1

Introduction: What’s Left of Modernity?

Ronald Strickland

Growing Up Postmodern takes its inspiration from Paul Goodman’s Growing Up Absurd, an indictment of postwar American society’s failure to provide the necessary conditions for boys to grow up into an emotionally healthy and dignified adulthood. Writing at the end of the 1950s, hard upon the emergence of both the “youth culture” and the socioeconomic and cultural conditions that we now identify as postmodernity, Goodman saw modern American society as suffering from a long list of compromised revolutions. In Growing Up Absurd he called for a revival of progressive efforts in areas such as urban planning, social welfare, workplace democracy, freedom of speech, racial harmony, sexual freedom, popular culture, and public education to produce a society that could inspire young people, an adult society worth joining.

In many ways the problems Goodman identifies are still with us today. He describes a postwar American society that was unwilling to fund adequate public education, and unable to provide meaningful and dignified employment for most of its citizens. At the turn of the century, despite the pro-education rhetoric of recent political campaigns, public education is still suffering after more than two decades of systemic underfunding from the 1970s into the 1990s. And during the high employment boom years of the 1990s the largest growth was in low-paying, dead-end service-sector jobs. Goodman describes a postwar society that was alarmed by youth violence and responded with increasingly punitive treatment of young offenders while the root causes of youth disaffection and hopelessness were ignored. In the last two decades, even as public education funding has stagnated, budgets for new prison construction are exploding and children barely in their teens are being held responsible as adults for criminal behavior. Goodman describes a postwar society in which young people have “a little extra spending
money,” so they “get around more and are exposed to the expensive glamour, but this is precisely not attainable by them unless they take short cuts.” At the end of the twentieth century the youth marketing industry that Goodman observed in its infancy has long since come of age. Contemporary youth are prematurely affluent—they have money for consumer electronics, fashion apparel, movies, and music c.d.’s, but they linger in dependence upon their parents’ assistance for basic living expenses, educational costs, etc. According to economic forecasts, many of them will not attain the level of economic security achieved by their parents.

These chronic problems of modernity have become the accepted status quo of postmodernity; to many people they now appear no longer as problems but as the natural and unchangeable order of things. Indeed, for some contemporary cultural critics postmodernity is a revolutionary new social order in which the political projects and goals of the enlightenment—democratic political empowerment, progressive social policy, high-quality public education, etc.—have been rendered obsolete. In the consumerist theory of Jean Baudrillard, for example, the freedom to consume has replaced political freedom. In postmodern society, according to Baudrillard, subjectivity is formed and expressed through consumption. Postmodern consumption exceeds the fulfillment of need, expressing the subject’s desire at the level of the “political economy of the sign,” which is taken to supercede the society’s economic relations of production. A broad (if tacit) coalition of mainstream political leaders from the center-right to the center-left has come together under the banner of “neoliberalism,” the hegemonic ideology of postmodern consumerism. Neoliberalism revives Adam Smith’s “invisible hand of the market,” seeking, as Rosemary Hennessy has observed, “to free up the operation of the capitalist market from public (state) controls and regulations,” and at the same time “to extend the rationality of the market—its schemes of analysis and decision-making criteria—to areas of social life that have not been primarily economic.” The corporate-political strategies of neoliberalism have been gaining prominence since the economic downturn of the early 1970s. Under expanded free-trade agreements industrial production has been displaced from “rust belt” U.S. cities to the “maquiladora” region of northern Mexico and other “underdeveloped” locations where cheap labor, weak or nonexistent environmental protection regulations and undemocratic governments enable greater corporate profits and leverage for corporations to squeeze further concessions from U.S. workers.

One of many harmful effects of neoliberal social and economic policy in the U.S. has been the corporate-sector demand for a curriculum of narrowly defined skills training in public schools and universities, undermining public education’s role as a democratic social institution. Neoliberal attempts to limit state and federal funding for education and to divert tax revenues to private schools have also taken a toll. Schools in poor rural areas and inner-city neighborhoods are scandalously underfunded in comparison with affluent suburban schools. Meanwhile, right-wing politicians call for “school choice” voucher schemes that would make tax
dollars available to subsidize families who send their children to parochial schools. “School choice” advocates employ the neoliberal rhetoric of marketization, arguing that forcing the public schools to compete in a “free market” would improve the quality of public schools, and arguing that all students should have the right to choose the school that best suits their needs. But the proposed voucher funds are never sufficient to pay the full cost of private schooling. Therefore, the inevitable result would be subsidies for middle-class families who can afford private schooling while poorer children are left in even more seriously underfunded public schools.

