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Counter...what? Metal Music and Its Culture in the 21st Century

Introduction

The term “counterculture” is one of the key concepts that emerged from the social and cultural upheavals of the 1960s. At the time, it was positioned as a frame encompassing an era of hippies, psychedelia, rock music, the sexual revolution, protesting the war in Vietnam, and a vision of peace and love. Later generations have largely encountered the counterculture movement as it has been evoked in film, literature, and other media that draw on iconic countercultural slogans, ideas, characters, practices, and values. This vision of the counterculture is characterized by a sentimental sense of nostalgia. However, despite these idyllic depictions of the counterculture, the movement was rooted in change-making efforts and sometimes violently suppressed by authorities. This overtly subversive aspect of the counterculture frequently escapes idealized remembrances of the period. In this article, I explore a central question: Given metal music’s rootedness in subversion, what relevance does the concept of counterculture have for researching metal culture? While some have addressed this question to an extent, the application of countercultural analysis to metal music and culture has been largely overlooked. This article, based on my research on inside metal culture, uses an approach that frames metal through the lens of counterculture.

Heavy Metal World

Heavy metal musicians on stages across the world are rebels who symbolize revolution, in nearly every sense of the word. The music is accompanied by elements of decadence and discord; leather, latex, and provocation arouse discontent among teenagers’ parents who find their children seemingly worshiping idols emerging from a rebellious and dark world. Heavy metal rejects dominant trends, with its subversive sound and image manifest in stage performances, album covers, and music videos.

Heavy metal: pimply, prole, putrid, unchic, unsophisticated, anti-intellectual (but impossibly pretentious), dismal, abysmal, terrible, horrible, and stupid music, barely music at

all; death music, dead music, the beaten boogie, the dance of defeat and decay; the huh? sound, the duh sound, ...music made by slack-jawed, alpaca-haired, bulbous-inseamed imbeciles in jackboots and leather and chrome for slack-jawed, alpaca-haired, downy-mustachioed imbeciles in cheap, too-large T-shirts with pictures of comic-book Armageddon ironed on the front (Duncan 1984: 36–37).

Deena Weinstein begins her book *Heavy Metal: A Cultural Sociology* (1991) with this very suggestive description by Robert Duncan in the early 1980s. Though research on metal music was significantly progressed in the years since its publication, Weinstein's work is recognized as one of the most important books in metal studies. The author analyzed metal culture by considering it as a counterculture situated as the evolution of music and youth culture of the 1960s, particularly in translating certain attitudes, values, and practices characteristic of the hippie counterculture. Still in favor were denim pants and long hair as well as ideological issues, such as distrust of social and political authorities. Artist authenticity was one of the most important qualities of the metal scene. Though, of course, there were many values of the 1960s counterculture movement that were left behind by metal culture, including notions related to love, rainbows, and soft fabrics. These were instead replaced by their opposites: evil, black, and leather. The idea of community with the connotation of religiosity faded. In its place, the metal scene emerged as a distinct social group, latching on to new elements of identity whose aesthetics differed significantly from what was seen in mainstream fashion, music, interests, or lifestyles.

In 2011, Titus Hjelm, Keith Kahn-Harris, and Mark LeVine wrote the article "Heavy Metal as Controversy and Counterculture" which was later published in an edited volume book by the same title (Hjelm, Kahn-Harris, LeVine 2013: 1–14). Their argument in this article provides closely parallels the theoretical basis for the current study, although it is open to polemics. Hjelm, Kahn-Harris, and LeVine put forward the notion that "controversy" is an integral aspect of creating metal "countercultures". This means that the transgressive aspects of metal make it antagonistic in various social contexts and the metal scene is in turn shaped by these controversies. Hjelm, Kahn-Harris, and LeVine's definition of controversy is "the activities of individuals or groups making public claims about conditions that are perceived as a threat to certain cherished values and/or material and status interests" (Hjelm, Kahn-Harris, LeVine 2013: 2). They also point out that controversy is material (caused by people, not ideas), public (present in the public discourse), discursive-symbolic (evidenced by the symbolic way of articulating specific statements made in the process of shaping and raising social awareness), and subjective (there may be a lack of evidence of an event that the public considers to be worrying, inappropriate, undesirable, or inappropriate) (Hjelm, Kahn-Harris, LeVine 2013: 2–3).

