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The Symbolic Imaginary of Counterculture

Abstract:

The symbolic *imaginary* of counterculture was fostered by dissent towards the cultural roots of the Western world, by a challenge to traditional norms, values and symbols, and by the rejection of historical identity and national sovereignty. This article aims to discuss some of the aftermaths of the counterculture of the 1960s as resulting from the transformations of its symbolic *imaginary*. The transformation of the symbolic *imaginary* of the counterculture is reflected in specific historical changes which had a profound impact on social relations, manners of perceiving or experiencing the world, and the shape of the public sphere within modern society. The dissent of the 1960s is framed in terms of its ability to take over and impose symbolic power, along with transformations of a given cultural model, a process which has roots in the concept of historicity and a new symbolic universe. Special attention is given to the institutionalization of multiculturalism, one of the most important outcomes of the transformation of the symbolic *imaginary* of counterculture and the normalization of countercultural radicalism. The aftermaths of the radicalism of the 1960s, when presented against the background of the transformation of the symbolic *imaginary*, underscore a ubiquitous and profound transformation of the entire culture and ideological dynamics in Western societies.

Keywords:
counterculture, imaginary, multiculturalism, Marxism, radicalism

Each society needs a narrative based on symbols, which in turn provides a backbone for that society's *imaginary*. Such symbols give a sense of belonging to community and are directly related to a given stage of historical progress. My starting point here is the assumption that the countercultural revolution took place first and foremost in the area of the symbolic *imaginary*, i.e., in culture. With this in mind, it is less important to ask about

a spread of specific ideas or ideologies, or forming social movements (which is an institutional analysis), but rather about the changes to the given cultural model and culture itself.

As I argue, the revolution in the area of the symbolic *imaginary* was translated into certain historical changes, including transformations of cultural models, which also cover specific manners of perceiving and experiencing the world. In other words, after the countercultural rebellion of '68, Europe was not the same Europe anymore, while the dissent itself became a "founding myth" in the new social *imaginary*. I use the concept of the *imaginary* as defined by Charles Taylor, i.e., an outline of preconditions for possible social practices, created through the process of giving meaning to such practices.[1] Hence, social imaginaries are components of the forms of collective memory and identity, components which at the same time affect such forms.

Although sociologists are no doubt more interested in institutional or class-related analysis, a philosopher may ask of what the countercultural *imaginary* is really constituted. The goal of the counterculture was not a political change, but rather symbolic power, rule over the collective *imaginary*. I believe it is hardly controversial to say that the counterculture of the 1960s was never a traditionally-defined revolution, but at its core was creating a new symbolic universe, i.e., a system of meanings, actions, attitudes, and visions that could alter the then-dominant social *imaginary*.

In this essay, I want to go beyond an analysis of counterculture as a rejection of consumerist values. I frame this moment of cultural resistance as a struggle for control over areas of historicity, i.e., in the categories of transformations within a certain cultural model. The ability to formulate the order of its own representations, independent of the order of actions, stems from a symbolic potential of society, and hence from the construction of its own cognitive system. Such an ability, which can be rephrased as the ability to achieve control over the area of historical action, allows for the creation of social reality.[2] In modern societies, the process of creating material goods gives way to the process of creating symbolic meanings, and it is precisely those symbolic conflicts and the struggle for cultural autonomy that become the pivot of social and cultural changes. Therefore, when we analyze both the origin and the recomposition of the symbolic *imaginary* in the 1960s, we need to focus on the history of the ideological revolution, which altered the very way modern societies derive their legitimacy.

In principle, the origins of this ideology follow the history of the radical Western Left. The leftist project of social change was thoroughly re-examined when it turned out that Marxism had been exhausted as a progressive narration, which took place as early as the mid-1950s. By the beginning of the 1970s, Marxism was practically devoid of any intellectual clout in Western Europe, especially with the experiences of the Paris-based Left, and due to its uselessness in describing social change in capitalist society. Although it rarely happened that intellectuals would give up on Marxism in favor of liberal democracy, they nevertheless realized that historical conflicts resided somewhere else, and are of a social and cultural nature, rather than being economic.[3] It is worth mentioning here that theoreticians of the French Left background, like Louis Althusser or Cornelius Castoriadis, also analyzed countercultural movements in context of transformations in the dominant ideology.