SUBVERSIVE CONSUMPTION AND HYPERCONFORMITY

Beyond the effects of social disinvestment on public education, both consumerism and neoliberalism shape the lived experiences of young people and the subjectivities available to them in postmodern society. As Bill Osgerby details in his chapter in this volume, consumerism developed in conjunction with the emergence of a new social agent—the “teenager.” In the era of industrial capitalism social subjectivity was predicated upon the adult male worker’s productive capacity; the subjectivities of women and children were constituted in relation to that of the adult male worker. According to the conventional logic of modernity, teenagers were not productive workers, hence they were not social agents. But they did become agents-as-consumers after World War II. The teenager is, in fact, the ideal subject of an economic order in which consumer demand for services and nondurable goods seemingly generates profits out of thin air. Teenagers are primarily consumers rather than producers, and most of their income is “disposable” income that can be spent on leisure-oriented consumer goods rather than basic necessities.

In addition to its emphasis on consumer demand—or “desire”—neoliberalism is marked by a tendency to obscure the relations of production of contemporary capitalism. Following Daniel Bell’s highly influential The Coming of Post-Industrial Society (1973), neoliberalism argues that we have entered a new phase of capitalism in which information processing is more important than material production. In the new information-driven economy, it is asserted, technological breakthroughs (primarily the development of virtually instantaneous global communications) have enabled the compression of time and space such that a surplus of material wealth is produced, making basic “needs” increasingly irrelevant for more and more people, and elevating “desire” as the principal concern of the postmodern subject. In the books of conservative futurists like Bell these conditions are taken as almost a fait accompli. But they tend to assume that industrial production has disappeared, when actually it has simply been restructured and relocated.

In his early writings Baudrillard argues that the distinction between use value and exchange value is no longer tenable in late capitalism, thus rejecting Marx’s critique of “commodity fetishism” and the concept of alienation. Both the concepts
of use value (expressing human needs) and exchange value (expressing human desires) are “an organized extension of productive forces” (Baudrillard, 46) and, as such, both express the “puritan” disciplinary ethos of capitalism. In the contemporary “information society” Baudrillard asserts, this disciplinary ethos leaves very little room for political agency. Confronted with a glut of information, the masses are entangled in a network of media discourses, completely “informed” by the media, which is the same thing as being “formless” (218). The individual is in a “double bind,” which, he argues, is exactly like the situation faced by young people in the transition to adulthood:

They are at the same time told to constitute themselves as autonomous subjects, responsible, free, and conscious, and to constitute themselves as submissive objects, inert, obedient, and conformist. The child resists on all levels, and to these contradictory demands he or she replies by a double strategy. When we ask the child to be object, he or she opposes all the acts of disobedience, of revolt, of emancipation; in short, the strategy of a subject. When we ask the child to be subject, he or she opposes just as obstinately and successfully a resistance as object; that is to say, exactly the opposite: infantilism, hyperconformity, total dependence, passivity, idiocy. (218)

Autonomous “subject resistance” is generally considered positive “in the same way as in the political sphere only the practices of liberation, of emancipation, of expression, of self-constitution as a political subject are considered worthwhile and subversive.” But the “strategic resistance” of refusal of meaning and of speech, “of the hyperconformist simulation of the very mechanisms of the system,” is, Baudrillard concludes, the “winning” strategy of postmodernity, “because it is the most adapted to the present phase of the system” (218-19).

This “silent” resistance, Baudrillard emphasizes, is not at all “passive” (215). But many cultural critics remain unconvinced. Following the lead of Michel de Certeau, cultural studies scholars have examined the neoliberal marketization of everyday life, searching for instances of symbolic resistance and “subversive consumption” in discursive practices such as youth fashion and popular music. In Postmodernism and Popular Culture, for example, Angela McRobbie analyzes “the role of the rag market” and the ongoing popularity of “retro” fashion as an implicit critique of consumerism and the social inequities of late capitalism. In Black Noise Tricia Rose describes how rap music’s production concepts evolved significantly in the context of the mid-1970s bankruptcy crisis in New York. Faced with the widespread retrenchment of music programs in the public schools, young people created a new hybrid musical form through “sampling” of existing records and the use of playback and production technologies (such as the turntable and the soundboard) as instruments in themselves. In Rose’s discussion of hip-hop culture there is an emphasis on the overtly pedagogical and polemical force of the discourse that distinguishes her analysis from other critics who treat the random nonconformism
of youth subcultural styles as self-evidently subversive.

Absent this self-consciously polemical and pedagogical dimension, however, subversive consumption has obvious limitations as a resistance strategy. In the words of Dick Hebdige, youth subcultural styles are “meaningful mutations,” capable of embodying a symbolic refusal of the social consensus on which western democracies depend, but in the end, “no amount of subcultural incantation can alter the oppressive mode in which the commodities used in subculture have been produced.”