There have been many controversies throughout the history of metal that fit this definition, from the origins of Black Sabbath to the musicians' reactions against the activities of Parents Music Resource Center to the burnings of Norwegian churches. These events strained boundaries and caused extreme social reactions, especially moral panic. They are also acts of resistance, elements of contestation that situate metal as a counterculture. However, at this point, I do not want to repeat the same

stories about the subversive nature of metal. Among the countercultural elements of metal, Kahn-Harris and Hjelm also include areas of interest that are present in metal culture: its antagonistic aspect, relentless exploration of the dark side of human nature, mysticism, and subjects such as Satan, death, and Hell that conservative groups often find provocative. Kahn-Harris and Hjelm suggest that regardless of the motives given by the participants of the metal scene, the music and culture will always be positioned as a counterculture by virtue of their very existence. In these terms, acts such as the attacks on Christianity (for example, public desecration of the Bible, trampling on the portrait of the Virgin Mary, and turning crosses upside down) are transformative and symbolic acts that irrevocably link metal countercultural sentiments. LeVine, who researches the presence of metal music in Islamic countries, gives numerous examples of the countercultural nature of the genre that include playing metal music despite its censorship, political repression, and social stigmatization. Public institutions and religious organizations in the Middle East and North Africa see extreme metal music as associated with the penetration of foreign cultures, especially Western civilization. Finding metal music a danger to society, the authorities of Islamic countries are convinced of the presence of Satanism in Western music and culture, which is perceived as harmful to Islam (Hjelm, Kahn-Harris, LeVine 2013: 1–14). LeVine's work is relevant for the study of metal music in Poland in that it is the context that underlines and testifies to counterculture as a movement of radical opposition to a specific order. This means that metal music and culture, through their innate transgressiveness, locate them as antagonistic in many social contexts. Controversy shapes the metal scene and allows it to be understood as a counterculture.

Researching the Metal Music Scene in Poland

Between January 2019 and October 2020, I conducted research that included 26 structured interviews with fans of metal music who also declared participation in metal culture in Poland. The interviews included questions about the role of metal music in participants' lives, their worldviews, motivations, values, and activities as members of the metal music scene. My research questions were meant to illuminate what makes metal music a counterculture and in what aspects the interviewees see metal music as transgressive (if at all). All the interviews took place in Poland and included people aged 18–51, half of who were women and the other half men, selected from different social groups and a range of large and small cities.

When I raised the issue of the counterculture of metal music, some interviewees were unfamiliar with the term “counterculture”, which is perhaps an indication of the term's obscurity in metal discourse in Poland. On the other hand, interviewees often discussed issues of the confrontational aspects of metal using words like “rebellion,” or less often “resistance”, though these terms were used without much reflection, and their placement in context often seemed random. The most fruitful way to generate discussion about counterculture was by talking about the topic of controversy in metal music which usually led interviewees to discuss issues surrounding counterculture. A lot of discussions encompass critiques of and attacks

on Christianity, the dominant religion in Poland that has played a significant role in shaping Polish history and culture. However, my particular attention was focused on the controversies that arise within metal culture, namely what outrages participants in metal culture. Talking through these issues allowed me to think about the evolution of the concept of the counterculture as it relates to present social situations.

