

Commodification and Popular Imagery of the Biker in American Culture

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OVER THE PAST SEVERAL DECADES, SOCIAL THEORISTS HAVE increasingly thought of American society as a consumer culture, in which purchasing goods, more than producing them, defines social relations. As such, consumption is intrinsically linked to the social construction of self and society (Adorno; Baudrillard; Featherstone; Horkheimer and Adorno; Slater). Rooted in theories of reification (Lukacs) the commodification of reality (Marcuse), the objectification of the self (Lefebvre), society as spectacle (Debord), and the culture industry (Horkheimer and Adorno), contemporary theories of consumption argue that advanced industrial capitalism has become the dominant mode of cultural reproduction wherein all social relations, activities, and objects can be exchanged as commodities (Slater 8, 27).^{1,2}

This process has been referred to as the culture industry and it was argued that capitalism, with its all-encompassing emphasis on standardization, rationalization, objectification, and pressures to consume, has led to the commodification of society (Adorno; Horkheimer and Adorno). Accordingly, the culture industry—made up of the media, manufacturers, marketing agencies, and advertisers—appropriates ideas and material cultural products that arise from grassroots society. It then mass produces these polished, retooled, and repackaged products, selling them to the public with powerful marketing strategies designed to convince potential buyers that consumer goods will make their lives better and more complete and meaningful. Consumers are told that they can achieve new identities, become members of desirable

The Journal of Popular Culture, Vol. 43, No. 5, 2010
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communities, and live more exciting and rewarding lives, if only they will purchase certain products (Adorno; Horkheimer and Adorno).

The commodification of culture has become so powerful in the post-World War II period that Baudrillard argued that it is impossible to distinguish reality from the “carnival of signs” with which we are surrounded. Further, Adorno maintained that, although consumers must be predisposed to believe the messages they receive from the culture industry, it is impossible to escape its power. In the process of commodification, the culture industry renders life devoid of intrinsic meaning, even as it markets its goods as supplying the meaning, freedom, adventure, emotional attachments, community involvement, and fulfillment that is lacking in modern life (Adorno).

Each year, hundreds of thousands of motorcyclists from all over the United States ride or drive (with their motorcycles on trailers or truck beds) to a small city in the Black Hills of South Dakota for a week-long rally known simply as “Sturgis.” Similarly, other annual major motorcycling events occur in places such as Laconia, New Hampshire; Myrtle Beach, South Carolina; Hollister, California; and Daytona, Florida. Events such as these signify the continuing fascination with a biker image that arose from grassroots culture in the 1940s. But far from the original “bikers,” many of whom were returning World War II veterans, today’s average motorcycle owner is far more affluent. In 2003, motorcyclists earned US\$55,850 per year while the wages of the average Harley-Davidson owner were over US\$80,000 (Higgins F9) with new motorcycle sales climbing for the twelfth consecutive year in 2004 (Motorcycle Industry Council).

This article is a result of a long-term ethnographic research project on the nonoutlaw recreational touring motorcycling community.¹ One of our early, unexpected findings was a strong divide within the community, with some members embracing an image of the outlaw biker and others strongly resenting and resisting it.² As a result of this finding, we sought to learn more about the historical origins of the image and its meaning to contemporary riders. Drawing upon the history of motorcycling, we argue that the present-day surge in the popularity of motorcycles is, in large part, a response to the commodification of a rebellious biker image created in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s and later amplified by capitalists to sell products to a population in search of adventure and expressions of rebellion. That image, more than others of its era, has been amplified by the media, commodified by

manufacturers, and sold to the public as a means of attaining a certain identity and *entré* into capitalist-produced communities.

Theoretically, we advance arguments about the commodification of culture by critically examining a segment of popular culture on which few, if any, theorists have focused. Few scholars have analyzed the role that government efforts to thwart an image may have on its further commodification. Further, theorists have overlooked the ways in which members of the grassroots subculture whose lifestyle is being appropriated can play a role in its commodification, and they have largely ignored the role that subcultures that are not the target of the efforts to commodify the image might play in its increasing popularity. In this article, we suggest that the government, popular culture, the press, and elements of the 1960s counterculture played roles in amplifying the biker image, which was later seized upon by manufacturers to sell motorcycles and other products. In the final analysis, we show evidence to support our claim that the contemporary biker image is one that was born of grassroots rebellion, amplified by the media, sanctioned by the government, and appropriated by capitalists to sell motorcycles, riding gear, fashion clothing, and motorcycle accessories to a population that was as much, if not more, interested in gaining membership to a “consumer tribe” (Maffesoli) as it was in riding.

