

BIKERS: A SUSTAINABLE SUBCULTURE MODEL

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I ride a Harley. It's a 2006, black pearl-colored Road King with almost 50,000 miles on the odometer. I've put all these miles on the bike myself from my, mostly solo, travels across the US and Canada.

I have drawers of Harley t-shirts, and a garage full of leather jackets, leather pants, bandanas, wrap around sunglasses, helmets, boots, knives, and skull rings. And on my favorite motorcycle jacket, (it's black, orange, and white: Harley colors), I have a patch that says: "I RODE MINE. STURGIS '08" – this is a badge of honor for me because it makes it clear that, unlike many riders, I didn't use a trailer to get my motorcycle from Boston to Sturgis. There's also a pin just above the Sturgis patch that says: "DILLIGAF." For the uninitiated, this stands for: "Do I Look Like I Give A Fuck."

When I'm on my Harley, I drape the "tough guy" image over me. I have come to expect the almost instant respect I get when I interact with "non-bikers" who are impressed, curious, or concerned when I stare at them in their minivan from the saddle of my 700-pound Harley-Davidson. I carry the attitude and behavior that is expected or imagined from someone who rides a motorcycle; I'm a biker. Or am I?

A New Type of Subculture: The Super-Subculture

Exploring, analyzing, and evaluating biker subculture raises a fundamental question: can, and should, the term biker be applied to everyone who rides Harley motorcycles and wears motorcycle apparel? I'm specifically focusing on Harley-Davidsons because the typical "biker" has traditionally preferred them:

Bikers are members of a Harley-Davidson cult, and they allow no room for compromise: 'Harley is the best, fuck the rest.' A biker will tell you that 'Harley-Davidson is more than a machine, it's a

way of life’ and ‘Until you’ve ridden on a Harley you haven’t been on a motorcycle’ (Wolf 37)

Millions of people ride Harleys and embrace biker style and attitude and, therefore, make up the dominant culture in this comparison. So are all these people, by definition, bikers? It is my contention that they are not. They are, in reality, motorcycle enthusiasts and they idealize and adopt pieces of biker subculture to fit their particular needs and/or insecurities.

I also believe that biker subculture is more than simply a subculture. It is both a subculture and what I will define here as a super-subculture. A super-subculture – the oxymoronic naming convention is intentional – is a subculture that: (1) effectively grows and maintains its core structure, hierarchies, membership, values, semiotics, and style; (2) buys (or takes) what it needs from dominant societies to sustain itself and provide for its members; (3) influences non-subculture members and other outsider groups, (in the case of biker subculture examples of these types of groups would be: motorcycle enthusiasts, heavy metal listeners, fashion designers, and commercial products or services), with its “style” without becoming fractured; and (4) uses this reflective relationship with, and respect from, non-members and outsider groups to empower itself and secure its position in relation to society.

I will use the terms biker subculture and biker super-subculture somewhat interchangeably because they are terms that are defined by perspective. In other words, bikers would, theoretically, view themselves as a subculture in relation to society, and I believe that society should view bikers as a super-subculture within this specific cultural framework for reasons I will explain throughout this essay.

Subculture vs. Super-Subculture: What’s the Difference?

When an individual aligns with a particular style, group, or activity there are adopted patterns of behavior and needs that are desired, and ideally fulfilled, by that association and identification. We all want to belong to something in some way, and there is security in identifying with others who also “belong.”

However, when there is an association or perceived/assumed relationship with a generally recognizable and publicly-engaged subculture that has, as part of its modus operandi, clearly identifiable styles, activities, behaviors, mannerisms, and particularities – as is found in biker subcul-

ture – and only part of that style is adopted by the established or dominant culture, e.g. motorcycle enthusiasts dressing and acting like bikers and riding Harleys, members of the dominant culture cannot legitimately align themselves with the subculture because they are not adopting the entire gestalt of the subculture. That said, how a subculture responds to this kind of style appropriation by the hegemonic culture directly affects the subculture's sustainability.