The transformation of society requires overcoming the inertia of traditional institutions, norms, symbolic systems, and relations of power. Normative and symbolic innovations should not be considered a result of functional adaptations, or the reproduction of a social system, but rather as creative processes of self-construction. The capacity of society to undertake creative and intentional symbolic actions means that social processes cannot be interpreted solely as knee-jerk reactions to a given situation, but rather in the categories of intersubjective

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1) See: Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

2) See: Alain Touraine, *Production de la société* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1973).

3) Touraine, *Production de la société*.

negotiations and creations of meanings.[4] Alain Touraine's sociology of action does not investigate the *praxis* of agents who belong to any given social class, but prefers to focus on power relations, which affect social struggles, movements, and ideologies. Hence, what is at stake here is the totality of social and cultural orientations that shape and direct actions.[5] Therefore, the functional model of society, in which change is considered to be simply an ever-growing complexity due to exogenous factors, seems out-of-date, as societies not only create a social order that is functional to them, but are also capable of creating norm-oriented actions, and thus they can both create and destroy their own social order, which applies above all to counterculture.[6]

In the context of transformations of the symbolic countercultural *imaginary*, what seems crucial is the concept of historicity, developed by Alan Touraine in the course of his *actionalist* theory. In my opinion, this term captures a fundamental ability of society to undertake creative self-transformations, an ability which combines the symbolic potential of human actions with the capacity to affect our own environment and social fabric.[7] When the potential of historicity is lost, the *status quo* is simply reproduced. Conversely, the society of the 1960s demonstrated a high potential of historicity as it could be reduced neither to its political system nor the dominant cultural model, and was capable of something much more than adaptation and consumption. I would even go as far as to say that it was the historicity itself that triggered the process of countercultural self-creation. Actionalist sociology focuses on defining a society through historicity and thus stresses the capacity for creative self-transformations, a vital feature of counterculture. When we pay too much attention to the coherence of axiological and normative systems, we arrive at a distorted image of a society as a stable system which follows and observes its dominant values.

Radicalization, in its social and political meaning as set forth by counterculture, should be based on cultural contradictions, which can be used in new forms of struggle for emancipation. It goes without saying that the radical Left did not backtrack on the issue of emancipation just because Marxism failed to deliver an ideology for revolution. However, the revolutionary symbolic *imaginary* underwent a far-reaching recomposition, as the bankruptcy of Marxism, as a symbolic and ideological *imaginary* that outlined the requirements and promises of social progress, did not culminate in the end of the progressive and emancipatory ideology *per se*. What we need to stress here is that up until more or less 1968, Marxism was considered as the intellectual avant-garde among left-wing circles throughout almost the entire world. Nevertheless, it was inevitable for Marxism to go out as an ideology and meta-narrative of modernity, as candidly summed up by Allan Bloom: "To put it crudely, Marx has become boring — and not only to American youngsters. In some backwaters, grim autodidacts may still thrill to the rhetoric of 'Workers of the world' while Third World presidents of one-party states focus their resentments by invoking the authority of Marx. But in the centers where people keep up-to-date and ideologies are made, Marx has been dead for a long time."[8]

Counterculture was one of many alternative ideologies, and offered something that cannot be found even in early, "humanistic" works by Marx – an attempt to solve the conundrum of how to live in a world in which unscrupulous capitalists do not appropriate the fruits of the labor of the downtrodden proletariat, and where labor is or may be a source of self-affirmation. To put it in other words, when considering the transformation

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4) See: Tomasz Maślanka, "Morbus hermeneuticus. Paradygmat komunikacji w socjologicznej i filozoficznej refleksji nad kulturą," *Uniwersyteckie Czasopismo Socjologiczne* 9 (2014): 7–16.