The problems with the “freedom to consume” argument are fairly evident. The power to consume is distributed very unevenly, notwithstanding the claims of the dominant ideology. Even for the affluent the power to consume never meets the desire produced by the advertising industry. By definition the consumer gratification dulls the critical edge, leaving us stalled in the effort to produce a better world, unaware that conditions could be different.

NEOLIBERALISM AND LABOR

A somewhat different argument for the revolutionary implications of postmodernity is found in Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt’s recent book, Empire. Like both conservative futurists and left-liberal cultural studies scholars, Negri and Hardt argue that capitalism has entered a new stage—or “new times” in the phrase popularized by the British journal Marxism Today. But they emphasize the importance of understanding late modernity as “crisis” and they focus on labor rather than leisure as the driving force of subject-formation in postmodernity. In their view, the synthesis of Taylorism, Fordism, and Keynesianism that coalesced under Roosevelt’s New Deal produced a “factory society”—“the highest form of disciplinary government”—in which “the entire society, with all its productive and reproductive articulations, is subsumed under the command of capital.” In the disciplinary society of late modernity, “productive subjectivities are forged as one-dimensional functions of economic development,” but during the 1960s “the expansion of welfare and the universalization of discipline in both the dominant and subordinate countries created a new margin of freedom for the laboring multitude,” accompanied by key moments of dissent and political destabilization such as the Civil Rights and decolonization struggles, the Vietnam War, and the feminist and gay rights movements (243). In the dominant capitalist countries, they argue, the social struggles of the 1960s raised the costs of labor to the point at which it eventually forced a change in the “quality and nature” of labor itself:

The disciplinary regime clearly no longer succeeded in containing the needs and desires of young people. The prospect of getting a job that guarantees regular and stable work for eight hours a day, fifty weeks a year, for an entire working life, the prospect of entering the normalizing regime of the social factory, which had been a dream for many of their parents, now appeared as a kind of death. The mass
refusal of the disciplinary regime, which took a variety of forms was not only a negative expression but also a moment of creation, what Nietzsche calls a transvaluation of values. (273-74)

In order for this revolution to be achieved Negri and Hardt identify three positive demands implicit in this “mass refusal”: the right to global citizenship, the right to a social wage and a guaranteed income, and the right to reappropriation of the means of production (400-407). These are modernist, enlightenment-inspired goals of the sort that Paul Goodman could subscribe to, but, in Negri and Hardt’s analysis, postmodernity presents the conditions for the achievement of these goals. They see the demand for global citizenship, for example, as the inevitable result of a labor regime in which corporations seek to exploit the labor of “under-developed” regions. Inadvertently, or perhaps the better term is “collaterally,” these ventures sometimes result in campaigns for unionization, skills training that translates to (post)industrial jobs abroad, and higher standards of living that enable workers in the dispersed industries to contest oppressive local regimes and to emigrate to metropolitan regions. Of course, both the industrialized countries and the “developing” countries attempt to control these steps toward global citizenship through immigration quotas and the creation of “international industrial zones” aimed at discouraging unionization. Nonetheless, the counterresponses themselves indicate that the trend toward the “globalization” of labor threatens to undermine the use of national sovereignty as a means of controlling the freedom of workers.

The “new proletariat” of postmodernity is “not a new industrial class.” The industrial working class of modernity, Negri and Hardt argue, represented only a temporary stage in the history of the proletariat, a stage at which “capital was able to reduce value to measure.” Production under the conditions of contemporary global capitalism, by contrast, is more elusive; they call it “biopolitical.” In postmodernity “the production of capital converges ever more with the production and reproduction of social life itself; it thus becomes ever more difficult to maintain divisions among productive, reproductive, and unproductive labor.” In calling for a “social wage” and a guaranteed annual income for all, Negri and Hardt are opposing in particular the modernist concept of a “family wage,” the “fundamental weapon of the sexual division of labor by which the wage paid for the productive laborer is conceived also to pay for the unwaged reproductive labor of the worker’s wife and dependents at home” (402). Since, in post-Fordist flexible production, labor has become increasingly collective and social, conditions are favorable for “the demand that all activity necessary for the production of capital be recognized with an equal compensation such that a social wage is really a guaranteed income, or, effectively, a ‘citizenship income’.” This biopolitical regime of production also gives a distinctive emphasis to the fundamental Marxist demand for the worker’s right to control the means of production. In the context of the “informatization of production” in postmodernity, all global citizens must also have “free access to and control over knowledge, information, communication, and affects” (407).
Attributing the current developments in global capitalism at least partly to the pressure of proletarian resistance rather than simply to capital’s escalating need for expanded profits, Negri and Hardt shift the discussion of “desire” from the terrain of consumption to that of production. This move points toward a more focused, active potential for a postmodern revolutionary struggle, one in which the resources and opportunities made available for young people are crucially at stake, and one in which young people might conceivably be mobilized to play a more active role than sullen rejection or subversive consumption. But the “new proletariat” Negri and Hardt describe still leaves out huge sectors of the global population. There is an immediate and urgent need to resist further privatization of resources and other kinds of social disinvestment. And, in their neglect of “desire as consumption” they leave aside the question of how to resist the ideological power of consumerism as well as the question of how to marshal the oppositional force—however limited—of “subversive consumption.” These issues are related to the adverse conditions of postmodernity and neoliberalism that make it difficult for young people to take control of their own lives—the relentless pressure to consume, the social disinvestment in education, the harsh responses to youth crime, and the continuing climate of intolerance for cultural diversity that falls heavily on the young. The following chapters seek to intervene against these conditions and to continue the struggle for a better future.

