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COUNTERCULTURE AND HYPER-CAPITALISM: COMMODIFYING THE REBEL THE CASE OF HARLEY-DAVIDSON

Jolanta Szymkowska-Bartyzel
Jagiellonian University, Poland

Abstract: The paper focuses on the universal mechanisms of capitalism to convert resistance into commodity, and to make money on selling the illusions of independence, freedom, and self-fulfillment. This process is exemplified by one of the most popular motorcycle brands: Harley Davidson. In the 1960s, Harley Davidson became a symbol of rebellion, diversity, freedom and resistance against the establishment values and lifestyle; however, soon these symbolic associations became the basis for marketing strategies that have turned Harley Davidson into one of the most luxurious brands in the automotive industry. Harley-Davidson is just one of many symbols of the revolution of the 1960s that sells freedom and independence to their users trapped in the mechanisms of capitalism. Music, clothes, jewelry, vegetarianism and ecology, discovered and propagated by counterculture rebels as the factors of a new, revolutionary lifestyle, were all co-opted into the very system and became globally sold commodities.

Keywords: Counterculture; conformism; rebel; consumption; Harley-Davidson.

I.

In its broadest meaning, counterculture means a new cultural formation generated in opposition to the cultural mainstream. The opposition of counterculture functions by negation of the main moral, behavioral, or aesthetic values functioning in the mainstream. On the one hand, counterculture arises from negation, disagreement and rebellion, while on the other it expresses certain

aspirations and dreams of a particular group of people at a specific time and place. Among the famous countercultural phenomena in the history of western culture, there are the Romantic movement (1790-1840), Bohemianism (1845-1910), and the most famous and still remembered counterculture movement of the 1960s. The logic of such movements is the same, regardless of the geography or historical period. Each time, the change begins with a small group of people negating the fundamentals of the mainstream and producing cultural texts and giving expression to an ideology that function somewhere at the fringe of the mainstream. With the acquisition of supporters identifying with the new trend, countercultural ideas spread like wildfire, turning into a serious social movement that initially changes and modifies the mainstream culture, in order to finally become mainstream itself.

The genesis of countercultural movements can be found in disagreement with the existing order of the world – the Romanticists reacted to the rationalism of the Enlightenment era, a social order based on the dominating role of the aristocracy and Industrial Revolution, while Bohemianism grew out of discontentment with the conventional lives and bourgeois values prevailing in society. The countercultural changes of the 1960s were a reaction to the order that was established across the entire western world after World War II. In the United States, the changes took a particularly spectacular form, and resulted from long-term processes that took place in American society for about twenty years after the end of the World War.

II.

For the entire contemporary world, World War II was a turning point that redefined the axiological system, and aesthetic and moral values. It also put the worldwide economy on a new track, giving it new dynamics. Although the United States did not experience war trauma as intensely as Europe, the changes that took place after the war were equally expressive. For American politics and economy, and also for Americans themselves, World War II led to a better, or at least a wealthier world. The United States, as victors in the worldwide conflict, established its position as a superpower – a political and ideological leader of western civilization. This contributed to an intensive growth of the American economy, and translated into an increase in the standard of living of American citizens. Americans who gladly used the benefits of the developing economy, eager to have a better life after the shortages caused by the Great Depression and wartime limitations, built what is referred to in history as the American prosperity of the 1950s. The era was also characterized by the development of large corporations, domination of mass media, and the development of the pop culture industry and advertising.

All these factors contributed to the fact that in the 1950s, a new world order emerged of advanced capitalism with a prevailing consumption culture. It praised typically bourgeois values: wealth, stabilization, security, family, and education. They served to guarantee an efficiently functioning society consisting of happy individuals who were expected to lead their lives according to a predefined scenario: a good education, a stable job, a large family, a house in the suburbs, a car, a fridge, and a TV set. Such a concept of happiness, very useful for the developing the post-war economy and control of the state, was perceived by many intellectuals, particularly the ones inclined towards Marxism and inspired by Freudian theories, as authoritarian and repressive. Representatives of the Frankfurt School such as Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and Erich Fromm, as well as American intellectuals such as Dwight Macdonald, William Whyte, and Vance Packard, warned against the threats of capitalism. They were concerned about the damage caused by the "era of abundance" with its characteristic prevalence of consumption, and wrote about society consuming standardized products of mass culture. In a dramatic tone, they presented the mechanisms of the pop culture industry that deprived individuals of autonomy and independence, generating false needs which lead them to focus all of their efforts and activities on accumulating material goods. They proved that for contemporary man 'to have' means more than 'to be.' Such intellectuals often identified the culture of consumption with mass culture, accusing both of repressing, limiting and enslaving individuals.