In addition, our work adds to the theory of Thorstein Veblen by illustrating how, rather than upward “pecuniary emulation,” wherein the lower classes endeavor to emulate the lifestyles of those of higher social status, the commodification of the biker image, as may be true with other forms of commodified culture, entails “downward pecuniary emulation.” This form of emulation is one in which those of greater economic means take on the styles of those beneath them in terms of status, prestige, and income. It appears to us that this turn may be a significant marker of the transition from an economy based upon production to one based upon consumption.

The Commodification of the Biker Image

When motorcycles were first introduced in the United States near the beginning of the twentieth century, they were looked upon as a call to adventure, enjoyed by the affluent and privileged classes (Joans). By the 1920s, motorcycle riding was considered a risky activity of the upper

class (Reynolds) more than a serious mode of transportation. The introduction of the Model-T meant that motorcycles were not cost competitive with automobiles for family transportation.

Throughout the twentieth century, images of motorcycles and riders experienced a number of transformations. Since the late-1940s to early-1950s, however, one image of motorcyclists—the stereotypical outlaw biker—has remained relatively constant. The biker has been cast as a free-spirited white male wearing black leather, boots, and denim. He lives a rebellious lifestyle that threatens mainstream American values. At the end of the twentieth century, thousands of middle-aged baby boomers, many whose parents had once warned them against the evils of bikes and bikers, flocked to motorcycling to express a desire for freedom and as a symbol of their own rebellion. Some experienced a genuine desire for travel and adventure. For others, the motorcycle was part of a sartorial expression of a desire to be associated with a “consumer tribe” (Maffesoli) born of a media-generated image.

The process of commodification (Adorno; Horkheimer and Adorno) begins when a practice develops in mass culture that is subsequently co-opted by the media and capitalists, repackaged, and sold back to consumers in an altered form. The public, then—believing they are embracing something genuine—purchase the commodity as an expression of desired identity, lifestyle, or membership in a certain community. Along these lines, Thomas Frank examined how 1960s rebellion became commodified into hip consumerism as the 1960s, counterculture anticapitalist rebellion was appropriated and sold back to people in the form of commodities, such as Nehru jackets, love beads, and lava lamps. Dissent and rebellion were commodified by capitalism as soon as they arrived en masse. Our research strongly suggests that the biker image that emerged from the riding community in the United States in the post-World War II period underwent a similar process, but that the government played an unwitting role in helping the image catch on with the public, as did other countercultures and key members of the outlaw biker subculture.

The Mass Cultural Basis of the Commodified Image

After the machine's early association with affluence at the beginning of the twentieth century, the military adopted motorcycles during World

Wars I and II for use by couriers (Joans). When World War II ended, an unknown number of restless young veterans, many of whom had been exposed to motorcycles in the military, returned to the United States unprepared to settle into a sedate civilian lifestyle (Barger, Zimmerman, and Zimmerman; Polhemus).

Some returning veterans were drawn to motorcycling as a way to rebel against the domestic expectations of the dominant culture. Rather than marrying, buying houses, and having children, these men focused their energies on riding and spending time with friends who shared similar interests. Out of this trend, a subculture emerged from grassroots society (Chambers). Riders formed clubs and adopted a style of clothing and self-presentation, including leather jackets, blue jeans, boots, and a cool demeanor that has been associated with motorcycling ever since. Much of the attire worn by bikers was practical, since in addition to giving the wearer a tough appearance, they provided protection from the elements and in case of a crash. When veterans first took up riding, most were law-abiding citizens. But, by the mid-1950s the image of motorcycling in the United States was transformed to one associated with danger and an outlaw lifestyle.

This transformation took place in a paranoid Cold War context in which deviance of any sort was considered a threat to the domestic social order. Bikers were only one of many groups viewed as threatening to postwar American culture. The biker image was amplified by the media, which presented motorcyclists' activities as illegal, dangerous, and a potential threat to national security (Barger, Zimmerman, and Zimmerman; Singer; Wood). The media focused on a troublesome minority of motorcyclists, creating a magnified image that took hold with the public.