**CONSUMERS AND CRIMINALS**

First, Bill Osgerby shows how post-1950s American advertisers successfully used images of “youth as fun” as a metaphor for a new consumer value system promoting commodity consumption and immediate gratification to the middle class as a whole. These transformations in marketing practices were essential features of a new middle-class faction characterized by its pursuit of “liberated” lifestyles that laid emphasis on the achievement of self-expression and individuality through the consumption of “distinctive” products. From the beginning of the “teenager” phenomenon critics have recognized that the commercial interests ostensibly serving the teenage market were in fact “creating” the market and even the social concept of the “teenager” through their market research methods and media strategies. Osgerby traces the historical development of this criticism from the pessimistic “mass culture” studies of the 1960s and 1970s through the “subversive consumption” arguments of the 1980s and 1990s. Throughout this period he finds an ongoing ambivalence toward youth in the larger society: “almost simultaneously youth is both vilified as the most deplorable evidence of cultural bankruptcy and celebrated as the exciting precursor to a prosperous future” (Osgerby, 23). This dualistic attitude is borne out in the ways neoliberal policies of social disinvestment depend upon the construction of teenagers as a “market.” Public education, and especially extracurricular programs such as music and art education, and services such as health
care, recreation, and rehabilitation programs for juvenile offenders and other troubled youth are seen as programs and services that a consumer might choose or not choose (assuming ability to pay, of course), rather than as generally beneficial programs and service to which every citizen should have access.

Following Osgerby, Henry Giroux describes the effects of the corporatization of public education on high school students. Ironically, as Giroux points out in his chapter included here, “the corporate model of educational reform wraps itself in the democratic principles of freedom, individualism, and consumer rights,” but “it fails to provide the broader historical, social, and political contexts necessary to render such principles meaningful and applicable” (Giroux, 39). Faced with ongoing budget difficulties, many school administrators have opened up their captive student markets to fast-food, soft-drink, and athletic-wear companies in order to secure program funds that should have been provided by tax revenues. Zero tolerance policies have streamlined the process for expelling kids from school while laws have been passed in all fifty states allowing juveniles to be tried as adults in the criminal justice system. Meanwhile, in the popular media, young people—especially the poor and young people of color—are demonized as violent and marked as disposable. Some of the examples of this media hysteria are truly sobering; Giroux cites a spate of recent anti-youth films like 187, a Death Wish-inspired revenge fantasy in which Samuel L. Jackson plays a beleaguered teacher who systematically murders his problem students. In response to the “war on the young” waged by the corporate culture of neoliberalism, Giroux calls for an educational policy that protects students from coercive consumer appeals and the abandonment of public support for education.

The effects of neoliberal ideology upon inner-city youth are considered in Jerry Phillips’s reading of Richard Price’s Clockers, a 1992 novel which was later made into a film by Spike Lee. Phillips criticizes postmodern social theory’s conception of the inner city as an “urban jungle,” existing outside of history and economic relations. Modernist writers like Marx and Goodman considered youth alienation in historical and social contexts, but contemporary postmodern writers often invite us to think of inner-city youth in biological determinist and social Darwinist terms—as a “breed” of “dangerous animal beings devoid of human conscience” (Phillips, 48). By contrast, Price’s novel relentlessly insists upon the fundamental humanity of young people struggling on the margins of the postindustrial city. The sad revelation of the novel is that while we may have passed beyond modernism in the form of liberal statism or Fordist industrial production, we still remain trapped within the horizon of social possibilities as determined by capitalist political economy.