For example, just because an individual loves the Sex Pistols and puts safety pins in her jeans doesn't, necessarily, mean that person is a member of punk subculture. And just because an individual listens to heavy metal music which, as Andy R. Brown states, "derived its style from 'outlaw-biker-gang(s)'" and rides a motorcycle doesn't, necessarily, make that person part of biker subculture (Brown 212). Regardless of the specific subculture, a significant risk with popularity-driven exploitation of a subculture's style and behaviors is that once the uniqueness of a subculture is infiltrated by the hegemony, the subculture risks dilution and potential dissolution. As Dick Hebdige points out in *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*:

As the subculture begins to strike its own eminently marketable pose, as its vocabulary (both visual and verbal) becomes more and more familiar, so the referential context to which it can be most conveniently assigned is made increasingly apparent... The process of recuperation takes two characteristic forms: (1) the conversion of subcultural signs (dress, music, etc.) into mass-produced objects (i.e. the commodity form); (2) the 'labeling' and re-definition of deviant behavior by dominant groups – the police, the media, the judiciary (i.e. the ideological form) (Hebdige 109)

With the punk movement, what started as a way to engage and embrace Britain's disenfranchised youth in the 1970s using, "things to whiten mother's hair" with regard to attitude, "Punks just like to be hated," dress, "the swastika was worn because it was guaranteed to shock," and sound, "Johnny Rotten succinctly defined punk's position on harmonics: 'We're into chaos not music,'" quickly became a commercialized commodity (Hebdige 126, 134):

Punk clothing and insignia could be bought mail-order by the summer of 1977, and in September of that year *Cosmopolitan*

ran a review of Zandra Rhodes' latest collection of couture follies which consisted entirely of variations on the punk theme... and the accompanying article ended with an aphorism – 'To shock is chic' – which presaged the subculture's imminent demise' (Hebdige 111-112)

Punk's "über-style" was no longer separated from mainstream style and the hegemony could now identify with punk to such a comfortable degree that, "Even punk, when reduced to a neat Mohawk hairstyle and a studded leather jacket, could be made into a cleaned-up spokesman for potato chips" (Clark 229).

The music, clothing, and attitude that defined punk subculture had made an extraordinary impact on the youth at that moment in time but one could reasonably argue that punk subculture made too significant of an impact and reached a level of coolness that was, in fact, too cool to be ignored by commercially-focused hegemonies. And as punk became commercially attractive, accessible, and viable it did not, simultaneously, have the necessary infrastructure to support mass-market appropriation of its style and, subsequently, to evolve into a super-subculture thereby contributing, albeit inadvertently, to its own demise. Lefebvre explains this transitional effect quite well, "That which yesterday was reviled today becomes cultural consumer-goods, consumption thus engulfs what was intended to give meaning and direction" (Hebdige 107).

I would be remiss to not briefly address hip-hop subculture in this analysis as it comes closer to my outlined model of a super-subculture. There are several "counter-hegemonic structures... 'posses,' 'families,' and 'crews,'" that reinforce the individual and collective identity of hip-hop subculture, as is also the case with biker subculture, and all members share an identity and solidarity through a specific type of music and style that deeply connects them with each other – this is similar to the Harley-Davidson motorcycle and biker style with biker subculture (Potter 463). And, importantly, like the Harley and motorcycle style/attire, hip-hop music and style have been embraced by multiple hegemonies and demographics, e.g. the middle class, suburban, white kid who wears FUBU clothes and Air Jordan sneakers and listens to Li'l Wayne.

The critical similarity between hip-hop and biker subcultures and the critical difference between these two subcultures and, for example, punk subculture is that the gentrification of hip-hop did not destroy the subculture from whence it came.

However, even with these attributes hip-hop subculture is unable to achieve super-subculture status due to the fact that it is not a highly organized, hierarchical and self-sufficient ecosystem where there is, for example, a clearly identifiable “us” (bikers) and “them” (motorcycle enthusiasts). And like punk subculture, with hip-hop one can simply wear the clothes and listen to the music and then there are, instantly, multiple levels of shared understanding between “members.” To be clear, I am not minimizing hip-hop’s musical, historical, social, and political importance or its enormous impact on both black and white culture. But I am saying that even with all of these connections or points of influence, hip-hop is not structured enough as a whole to be considered a super-subculture.

Biker Subculture: Style and Lifestyle

Referencing *Profane Culture* by Paul Willis, Hebdige states, the internal structure of any particular subculture is characterized by an extreme orderliness: each part is organically related to other parts and it is through the fit between them that the subcultural member makes sense of the world” (Hebdige 130). The structure and order Willis describes is critical to understanding the sustainability of biker subculture.