The Media Construction of the Outlaw Biker Image

Observers agree that the most significant event in the development of the biker image was a gathering of more than 4,000 bikers over the Fourth of July period in 1947 at an American Motorcyclist Association sponsored race in Hollister, California (Barger, Zimmerman, and Zimmerman; Fuglsang; Singer). The race was the first postwar incarnation of the gathering. During the event some bikers may have been a little rowdy, but analysts assert that the level of disturbance was far less

than that portrayed in the media (Barger, Zimmerman, and Zimmerman; Singer). In attendance were the Boozefighters, which one author regards as the first “outlaw” biker gang (Stidworthy 191). A now famous photo of a drunken biker with beer bottles littering the ground around him appeared on the July 21, 1947 pages of *Life* magazine. Although the photo was posed (Singer), it initiated fears among some Americans and confirmed the beliefs of others that motorcyclists presented a threat to their conservative postwar way of life. The photo initiated a stereotype that continued into the twenty-first century.

After Hollister, a short story about the takeover of a small town by a motorcycle gang, titled “Cyclists’ Raid,” was published in *Harper’s* magazine in 1951. The story caught the eye of film maker Stanley Kramer, who developed a fictionalized version of the Hollister gathering, resulting in the 1954 movie, *The Wild One*. That film further confirmed the fears and stereotypes that originated with the *Life* photograph. In the film Marlon Brando starred as a misunderstood, brooding, and potentially dangerous biker. The movie opened with a solemn warning: “This is a shocking story. It could never take place in most American towns but it did in this one. It is a public challenge not to let it happen again.” Brando and his motorcycle-riding buddies wreaked havoc and destruction on a small town. The film was deemed so threatening that it was initially banned in some countries.

The Wild One reinforced the belief that motorcyclists posed a threat to the social order and, even more alarming, that they were a menace within US borders that could arise anywhere. As social and moral watchdogs, the film industry and print media created the stereotype of the dangerous brutal biker as a “negative example of bad citizenship” (Fuglsang 192). As a result of the film, Hodenfield (72) commented that “overnight every motorcyclist in America acquired a mean and shifty reputation.” This reputation was enhanced by other, less influential films of the era such as *Motorcycle Gang* (1957), *Dragstrip Riot* (1958), and *The Hot Angel* (1958). By the end of the 1950s, the print and film media had successfully created an image of motorcyclists as dangerous deviants who were an unmitigated threat to social order and common decency.

Despite these media images, the public does not blindly adopt what the culture industry presents to them (Horkheimer and Adorno). Rather, people must be predisposed to believe the images that confront them. As frame alignment theory (Snow, Rochford, Worden, and

Benford) suggests, the public more willingly adopts new information that aligns with what they already accept as true. The stereotypes and fears promulgated by *Life* magazine and *The Wild One* took root in a paranoid postwar culture rife with fear of the internal and external specter of communism. During this Cold War period, social and political conservatism was pervasive in the dominant culture, and conformity to these standards was expected and encouraged. Those who did not subscribe were considered suspect, and motorcycle riders were deemed to be dangerous nonconformists (Dirks). Bikers were free to travel the nation and might choose any town for their next physical and cultural invasion. Pierson ("Precious Danger" 71) commented, "The ethos of the Fifties—the conformity, cleanliness, safety, and impersonal modernity that helped wash away the residue of war—could not embrace motorcycling." Americans had learned how to protect themselves from external threats, with the use of civil defense measures in conjunction with political and military means. Internal threats were far more challenging and difficult to identify.

Motorcyclists themselves were not the only victims of the negative imagery, but the biker image was the only one of its time to be later commodified to such an extent. *The Wild One* took a garment, the leather jacket, which was a useful part of motorcycling attire as well as part of the uniform of World War II flying crews, and helped transform it into a cultural icon that exemplified rebellion. As standard gear among riders, the leather jacket in the wake of *The Wild One* became a reliable visual indicator that could be used to identify potential sources of trouble. By the late 1960s, a generation seeking ways to express their disaffection with the conservative values of their parents, often adopted the leather jacket. In the 1970s and beyond, the stereotype associated with the jacket made its way into the fashion consciousness of mainstream American society as an expression of real, imagined, or faux rebellion. As one writer stated, "the motorcycle jacket never loses its identity in fashion: it . . . still has the legend of the road, the scent of masculinity, and the aura of the invincible" (Cook 83).