As Giroux’s list of violent anti-youth films demonstrates, one of the most prevalent media images circulating in public discourse during the last decade has been that of the teenager as sociopath. These media images reflect a tendency to replace rehabilitative correctional programs with merely punitive criminal justice for teenage offenders. In “Remorseless Young Predators” Gary Smith discusses this critical erosion of the juvenile justice system in the United States. At the end of the
nineteenth century social reformers in Chicago established an alternative court structure that would become a national model for the rehabilitative treatment of juvenile offenders, but at the end of the twentieth century more and more teenagers are tried in adult courts with mandatory sentence laws that prevent judges from considering their youth or circumstances. At the same time, the economic impact of youth incarceration is significant. The construction of new prisons means jobs and prosperity for economically depressed rural communities. Inside the prisons, inmates produce products and services for token wages. This neoliberal regime of social disinvestment and “market solutions” to social problems helps keep taxes low and labor costs down, while the social costs of writing off so many young people as unredeemable criminals goes uncalculated.

In “Growing Up Incarcerated” Elizabeth Kleinfeld offers a loosely ethnographic discussion of the literacy struggles of typical prisoners. Kleinfeld shows how juvenile correctional facilities and prisons limit prisoners’ literacy by systematically regulating prisoners’ reading and writing. Seventy percent of prisoners in this country are illiterate, and research shows that when correctional facilities do provide educational opportunities for prisoners, recidivism rates decrease. Nonetheless, correctional institutions are reducing, not increasing, their educational programs. There is no coherent literacy program or other educational programming in our prisons, resulting in haphazard approaches and conflicting philosophies from state to state and prison to prison. In addition, none of the existing educational programs are designed specifically for prisoners. Mass literacy is a distinctly modernist phenomenon that, by all accounts, is declining in the visually oriented culture of postmodernity. Yet, the prisoners interviewed by Kleinfeld see their literacy struggles as vitally important. For these prisoners who confront an oppressive social and institutional order without the mediating release of consumerist escapism, literacy means power against the system.

INTERPELLATION AND SUBJECTIVITY

Andrew Kurtz’s and Tim Scheie’s chapters explore different modes of interpellation in the gray area between modernist and postmodernist subjectivity. In the complex mix of ideological and interpellative effects of “first-person shooter” video games Kurtz sees a replication of the “manichean ideologies in which the only ‘other’ in the game is an enemy to be destroyed” that permeate most media and political discourses in the United States. In the public sphere these reductive oppositions and the simplistic responses they evoke are able to become hegemonic and yet also are held in check because they are “filtered through larger discursive structures such as humanism, democracy, and globalism” (Kurtz, 107). But these modernist values are absent from the violent video games. These games give the player a false sense of being in control of his environment through the deployment of a prosthetic device (the joystick) that is very much like the experience of carrying a fire-
arm. For the overwhelming majority of players, the video game experience functions symbolically to resolve contradictions symptomatic of the perceived breakdown of white male hegemony in the contemporary information-based economy. Of course, this symbolic resolution is not always sufficient; Kurtz notes the references to the video game *Doom* made in a video left behind by the Columbine High School killers. Other observers have made this connection, but Kurtz’s interest is in explaining the relationship between symbolic and real violence in the context of the inability of late capitalism to deliver on its promise of personal freedom and happiness through consumerism.

In the following chapter Tim Scheie analyzes *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, a book of childhood photos with commentary by Barthes. By inviting the reader to approach the childhood photographs as texts of pleasure, Scheie argues, Barthes has engaged in a provocatively “queering” gesture: he invites and even coerces the reader to consider a child who is not the guarantor of a future in the form of biological progeny (this, Scheie argues, is a key function of children in the family photo albums of the modern era). Scheie concludes with a speculative discussion of how Barthes’s elegant but rather passive theorizing stands as a sort of “cautionary shadow” to the more aggressive “in-your-face” attitude of contemporary queer activism. While noting that Barthes’s rethinking of youth outside the bounds of the regime of reproduction was a fundamental gesture, Scheie doesn’t see Barthes as a sort of “proto-queer” thinker. Barthes lacked the implicit optimism that underlies more recent invocations of queerness.