Considering the Marxist genesis of such views and their great impact on the emergence of counterculture movements of the 1960s, we can clearly say that in this context, counterculture is perceived as the main opponent of the entire capitalist system and of its fundamental values and mechanisms. The movement consisted of discontented individuals who could not find a place for themselves in the general model of happiness, who rejected its values, or who were automatically excluded. Those who did not fit the unified, monocultural model of life in post-war America were numerous: ethnic minorities who were still perceived as second-class citizens, culturally limited and enslaved women, youths who could not find jobs, and veterans who were mentally or physically handicapped and could not find a place for themselves in the post-war reality.

According to William Kornhauser and Irving Horowitz, social movements in contemporary mass societies are caused by people who are not fully integrated into society, are excluded from it, or function on its margins. They are characterized by a sense of being different and helpless, yet their helplessness yields to the will to act when they find other people like them and form groups according to similarity of social situation, living situation, or common experiences. Because such people are also characterized by a lack of faith in the rules that apply in a particular social order, they willingly engage

in changing such rules. Hence, all the movements of the 1960s, such as the Civil Rights Movement, feminism, sexual minorities activism, and the hippie movement, arose directly from the social isolation of their participants.

Unhappy and excluded people functioned in society in contradistinction to those who achieved their goals in fulfilling the generally popularized model of happiness, which was based in building a corporate career, gathering material wealth, and consumption. In order to appropriately fulfil a social role and achieve one's goals, one had to consume, and mark one's social status by consumption.

Consumption in the 1950s reflected the prevailing paradigm for the functioning of American society in the 1950s – a paradigm based on rationalization and effectiveness. The most significant symbols of the consumer culture of the period, such as Levittowns or McDonald's restaurants, rejected differentiation and individuality. The Fordist-Taylorist production model of a large number of identical products, which was based on time- and cost-efficient line production, also functioned as a model of society's organization and worked very well in the post-war society that was rising from its difficult experiences. The next generation, not having experienced shortages, raised in the wealth of the "era of abundance," did not accept such a model of society, and openly claimed postulates related to anti-industrialism, anti-militarism and anti-consumerism. Young contesters considered a struggle against consumption as the best way of fighting against the capitalist system. As Marxist cultural critics were convinced, in order to efficiently function, capitalism needs inert conformists, slaves of the system. Therefore, to crush the system, one had to reject consumption, which was considered as repressing and enslaving individuals. It is worth considering to what extent they succeeded.

Joseph Heath and Andre Potter, authors of the book *The Rebel Sell: Why the Culture Can't be Jammed*, write:

In the '60s, the baby boomers declared their implacable opposition to the 'system.' They renounced materialism and greed, rejected the discipline and uniformity of the repressive '50s, and set out to build a new world based on individual freedom. What ever happened to the project? Forty years later, the system does not appear to have changed very much. If anything, consumer capitalism has emerged from decades of countercultural rebellion much stronger than it was before. (Heath and Potter 10)

However, as argued by Heath and Potter, the countercultural rebellion did not mean rejection of consumption, but only a change of its form and, as a result, a certain remastering and strengthening of its mechanisms. Paradoxically, it was the counterculture that grew from the opposition against the capitalist system which ultimately refreshed and thus strengthened its functioning. Consumption models of the 1950s relied on similarities, on pre-

defined order and aesthetics, on the templates dictated by mass culture. A typical example of a citizen and consumer of the 1950s is the protagonist of Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit*, who puts on his grey flannel suit every day and goes to work in a large corporation. He lives like a programmed robot in the treadmill of imposed social roles and recommended behavior. He is a predictable conformist in the sphere of consumption, and his grey suit is its symbol.

Yet, the countercultural rebellion, growing from opposition to such a life, was only expressed in the replacement of grey flannel suits with loose flax trousers and tunics, ties with love beads, and Chryslers with Volkswagen Beetles. It was not a resignation from consumption as such, but merely a change of the consumed items and methods.

The first generation hippies did everything they could to violate the dress code of 50s society: men grew their hair long and wore beards, refused to wear suits and ties: women adopted miniskirts, threw away their bras, stopped wearing makeup – and so on.: But it wasn't long before these items and clothing styles started showing up in advertisements and on *mannequins* in shop windows. Soon *department stores* were selling peace medallions and love beads. In other words 'the system' seemed to regard the hippies less as a threat to the established order than as a marketing opportunity. (Heath and Potter 36)

As it turned out, rebellion against mass society is not the same as rebellion against the consumer society. What is more, as argued by Thomas Frank, the system co-opts the symbols of rebellion, assimilates them, makes them conformist, robs them of deep meaning and implements them in the market mechanisms.

