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Dissonance and Mutations

Theorising Counter-Culture

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Could there be a more telling example than that of The (International) Noise Conspiracy, a self-proclaimed revolutionary rock band steeped in Situationist rhetoric, dancing on music programs in *über*-stylish clothes singing "Everything is up for sale"? Is it the ultimate subversion: the repositioning of dominant structures of the culture industry, turning them into opposition voices? Or, is it the ultimate recuperation, the transformation of the expression of alienation and revolt into niche commodities for expanding youth markets: the conversion of dissent into a *spectacle* of harmless dissent? Counter-culture (especially that based around "youth") is now a fundamental part of the life of global cyber-industrial civilisation. Often critiqued as a pastime for middle-class children in Western nations, anecdotal evidence suggests people all over the world participate in counter-culture on deep personal levels. Despite the conception that counter-culture is a diversion for bored suburban youth of the Global North, places like Malaysia have as large "metal" scenes as Australia. [1]

It is crucial to understand that there is no one singular counter-culture. Instead, there is a flourishing and fracturing of multiple trajectories, both of cultural organisation and cultural expression. This is often overtly political, but is also apolitical, anti-political and post-political. How can this be theorised? Can any sense be made of such a global phenomenon? Political science is often geared toward an understanding of political life through official organisations and expressed statements. Counter-cultures – whilst often producing overlapping organisations and manifestos (for example, *A New Punk Manifesto*) – are organised far more rhizomally. [2] They fit the pattern of "war machines" articulated in the writings of Deleuze and Guattari. [3] They are decentred, divergent, transverse, non-hierarchical, lateral patterns of subverting and re-creating patterns of living. [4] Thus, the content of their politics exists beyond a level of expressed positions and flourishes on a more molecular relationship – within the social relationships that form the ectoplasm of a counter-culture.

This paper charts an understanding of counter-culture based on the belief that the subversive potential of these counter-cultures is beyond that of their expressed politics. To argue this, the autonomous activities of counter-culture will be positioned in the context of the dynamics in current capitalist civilisation, involving a move to understand the role that culture and communication have in the total subsumption of social relationships of society by Capital. Most importantly, this will involve engaging with all activity that refuses or challenges this process of subsumption, however seemingly "primitive" or "simplistic" this activity may seem.

Counter-culture has a long history in radical discourse, especially those post 1945, and similar patterns of cultural association and revolt are a predominant aspect of the development of both capitalism and its opposition. Indeed, the resistance of commoners to the Enclosures during the dawn of capital in England was built around cultural customs and traditions. For example, the evolution of the game of soccer shows that quite often it served as a direct way to counter the encroaching power of the state and market. In 1768 at Holland Fen, Lincolnshire, three football matches were organised on land which had been enclosed, the first of which ended in a violent confrontation with a troop of dragoons. [5] This brings to mind immediately the comparison with today's "Reclaim the Streets" parties, a global phenomenon in which roads are taken over and transformed into carnivals and dance parties. This is a movement aimed at fighting another kind of "enclosure," occasionally meeting with direct confrontations with the state (such as in London in 2000). [6] This suggests a continuum of revelry, celebration and custom as the basic building blocks of class warfare. Is it this spirit that animates counter-culture today? Is it this simple or is something more at work? Is this class war or is it enclosure by consumption?

The overt radical politics of the traditional Left (including but not limited to social democracy, socialism and anarchism) and counter-cultures have had an uncomfortable relationship with each other. [7] During the mid-nineties American anarchist circles were divided by an increasingly bitter argument between "life-style" anarchism and "social" anarchism, driven through the polemics of the theorist Murray Bookchin. This was cruelly ironic considering Bookchin was denouncing the counter-culturists, while 20 years previously he had been their champion. [8] At other times, such as the Rock Against Racism gigs organised by the Socialist Workers Parties, more traditionalist Trotskyists worked with a number of punk bands. [9] Positive or negative, the primary approach of the traditional Left to counter-culture has been