Bikers were not the only threat to the social order as other forms of social deviance were also viewed with suspicion and fear in the 1950s. Mainstream films, such as *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) and *The Blackboard Jungle* (1955), provided a much different view of 1950s America than seen in television families (DeWitt). Juvenile delinquency was explored, or perhaps exploited, in movies such as *Untamed Youth* (1957)

and *High School Confidential* (1958). Much like the B-movie biker films, the hot rod car culture also provided a format for films that both captured the attention of and warned moviegoers with visions of “cool characters, violence, hip slang, high-speed thrills, titillating sexual innuendo, and the cars themselves” (DeWitt 13). Films such as *Hot Rod Girl* (1956) and *Hot Rod Rumble* (1957) reinforced the image of a youth culture that was out of control. Movies that presented aliens or monsters living among the population, such as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) and *The Blob* (1958), also thrived in this fearful culture.

As MacDougall (71) points out, the anticommunism of the era had two components. One focused on clearly defined international enemies of the United States, while the second focused less on national defense but more on the perceived internal decay of American morals and standards. This was a more populist war of ideas and ideology. It was a war that portrayed the enemy as full of dangerous, but potentially alluring, values and ideas. Playing on these fears, films that featured various types of deviance stirred a type of prurient interest in the American public. Although all these forms of deviance were viewed as threats to mainstream values, it is only the biker image that received extensive commodification into the twenty-first century and remained a mainstay in popular culture.

Motorcyclists became fertile ground in which film makers could plant the seeds of fear of an internal threat posed by those who did not share the appropriate values of 1950s America. “Until the end of the 1960s, the basically negative premise set down by *The Wild One* was perpetuated—that while bikers might be sexy and stylish, they are ultimately a bunch of confused, fatally flawed, psychologically dysfunctional losers who will never ‘get anywhere’” (Polhemus 92). Subsequent “B” films, such as *Motorpsycho!* (1965), with advertisement focusing on “Bike riding hoodlums flat-out on their murdercycles” (Stringer 168), did little to improve the image. This theme continued to be fairly strong until the early 1970s (Morton 81).

Amplification of the Image

Although the media created and distorted negative images of bikers during the 1950s, films such as *The Wild One* were not without some foundation in fact. Indeed, veterans had returned from the war, and

some of them rode motorcycles in groups while participating in less than exemplary behavior. By the mid-1960s the best known of these biker clubs was the Hell's Angels, with chapters that eventually spread throughout the United States and the world. In 1964, a weekend club-sponsored party in California resulted in charges of rape against two members of the gang by local teenage girls. The young women later retracted their allegations, but the charges confirmed fears and beliefs many Americans already held. The next year, bikers overturned a car at a gathering of riders in New Hampshire and set it ablaze. The disturbance, which resulted in numerous injuries and arrests, was reported in the media, with language that emphasized riders' deviant appearance as much as their illegal behavior. For example, the *New York Times* reported, "Laconia's streets have been full of long-haired inarticulate men riding cycles bearing such names as 'Cold Turkey' and 'Bad News.' They wear the customary black leather jackets" (Benjamin 45). Despite such biases in journalists' reports, most observers agree that the actual danger of outlaw biker gangs increased in the 1960s (Barger, Morton; Thompson; Zimmerman, and Zimmerman).

As with most social problems, it is difficult to ascertain whether government reactions to social issues result from an objective increase in their occurrence, greater public awareness of them, political considerations, or some combination of the three. Nevertheless, in the mid-1960s, the government of California, where the Hell's Angels gained much of their early notoriety, got involved in investigating motorcycle clubs, in much the same way the federal government investigated organized crime. In language some might find curious for an "objective" government report, California's attorney general, Thomas Lynch, asserted in 1965 that motorcycle gangs were comprised of "unwashed thugs, wreaking havoc on the highways of the state" (Morton 56). Former president of the Hell's Angels Oakland chapter and best known member of the club, Sonny Barger (Barger, Zimmerman, and Zimmerman 101), said with this report, the "government declared war" on bikers. That "war" may have advanced the biker image and contributed to the public's fascination with the Hell's Angels.

Barger took advantage of the economic opportunities that arose as he served as a paid consultant on films such as *Hell's Angels on Wheels* (1967) and *Hell's Angels '69* (1969), allowing producers to draw upon his life experiences to amplify the negative images that sold movies. Around the same time, Hunter S. Thompson's best-seller, *Hell's Angels:*

A Strange and Terrible Saga, added to the negative imagery. Though many reacted to bikers with fear, for some, motorcycles became a source of fascination because they represented freedom and rebellion.