Frank, an American publicist and one of the founders of *Baffler Magazine*¹ was one of the first to question the fundamental myth of the counterculture – that the counterculture acts against consumer culture and weakens its impact. In his famous book-length essay, *The Conquest of Cool*, Frank shows how American business took over the language of the youth rebellion of the 1960s and used it to increase sales. This happened as a result of the co-optation process, which Frank understands as: "Faith in the revolutionary potential of 'authentic counterculture combined with the notion that business mimics and mass-produces fake counterculture in order to cash in on a particular demographic and to subvert the great threat that 'real' counterculture represents." (Frank 7)

¹ *The Baffler* – is a magazine of art and cultural and political criticism, founded by Thomas Frank in 1988. It is published every March, June and October in print and digital formats by MIT Press. See more at: www.thebaffler.com

To exemplify the process of co-optation, Frank analyses the operation of two branches of American business in the 1960s – production of men’s fashion and the American advertising business – and convincingly points out the mutual relations of the anti-establishment rebels and the world of money. He argues that within the sphere of consumption, contesters were supported by business, their dreams and wishes were often guessed or anticipated, and as a result many of the products and slogans were not due to authentic, spontaneous actions of the rebels, but were carefully calculated strategies of corporate workers, according to the principle “if you can’t beat ‘em absorb ‘em.”(Frank 7)

According to Frank, as a result of co-optation mechanisms, mass culture followed the direction of the authentic counterculture and created commercial replicas which it thus sold, turning the symbols of rebellion into merchandise and making them part of systemic market mechanisms. Moreover, Frank claims that:

it was and remains difficult to distinguish precisely between authentic counterculture and fake: by almost every account, the counterculture, as mass movement distinct from the bohemians that preceded it, was triggered at least as much by developments in mass culture [...] as changes at the grass roots. Its heroes were rock stars and rebel celebrities, millionaire performers and employees of the culture industry; its greatest moments occurred on television, on the radio, at rock concerts, and in movies. (Frank 8)

Often, what has been perceived as countercultural and anti-systemic was a mass product of that very system, created for commercial purposes. Frank’s analysis is very convincing – it makes the reader realize how, together with the changes to social needs, the very nature of business has changed. Marketing tools have become more flexible, and business has culturally invigilated the young rebel generations in order to meet their consumer needs and commodify their rebellion. What is more, the analyses show, although indirectly, how much the cultural revolt has changed consumer culture.

We shall track the process of the changes and the operating system of the mechanism of co-optation by analyzing the history of a product which is still a synonym of rebellion and a manifestation of individualism – the Harley-Davidson motorcycle. It’s a legendary element of the rebellion of the 1960s, which – owing to co-optation – has been turned into a luxury product and a symbol of high social status. Owing to this, we will be able to pinpoint and describe the key changes that took place in the 1960s in consumer culture, and which have changed it for good.

In the context of our deliberations, we will not be talking about Harley-Davidson as a two-wheel means of transport with specific technical parameters, but about Harley-Davidson as an object which, following Roland Barthes,

became a symbol of its own use, and was transferred to the stock of certain symbols and myths of mass culture. Actually, it is since Roland Barthes made his argument in *Mythologies* (1972) that consumption has been analyzed as a system of behavior with a meaning. For Baudrillard, who in his theories followed and referred to Barthes, consumer culture was an ideology. Gottdiener provides the explanation of Baudrillard's concept:

To him a material world of commodities has been transformed into a symbolic world of ideological meanings attached to commodities (1968, 1981). This ideology of consumerism has reduced all material objects to their 'sign value,' that is a meaning constructed through advertising and consumer manipulation by the logotechniques of capitalist corporations. It is the sign value of the object that superimposes itself upon the sign function of the object, transforming the meaning of objects that comes from their everyday use into ideology of consumerism. (Gottdiener 987)

Therefore, we will discuss Harley-Davidson as a certain carrier of meanings, as through various meanings that were evoked by the history, silhouette, aesthetics, and finally the entire mythology of the Harley-Davidson brand. Specific consumers made specific decisions, co-creating entire sets of meanings. The generation of meanings has taken a different course than the one proclaimed by Marxist cultural critics, who perceived semiosis in culture as a vector process that served to build a specific ideology needed by the dominating class to maintain power.

Nowadays we know, and we owe this knowledge to the ferment of the counterculture revolt, that generation of meanings is not a one-way process, and it is not only the market system and the advertising, mass media or popular culture that agree on and impose meanings, but people, recipients of such texts appropriately process and interpret cultural texts, and define their sign value. "People are the bearers of meaning, either in isolation of personal use or as the product of a complex social process of group interaction" (Gottdiener 986). Moreover, as Gottdiener remarks: "The market segments of the mass culture audience are not made up only of consumers; they include individuals involved in social networks with complex, highly variegated linkage. In short, the users of mass culture constitute a heterogeneous aggregation or *subcultures*" (Gottdiener 990).