Do Not Fake It

While discussing controversies in metal music, 24 out of 26 respondents referred to the commercial success of the Polish metal band Behemoth, particularly how the band's leader Nergal has cultivated his image on social media. In the early stages of his musical career (in the 1990s), Nergal was part of the extreme metal scene. In the mid-2000s, he became a celebrity (respondents mentioned his relationship with Polish pop singer Doda, participation in a televised talent show, and presence in tabloids) and a hero of capitalism. Similar situations are common in metal music: bands that were once considered "underground" later become media superstars and play for the masses at major music festivals. These groups' commercial success means that they become *mainstream*, and, in the eyes of some fans, they shed some element of controversy. According to my interviewees, controversy disappears with increasing success. Moreover, my interviewees also suggested there is a concomitant loss of authenticity as artists' celebrity increases. In this way, for many fans, controversy is linked with authenticity. As an artist's controversy (and therefore authenticity) diminishes, some fans are not able to maintain interest. They also draw attention to the way famous metal artists use signs, styles, and gestures associated with the metal scene, suggesting that such usage constitutes a kind of commercialization of metal.

I categorize 15 of my interviewees as "metal defenders", fans who defended metal music's values, authenticity, and honesty. In this group were people who accused Nergal of caring more about money and public acclaim than the art of metal. These metal defenders often referred to ideological issues and the truth that metal music should provide. They saw metal music as the voice of their community; therefore, they demand that the music and the musicians be authentic. In doing so, they criticize the commodification of the metal style, which has been dispersed to a wide, perhaps new, audience. The metal defenders also lamented that the previously internal and independent ideas and values of metal should remain unpolluted rather than be commodified within the public sphere. Their dissatisfaction reflects what Dick Hebdige called "defusion of the subcultural style" (Hebdige 1979: 93) in which the subversive potential of a subculture's signifiers loses its meaning through the processes of commercialization. James Clarke and Thomas Jefferson echo Hebdige as they suggest that "the element of commercial reaction which attempts to universalize, at a purely stylistic and consumption level, the innovations made by distinctive youth cultures, while simultaneously defusing the oppositional potential of the exclusive lifestyles" (quoted in Muggleton 2000: 132). The tension caused by commercialization of metal is also evident in relations between fans of so-called "old" Behemoth and "new" Behemoth (the demarcation between the two incarnations is

alternately claimed to be either the album *Zos Kia Cultus* or *Evangelion*). Fans of the early recordings of Behemoth accuse others of a lack of appropriate musical sensitivity. In their perception, the music of an artist who has achieved commercial success is less valuable based solely on the artist's status. My respondents expressed this view as "selling oneself", "being ruled by money", or "choosing the easiest way".

A similar example of selling out and losing authenticity is the successful Polish black metal band Batushka. In this case, the conflict between fans is related to the split within the band itself: one of the band's founders wanted Batushka to continue being an underground project, while the other wanted to follow a path leading to acclaim and popularity. In the opinion of metal defenders, the first remained authentic and the second sold out. However, those interlocutors who stood up for authentic metal, when asked to name concerts they had recently attended, listed mostly groups like Kiss, Slayer, Anthrax, Europe, Morbid Angel, and Helloween – bands that rose to worldwide stardom and commercial success.

Own Way

For those I interviewed, it is clear that they love participating in metal culture. Moreover, they feel safe in their community with those who espouse similar views, interests, and goals. There is a common pattern in all the respondents' narratives: even though not everyone considers themselves particularly drawn to active resistance to authority, interviewees still deny mainstream affiliations, which (in their words) tend toward trendiness, artificiality, insincerity, lack of self-expression, boredom, repetitiveness, and superficiality. Metal music and culture stand in stark opposition to these characteristics, and choosing to eschew the mainstream for the metal scene is indeed a conscious choice. A scholar of gothic subculture, Paul Hodkinson found that subcultures represent a postmodern aesthetic play rather than a representation of resistance to any kind of oppression (Hodkinson 2002). Metalheads are often motivated to participate in metal culture through desires to express their individuality and difference from the mainstream, though not necessarily by some fundamental sense of rebellion. They are aware that when they interact with others, they distinguish for themselves what is important, thus proving their authenticity. The ethos of a favorite band's music is seen as part of an individual's identity. David Muggleton suggests that subcultures express individualism rather than resistance, this extended from his theoretical position that postmodern consumer culture and subcultures are an extension of romanticism (Muggleton 2000: 50). However, after many hours of conversations with metal music fans, I find Muggleton's assertion incomplete. After all, manifestations of individualism and resistance are not mutually exclusive. Yet, consumer culture is related to counterculture through romantic idealism, which evokes the need to search for oneself, one's ideals, distinguishes the aesthetics of freedom, and celebrates authenticity, individuality, and resistance to social restrictions. Participants in metal culture are aware that there are many available choices regarding forms of entertainment. Yet, they seem to be most concerned about those choices that fulfill their specific needs.