Some of the key differences between bikers – the identified subculture and super-subculture – and motorcycle enthusiasts – the hegemony in this comparison, are found in its clearly structured style. Hebdige asks, “How does a subculture make sense to its members? How is it made to signify disorder?” (Hebdige 116) Although Hebdige presents this initially as a type of paradox, which is understandable in relation to the typical perception of style, he later makes a critical observation that applies directly to bikers and their style, “The communication of a significant difference, then (and the parallel communication of a group identity), is the ‘point’ behind the style of all spectacular subcultures” (Hebdige 118).

Whether we examine real motorcycle clubs (MCs) such as the Hells Angels, Warlocks or Outlaws, or the fictitious Sons of Anarchy motorcycle club on FX TV’s eponymous drama, or look at representations of bikers in films like *The Wild One* or *Hell Ride*, they all are part of, or pay homage to, biker subculture; their lifestyles are conspicuously consistent and their style is ubiquitous. Reality and fiction align.

Every member of an MC wears a leather vest with a three-piece patch on the back identifying the club name, logo and location – these are

known as the club's "colors" and are prized above almost everything else by members, "When I got my colors it was the proudest moment of my life" (Wolf 116). These colors are only to be worn by members, "Hells Angels paraphernalia is only for members of our club. No one else but us is allowed to produce, sell or buy any items with the words HELLS ANGELS and our logo with our DEATH HEAD" (Hells Angels: FAQs). Members also typically wear "1%er" diamond patches identifying themselves as outlaw bikers (this serves to separate the outlaw biker from the 99% of law abiding motorcyclists as determined by the American Motorcycle Association after the Hollister riot of 1947).

As Dylan Clark observes, "people find solidarity, revolt, and individuality by inhabiting a shared costume marking their membership in a subculture" (Clark 224). And most "brothers" – how members of the MC refer to each other – will often also have the club name or logo tattooed on their bodies. Incidentally, if a member with a club tattoo wishes to leave the club without the MC's permission, the club will remove the tattoo for them. In Season 1 of *Sons of Anarchy*, "Clay Morrow," the president of the MC asks a disgraced former Sons member named "Kyle" about his preferred removal of his Sons of Anarchy back tattoo and if he wants "the knife or the flame?" ("Giving Back." Season 1) Kyle chooses the flame.

In biker subculture, style extends beyond the sartorial or artistic, it permeates every part of the biker's environment and is intertwined with their individuality, "The integration of personal, interpersonal, and institutional levels of participation provides the foundation for the outlaw-biker subculture" (Wolf 346). These deep and multi-faceted connections are due, in significant part, to the lengthy and challenging initiation rites required of all those who wish to join an MC and become part of this recognized subculture and brotherhood.

Returning to the Hells Angels' website FAQs page for insight into their process, they provide valuable information for the curious:

How do I join the club? If you have to ask, you probably will not understand the answer...if you are really interested you should talk to a member in your area. If you have to ask where the nearest Charter is...you are not ready to join our Motorcycle Club

The implied understanding from the Hells Angels about what's involved with becoming a member of their MC is the first step towards initiation,

while also dissuading most visitors who are simply curious and/or are unlikely to fit in from pursuing this further. This is a critical differentiation point between biker subculture and other subcultures – you cannot just “join” an MC. There is no sign up sheet. And, unlike with punk subculture, dying your hair, ripping your clothes, listening to The Clash, and assuming a particular affect does not cover the price of admission into biker subculture.

The path to becoming a member of an MC is “tough and most fail” (The Death Head). The timeline to move from interested individual to prospect to “full patch member” can range from months to years, and while you are prospecting you, “...never turn your phone off, you never say no to a member, you are available 24/7, you are a slave to the club” (American Bikers). And then once you become a member the MC becomes your life, “Make sure you’re prepared to give up the family life because that’s what’s going to happen” (American Bikers).