The corporation itself builds a specific cultural myth through advertising and marketing, a myth which, according to Barthes, can be understood as a semiological system. Therefore, the meanings created by and around Harley-Davidson and functioning within culture are a result of actions not only of the corporation, but are also co-created by people, users, fans, as well as regular recipients who have never owned or used a Harley, but are con-

sumers of popular culture products upon which Harley-Davidson is a very distinctive sign.

Martin Krampen claims that commodities are used in two ways: firstly, according to their practical function, and secondly they can serve to pass on some meanings, as signs, and cultural messages. This happens as a result of a transfunctionalization process, where the original, basic meaning of a commodity becomes obscured by its secondary meaning. Mark Gottdiener, who took the ideas of transfunctionalization from Krampen, assumes that both manufacturers of commodities and their users participate in this process, and he identifies three phases of semiosis in mass culture.

The first phase is built on the basis of the producer/user relation, and involves transformation of commodities into signs:

Producers produce objects for their exchange value, whereas purchasers of those objects desire them for their use value. This use value is embedded in a cultural life whose meaning systems preexist in the stage of semiosis associated with mass culture. [...] The link between exchange value and use value, which is characteristic of the producer/user relation, is designated as the first stage of semiosis for mass culture and involves the transformation of commodities from exchange value to an arbitrary sign value status in order for them to be sold. (Gottdiener 993-994)

The second phase of semiosis, in turn, involves the user/object relation. At this phase, objects are transfunctionalized by the users who create meanings around them that are often far from the ones created by the producer. An example of such a generation of meaning for Gottdiener is personalization, "in which users modify objects of mass consumption in order to express certain cultural symbols, or in connection with specific group practices, or for use of subcultural activities" (994). At this phase of semiosis in culture, Gottdiener perceives the main source of meanings in the mass culture, as well as in the emergence of alternative cultures, or subcultures that emerge in opposition to the mainstream culture.

At the third phase, semiosis occurs in the producer/object relation: "The transfunctionalized objects produced by social groups and the needs that are generated by everyday life eventually become the raw material for cultural industries [...] Subcultural signifiers are divorced from their everyday codes and transformed by culture industries into more marketable, less radical meanings" (Gottdiener 996). This is a sort of trivialization of alternative, revolt meanings, their acculturation and conforming, and then, in a milder form, they are incorporated into the mainstream.

From the perspective of our analysis of the sales of Harley-Davidson motorcycles as an icon of rebellion, the last phase of semiosis in mass culture is the most important, and this is also the focus of attention for Thomas Frank,

Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter, while analyzing various signs of rebellion used by large businesses. Harley-Davidson is an object very intensely saturated semantically. It is worth tracking its history to show how the cultural functioning of the brand changed – what was the path of the bike from a regular, useful means of transport to a transfunctionalized symbol of rebellion, and, finally, how this rebellion became trivial and commercialized by big business.

The history of Harley-Davidson began in 1903, when William Harley and Arthur Davidson constructed the first model of the chopper under the Harley-Davidson brand. In 1906, the company issued the first advertising catalogue, where the new Harley-Davidson model was referred to as the Silent Grey Fellow. This was the first important element in the building of the market personality of Harley-Davidson, the building of the Harley myth – a myth understood as Roland Barthes understood it, as a semiotic system (the first stage of the semiosis producer/user relation). The short history of the machine was supplemented with a story borrowed from a different, non-automotive reality – a story of friendship – male friendship, in which the bike became a friend, a travel companion, like a horse for a cowboy. Here, in the modern, industrialized world of the 20th century, the horse, which belonged to the pre-industrial era, was replaced with a more efficient, faster, and equally ‘live’ and co-feeling motorbike.

During World War I, Harley-Davidson choppers were used for military purposes and, owing to the American army, reached Europe. In the inter-war period, road races and ‘hill climbing’ races, as well as chopper rides, were very popular. The popularity of races and rides also resulted in the emergence of the first organizations associating bikers. These were energetic clubs that were divided into sport and tourist clubs. During World War II, Harley-Davidson obtained a governmental contract for production of machines for the American army. In 1940, the US Army ordered 745 items of the Harley-Davidson WLA model, which proved to be so successful that almost 90,000 were manufactured. In the USA, after the war, thousands of Harleys were demobilized together with their owners.

It was war veterans who started building the reputation of Harley-Davidson as an anti-system machine. Frustrated, and psychologically handicapped, they felt misunderstood or socially redundant. Lost in the new reality, they felt best in the company of similar people, and started assembling themselves in special support groups referred to as biker gangs. Brock Yates, however, the author of *Outlaw Machine. Harley Davidson and the Search for the American Soul*, argues that biker gangs were a product of the Great Depression – it was then that the workers performing dirty jobs, from dirty, industrial areas in Southern California, rode choppers after work, drank and traded stolen parts. By that point, Harley-Davidson had already become the most popular brand, which is why it was most frequently chosen as property and the target of theft

(13). However, the true boom of the biker gangsters took place in the second half of the 1940s.