**CONSUMERISM, FEMINISM, HYPERMASculinity**

In “The Big Business of Surfing’s Oceanic Feeling” Margaret Henderson analyzes the evolution of the Australian surfing magazine, *Tracks*, from its beginnings as a vanguard text of the counterculture to its current incarnation as a “glossy, commercialized, rebelliously adolescent and hypermasculine” organ of postmodern consumerism. In Henderson’s reading, the thirty-year history of Australian surfing subculture is interpreted through mapping the conjunctions of several discourses where the relationship between modernity and postmodernity is textualized—the 1960s counterculture, the professionalization of leisure as sport, second- and third-wave feminisms and the attendant backlashes, and the consumerist hypermasculinity of corporate-sponsored youth “anarchy” all packaged especially for young male readers and surfers. These conjunctions can be read in *Tracks*, Henderson argues, because throughout its history the magazine has, however ambivalently, attempted to reconcile the growing contradictions between surfing as a countercultural lifestyle and surfing as a highly commodified professional sport. Over the decades, *Tracks* has steadily undermined the oppositional political force of the surfing counterculture by hardening its patriarchal ideology and masculine symbolic identities against the increasing demands by women for a place in the sport. Australian surfing is a
In the following chapter, Angela Hubler discusses shortcomings in the representation of the “crisis” of female adolescence in writings by both academic and popular writers. Some contemporary observers locate the source of these problems, as Paul Goodman would, in the “sick culture” that teaches girls that their value lies only in their appearance and sexuality. Nonetheless, they respond to the problems in narrowly psychological terms, offering therapeutic remedies that place the responsibility for the problems on the victims themselves and fail to develop a transformative critique of the social system. Mary Pipher’s best-selling trade book, Reviving Ophelia, is a characteristic example. Pipher understands the self-mutilation, eating disorders, depression, multiple unplanned pregnancies, and suicide attempts of the girls she sees as socially induced problems. She provides suggestions for helping girls to develop the self-esteem to survive in a patriarchal society, and she calls for cultural changes such as better sexual harassment policies and a redefinition of manhood to counter the traditional association of masculinity and violence. But her individualist orientation precludes a discussion of the collective social efforts necessary to change the society that she describes as sick. The problem with analyses like Pipher’s, Hubler argues, is also the secret to their success—they simplify, psychologize, and individualize the effects of capitalist patriarchy on adolescent girls, and thereby present a palatable if not very useful version of the crisis of female adolescence for readers.

Concluding this cluster of essays, Jennifer Drake explores the contradictory forces of “third-wave,” “capitalist,” or “power” feminism. Though it is strongly influenced by the anti-feminist backlash against the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s, third-wave feminism also represents a progressive feminist response to the backlash, drawing on critiques of mainstream academic feminism from working class women and women of color. Power feminism attracts many young people across lines of race and class at least partly because it offers success stories rather than victim stories. But the transformative potential of this hopeful, capitalist version of third wave feminism is easily subsumed under the logic of acquisitive individualism. “Within the dominant culture,” Drake observes, “power feminism’ has been privileged as the new feminism because it shores up competitive individualism, meritocracy, consumerism, and catfighting, its motto being ‘work, buy, and/or claw your way to the top’” (Drake, 184). Drake sees more promise in the “Girl Culture” movement, an aggressively sexy feminist music and ‘zine culture that has emerged in the 1990s. Though it began as a grass-roots movement, Girl Culture was almost immediately colonized by the mass consumer products industry. Some observers, Drake points out, see benefits behind this curse—Girl Culture circulates more widely and becomes a more popular discourse through the capitalist marketing apparatus. Drake is skeptical about this, but she explores two examples of third wave feminist polemic and what might be called a revolutionary public pedagogy in the music of Lauryn Hill and Ani DiFranco. In the work of Hill and DiFranco, she
Ronald Strickland

demonstrates, Girl Culture intersects with history-saturated oppositional discourses—hip-hop culture for Hill and the folk and punk countercultures for DiFranco—to produce spaces where community and collective action can be imagined and made.

COUNTERCULTURE AND 1968

In “Post-'68: Theory Is in the Streets” Astra Taylor reacts to the recent wave of anti-global capitalism protests from the perspective of the post-1968 student generation. Her generation, she observes, has come of age in a period during which the forms and goals of civil disobedience that had been so successful in the 1960s had to be reevaluated. Taylor interprets the institutionalization of academic postmodern theory and technological developments such as the Internet as conditions that have suddenly made possible a new kind of student resistance movement based on situated action, nonhierarchical associations, and contingent tactics. The protests are decentralized. In place of what would have been the “protest headquarters” in years past one now finds a “convergence center” in Seattle. Environmentalists and Teamsters march side by side. Compulsory unity has been abandoned in favor of a more fluid form of coalition building based on “affinity groups” and depending on the Internet for communication. The Websites published by the activists provide news and updates, but they also serve as forums for discussion of the movement as it progresses. These developments have captured the imaginations of contemporary students who have grown up in the era of postmodernity and enabled new tactics appropriate to their specific historical moment. Whether the protests of 2000-2001 will inaugurate a new revolutionary era of civil disobedience and progress remains to be seen.

