The internet didn't kill counterculture—you just won't find it on Instagram

Text by Caroline Busta

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Search Google Images for 'counterculture' and it overwhelmingly returns black-and-white photos of young people all now over 60. In the pictures, it is so clear what they were countering: The Man, of course, who, with his white collar, white skin, and short hair, singlehandedly symbolized dominant cultural norms. In the age of social media, personal expression has become the most valuable form of currency, yet we still use the term 'counterculture' to describe alternatives to the hegemonic forces of yesteryear, as if dressing middle-class, white, and preppy still aligned with the rules of power today.

In an era more profoundly organized by Big Tech than our own elected governments, the new culture to be countered isn't singular or top-down. It's rhizomatic, nonbinary, and includes all who live within the Google/Apple/Facebook/ Amazon digital ecosystem (aka GAFA stack). With digital platforms transforming legacy countercultural activity into profitable, high-engagement content, being countercultural no longer means being counter-hegemonic. What logic could possibly be upended by punks, goths, gabbers, or neo-pagans when the internet, a massively lucrative space of capitalization, profits off the personal expression and political conflict of its users?

As recently as the early '90s, abjection and extreme profanity still worked pretty well to repel the big social threats of the time: pearl-clutching conservatives with their anti-progressive ideology and market recuperation. Take, for instance, musician GG Allin in an American-flag loincloth, fighting with his audience and shitting on stage before launching into a performance of "I'm Gonna Rape You," or artist and noise musician Boyd Rice, in what he reports was a prank, joining the founder of the white supremacist group American Front in a 1989 Sassy photo shoot for an article the teen magazine was running on neo-Nazis. In context, these artists (like the psychedelic hippies of yore) were being literally countercultural—using culture against itself to violate the hegemonic push toward, in Allin's and Rice's case, neoliberal "responsibilization."

In today's online space, however, this strategy breaks down. Brought back into the spotlight in 2018 via a NYC gallery exhibition of visually innocuous abstract paintings, Rice quickly found himself at the center of controversy as his decades-old Sassy appearance (among other such stunts) tripped present-day censors. An old punk, he smirked at the outrage. "I'm too dangerous for New York City," he told Artnet. Yet he wasn't too dangerous for the internet. High-tension discussion of his work and life and the gallerist's moral compass raged online, which is to say Rice was attentionally successful online. Despite being informed by billions, this new technological hegemony isn't democratic; it's a swarm-led form of para-governance programmed

to maximize engagement while obfuscating responsibility for the social and environmental damage it wreaks. Zuckerberg, Bezos, Thiel, and other tech behemoths are quick to remind us that they're not in charge of public laws or policy; their empires were built according to the "peaceful mechanisms" of free-market capitalism—and that society has adopted their tools and spaces through its own free will. If pressed, they'll point out how their platforms reflect the countercultural demands of earlier generations: eschewing big government and vertical corporate culture while encouraging personal fulfillment and flat organizational structures. Today you can be a coder and a DJ, an Uber driver and a travel blogger, a Sand Hill Road suit and a Robot Heart Burner.

Similarly slippery is the new look of power. Far from the parades, palaces, and outsize girths of present-day strongmen like Viktor Orbán, Kim Jong-un, and Donald Trump, the most iconic tells you'll find among the big tech set are more likely to be a black turtleneck, a Patagonia fleece, and the absence of carrying bags. It's a flex to be visually indistinguishable from the crowd. The power of today is firmly situated in minimalism, restraint, and ease—it's only power under threat that turns to physical displays of strength. Actual power is controlling the means by which lesser power can be displayed—i.e., congrats on the 500K likes on your polling numbers, @jack still owns all your tweets. Actual power keeps a low profile; actual power doesn't need a social media presence, it owns social media.

In recent years, users have started to register this shift. Yet the term counterculture still gets used to describe someone like rapper Tekashi 6ix9ine, whose notoriety—first breaking society's code (sexual abuse and murder conspiracy, among other offenses) and then the omertà code of the streets (snitching on fellow gang members to lessen his own sentence)—propelled him to superstardom: "Gooba," a track he surprise-dropped upon being surprise-released from prison, made YouTube history by becoming the most-watched rap video in a 24-hour span, frying the platform's view counter. That same day, 2 million simultaneous users tuned in to his Instagram Live as he confessed into his phone camera: "I snitched, I ratted. But who was I supposed to be loyal to?" And then with a sparkle of VVS diamonds, "I broke the YouTube. I'm at 5 million views in one hour. […] A rat is doin' more numbers than you. Numbers don't lie." But behind 6ix9ine's self-loyalty is an unwitting loyalty to the platform and, by extension, to the shareholders of Alphabet and Facebook, Inc. And this is where it gets tricky. To be truly countercultural today, in a time of tech hegemony, one has to, above all, betray the platform, which may come in the form of betraying or divesting from your public online self.

6ix9ine is subcultural, but he isn't countercultural. Someone like Edward Snowden, by comparison, isn't subcultural but may be the closest we get to a countercultural figure in the postdigital age. A US government subcontractor with access to classified intelligence, Snowden saw Big Tech's radically scaling power and, in 2013, exposed the NSA's illegal agreements with major tech platforms to intercept the private e-mail, call records, and cache of "almost anything done on the internet" by users worldwide. Snowden's whistleblowing targeted a major chakra of the new hegemony, resulting in great personal compromise. But a single individual isn't an entire counterculture.