Individuals who join an MC and become part of biker subculture typically have working class roots, (much like members of early punk subculture), and are seeking to be accepted and fulfilled in ways they have been unable to find in traditional society:

A man who enters this subculture in search of an identity looks to the outlaw-biker tradition to provide him with long-standing values, behaviors, and symbols. What he will find are heroes and role models, a personal legacy that is consistent with what he discovered on the streets about the complete man (Wolf 33)

Once an individual earns his place in the MC and becomes part of biker subculture they also then become a critical tool in driving the specific MC’s “machine” and helping to ensure its survival. This integration between the biker and the MC allows the continuation and expansion of the organization while, simultaneously, giving the individual a place to belong and a way to explore their own insecurities within a previously unavailable familial framework, and with a sense of camaraderie that may have been what initially led them to the biker lifestyle:

The outlaw who flies his colors is psychologically transformed. For the rest of his remaining days in the club, the colors will actually magnify the member’s ability to perform as a patch holder. On

one level, the colors act as a uniform that conceals the limits and inadequacies of the members' concept of self, giving them an aura, a collective power (Wolf 125)

As part of the MC, the biker lives within the set rules and regulations set out by his club – and he does not deviate without permission. Every member embraces strict codes of behavior with regard to their brothers and the rest of society, “You back up your brother no matter what – whether he’s right or wrong. You have to let the world know that you don’t fuck with us” (American Bikers). This inherent sense of understanding and absolute loyalty to the club drives the continued success and growth of the subculture. This circular flow of respect and camaraderie between brothers is what provides the security and comfort the member needs, while also providing the club with the resources it needs to sustain itself and grow. In many ways it is a self-regulating society.

As supportive as life inside an MC may be for its members, for those who break the rules there is little sympathy; the worst offense is betraying the club. Mike Lynn, a former Outlaws member sums it up succinctly, “We have saying: ‘God forgives, Outlaws Don’t;’ and we have a shirt that says ‘snitches are a dying breed’ – so if you rat on the club you’re going to get killed eventually” (Inside The Outlaws). The reason a member would consider ratting on his club is, usually, because they were caught doing something illegal, and law enforcement will use that opportunity to go after the club as a whole.

This essay is not about proving, disproving or exploring the illegal activities within biker subculture but, frankly, it is no surprise that MCs utilize both legal and illegal means to sustain themselves considering that many members have chosen to live outside society’s defined rules. But biker super-subcultures are complex and most have a deep enough infrastructure to withstand the occasional legal setback or snitch. The Hells Angels’ Chuck Zito explains, “One man does not run a club. The Feds can arrest anyone they want but there are a hundred more ready to take the guy’s place” (American Bikers).

It is worth noting what happens when a member of a biker subculture is disillusioned and wants to leave the club as the feelings around the member’s departure are felt very deeply by both the departing member and the MC itself. I am not referring to members like Kyle from Sons of Anarchy, this is about members who have determined that the club is not

what they thought and/or they had enough:

Years of battling my own demons living the outlaw lifestyle brought me to the point where I reached a personal crossroads and I decided to leave the club. I returned home and collected everything that reminded me of the club, started a bonfire and burned everything. I was letting go of an identity. Then I burned all my Harley shirts – that was my whole wardrobe. This was my life (American Bikers)

This story from a former member of the Warlocks is not passive commentary or a casual expression of unhappiness; this is extremely emotional and, in many ways, tragic. His entire identity – right down to his Harley shirts – was the MC. Emotional commitment to membership is a cornerstone of biker subculture. Unlike other subcultures where you can come and go as your attitude, interest, or style changes, for the biker the complete devotion of oneself to the group right down to the significance the member attaches to the clothes on his back, is paramount and further highlights the depth of this subculture. It is extremely difficult and takes enormous personal sacrifice to become part of biker subculture and, once in, most don't leave until they die.

Biker Super-Subculture and Mainstream Society

In my list of what I believe is required for a subculture to be considered a super-subculture, I identified in (2) that a super-subculture “buys (or takes) what it needs from dominant societies to grow and provide for its members.” This sets up an interesting dynamic because, unlike subcultures whose members want to disassociate from mainstream society and either do nothing and/or just spend their time on criminal activities, members of the super-subculture understand that they are reliant on society for certain things that then, in turn, allow their subculture to survive. For bikers, there is an acceptance with minimal hypocrisy that they need, or want, things that society provides. So, for example, many bikers have “real” jobs, own homes and cars, take their kids to school, go Christmas shopping, eat at nice restaurants, hire lawyers, go to the hospital when they are sick, pay taxes, etc. In many ways, they participate in, and contribute to, mainstream society just like everyone else. Granted, if a biker wants

something and can not afford it they may “take” it, but if they have to pay for something that mainstream society provides then they will often adapt.