Young people who could not find a place for themselves in the post-war reality, and were aware of modern technology since they had operated tanks, airplanes and trucks during the war, and had thus become quite competent with vehicles and machinery, made choppers the object of their fascination and also a very clear instrument of rebellion, a weapon against the establishment. The newly created clubs bore strange, often frightening, nihilist names: The Booze Fighters, The Pissed-Off Bastards of Bloomington, or Satan's Sinners. At the same time, clubs such as The Road Runners and Sidewinders emerged, which engaged in enthusiastic, boyish and innocent biking.² Harley-Davidson was already perceived as an *outlaw machine*. This is because the second phase of semiosis had occurred in which a relation is built between the object and the user, while the texts generated as a result of interaction between the parties took place as if outside, and often against the will of the manufacturer.

At the same time, the process of criminalization of Harley-Davidson was supported by the mass media. The event that established a bad reputation for Harley-Davidson in American society was a motorcycle riot that took place between July 4th and 6th, 1947 at Hollister, a small farming town in California, which became flooded, as media reported, by 4,000 members of biker clubs. Clashes between residents and the police took place, and several participants in the event were arrested, with a more or less similar number of injuries, including several that were severe. This is how the events occurred in Hollister, but the reputation of the gangs and choppers was built up by the media. According to Brock Yates, a major role was played here by *Life* magazine. Firstly, it overestimated and dramatized the entire story; secondly, it published an outstanding photo taken by a photographer from *The San Francisco Chronicle*, Barney Peterson. The photo was purchased by the Associated Press and *Life* magazine. The photograph presents a young, heavily built and devil-may-care biker in an unbuttoned shirt and askew baseball cap on a chopper – undoubtedly a Harley-Davidson – holding a beer bottle in each hand. Lying on the ground next to the motorbike are empty bottles, and lots of broken glass. This photo, according to Brock Yates, was posed. This was because Peterson and the accompanying reporter, C. J. Doughty, arrived in Hollister on July 5th, when it was much more peaceful than on the previous day. As they had to supply hot material to *The Chronicle*, they decided to make it a little more dramatic (Yates 18). This photo by Peterson which, owing to *Life* magazine, was seen by residents across the USA, added to the reputation of

² Biking takes many forms, such as racing on tracks or in the wild, wandering and sightseeing by bike, or never ending repairs to care for a bike.

Harley-Davidson and its users, and changed Harley-Davidson into a sign of rebellion, aggression and demoralization.

Such meanings around Harley-Davidson were provided to by legendary biker clubs, such as the Hell's Angels. Harley-Davidson was identified with this formation, as it was the then most popular and most widely available motorbike in the USA, and it was in fact the only (not counting the slightly obsolete Indiana) pure American chopper, which was important for the gangs since they were characterized with a rather perverse sense of patriotism. The mainstream media demonized the image of the Hell's Angels, presenting them as aggressive rapists and murderers, while in the already classic description in *Hell's Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga* by Hunter S. Thompson, nowadays considered as a very credible description of the group, the Angels were a subculture of petty thieves and idlers who spent their free time wandering on their Harley-Davidsons, leading an abundant and varied sexual life or entering into conflicts and fights against competitive gangs (Yates 41).

It must be noted here that although representatives of biker gangs opposed the system and the establishment, their lifestyle and value system were not the values and lifestyle of the representatives of the mainstream of counter-culture, namely the Hippies. In biker gangs, there was a hierarchy almost like in the army, in which women had a servile function and the prevailing ethos was the ethos of male friendship. The culture of biker gangs had nothing in common with the narcissistic culture of the Hippies. The two groups also significantly differed in their political views. Members of biker gangs represented clearly right-wing views. Since most of them were veterans, they supported the war in Vietnam, and were advocates of American values. They were also seen more as outlaws than rebels and their culture was *criminal culture*³ rather than *counter culture*.

On the other hand, however, there were significant similarities between these groups. Justified by Freudian theories of repressive measures against all cultural standards, the counterculture accepted, and even idealized, criminal behavior. Criminal acts were often explained by disagreement with the existing reality, lack of understanding, and rejection, and this shared misery formed a link between the narcissistic Hippies and the super-tough guys on bikes.

Soon, as a result of co-optation mechanisms, the world of business used both of these groups for mercantile purposes. Just as various products connected with the counterculture were immediately imitated and produced in mass volumes, the symbols of the chopper rebels began to be consumed on a mass scale. Leather jackets and high boots were now not only worn by mem-

³ Cultural criminology is a new orientation in sociology and criminology exploring the relationship between crime and culture. Specifically it investigates subcultures, the symbolic criminalization of pop cultural texts and consumeristic activities.

bers of biker gangs, but also by those fascinated by the culture in a superficial, aesthetic manner. Just as the counterculture had its replicas and false Hippies, there were also false outlaw bikers. This took the form of a very expressive trivialization, namely the third phase of semiosis in culture.