opportunistic: viewed as a potential recruiting ground rather than a legitimate form of struggle in its own right. This arises from the highly fetishised role of "militants" or "activism," privileging some forms of activity as real struggle and de-legitimising others; this is coupled with a perspective that focuses on the conflict in the realm of *production* (interpreted in the most traditional sense) as the *sine qua non* of the class struggle. On the other hand, some radicals look to counter-culture as the new expression of struggle itself. The *Berkeley Barb* in 1967 wrote: "Hippies are more than just people who walk down Haight Street with beads, bells, long hair stoned on drugs. They are a concept, an act of rejection, a militant vanguard, a hope for the future." [10] But how, and why?

Between a Rock and a Non-Place.

Post-modernism places us in a terrible bind. The ability to construct serious revolutionary transformation is rejected as reality subsides into the black hole of the simulacrum or melts in a seemingly limitless world of choices in a cybernetic existence. These are, according to Antonio Negri, the two sides of postmodernism: one is "banal and pessimistic," the other "sophisticated and positive." [11] The former is probably best typified by the writings of Jean Baudrillard and his conception of the simulacrum. [12] This situation is one in which "the map precedes the territory," and any sense of the authentic is swamped under a "hyper" reality of simulacrum that codes all forms of behaviour. [13] Dissent thus becomes impossible as the simulacrum implants itself through all behaviour, removing any space from which to build a coherent challenge. The population "living" in this hyper reality undergoes social implosion and collapses into "atomization and spectatorship." [14] We can only sit back and fit into the roles provided for us in the serialised and televised apocalypse that unfolds around us.

The other side to this is the post-modern celebration of the increased development of the internet super-highway. It is one that sees the potential for multiple fractured subjectivities built by limitless choice of an increasingly consumer globe. Here revolt disappears because it becomes unnecessary. The communicative potential of capitalism is portrayed as being so advanced that the need for class struggle is removed. [15]

Negri argues that what both sides of this rift within postmodernism are trying to do is map the increased importance of communication in the functioning of capitalist production, consumption and circulation. [16] The response of capitalism to the revolts of the late 1960's has been a strategy of flexible deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation, and the application of mixed forms of both co-option and control. This has been coupled with the continual process of the subsumption and thus recreation of all social life within the boundaries of Capital. All of this has been reliant on a massive expansion and digitalisation of the apparatus of information transferral. With Michael Hardt, in *Empire*, Negri reiterates his claim that deepening of the subsumption of all social life has been contingent on the increased importance of *immaterial labour* – thus more and more human activity is directly involved in the mapping and re-mapping of signs. [17]

The first part of this formulation has been the creation of sophisticated and complex systems of social control. This has involved the mutation from a *disciplinary society* to a *society of control.* [18] In the disciplinary society, power stands above the social interactions beneath it, intervening to control and limit their potential. Disciplinary society is characterised by the focus of social control on separate apparatuses of domination: for example, the police and state censorship. The society of control goes beyond this to a situation in which power enters and animates the personal body and the body politic. A vast expansion of the cybernetic apparatus is a characterisation of the society of control. As Hardt and Negri write:

> Power is now exercised through machines that directly organise the brains (in communication systems, information networks, etc) and bodies (in welfare systems, monitored activities, etc.) towards a state of autonomous alienation from the sense of life and the desire for creativity. The society of control might thus be characterised by an intensification and generalisation of the normalising apparatuses of disciplinarity that internally animate our common and daily practices, but in contrast to discipline, this control extends well outside the structured sites of social institutions through flexible and fluctuating networks. [19] .

