T.C.
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SOSYAL BİLİMLER ENSTİTÜSÜ

READING AGAINST THE GRAIN: FORMATION OF CULTS AND COUNTERCULTURE MOVEMENTS IN AMERICAN CULTURE AND ITS REPRESENTATIONS IN AMERICAN NARRATIVES

Doktora Tezi

Gökçen UZUNKÖPRÜ

Danışman(lar)

Doç. Dr. Esra Öztarhan

İZMİR

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AMERİKAN KÜLTÜRÜ VE EDEBİYATI ANABİLİM DALI
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ETİK KURALLARA UYGUNLUK BEYANNAMESİ

Bu tezin bana ait, özgün bir çalışma olduğunu; çalışmamın hazırlık, veri toplama, analiz ve bilgilerin sunumu olmak üzere tüm aşamalarında bilimsel etik ve kurallara uygun davrandığımı; bu çalışma kapsamında elde edilen tüm veri ve bilgiler için kaynak gösterdiğimi ve bu kaynaklara kaynakçada yer verdiğimi; bu çalışmanın Ege Üniversitesi tarafından kullanılan 'bilimsel intihal tespit programı' ile tarandığını ve hiçbir şekilde 'intihal içermediğini' beyan ederim.

Herhangi bir zamanda, çalışmamla ilgili yaptığım bu beyana aykırı bir durumun saptanması durumunda, ortaya çıkacak tüm ahlaki ve hukuki sonuçlara razı olduğumu bildiririm.

Öğrencinin Adı Soyadı

PREFACE

This dissertation emerged from a central question concerning the relationship between alternative belief systems and the broader ideological structures of American society: Why do cults, New Religious Movements, and countercultural movements continue to occupy such a persistent and controversial place within American culture? The initial motivation behind this study arose not only from academic curiosity but also from an increasing awareness that these formations repeatedly surface during periods of cultural anxiety, social transformation, and ideological crisis throughout American history. The more closely these movements were examined, the clearer it became that they should not be understood merely as marginal or deviant phenomena, but rather as structures deeply connected to the cultural, political, and ideological development of the United States.

Throughout the research process, it became evident that the subject required an interdisciplinary approach that brought together cultural studies, historical analysis, the sociology of religion, and critical approaches to ideology. Neither a purely historical narrative nor an exclusively theoretical framework could adequately account for the complexity of sects, cults, New Religious Movements, and countercultural formations in America. Their emergence and persistence are inextricably linked to broader processes, including religious pluralism, modernization, capitalism, migration, media transformation, and various forms of cultural resistance. Accordingly, this dissertation seeks to combine historical continuity with theoretical analysis in order to examine how these formations simultaneously challenge, negotiate, and reproduce dominant ideological structures.

The research process unfolded in three broad phases. The first phase focused on the historical foundations of religious pluralism and dissent in America, tracing the emergence of sectarian formations from the colonial era to the Second Great Awakening and examining the conditions that enabled the proliferation of alternative religious movements. The second phase concentrated on the theoretical frameworks necessary for understanding the ideological dimensions of these structures, engaging particularly with the works of Antonio Gramsci, Louis Althusser, Jean-François Lyotard, and theorists of subculture and counterculture. The final phase brought together these historical and theoretical perspectives to analyze the representation of cults and countercultural movements within American narratives, especially in film, literature, and news media.

The analytical core of the dissertation lies in its attempt to examine sects and countercultural movements not only as historical phenomena but also as discursive constructions shaped through representation. The case studies and textual analyses included throughout the dissertation were selected because each reflects a distinct ideological tension within American society. Upon closer examination, these narratives revealed far more complexity and contradiction than their surface depictions initially suggested. Some portrayals framed these formations as irrational and dangerous threats to social order, while others represented them as expressions of freedom, resistance, or alternative modes of existence.

This dissertation makes no claim to comprehensiveness. The history of American religious dissent and countercultural resistance is vast, and the present study necessarily privileges certain theoretical perspectives, historical periods, and cultural representations over others. Such choices are defended throughout the dissertation, yet they remain interpretive decisions that future scholarship may reconsider from different angles. What this dissertation does

propose is that cults, New Religious Movements, and countercultural formations offer an essential framework for understanding the ideological contradictions and cultural anxieties of modern American society.

It is the author's hope that this study contributes, even modestly, to a more critical understanding of how alternative belief systems and countercultural movements function within American culture, and how their representations continue to shape contemporary discussions of freedom, identity, authority, and resistance.

İzmir, 2026
Gökçen UZUNKÖPRÜ

ÖZET

Bu tez, Amerikan kültüründe mezhep, Yeni Dini Hareketler (New Religious Movements) ve karşıt kültür hareketlerinin ortaya çıkışını, dönüşümünü ve Amerikan anlatılarındaki temsillerini disiplinlerarası bir perspektifle incelemektedir. Çalışmanın temel argümanı, bu oluşumların yalnızca marjinal ya da sapkın yapılar olarak değerlendirilmemesi gerektiği; aksine modern Amerikan toplumunun ideolojik çatışmalarını, hegemonik krizlerini ve kültürel dönüşümlerini görünür kılan önemli toplumsal oluşumlar olduğudur. Bu bağlamda tez, mezhep ve karşıt kültür hareketlerini Amerikan kültürünün merkezî ideolojik dinamikleriyle ilişkili yapılar olarak ele almaktadır.

Çalışmanın kuramsal çerçevesi eleştirel kuram ve kültürel çalışmalar geleneğine dayanmaktadır. Antonio Gramsci'nin hegemonya teorisi, Louis Althusser'in ideolojik devlet aygıtları yaklaşımı, Jean-François Lyotard'ın büyük anlatı eleştirisi ile alt kültür ve karşıt kültür kuramları çalışmanın temel teorik araçlarını oluşturmaktadır. Bu teorik çerçeve sayesinde mezhepler, kültler, Yeni Dini Hareketler ve karşıt kültür hareketleri yalnızca inanç sistemleri olarak değil; aynı zamanda egemen ideolojiyle çatışan, alternatif anlam sistemleri üreten ve kimi zaman sistem tarafından yeniden soğurulan ideolojik yapılar olarak değerlendirilmektedir.

Tez üç ana bölümden oluşmaktadır. İlk bölümde mezhep, kült, grup ve hareket kavramları açıklanmakta; Yeni Dini Hareketler ve karşıt kültür oluşumları kuramsal bir bağlam içerisinde değerlendirilmektedir. İkinci bölüm, Amerikan tarihindeki dinsel çoğulculuğun gelişimini inceleyerek kolonyal dönemden modernleşme sürecine kadar uzanan tarihsel arka planı analiz etmektedir. Bu bölümde göç hareketleri, dini özgürlük anlayışı, İkinci Büyük Uyanış ve modernleşme süreçlerinin mezhep ve Yeni Dini Hareketler ortaya çıkışındaki rolü tartışılmaktadır. Üçüncü bölüm ise Yeni Dini Hareketler ve karşıt kültür hareketlerinin ideolojik işleyişini, egemen ideolojiye karşı alternatif bir toplumsal ve kültürel güç oluşturma potansiyellerini, metalaştırılma süreçlerini ve Amerikan anlatılarındaki temsillerini incelemektedir. Film, haber medyası ve edebiyat alanlarından seçilen örnekler üzerinden gerçekleştirilen çözümlemeler, bu yapıların Amerikan kültüründe nasıl temsil edildiğini ve hangi ideolojik çerçeveler içinde anlamlandırıldığını ortaya koymaktadır.

Tezin temel bulguları, Yeni Dini Hareketler ve karşıt kültür hareketlerinin Amerikan toplumunda yalnızca "uç" yapılar olmadığını; aksine modern Amerikan kültürünün ideolojik, tarihsel ve kültürel dönüşümlerini anlamada merkezi bir rol oynadığını göstermektedir. Çalışma ayrıca bu oluşumların Amerikan anlatılarında çoğu zaman korku, tehdit, özgürlük, bireysellik ve direniş kavramları etrafında yeniden üretildiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Böylece tez, Amerikan kültüründe alternatif inanç sistemleri ve karşıt kültür oluşumlarının toplumsal bilinçteki yerini eleştirel bir perspektifle değerlendirmeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Amerikan kültürü, mezhep, kült, Yeni Dini Hareketler, karşıt kültür, hegemonya, ideoloji, temsil

ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the emergence, transformation, and representations of sects, cults, New Religious Movements (NRMs), and counterculture movements within American culture through an interdisciplinary perspective. The central argument of the study is that these formations should not merely be understood as marginal or deviant phenomena; rather, they function as significant cultural formations that reveal the ideological conflicts, hegemonic crises, and social transformations of modern American society. In this regard, the dissertation approaches sectarian and countercultural structures as formations deeply connected to the central ideological dynamics of American culture.

The theoretical framework of the dissertation is grounded in the traditions of critical theory and cultural studies. Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony, Louis Althusser's concept of ideological state apparatuses, Jean-François Lyotard's critique of metanarratives, and theories of subculture and counterculture constitute the primary analytical tools of the study. Through this framework, sects, cults, and counterculture movements are examined not only as systems of belief but also as ideological formations that challenge dominant ideologies, generate alternative structures of meaning, and are at times absorbed back into the capitalist system.

The dissertation consists of three main chapters. The first chapter establishes the conceptual and theoretical framework by defining sects, cults, groups, and movements, while also discussing New Religious Movements and countercultural formations within broader sociological and ideological contexts. The second chapter traces the historical background of religious pluralism in America from the colonial period to modernity, examining the role of migration, religious freedom, the Second Great Awakening, and modernization in the emergence of sects and cults. The third chapter forms the analytical core of the dissertation by investigating the ideological operations, counter-hegemonic potential, commodification processes, and cultural representations of cults and counterculture movements. Through analyses of film, news media, and literature, the dissertation demonstrates how these formations are represented within American narratives and interpreted through particular ideological frameworks.

The principal findings of the dissertation indicate that cults / NRMs and counterculture movements are not merely "fringe" structures within American society; rather, they occupy a central role in understanding the ideological, historical, and cultural transformations of modern American culture. The study further demonstrates that these formations are repeatedly reproduced in American narratives through discourses of fear, threat, freedom, individuality, and resistance. Ultimately, the dissertation seeks to provide a critical understanding of the place occupied by alternative belief systems and countercultural formations within the cultural consciousness of American society.

Keywords: American culture, sects, cults, New Religious Movements, counterculture, hegemony, ideology, representation

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People join cults because they're looking for love and acceptance. They want answers to the personal problems in their lives. When a person feels lonely and alone, when they feel unloved, or when they feel no one cares about them, they are susceptible to a manipulator who fills the void. These are all very human needs. Even religious groups capitalize on them. A person who feels "lost" needs a savior. That's how Christianity spreads, for instance. The song "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so" is a powerful marketing tool. It assures people that a loving savior cares about them and at the same time promotes the group's guiding text, the Bible, in a very short soundbite that comes attached to a singable tune.[1]

[1] Jim Willis, **American Cults: Cabals, Corruption, and Charismatic Leaders**. Visible Ink Press, 2023, p.3.

INTRODUCTION

Modern American culture has a multilayered ideological structure shaped by changes in politics and the economy, as well as by religious diversity, diverse belief systems, and forms of cultural protest. Sects, cults, New Religious Movements (NRMs), and countercultural formations arise as dynamic processes within this structure, simultaneously challenging the boundaries of social order while contributing to its reproduction.

This thesis, following the "reading against the grain" approach, argues that these formations within American culture should not be seen merely as marginal or deviant structures but as tangible expressions of the contradictions, ideological conflicts, and crises of meaning brought about by modernity. From this perspective, these structures can be analyzed beyond standard methods and explored within their complex interactions with the dominant order.

In this context, the study offers a thorough analysis that traces the emergence of sects in early American society, the rise of cults, and the development of counterculture movements in today's era, outlining a historical path that includes the ideological and cultural portrayals of these groups. This approach goes beyond simply establishing a historical timeline; it also explores the social conditions under which these groups formed, how they gained legitimacy, and the discursive strategies used to portray them. Especially in American society, the institutionalization of religious freedom, migration movements, modernization, and social unrest are seen as the main forces driving the rise of such alternative groups. Therefore, sects and cults are linked not only to personal beliefs but also to larger social and political changes.