The relationship between biker and society is perhaps most evident with regard to biker super-subcultures and Harley-Davidson motorcycles. As mentioned, Harleys are the motorcycle of choice for the majority of biker subcultures and have been for decades, and along with Harley paraphernalia – as described earlier with the Warlocks member and his t-shirts – are critical components of a biker’s overall identity. So why is this important to point out? It is important because in 2013, Harley-Davidson had worldwide revenues of \$5.09 Billion, and Harley-Davidson certainly is not giving every biker subculture member a free motorcycle (Financial News). Bikers have to buy every motorcycle and shirt from Harley-Davidson just like the motorcycle enthusiasts. But biker subculture allows for this kind of reliance on a specific, for-profit, multi-national company to supply them with the core piece of their subculture and style – these subcultures are motorcycle clubs; they don’t exist without the motorcycle.

Let’s revisit the Hells Angels to get a better sense of what would be an expected dichotomy with regard to Harley-Davidson and biker subculture. Individuals are not allowed to even go “hang out” with the Hells Angels if they do not have a Harley, let alone expect the latitude to believe there is an opportunity to join.

Although it seems counterintuitive that the Hells Angels would insist on a specific commercial brand for even the most basic access to their subculture and their environment while, at the same time, accepting that this particular brand is the same one that is embraced by millions of motorcycle enthusiasts, (who clearly generate the majority of Harley-Davidson’s revenues), the Hells Angels and other outlaw MCs make no apologies or qualify this requirement in any way. These bikers do not feel any threat from the millions of individuals who are appropriating this core piece of their style and identity by riding the same brand of motorcycle. Hells Angels require their members and associates to ride Harley-Davidson motorcycles, and given that the Hells Angels are estimated to have approximately only 2,500 members worldwide, further solidifies the biker super-subculture classification (Motorcycle Gangs).

When we examine the biker/society relationship from the dominant culture’s perspective, e.g. the motorcycle enthusiast or admirer, we get a much greater sense of the scale and scope of the top down fracturing and appropriation that biker super-subculture has been able to withstand.

I am adding the classification of the “admirer” here because there are, as mentioned earlier, other groups that have adopted biker style including heavy metal listeners, punks, and fashion houses like Alexander McQueen. These groups do not dress this way because they necessarily ride motorcycles; they are wearing, or designing, this style of clothing because they simply like the look and the image. For example, in 2010, the Hells Angels sued designer Alexander McQueen for using a similar looking Death Head in his designs (Abraham 2010). That suit was eventually settled when McQueen agreed to recall all his merchandise that featured the Death Head; he had enough common sense to change his designs rather than go up against the Hells Angels – a point worth noting regarding the kind of power this subculture wields.

Finally, it is also critical to look at the biker image as it is represented in advertising – the ultimate identifier of acceptance by the masses and commercial culture. Recall Clark’s example of the punk and the potato chip and then watch the current Progressive, GEICO or Priceline commercials that feature the “biker.” From an advertising standpoint, this way of selling insurance or travel plays right into the motorcycle enthusiast’s desired image addressed earlier in this essay, while also maintaining the mystique of the biker for the benefit – undoubtedly unintentionally – of biker super-subculture.

Conclusion

There are many reasons why subcultures are created and exist in relation to their respective hegemonies. And although subcultures will often sustain themselves for years, few will retain their original purpose, structures and beliefs, let alone survive significant commercial attention, stylistic appropriation, and top down fragmentation from the hegemonies from which they were born. Biker subculture is unusual in this regard as it has, in reality, thrived and grown by adapting to and accommodating multiple levels of style appropriation, by expanding its – real and perceived – association with broad-based consumer products, and by continuing to engage with dominant cultures on its own terms.

There is still a great deal more research and analysis to be done to prove the “subculture versus super-subculture” concept but for the time being – unlike most other subcultures – biker subculture continues to survive and grow regardless of how many connection points are formed between this particular subculture and mainstream society.

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