Between the government's so-called war on bikers, Barger's involvement in media portrayals of the Hell's Angels, and Thompson's book, bikers were juxtaposed as rebels against the government and cultural conservatism. This was a stance that antiestablishment intellectuals and other cultural leftists found appealing (Polhemus). The 1960s counterculture idealized the Hell's Angels as free-living individualists (Wood), further adding to the appropriation of the biker image.

During the 1960s some segments of the California counterculture, such as hippies, Berkeley intellectual leftists, and certain well known countercultural figures, became involved at the fringes of the Hell's Angels organization by inviting club members to parties and associating with them socially. Just as the biker image fell on fearful fertile ground in conservative 1950s, the antiestablishment rhetoric and lifestyle of the Hell's Angels struck a chord with intellectuals of the 1960s, who saw themselves as agents of change reacting to a society and government that was out of step with their goals and objectives. Some members of the counterculture viewed the Angels as free spirits (Osgerby) despite the overwhelming differences in their visions of rebellion. Although the two groups presented an image of opposition to mainstream culture, they clashed when it came to sentiments about the government, the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights Movement, and the way problems should be solved. Specifically, though the government had declared "war" on biker gangs, most bikers were political patriots, with many having served in the military. Further, cultural leftists may have failed to recognize the extent to which outlaw biker gangs often espoused and practiced violence as a means of solving problems.

By the end of the decade, with rising levels of biker violence, cultural leftists could no longer ignore the facts, particularly after danger manifested itself in their midst. In 1969, the Hell's Angels were hired to provide security for a free Rolling Stones concert near San Francisco at the Altamont Speedway, which drew an audience of over 300,000 (Canby). Violence erupted at the concert, and one spectator was stabbed to death by a Hell's Angel. The incident was captured on film and became part of the documentary film, *Gimme Shelter*, which shattered romanticized ideas about the Hell's Angels (Morton). Although the defendant was later

found not guilty, the incident emphasized the level of violence that could emerge from members of the group. Cultural and political leftists parted ways with the gang, but the rebellious stance and biker images associated with motorcycles survived.

The association between motorcycling, rebellion, and leftist cultural and political views was turned into a new, unified image in the film, *Easy Rider* (1969), which “shook up the whole Hollywood establishment” (Stidworthy 2). The movie depicted the leftist leaning, peaceful main characters as opposing the dying conservative values of the era and as victims of the old order’s enduring intolerance. *Easy Rider* successfully juxtaposed public fears of outlaw bikers with a 1960s youthful fascination with intellectual rebellion against the conservatism of the 1950s, as personified by freewheeling riders (Klinger). The film left an indelible mark on the consciousness of the baby boom generation, many of whom identified with the characters played by Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper. With this film, the unambiguous danger of the motorcycle gang member, as expressed by 1950s and 1960s films, was replaced with an uninhibited, peace-seeking, free-spirited rebellion that many members of the baby boom generation found attractive with nonviolent hippies moving freely through the American landscape.

The widespread popularity of the film suggests that its impact may have been greater than any other motorcycling film since *The Wild One*. Among young people, motorcycles became associated less with anti-social criminality than with peaceful, carefree, rebellious abandon—exactly the lifestyle desired by early post-World War II riding veterans—as *Easy Rider* “gave a more bohemian spin to the biker flick formula” (Osgerby 105). While the film did not follow the standard B biker film formula, it still portrayed motorcycle riders as a danger to the conservative values of mainstream America.

Commercial Efforts to Reshape the Image of Motorcyclists

Commercial efforts to challenge US motorcycling stereotypes began in earnest during the 1960s when certain manufacturers recognized that the market was limited by the outlaw biker image. Throughout much of the twentieth century, people in Asia and Europe had ridden scooters and motorcycles because they were practical and economical means of transportation. Relatively cheap fuel, a prosperous middle class, and

patterns of development helped to prevent scooters and motorcycles from posing a serious threat to the automobile culture of the United States.