Additionally, this perspective views these formations as processes that actively contribute to the construction of ideological frameworks rather than merely as historical occurrences. The theoretical framework is grounded in Louis Althusser's theory of ideological state apparatuses and Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony. Such a framework enables an examination of how sects, countercultural movements, and the hegemonic order interact, reproduce, and oppose one another. In this context, countercultural movements are understood not only as sites of resistance to dominant ideology but also as structures that may be gradually absorbed and reshaped by the system.

The analysis of these representations reveals not only how such structures are portrayed but also the ideological frameworks within which they gain meaning. Accordingly, the study aims to uncover the ideological mechanisms behind these representations by examining how cults and countercultural movements are positioned in American narratives—sometimes as threats, other times as expressions of freedom, and occasionally as alternative ways of life. The analysis is divided into three main sections, each providing a distinct yet connected

perspective. The first presents key conceptual definitions and theoretical frameworks; the second traces the historical development of sects and cults; the third explores their ideological construction and cultural portrayals. This structure ensures both theoretical clarity and analytical rigor. Ultimately, this thesis intends to demonstrate that sects and countercultural movements in American culture are not merely "fringe" phenomena but rather important formations for understanding the ideological and cultural dynamics of modern society.

American culture has developed on a foundation in which religious pluralism and ideological diversity have historically been institutionalized; this situation has enabled alternative belief systems and opposing cultural formations not only to emerge but also to exist in constant interaction with the social order. Sects, cults, and new religious movements should be considered not only as structures representing differences in beliefs but also as dynamic spaces where social boundaries are negotiated and reproduced.

This section establishes the conceptual and theoretical foundation for the analysis throughout the thesis. Initially, the words "sect," "cult," "movement," and "group," which are sometimes used indiscriminately in the literature but carry unique sociological and ideological connotations, will be clarified. Clarifying these concepts is crucial for establishing terminological precision and situating the structures under analysis within the appropriate framework.

At the very least, in the United States, these ideas are not confined to the ivory tower; the media, political rhetoric, and popular culture have given them powerful ideological connotations. The negative connotations of the word "cult" in common use immediately shape society's perceptions of such groups and necessitate a shift to more neutral terminology in academic discourse. Therefore, ideas will be both defined and analyzed within their historical and ideological contexts.

Sects are often seen as entities that diverge from established religious traditions and assert a "return to the essence" of these traditions, while cults tend to manifest as more autonomous and radical formations. Nonetheless, it is important to recognize that this difference is not always clear-cut and may fluctuate with historical circumstance which illustrates that religious categories are not fixed; rather, they are frameworks constantly reinterpreted within social and cultural settings.

Following this conceptual discussion, new religious movements will be examined within the framework of the social and cultural transformations brought about by modernity. Globalization, advances in communication technologies, and the rise of individualism are among the main factors accelerating the emergence of these movements. In this respect, new

religious movements should be regarded not only as alternatives to traditional structures but also as new responses to the modern individual's search for meaning.

Countercultural movements, on the other hand, point to a broader field of critique within this framework. These movements not only question religious norms but also produce an inquiry into social value systems and established ideological structures. Accordingly, when it intersects with sects and new religious movements, it creates a broader field of cultural resistance.

The second half of the section is devoted to theoretical methods, following the conceptual framework. The concepts of hegemony, ideology, counter-ideology, metanarrative, subculture, and counterculture will be used as analytical tools that not only define the formations under consideration but also enable the analysis of their ideological functions. This theoretical framework aims to evaluate the position of sects and countercultural movements within the social structure in greater depth.

In summary, this section establishes the theoretical framework and conceptual clarity essential to the historical and cultural analyses conducted in the subsequent sections of the study. This framework allows for understanding the formations discussed in the subsequent sections as historical phenomena and components of ideological production processes.

The emergence of sects, cults, and countercultural movements in American culture should be regarded not merely as a matter of individual belief preferences but as a product of specific historical conditions. Therefore, understanding these formations requires considering the transformation processes that extend from early American society to the modern era. This historical perspective plays a fundamental role in explaining how religious pluralism emerged, what social tensions fueled it, and how it became institutionalized.

In the early years of the United States, many different religions were present because people moved to the country to escape religious persecution in Europe. These groups not only stayed in the new place but also tried to build communities where they could practice their own beliefs freely. However, this diversity has not always been as peaceful as it is often portrayed; instead, it has led to a structure marked by conflict, exclusion, and competition. This shows how contradictory the early American religious sphere was, encompassing both freedom and tension.

Especially during the colonial period, the sects that emerged were shaped by criticisms of established religious authorities and positioned themselves by claiming to create a "purer" practice of faith. These movements emerged not only because of theological divergences but also as expressions of individual freedom of conscience and resistance to religious authority. In

this respect, sects have become the main actors in the pluralism and fragmentation that have characterized the American religious tradition since its early period.

One of the most significant turning points in this historical process is the legal institutionalization of religious freedom. Especially shaped by the Enlightenment thought, the principle of "separation of church and state" has created a new ground for the existence of different religious groups. However, this freedom has not only increased pluralism but has also led to the transformation of the religious sphere into a competitive structure. This competitive environment has accelerated the proliferation of sects and enabled the emergence of new religious movements.

The Second Great Awakening, occurring in the 19th century, exemplifies this transition prominently. The revivalist groups that arose during this time effectively made religious practice more accessible to the populace and focused on individual change. This strategy has facilitated both the rise in religious engagement and the democratization of religious authority. Nonetheless, these advancements have made the religious domain more competitive and fragmented. Processes such as industrialization, urbanization, and migration intensified social fragmentation and encouraged alternative searches for identity and meaning.

Countercultural movements have arisen not just in a religious setting but also within a wider framework of societal criticism. Particularly in the 20th century, these movements, centered on individual liberty, anti-authoritarianism, and alternative lifestyles, challenged the limits of the prevailing social order and gave rise to new forms of artistic expression. Nonetheless, the evolution of these movements within mainstream culture over time demonstrates that dissent can also be perpetuated within the system.

This historical process demonstrates that the American religious and cultural landscape is dynamic, characterized by ongoing change and reconstruction. This transformation, extending from sects to cults, from countercultural movements to new religious formations, marks an area where not only belief systems but also ideological structures and social relations are being reproduced.

Therefore, the analysis of the historical background is highly remarkable not only as a chronological narrative of the past but also as a basis for understanding the emergence and transformation of the formations discussed in this thesis. This perspective enables the theoretical and cultural analyses to be conducted in the later sections of the study to be grounded on a more solid foundation.

At the final stage of the introduction, the analytical focus of the study shifts to the ideological construction and cultural representations of cults, NRMs, and countercultural

movements. In this context, the thesis not only considers these formations as products of historical processes but also examines how these structures are interpreted within American cultural discourse and through which ideological frameworks they are represented. This approach enables understanding not only the conditions under which NRMs and countercultural movements emerged but also how they are perceived and reproduced in modern American society.

Within the framework of this analysis, the third section of the study primarily addresses the forms of protest these formations have developed against dominant social and religious systems. This discussion seeks to illustrate that cults, NRMs, and countercultural movements function not merely as alternative belief systems but also as frameworks that challenge and reconfigure the parameters of the prevailing social order. In this regard, protest is regarded not only as a manifestation of dissent but also as a mechanism for generating novel systems of meaning and social identities.

However, this chapter also demonstrates that these movements cannot be defined solely by way of opposition. Therefore, NRMs and countercultural movements are reexamined within the framework of Louis Althusser's theory of ideological state apparatuses. This perspective allows us to examine how these structures function as ideological systems that place individuals in specific subject positions through rituals and practices. Thus, these formations are considered not only as anti-system structures but also as structures that establish alternative ideological orders within themselves.

To deepen this discussion, the section analyzes counter-hegemonic struggles within the framework of Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony. In this context, NRMs and countercultural movements are viewed as formations that arise during crises of the dominant order and have the capacity to alter this order. The hegemonic system often shapes and constrains this potential, rather than allowing it to lead to a radical transformation, as will be discussed further.

The study centers on the commodification and commercialization processes of countercultural movements over time. The flexible and transforming framework of capitalist modernity may assimilate and replicate several cultural activities that originally arose as anti-systemic. This situation illustrates that counterculture transcends its role as mere resistance; it integrates into economic circulation and becomes a consumable entity. This transformation, particularly via symbols, aesthetic norms, and discourses, demonstrates that even resistance may be reduced to a commercial value. In addition to highlighting the conflict between

intellectual opposition and systemic reproduction, this process also reveals the significant limitations imposed on the radical potential of counterculture.

The last phase of the introduction shifts the research to cultural production by examining the depiction of NRMs and countercultural movements in American narratives. Narrative forms such as cinema, news media, and literature are considered not only as areas where these formations are reflected but also as spaces where they are interpreted and reconstructed. In this context, these structures are represented in some narratives as irrational and dangerous formations threatening social order, while in other cases, they are reframed as symbols of individual freedom, alternative lifestyles, and anti-system stances. These different representations should be regarded not only as aesthetic preferences but also as reflections of ideological positions.

Determining the ideological character of artistic output requires an examination of these representations, which is of paramount significance. Narratives not only mirror reality; they also select, organize, and reproduce it within certain frames of meaning. In this context, the ways in which sects and countercultural movements are represented actively shape social perception and contribute to the reproduction of certain power relations. Especially in media discourses, categories such as "dangerous cult" or "deviation," which are frequently encountered, create an ideological framework that positions these formations as structures to be marginalized and controlled.

In this context, the third chapter systematically examines the discursive strategies through which sects and countercultural movements are represented in American narratives. The analysis aims to reveal how these representations are constructed not only at the content level but also in terms of linguistic structure, narrative construction, and ideological framework. In this context, the fields of cinema, news media, and literature have been identified as the primary areas of analysis for the comparative examination of different forms of representation.

This perspective illuminates how these formations are positioned within social consciousness and the meanings attributed to them. It thereby facilitates an understanding of sects and countercultural movements not only as historical and ideological structures but also as systems of meaning continuously reproduced through cultural narratives. In conclusion, the analysis establishes a holistic connection between historical processes, theoretical frameworks, and cultural representations, addressing the place of these formations in modern American society from a multi-layered perspective.

This study aims to examine the formation of sects, cults, New Religious Movements, and countercultural movements in American culture and their representations in cultural

narratives from a multi-layered perspective. In this context, the thesis is structured around the following fundamental research questions: Under what historical and social conditions do sects, cults, New Religious Movements, and countercultural movements emerge? How do these formations relate to hegemonic ideology? In American narratives, through which discursive strategies are these structures represented? These questions form the core axis that guides the study's theoretical orientation and analytical framework. Accordingly, the selected narratives are not used merely as illustrative examples; they function as primary sources through which the dissertation develops and substantiates its theoretical claims.

In seeking answers to these questions, the thesis adopts an interdisciplinary methodological approach that brings together close reading, critical discourse analysis, cultural analysis, and ideology theory. More specifically, the dissertation examines how cults, New Religious Movements, and countercultural formations are textually and visually constructed in selected American narratives. The analysis does not treat films, news reports, or literary texts as neutral reflections of reality; rather, it approaches them as ideological sites where meanings of deviance, freedom, danger, authenticity, authority, and resistance are produced and contested. In this sense, the study focuses not only on what these narratives represent, but also on how they organize meaning, frame alternative belief systems, and shape social perception. In each primary source, the analysis considers three interrelated dimensions: the historical context in which the narrative emerges, the ideological contradiction it makes visible, and the representational strategies through which cults, New Religious Movements, or countercultural practices are framed. This method allows the dissertation to move beyond description and to foreground the critical function of representation. Through this approach, films, news media, and literary works are scrutinized in terms of their narrative structures, discursive choices, symbolic patterns, and ideological implications. The aim is to demonstrate that cults, New Religious Movements, and countercultural formations are not only historical or sociological phenomena, but also discursively produced constructs whose meanings are continually shaped, contested, and reproduced within American culture. In conclusion, this thesis aims to demonstrate that cults, NRMs, and countercultural movements are not merely "fringe" or marginal structures; rather, they play a central role in understanding the ideological, cultural, and historical dynamics of modern American society. In this regard, the study brings together historical analysis, a theoretical framework, and examinations of cultural representation, evaluating the place of these formations within modern cultural discourse from a multi-layered perspective.