5) See: Touraine, *Production de la société*.

6) Ibid.

7) Ibid.

8) See: Alan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (New York: Simon&Schuster, 1987).

of the symbolic *imaginary* of counterculture, that early fascination with Marxism, although understandable, nowadays serves only to underscore the common belief of the Western-European Left that the historic role of intellectuals is to participate in creating a rational civilization, one which does not lag behind its *zeitgeist*.

Since its inception, numerous intellectuals have thought of Marxism as an intellectually attractive philosophy, and not a political agenda or a comprehensive description of capitalist economy.[9] In this sense, presenting Marxism solely as a theoretical cornerstone of one of the main ideologies of the twentieth century deprives it of its most important dimension, that of seeking sense through *praxis* of social actions, which leads to the self-realization of man.

To sum up, we can indicate the following aftermaths and causes of the bankruptcy of Marxism as an ideological and theoretical foundation for the countercultural *imaginary* in the 1960s – above all, Marxism does not fit into the reality of late capitalism, which proved that the contradictions pointed out by Marx are incorporated by the logic of the system (which exhibits Hegelian "cunning of reason"), and thus they do not bring about the implosion of this system. In short, capitalist society which formed after the Second World War took a radical turn from the society as described by Marx, which provided no room for any middle class that could at least in part benefit from consumption. What is more, the role of the proletariat was dubious and over-estimated, as perfectly shown in the example of the French Communist Party, which made "a deal" with the Gaullist government instead of supporting radical changes pushed for by the students' movement. Here, the "people" became *de facto* an enemy of the revolution. The failure of Marxism as a revolutionary operating system stems also from particular historical circumstances, mainly revealing the whole truth about the Gulag system and the slow agony of the socialist ideology after Stalin's death, culminating in the disclosure of Khrushchev's "secret" speech at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union; last but not least, the year 1956 saw the Hungarian uprising brutally squashed. All those events served to undermine the credibility of a regime that sought ideological support in dialectical and historical materialism. Of course, the utter failure of the Soviet version of Communism did not erase the issue of radical emancipation, best expressed by Marxism, i.e. the abolition of alienation. Liberal society was thus far from vindicated.

From 1968 on, the history of emancipation would enter a new stage and concern other forms of domination. In this context, American sociologist Alvin Gouldner indicates a need for a new, progressive sociology, which could allow us to rethink and reconsider existing social relations.[10] On the other hand, for French sociologist Alain Touraine, already mentioned above, the key factor is a new dimension of social struggle, a symbolic and culture-based one. When explaining cultural and symbol contradictions, the traditional sociology of the labor movement proves lacking and out-of-date because it focuses on economic struggle in the context of relations of production and the evolution of social and economic factions. Moreover, Marxism became outdated as it served for the Left not only as a denunciation of capitalism, but also as an attempt to find a social struggle that could explain the dynamics of emancipation. For the radicals of 1960s, social change and revolution limited to fixing the relations of production did not go far enough, and what was at stake was the transformation of the entire symbolic *imaginary*, or according to Alain Touraine, the control over the "field of historicity", i.e., a certain cultural model. Such attempts were made by many authors routinely associated with counterculture of the 1960s, like Herbert Marcuse, for whom dissent must lead to a transformation of the symbolic nature of society (attitudes, goals, values) and not institutions or politics.[11] As we can easily see, this was about a radical

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9) Leszek Kołakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, trans. P. S. Falla (New York: Norton and Company, 2005).

10) See: Alvin Ward Gouldner, *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* (New York: Basic Books, 1970).

