

Introduction



Does every society need rebels, outlaws, troublemakers, and deviants? This collection of primary sources takes readers on a journey through the intellectual and cultural history of the underground in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It explores ideas, artistic expressions, and cultural practices that radically challenged the societies in which they were created. These readings chart the historical evolution of challenges to mainstream values—some of which have themselves become mainstream—from their beginnings in the nineteenth century to 1970. And this collection emphasizes that underground thinkers in the United States and Europe have engaged in an ongoing transatlantic dialogue about issues of common interest, inspiring one another across national boundaries to challenge the broader norms of Western society.

For us, the underground is an important concept because it highlights the rejection of the modern world. Stressing conformity, capitalism, and homogenization, the development of modern life as the norm within the West has produced a wealth of protest movements that have tried to provide an alternative set of values by which to live. Underground thinkers have often dwelt on the impulses, instincts, and tendencies that many societies have tried to criminalize or demonize. The story of the underground cannot be reduced to being simply antimodern, but the critique of modernity is a trait that these thinkers and movements share, and one that links the readings in this volume. Modern society created the underground by inspiring the reaction against mainstream trends, but it also needs that reaction. The dynamic back-and-forth dialogue between marginal and mainstream—the give and take between culture and counterculture—has produced some of the most innovative insights and artistic revolutions in Western history.

Unfortunately, too often underground culture has been portrayed in recent studies as unique to a particular country or region. As a result, scholars often ignore the strong transatlantic connection between countercultural movements in Europe and the United States. American movements, from the rebels in Greenwich Village of the early 1900s to the 1960s hippies, have roots and connections in the intellectual and artistic traditions of revolt in Europe,

dating back to the mid-nineteenth century. Likewise, many present-day countercultural impulses in Europe draw their inspiration from American sources as they protest the mainstream. The following documents show the crucial links between underground movements on both sides of the Atlantic in order to put the idea of cultural outrage into a larger framework of intellectual and artistic ferment within the Western world.

This collection begins tracing the idea of the underground in the mid-nineteenth century with the European Romantic movement's emphasis on individual freedom, intuition, inspiration, and spirituality outside traditional religious forms. It then shows how that idea developed into the myth of the bohemian artist, the archetype for later generations of rebels who sought to make their voices heard against the strictures of the society around them, particularly in turn-of-the-century Paris. As American intellectuals crossed the Atlantic to visit European centers of culture, including London and Paris in the mid- to late-nineteenth centuries, they strengthened the notion of homegrown rebellion born in the Transcendentalists and added European inspiration to their calls for cultural and social change. By the late nineteenth century, socialism, free love, and early ecology were common on both sides of the Atlantic among those thinkers and activists who resisted the growing homogeneity and regimentation of the industrial, bureaucratic world. Those connections only became stronger with the so-called Lost Generation that made pilgrimages to Paris in the 1920s to seek a way of life different from that in America. At the same moment, French and other European avant-garde artists and intellectuals were also finding a new inspiration in America on their visits across the Atlantic.

This transatlantic history of the underground also brings to the fore the often-overlooked element of the complex role of race in countercultural movements. In both Europe and the United States by the early twentieth century, blackness—specifically African-American people and culture—was increasingly equated with the idea of rebellion when whites crossed the color line. Music became a crucial element in creating this aspect of the underground as jazz—and later, blues and rock and roll—allowed white and black audiences to share a common cultural form that many called the “devil’s music,” believing that it corrupted young listeners. Jazz, blues, and rock were extremely popular on both sides of the Atlantic, and they challenged assumptions about art and morality everywhere people heard them.

The fascination of whites with African-American culture were expressed in perhaps the most important countercultural concept of the twentieth century: the notion of coolness as the ultimate self-imposed marginal stance of opposition against the rest of the world. Black and cool became intertwined in both Europe and the United States, and young rebels throughout the West drew on the outsider status of African-Americans to make themselves stand out from

the rest. With coolness, we also begin to see the importance of the United States in shaping the countercultural agenda. For example, British rock musicians drew on African-American blues as their inspiration.

By the post-World War II era, the notion of the underground began to spread beyond the avant-garde artistic and intellectual circles of earlier years. Ironically, the idea of rebellion was becoming mainstream, as the youth culture of the 1960s, itself a transatlantic phenomenon, demonstrates. Increasingly the counterculture was coopted by corporations and advertising agencies as a product to be sold to young people who hoped to reimagine their lives in an age of plenty. As elements from the underground found their way into more mainstream political and cultural discourse, the meanings of counterculture began to transform dramatically. We end our reader in 1970, just as many aspects of underground culture began to become firmly accepted as ordinary aspects of life in the West.

Though artists and intellectuals continue to confront the dominant culture, commercial interests and political discourse since 1970 have eagerly adopted aspects of their challengers' protests, blunting the subversive capacity of the underground to challenge mainstream norms. For example, the selections we included in this book were shaped in part by our ability to acquire permissions to reprint what were once seen as rebellious documents but that are now thoroughly embedded within the world of commercial publishing; some documents were omitted due to the high cost of obtaining the rights to reproduce them or our inability to trace the holder of the original copyright. In addition, important transnational conversations have taken place across a host of global boundaries in recent decades, diluting the significance of the transatlantic dialogue and its importance for iconoclasts. Consequently, the meaning and influence of the underground has been altered significantly from its roots in the nineteenth century, and rebels have gone in new directions with alternately dull and thrilling results. Even with the changes in current debates, we hope to provide with this reader an important context for the origins of critics of conformity and modernity and to stimulate further conversations about possible directions for twenty-first-century subversive artists, angry intellectuals, political radicals, and assorted crackpots.

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