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The Conquest Of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, And The Rise Of Hip Consumerism



Synopsis

While the youth counterculture remains the most evocative and best-remembered symbol of the cultural ferment of the 1960s, the revolution that shook American business during those boom years has gone largely unremarked. In this fascinating and revealing study, Thomas Frank shows how the youthful revolutionaries were joined—and even anticipated—by such unlikely allies as the advertising industry and the men's clothing business. "[Thomas Frank is] perhaps the most provocative young cultural critic of the moment."—Gerald Marzorati, New York Times Book Review "An indispensable survival guide for any modern consumer."—Publishers Weekly, starred review "Frank makes an ironclad case not only that the advertising industry cunningly turned the countercultural rhetoric of revolution into a rallying cry to buy more stuff, but that the process itself actually predated any actual counterculture to exploit."—Geoff Pevere, Toronto Globe and Mail "The Conquest of Cool helps us understand why, throughout the last third of the twentieth century, Americans have increasingly confused gentility with conformity, irony with protest, and an extended middle finger with a populist manifesto. . . . His voice is an exciting addition to the soporific public discourse of the late twentieth century."—T. J. Jackson Lears, In These Times "An invaluable argument for anyone who has ever scoffed at hand-me-down counterculture from the '60s. A spirited and exhaustive analysis of the era's advertising."—Brad Wieners, Wired Magazine "Tom Frank is . . . not only old-fashioned, he's anti-fashion, with a place in his heart for that ultimate social faux pas, leftist politics."—Roger Trilling, Details

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Customer Reviews

In his book-length essay *The Conquest of Cool*, Thomas Frank explores the ways in which Madison Avenue co-opted the language of youthful '60s rebellion. It is "the story," Frank writes, "of the bohemian cultural style's trajectory from adversarial to hegemonic; the story of hip's mutation from native language of the alienated to that of advertising." This appropriation had wide-ranging consequences that deeply transformed our culture--consequences that linger in the form of '90s "hip consumerism." (Think of Nike using the song "Revolution" to sell sneakers, or Coca-Cola using replicas of Ken Kesey's bus to peddle Fruitopia.) This is no simplistic analysis of how the counterculture "sold out" to big business. Instead, Frank shows how the counterculture and business culture influenced one another. In fact, he writes, the counterculture's critique of mass society mimicked earlier developments in business itself, when a new generation of executives attacked the stultified, hierarchical nature of corporate life. Counterculture and business culture evolved together over time--until the present day, when they have become essentially the same thing. According to Frank, the '60s live on in the near-archetypal dichotomy of "hip" and "square," now part of advertising vernacular, signifying a choice between consumer styles. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

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Definitely not the most critical among Frank's several books, however, this examination of counterculture and how advertising sponged ideas from it to sell to modern youth is fascinating. Any study of the history of sales or advertising must include this text.

Thomas Frank has written one of the most important, and yet baffling, works on understanding the Megamachine and like others of his type (Lewis Mumford, Jacques Ellul), it will strike so close to home as to be actually uncomfortable to read and digest and still view the world as before. The thesis that Madison Ave. invented the counter-culture by co-opting the hip underground culture of the time is both brilliant and obvious; so obvious, in fact, that its very simplicity caused it to go unnoticed for years. That is the very essence of the Megamachine, the ability to absorb humanist and revolutionary trends, only to revise them in the very image of the machine and counter to their intended purposes. Only when up against another machine (fascism, Soviet Marxism, Chinese Marxism) does the Megamachine have to posit counter values. (i.e., Hollywood propaganda: "Why

We Fight," Red Scare films, why Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as well as Dresden, were necessary for freedom, etc.) I remember an interview with a rock star of the 60s who boasted that by publishing his music the Establishment was laying the very seeds for its own destruction. Nonsense. Nothing truly subversive would ever be allowed to pass through those hallowed commercial halls. Frank's book shows just how insidious the Megamachine is in its cultural hegemony.

Reading this book reminded me of a nightmare from my distant past. Way back in the 70s, my first car was an ugly Volvo passed down to me by my older hippie (soon-to-be yuppie) brother. The dilemma the author addresses is a simple but important one: how does one enjoy the benefits of living in a prosperous, corrupt, and hypocritical society without feeling prosperous, corrupt, and hypocritical. It all changed in the late 60s. What was once called 'white man's burden' suddenly became 'white man's guilt'. Advertisers responded as they always have, by catering to people's needs. Give them what they want while doing their best to ameliorate the feelings of guilt. One of the consequences is that we have to face 158 different kinds of shampoo. But there's another side to this story. Not all of us 80 million Boomers were so guilt ridden and socially conscious. For many the immediate response was revulsion over the hypocrisy of the counterculture. So for every anti-conformity ad during the period in question one can probably find as many instances of conformity-appeal, family values, American tradition and so forth. It's partially a class divide. Remember that over 70% of the population never gets a four year degree. And while this segment of society may not have anywhere near the amount of disposable income per-capita as their educated counterparts, they still represent a huge prize for corporate America. Consider the commercials that target the working class: Levis, Pick-up trucks, Marlboros, and the like. The ad agencies changed in the 60s along with a young, gregarious, and affluent segment of society. This is not a startling revelation. But it's still a marvelous book. If you are my age you won't be able to help summoning up memories of all those idiotic, be yourself, and do-your-own-thing ads -- and of some other unpleasant memories, such as that ugly Volvo I used to drive...

I needed this book for a History course I was taking and had to write a paper on it. I was surprised that I found it interesting. If you are into American Business in the 1960's you should give it a read.

Great Job all around!

Great read.

great book, good writing. very interesting

Impressive background knowledge of the 60's and in manipulative advertising. Frank lays before us a paradigm of how the 60's movement was propelled by advertising and marketing in a most unsettling way. Liberation had a pricetag on it.

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