It is hard not to notice that the majority confirm the defiant nature of metal culture. However, from the sociological point of view, participants in metal culture frequently imagine the structure of the counterculture in rather different ways. The aversion to the mainstream and to individuality, or “differentiated identity” (to quote David Muggleton), emerge in the foreground in most interviews. In this way, metalheads form a rather closed, hermetic group focused on their own social needs rather than a specific ideology apart from claims to a vague sense of “nonconformity” and a greater or lesser denial of religion. They emphasize the differences between their group and culture and the majority mainly by marking their individuality against a background of the undefined masses characterized by otherness, ordinariness, and conformism. The features of the mainstream and the masses are mentioned subjectively, depending on what the respondent emphasizes in their understanding of being part of the counterculture.¹

The One to Admire

As previously discussed, some metal fans admire Behemoth (and other bands that have achieved commercial success). While these fans are certainly aware of the controversy surrounding the band “selling out”, they disagree with accusations, which they see as emerging as a sign of jealousy. More importantly, supporters of Behemoth characterize the band’s success as an artistic achievement since the group’s music is now positioned to reach a wider, international audience. As I have established, one of the key tenets of metal culture is nonconformity. Despite disparaging accusations being lobbed at Behemoth, or perhaps because of it, fans of the band situate their support of the group as an act of nonconformity that runs contrary to the attitudes of a large swath of the metal scene.

I find nonconformity a particularly interesting issue. Several respondents spoke negatively about Nergal’s appearance, lifestyle, and social media activity (mostly in terms of sharing videos and photos from his routine yoga sessions or beauty treatments), such comments strengthening respondents’ conviction about Behemoth’s loss of authenticity, a loss perceived at least in part in terms of gender. Weinstein’s remarks regarding the relationship between metal and gender identity are illuminating on this point.

The metal audience is more than just male; it is masculinist. That is, the heavy metal subculture, as a community with shared values, norms, and behaviors, highly esteems masculinity. Whereas other youth cultures and audiences... countenanced play with gender, heavy metal fans are deadly earnest about the value of male identity. Masculinity is understood in the metal subculture to be the binary opposite of femininity... The metal subculture holds that gender differences are rooted in the order of things: it is perilous even to question, let alone play with or breach, the boundaries (Weinstein 1991: 104).

These words were written more than thirty years ago. While some ideas about the intersections of metal and gender are no longer relevant, the masculinity of metal

¹ This is not the first time that the notion of “the masses” has been a theoretical concept (for example see Jean Baudrillard’s *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities*).

that Weinstein describes remains one of the hallmarks of metal culture. Nergal's yoga practice and beauty treatments came up often in the interviews I conducted, generally expressing a negative view of the way Nergal follows trends in fashion and beauty. In perception of many metal fans, Nergal goes beyond the patterns of masculinity and countercultural nonconformity outlined in the unwritten rules of metal culture generations ago. For some, Nergal's penchant for trendiness marks him as a poseur, a pretender who does not truly share the metal worldview.

