifestyle has been criticised in the past for allegedly bespeaking a largely celebratory position in relation to cultural consumption and the creation of social identity (e.g. see McGuigan 1992). Admittedly, in previous applications of the term – and through its use in market research and advertising – lifestyle has assumed a resonance with leisure-orientated consumerism and the hedonistic sensibilities that often pre-figure this (e.g. see Featherstone 1991). However, the notion of lifestyle sites and strategies denotes a more socially and culturally complex way of positioning lifestyle as a conceptual framework for understanding aspects of opposition and change. Thus lifestyle sites and strategies pertain not only to the objects, images and texts that individuals consume, but also how they inscribe them with specific meanings, which in turn are embedded in the everyday realities with which groups and individuals are confronted.
- 22 Moreover, lifestyle sites and strategies provide scope for different lifestyle projects, with points of commonality but also points of difference, to find pathways to convergence – thus building towards broader socio-cultural ends. Such a description arguably befits the counterculture of the late 1960s. Thus, although superficially the counterculture appeared to coalesce around a common series of resources that, as

noted above, included music, drugs and literature, in truth it marked a far more complex and diverse array of lifestyle sites and strategies that were able to coalesce – albeit for a limited period – under a single descriptive banner. Thus, while some of the more radically political elements of the counterculture harnessed music, style and the hippie argot and rhetoric to make powerful statements against government (as with the anti-Vietnam War movement), other elements were more invested in an essentially passive greenist, back-to-the-land ideology (as in the commune movement), while others were attracted to happenings and other ‘total experience’ events informed by drugs and literature such as Huxley’s *Doors of Perception* (1954). Still others, while aware of such elements coexisting and overlapping in the counterculture, were less invested in such articulations of hippie lifestyle, but largely took an interest in the music, style and in being part of a particular urban scene (as seen in the example of the so-called hippie Mecca, San Francisco’s Haight-Ashbury district).

Counterculture in a Contemporary Context

- 23 Despite the theoretical arguments that can be raised against the sociological value of ‘counterculture’ as a meaningful term for categorising social action, like the term ‘subculture’, it lives on as a concept in social and cultural theory. Arguably, however, the continuing resonance of counterculture in academic scholarship has much to do with the way the term is now deployed and assimilated at a broader everyday level. As with subculture, counterculture has now become an embedded aspect of the discourses employed by the cultural industries, and is in everyday vernacular discourse. This partly relates to the past associations and legacy of the term ‘counterculture’ and the way in which this has been represented and redeployed by the popular and ‘quality’ media. Through its omnipresence in the global ‘mediascape’ (Appadurai 1990), counterculture retains its aura as a potent discursive symbol for forms of social action and/or alternative lifestyles and belief that all appear – or can be made to appear – to link with the aesthetic, political and cultural trends associated with the late 1960s manifestation of counterculture.
- 24 This goes further than merely a nostalgic yearning on the part of the baby boomer generation. Through its rich historical legacy and continued representation as a mode for expressions of ‘otherness’ from a ‘mainstream’ ideology, the term ‘counterculture’ now occupies a special place in the popular imagination. From the point of view of post-1960s generations, counterculture has become part of a received, mediated memory (van Dijck 2007; Bennett 2010) that bespeaks a reaction to a series of pathological issues still very much at large in today’s world. Whereas subculture is held to represent small-scale, perhaps underground or quasi-devious solutions to social problems, counterculture connotes something larger in scale – a movement or series of movements directed towards and orientated to address large, globally dispersed socio-economic problems and issues. For this central reason, it retains significant currency in the minds of many who participate in, report or reflect on, various forms of counter-hegemonic activity in contemporary social settings. Global movements centred on current issues such as environment, human and animal rights and the financial crisis all in some way absorb and rehearse oppositional discourses that took on their initial shape during the late 1960s. Indeed, McKay (1996) identifies what he regards as a

palpable connection between the styles of activism that acquired global momentum in the late 1960s and those that have emerged during subsequent decades.

- 25 As a form of popular narrative, counterculture asserts its relevance in our perceptions and understandings of the hegemonic struggles that continue to inform everyday life in myriad societies and cultures across the globe. Beyond these semantic features of counterculture, however, are more complex forms of social interaction and trans-local communication and bonding that only begin to make critical sense, in sociological terms, when one applies the theoretical lenses produced through the cultural turn. When viewed from this perspective, the term 'counterculture' is seen to encompass a highly complex and diffuse range of lifestyles, sensibilities and beliefs that, although clearly connecting at some level, are rooted in varying biographical pathways and trajectories, each with their own connections to other specific cultural milieu and lifeworlds. As such, at a theoretical level, counterculture – like subculture – cannot effectively work as a form of cultural categorisation that defines social groups as distinct from each other in a counter-/dominant binary fashion. Rather, the term 'counterculture' acts as a mechanism for describing particular points of convergence through which individuals are able to connect temporarily in the pursuit of specific goals. Countercultures are, in effect, fluid and mutable expressions of sociality that manifest themselves as individuals temporarily bond to express their support of and/or participation in a common cause, but whose everyday lives are in fact simultaneously played out across a range of other cultural terrains.

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ABSTRACTS

This article offers a critical examination of the concept of counterculture. Beginning with an overview and discussion of counterculture's application in the context of the late 1960s, the article argues that many of the claims for the validity of counterculture in this socio-historical context reflect issues and shortcomings similar to those offered in relation to the concept of subculture. That is to say, counterculture was cast as a class-based (in this case middle class) mode of resistance to the dominant mainstream society. The article then goes on to offer reasons as to why such a claim was, as in the case of subculture, ill-founded. The article then goes on to consider how the emergence of the cultural turn in sociology and cultural theory further problematises the original conceptualisation of counterculture and renders the term largely incompatible with contemporary understandings of social and cultural movements in a global context. Finally, the article considers why counterculture lives on in a popular and vernacular context, a central facet of which, it is argued, relates to the way in which counterculture has been deployed in the media as a means of representing critical moments in everyday responses to socio-economic and cultural tension.

Cet article propose un examen critique du concept de contre-culture. Il analyse d'abord son usage à la fin des années 1960, qui révèle de nombreuses limites, similaires à celles rencontrées par celui de subculture, notamment celles de la définition de la contre-culture, comme un mode de résistance, socialement situé (la bourgeoisie), à la société dominante. L'article considère ensuite en quoi le tournant culturel de la sociologie et de la théorie culturelle rend problématique l'usage originel du concept, qui se révèle largement incompatible avec l'analyse des mouvements socioculturels contemporains, dans un contexte globalisé. Enfin, cette contribution cherche à comprendre pourquoi le concept continue néanmoins à être utilisé dans les contextes populaires – l'une des raisons étant la manière dont les médias s'en ont servi pour représenter des moments critiques dans les réponses quotidiennes apportées aux tensions socio-économiques et culturelles.

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Geographical index: États-Unis / USA

Subjects: psychedelic / acid rock, rock music

noms/mots/cles Wolfe (Tom), Thompson (Hunter S.)

Keywords: counterculture / resistance, lifestyles, reflexivity, scenes, subcultures

Mots-clés: contre-culture / résistance, modes de vie, réflexivité, scènes, subcultures

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