

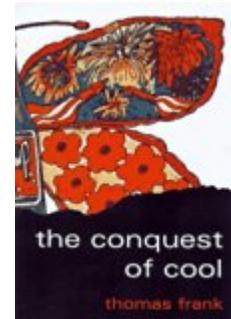
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Thomas Frank. *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997. xii + 287 pp. \$22.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-25991-8.

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In 1968, Petrocelli sport coats adopted the advertising slogan “Tune in. Turn on. Step out.” This gloss on one of the most famous slogans of the counterculture—Timothy Leary’s “Tune in. Turn on. Drop out.”—symbolizes the paradoxical relationship between American consumer capitalism and the counterculture of the sixties. As Thomas Frank argues in this fine book, American business underwent its own cultural revolution in the sixties, a process that paralleled, and in many ways even anticipated, the broader cultural upheavals of the decade. Focusing on developments in advertising and men’s fashion, Frank complicates standard notions of hippie innocence and corporate venality to offer a complex and compelling study of the dynamic nature of capitalism and the ways it foresees, deflects, eviscerates and absorbs alternative value systems.

The sixties, of course, is still very much a contested decade in the national memory. For conservatives, like Robert Bork and Newt Gingrich, it symbolizes a period in which traditional standards of decency were overwhelmed by an ethic of hedonism. For those more sympathetic to the political and cultural changes of the period, the sixties witnessed a welcome challenge to the rigidity and repression of the gray-flannel fifties. But as Frank indicates, out of these diametrically opposite readings emerges a consensus that business represents order, stability and tradition while the counterculture represents freedom, anarchy and liberation. Thus is posited a simplistic vision of capitalism as a static entity. In fact, though, capitalism is extremely dynamic and consumer capitalism in particular demands not repression, but self fulfillment and immediate gratification.

Many histories of the sixties describe the relationship

between business and the counterculture as a process of gradual co-optation as capitalism cynically created an ersatz version of the authentically rebellious youth movement. Abe Peck, for instance, has defined the era as “from counterculture to over-the-counter culture,” citing Columbia Records’ infamous advertising campaign, “But the Man can’t bust our music.”[1] As Frank shows, though, the story is not so one-directional. Instead, key elements within American business, notably advertising, had begun formulating their own critique of the staid post-World War II business culture several years before the development of the counterculture. In significant ways this emergent business culture articulated the same anxieties that would motivate the counterculture: fear of conformity and alienation and, ironically, revulsion at the manipulation of consumerism.

Advertising in the fifties emphasized images of conformity and complacency. As articulated by such influential figures as David Ogilvy and Rosser Reeves, the philosophy of advertising aimed at a mass audience which was to be reached through constant repetition of a single, simple message. Images focused on happy families living in suburban bliss. Underlying this attitude was a fundamental lack of respect for the intelligence of the consumer. As Frank says of the fifties, “Never has advertising been so unwilling to acknowledge the myriad petty frustrations, the anger, the fear that make up so much of daily existence, consuming and otherwise. Never has it insisted so dogmatically on such an abstractly glowing vision of American life. And never has it been so vulnerable to mockery” (p. 48).

The mass society of the fifties, of which advertising was only one example, did not go unchallenged. A num-

ber of critics, such as David Riesman, William Whyte, John Kenneth Galbraith and Vance Packard, expressed dissatisfaction with the sterility of American culture and the manipulative nature of consumerism. And, as Frank argues, these criticisms found sympathizers within the advertising industry itself, where some were chafing at the restrictions of the dominant Ogilvy-Reeves philosophy. Fueled by people like Bill Bernbach, Howard Gosage, Jerry Della Femina and George Lois, a creative rebellion in advertising developed in the early sixties challenging the vision proffered by advertisers in the previous decade. "But the ads of the creative revolution not only differed from those of the gray flannel past," Frank argues, "they were openly at war with their predecessors. What distinguished the advertising of the 1960s was its acknowledgement of and even sympathy with the mass society critique.... It deftly punctured advertising's too-rosy picture of American life and openly admitted that consuming was not the wonder-world it was cracked up to be.... (I)n the sixties, advertising actively compared a new, hip consumerism to an older capitalist ideology and left the latter permanently discredited" (p. 54). The philosophy of the creative revolution stressed the consumer's intelligence, the fact that both advertiser and consumer realized the manipulative and depersonalizing nature of mass society. Thus was created what Frank labels "hip consumerism." Ads for Volkswagen, for example, deliberately flaunted its lack of style change as an attack on the auto industry's policy of planned obsolescence.