Trivialization of the set of meanings related to the culture of biker gangs was intensified due to *outlaw biker films*. It was these products of popular culture that contributed to the mass consumption of the image of an arrogant biker criminal. An important film popularizing the culture of motorbike gangs was *The Wild One* by Laszlo Benedek of 1953. This Hollywood production, with the charismatic Marlon Brando in the lead role, excited the youth, and turned Brando into an icon of young rebellion. The success of the movie led to mass production of class B films, the protagonists of which were frustrated rebel bikers, and which were mass consumed by American teenagers. In the mid-1960s, when social discontent increased, there were even more productions of this type, which were later referred to as legendary.

Due to these films, and for purely mercantile purposes, a certain marriage of outlaw and Hippie occurred. Roger Corman, a specialist in film for the young, "and his scriptwriter, Charles Griffith, came up with a brilliant notion, they combine the two cultures. Hippies on bikes!" (Yates 50). And as Yates continues: "Angels were portrayed not as unemployed blue-collar grubs, but as disaffected kids rebelling against a stiff, uptight, conformist society. The film tells the story of bikers terrorizing the straights, portraying them as lost souls seeking their own vision of freedom in a hostile world" (Yates 50).

Harley-Davidson choppers played a major role in *The Wild Angels*, but the Harley-Davidson company did not like having a reputation as the centerpiece of a renegade culture. It was a time when the company had financial problems, the market was flooded with British bikes, and Japanese machines were becoming increasingly popular. Harley-Davidson was still the beloved chopper of the Hell's Angels and similar biker gangs, mainly due to the specific patriotic code that forbade gang members to ride non-American bikes.

For the company, however, this love of Harley-Davidson by members of biker gangs did not bring about anything positive, while the popularity of the machine in the texts of popular culture and the media did not, unfortunately, create a good marketing image. Harley-Davidson still functioned in the general awareness as the bike of aggressive outsiders.

The movie that radically changed the perception of the Harley-Davidson brand was the legendary *Easy Rider* Directed by Dennis Hopper in 1969, the film became a manifesto of the countercultural revolution. Alongside the peace sign, LSD and long hair, Harley-Davidson became an icon of the times. The protagonists of the film are two young people, Billy and Wyatt, who are peaceful and harmless. They love freedom, which is most fully experienced on the road. They smuggle drugs, and themselves also willingly enhance their sensations. With their money from drug sales, they go on the road in the

southwest of the United States. They go to New Orleans to take part in the Mardi Gras that ends the carnival season. For the protagonists of *Easy Rider*, the road is not an escape, but rather a search for new values, an alternative way of living. Billy and Wyatt, however, find nothing but death at the hands of small-town morons, for whom they are strange, and thus dangerous. It is important to note that, both with their behavior and values, Billy and Wyatt resemble the flower children, not the aggressive outlaw bikers. They are loners and wanderers searching for their place in life.

In Hopper's film, the bikes are equal protagonists of the story. They were specially tuned and stylized Harleys that the actors playing the main heroes were privately fans of. Hopper's film led to the Harley-Davidson brand being associated with strangeness of another type - with youth rebellion and the search for one's place in life, with the desire for freedom and independence, rather than with the aggression, violence and crime that the biker gangs had so far been associated with. Owing to the presentation of protagonists that represented the values of two different subcultures, *Easy Rider* introduced the Harley-Davidson brand into the cultural mainstream for good. From the 1970s onwards, the popularity and positive reception of Hopper's film caused Harley-Davidson to gradually become attractive to those not actually rejected, misunderstood or rebellious against the establishment, but rather to representatives of the establishment itself. The youth rebellion that was inscribed in the brand was made conformist, overtaken by the machine of consumption.

This was not quick, however. The company did not immediately realize the marketing potential in the complex of meanings given to Harley-Davidson owing to pop culture. In the early 1970s, the company's situation was tragic. In official promotional materials, references were still being made to the old company values and benefits of its products. These lost against both the technology and marketing strategies of the Japanese motorbikes which flooded the market in the 1970s.

The man who first noticed the cultural shift and shift of meanings which Harley-Davidson had undergone was William G. Davidson, the grandson of one of the founders of the biker clan from Milwaukee. A well-educated graduate of the L.A. School of Design, he decided to profit from the Harley-Davidson reputation created by popular culture. When the Harley-Davidson company launched the famous FXS Low Rider model in 1977, it became clear that Harley-Davidson did not intend to compete with Japanese bikes, and that its future lay "in a rising group of traditionalists looking backward away from the seamless world of high tech and toward a simpler time and real values like friendship, brotherhood, freedom" (Yates 134). The bike was promoted with the slogan "The American Freedom Machine," which obviously referred to its rebel identity, but also promoted a sense of unity, exception, and patriotism - all the values important for both biker outsiders and narcissistic Hippies. "The outlaw biker became a prototypical Harley rider, decked out in

black leather and hooting patriotic themes, they were authentic Americans, the *nouveau cowboys*" (Yates 135).