These networks include the digitalised entertainment products of the culture industry. Crucial to this has been the creation and social wide projection of "life-styles." New and compliant versions of subjectivity and identity are brought to life through all of the production/consumption nodes of the capitalist life. Entertainment, cults of celebrity, and frantic consumption swarm over all interaction, encoding particular patterns of behaviour, fuelled and made desirable by the alienation of experience within commodity society. According to Peacock, "the 'lifestyle' is projected by advertisers as the off-the-peg human software for workers to install … in order to be able to tolerate the leisure shopping environment of the mega-mall outside." [20]

The important role of globalised, digitalised commodity culture is heightened with the development of the real subsumption of society by Capital. The situation of real subsumption is one in which the rules and logic of capital leeches out of the traditional sites of production. The result is that the entire social body is transformed into an integrated ensemble of machines for the production, circulation and consumption of commodities, and the extrapolation of surplus

value from all nodes within the machine. Changes happen within the productive process itself: "Science is systematically applied to industry; technological innovation becomes perpetual; exploitation focuses on a 'relative' intensification of productivity rather than an 'absolute' extension of hours." [21] The result is the tendency towards the formation of the *social factory*. Social spaces seemingly exterior or irrelevant to production take on new life. The public sphere disappears into a corporate sphere denoted by shopping malls, private entertainment facilities, service industries and ever-present advertising. The boundaries between institutions collapse into each other. As Hardt and Negri write:

> The processes of the real subsumption, of subsuming labor under capital and absorbing global society within Empire, force the figures of power to destroy the spatial measure and distance that had defined their relationships, merging the figures in hybrid forms. [22]

Thus the subjectivities and organisational modes of different sections of Fordist capitalism collapse into each other: into fragmented, hybrid bodies networked together. Simultaneously the individual becomes the mother, the worker, the student – spending their day reproducing the conditions of labour, working for a wage, consuming, retraining, doing "shadow work," and on and on. The entire day becomes abstract labour for Capital, through labouring for specific capitalists or institutions specifically at different times. Thus, the individual becomes all subjectivities and none: part of a generalised proletarian condition, individually heterogenous while socially homogenous.

This social factory is constituted through the globe on all social territory, and networked together through a dense mesh of digital information systems. The advent of the social factory and the rise of cybernetic communications (the internet, digital TV and so on) are impossible without each other. The social factory thus manipulates and manages multiple sites through computerised communication and the immaterial labour of symbolic manipulation is becoming the most important work of the global industry. [23] More and more emphasis is placed on the creation of consumer desire; on the production of statistical information about all parts of the labour process; on the re-labelling and design of all social territory; on the projection of reified consumer icons (logos) across all interaction; on the meshing of financial markets together; on the co-ordination of planetary weapons systems; the organisation of just-in-time production; international trade.

The life of the post-modern proletariat is swamped by the white noise of communication. Produced as it is out of Capital, the experience of the communication is fundamentally alienating. Commodity fetishism is enlarged to such an extent that it turns into almost something else. Life is commodified and thus reified above us. The intense psychological sickness of post-modern society – especially body dismorphia – is testament to this. The obscene situation of the proliferation of *anorexia nervosa*, in which biological life is destroyed for not equating synthetic life, is one example.

Yet, the struggles of the multitude are never extinguished by capitalism. Increasingly, the autonomous desires of the people are recruited in order to keep the social machine functioning. Thus, communication has another side, one that interacts dialectically with the former. Negri suggest that communication is to the post-Fordist proletariat as the social wage was to the Fordist one. [24] This means a world of meaningful communication is expected from the system and entertainment is part of the daily desires and rewards that we expect for our labours. Like the social wage, capitalism hopes its application will be enough to stymie demands for change that go beyond the status quo. Negri has also suggested that just as the social wage was the basis for the expansion of consumption, the communication wage is used as the motor for accumulation. [25] Driven by and also against alienation, the want for more contact and more communication with the world is marshalled into a demand for more commodities and services of the culture industries.

This situation goes beyond culture as the realm of ideology and/or hegemony. Instead, the whole realm of cultural activity – "lifestyles," digital entertainment, cybernetics, the whole raft of entertainment industries and cultural commodities – becomes important in the management of populations and the daily and long term functioning of global capitalism. It is an antagonistic and contradictory situation.