One of the earliest major attempts to bring motorcycling to mainstream America was the "You meet the nicest people on a Honda" advertising campaign, which appeared in both motorcycling and non-motorcycle-related magazines. In the 1960s, Honda advertised and imported thousands of their small motorcycles. The company's advertising featured nonthreatening images of clean-living, law-abiding, respectable Americans using their bikes as a form of recreation. Initially, Honda attempted to avoid referring to the machines as motorcycles because the strategy was to tap a market of consumers who eschewed the outlaw image (Dregni). The new marketing strategy apparently worked. Unit sales shot up from 35,000 in the first year of the "nicest people" campaign to 90,000 by the end of the second year 1963 (Frank 43) as total sales in the United States rose from US\$500,000 in 1959 to US\$106 million in 1966 (Thompson 75).

By 1969, when Honda introduced its 750, a large displacement, reliable, and cost-efficient motorcycle, the company helped to further the demise of an already declining market in British motorcycles (such as Norton and Triumph) that had often been the machine of choice among many American riders. The introduction of the Honda 750 is viewed by many as a turning point in American motorcycling history (Brown; Drutt), as the 1970s witnessed a growth in the popularity and social acceptability of motorcycles. This transition in market trends was exemplified by the 1971 film, *On Any Sunday* (1971), which depicted motorcycle riders as respectable and responsible members of society. It was further reinforced by television shows such as *Happy Days* and *CHiPs* and the film *Mask* (1985), which portrayed members of a biker club as decent, compassionate people (Pierson *The Edge*).

By the time *Easy Rider* made it big in the film market, the classic biker films of the 1960s were reaching the end of the road. Some attribute the decline in the popularity of the films to the realization, after the Altamont concert incident, of the Hell's Angels' penchant for violence (Morton; Osgerby). *Easy Rider* typifies this transition from a no-holds barred imagery of the violent biker to the free-spirited rider more intent on self-actualization and indulgence than on bringing violence to small-town America. The more traditional biker films did not completely disappear in the early 1970s, but the genre was at the

end of a prosperous ride with the biker image reworked into an “icon of wholesome Americana” with films such as *C.C. and Company* (1970), starring the football star Joe Namath (Osgerby 107). Biker imagery later evolved into parody in films, such as *Every Which Way But Loose* (1978) and 1990s *Masters of Menace*.

The Decline and Resurgence of American Motorcycles: the Commodification of the Biker Image

In the postwar era, the most popular brands of motorcycles in the United States were British—such as Triumph—and American made—Harley Davidson and Indian. But in the post-World War II period, sales of American motorcycles began to flag as US manufacturers were unable to fully capitalize on this new and growing market. By the mid- to late-1950s, the major American brands were in serious decline, and the US motorcycle market was dominated by British companies. The last (American made) Indian motorcycle was built in 1953, and in 1955 fewer than 10,000 bikes were sold by Harley-Davidson (Brown). It was into this market that Japanese manufacturers were able to sell their small reliable machines. But, it seems, the clean appeal of the image projected by Japanese manufacturers could not bury the rebelliously sexy biker image that had been popularized in US culture.

From the early days of Harley-Davidson through both world wars, the company was proud of its positive image and the role it had played in the US military. During its earliest years, some of its ads pointed out that Harley-Davidsons were so quiet that “they would not scare horses or the unsuspecting pedestrian” (Dregni 85). In the 1940s and 1950s, the new and negative image that began with the 1947 Hollister rally and the popularity of *The Wild One* posed a threat to the good reputation of Harley-Davidson and the riders of its machines, despite the fact that Brando rode a Triumph in the film. The company did not want to be associated with outlaw bikers. According to one member of the cofounding Davidson family, “The one that hated this new image the most was Harley-Davidson President William H. Davidson” and he “fought tooth and nail for decades to retain Harley-Davidson’s clean cut image” (Davidson 240).

In 1969, the company began sponsoring a television show, *Then Came Bronson*, which featured a lone traveler on a continuing ride on

his Harley-Davidson that took him throughout the country. Motorcycling was portrayed as an exciting avenue to adventure, but without many of the negative connotations of *The Wild One*. The rider “was a chivalrous knight in a black leather jacket, a good-guy version of Marlon Brando’s rebel” (Davidson 241), presenting the public with an image that was tough, free, and humane.