1. THEORETICAL APPROACHES

Presently, there are over 2,000 distinct principal religious groups in the United States. These organizations, including churches, sects, cults, groups, and temples, aim to represent the religious beliefs and sentiments of their members and followers. Except for Native American religions, which Christians viewed as at best fading and soon to be supplanted by Christianity, there was no rivalry for the Christian churches in the early 19th century. Around the period of the American Revolution (1775–1783), a significant shift in the atmosphere started. Official church-state links ended, apart from a few New England states, and an increasing number of the many unofficial relationships ended with each passing decade.

> *From the beginning of the nineteenth century, the church has moved from a position of disestablishment in the midst of an indifferent public to the creation of what amounts to a powerful new religious establishment through its ownership of ever-increasing sums of real estate and stock and its steady penetration of the indifferent public, the majority of which it has finally won to its membership.*[2]

Since ancient times, people have been curious about and researched many belief systems, religions, and ideologies. From the established beliefs held by the majority of the world to the countercultural movements that challenge these beliefs, to the cults, sects, and popularized New Religious Movements, they have found their way into every aspect of the social and cultural fabric. This chapter explores the meanings of these expressions and examines how they shape people's beliefs and actions. Moreover, what about more modern religious movements that often challenge conventional notions of religiosity and spirituality? To make sense of these complex challenges, this chapter aims to illuminate the realm of words. To provide clarity and differences between ideas that are frequently used synonymously, this chapter opens with detailed explanations of essential terminology. The concepts of "cults," "movements," "sects," and "groups" are examined, as is the formation of "New Religious Movements," while "counterculture movements" offer a crucial aspect of cultural criticism. Clarifying terms will lay the groundwork for a deeper comprehension of the diverse structures and belief systems that make up the present cultural environment.

1.1. Definitions

a. Sects, Cults, Movements, Groups

When immersed in the complex study of religious structures, it is crucial to understand the many words related to religious and ideological affiliations. These expressions cover a wide range of cultural settings and views. While these expressions cover a range of different human

[2] J. Gordon Melton, **Melton's Encyclopedia of American Religions,** Cengage Learning, New York, 2009, p.1

organizational structures and belief systems in the context of religious and ideological phenomena, they are actually used to refer to interrelated categories.

Sects

Many sects and groups that sprang from the free spirit of the Protestant Reformation have only led individuals in a multitude of different paths in their quest for the real God especially after the Second Great Awakening.[3] Simultaneously, under the conditions of religious freedom, novel religious movements that under a state-church regime would have faced repression from the government were allowed to flourish and spread.

Religious groupings that have broken away from a more extensive, well-established religious tradition are known as "sects". They usually adhere to unique rituals, beliefs, or interpretations that distinguish them from the dominant religion from which they originated. Sects can range significantly in size from small, tightly connected groups to enormous congregations, and they can be more structured than cults. Usually, sects have been part of a religious group that they have purposefully broken away from. Their goal is to take the tradition back to its pure beginnings and build its foundations once again. As a case in point, "sectarian forms of Christianity frequently exhort their partisans to get back to the Bible; contemporary Islamic sects yearn for the purity of the times of the prophet Muhammad"[4].

When sects are compared to the cults, Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge endeavor to preserve the term "cult" as a precise, neutral descriptive phrase, but it may not be sufficient to offset the term's popular, contentious use, but their argument is worth considering. They characterize them as autonomous religious traditions, eschewing the polemical concept of cults that their cultural opponents developed.[5] Similar to sects, cults will frequently experience

[3] **SECOND GREAT AWAKENING**. A widespread eruption of Christian piety that began around the turn of the 19th century and persisted into the 1830s. It affected all the Protestant sects in one way or another, dramatically expanding the number of Americans actively affiliated with a religious community. But the newer sects like the Baptists, Methodists, and Universalists fared better than the older, established ones like the Congregationalists, the Episcopalians, and the Presbyterians despite the heroic efforts of religious leaders like Timothy Dwight and Lyman Beecher to harness the Awakening's energies in the service of orthodoxy. Though the Second Great Awakening failed to generate as many new sects as had the first Great Awakening (1735–1750), the roots of one uniquely American religious movement, Mormonism, can be traced directly to it. The Second Great Awakening also left a wider imprint on the culture of the early Republic than the first Great Awakening had on late colonial culture. The Second Great Awakening's evangelism merged with the revolutionary quest for perfectibility to mobilize religious energies for larger, social purposes.-Richard Buel Jr. and Jeffers Lennox, **Historical Dictionary of the Early American Republic**, Rowman and Littlefield, 2016, p.242, 243.

[4] Eugene V. Gallagher, **The New Religious Movements Experience in America**, Greenwood Press, London, 2004, p.16

[5] Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, **The Future of Religion**, University of California Press, California, 1985, p.35.

conflict or tension with society at large just by virtue of being unique and distinct. When it comes to earlier traditions, cults differ from sects in that they usually don't have a "history of institutional conflict and eventual separation". Cults are identified as distinct organizations from the outset.

Cults

In the study of religion and society, the word cult has a distinguished place. Cult can be defined as a system consisting of a group of people who hold an unusual or radical set of religious, ideological, or philosophical views under the charismatic leadership of a single figure. Although cult is a system of worship according to the definition, the term is typically used to describe a non-mainstream religious movement. In addition, a variety of current religious and quasi-religious groupings that have drawn media and political attention in recent decades have lately been referred to as cults. Some authors have written about cults in a pejorative way, while others have tried to approach them objectively. One of the negative writers, Margaret Thaler, defined cults as follows:

> *The term cult tends to imply something weird, something other than normal, something that is not us. But cults are far from marginal, and those who join them are no different from you or me. The issues they represent are basic to our society, to our understanding of each other, and to our accepting our vulnerabilities and the potential for abuse within our world.*[6]

It is common for people to use the term "cult" in a derogatory manner to refer to a group that has uncommon, out-of-the-ordinary, and sometimes divisive beliefs and practices. When the term cult is used, it is typically assumed that there is an all-powerful leader who has unrestrained control over group members who were recruited using unethical methods known as "brainwashing," which also carries a negative connotation.[7] Cults sometimes have hierarchical power structures, and their members are frequently under tight control—sometimes to the expense of their well-being. According to Lorne L. Dawson, this attitude towards cults is interpreted as follows:

> *In the words spoken by the leaders of these new religions we often hear distinct echoes of the higher values and sentiments, the spiritual insights, of the great religious figures of the past. Surely there is more to life we all sense at times, and the teachings of Jesus, Mohammed, the Buddha and others, may seem to be more genuinely present in the discourses of these still largely unknown or already scorned men and women than in the sermons and pronouncements of the accepted religious leaders around us. But fear holds us back from exploring these possibilities further and the "cults" in our midst remain just a curiosity.* [8]

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[6] Margaret Thaler Singer, **Cults in Our Mindst**, Jossey Bass, San Francisco, 2003, p. 9.
[7] Robbins, T. and Anthony, D, **Deprogramming, Brainwashing, and the Medicalization of Deviant Religion**, Social Problems, 1982, 29.
[8] Lorne L. Dawson, **Cults and New Religious Movements,** The Blackwell Publishing, Massachusetts, 2003, p.1.

In more secularized countries, people who adopt alternative worldviews and lifestyles sometimes draw attention because of their passionate and obviously unusual activities. Their intense feeling of commitment and purpose has the power to both entice and repel others. A rich fabric of societal responses, religious beliefs, and individual conduct are woven together by this dualism. Dr. Charles Braden has also defined the cult in a way that contributes to this idea:

> *By the term cult I mean nothing derogatory to any group so classified. A cult, as I define it, is any religious group which differs significantly in one or more respects as to belief or practice from those religious groups which are regarded as the normative expressions of religion in our total culture).*[9]

As a result, cults may question societal norms and ideals, but they also raise questions about the limits of religious liberty, personal freedom, and the role of charismatic leaders. Adopting an open, critical, and nuanced perspective that considers the many facets of this complex issue is essential to fully comprehend and address the phenomenon of cults.

Movements

Within American religion, a movement is an organized and coordinated endeavor by one or more religious groups to advance certain practices, beliefs, or social and cultural transformations. In the US, religious movements can take many different shapes, from grassroots endeavors to more formalized, organized institutions. The nation's religious landscape is greatly influenced by these movements, which often arise in response to historical, social, or cultural conditions. Due to the country's dedication to religious freedom and its role as a melting pot of cultures and beliefs, America's religious movements are rich and varied. America's religious environment has undergone many dramatic transitions over the years, from the Puritan settlers seeking religious refuge in the 17th century to the Great Awakenings of the 18th and 19th centuries that fueled intense evangelicalism. In reaction to modernity, fundamentalism gained ground in the 20th century, and new religious groups, including charismatic movements and the expansion of Pentecostalism, also emerged. Changes were further spurred by the civil rights era, which saw a rise in the prominence of churches in social justice movements.

Groups

In many sources, the meaning of the term group is expressed in the following sentences: The word “group” describes “a number of people or things that are put together or considered as a unit”.[10] In a group of people meet together for a common goal, passion, or purpose. Members of this group affiliation, which might be official or informal, interact and influence

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[9] Charles S. Braden, **These Also Believe**, Macmillan, New York, 1951, p. xii.
[10] Group, “Cambridge Dictionary”, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/group, (18.12.2023).

one another to differing degrees. Cohesion is a quality that groups frequently display, with members demonstrating mutual awareness and recognition. The structure of a group might change depending on the type of common aim, whether it be task-oriented, professional, or social. Group dynamics can range from harmonious collaboration to divergent opinions. Group interactions are shaped by the roles, norms, communication patterns, and power dynamics that are all part of group dynamics.

Within the United States, the term “group” has multiple meanings due to the country's diverse and ever-changing social landscape. In the United States, “group” refers to a collection of people who are part of the diverse fabric of American society and who have similar goals, affiliations, or interests. The diversity of religions competing for attention and adherents—some with great success, others almost ignored—gives the impression that America's religious landscape is somewhat chaotic at first look. Every family comprises a collection of religious groups that were united by a common history, similar doctrinal discussions, and comparable behavioral tendencies. People prefer to identify with basic religious frameworks that work for them in today's secular society, which is defined by the separation of religion and government. They create long-lasting, comparatively stable groups that sustain an ongoing, structured religious life beyond this association. The word "denomination," which was first used in a Christian context, is frequently used in the United States to refer to enduring religious communities.

According to J. Gordon Melton, religious organizations in America are categorized into different groups based on their functional and institutional characteristics. Melton uses the concept of "primary religious groups" to refer to religious organizations that organize regular worship practices at the local level and connect local communities through regional and national structures. These structures are mostly legally institutionalized organizations and form the fundamental framework of American religious life. In addition, Melton defines ecumenical or interfaith associations as "secondary religious groups," while classifying structures that operate in specific areas such as education, publishing, missionary work, and evangelism but do not form regular congregational life as "tertiary religious groups" or "para-church" organizations.[11]

Accordingly, it is clear that in a free society, the main religious groups are fundamental to the formation and maintenance of religious life. These organizations act as the cornerstone, laying down the essential policies, ideologies, and hierarchies that guide their daily activities. They establish the bounds of worship, the level of devotion to doctrine, and the general

[11] J. Gordon Melton, **Melton’s Encyclopedia of American Religions,** Gale, Cengage Learning, The United States of America, 2009, p. Xii, x,v

flexibility or rigidity of the institution. Furthermore, these communities are stable organizations that endure despite the ebbs and flows of religious zeal and doctrinal fads. The pragmatic role of denominations in a society with limited knowledge and different religious demands is necessary, even in the face of historical hopes for a unified Christianity or a single religious community.

A wide range of religious groups coexist in the US, adding to the complex tapestry of religious expression in the country. People in the nation are allowed to practice any faith they want or none at all according to the fundamental guarantee of religious freedom. Christianity remains the dominant religion in the United States, but it consists of numerous denominations that differ in doctrine, ritual practices, and institutional organization. Protestantism, Catholicism, and Eastern Orthodoxy represent the three major branches of Christianity. The religious mosaic also includes charismatic, mainstream, and evangelical Christian organizations. There is also a good representation of other major global faiths, such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and Sikhism. Mosques, temples, synagogues, churches, and other places of worship catering to many religious communities are becoming more and more common in the United States. In addition, the religious landscape in America encompasses nonreligious or secular organizations, agnostics, atheists, and those who identify as spiritual but are not connected to any formal religion. Because of this variety, there is a growing appreciation for interfaith communication and collaboration.