Feedback! / Distortion! / Revolt?

Counter-culture in all it diversity is at the very least feed-back along the circuitry and wires of Capital; feedback –due to both the increasing importance of the communication/knowledge/culture nexus and the peculiarities of disciplining immaterial labour – has the potential to burn out the fundamentals of the system. However, the traditional ideologies of the left are often blind to this potential. This is due to the fact that these ideologies and their practitioners have reified certain moments of proletarian history into universal models of struggle. The most common, of course, is the extreme fetishism that surrounds Fordist ideas of the working class: the industrial proletariat organised in trade unions and engaged in "serious" struggle through social democratic parties. While the industrial proletariat, trade unions and social democratic parties still exist, they are no longer hegemonic. The whole proletariat exists inside the world of the spectacular commodity economy that was the centre of the critique elaborated by the Situationist International. [26] It is upon this territory of commodities, circulation and consumption that more and more struggle takes place. The refusal of a reified idea of struggle also means accepting that any struggle within capitalism is contradictory and open to recuperation. Any struggle that could totally supersede its context – and thus free itself of alienation, division of labour and commodity

fetishism – would be already in a state of total liberation. [27]

The many actions of auto-valorisation that challenged the mass factory of Fordism seemed small and almost invisible: stealing at work, sabotage, absenteeism. (Though of course many of them were overt, such as factory occupations – indeed we could suggest that there is a continuum or weave of struggle that connects both the every-day and the insurrection.) However they did contain a radical kernel. They went beyond a critique of the quantity of the social wage – amount of pay or access to commodities, for example – to quantitatively challenge the idea of wage labour, the validity of commodities. Counter-culture does this to the communication wage of post-modern capitalism and thus throws up questions about the entire nature of everyday life.

It is impossible to be certain of the motivations behind involvement with counter-culture. Generally, it would be possible to say it is driven by alienation. More specifically, it would be possible to say that it is a discontent with the nature and content of the communication wage, at its inability to deliver its own promise. This rupture works itself into more general critiques and the construction of the origin of subversive social relationships. It does this at numerous points, including the creation of cultural subsistence, the development of new networks of exchange, and the reworking of commodity fetishism.

Whilst communication apparatuses and commodities spread out increasingly through society, the ability to communicate recedes. At most, people are offered a blend of commodities and interactivities: an ensemble of pre-packaged signs that offer limited interaction and self-expression. Individuals thereby experience both massification and atomisation. Counter-culture is the inversion of this: the simultaneous attempt to assert individuality and community.

The first act of counter-culture is creation: for example, the creation of music, of clothing, or of zines. The recuperative entertainment industry tries to reduce counter-culture to individual niches of musical style, but there is far more going on beyond the surface. Individuals form bands, organise gigs, record music, make clothes; in other words, they produce culture. Superficially, they do so through capitalist means. Money is fundamental to much of this operation. However, since counter-culture is produced in a context of proletarianisation and exile from the dominant communication apparatus, it is inevitably pushed against Capital. Under financial pressures, it can go one of two ways: the first is to attempt to fit into the apparatus, by watering down musical style or lyrical content, thus transforming into a niche market; the second is to challenge commodification and property rights.