The manufacturer noticed that for users of Harley-Davidson bikes, their value had changed. Under the influence of stormy times, buyers not only looked for a reliable machine to help them move about, but importance was also attached to the expressive nature of the bike, its identity which had arisen both from Harley-Davidson's own history and from stories of popular culture. Hence, in the building of the producer/user relation in the first phase of semiosis, the producer used this heritage and built another sign value, joining exchange value (money made) with use value (meeting user needs). This example clearly shows that particular phases of semiosis within culture are nothing but continuous circulation of signs, continuous transformations, transfunctionalizations, retransfunctionalizations, and trivializations. All the time, there is a struggle for meaning which accompanies both production and consumption.

The 1970s generated a demand for the same values that mattered so much to the young, rejected loners in the 1940s and 1950s. Veterans returned from the Vietnam War even more frustrated because they had lost the war. Furthermore, due to the feminist movement in the 1970s, male privileges became endangered. The world seemed evil and depraved, the government and police corrupt, while the world of Harley-Davidson continued to praise archetypal masculinity, male friendship and honor.

Together with the strengthening of the economic standing of the brand, Harley-Davidson users also changed. Until the early 1980s, Harley Davidson "was firmly entrenched as a blue-collar machine" (Yates 138), but in the late 1980s, when the prices of Harley-Davidson bikes significantly grew, they became luxury vehicles, purchased not by the socially and economically excluded, but, on the contrary, by CEOs of corporations, bankers, and lawyers – the ones forming the establishment.

For them, Harley-Davidson biking became a sort of ideologically saturated recreation, a form of leisure activity that allowed them to change and shake off the mask of the CEO or manager, and put on the "outfit"⁴ of a rebel outlaw. A *yuppie outlaw* – a young, well-educated, wealthy professional buying a bike to feel the thrill, the air of freedom far from corporate life, while the machine is for him a symbol of high social position. A yuppie, a conformist slave of the system, for whom the most important thing is to get rich and who, like Gordon Greco, the hero of Oliver Stone's movie, believes that greed is good, uses the machine of rebellion to mark his material status.

⁴ The word "outfit" is used on purpose here, and is not intended to sound cynical, since being a contemporary Harley biker requires many costly accessories: appropriate boots, a leather jacket with the company's logo, and a Zippo lighter.

Harley abandoned the shabby garages at the outskirts of town and drove into the exclusive downtown. It started being parked in garages next to the latest BMW or Porsche model owned by someone wealthy. Brock Yates argues that the elites' interest in Harley-Davidson motorcycles is related to the search for authenticity, roughness and some coarse nature, which are inscribed into Harley-Davidson bikes. In a time of smooth, computer-generated products in pop culture, the noise of Harley engines, and some roughness and discomfort in its driving, became features sought after by wealthy users who wanted to experience something true and painfully authentic (Yates 141).

This does not, however, mean that other Harley-Davidson users were pushed out of the market. On the contrary, Harley-Davidson has a very diversified group of users: they include millionaires and ordinary workers, machos, and an increasing number of women, representatives of HOGs⁵ as well as those not associated. There are still Harley outlaws as well, although there are certainly fewer nowadays.

The heterogenic nature of the users shows how important the process of semiosis is in the user/object relation. The same bike can mean something different for every user, it is adjusted to individual use, and serves to express the biker's personality. For many users of Harley-Davidson bikes, it is very important to customize them – each bike is individually adjusted both in terms of technical parameters and decor. In one of its commercials, Harley-Davidson encourages bike customization: "Build your bike – build your freedom." In this way, the corporation referred to one of the most important slogans of the counterculture: "Express yourself," or "Be yourself." In the sphere of consumer culture, it is exactly this shift from standardization and uniformization, most profoundly expressed by the grey flannel suit, to an expression of a consumer's personality, that was of key importance.

The above analysis points to processes and changes which can be treated as the legacy of the countercultural 1960s.

Firstly, The free market mechanisms commodified rebellion, as it turned out that it was wrong to assume that consumption was about conformism, when the issue truly was to differentiate. People buy commodities in order to determine their position as compared to other participants in the market. Consumption is an activity involving competition, and the competition is not about being like others, but about being better, more state-of-the-art, more cool, more trendy, more original. The consumption slogan of the 1950s, "Keeping up with the Joneses," was questioned in the following decade. In contemporary consumption and behavior models, it is not about wearing a grey flannel suit like Mr. Jones and living in an identical house, but about

⁵ The Harley Owners Group (HOG) is a company-sponsored club operated by Harley-Davidson Company for the users of that brand's machines, promoting Harley-Davidson's motorcycle and certain lifestyle and aura connected with them.

marking one's uniqueness. At some point living in a white house in the suburbs was no longer cool, and it was more trendy to buy a post-industrial loft. What will happen when too many want to be trendy and live in lofts? Then those who want to stress their difference from the large group of similar residents of lofts, wishing to preserve their distinction, will be forced to look for another, more cool, more countercultural form of accommodation.