Religious groups in the US have an impact on political discourse, cultural conventions, and ethical viewpoints in addition to influencing individual belief systems. Because of the nation's dedication to religious freedom, many faith traditions are able to coexist, fostering a lively and pluralistic religious atmosphere. Ernst Troeltsch, who was a notable theologian during the end of the 19th and the early 20th century, pioneered the categorization of churches, sects, and cults in his analysis of major religious organizations in America. Unlike traditional approaches that focused on doctrinal differences, Troeltsch examined these Christian entities through a societal lens, recognizing churches as more than mere repositories of specific doctrines. In his work *The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches*, Troeltsch delved into post-Reformation Europe, identifying three primary groupings: the prevailing state churches, mystical groups later labeled as cults, and sect groups that emerged as dissenting factions from official churches:

> *The destruction of national religions, which was a natural result of the loss of national independence; the mingling of races, which led naturally to the mingling of various cults; the rise of mystery- religions, with their exclusive emphasis upon the inward life, and their*

independence of questions of nationality and birth; the fusion of various fragments of religion which had broken away from their national foundation.[12]

The transition from the old world to a new era marked by fervent beliefs and heightened susceptibility to religious influences was attributed to various factors. These included the demise of national religions due to the loss of national independence, the intermingling of races leading to a convergence of diverse cults, the emergence of mystery religions emphasizing inward life independent of nationality, and the amalgamation of fragmented religious elements detached from their national origins.

It is crucial to note that Troeltsch focused exclusively on Christian faiths for a comprehensive understanding. His research extended to nations where all residents were obligated to attend Christian state churches. Notably, before 1800, when Troeltsch concluded his research, the United States harbored more non-Christian churches than Europe and lacked a state church. Despite Troeltsch's emphasis on Christian denominations, American sociologists adopted his classifications for analyzing religions in the United States. Over time, the terms "cult" and "sect" acquired negative connotations in the mainstream media, a departure from Troeltsch's original intent.

b. New Religious Movements

Often labeled as "cults" or "alternative spiritualities," New Religious Movements (NRMs) are a broad category of modern religious and spiritual expressions that are characterized by creative organizational structures, beliefs, and practices. These movements challenge pre-existing religious conventions as a result of the significant socioeconomic, cultural, and technical developments that define the modern period. NRMs are studied by academics and researchers to understand their theories, history, and effects on people and communities. Certain NRMs may be the target of criticism, controversy, and accusations of manipulation, but others may enjoy a devoted following and have a beneficial impact on its members. Studying New Religious Movements provides insightful information on the complex connections between spirituality, identity, and the development of society in the modern era. Paul J. Olson illustrated the NRMs as follows:

The term "cult" has attracted much criticism from several sociologists of religion and religious studies scholars in recent years, and many scholars have dropped the word for a less pejorative term such as "new religious movement" (NRM)… The term "cult" has become laden with negative connotations among the general public and media and have advocated dropping its use in academia. It has become a pejorative label given to religious groups the user does not like or understand, and that merely using the word to describe a

[12] Ernst Troeltsch, **The Social Teaching of Christian Churches**, Halley Steward Publication, London, 1931, p.43.

group elicits negative, stereotypical images about what the group is like before any factual information has been obtained.[13]

Some researchers in the fields of religious studies and sociology of religion are gradually substituting the term "cult" with "new religious movement" (NRM) in order to avoid negative connotations. This change recognizes the derogatory meaning that the word "cult" has come to imply in public and media discourse. It is argued by academics that the term "cult" frequently creates stereotypes and skewed impressions that impede impartial examination of religious groups. By using more neutral terminology, researchers are encouraged to conduct their research with greater rigor and sensitivity, leading to a more nuanced understanding of various religious movements. Scholars have proposed many ways to avoid using the term “cult” when discussing groups that are frequently called such. As Paul J. Olson states in his study:

“Barker (1986, 1989), Richardson (1993), and several other sociologists of religion, as well as religious studies scholars such as Miller (1996) and Wessinger (2000), have argued that the term “cult” has become laden with negative connotations among the general public and media and have advocated dropping its use in academia.”[14]

These suggestions are predicated on the idea that by redefining the term, one might lessen the negative associations attached to the word "cult," which could lessen reader prejudice and encourage a less critical viewpoint of these religious organizations. But it is also important to keep in mind that one has to question how much the change of words affects the way people view these groups.

In *New Religious Movements in the 21st Century*, Philip Lucas examines the increasingly complex relationship between contemporary alternative religions and state authorities in different cultural and political contexts. Drawing on discussions published in *Nova Religio*, Lucas explores the interactions between “new, esoteric and minority religious organizations and state authorities” in various parts of the world.[15] The growth and spread of academic interest in these esoteric New Religious Movements that chart paths outside of traditional religions has been particularly influenced by the following factors. First, more movements have broke out more often, which has increased visibility. Second, there is now more interest in new faiths both inside and outside of academic circles due to the development of online communication and globalization. Third, mass media coverage of prominent figures participating in these movements and intensive marketing campaigns have made new faiths

[13] Paul J. Olson, “The Public Perception of Cults and New Religious Movements”, **Journal of the Scientific of Religion**, 2006, https://www.deepdyve.com/lp/wiley/the-public-perception-of-cults-and-new-religious-movements-vU0PLE0pCb, (17.12.2023), p.1.
[14] Olson, (2006).
[15] Philip Lucas, **New Religious Movements in the 21st Century**, Routledge, New York, 2004, p.2.

more widely accepted. Fourth, as more educators include research on cults into their curricula at colleges and universities, there is an increasing need for resources on contemporary religious groups in the classroom. Finally, on a number of crucial topics essential to the study of new religions, researchers have come to a general accord, if not total consensus. The greater accessibility and prominence of these religions is something entirely new. Spiritual leaders are increasingly hosting television shows and going on speaking tours, so their influence extends beyond the internet.

> *Institutes such as Esalen, Omega, and Hollyhock lure international clientele. Spiritual retreats and spas sponsored by specific movements and also available to the general public have developed in spiritual magnet communities like Sedona, Arizona. Organized tourism sends seekers to far-flung holy places.*[16]

Increased competition drives the formation of multiple separate entities as new religious organizations proliferate in the free market of religion. In the English-speaking world, Sarlo's Guru Rating Page alone lists approximately 1,400 modern religious leaders with active followers. [17] Many of these organizations organize into networks, sharing foundations and tenets with older new religions; this suggests that the number of new religious movements in the US may be on the rise. The familiarity and acceptance of these new faiths in popular culture is facilitated by favorable publicity, outreach to the general public, and the legal and political normalization of spiritual discourse. The commercialization of spiritual goods and the high-profile members of these groups both increase their prominence. Because of its widespread use and partial mainstreaming, the subject has attracted undergraduates over the past forty years, leading to the development of complex theories and research in the field. The terminology used to characterize the groups being studied remains the subject of debate after years of research, even though there is significant scientific consensus on many points. Synonyms as "new religious movements," "NRMs," "novel religions," "alternative religions," and "cults" are used interchangeably, which is indicative of the ongoing discourse in university circles. It is suggested that the term "cult" be reclaimed to transcend the current state of study. But because the term "cult" has negative connotations, most sociologists—including Dawson, who named his collection "Cults and New Religious Movements"—remain wary of using it.[18]

The deliberate language choices made by academics in the 1970s to create synonyms for "cult" were an attempt to show respect for the many groups that were the subject of the

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[16] Marion S. Goldman, “Cults, New Religions, and the Spiritual Landscape: A Review of Four Collections”, **Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion**, 2006, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3590619, (24.12.2023), p.89.

[17] Goldman, (2006).

[18] Lorne L. Dawson (2003).

study and to remain objectively detached from sensationalism. This warning was prompted by past instances of abuse and violence against large groups of religious people, which cast doubt on the usage of the word "cult." The word "cult" is slowly making its way into American popular culture, despite sociologists' reservations about its negative implications. This is especially true of young adults, who tend to use the phrase more neutrally. Even if sociologists continue to employ euphemisms for "cult," this normalization reflects comparable patterns observed with other formerly derogatory terminology, showing a shift in public attitude.

In summary, the study of New Religious Movements (NRMs) reveals a wide range of modern spiritual manifestations that defy established conventions and are influenced by important socioeconomic, cultural, and technological changes. Although these movements face varying degrees of disagreement and criticism, they also attract loyal supporters and have a beneficial impact. A major topic of discussion among scholars has been nomenclature, especially the contentious term "cult," and attempts have been made to replace it with more neutral terms such as "new religious movement" (NRM). Due to the unfavorable connotations attached to the word "cult" in public and media discourse, which affect the objective analysis of religious organizations, caution is warranted. Notwithstanding sociologists' reluctance, the term "cult" is slowly permeating American popular culture, particularly among young adults, who use it more neutrally, following patterns seen with other labels that were formerly disparaging. The dynamic interplay of spirituality, identity, and societal evolution in contemporary society is reflected in the expanding discourse on NRMs, which has sparked continuous study and thoughtful conversations in academic circles.

c. Counterculture Movements

The term "counterculture" describes a social and cultural movement that began in the 1960s, mostly in the United States. Its fundamental characteristic was the rejection of established norms and standards in favor of unconventional lifestyles, philosophies, and artistic expression. J. Milton Yinger described it as “a set of norms and values of a group that sharply contradict the dominant norms and values of the society of which that group is a part”.[19] In order to address social issues, the author suggests a paradoxical yet potentially insightful approach. The author proposes a novel approach to sociological issues concerning social order and change. To learn more about sociology, they suggest looking into chaos rather than sticking

[19] J. Milton Yinger, “Presidential Address: Countercultures and Social Change”, **American Sociological Association,** 1977, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2094571, (29.02.2024), p.833.

to well-established beliefs. They admit that this method might not offer total clarity and that it needs to be combined with other viewpoints, such as:

> *It is a product of a mutually shared normative system a blueprint for action that has been internalized by a set of persons in interaction. It is a product of reciprocity and exchange, of perceived mutual advantages. It is a consequence of the power of some to command the behavior of others-the reciprocal of power being the fear of sanctions, of loss or pain or death.*[20]

These theories are considered useful for analysis because they explain how interactions and social circumstances are often shaped by a combination of the three factors. The article highlights the significance of understanding the empirical combinations of rules, power, and reciprocity and warns against fruitless debates over the fundamental cause of social order. Since interactions and social circumstances often involve a combination of all three components, even when one is more prominent in a given setting, these theories are best understood as analytical frameworks. Exchange agreements can become embedded in culture, norms can be bent to one's advantage, and long-standing power relationships can develop into authoritative social structures. Since social order is dynamic and constantly changing, social change must also be examined alongside it. Expected satisfactions and new demands may stay unsatisfied under specific conditions, such as breaks in normative agreement, changes in power balances, or adjustments in what individuals and groups contribute in exchange.

Countercultures can form when individuals and groups strongly feel that the current social order is not meeting their needs or expectations. Such movements challenge or reject the norms, power dynamics, and values of the dominant society, serving as alternatives to the mainstream social structure.

Some groups see the current order as unjust, while others criticize the political authority or the social values system. Reform movements try to alter social relations and "exchange rates," whereas rebellion movements aim to challenge existing power structures. Countercultural movements, however, focus on fundamentally reshaping society's normative foundations. These emphasize frameworks that oppose mainstream culture and include organizations and individuals supporting these divergent norms. To fully understand society, it is essential to consider conflict and countercultural processes alongside social order and structure. Christopher Gair, in his publication *The American Counterculture*, underscores the intricate and often ambiguous relationship between the "mainstream" and the "marginal." He refers to the revolutionary elements of the counterculture and its representations in Hollywood productions from the 1950s to the early 1970s. These portrayals reflect the evolving visibility

[20] Yinger, p. 834.

and impact of the counterculture within Hollywood's corporate environment, ranging from crude, aggressive depictions to more nuanced, sympathetic ones.