Culture needs space. People need places to meet, bands need places to play, and places are needed for people to meet, swap, and trade records, zines, clothing and food. Sometimes, it is possible for counter-culture to find cracks and to hold space temporally. Traditionally in Sydney, alternative venues have been run-down pubs desperate for customers (such as the Green Square in Alexandria, Tailors on George in Surry Hills). It is never a happy scenario, and mini-hierarchies develop around those who have the power to book acts. The growing tendencies of pubs to replace live music with gambling machines, along with the increased control over music venues exercised by promotional agencies and booking agencies, has added extra pressure. Therefore, across the gamut of counter-cultures, the necessity to challenge the privatisation of space has developed. For years now electronic music ("Doof") has been holding parties in public areas varying from bush-land to abandoned army bases. Punks in Sydney regularly hold unauthorised picnics in Sydney Park in St Peters. Often these events happen 'under the radar' of state authorities. However, at other times they encounter direct state intervention. Graffiti, for example, is increasingly stigmatised in the media and has become a focus for heavy policing and punishment by society's disciplinary apparatuses. The "Reclaim the Streets" parties have faced repeated confrontation with police. The reason for this repression is that the reclamation of space for counter-culture threatens to intervene and destabilise various nodes in the social factory. From directly clogging traffic (and consequently goods, commerce, and works) to challenging the spectacle of gentrification in inner-city Sydney, counter-culture, by claiming its space, starts jamming the communication of Capitalism.

The most concrete expression of this is the formation of long term squats or social centres. Examples of this are the Grand Midnight Star in Sydney [28] or ABC No Rio in New York. [29] Both spaces were abandoned buildings that were squatted publicly and converted into social centres. [30] Both have required large amounts of direct action and confrontation with state authorities. Here, most explicitly, it is evidenced that the need for space pushed counter-culture onto a insurrectionary and radicalising trajectory that brings them into conflict with increasingly wider social forces. As Capital transforms the city in a megalopolis defined by social stratification, intensified policing and gentrification, the illegal and collective occupation of space threatens to destabilise its fundamentals.

Loose networks form to maintain the operation of counter-culture. In the absence of professional tour promoters and massive record companies, the production and distribution of the counter-culture relies on multiple voluntary work. Felix Havoc from the band *Code 13* describes how they toured throughout Asia and Australia through a host of networks, staying in people's houses and relying on the good will and co-operation of the global punk community. [31] This is a typical scenario. Starting with the *Buzzcocks* releasing their own single out of both necessity and desire, a strong DIY ethic has developed through punk. American zine MaximumRockNRoll compiles a massive annual publication called

Book Your Own Fucking Life. [32] This text lists thousands of international contacts within the punk community. It is only a snap shot of a much wider picture that is common through the vast majority of counter-cultures. Some counter-cultures such as Punk, Hip Hop and Doof explicitly state the political reasons for self-organisation.

This participation that weaves together a counter-culture is the antithesis of the social relationships of capitalist commodity culture: to consume and to spectate. Activity is conferred onto a few idols or stars (often on high rotation) and passivity and the absence of control define the experience of interaction with them. At most one might buy a CD or attend a concert but little else. Counter-cultures can only flourish with a high level of democratic participation within them. They rely upon constant social co-operation. This can be likened to what Guattarri would call a "molecular revolution," that is, a revolt within the very specific social logic that hold individuals together in capitalism. [33] The necessity of participation becomes a series of networked mutations that pass experiences and identities in increasingly rhizomic patterns.

Yet we must remain aware that for counter-culture to maintain its radical (if often not overtly political) potentiality/ies it must move against the rule of Capital. Often it does not. There is a danger that counter-cultural struggle, like all struggles, is open to recuperation by the *status quo*. Indeed we could be suspicious that transgressive expression merely works as unpaid R&D creating new desires and subjectivities to be taken up by the culture industry. This concern begins to nudge towards deeper, more complex questions concerning the nature of life and activity within the confines of the cybernetic social factory. Here we can look to John Holloway's investigation into the relationship between labour and capital through tangling with the idea of fetishisation. Holloway argues that Capital never completely fetishises labour; rather, there is constant contested process of fetishisation. [34] These tendencies with counter-cultures, that are both against and beyond and within and towards Capital, are part of this conflict.