11) See: Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1974); Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimentional Man: Studies in The Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (London: Routledge, 1991).

philosophy of emancipation and not a social movement that mobilizes in order to effect changes in institutions or the political system. This is also the aspect that I would like to stress here because I believe it allows us to present counterculture as a new form of culture and not a social movement that aims for any kind of institutional or political overhaul. Generally speaking, the symbolic *imaginary* of counterculture was fostered by dissent towards the cultural roots of the Western world, by a challenge to traditional norms, values, and symbols, and by the rejection of historical identity and national sovereignty. Of course, this leads us to another question: what are the results of the above for contemporary society?

Going back as far as the classic book by Theodor Roszak, we can encounter the idea that the West "was existentially bankrupt", and the trigger for emancipation may come from irrationalism, which he associated with European counterculture.[12] If I interpret Roszak right, what he meant was a complete make-over of the traditional symbolic *imaginary* of Western societies, whose fundamental principle was formal and operational rationality, or as defined later by Jürgen Habermas, "functional reason".

I would like to suggest contemplating the symbolic *imaginary* of counterculture in the context of the critical tradition, which was considered a shift of the revolutionary subject as described by Marx. This shift constitutes a new revolutionary subject, one which replaces the traditionally defined proletariat. Now this subject is the plurality of identity claims, hidden behind a rhetorical veil of diversity and multiculturalism. But what does it mean? First and foremost, the policy of recognizing differences becomes the horizon of politics. Second, the Other becomes a point of reference to criticize the Western culture, and their virtues serve to underscore our European vices and prejudice. Third, exclusion is equalized with victimhood, which leads to a certain sociology of defending victims.[13] And fourth, identity claims of excluded groups and other minorities call for their inclusion in the political community, where such claims will be accepted.

All those processes lead to the institutionalization of multiculturalism and making all identity claims equal within a radical democracy. Isonomy, the equality of rights, is replaced by the inclusion of excluded groups, which is often followed by dismantling traditional institutions that block access of minorities to full civic rights. Radical democracy uses the post-modern nomenclature to call this process a deconstruction of unseen discriminatory logics. The ideal of celebrating difference, dating back to the radicalism of the 1960s, is based on the template of struggle against discrimination. The institutionalization of the revolutionary *imaginary* of the Western radical Left consisted mainly in the fact that it dropped the ideal of a Socialist state in favor of a state which celebrates differences.[14] As a result, new forms of social exclusion were discovered, and the place of an alienated worker was taken by discriminated minorities (either ethnic or sexual). In essence, it went much further than the Marxist critique of alienation, as its aftermaths were unearthed in almost all spheres of human life, and not only in labor, as Marx would have it.

Another key element of the ideological legacy of the radical sixties was the culture of negative remembrance, commemoration of victims, and constant apologetic repentance. This remorse or even obsession with penance was called by Jean Sevillia "historical correctness", which also includes the criminalization of colonization. For Canadian sociologist Matthieu Bock-Cote, this penance-based ideology and historiography, which celebrates the memory of victims, is a part of the ideological arsenal of multiculturalism.[15] The main goal is to expose the crimes of European societies and to rewrite history with the victims' perspective in mind. Often,

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12) See: Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the technocratic society and its youthful opposition* (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1968).

13) See: Mathieu Bock-Cote, *Le multiculturalisme comme religion politique* (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 2016).

14) Ibid.

15) Bock-Cote, *Le multiculturalisme comme religion politique.*

we see a clever figure of speech, of "the inclusion of the Other", used by people like Habermas.[16] The process of universalizing national historical consciousness is reversed by putting discriminated and dominated groups in the spotlight. The burden of guilt of repressing diversity is borne by European nation-states, which follow policies of exclusion and discrimination. Bock-Cote says here about a deconstruction of the foundation of the Western nation in a democratic manner, supported by the sociology of the celebration of victims.[17] French writer and director Claude Ribbe points out that nations are more capable of acknowledging their errors and crimes.[18] Therefore, we can safely say that the apex of the decolonization of Western societies is their conversion to multiculturalism.