Beginning in the early sixties, the creative revolution increasingly identified itself with youth. As Frank says, this focus only partly derived from an attempt to capture the youth market. More importantly, he argues, "youth" symbolized an attitude, a break with the old patterns of conformity, an emphasis on the new and exciting. Therefore the image of youth could be applied to a variety of products not necessarily aimed at young people. Consumers were invited to join the Pepsi Generation, for instance, if they were willing to "think young."

Stressing youth as a form of rebellion against the conservatism of the old order, advertisers of the creative revolution viewed the counterculture that began to emerge in the second half of the decade with sympathy. They adopted many of the trappings of the counterculture: psychedelic graphics, rock music and hip fashions. And if this vision of the counterculture remained superficial and unconvincing to those actually involved in the youth culture (as it did), that was all right with the advertisers because young people were not necessarily the primary

intended audience. After all, they did not have to be told to "think young."

A similar process also occurred in the men's clothing industry with the "Peacock Revolution." Men's fashion, which had remained virtually unchanged for decades, began to change profoundly in the early sixties. As Frank says, "The garment industry threw itself headlong into revolution for reasons of its own: the counterculture merely happened along at precisely the right time with what the industry believed to be the right attitudes toward clothing and the right palate of looks" (p. 186). By 1967, these tendencies had coalesced into an archetypal character, "The Rebel," whose sartorial choices symbolized his resistance to conformity. Once again, images of youth and counterculture were used to target an audience that was neither youthful nor countercultural.

As Frank recognizes, in many ways this work is marked by an old-fashioned sensibility. Recent scholarship has tended to focus (perhaps too much) on resistance to capitalist culture industries, showing how people appropriate the messages of these institutions to serve their individual or group needs. By focusing on culture producers rather than consumers, Frank not only restores a needed emphasis on the role of power in cultural discourse, but provides a fascinating look at "the creators of mass culture, a group as playful and even as subversive in their own way as the heroic consumers who are the focus of so much of cultural studies today" (p. x).

The development of hip consumerism, then, is the story of the adaptability of consumer capitalism. Recognizing the validity of critiques of fifties' mass society, representatives of the advertising and fashion industries sought to speak to those who felt alienated, who craved authenticity. Industry representatives, particularly younger people dissatisfied with the bureaucratic and creative strictures on their work, articulated their own variation on the frustrations of living in a consumer society. But in this view, the solution to such problems lay in increased consumption. And, as Frank argues, in the period since the sixties, hip consumerism has become the dominant ethos for "transform(ing) alienation and despair into consent" (p. 235).

In Frank's view, both defenders and detractors of the counterculture are mistaken in portraying the sixties as a period of "fundamental cultural confrontation.... (I)nstead...the counterculture may be more accurately understood as a stage in the development of the values of the American middle class, a colorful installment in the twentieth century drama of consumer subjectivity"

(p. 29). With its emphasis on self-fulfillment and immediate gratification, on the new and revolutionary as opposed to the stodgy and conformist, the counterculture did not need to be co-opted. It was already firmly within the value system of consumer capitalism. While this argument is not necessarily new—it has been variously made by such critics as Michael Harrington and Christopher Lasch—it serves as a useful corrective to more recent scholarship which has tended to minimize the role of power in cultural discourse. For one of the most significant forms of hegemony wielded by the dominant culture

is the power to determine the nature of its own countercultures. As Peter Fonda said in *Easy Rider*, “We blew it.”

[1]. Abe Peck, *Uncovering the Sixties: The Life and Times of the Underground Press*, New York: Pantheon, 1985, pp. 164-165.

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