Discipline within a society of control is embedded in social relationships. Molecular revolutions extend the capacity to which people are ungovernable. They pull at the restrictions of passivity and replace them with open-ended co-operation. Counter-cultures break open the numerous social locks throughout the social factory. They begin to reclaim public space, challenge the nature of production and leisure, and develop a sense of individual and collective self-agency. Thus, they undermine important apparatuses of social control, production and circulation, as well as weaving together a cultural "commons." It would be simplistic to suggest that the dismantling of capitalism will be the work of counter-cultures alone. But their importance is obvious.

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[1] Felix Havoc, "And It Was Written", *Havoc*, http://www.havocrex.com/mrr212.html, date of access 11/12/03, 2000.

[2] Joel, "A New Punk Manifesto", in *Profane Existence: Making Punk a Threat Again* (Minneapolis: Loin Cloth Press 1993), p. 6.

[3] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (London: The Athlone Press, 1992) p3-25.

[4] Nick Dyer-Witherford, *Cyber-Marx: Cycles and Circuits of Struggle in High-Technology Capitalism* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), p. 182.

[5] Anonymous, "It's All Kicking Off!", in *Do or Die : Voices from the Ecological Resistance #9* (2000) p. 140-9.

[6] Anonymous, "May Day Guerilla? Gardening? The RTS action in London on May Day" in *Do or Die: Voices from the Ecological Resistance #9* (2000), pp. 69-83.

[7] There is no space here to look closely into the politics of youth counter-culture that have right-wing, fascist or conservative politics – in particular, sections of skinhead (though not all) culture and the new waves of Scandinavian Black Metal that blend pagan 'Norse' aesthetics with white power politics. Tentatively, it could be suggested that the desire for community beyond capitalist atomisation that animates all counter-culture is at work here too, however twisted it is or unpleasant the outcome.

[8] See Murray Bookchin, *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1986).

[9] Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen, 1979), p. 64.

[10] Anonymous, "From the Haight", in ed. Massimo Teodori, *The New Left: A Documentary History* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970), p. 363.

[11] Quoted in Dyer-Witherford *Cyber-Marx*, p. 175-6.

[12] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), p. 1.

[13] Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 1.

[14] Dyer-Witherford, *Cyber-Marx*, p. 176.

[15] Dyer-Witherford, *Cyber-Marx*, p. 177-81.

[16] Dyer-Witherford, *Cyber-Marx*, p. 172-7.

[17] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), 290-294

[18] Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, pp. 22-3.

[19] Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, p. 23.

[20] Andrew Peacock, *Two Hundred Pharaohs, Five Billion Slaves* (London: Ellipsis, 2002), p. 130.

[21] Dyer-Witherford *Cyber-Marx*, pp. 39-40.

[22] Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, p. 317.

[23] All these issues are explored in great deal throughout *Empire.*

[24] Dyer-Witherford *Cyber-Marx*, p. 85.

[25] Dyer-Witherford *Cyber-Marx*, p. 85.

[26] Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Canberra: Hobgoblin Press, 2002), no page numbers.

[27] This situation can be equally well described as either communism or anarchy but since use of such terms is very loaded they are here omitted.

[28] For more information of squatting and social centres in Sydney, Australia especially the history of the Midnight Star see their web site: SCAN, "Social Centre Autonomous Network" < http://scan.dorja.com/>, date of access 16.12.03.

[29] For more information on ABC No Rio see their web site: ABCNoRio Collective "ABC No Rio" < http://www.abcnorio.org>, date of access 16.12.03.

[30] Here "social centres" refers to the creation of public squats – on the borders of or outside the law – to meet a variety of needs. The term "social centre" is often associated with the antagonistic social movements of Italy.

[31] Havoc, "And It Was Written".

[32] *Book You Own Fucking Life* is available on line at <www.byofl.org> date of access 16.12.03.

[33] Dyer-Witherford, *Cyber-Marx*, p. 183.

[34] John Holloway, "In the Beginning was the Scream", in ed. Werner Bonefeld, *Revolutionary Writing: Commonsense Essays in Post Political Politics* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2003), pp. 20-1.

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