It is important to note that hostility toward conformism is rarely raised in the metal literature. Extreme metal has always been at some distance from mainstream music, likely because general audiences find the music's sound and subject matter difficult to comprehend. Moreover, the airtight metal music fan community tends to separate everyday lifestyle issues from the music and its culture. Hence, it is rare to find lifestyle statements in the foundations of extreme metal music. Many studies of metal have described the scene's rejection of prohibitions prescribed by organized religion, Christianity in particular. In such contexts, metal culture advocates for individual freedom of behavior and self-expression. As such, the criticism of Nergal's lifestyle seems antithetical to such values. However, such critique simultaneously upholds metal culture's longstanding disapproval of "selling out". In the case of Nergal, the frontman of one of the most iconic Polish metal bands, there are even higher stakes involved since his detractors see him as ready to make compromises that could shake the very framework of black metal music. Such attitudes reflect the subversiveness of the hippie tradition, one characterized by ardent nonconformism and mistrust of mainstream regimes.

Although I do not intend to focus on the issue of resistance to religion. However, a thread appeared in my research that requires some attention because it helps locate the issue of controversy within the metal culture. Many times, respondents mentioned that honesty and authenticity are of utmost importance in metal music and culture. For example, several respondents suggested that Nergal's profaning of religious symbols is insincere, but rather is done simply to attract attention. Profanation becomes a tool, a stylistic means, not an expression of one's authentic perspective. Three respondents agreed that if they did not follow Nergal's antics, they would have no contact with any religious practice. This situation is rather paradoxical: it is Nergal's extreme critique of religion that triggers a discourse on religion among metal fans that would otherwise have no occasion to encounter religion. Through the artist's attempt to make his actions radical, he finds a way to challenge society. One can ask here if this challenge is indeed a motivating force? Does the desire for social change still define the concept of counterculture? For that matter, what does it mean to belong to the counterculture? To answer these questions, I interpret metal culture as counterculture.

To Be or Not To Be?

For several years now, the study of countercultures has been – to put it bluntly – trendy. Progressive and radical changes in social and cultural structures have had an important impact in this regard as they replace styles and practices

that were formerly considered features of working-class subcultures. Individuals' choices about cultural participation reflect the postmodern emphasis on individuality, consumption, and cultural fluidity. With this in mind, if the concept of counterculture is to remain relevant, it must be redefined, detached from its historical context, and reassembled according to the patterns and inspirations appropriate for the present. In other words, the concept of counterculture can only be useful as both a force for making change and a discursive frame if it's germane to critiques of the current dominant culture. Therefore, in my opinion, the ideas of the Birmingham and Chicago schools should be combined with contemporary approaches such as social constructivism. Moreover, in theoretical terms, culture is not the determining structure it once was. Indeed, we must recognize that individuals and groups are those who create culture. To be able to speak about countercultures, we need to view subcultures as deliberate formations created by people, not rooted in class, ethnicity, or age. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we much change the way we view participation in subcultures. In the past, academics suggested that marginalization was a key factor in individual orientations toward subcultures. However, I suggest that participation in subcultures centers around non-normativity. Such a frame allows for emphasis on inclusivity rather than exclusivity, and positivity rather than negativity.

Hjelm, Kahn-Harris, and LeVine see the possibility of using the term *counterculture* through transgression, antagonism, shock, and provocation (Hjelm, Kahn-Harris, LeVine 2013: 1–14). They argue that there are situations in which “metal shocks just by its presence”. In my opinion, transgression and provocation are not enough to engender metal culture as counterculture. However, as my research suggests, there are other elements that enrich the metal discourse and direct it toward becoming countercultural. To be more specific: participants of metal culture perceive themselves as more critically aware of what is happening in the world around them than the average person, and they tend to choose a lifestyle that closely reflects their beliefs. They trust that they are acting in accord with this critical awareness in their thoughts, words, and deeds and want to cut themselves off from anything that might be involuntary or unconscious commitment to mainstream culture by refusing to uncritically adhere to social mores. Their belonging to metal counterculture provides the guidelines necessary for individuals to strive for freedom from the various forms of perceived oppression in daily life. Furthermore, opposition and resistance are key variables in metal culture and its articulation as a counterculture; this helps explain why members of metal culture break with the mainstream. I also think that in redefining counterculture, it is worth considering the categories of behavior that go beyond the mainstream of sensitivity, which is visible in metal culture.