Changes that were to develop in what would later become the Harley subculture, as well as shifts in mainstream perceptions of motorcycles and their riders, were preceded by a change in the ownership and direction of the company itself. In 1969, with sales of Harley-Davidson motorcycles continuing to slump, American Machine and Foundry (AMF) bought the company. This acquisition provided AMF with a venture into this aspect of the leisure market and was a source of badly need capital for Harley-Davidson (Teerlink and Ozley). During the AMF years, the company was known for producing poor quality motorcycles and suffered further financial setbacks.

In 1981 a group of Harley-Davidson executives purchased the company back from AMF, and by 1984, had begun selling a new engine design. In 1987, the company went public, offering shares on the New York Stock Exchange. Its newly found success was due, in part, to a better-designed machine, but was also attributable to a transformation in its marketing strategy, leading to the commodification of its motorcycles as icons of a lifestyle the company sold to riders and would-be owners of its machines. Anthropologist Ann Joans (14) notes, “In the mid-eighties, the biker world began to change.”

In the 1980s, Harley-Davidson abandoned its commitment to marketing a clean-cut image and embraced, repackaged, and amplified a synthesis of the outlaw biker image of *The Wild One* and carefree, rebellious youth as depicted by *Easy Rider*. Although successful in marketing its motorcycles to long-term Harley-Davidson enthusiasts, company executives seemed to recognize the market potential in selling its products to a segment of the population that seemed to be just as interested in portraying an image of rebellion as in motorcycling as a serious a form of recreation.

Partially as a result of Harley’s marketing strategy, “biker chic” styles became commodified as the mainstream public adopted items such as black leather vests, jackets, pants, boots, and hats as symbols of their hipness and their association with a population considered rebellious, free, and cool (Polhemus 96). By purchasing and wearing the

accouterments associated with motorcycling, people could present an image that suggested they owned and rode a motorcycle, without the financial commitment and physical risks that come with riding. In short, owning a Harley t-shirt or bumper sticker promoted entrée into a “consumer tribe” that was created by marketing media and government-amplified images of riders to a population base hungry for symbolic representations that they had not completely sold out.

The biker image sold by Harley-Davidson portrayed a lifestyle that most people could buy into, whether purchasing a Harley-Davidson motorcycle or merely buying a t-shirt or any of a large number of its products. As Jean Davidson (242), a descendant of the original owners, claimed, “Nowadays, the company makes tons of money from the bad boy-image.” Sales of Harley-Davidson merchandise increased to US\$232 million in 2002 from US\$115 million in 1998, accounting for close to six percent of annual revenue (Eldridge). Products with the company logo and advertisements in nonmotorcycle related magazines make it clear that one does not need to ride a motorcycle to belong to this consumer tribe (Joans).

Motorcycling in the New Millennium

In the twenty-first century, most people who own and ride motorcycles are members of mainstream American society. Still, outlaw biker gangs continue to exist and associated stereotypes still linger in the public psyche. Although they represent a small minority of riders, even referring to themselves as “one-percenters,” biker gangs continue to exist on the fringes of motorcycling culture. Periodic incidents of violent and unlawful behavior still occur, and reports make it into the popular press. An incident in Nevada in 2002 between rival motorcycle gangs, for example, left four dead when violence erupted at an event that drew as many as 100,000 riders, most of whom were law-abiding citizens (Booth). Isolated events such as these receive a good deal of press coverage and serve to reinforce the biker image, providing a small, but culturally significant, foundation to the image marketed by Harley-Davidson and others.

An image that was once viewed as threatening is now used as a marketing tool to attract affluent motorcyclists. For example, Hollister, California hosts an annual rally and “has deliberately embraced a cliché

whose provenance can be traced to Marlon Brando's performance" in *The Wild One* (Singer 57). The commercial appeal of this imagery has evolved from a threatening vision to one with marketing appeal for upscale consumers. Owning a motorcycle and the clothing associated with the outlaw image has become an "erstwhile emblem of the counterculture" and the latest in fashion accessories (Schoultz). Such consumption has allowed middle-class Americans to flirt with behaviors and faux lifestyles that were off limits to their parents and deemed too dangerous for most of them when they were younger. As one observer noted, "The motorcycle has come full circle in acceptance. The outlaw biker mystique that once shocked and terrified the masses has been subjugated into the mainstream, eaten up by society, and spit out as everyday fashion" (Dregni 142). Put another way, rather than pecuniary emulation moving in an upward direction, as Veblen suggested it did in the nineteenth century, a key to the success of the commodification of the motorcycling image has been its ability to entice Americans toward downward emulation. This emulation has not come without resentment by long-term, serious riders.