Additionally, the article highlights the increasing blending of oppositional and popular cultures starting in the 1950s—a development less evident in earlier periods. This convergence is clear across various cultural fields, such as music, literature, painting, and film. Furthermore, it underscores that popular and oppositional cultures have become more integrated since the 1950s, a trait that was less noticeable in previous eras. Different cultural areas, like music, literature, painting, and film, show this blending. Demographically, the Baby Boomer generation was crucial in shaping the cultural environment. The advent of rock and roll accelerated the adoption of African-American musical forms by white youth, a process that had already been set in motion by the popularity of jazz before the war, and contributed to what many official voices referred to as

> *"the 'juvenile delinquency' of the mid-1950s, depicted in such movies as Rebel Without a Cause, The Blackboard Jungle and The Wild One. These movies also established a new group of Hollywood stars, most notably James Dean and Marlon Brando, whose rebellious images appealed to the young.*[21]

The post-war prosperity and leisure that many Americans experienced created an environment that was conducive to dissent and cultural innovation. The growth of the college and university industry produced communities of young, educated people with discretionary income, which encouraged the questioning of conventional wisdom:

> *The permeability of the culture/counterculture divide was facilitated by the prosperity of post-war America: a great deal of the music, literature, art and film that challenged mainstream values was a product of, rather than a reaction against, the material wealth enjoyed by much of the nation in what was widely believed to be a 'post- scarcity' economy.* [22]

It should be underlined that the countercultures of the 1950s and 1960s encountered strong opposition and animosity from mainstream societal forces, despite the modern image of these movements as important and transformational:

> *That said, it is easy now to forget how threatening the counter-cultures of the 1950s and '60s seemed then to many Americans, and not just because we may fail fully to remember the deep-rooted conservatism and hostility to otherness that characterized dominant discourse at the time and, in particular, before the 1960s.*[23]

It is essential to comprehend the historically embedded conservatism and fear of otherness that characterized the period in order to fully recognize the impact of countercultural movements in reshaping cultural discourse and upending conventional wisdom.

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[21] Christopher Gair, **The American Counterculture**, p. 4, (2007).
[22] Gair, p.4
[23] Gair, p.5

Some of the transgressions of the previous decade in the realm of spirituality were rectified by the radical ideas and actions of the 1960s. Religious movements evolved that brought mystery back into the concept of the sacred, instead of adhering to comfortable, known buildings of worship, giving a predictable God. The 1960s saw Americans embrace movement, seriously explore different faiths, and rediscover spirituality outside of traditional settings—a stark contrast to the 1950s when people stayed home for stability rather than pursuing spiritual depth. This period also cast doubt on traditional, middle-class ideas about God and the location of the divine, making it difficult to know how to connect with the sacred. Numerous people found motivation in the hardships faced by underprivileged groups, abundant spiritual customs, various global faiths, and changing viewpoints regarding gender and sexual orientation. This intricacy revealed a more accurate portrayal of the human condition. And it is clear from this that counterculture and new religious movements are two different social phenomena:

> *The upsurge of interest in spirituality in the late 1960s is all the more impressive when viewed against these predictions of declining interest in spirituality. The new quest for the sacred blossomed despite the break-down of social arrangements that had given religion its communal base. The fact that it could blossom this way attests to the fact that spirituality was indeed shifting from an attachment to place and becoming increasingly eclectic.*[24]

Furthermore, the 1960s religious zeal was based on long-standing American traditions of religious freedom, which emphasized people's choice to practice any religion they choose. An essential component of this spiritual awakening was freedom. Deeply ingrained in American culture, the freedom of conscience and religion permitted people to follow a variety of spiritual trajectories. Freedom was viewed by some as a way to travel between alternative communities or organized faiths, but others took a more independent path, questioning existing religious practices and searching for spirituality outside of institutional structures. By highlighting the fight against tyranny and the pursuit of equality and dignity, the Civil Rights Movement significantly transformed ideas of freedom. In the struggle for racial equality, leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. urged Americans to follow their collective conscience and made the connection between social justice and spiritual freedom. Freedom meant having the ability to pursue happiness and fully participate in a society where human rights were unalienable; it meant that all of God's children could sit around a table, hold hands, and sing songs of their homeland together.[25] Still, as the 1960s progressed, spiritual freedom increasingly meant stepping outside of recognized institutions, questioning accepted wisdom, and investigating a

[24] L. Dawson, 2003, p.92.
[25] Arthur Greil and David Rudy, "What Have We Learned from Process Models of Conversion?" **An Examination of Ten Case Studies**', Sociological Focus, p. 17, (1984): 305–23.

variety of lifestyles and philosophical perspectives, and this should never be viewed as a unified social force, and the word "counterculture" oversimplifies it. This unstable mixture of stances, gestures, lives, and ideas was reflected in the wide range of attitudes, behaviors, and ideals that made up the group. Prior to redefining their identities, participants mainly identified with what they were not. The counterculture was a dynamic process rather than a static entity that prioritized individual change over group action. Against Marxist beliefs, its adherents saw common cultural values as the source of the society issue and held that culture should be the cornerstone of the state:

> *For the sake of taxonomy, those who were subsumed belatedly by others under the label of counterculture generally understood the crisis that befell not just the American nation, but evidently all the industrialized West, as emanating from our common culture; the state was erected on the platform of culture, not vice versa as a vulgar Marxist might argue.*[26]

From this angle, major societal change required cultural, not political, transformations that were attained gradually as people reevaluated their behavior and values. As more people deviated from the norm, the prevailing culture would unavoidably shift. Two distinct periods may be identified within the American counterculture of the 1960s: the “Flower Children” period, the first phase marked by notable utopianism and optimism among white youth. After Nixon was elected president in 1968, however, it began to progressively fade. The counterculture displayed a number of paradoxes in its early years, including its emphasis on youth while being guided by elders like Leary, Ginsberg, and Snyder.[27] The question of whether "hippies" and "the counterculture" have the same definition is also discussed. It is safer to see "hippies" as a transient ideological veneer donned by certain counter culturalists, which faded away by 1968–1969 but continued to exist as a symbol of a specific appearance, dress, attitude, or lifestyle because "hippies" was mostly utilized by the mainstream media at the time.

One of the most well-known writers of the Beat Generation and one of the key players in the 1960s counterculture, Alan Watts, predicted the creation of a significant leisure-oriented society. He imagined a world in which people would be paid for the labor that machines did, and taxes would be reversed. Similarly, the Yippies promoted the phrase “Let the machines do it,”[28] calling for a transformation in society that embraces and encourages “full unemployment."[29]

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[26] Peter Braunstein and Michael William Doyle, **Imagine Nation, The American Counterculture of the 1960’s and 70’s**, Routledge, New York, 2002, p. 11.
[27] Braunstein and Doyle, p.12
[28] Alan Watts, "Changes," popularly known as the "Houseboat Summit" of February 1967, San Francisco Oracle, 21 March 1967, 10ff.
[29] "Free" (pseud. Abbie Hoffman), Revolution for the Hell. (New York: Dial Press, 1968),167.

In the end, the 1960s were a time of deep spiritual discovery and reinterpretation that upended established theological frameworks and promoted a more inclusive and varied conception of the sacred. As previously stated, concepts such as sect, cult, New Religious Movements, and countercultural movements have not had fixed and unchanging meanings throughout history. The meanings and social positions of these structures have been continuously reshaped in accordance with historical, cultural, political, and ideological transformations. Therefore, these formations should be considered social and cultural structures that are continuously reproduced within the changing dynamics of American society, rather than static categories.

1.2. Theories and Cultural Formations

In American culture, religious formations, sects, new religious movements, subcultures, and countercultural groups have been defined in various ways, reflecting their diverse and constantly evolving nature. However, descriptive definitions alone are insufficient to explain the social functions, ideological orientations, and transformative roles of these structures within society. A deeper understanding of such formations requires the application of specific theoretical and conceptual frameworks. In the United States, religious and cultural movements function not only as systems of belief but also as political, ideological, and discursive formations that continuously negotiate with dominant cultural values.

Theoretical approaches such as hegemony, ideology, counter-ideology, and metanarrative provide important tools for analyzing the production, legitimization, and transformation of cultural and religious identities. Gramsci's theory of hegemony explains how dominant culture maintains consent-based authority, while Althusser and Eagleton's theories of ideology reveal the processes of subject formation and their relationship to cultural production. Likewise, Lyotard's critique of metanarratives offers a postmodern perspective that questions the universal claims of modernity and contributes to the understanding of emerging religious and cultural movements.

In contrast, subculture and counterculture are not treated in this study as theories, but rather as cultural formations and collective forms of resistance that emerge in opposition to dominant social norms. Stuart Hall's discussions of subculture and counterculture demonstrate how marginalized groups construct symbolic practices, identities, and alternative value systems to challenge mainstream culture. Therefore, moving from definitions to theoretical frameworks and cultural formations enables this study to go beyond descriptive analysis and critically examine the representation, reproduction, and transformation of religious and cultural identities within American society.

a. Hegemony

A concept having strong roots in political theory and international affairs, hegemony refers to the intricate interactions between consent, power, and control both within and across communities and states. The dictionary defines power as "an ability to do things and control others, to get others to do what they otherwise would not".[30] The possession of certain assets is usually connected to this power over others. Therefore, having a large population, a large landmass, abundant natural resources, economic strength, strong armed forces, and political stability are all common ways that politicians and diplomats describe power. Early 20th-century Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci was largely responsible for its conceptualization, which was later further developed by academics from other fields.

Antonio Gramsci's writings, especially those he wrote while imprisoned in Italy under Mussolini's rule, are credited with giving rise to the hegemony thesis. Gramsci's ideas were always oriented toward the practical goal of political action. In his writings from prison, Marxism was always referred to as "the philosophy of praxis"[31]. It would also have shown, at least in some way, his intention to interact with a lively flow of concepts that were informed by Marx's works but not exclusively so. He had no desire to read canonical Marxist works to perfect a set of categories and ideas that would remain constant over time. This word choice was probably intended to highlight philosophy's revolutionary and practical aspects, at least in part. Marxist ideas that emphasized class conflict and economic determinism were the main targets of Gramsci's critique, which gave rise to the notion of hegemony. In his view, the establishment of cultural and intellectual domination by the ruling class also plays a significant role in the ruling class's ability to hold onto power. Gramsci highlighted how civil society institutions, including the media, educational institutions, and religious groups, spread dominant ideas and, in the process, win over subordinate groups' consent.

Gramsci broadened the notion of the state through his understanding of hegemony. It was insufficient to limit the state's definition to only governmental components when the ruling class's hegemonic influence effectively controlled the society's governing machinery. The basis of civil society's political system has to be included in the definition of the state for it to have

[30] Joseph S. Nye, Jr.,Soft Power, **Foreign Policy, Autumn**, 1990, Slate Group, Washington, pp. 153-171, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1148580, (11.03.2024), p.154.

[31] Robert W. Cox, "Gramsci, hegemony and international relations: an essay in method", **Gramsci, Historical Materialism and International Relations.** Cambridge Studies in International Relations. Cambridge University Press; 1993:49-66, https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/gramsci-historical-materialism-and-international-relations/gramsci-hegemony-and-international-relations-an-essay-in-method/1F802B2FFB5C21B6BE1991C442A19709. (10.03.2024), p.50

any real significance. Gramsci conceptualized these elements in concrete historical terms, citing organizations such as the press, the church, and the educational system that shaped people's expectations and conduct in accordance with the dominant social order. As a case in point,

> *Gramsci argued that the Masonic lodges in Italy were a bond amongst the government officials who entered into the state machinery after the unification of Italy, and therefore must be considered as part of the state for the purpose of assessing its broader political structure. The hegemony of a dominant class thus bridged the conventional categories of state and civil society, categories which retained a certain analytical usefulness but ceased to correspond to separable entities in reality.*[32]

According to Gramsci's theory of hegemony, the ruling class keeps up its power by convincing the lower classes that its way of thinking is normal and unavoidable. This intellectual hegemony maintains social inequality by defending the status quo and is essential to the stability of capitalist regimes. When the consensual dimension of power is prioritized, hegemony rules, and coercion usually remains latent, applied only in extreme circumstances. Hegemony is usually enough to ensure that most people behave uniformly. It becomes more broadly applicable to dominance-subordination interactions, possibly with consequences for international order. This viewpoint, however, stresses the significance of comprehending these social underpinnings even in the setting of global order relations, rather than distancing power dynamics from their underlying social foundations.

