

The Playground Was Actually a Spaceship Was Actually an Office Building Was Actually a Playground Was Actually a Spaceship

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I am convinced that the dawn of adolescence is marked by much emotional intensification of dream life, and that at no age is its influence so important upon the moods and dispositions of waking consciousness.

—G Stanley Hall, 1904¹

In 1990 I turned 12, and in 2000 I turned 22, so my teenage years essentially spanned the 1990s. In Seattle of all places. The grand narratives there at the time were mainly between the rebaking of punk rock into grunge, the promises of the so-called new economy of the Microsoft Corporation and the like, and the democratized yuppiedom of Starbucks. All of this together created a sense that a previously hermetic outpost in the top left corner of the US was not only quickly joining the rest of the world, but had also suddenly become a cultural and economic vanguard—a sleepy laboratory of the future. But this was not just any future, but a new epoch of American technological innovation and economic supremacy. I could feel the youthful optimism of the time moving into me and fusing with my own teenage sense of possibility and forward motion. But at the same time, it was all fitting together a little too well, and at my young age I felt there might be something diabolical at work. Even if the sense of possibility was infectious. So I began to learn how to steal that sense of possibility for myself—detach it from the superstructure and take it with me. There was something that allowed for it.

As with the 90s in general, the politics of the era remained quite mysterious, but at the same time, the sweetness of it all was incredible—it was as if you could feel layers of Cold War military armor being peeled off sheath by sheath to reveal sensitive and intelligent beings underneath who were exploring all the things you could do with computers and starting to realize that playing the guitar and starting a band was better done by amateurs and kids. These things might even have something to do with democracy. It seemed that everything was becoming democratic. Money was becoming democratic. Punk rock was becoming democratic. Democracy was becoming even more democratic. The logic might sound a bit childish, but at the same time, we were all to become more like children in this new scheme. It seemed that adults were suddenly becoming kids as I was struggling to become an adult. We might meet in the middle. Wouldn't that be very democratic! The playground that became a spaceship was actually an office building, but that office building then became a playground that was

¹ G Stanley Hall, *Adolescence; Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion and Education* (New York and London: D. Appleton and Company, 1919 [1904]), 262–3.

actually a spaceship.

This was of course the time just following conservative American philosopher Francis Fukuyama's proclamation of an "end of history" following the dismantling of the Soviet Union—a triumph of Western liberal democracy. By extension, the free market celebrated US capitalism could now cover the earth. And the excitement over the end of grand-scale political ideologies of communism and nationalism was a very important part of the new excitement over gentle and humane hegemonies in an emerging era of soft power based in trade, where technological innovation would start to merge with aesthetic effects and feel-good lifestyles. Even in punk rock and punk aesthetics there was a strange sense that the enemy had gone missing—the friction, the class tension, the missing dictatorship, the generational warfare, the fight over the future. The absent rub came in how sweetly seductive the 1990s promises of this particular new soft supremacy were in removing or suppressing tensions between historical groups.

The symbolic violence that punk promised as a weapon that young people could always claim didn't seem to be available anymore. Instead, it was replaced by a softening of distinctions between subcultural groups, as well as between youth subcultures and much larger engines that belonged to adults. The punk promise of giving enough form to our anger and imagination that it can replace the old regime that seemed to be actually capable of pulling it off, this was still there, but at the same time it was already clear that this was actually not something we could have ever come up with on our own. Even though the energy was very real, it was becoming increasingly clear how bound up it was in a loop—the other side of which was considered to be corporate adult PR conspiracies aimed at recuperating the signs of subculture to package them and sell them back to us, essentially to designate the behavioral limits of our wild expressions and bring us back into civilization. What was happening around me was not really about young people as much as it was about a new phase in a much longer experiment in creating images or ideas about the future, but also about how wild people or forms of expression are subject to a kind of inescapable chronological formatting.