Reynolds argued that some long-term riders resent new riders, particularly as represented in the subculture surrounding Harley-Davidson motorcycles. Schouten and McAlexander observed that "an almost palpable tension" exists between the "bikers with outlaw sensibilities and the new, upscale bikers, whom they regard as poseurs" (58). That resentment is rooted, primarily, in perceptions that most new Harley owners do not "really ride," as well as a sense that the company has abandoned them, after their years of allegiance to the company and products that were, during the AMF years, highly unreliable.

Conclusions

The post-World War II motorcycle clubs were tame compared with some of the gangs that later organized. Still, media-generated images of the antics of some of these riders played into Cold War fears of threats to the hard-won peace and prosperity that mainstream Americans wished to enjoy. In the process, the media created public perceptions of motorcycle riders as dangerous thugs who threatened their American way of life.

The rebellious attitudes of members of the politically conservative Hell's Angels met with the cultural and political left for a brief period in the 1960s. An image of free-wheeling, pot-smoking, LSD-dropping, bike-riding, nonviolent hippies was born with the production of *Easy Rider*. It was this image, combined with some of the sartorial expressions of early biker culture that Harley-Davidson appropriated to market its machines and lifestyle products in the latter part of the twentieth century. We believe the company's success was due in part to the fact that an aging baby-boom generation, who had grown up in the 1960s among stylized images of outlaw bikers, easy riding hippies, and countercultural influences, was looking for a symbolic means of expressing their own latent rebellion.

Theoretically, our work expands upon that of Thorstein Veblen by showing a transition to downward pecuniary emulation that appears to be a result of the shift from a production-based economy to one based upon consumption. It appears that many motorcycle owners in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries are those seeking entrée into a consumer tribe created and marketed by Harley-Davidson. In that light, we have drawn upon the work of Horkheimer and Adorno to make the argument that this downward pecuniary emulation is the result of a commodified image that once existed in grassroots culture, but has since been appropriated, stylized, polished, amplified, and sold back to consumers looking for greater meaning in their lives. Our work expands upon their work by showing how the government unwittingly played a role in the amplification of the biker image, even as it was trying to control and sanction outlaw riders. Hence, as the government sought to portray bikers in a negative light, its report further stimulated the idealized biker "bad boy." The role of government involvement and Sonny Barger's grassroots member involvement in the commodification of culture should be the focus of further research. Finally, our work points to the interplay of numerous grassroots subcultures—outlaw bikers, intellectual leftists, and hippies—in the creation of the easy riding image of motorcyclists, which was ultimately appropriated and repackaged by Harley-Davidson and others capitalizing on the stylized biker.

Two ethnographers of the Harley-Davidson subculture noted that riding a Harley "can be regarded as performing for an audience" in which "riders seek, monitor, and respond to audience responses in this performance mode" (Schouten and McAlexander 46). This performance

is styled upon an image that once had its origins in a grassroots biker subculture that was amplified and distorted by the media and later appropriated, polished, and sold back to the public as a means of achieving identity and entrée to a community created entirely by manufacturers and marketers, or a “consumer tribe” (Maffesoli). Interestingly, none of the other perceived threats to the peace and prosperity of the Cold War era, such as juvenile delinquents and hot rodders, has been subject to this level of commodification and adoption by the larger culture.

Although many riders resist the commodified image of the outlaw biker, it appears that this image has had a major effect on the recreational riding subculture. Certainly, it has had a major impact on motorcycle sales, as well as the style of clothing worn by many riders. This image has also been used to market the myriad products consumers buy to communicate to others their membership in this consumer tribe, whether they own a motorcycle or not.

Notes

An earlier version of this project was presented to the Annual Meetings of the Society for the Interdisciplinary Study of Social Imagery. This research was partially funded by an Intramural Research Incentive Grant and a Research on Women Grant, both from the Office of the Vice President for Research at the University of Louisville.

1. Outlaw biker gangs were originally labeled as such because they were not affiliated with the American Motorcyclist Association. Outlaw bikers are sometimes referred to as “one-percenters.” The term originated with a comment from an official of the American Motorcyclist Association that the bad element in motorcycling represented only one-percent of riders.
2. Hopper and Moore (1990), Quinn (2001), and Wolf (1991) provide good academic analyses of biker gang life in the United States and Canada.

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