Richard Howson and Kylie Smith provide an overview of key ideas from the theory of hegemony in "Hegemony and the Operation of Consensus and Coercion", setting the stage for further examination later in the thesis. There are four main ideas mentioned: "power, subalternity, common sense, and ethico-political"[33]. The hegemonic framework connects these ideas, providing a conceptual map of their relationships. For analytical reasons, these ideas are presented as separate entities. The purpose of abstracting each notion is to help readers better grasp the complexity of hegemony by clarifying its nature, relationships, and its usefulness to empirical study. Subalternity, the absence of political autonomy for marginalized groups in society, is emphasized as a starting point for research on hegemony. Understanding how hegemony functions beyond merely exercising political power requires an understanding of Gramsci's concept of the "Integral State", which combines civil society and politics.[34] Achieving political power requires the uniting of subaltern groups, who are mostly located inside civil society and are characterized by animosity and discord.

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[32] Cox, p.51.
[33] Richard Howson and Kylie Smith, **Hegemony Studies in Consensus and Coercion**, Routledge, New York and London, 2008, p.2.
[34] Howson and Smith, p.3.

The relationship between subalternity and common sense can be explored with a focus on how the latter reflects the norms and values of subaltern communities. Contrary to common sense, which upholds adherence to established conventions, critical elaboration promotes coherence and unity and gives rise to good sense. In this process, Gramsci believes that "organic intellectuals"[35] are essential because they provide progressive self-awareness and use education to reshape power relations. From common sense to good sense, hegemony must change to one that is characterized by consensus and openness rather than by force and dogma. Because of their affiliation with the mass-intellectual nexus, organic intellectuals in this context are distinguishable from traditional intellectuals, hence exposing the ideological function of traditional intellectuals. While conventional intellectuals work to disassociate the people from authority and hegemony, organic intellectuals are both affected by and influential upon the masses. The organic intellectual has a role in changing power relations during the shift from common sense to good sense, or the formation of a new hegemony, usually through a "war of position".[36] It can be difficult to describe how power functions inside the hegemonic framework and how it applies to various social, political, and economic circumstances. To achieve hegemony, power must be rearranged through a struggle for position, but this process does not always proceed smoothly or provide predictable results. It is still acknowledged as hegemony, though.

Benedetto Croce played an important role in shaping Gramsci's intellectual approach to Marxism, particularly through his ideas on history, ethics, and culture. The idea of ethico-political, which Gramsci incorporates into his theory of hegemony, mostly borrowing from Croce's views, is central to this quest. In Gramsci's paradigm, the ethno-political takes on a dual role: it functions as a progressive goal and a crucial component in comprehending hegemony and the historical bloc. But as Gramsci argues, a crucial component of the ethico-political inside hegemony is its unbreakable connection to dialectical technique. Gramsci's philosophical endeavor substantially draws from Croce's findings regarding the ethico-political. Based on Croce's theories, the ethico-political becomes a central objective in the context of hegemony and necessitates a continuous dialectical approach. This idea is further developed by Gramsci's dialectical approach, which draws not just from his critique of Croce but also from Hegel. Croce's differentiation between "moralistic history" and "moral history" provides more clarification on the idea. Legality and compliance with the law are the main concerns of

[35] Antonio Gramsci, **Selections from the Prison Notebooks**, New York, International Publishers, 1971, p.6.
[36] Gramsci, p. 230.

moralistic history, whereas moral or ethico-political history takes acts into account within a larger historical framework that includes many social institutions.

Gramsci criticizes Croce's method for ignoring power relations. In his study, Gramsci highlights how crucial it is to appreciate power dynamics in order to understand social phenomena and historical processes. Croce's technique fails to take into consideration the influence of power on historical processes and social structures, which is one of Gramsci's main criticisms of it. Croce's emphasis on moral and ethical issues, according to Gramsci, ignores the power dynamics and material circumstances that underlie society transformations. In Gramsci's view, a knowledge of power dynamics is essential to comprehending how dominating groups sustain their dominance over subordinate classes and how social order is preserved or disturbed.

The core of Croce's philosophy, as articulated by Gramsci, is that it reduces historical activity from a conflict between opposites to a purely conceptual dialectic known as the "dialectic of distincts."[37] Although such a schema might have a place in the philosophy of a society that had finally achieved the unity of knowledge and being, which was unattainable in a class society, Gramsci argued that it was unable to provide an account of the actual concrete character of a history that was fundamentally shaped by the class struggle. A severe rejection of politics coexisted with this abstraction of actual history into an ethereal world of discrete conceptions in Crocean philosophy:

> *The distinct "categories" of the Crocean system allow for the existence of four sciences, Aesthetics, Economics, Logic and Ethics, relating to the pursuit respectively of the Beautiful, the Useful, the True and the Good. Politics, in this conception, can only be a composite entity, a mere "passion", of no philosophical value. In Gramsci's thought, by contrast, politics figures, philosophically, as the central human activity, the means by which the single consciousness is brought into contact with the social and natural world in all its forms.*[38]

In order to get a fuller knowledge of hegemony as a synthesis of social, political, and economic forces, Gramsci highlights the significance of an approach to ethico-political history that is dialectical in nature. According to Gramsci's theory, hegemony functions as "aspirational hegemony," giving leadership in morality and thought precedence over force. Practical wisdom was very important from a strategic perspective, as Gramsci saw it through the prism of war, when an army's effectiveness depends on "the ufficiali (lieutenants)" facilitating communication between "the generals (the brains)" and the troops (the muscle).[39] It was the responsibility of the new generation of intellectuals to develop a modern humanism that would

[37] Antonio Gramsci, **Selections from the Prison Notebooks**, International Publishers Co, 1971, p. xxii.

[38] Gramsci, **Prison Notebooks,** p. xxii

[39] Nadia Urbinati, "From the Periphery of Modernity: Antonio Gramsci's Theory of Subordination and Hegemony." **Political Theory,** 1998, http://www.jstor.org/stable/191840, (25 Mar. 2024), p. 378

appeal to even the most illiterate and uneducated parts of society. Finding historical instances to bolster this theory was not difficult for Gramsci:

> *The Protestant Reformation triumphed when the aspirations of the few became the common sense of the many, transforming a religious event into a political one and thus fulfilling the hegemonic project of modernity. Thanks to the popularization of its tenets, the Reformation had the strength to resist Catholic armies and to form the "German nation."*[40]

Gramsci's criticism of Croce's theory highlights the shortcomings of limiting historical action to a dialectic that is just conceptual and ignores the tangible reality of class conflict. Croce's reduction of politics to a simple emotion devoid of philosophical meaning stands in stark contrast to Gramsci's stress on the importance of politics as a philosophical activity. It is crucial to comprehend hegemony as a synthesis of social, political, and economic forces, as shown by Gramsci's focus on the dialectical character of ethico-political history. Considering hegemony as "aspirational hegemony," Gramsci highlights the superiority of moral and intellectual leadership over coercion. This viewpoint calls for a contemporary humanism that speaks to all social classes and needs common sense to close the knowledge divide between the general public and the academic elites. The Protestant Reformation is here one of Gramsci's historical examples that shows how desires may become common sense and drive hegemonic efforts that influence history. A more complex understanding of power relations and societal transformation is ultimately provided by Gramsci's argument for a dialectical approach to ethico-political history.

In summary, Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony is a fundamental tool for comprehending the intricate relationships that exist between control, consent, and power both inside and across communities and countries. Because to Gramsci's observations, we now have a better understanding of how the ruling classes use civil society institutions to impose their cultural and intellectual hegemony in addition to economic ones in order to preserve their supremacy. Gramsci emphasizes the crucial part that hegemony plays in forming societal norms and institutions by extending the concept of the state to include these influences. But Gramsci's criticism of Benedetto Croce's philosophy emphasizes the necessity of a dialectical approach to ethico-political history and the significance of acknowledging power dynamics in historical study. By delving into the concept of "aspirational hegemony," Gramsci highlighted the role that moral and intellectual ideals play in establishing social norms and pushed for a contemporary humanism that appeals to a wide range of social groups and overcomes established power structures. Essentially, Gramsci's theories of hegemony provide a thorough framework for deciphering and negotiating the intricacies of modern social and political

[40] Urbinati, p.378

dynamics, demonstrating the concepts' continued relevance in comprehending and altering power relationships in society.

b. Ideology

Ideology is the unseen force that permeates every facet of society and determines our attitudes, convictions, and behaviors. People view the world through it, and it serves as a framework for comprehending complicated occurrences and directing action. Ideology is a major factor in shaping political affiliations, public debate, and social standards in the United States. American philosophy spans a wide range of viewpoints, from the hardy individualism of libertarianism to the collective ethos of socialism. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' "The Communist Manifesto," which clarifies the idea of ideology as a weapon employed by the ruling class to retain power and continue exploitation, is one of the foundational works on the subject. According to Marx and Engels, ideology acts as a mask that hides the fundamental character of the exploitation and class conflict that are intrinsic to capitalism. As Marx and Engels famously argue, "the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles." [41] Their main argument—that society is made up of competing classes and that the bourgeoisie takes advantage of the proletariat for personal gain—is emphasized by this claim.

False consciousness is central to Marx and Engels' critique of ideology. They contend that ideas propagated by the bourgeoisie, or ruling class, conceal the exploitation of the proletariat, or working class. Marx and Engels once said, "The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas."[42] This claim emphasizes how the ruling class creates and spreads prevailing ideas, such liberalism or conservatism, in order to hold onto their hegemony.

One well-known ideology that is profoundly embedded in the American way of life is liberalism. Liberalism, which has its roots in the Enlightenment ideas of individual rights and limited government, places a strong emphasis on equality, individual freedom, and the pursuit of happiness. According to political thinker John Rawls, liberalism aims to create a just society in which each person has an equal chance to succeed. The Declaration of Independence famously stated, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."[43]

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[41] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, **The Communist Manifesto**, OUP Oxford, New York, 2008
[42] Karl Marx, **The German Ideology**. Marchen, 2024, p. 64.
[43] Jeffrey L.Sammons and Mieder Wolfgang, **Yes We Can.**,Peter Lang, Austria, 2009.

The interpretation of ideology in the United States is a subject of debate. There is a lack of agreement about the major political orientation of the United States, whether it leans towards the left, right, or center. Furthermore, there is ongoing disagreement regarding the reasonableness of categorizing American politics solely based on left and right. The definition of American ideology continues to be a subject of uncertainty, despite extensive study conducted over many decades:

> *Elections should decide whose claims should be honored. If the United States really is a nation of the right, then the party of the right should win most national elections. It does not. Nor of course does the party of the left fare any better. Alternation in electoral success does not necessarily make us a nation of the center. And despite the vagaries in ideological thinking at the individual level highlighted by Converse (1964) and others, it is not as simple as dismissing the American public as "nonideological," either.*[44]

For Christopher Ellis and James A. Stimson, the importance of ideology resides in its impact on elections and the results of public policy. Electoral choices are influenced by ideology, since voters tend to favor candidates whose values are in line with their own. Moreover, it is argued that ideology ought to serve as a theoretical framework for shaping public policy, wherein elected representatives are responsible for enacting policies that align with the ideological inclinations of the voting population.

Looking at earlier studies, in his work "On the Reproduction of Capitalist Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," Louis Althusser described ideology as a set of ideas and beliefs that affects how people perceive the world and how they fit into it. Althusser contends that ideology serves to uphold and replicate the current social structure, especially the capitalist one.

Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) and Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs) are two concepts that Althusser employs to demonstrate ideology. Institutions that propagate prevailing beliefs and mold people's subjectivities are known as ISAs. These institutions include education, religion, the media, families, and culture. These organizations work covertly to sway people's beliefs, attitudes, and actions to support the objectives of the governing class.

As Althusser illustrated, "Ideology is an imaginary assemblage, a pure dream, empty and vain, constituted by the 'diurnal residues' of the only full, positive reality, that of the concrete history of concrete, material individuals materially producing their existence."[45] Ideology is characterized by its tendency to give a biased or limited perspective of reality, hence influencing individuals' perceptions and comprehension of their social and material circumstances. Furthermore, the relationship between ideology and social reality shows how ideological

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[44] Christopher Ellis and James A. Stimson, **Ideology in America**, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2012, p.1

[45] Louis Althusser, **On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses.** Verso Press. London. p.175.

frameworks shape individuals' perceptions, beliefs, and actions. Building on Althusser's ideas, theorists such as Terry Eagleton emphasize the dynamic and contested character of ideology. Eagleton rejects the idea of ideology as a rigid and uniform structure; instead, he approaches it as a flexible formation that operates through changing social and cultural conditions.