Metal culture is not uniform in structure; individual expressions are common and, as highlighted by my analysis, disagreements within the culture often arise. However, this inconsistency is not a novelty here. A similar phenomenon was observed by Mirosław Pęczak in his study of Polish subcultures in the 1980ss. He notes that such an “inconsistency results from the fact that the dominant pattern was characterized by incoherence and variability reflecting changes in social consciousness, determined in turn by unstable economic and political conditions”

(Pęczak 2013: 134). This holds true today. The framework of the dominant culture is difficult to define but most relevant for the present study, mainstream culture is generally characterized by cultural traditions based on religiosity, consumerism, and trends dictated by the media. Any effort aimed at questioning the dominant culture is met with obstacles in the form of mixing styles, a sign of postmodernity. My respondents, however, manage to emphasize their distinctiveness from the mainstream and their belonging to the circle (as one of them said) of metalheads. In distinguishing themselves from the dominant culture, my respondents used terms like “the majority,” “others,” “they”, etc. Metal culture’s distinctiveness applies to both style and musical choices. Muggleton’s notion of “differentiated identity” (2000: 96) is relevant in this regard as it describes ways in which an individual clearly marks the difference that separates them from the collective, which in each case constitutes a reference group.

Continued research on metal culture as counterculture has great potential as it helps describe a variety of issues. First, it clarifies ways in which metal opposes prevailing standards. Second, such a perspective productively highlights similar understandings of the collective lifestyle and a collective understanding of resistance and social change. Third, approaching metal from the perspective of counterculture helps us better understand the workings of experimentation in individual expression, musical expression, and other areas. By viewing metal through a countercultural lens, we are better able to determine why and how some activities are controversial and antagonistic to the mainstream, while others are not. In any case, metal as counterculture promotes a lifestyle that, through minor everyday actions, causes a bottom-up reaction to dominant social, lifestyle, and political practices.

By transforming the conventional connotations of what we mean by “counterculture”—by stripping away the ethos, high ideas, and communal values that once defined the concept in the 1960s—what remains is the profoundly fundamental notion of speaking against the dominant culture. Metal culture will find a home here without any problem, even while maintaining its resistance to new ideas. A little more work awaits the majority, which is also becoming more and more diverse, overburdened by a wealth of choices that tend toward fragmentation. For metal culture, however, the majority is still the majority, different and unfamiliar. If it remains so, which is very likely, this “pimpley, prole, putrid, unchic, unsophisticated, anti-intellectual (but impossibly pretentious), dismal, abysmal, terrible, horrible, and stupid music, barely music at all” will successfully defend itself as a counterculture, even against the backdrop of the comic book Armageddon.

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Abstract

The author of this article seeks to verify the thesis that proclaims that metal culture can be classified as counterculture. The author supported her arguments with research she conducted in Poland in 2018–2020. The main research questions concerned controversy in metal music and manifestations of social discord, as well as other issues that might constitute the recognition of metal culture as a counterculture. Based on the research, a redefinition of the term was proposed to make it more useful today.

Kontr...co? Muzyka metalowa i jej kultura w XXI wieku

Streszczenie

Autorka artykułu stara się zweryfikować tezę głoszącą, że kulturę metalową można zaliczyć do kontrkultury. Autorka poparła swoje argumenty badaniami, które prowadziła w Polsce w latach 2018–2020. Główne pytania badawcze dotyczyły kontrowersji w muzyce metalowej i przejawów niezgody społecznej, a także innych zagadnień, które klasyfikują kulturę metalową w obrębie kontrkultury. Opierając się na przeprowadzonych badaniach zaproponowano redefinicję tego pojęcia tak, aby było ono bardziej użyteczne w dzisiejszych czasach.

Keywords: heavy metal, metal culture, counterculture, commercial culture, commodification, subculture

Słowa kluczowe: heavy metal, kultura metalowa, kontrkultura, kultura komercyjna, komodyfikacja, subkultura

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