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A 'HEDGE' AGAINST CULTURAL DOMINANCE

Patrick F. McCarty

A. Norman Klein, "Counter Culture and Cultural Hegemony: Some Notes on the Youth Rebellion of the 1960's." In Dell Hymes, ed. Reinventing Anthropology. New York: Pelican Books, 1969. 470 pp. pp. 312-334.

During the 1960's, student unrest became an issue of international proportions. College-age protesters participated in various forms of dissent (peaceful and violent) for various reasons.[1] Because of their break with conventional beliefs and customs, the youth of the 60's were identified as a subculture or "counter culture". This counter culture was established to protest critical issues ignored by the dominant culture. In his article on counter culture and cultural hegemony, A. Norman Klein addresses the nature of cultural dominance in America. He argues that a study of the youth movement of the 60's reveals the true character of hegemonic culture.[2]

Klein goes on to say that because of its general disorganization and impromptu nature, the counter culture was nothing more than a hasty reaction to hegemonic culture and so was doomed from the start. He asserts that the counter culture was assimilated and used by the hegemonic culture to its own advantage, despite the antagonistic interests of the youth rebellion.

To preface his discussion of the student revolt of the 1960's, Klein defines the character of a hegemonic culture and its power elements. These elements exercise social, economic, political, artistic, and religious domination over culture. He draws the distinction between "political" coercive society (peasant and early capitalistic cultures) and "civil" society, the political state. Although non-coercive, the hegemonis culture as a minority power elite is all-absorptive, using cultural institutions to exercise cultural dominance. Klein uses the youth rebellion as a lesson of the evils of cultural dominance as imposed by hegemonic culture.

Klein stresses the point that structurally, the counter culture was endered nonpolitical, mainly because the dominant culture assimilated and subverted the counter cultural criticism of it (1969:316). Although the counter culture hoped to attack the cultural values of the hegemonic culture, he feels that it failed for three specific reasons. First, it was not, in fact, a subculture but an integral part of hegemonic culture.[3] Second, the content of protest was assimilated by the dominant

culture. Finally, because the counter culture failed to understand the pervasive nature of the hegemonic culture, its politics were rendered non-political.

Klein then discusses the ideological nature of the youth rebellion in Europe and America and draws several important contrasts. In keeping with the non-political conception of the youth rebellion, he explains that European students make more "discrete" political distinctions and are united by a common ideaology. Klein maintains that in contrast, American dissenters lack organization, homogenize their political ideaologies, and formulate hasty solutions to the issues they address themselves to. The revolt of the American student left was an end in itself, rather than an effective means to an end.

He correctly assesses the youth rebellion as a new mode of cognition. Klein says that the "counter culture" began on a satirical note as a protest and parody of the hegemonic culture, and he lists some of the unique attributes of this protest. These include: new language (both verbal and non-verbal), a spontaneous, existential philosophy, and a general attitude which is anti-intellectual, anti-rational, and ahistorical in perception.[4]

At this point in his discussion, Klein chooses to ignore the impetus of student revolt - the desire for cultural change. He glosses over the roots of the rebellion as well - the "pathological passivity" of the 1950's.[5] Also, Klein never effectively addresses the issue of the counterattack on the counter culture by the "silent majority" of the Great Society. A major segment of the American populace was entrapped by a dominant political structure, and it was <u>their</u> reaction to the youth rebellion which quashed the movement. Symbols of the movement, apart from actual protest, were enough to evoke rejection and anger.[6]

The hegemonic culture, operating through the "civil society", centralized its energies through the support of the "silent majority" of its faltering social system. This resulted in continued warfare in Vietnam, racial injustice, environmental decay and rising crime rates. Thereby, the hegemonic culture could concentrate its attack on the youth movement. If dealt with, such critical issues would help to promote culture change, but they were ignored. The violent displays of the radicals were not.

In support of his ideas about the apolitical nature of the American youth rebellion, Klein uses the political radicals of the "do it" philosophy, Jerry Rubin and Tom Hayden. Despite the fact that such persons were highly visible and could mobilize a large following, they were not the essense of the youth rebellion, but were only a small faction. However,

the important issues for cultural change were lost because of the radical faction's visibility and misguided political philosophy. Rubin, Hayden, Abbie Hoffman, and others molded a distorted perception of the youth rebellion, as viewed by the hegemonic culture.