Counterculture requires a group. Us against the world. And the internet is excellent at bringing groups together around collective dissent. But just like the internet, there is nothing inherently

socially progressive about these tools. Extinction Rebellion is countercultural in spirit but so too are QAnon, the armed right-wing libertarian Boogaloo Boys, and Europe's Reichsbürger, who deny the existence of present-day Germany, claiming to be citizens of the Third Reich (which, they argue, technically never ended).

A truth specific to our time is that dissent against one level of authority is now very often driven by a deeper hegemonic force. Perhaps this is why, among many younger people (Greta Thunberg notwithstanding), there is less focus on battling current leaders and more interest in divining counter-futures. Instead of attempting to dismantle the master's house using the master's tools, it's more something like: Let's pool crypto to book the master's Airbnb and use the tools we find there to forge a forest utopia that the master could never survive. Central to this counter-future crafting is a strong belief in impending ecological collapse, rendering all the existing systems of control obsolete—which is a logical work-around for thinking about dissent in a time when the socially and ecologically corrosive systems are deemed too sprawling to effectively counter or boycott. Another key factor is Gen Z's rediscovery of PoliticalCompass.org, a Web 1.0 site that, via six sets of prompts with which a user is asked to dis/-identify, generates an approximate position on the Political Compass's X/Y axis of Left to Right, Authoritarian to Libertarian.

Having spent the past several years intensively studying the development of Gen Z's online political expression, artist Joshua Citarella points to the emergence of "e-deologies, radical politics as a form of niche personal branding." In his 2019 report *20 Interviews*, Citarella underscores the influence of Political Compass and gaming more generally on ideations of countercultural participation—or what he refers to as a "choose your character / choose your future" mode of "identity play that gained heightened relevance as American politics subsumed all of pop culture" during the mid-2010s.

Among the political identities one finds in this space is, for example: "Ted was right" anarcho-primitivism (anprim), which, following Ted Kaczynski's *Industrial Society and Its Future* manifesto, promotes a reactionary return to pre-agrarian times where people, reskilled as hunters and gatherers, are no longer alienated from their labor and seek fulfillment through daily survival. If you think this sounds fringe, consider the 10.3 million users currently subscribed to the Primitive Technology channel on YouTube, which has tutorialized building things "in the wild completely from scratch using no modern tools or materials, […] seeing how far you can go without utilizing modern technology"—except, of course, the device you use to stream the video showing you how.

The names of these e-deologies tend to be both fantastical and literal. A "post-civilizationist" might focus on what optimal human survival would look like were civilization no longer possible. A "voluntarist post-agrarianist," meanwhile, might value anarcho-primitivism skills but see them as integral to realizing a civilization sustained through opt-in agrarian communes. Elsewhere on the compass, one finds the likes of "Fully Automated Luxury Gay Space Communism" (where a total embrace of technology delivers humanity from scarcity, ecological volatility, and the reactionary social ills of resource competition) and the defiantly neo-traditionalist "technocratic theocracy," which puts its faith in a machine-governed future that upholds Christian virtues. E-deologies are further explored on message boards and social media via memes, TikTok posts, and livestreamed Twitch and YouTube debates, all of which can get

pretty gnarly (calls for "eco-fash global genocide" and "secession of white ethnostates," etc.) And maybe here, we do have an aesthetic counter to the wallflower non-style of Big Tech: a raging messy semiotic meltdown of radicalizing (if absurdist) meme culture where the only ideological no-go zone is the liberal center. Key here is that most of this activity is happening under the guise of avatars, pseudonyms, and collectively run social media accounts where direct lines between IRL subjects and online personas are rarely clear. The "niche personal branding" is gamified—push an account to the extreme, see what happens. If the platform shuts you down, start over.

While climate change is a shared concern for many younger people, their responses might be more accurately understood as competitive-futurist than countercultural. As the greatly imaginative range of Political Compass positions illustrates, there is little consensus over who or what they are specifically opposing. This is wise in an era when the complexity of global crises makes it exceedingly difficult to effectively isolate responsible parties. How would one even begin to hold, say, Apple accountable for all of the externalities within the life of an iPhone? Who among us could easily give up our connectivity and still be economically and socially okay? It's as if, having grown up on a fully networked Earth, Gen Z has bypassed counterculture, finding it futile in the face of a hegemonic system that more clearly resembles a Hydra than the monolithic forces that legacy counterculture was rebelling against. Intuiting that any activity directly opposing the system will only make the system stronger, the next generation is instead opting for radical hyperstition: constructing alternative futures that abandon our current infrastructure entirely (the emergence of blockchain-based currencies, for instance, or calls to not merely reform but fully abolish the police).