In “To Be Young, Countercultural, and Black,” David Jones notes that the term “countercultural” has sometimes been associated with hedonism and lack of ambition—characteristics with which black people have been denigrated historically. Partly for this reason, most African American political and cultural activists have not claimed the term “countercultural.” But Jones points to a tradition of innovative counterculture including predominantly black and integrated movements from the ragtime era through the Harlem Renaissance, jazz, rock and roll, and into the hip-hop era. And, he argues, while the term “counterculture” has too often been associated with an urge toward individual self-expression and self-gratification it should also be recognized as encompassing an urge toward collectivism and community. Jones offers this broader definition of “countercultural” as a way beyond the racial essentialism of much African American political and cultural activism. Noting that the most widely circulated images of black culture privilege urban, usually coastal settings, hip-hop music, and a small number of national figures as representatives of black cultural generally, Jones urges a more pluralistic African American activism that would be more resistant to commodification and reproduction.
WHAT’S LEFT OF MODERNITY?

As the essays collected here will demonstrate, this question is urgent in several senses. Despite the claims of neoliberalism and consumerism, postmodernity is not inherently to the “left” of modernity—postmodernity, in political and economic terms, is no more revolutionary than it is reactionary. The social transformations of postmodernity represent global capitalism’s attempt to maintain a regime of profit against the challenge of a new proletariat produced by modernist social institutions. The modernist ideal of a good society, with universal access to education and other social services, is an important, even necessary, stage in the progress toward replacing a realm of necessity with a realm of freedom for all humans. Postmodernity has not achieved those goals, nor rendered them obsolete. In this context it is important to take stock of what remains of modernity—what remains of enlightenment values and institutions—that can be preserved and adapted to help young people to resist the new forms of exploitation and social disinvestment characteristic of neoliberalism. Postmodern theories of resistance, generally framed in the context of semiotic and consumerist theories of subjectivity, fall short in neglecting to consider the social relations of production, the true source of profit in capitalism. The argument that surplus wealth can be generated without labor always depends upon the concealment of labor through geographical displacement or the redefinition of congealed labor such as private property or information as existing outside the relations of production. Analyses of practices such as subversive consumption can be helpful insofar as they identify sites of potential resistance to oppression. But subversive consumption must be a part of a larger organized resistance in order for it to avoid being easily co-opted by corporate marketing strategies. Finally, the fact that subversive consumption is widely seen as the only viable mode of resistance to global capitalism is in itself alarming; the discourses of youth culture are already so thoroughly saturated with the ideology of consumerism that it is increasingly difficult to imagine alternatives. This book is conceived as a critical and polemical response to this assault upon the public imagination. Reclaiming the right for young people to grow up in a safe, supportive, and tolerant social environment is an important step to resist the subsumption of an ever-increasing proportion of social consciousness under the logic of neoliberalism.

NOTES


2. For a representation of Baudrillard’s thought over the past thirty years see Jean Baudrillard, Selected Writings (trans. Mark Poster). Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988. For a detailed critique of Baudrillard’s semiotic displacement of “production” see Mas’ud Zavarzadeh, “Post-ality: The Dis-simulations of Cyber-capitalism,” in Mas’ud


**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


“A Caste, a Culture, a Market”: Youth, Marketing, and Lifestyle in Postwar America

Bill Osgerby

The high school set makes its own decisions about what to buy and where to buy it, often dragging their parents along in their wake. Thus teen-age boys have created the vogue for button-down collars, Bermuda shorts, cashmere sweaters, sport shirts, “Ivy League” jackets and loafers. And the junior miss . . . leads the way in endorsing “separates,” “man-tailored” shirts, ballet slippers, and skintight “stem” skirts or ballooning layers of petticoats.

Eugene Gilbert, in Harper’s Magazine, November 1959

Writing in New Yorker in November 1958 cultural critic Dwight Macdonald drew readers’ attention to what he depicted as a startlingly new social phenomenon—the American teenager. “Teenagers,” the author affirmed, were now “not just children growing into adults but a sharply differentiated part of the population.”1 As a generational cohort of unprecedented numbers, with unique levels of disposable income and an apparent thirst for the exciting opportunities opened up by postwar affluence, it did not seem unreasonable for Macdonald to conclude that young people represented an exceptional social formation. Proclaiming the advent of a “teenage revolution,” he argued that American youth had “a style of life that was fast becoming sui generis.”2 In these terms the 1950s had seen youth emerge as both a potent economic force and a compelling cultural influence, Macdonald opining that the American teenager had now taken discrete and distinctive shape as “a caste, a culture, a market.”