Traditional beliefs of the "civil society" in racial superiority, governmental infallibility, and the "perversion" of dissent impeded change and enforced hegemony. Efforts by the youth movement to achieve cultural change were not immediately apparent. The Vietnam War ended, blacks became a recognized political factor, and environmental quality standards were imposed, among other changes. But elements of cultural change lagged behind efforts to achieve them.[7] The youth movement acted as a catalyst for change. The "silent majority" reacted to symbols of the youth movement in its apolitical leaders, styles of dress, and certain modes of behavior such as communal living, rather than its attempts to achieve change. As a result, the youth movement was rendered non-political. It failed to conceive the power of hegemonic culture and was absorbed by it.

Because it realized the need for cultural change, the youth rebellion acted as a form of cultural revitalization.[8] Certain discrete elements in the culture such as styles of attire, attitudes about the war, and racial superiority visibly changed as a result of the youth movement. But the interpersonal domination asserted by the hegemonic culture still persists.

We are driven by our culture to achieve. The media control our tastes and attitudes through advertising. Our educational system reinforces these attitudes by teaching them in our schools.[9] Whether or not one can be optimistic in light of hegemonic dominance is questionable. The pessimism which runs through Klein's article does, however, seem somewhat unwarranted. By glossing over the underlying causes of the shortcomings of the youth rebellion, he chooses to ignore important, positive aspects of culture change it helped to bring about. Still, this article presented a valid example of interpersonal cultural dominance and the need for change. Regrading the general theme of Reinventing Anthropology, Klein provides information which could be useful in some applied aspect in studying power. In another article in the same collection, Laura Nader carries this point further. It deserves the attention of anthropologists:

> Anthropologists have a great deal to contribute to our understanding of the processes whereby power and responsibility are exercised in the United States... for the quality of life and our lives themselves may depend upon the extent to which citizens understand those who shape attitudes and actually control institutional structures. The study of man is confronted with an unprecendented situation: never before have so few, by their actions and inactions, had the power

of life and death over so many members of the species. (1969:284)

NOTES

1. The Scranton Commission (1970, pp. 3-4) has isolated three issues of the American student revolt. These are: 1) racial injustice; 2) the Indochina War; and 3) the University and its policies.
2. Theodore M. Newcombe (1970, p. 136) feels that the youth movement was an attempt to hasten the destruction of conservative, authoritarian hegemonic falues. He asserts that this involvement increased interests in intellectual pursuits and capacities in independence, dominance and self-confidence.
3. Valentine (1968, p. 113) points out that subcultures do not embody any design for living to which people give sufficient allegiance or emotional investment to pass on to future generations.
4. The Cox Commission (1968, p. 4) concludes that the hegemonic culture has perpetuated materialism and ruthless exploitation of human, economic, and natural resources. They feel that the youth movement was sensitive to such issues as the best informed, most intelligent and idealistic generation this country has ever known. They also said that as a group, the youth movement exhibited a high level of social conscience.
5. Paul Goodman feels that the unchecked, interpersonal dominance exerted by hegemonic culture has continued because of a general passive attitude. He calls this the "nothing-can-be-done-disease". His ideas were originally presented in his book, Growing Up Absurd, published in 1956.
6. The Scranton Commission (1970, pp. 52-53) found that the majority of the American culture reacted with an "intolerance" of their own to protest the youth movement. Rather than reacting to political and social issues generated by the "counter culture", the Commission feels that individual members were reacted to and rejected because of their unorthodox appearance alone. As a result, the members of hegemonic culture felt that all forms of protest should be dealt with harshly.
7. William Ogburn (1957, p. 167) originated the theory of "culture lag" which states that a disharmony is created when one of two correlated parts of culture changes before the other.
8. In further discussion of subcultures, Charles Valentine (1968, p. 113) says that pervasive disaffection from existing patterns of existence (i.e.,hegemonic culture) by certain subgroups, such as the youth rebellion, are ripe for massive cultural revitalization, which could take the form of protest movements.
9. Jules Henry (1963, et.al.) discusses "technological

drivenness" and the means utilized by a dominant culture to perpetuate this idea. The advertising media, education, jobs, nursing homes and the family are used as examples (of what Klein would call "civil society") to verify his assertions.

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