

RESIDUAL

Pre- "Latte Town"
Ashland

DOMINANT

Bourgeois Bohemians

EMERGENT

Cool-Hunted
Millennials?

As the traditional custodians lose their hold on residual cultures, their artifacts become open to appropriation. Frederic Jameson has argued this mining of the past is a basic procedure of advanced consumer capitalism. It selects earlier aesthetics, sheers them from their original contexts, and then re-markets them. Instead of history and causality, we have styles. Not the 1950s, complete with segregation and the Korean War, but *American Graffiti* and Camper™ footwear inspired by bowling shoes.

Though there's nothing *intrinsically* "subversive" about retro appropriation, it can provide a means of expression to those who feel shut out from a particular dominant culture: a past that has room for you and your friends to inhabit, like squatting in an abandoned building.

For many Gen Xers retro is a cultural survival skill, a means of escaping the market dominance of Baby Boomers, especially unfailingly heroic images of Boomers' formative years. Xer retro rarely includes Woodstock nostalgia. Instead it looks to periods predating Boomers' marketplace hegemony. Why accept the dominant yardstick equating the 1960s with authenticity, youth, and freedom when there are other, more inviting, periods to choose from? If the playing field isn't level, move your game elsewhere.



from Coupland's 1991 book
Generation X

The Elks Lodge is a repository of cultural artifacts (and people) pre-dating Ashland's transformation into a well-heeled tourist and retirement town. Not least among its appeals is an egalitarianism that the rest of the town claims but rarely practices. Its physical space, set apart from tourist-oriented commerce, is another draw.

David Brooks describes "Bourgeois Bohemians" and their "Latte Town" environs this way: "Like so much of the new cultural wave ... [it] has taken the ethos of California in the 1960s and selectively updated it. Gone are the sixties-era things that were fun and of interest to teenagers, like Free Love, and retained are all the things that might be of interest to middle-aged hypochondriacs, like whole grains. ... customers can stroll amidst the jars of powdered fo-ti root, the Mayan Fungus Soap ... and the vegetarian dog biscuits, basking in their reflected wholesomeness." Such shoppers use bohemian purchases and lifestyles to finesse their class privileges and sense of entitlement. As the slogan to the Phoenix day spa puts it, "it's not luxury, it's a lifestyle."

This leads to sad paradoxes, such as nostalgic invocations of 60s-era subversion coexisting with policies (like curfews and skateboard prohibitions) that limit the freedoms of young people. Sustained political endeavor shrinks to enlightened purchases. Rather than seeing themselves as embedded in larger social structures that won't change without collective action, bourgeois bohemians tend to pursue libertarian fantasies of personal autonomy. They rarely acknowledge that their ability to achieve a measure of this autonomy is an index of privilege, not an escape from it.

Bourgeois bohemians form a dominant culture to the extent that they take their own experiences as a norm for what is authentic and meaningful. Market share and the ability to define cultural meaning—not some cartoonish image of "repression" or "conformity"—are what underline their dominant status. Perhaps the primary indication of privilege is its *invisibility* to its beneficiaries. To inhabit a privileged norm is to think that you are "simply" human, not marked in some more specific way, that you are the yardstick, not what's measured against it.

Given the increasing number of retirees (and cost of living) in Ashland, don't look for Bourgeois Bohemians to be displaced anytime soon. Nonetheless, "Millennials" (born after 1980) are at least as large as the Baby Boom. Because of this they are more studied by advertisers and demographers than anyone in history. Changing parenting, educational, and other practices also mean that Millennials are more watched and scheduled (in short, more managed) than previous generations. So their demographic heft comes with a high price tag: being the object of an unrelenting surveillance.

I am not certain how these issues will play out with regard to residual cultures. Certainly the dynamic Jameson notes is at work as past aesthetics, such as 70s clothing, are repackaged and marketed toward Millennials. The cultural scavenging Gen Xers are known for is also available to Millennials. But there may be a crucial difference: for Xers it was (and is) a way to fly under mass marketers' radar, and thus affords a degree of autonomy. But Millennials are tracked by professional "cool hunters" and subjects of sophisticated niche marketing. Their retro excursions may primarily function as R&D for the next mid-sized, niche-marketed thing.

In Ashland, the Elks Lodge may present a work-around. Nationally, the organization is probably still too square to be subject to hip appropriation. Locally, it might represent a refuge from both the dominant Bourgeois Bohemian culture and Millennial niche marketing. I think this may be especially true for younger people who move to Ashland but don't have the money (or desire) for its dominant institutions. The Elks Lodge is cheap, unpretentious, and communal: a place where they get to drink the coffee instead of serving it.

Appropriation

Stripping something from its context and putting it to uses that attenuate, subvert, or negate its original significance. Appropriated by advertisers, rap becomes background music for Sprite commercials. But individuals can also reappropriate commodities by putting them to unintended uses: punks turn safety pins into jewelry.