The logic of a shift to a diversity-based society is a very radical one, as it does not aim for any fine-tuning of national identity or the very concept of culture, which stems from shared history, but for the rejection of national culture *en block*. Nationality becomes an element of the predominant discourse which serves the majority's interests. It is not one of the elements of the pluralistic *imaginary* of the Western democratic community, but runs afoul of the very notion of democracy, which struggles against discrimination. Looking at this issue in the context of political philosophy, we can say that civic society is not a historical community anymore,[19] but an abstraction being held together by formal and legal bonds. John Fonte was right to call this radical universalism of Western societies a *post-West syndrome*,[20] as seen in the dechristanization of public space in order to open it for diverse religious identities (e.g. in France). This is done not in the name of defending laity, but rather multiculturalism. Christian symbols are excluded from the public sphere not because they are religious symbols, but because they convey, to use Roland Barthes' jargon, the hegemony of Western imperialism.

The radical Left of the 1960s quite easily transformed into the multicultural Left. The tools to exert political pressure – human rights (or fundamental rights) as an instrument of fulfilling claims of minority groups, in a manner mostly free from the controversies of traditional politics – are maybe not that radical anymore, but they are equally effective. This appeal to human rights, rather than people's sovereignty, is combined with a process identified a long time ago by Habermas and Niklas Luhmann, namely the judicialization of the public sphere.[21] Structural distortions of the political dimension of the public sphere, described extensively by Habermas, are reflected directly in the shape of current debates in democracy – they get transferred from the area of communications into the area of law. It is therefore the law that became a perfect space in which to manage the claims of have-nots and the discriminated, although these processes seem not to spill into peripheral countries like Poland. In Western Europe there is a different legal culture, and its superiority over peripheral countries is by no means obvious. In the former, many key social issues are analyzed and justified by appeal to a higher rationality of law, which supersedes the rationality of politics, as evidenced by the abstract rules of equity developed within the Anglo-Saxon normative political philosophies.[22] This higher rationality outlines the preconditions of coexistence in a multicultural society, without referring to people's sovereignty, but rather to abstract principles of justice. It goes without saying that such an approach does not encourage consensus over

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16) See: Jürgen Habermas, *Die Einbeziehung des Anderen. Studien zur politischen Theorie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1996).

17) See: Bock-Cote, *Le multiculturalisme comme religion politique*.

18) See: Claude Ribbe, "A l'esclave inconnu," *Le Monde*, December 23, 2005.

19) See: Edward Shils, "Co to jest społeczeństwo obywatelskie?" in *Europa i społeczeństwo obywatelskie. Rozmowy w Castel Gandolfo*, ed. Krzysztof Michalski (Kraków: Znak, 1994).

20) See: John D. Fonte, *Post-West Syndrome* (American Enterprise Institute Online, 1997).

21) See: Tomasz Maślanka, *Racjonalność i komunikacja. Filozoficzne podstawy teorii społecznej Jürgena Habermasa* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2011).

22) See: John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971).

the common (public) good, but instead emboldens claims and demands for respecting rights, *implicite* rights of minorities. Often, the term "fundamental rights" is used, which is supposed to close any further discussion, as such rights, like axioms in mathematics, are not subject to any further justification or negotiations. The idea of fundamental rights reduces the state to the role of a referee in disputes between various rights, a creator of a *sui generis* economy of norms, without any reference to the common interest.

Doing away with the stigmatization of alternative lifestyles requires a reconstruction of dominant cultural patterns and symbols, that is to say, a recomposition of the symbolic *imaginary*. Such reconstruction takes place through suppressing differences, which more often than not looks like a shift from tolerance to recognition. A new, inclusive representation of society has a truly therapeutic sense, as it requires an adjustment of both the personal mental attitude itself and the social attitude to diversity. To go a bit overboard, the goal is to make people *love* multiculturalism. This was a countercultural task in the sense that it required a challenge to the old culture and its patterns, followed by the establishment of new ones. This is a strategy well-known from the classic countercultural texts of the 1960s, which offered a scathing criticism of the system and technocracy.[23] Back then it was all about a transformation of awareness, which was supposed to precede institutional changes, while now it has become a kind of therapy, with a goal to create a mental disposition towards openness to diversity. I believe that what we are dealing with here is a certain kind of identity engineering: education to pluralism. The therapeutic role of the state is to reconstruct institutions whose purpose is to socialize (like schools) and turn them into agencies responsible for eliminating any opposition to the pluralism of identity.