Secondly, the example of Harley-Davidson, apart from confirming the theory of co-optation which is about the way the system neutralizes and absorbs the representations of rebellion, shows a certain important consequence of the cultural revolution of the 1960s for consumer culture as such. If the 1950s were characterized by uniformization and standardization in consumption, the 1960s introduced more individualized, tailored consumption, which escaped explicit standards. "If American capitalism can be said to have spent the 1950s dealing in conformity and consumer fakery, during the decade that followed, it would offer the public authenticity, individuality, difference and rebellion" (Frank 9). Despite painstaking efforts made by advertisers to place consumers within defined target groups, it is nowadays known – as was proven by many studies – that people treat the same objects very individually, adjusting them to their needs, and changing their purpose. Consumption has become a means of expressing human creativity.

As a consequence, there appears a third important element of the legacy of the 1960s; when observing contemporary strategies of large corporate businesses regarding consumer culture, we can formulate a thesis that they follow the traces of counterculture, they inspire people to be themselves, to be spontaneous, to express their innermost dreams, to reject all limitations. Many commercials nowadays use the rhetoric of rebellion in order to encourage buying: "Wear your passion" (Reebok), "Just do it" (Nike), "Create yourself" (Cropp), "I'm making myself" (Nike), "Lead yourself into temptation" (Harley-Davidson), and "The Eagle Soars Alone" (Harley-Davidson). Thomas Frank notes that:

rebel youth culture remains the cultural mode of the corporate moment, used to promote not only specific products but the general idea of life in cyber revolution. Commercial fantasies of rebellion, liberation, and outright 'revolution' against the stultifying demands of mass society are commonplace almost to the point of invisibility in advertising, movies and television programming. For some, Ken Kesey's parti-coloured bus may be a hideous reminder of national unraveling, but for Coca-Cola it seemed a perfect promotional instrument for its "Fruitopia" line, and the company has proceeded to send replicas of the bus around the country to generate interest in the counterculturally themed beverage. Nike shoes are sold to accompaniment of words delivered by William S. Burroughs and songs by The Beatles, Iggy Pop, and Gil Scott Heron ('the revolution will not be televised'); peace symbols decorate a line of cigarettes manufactured by R.J. Reynolds and

the walls and windows of Starbucks coffee shops nationwide; the products of Apple, IBM, and Microsoft are touted as devices of liberation; and advertising across the product category spectrum calls upon consumers to break rules and find themselves. (Frank 4)

Harley-Davidson has traveled along a very long path, from a reliable manufacturer supplying products under governmental contracts, through a machine associated with criminals and outlaws, a motorbike for young people not understood by the stiff and heartless world, to a bike generally associated with luxury and the high social status of its users. Both the true story of the motorcycle and the myths built around it by the media and popular culture have created many layers of meanings, many values, references, and symbols, which are now used by individual consumers depending on their own needs, feelings and sentiments. As according to A. Fuat Firati and Nikhilesh Dholakia:

Consumption – in its currently developing sense of construction of meanings, life experiences, and identities – is the domain that will provide the field for these multiple forms of intercourse, or the stage for the theater(s) of life. Having lost the ability to influence the public domain of socially organized production in modernity, consumers are turning to the theaters of consumption in postmodernity. As signifying subjects, consumers are producing and will increasingly produce the varied meanings and identities they wish to play with and experience through these theaters of consumption.(155)

In reference to changes in the area of broadly understood consumption, one can say – paraphrasing the famous comment by Herbert Marcuse – that *Flowers have much power, whatsoever*. At the same time, it is worth realizing that manufacturers of commodities, by referring to our consumer independence, and encouraging rebellion and self-expression, suggest that being cool and independent can only succeed with the support of the commodities they produce. This is thus quasi-independence, controlled rebellion and controlled freedom. It all serves not to weaken consumerism, but to strengthen it. It seems that the system has negotiated a very favorable agreement with the individual – more quasi-freedom and narcissistic illusions in return for peace and big money.

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Jolanta Szymkowska-Bartyzel, Ph.D., is an associate professor at the Institute of American Studies and Polish Diaspora, Jagiellonian University, Poland. Her scholarly interests focus on history and reception of American popular culture in Poland. She is an author of a book and articles on American popular culture, Americanization and mass media communication.