Dominant Culture

Not a monolith, but a bloc of interests. Consumer culture in general and bourgeois bohemians in particular are especially omnivorous and adaptive. The challenge for any emergent culture is how to avoid having its indicia targeted, domesticated, and disseminated for widespread consumption.

Emergent Culture

New cultural elements that may, or may not, one day become dominant.

Residual Culture

Raymond Williams, who coined the terms dominant, residual, and emergent culture, wrote that “By ‘residual’ I mean that some experiences, meanings and values, which cannot be verified or cannot be expressed in terms of the dominant culture, are nevertheless lived and practiced on the basis of the residue—cultural as well as social—of some previous social formation.”

Paradoxically, a once-dominant culture can represent a safe haven for those unwelcome in the current dominant culture. For example, if bourgeois bohemians defined themselves by “rebellion” against the Swing generation, to younger people the iconography of the (now residual) Swing generation may signify a greater range of possibility and cultural ownership than the dominant culture: a place where bourgeoisie bohemians can’t follow without seeming to embrace what they defined themselves against.

Cultural Capital

Cultural capital includes university degrees, a familiarity with art and literary history, and skills such as the ability to play an instrument. But more generally it is the ability to make the “right” aesthetic judgments in a way that brings you recognition and admiration from people important to you. Even more than wealth, social distinctions are policed by taste. It’s the difference between coming off as sophisticated or tacky, authentic or a poseur, the real deal or a wannabe. It can operate on a macro level (who has power in society as a whole) or in a particular social niche (who’s the coolest at the club, or even just an ordinary, acceptable, guy).

Generation

“A” generational identity might work during a period of mass marketing and a few major news outlets. But it doesn’t work for an ethnically diverse set of people growing up during a period of global micro-marketing and niche media. A more productive approach is to analyze generations in terms of *economic circumstances*: opportunities (or lack thereof) and sense of entitlement (or lack thereof). In other words, to consider inter-generational issues as *class issues*.

Hip

Hip was originally a cultural survival strategy for (mostly black) jazz musicians: a way of being superior to “squares” with more formal power. It was appropriated by a (mostly white) counter-culture, and now is, in the words of Thomas Frank, “the official culture of capitalism.” Hip is ideally suited to consumer capitalism because of the almost-instant obsolescence of what’s cool. As soon as something is widely pursued as a marker of hipness, newer products must be found to signify authenticity and independence. Think of it as cultural capital with a short shelf life.

Frank writes that “it has become difficult to understand the countercultural idea as anything more than the self-justifying ideology of the new bourgeoisie that has arisen since the 1960s, the cultural means by which this group has proven itself ever so much better skilled than its slow-moving, security minded forbearers at adapting to the accelerated, always-changing consumerism of today. The anointed cultural opponents of capitalism are now capitalism’s ideologues.” For the foreseeable future, thinking “outside the box” *is* the box.

Cool Hunting

Cool hunters run focus groups, interview cool kids, and roam streets and dance clubs, looking for the next hip thing. They are professional appropriators, and if you were born after 1980, they have you in their crosshairs.

Irony

If hipness is the culture of capitalism, then irony is its discourse. Far from being something that operates at a remove from consumer capitalism, irony is one of its central mechanisms. It allows one to consume while denying that one is compromised by consumption, to participate in structures of power while pretending that one is unaffected by them, and to proclaim one’s singularity while converting it into a static product to be validated by those in the know.

Majoritarian, Minorities & Minoritarian

In *1,000 Plateaus* Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari maintain that the distinction between majority and minority is not quantitative, but *qualitative*. The hallmark of the majoritarian is that it is normative:

“Majority implies a constant, of expression or content, serving as a standard measure by which to evaluate it. Let us suppose that the constant or standard is the average adult-white-heterosexual-European-male-speaking a standard language . . . It is obvious that “man” holds the majority, even if he is less numerous than mosquitoes, children, women, blacks, peasants, homosexuals, etc.”

Majoritarian, minorities, and minoritarian represent different relations to a fundamental, underlying variability:

- 1> Extracting a normative standard that is used to evaluate a whole system (majoritarian)
- 2> Extracting a normative standard that applies to a subset (minority)
- 3> Recovering continuous variation (minoritarian)

Notice that “rebellion” against a norm is nowhere in this picture. Norms and standards are real, but they are always extracted from a more fundamental mutation. During protests in Paris, people pulled up cobblestones for barricades, uncovering the streets’ sand foundations. “*Sous le pavé, la plage!*” they shouted: “Beneath the flagstones, the beach!” What matters are the possibilities immanent in a given situation, not an abstract norm or deracinated identity that claims to transcend or escape its circumstances.

Sources & Readings

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