Young people and childhood are anyhow quite young on their own. While young people have obviously been around as long as people have, the childhood we now understand as a fixed stage of development with a certain culture of its own dates back only to the 18th or 19th century when the child was identified as a site for installing social promises, as a distinct category of care and cultivation in the longer drama of Western Liberalism. It is this distinct site that became potent enough as a self-evident humanist good that it could arrest industrial expansion later in the 19th century and into the 20th with laws protecting young people from the demands of labor and industry. With these laws, a much more concrete time was created for the category of the youth, as a special free time reserved for growth, for education, development, reflection, even mischief. While the industrial

revolution “liberated” a form of leisure time for adults, it was after World War Two that that this special time of nurturing for young people began to be also accessed as a place where young people could be drafted back into being producers, but without ever having to get their hands dirty in a factory or coal mine. In a plump postwar economy, the youth would become the exemplary consumers—and they would produce culture that way, by voicing not only their tastes and preferences, but also their nascent politics through their style choices and buying habits.

It’s important however to maintain that this recuperation of the youth into the market is not a wholesale defanging of some kind of primitive insurrectional energy that would be better left to roam free and overtake governments. This is usually the subtext of depressive arguments that the dissident subcultures of the 1968 generation provided the template for cognitive capitalism's later absorption of human creative and libidinal energies.² Even though the following decades were so much about the inevitability of capitalism spreading into the totality of life, some other part of the promise of sudden transformative development can't be explained away as easily. So the question then becomes less a matter of how these energies were recuperated, but where they went. But in order to locate them, we have to ask a much more profound, and perhaps embarrassing question: What were they in the first place? What was it exactly that we are supposed to be looking for?

Today, we look to the production and recuperation of youth culture in the postwar period as a cyclical process that has since accelerated to a degree that it becomes difficult to track in the same. A certain promise that various instances of youth expression is no longer registered or felt before the dream gets put to work. But the reason for this is to be found less in the dulling of a revolutionary drive or its dissipation into social factories, but as the beginning of a profound challenge to distinguish the social promises of insurrectionary projects from their symbolic effects—not because the internet has made everything the same loopy mess, but for a much more frightening reason. Because today it seems that it is not only hairstyles, but history itself that returns with these constant loops—and it returns not with revolutionary hopes, but by opening crevice of historical contradictions, grievances, and atrocities so wide that it will take generations to sift through them. Indeed, this has always been the other side of the revolution—but the side that is nearly impossible to sell. It is the part no one wants. The question for today may then be: Who will develop the youth culture that can make this other side sexy—sexy enough to sell, maybe, but also sexy enough to look at in the first place? Sexy enough for the recuperation or recovery not of a political project, but of a hospital patient.

² Most notably Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London/New York: Verso, 2007).

It is interesting to remember how characters like the native warrior, cowboy, and gangster figured in the postwar imaginary of young Americans—wild and free figures who did not respect borders and laws.³ Primitive and untamable, but also dangerously advanced not only because of the seductive draw of their boundlessness. They in fact provided an image of children themselves, but also often for an audience of children. The gangster is a capitalist par excellence, the cowboy an imperialist, and the native warrior a kind of supernatural freedom fighter, each carrying a symbolic boundlessness that young people could absorb into their psyche, while still knowing that each was always threatened by some kind of recuperation just around the corner. But whereas the recuperation of youth subcultures in the postwar era usually took place through the media,⁴ the 1990s also introduced a widespread understanding of how media works, as well as access to its tools, expanding the symbolic order to encompass adult morality and youthful deviance alike. This is perhaps what Dick Hebdidge and Stuart Hall and the Birmingham School already knew in the 1970s: that pop was already becoming the parliament where the disenfranchised and the powerful would convene through media and forms of symbolic representation. Like in previous centuries, and with other subaltern populations, the youth would become a medium for projecting time, for recording and concealing damages and prospects. Cloaked as entertainment, pop's territorial battles over aesthetics would start to merge with the writing of history. When terminating the Sex Pistols' recording contract in 1976, EMI Chairman Sir John Read described a certain "fullness of time" that would make even the most shocking new forms of music "wholly acceptable,"⁵ and this time has arrived. Now the future is behind us.

³ See Jon Savage, *Teenage* (New York: Viking, 2007), 114.

⁴ See the writings of Stuart Hall or Dick Hebdidge.

⁵ Quoted in Dick Hebdidge, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen, 1979), 160. Originally in Fred and Judy Vermorel, *The Sex Pistols: The Inside Story* (London: Tandem, 1978).