For Macdonald it was their unparalleled spending power that, above all else, marked out 1950s teenagers as “a new American caste.” “Economically,” Macdonald
advised his readers, teenagers constituted “the latest—perhaps the last—merchandising frontier.” Before 1958 was out, Macdonald estimated, America’s seventeen million teenagers would have spent at least nine-and-a-half billion dollars, an annual spending that was set to rise by a further five billion dollars by 1965. And this financial power seemed all the more impressive for the way it was unencumbered by domestic responsibilities or restraints—teenage consumption being concentrated in the realms of leisure, style, and hedonistic pleasure. As Macdonald put it, the distinctive feature of the teenage market was that it was “free money”: 

Free from all claims except the possessor’s whim. . . . Some teenagers actually have more free money to spend than their parents, who must meet all kinds of fixed obligations, among them the support (and the allowances) of the teenagers in question.5

Nor was Macdonald a voice in the wilderness. Throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s the scale and character of youth consumption was a regular topic for awestruck media comment. In 1959, for example, a breathless edition of Life announced “A New $10-Billion Power: The US Teenage Consumer”—the magazine recounting how American youth had “emerged as a big-time consumer in the US economy. . . . Counting only what is spent to satisfy their special teenage demands, the youngsters and their parents will shell out about $10 billion this year, a billion more than the total sales of GM [General Motors].”5 In 1964, meanwhile, Newsweek averred that “the country’s 28 million youngsters between the ages of 13 and 22 control a collective purchasing power that has long since ceased to be child’s play, with US youngsters expected to spend more than $24.5 billion in 1964.”6 And two years later the teenage market was still a hot topic—Newsweek devoting a special edition to a survey of the young generation’s tastes and lifestyles, the magazine concluding that “the high school set has graduated from the ice-cream, soda-fountain and bicycle circuit into the big leagues of US consumption.”7

During the late 1950s and early 1960s commercial interests scrambled to cash in on the gold mine represented by young people’s spending. The range of products geared to the young was literally boundless, consumer industries interacting with and reinforcing one another in their efforts to woo the youth market. Rather than neutrally “reflecting” consumer demand, however, manufacturers and marketeers played an active role in shaping and disseminating the tastes, styles, and attitudes of “teenage” America. Moreover, the process of interpellating youth as a discrete consumer group was integral to the transformation of the American marketing industry. In recognizing “teenagers” as a distinct market segment, with specific tastes and interests, the strategies of youth marketing developed by postwar advertising gurus pioneered the concepts of “consumer lifestyle” and “niche marketing” that became central to the regeneration and revitalization of Madison Avenue.
The manner in which consumer industries represented and responded to the youth market during this period was also fundamental to broader patterns of cultural change. Mobilized as a signifier for dynamic modernity and stylish individualism, the iconography of “youth as fun” was central to a new consumer value system that prioritized commodity consumption and immediate gratification. This cultural infatuation with “youthful hip” was especially pronounced within an emergent faction of the American middle class—a group that sought to distinguish itself as a distinct class formation through the pursuit of expressive, “liberated” lifestyles that laid emphasis on the achievement of self-expression and individuality via the consumption of distinctive cultural goods and signifiers.

YOUTH IN THE JAZZ AGE

The existence of a commercially based youth culture was not a feature unique to America during the 1950s. An embryonic youth market was already discernable in the universe of commercial entertainment that took shape in the burgeoning cities of the late nineteenth century. And during the consumer boom of the 1920s a more fully formed, youth-oriented leisure culture became recognizable—a phenomenon heavily indebted to the concomitant expansion of higher education. Once the preserve of a relatively small elite, colleges and universities saw a threefold increase in enrollments between 1900 and 1930, nearly 20 percent of the college-age population attending some kind of educational institution by the end of the 1920s. In her meticulous survey of this growing student body, Paula Fass shows how “the first modern American youth culture” coalesced during the Jazz Age amid the budding network of student fraternities and a world of proliferating dance halls, cinemas, cafeterias, and other campus hangouts.8

The student culture chronicled by Fass weathered the lean years of the 1930s, but overall American youth was hard hit by the Depression. Young people represented 27.5 percent of those unemployed in 1930, and by 1937, 16 percent of the total youth population was still out of work. Even those from relatively well-to-do backgrounds were hard hit—this reflected in the 10 percent decline that took place in college enrollments between 1932 and 1934.9 During the 1940s, however, youth culture was reenergized by the labor demands of the wartime economy. The economic pressures of the war drew increasing numbers of young people into the workforce, partially reversing trends towards extended schooling and dependency on parents. In 1944, Census Bureau statistics showed that over two in five young men aged between sixteen and seventeen were gainfully employed—35 percent of these having left school altogether to enter full-time work.10 As a consequence, greater disposable income was delivered into young hands. By 1944 American youth was believed to account for a spending power of around $750 million, much of it discretionary.11 This economic muscle not only helped crystallize notions of