The groundwork for Eagleton's engagement with ideology was established by Louis Althusser, whose idea of ideology as a material activity serves as the basis for Eagleton's critique. Eagleton contends that ideology functions as a decisive but flexible force inside society, influencing both individual subjectivities and social consciousness, departing from the economism and spiritualism common in earlier Marxist criticism. Eagleton aims to free literature from reductionist interpretations while recognizing its usefulness in the social formation process by recognizing the relative autonomy of creative and literary forms within ideology. As Geoffrey Nowell Smith pointed out in his review,

> *Basing himself on a broadly Althusserian concept of ideology, he argues that ideological forms cannot be reduced to their economic base, but that at the same time they do not have any mystic qualities of ' human essence' about them - that they are, in short, determinate, and yet variable forms.* [46]

At the core of Eagleton's methodology is the notion of interpellation, derived from Althusser's work, which underscores the manner in which people are praised or addressed by ideological apparatuses, so establishing their status as subjects within a certain ideological framework. The aforementioned concept highlights the performative and discursive aspects of ideology, demonstrating its widespread impact on the development of subjects and the building of identities.

Ideology operates in a manner that involves the recruitment of people as subjects or the transformation of persons into subjects, a process often referred to as interpellation. The notion of interpellation, as proposed by Althusser, provides significant contributions to the comprehension of how people are recognized or addressed by ideological apparatuses, so establishing their status as subjects within a certain ideological framework. According to Althusser, the class struggle takes precedence over both the dominant ideology and the ideological apparatuses themselves, and the former are just instruments in this conflict. The class struggle is a continuous process that transcends the mechanisms accountable for perpetuating dominance, even while the state's policies ultimately support the interests of the dominant classes in it, as Althusser emphasizes. According to Althusser, the law only resorts to repression as a last option, and as a general principle, norms are internalized. Norms manifest

[46] Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, "Terry Eagleton on Ideology and Criticism", **Screen**, 1977, https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/18.1.126, (28.03.2024), p. 127.

as an internal voice that “interpellates me -precisely, as a subject”[47] in the shape of moral ideology. The analysis presented by Althusser has importance due to its attribution of a materialist realist viewpoint and social ontology to ideology. Additionally, it presents ideology as a process of 'interpellation' that calls people together and shapes their social identity as subjects. According to Althusser, ideology does not possess an ideal or purely spiritual existence; rather, it has a material existence embodied within institutions and practices. Ideology functions through ideological state apparatuses, which serve as the material platforms through which ideology operates. Furthermore, every ideology functions by constituting individuals as subjects.[48]

The primary contention presented in this context is on the explicit articulation of the proposition: ideology is contingent upon and operated by humans who are socially constructed as subjects. In more accessible language, ideology has significance only within the framework of tangible entities such as individuals, and this connection is reinforced by the notion of the subject and its functioning. The term "subject" may have originated from bourgeois ideology, especially in legal contexts. However, the fundamental concept of the subject, which may have been referred to as the soul in God, is present in all ideologies, regardless of their specific classification or historical period. This is because ideology itself lacks a historical trajectory. At this point, the idea that ideology operates through the individual comes to the forefront. However, according to Althusser, the individual is not an independent, natural being outside social relations; rather, they are a subject shaped by ideological processes. The bourgeois ideology, in fact, presents social relations, which are collective and historical, as if they were the result of individual preferences. Therefore, concepts such as the state, politics, will, and social belonging are often explained in terms of individual choices, yet they are products of broader social and ideological structures. Althusser's approach reveals that ideologies "interpellate" individuals within certain social roles, making them subjects and thereby reproducing existing power relations.[49] This approach questions the idea of the individual as an independent subject outside society and makes visible the role of ideological apparatuses in maintaining social order. Additionally, Althusser argues that ideologies conceal the power mechanisms behind relationships that are seemingly natural and individual, suggesting that social institutions should be analyzed more critically.

[47] Althusser, p.xxv.
[48] Althusser, p.xxvı.
[49] Jodi Dean, “Enclosing the Subject”, **Political Theory**, https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591714560377, 2014, p. 6.

The complex relationship between people and ideological systems is better understood by looking at how ideology forces people into certain social roles. Althusser's theory goes against the liberal humanist idea that people live apart from, or before, their social relationships. Instead, ideologies shape people by defining the limits of their freedom of choice, agreement, and belief. Ideology, then, not only affects awareness; it also makes people who define themselves by its rules. In Althusser's work, the discussion moves from the liberty of individuals to the processes that make and keep identities. Therefore, Althusser proposes a new understanding of the state: the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) should be included alongside the Repressive State Apparatus when formulating a theory of the state. Educational, familial, religious, political, and associational, media, publishing, and cultural institutions are all part of the ISAs, which are separate from the Repressive State Apparatus.[50]

The structures and organizations that make up an ISA are not theoretical constructs but rather have their foundations in hard, physical reality. As an example, in addition to functioning as an ideological apparatus, the family is also engaged in biological reproduction, production (family farms being one example), and consumption. Cultural ISAs, for example, engage in aesthetic or physical pursuits like literature, athletics, and the theater in order to further their beliefs. An Ideological State Apparatus is a system of specified institutions, organizations, and related activities that bring the state's ideology to fruition. This term is based on previous findings. This worldview guarantees that all ISAs are cohesive systems by highlighting the material roles that each ISA plays. The Repressive State Apparatus employs physical violence, either directly or indirectly, to carry out its operations. In contrast, the Ideological State Apparatuses operate in distinct ways. Unlike the 'state apparatus,' they do not depend on physical coercion. Organizations such as the Church, schools, political parties, the press, radio, publishing, entertainment, and sports do not use physical force while engaging with their members. Their functioning does not prominently or visibly rely on physical force.

This discovery immediately informs Althusser's innovative thesis: any theory of the state must see the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) as coequal foundations of state power alongside the Repressive State Apparatus.

The ISAs differ from the Repressive State Apparatus in that they include schools, families, churches, political groups, unions, the media, publishing companies, and cultural institutions. These are not just ideas; they are grounded in solid, genuine things. The family, for example, has both ideological and biological functions, such as reproduction, production (e.g.,

[50] Althusser, p.75

family farms), and consumption. Cultural ISAs engage in artistic or physical pursuits—such as literature, athletics, and theater—to manifest belief. So, an Ideological State Apparatus is a group of institutions, organizations, and behaviors that put the state's ideology into action.

Althusser's idea of Ideological State Apparatuses is most clearly shown by the religious ISA, which he names first: "the religious ISA (the system of the different Churches)...".[51] In the United States, where the First Amendment prohibits an established church, the religious ISA persists privately; megachurches and interfaith councils "hail" individuals into subjects who see their religion as freely chosen while perpetuating capitalist obedience. People applaud mainstream religions and call new ones "cults." So, constitutional religious freedom becomes the prevailing ideology's quiet gatekeeper. ISAs and interpellation are crucial for understanding the formation, regulation, and transmission of religious and cultural identities within the social and political framework of the United States. Institutions of social influence (ISAs), including educational institutions, media networks, legal systems, and religious organizations, serve as channels for the dissemination of ideology while ostensibly upholding an "objective field" in a context where religious freedom is constitutionally protected yet culturally influenced by dominant narratives.[52] Althusser's framework transcends theoretical constructs to delineate the tangible mechanisms of ideological reproduction, wherein ISAs are embodied in particular institutions that subtly perpetuate dominant ideologies. These systems work together to shape religious legitimacy and cultural norms in the U.S. by giving more weight to established narratives than to marginal ones. Althusser explains this in his analysis:

> *One can observe, empirically, that there exist 'institutions' or 'organizations', as they are called, corresponding to each ISA. For the scholastic ISA: the various schools and their various levels, from the primary to the tertiary, the various institutes, and so on. For the religious ISA: the various churches and their specialized organizations (for example, youth organizations) . For the political ISA: the parliament, the political parties, and so on. For the information and news ISA: the press (the various newspapers or newspaper groups), and a large number of publications and organizations. For the familial ISA: all the institutions that have to do with the family, including the famous associations of parents of schoolchildren, and so on. For the cultural ISA: all kinds of entertainment, sport included, as well as a series of institutions that may dovetail with what we have called the publishing ISA.*[53]

Interpellation compels individuals to be "hailed" into specific topic views that align with broader ideological objectives. Individuals join these groups because they agree with or oppose the beliefs they hold, thus functioning both as products of the ideological system and as actors within it. In the United States, interfaith organizations (ISAs) not only maintain social order but

[51] Althusser, p. 76.

[52] Althusser, p. 247.
[53] Althusser, p.76.

also actively delineate the boundaries of religious legitimacy. Conventional religions have been separated from counterfeit ones. The word "cult" has been used to label developing religions as "inauthentic, deviant, or perilous."[54] The media and "anti-cult movements" often label emerging religious movements as "cults," portraying them as "deviant or brainwashing organizations," while favoring mainstream religious groups.[55]

Individuals within alternative spiritual or countercultural movements often reconstruct their identities by "counter-ideological" actions aimed at resisting the "interpellative pressures" exerted by prevailing organizations (Eagleton, 1991). Eagleton indicates that "'[i]nterpellation' is the mechanism through which ideology 'hails' individuals as subjects," while "counter-ideological strategies" may emerge when individuals consciously "resist this hailing," enabling these movements to "reinvent themselves through acts that challenge the dominant ideology, turning interpellation against itself."[56] Ideological counter-sites are places where different stories about identity, morality, and salvation challenge the power of organized religion. In this way, countercultures and new religious movements act as ideological counter-sites. Consequently, when applied to the phenomenon of religious pluralism in the United States, Althusser's theory provides a critical framework for analyzing the nuanced mechanisms of cultural power, the ideological containment of dissent, and the emergence of new belief systems as both products and critiques of hegemonic structures.

Repressive State Apparatuses:

Kant's Metaphysics and the Hegelian theory of law clearly demonstrate the oppressive character of law. The oppressive nature of law stems from its reliance on a system of punishments, such as civil and criminal codes, to ensure its effectiveness. The existence of a legal contract is contingent upon its application, which entails adherence to or avoidance of the law. Hence, it is necessary to establish a legal principle governing the occurrence of errors in the application or non-application of rules inside a legal contract.

In a contractual agreement, two distinct legal entities commit to engaging in specific, mutually agreed-upon transactions and to face penalties for non-compliance with the contractual provisions. This necessitates a crucial legal supplement to the existing legal framework, consisting of a set of regulations governing the consequences of (non)compliance

[54] David Chidester, **Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture**. Univ of California Press, 2005, p.13.
[55] Eileen Barker, **New Religious Movements: A Practical Introduction.** Bernan Press(PA), 1989 p.20.

[56] Terry Eagleton, **Ideology: An Introduction.** Verso, 1991, p. 201.

with contractual obligations, as well as a legal supplement to the civil code encompassing the criminal code. Kant perceives this limitation through the lens of morality, thereby differentiating law from morality, which encompasses an obligation (duty) devoid of sanction and, hence, devoid of repression. The perspective on law diverges from Kant's in its treatment of the distinction between law and the relations of production. Constraint is synonymous with sanction, and sanction is synonymous with repression, therefore necessitating the presence of repressive machinery.[57] Nevertheless, the field of law does not just rely on the implementation of repressive measures. Repression often assumes a "preventive" role, participating in legal-state structures in a limited number of instances, while disregarding the vast number of contracts upheld without the repressive apparatus's involvement or the initiation of a repressive procedure. In the overwhelming majority of cases, contractual conditions are adhered to without complication.