The transformation of the symbolic *imaginary*, if we assume it to be a legacy of the radical sixties, can be reduced, in the spirit of the critical tradition, to several key elements: challenge to rigid and petrified social hierarchies, demands for more equality, transgression of ethnic and cultural boundaries, defense of the rights of minorities, and demands for the redistribution of power. The opposite of the critical tradition of an open society would be here a peripheral narrative of a closed society, one which features a rigid hierarchy reinforced through inequalities and oppression of minorities, with the idea of the nation as a main component of collective identity. What is more, any criticism of multiculturalism or any conservative defense of national culture and identity is confronted by the intolerance of the ideological Left. Thus, the Left defines the preconditions for political legitimacy, setting the boundaries for what can be thought and what can and cannot be said in public debate.[24] Multiculturalism in Western societies is not only a political issue, but also an anthropological one. Any hostility to this ideology is considered an objection to emancipation and progress and earns a label of narrow-minded bigotry. The utopia of '68 had an element of a regressive, childish fantasy about being set free from the logic of the adult world and its institutions, or its culture in general.[25] However, a dissent from culture and history does not lead to the expected freedom, while the notion of acceptance for a diverse world falls victim to the pipe dreams of cultural universalism[26] – in the figure of the Other, like a retort, all cultures mix freely, and any one may be easily replaced by any other.

The ideas and processes discussed here overlap with the more general process of the normalization of countercultural radicalism. One of its key elements was a narrative of penitence and rituals of negative remembrance, a crucial part of the discourse in societies that celebrate diversity. In the context of transforma-

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23) See: Raoul Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2012); Charles A.Reich, *The Greening of America* (London: Pengiun Books, 1972).

24) See: Bock-Cote, *Le multiculturalisme comme religion politique*.

25) Ibid.

26) Leszek Kołakowski, "Szukanie barbarzyńcy. Złudzenia uniwersalizmu kulturalnego," in *Czy diabeł może być zbawiony i 27 innych kazań* (Kraków: Znak, 2006), 11–31.

tions of the symbolic *imaginary*, we can say that Europe (once Western, now the EU) defines itself through references to universal values and symbols, of which one striking example is the refusal to discuss in public its own Christian roots, considered to be a rather singular legacy. It comes as no surprise then that conservatism is so widely criticized, as a pathological loyalty to narrowly-defined values, interests, and traditions, often national ones. It is said to be proof of some deep-seated flaw in groups that fear strangers and otherness; an ideological knee-jerk response by those waterboarded by the wave of the modernization; an old-fashioned and pre-modern manner of creating collective identities. Time and again, conservatism is confounded with bigotry, homophobia, Islamophobia or Europhobia. Generally speaking, a positive opinion about the legacy of '68 is in Western Europe a condition for participation in democratic discourse, a prerequisite for recognition by politicians and media alike.

The ideological renaissance of the progressive narrative in the wake of the 1960s has without doubt a tremendous impact on the fate of the entire Western culture. Counterculture and the implosion of Marxism shifted collective attention from material to cultural orientations of social actions and gave birth to ideologies that provided new epistemological frameworks for modernity, along with the confines of what can be thought and said. I have no doubt that the aftermaths of the radical sixties did not fade away when that generation became grown-ups, but rather profoundly transformed the entire culture and ideological dynamics of Western societies. To put it short, the most tangible legacy of counterculture proves to be the reconfiguration of the symbolic *imaginary*.

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