While Citarella's research focuses on teenagers who began posting online around 2016 (and in 2020 are roughly 18 years old), it nevertheless distills the changing nature of contemporary countercultural activity more broadly. For one, anonymity, or at least pseudonymity, is increasingly important if not fundamental to being active online in counter-hegemonic ways. This is very different from, say, 1990s ideations of IRL counterculture, where there was a premium on unmediated authenticity and "being real" (think MTV Unplugged). Now "selling out" is tying your online identity to your IRL life and real name. In part, this is because one of the biggest impediments to countercultural activity is the fact that the internet doesn't suppress expression—it forces you to express and then holds you accountable for whatever you say for years. On the platform, silence isn't an option, at least not if you want the network to remember you exist. This is especially true in the culture sector, where being visible means being kept in mind for gigs and collaborations. There is a reason why 6ix9ine is obsessed with breaking YouTube and why talented young rappers must be equally talented at social media marketing if they ever hope to build a career.

We saw this dynamic metastasize in the wake of George Floyd's murder, when well-intentioned claims of "silence is violence" (recalling the powerful 1987 ACT-UP "Silence = Death" campaign) spiraled into calling out individuals with even a small following who hadn't come forward with a timely public statement of solidarity or remorse. Yet public posts were subject to popular scrutiny and judged based on sincerity, originality, and tone. Not surprisingly, many people defaulted to posting a somber plain black square. But this generated criticism of its own by clogging the feed with an informational blackout during a moment when community resource

sharing was critically important. Amid a chaotic time, the platform functioned exactly as designed: amplification of emotions, uptick in user interaction, growth in platform engagement and data cultivation. *Cha-ching*, the platform cashes in. What's really messed up about this is that users, despite understanding that the platform's mechanics are net-bad, still feel a moral responsibility to obey the platform-enabled-hive-mind's rules.

On the dark edges of the early internet, hackers foresaw the enclosure of the public commons long before the likes of 6ix9ine, Snowden, and teenage Gen Z. These users developed an ethos that valued the radical freedom of a fully anonymous, hyperconnected zone where people could communicate unburdened by their physical bodies and government names. As online activity began to centralize around search engines, such as Netscape, Explorer, and Google, in the late-'90s and early-'00s, the internet bifurcated into what became known as the "clearnet," which includes all publicly indexed sites (i.e., big social media, commercial platforms, and anything crawled by major search engines) and the "darknet" or "deep web," which is not publicly indexed (due to being built on anonymized, encrypted networks such as Tor). There were also a number of sites that though officially clearnet, laid the groundwork for a sub-clearnet space that we might think of as a "dark forest" zone—particularly message board forums like Reddit and 4chan, where users can interact without revealing their IRL identity or have this activity impact their real-name SEO.

Taken from the title of Chinese sci-fi writer Liu Cixin's 2008 book, "the dark forest" region of the web is becoming increasingly important as a space of online communication for users of all ages and political persuasions. In part, this is because it is less sociologically stressful than the clearnet zone, where one is subject to peer, employer, and state exposure. It also now includes Discord servers, paid newsletters (e.g., Substack), encrypted group messaging (via Telegram, etc.), gaming communities, podcasts, and other off-clearnet message board forums and social media. One forages for content or shares in what others in the community have retrieved rather than accepting whatever the platform algorithms happen to match to your data profile. Additionally, dark forest spaces are both minimally and straightforwardly commercial. There is typically a small charge for entry, but once you are in, you are free to act and speak without the platform nudging your behavior or extracting further value. It is also interesting to keep in mind that the dark forest shares the same cables and satellite arrays as clearnet channels, is accessed via the same devices, and essentially all of its denizens continue to simultaneously participate in clearnet spaces (as contemporary professional protocol demands). It is therefore not analogous to legacy countercultural notions of going off-grid or "dropping out."

To be sure, none of these spaces are pure, and users are just as vulnerable to echo chambers and radicalization in the dark forest as on pop-stack social media. But in terms of engendering more or less counter-hegemonic potential, the dark forest is more promising because of its relative autonomy from clearnet physics (the gravity, velocity, and traction of content when subject to x algorithm). Unlike influencers and "blue checks," who rely on clearnet recognition for income, status, and even self-worth, dark forest dwellers build their primary communities out of clearnet range—or offline in actual forests, parks, and gardens (e.g., cottagecore and related eco-social trends)—and then only very selectively or even absurdly/incoherently show themselves under clearnet light. The crux of Liu Cixin's book is the creed, when called by the clearnet: "Do not

answer! Do not answer!! Do not answer!!! But if you do answer, the source will be located right away. Your planet will be invaded. Your world will be conquered."

So what does today's counter-hegemonic culture look like? It's not particularly interested in being seen—at least not in person. It gets no thrill out of wearing leather and a mohawk and walking past main-street shops, which are empty now anyway. But it does demonstrate a hunger for freedom—freedom from the attention economy, from atomization, and the extractive logic of mainstream communication. We can imagine collectively held physical spaces reclaimed from empty retail or abandoned venues hosting esoteric local scenes, a proliferation of digital gangs in dark forests who hold secrets dear, and a new desire for scarcity in cultural objects—deeper and closer connections made between people even while rejecting the platform's compulsion to "like and share." In the internet era, true counterculture is difficult to see, and even harder to find—but that doesn't mean it's not there.