By reversing Althusser's interpretation, the subject is liberated from being automatically limited to an "individual form that psychoanalysis teaches is always already as failing and impossible as it is assumed and demanded."[58] This reversal necessitates a thorough analysis of the individual framework itself, exposing it as a problematic and manipulative result of efforts to repress, disregard, and impede collective political subjectivity by confining shared experiences. Highlighting the individual aspect would call into question Althusser's assertion that ideology is the imaginary link between people and their real-life situations.[59] The imagination is rooted in the assumption that the circumstances established by ideology largely relate to the isolated life of an individual. According to Jacques Lacan, "the individual is itself an imaginary figure"[60]. Bourgeois ideology erroneously regards communal and social circumstances, which are influenced by historical violence and exploitative structures, as if they only pertain to individual interactions. It presents the idea that states are formed through the agreement of individuals, that politics is determined by human decisions, and that wants, abilities, emotions, and determination are exclusively assigned to the individual.

In consequence, ideology functions as the implicit framework through which people and societies perceive their reality, internalize values, and perpetuate systems of power. It operates, literally, through institutions such as religion, schools, families, and the media, shaping

[57] Althusser, p.65.
[58] Dean, p. 5.
[59] Louis Althusser and Jacques Bidet, **On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,** Verso, London, 1971, p. 256.

[60] Jacques Lacan, **My Teaching,** Verso, London, 2009, p. 79.

communal consciousness and shaping perceptions of truth and freedom. Althusser and Eagleton show that ideology not only controls the mind but also creates people who willfully submit to it, thinking that structural constraints are their own choices. In the American context, this process is profoundly intertwined with religion and culture, in which institutions that ostensibly ensure freedom of belief often bolster prevailing social and political norms. This research necessitates an understanding of ideology in this manner, as it provides the theoretical framework for examining how cults, new religious groups, and countercultures both perpetuate and challenge these ideological frameworks. This paradigm reveals the interplay between belief and power, enabling a more profound analysis of how alternative movements in contemporary America arise as both manifestations and criticisms of the prevailing ideological framework.

c. Counter Ideology

Counter-ideology pertains to the collection of views and values that emerge in opposition to a prevailing or widely accepted ideology. It centers on the possibility of a fundamentally new society based on egalitarian anarcho-communist ideas. This ideology opposes the present power structures, which are governed by elite power brokers who wield enormous political, social, and economic influence. It is a kind of critique that seeks to question, subvert, or offer alternative viewpoints to existing social standards. Counter-ideology is essential for promoting diverse perspectives, driving societal transformation, and encouraging active participation in democracy.

> *The elite effectively use their power to reproduce existing social relations by preempting the emergence of counter ideologies. In addition, they reproduce capitalist socioeconomic relations internationally, as predicted by Marx, through globalization based on neoliberal policies constructed and imposed by the U.S. government which they control.*[61]

An ideological reaction consists of two components. First and foremost, "counter-ideology practitioners must possess the kind of scholarly gravitas that establishes their credibility"[62]. To counter and discredit extremist ideology, individuals must be able to articulate theologically valid arguments. Secondly, counter-ideology practitioners must also be capable of reaching diverse audiences and presenting their ideas in a persuasive and accessible manner. Without effective public engagement, even theoretically strong arguments may fail to influence society. Therefore, intellectual credibility and communicative ability work together in strengthening counter-ideological discourse.

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[61] John Asimakopoulos, "Counter Ideology and Evolutionary Change: A Proposal for a Research and Political Action Program." **Theory in Action**, 2008, https://doi.org/10.3798/tia.1937-0237.08001, (11.06.2024), p.2.
[62]Muhammad Haniff Hassan, "Communicating Counter Ideology", **S. Rajanatram School of International Studies,** 19.02.2008, www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/CO08016.pdf., (10.06.2024), p.1.

Within the existing framework, the dominant class (such as the socially aware elite in the United States) exercises authority over the production of goods and services, therefore influencing several facets of society: By exercising this control, the proprietors and administrators of society guarantee that all societal interests are in accordance with their requirements. State resources are employed by these elites to suppress challenges to their power, influence the political process, and shape the ideological system.

> *All necessarily subordinate themselves and their interests to the overriding need to serve the needs of the owners and managers of the society, who, ... with their control over resources, are easily able to shape the ideological system (the media, schools, universities and so on) in their interests, to determine the basic conditions within which the political process will function, its parameters and basic agenda, and to call upon the resources of state violence, when need be, to suppress any challenge to entrenched power.*[63]

Elite control is perpetuated via a variety of means. The provision of financial resources and personnel to think tanks, policy-making groups, and colleges guarantees the perpetuation of prevailing beliefs. The mainstream media, largely controlled by the elite, propagates information that aligns with their interests, shaping public perception and dialogue. Political institutions solidify their authority through governance, marginalizing opposing ideas and reinforcing the current social structure.

To bring about significant societal transformation, it is necessary to advocate for alternative ideologies through social movements that question the validity of the prevailing worldview. The subjugation of dissenting ideas by totalitarian governments highlights the influence of ideologies in maintaining authority. As Weber pointed out, historical instances, such as the disintegration of the Soviet Union, illustrate how eroding the legitimizing ideology of a system can lead to instability and eventual collapse.[64]

To sum up, counter-ideology plays a vital role in questioning and changing the existing power structures and social norms maintained by elite domination. Based on egalitarian anarcho-communist ideals, it aims to undermine the established structures of control upheld by political, social, and economic elites. The elites use governmental resources, media, and educational institutions to maintain their control and stifle dissenting perspectives. Proficient counter-ideology practitioners must not only have academic legitimacy but also convey their message effectively to a diverse audience, ensuring their criticisms are widely understood and accepted. To bring about significant change in society, it is crucial to actively support and promote alternative ideas through collective efforts and social movements that question the

[63] Noam Chomsky and Barry Pateman, **Chomsky on Anarchism,** AK Press, West Virginia, 2005, p.140.

[64] Max Weber, **Economy and Society.** Univ of California Press, California, 1978, p.38.

authority of the prevailing worldview. Counter-ideology is crucial in promoting social progress towards a fair and equal future by nurturing a range of viewpoints and promoting active democratic engagement. In conclusion, counter-ideology questions current beliefs and power structures intellectually and practically. It challenges the ideological structures that maintain the elite's control over politics, the economy, and culture, and proposes equality, participation, and social transformation. Counter-ideological movements provide spaces of resistance and new meanings to challenge the ruling elite's use of the state, media, and education. Turning critique into collective action requires theoretical and theological credibility, as well as the capacity to connect with diverse audiences. This study uses counter-ideology to understand how cults, new religious groups, and countercultural forms in America reflect and respond to ideologies. These organizations demonstrate that ideological control and human freedom are constantly in opposition by expressing various views on community, morality, and religion. The struggle remains central to American religion and culture.

d. Metanarrative

A metanarrative, also known as a grand narrative, is a narrative that encompasses and offers a structure for comprehending the many smaller tales within a culture or civilization. It may be seen as a story about stories, serving as a higher-level narrative. Metanarratives, according to Lyotard, are comprehensive narratives or big tales that civilizations use to justify their rules, beliefs, and behaviors. These tales often include historical, cultural, and philosophical elements, offering a framework for interpreting individual and shared experiences.

> *If a metanarrative implying a philosophy of history is used to legitimate knowledge, questions are raised concerning the validity of the institutions governing the social bond: these must be legitimized as well. Thus, justice is consigned to the grand narrative in the same way as truth.*[65]

The foundation of Lyotard's criticism of metanarratives is his mistrust of their ability to influence individual stories and their general applicability. Claiming to reflect universal truths, metanarratives, he says, often repress and marginalize competing, localized, or small narratives. Lyotard's postmodern criticism centers on the deterioration of these grand narratives. Lyotard argues that in the postmodern era, there is a general skepticism towards grand narratives:

According to Lyotard, one of the most distinctive features of the postmodern era is the distrust of grand narratives, or "metanarratives." In the modern era, knowledge, truth, and social

[65] Jean Francois Lyotard, **The Postmodern Caption: A Report on Knowledge**, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1979, p. xxiv

order were often legitimized through grand narratives that offered universal explanations. However, Lyotard argues that these legitimizing structures are gradually weakening under the influence of scientific and social developments. In this process, the authority of institutions such as universities, grounded in traditional knowledge rooted in metaphysical thought, has also begun to be questioned. Thus, instead of a single, inclusive understanding of truth, fragmented, plural narratives have come to the forefront.[66]

This criticism stems from the acknowledgment that such narratives often neglect the multitude and intricacy of human experiences. The information provided regarding the contemporary issue of legitimizing knowledge is sufficient to meet the requirements. Grand narratives—neither the dialectic of Spirit nor the concept of human emancipation—can no longer be relied upon to justify postmodern scientific discourse. Postmodernism venerates “little narrative” or "petits récits"-narratives that are limited in scope and tied to particular contexts, which defy the all-encompassing nature of metanarratives and “remain the quintessential form of imaginative invention, most particularly in science”.[67]

Lyotard emphasizes that science aims to distinguish itself from narrative knowledge present in tribal wisdom, often transmitted via myths and legends. However, contemporary philosophy has endeavored to provide justifying narratives for science. The narratives are presented as “the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth”.[68] Science primarily focuses on denotation within the language game, while disregarding other types of narrative knowledge, such as the comprehensive narratives offered by philosophy. Lyotard argues that the fast advancement of technologies and procedures in the latter half of the 20th century has led to a change in the focus of knowledge from the goals of human activity to the methods used to achieve those goals.[69] This transition has eroded the speculative aspect of philosophy and enabled each scientific subject to develop autonomously, without relying on philosophical principles or a systematic framework. According to Lyotard, postmodernism is characterized by a skeptical attitude towards grand narratives or overarching explanations of reality. As a result, new interdisciplinary fields arise that are apart from established systems of knowledge, especially philosophy. This implies that science operates within its own boundaries and cannot provide validation for other domains, such as moral advice.

[66]Lyotard, p. xxiv
[67] Lyotard, p. 60.
[68] Lyotard, p. xxiii.
[69] Gary Aylesworth, “Postmodernism”, **The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2015 Edition)**, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2015/entries/postmodernism/, 21.03.2015, (19.06.2024).

The pursuit of truth is the primary objective of science, which requires establishing its own set of laws. This legitimization is manifested via philosophical discourse, which serves as the foundation for the scientific enterprise. Modern science often relies on comprehensive narratives that serve as a fundamental structure for comprehension and validation. These narratives, like the Enlightenment narrative, are used to validate scientific and social institutions by imbuing them with a clear sense of purpose and direction. The Enlightenment narrative, "in which the hero of knowledge works toward a good ethico-political end—universal peace"[70] serves as a prominent illustration of a great narrative used to validate knowledge. The theory suggests that logical discussion and scientific advancements lead to worldwide tranquility and ethical-political progress. This narrative portrays the quest for knowledge as a noble undertaking that benefits mankind as a whole. Its structure serves both to validate scientific investigation and to maintain the institutions that regulate social standards and principles. According to Lyotard, narratives are more than just cultural stories in modern societies; they are also tools for legitimizing knowledge and power. Especially in the modern era, as the bourgeois class has become independent of traditional authorities, narratives have regained importance and begun to legitimize new social authorities. In this context, "knowledge" and social order are grounded in concepts such as specific hero figures, collective subjects, and the "people." Lyotard argues that this process establishes a connection between scientific knowledge and social norms; thus, legitimizing the authority of certain individuals or groups to speak and make decisions on behalf of society. [71]

The idea of "the people" in this context differs significantly from conventional story knowledge, which, unlike scientific knowledge, does not need organized debate, cumulative development, or universal claims. Scientific knowledge employs these operations. Therefore, it is predictable that proponents of this new type of legitimation by "the people" are also destroying conventional knowledge systems, perceiving them as minority viewpoints or separatist movements that encourage obscurantism.

Postmodernism, unlike contemporary science, exhibits skepticism toward grand narratives, or metanarratives. This doubt, or disbelief, arises from scientific advancement itself, which, ironically, weakens the overarching stories that previously gave it credibility. As these outdated narratives lose relevance, we see a similar crisis in metaphysical philosophy and educational institutions that have traditionally relied on them. The narrative function is

[70] Lyotard, p. xxiv.
[71] Lyotard, p.31, 32

seeing a decline in its conventional components such as heroes, epic journeys, and overarching objectives. Instead, it is divided into several narrative language aspects, such as narrative, denotative, prescriptive, and descriptive, each with its own distinct pragmatic significance. People traverse between many linguistic aspects, creating temporary and sometimes incomprehensible combinations. According to Lyotard, "there are immediate problems with this form of legitimation: the difference between a denotative statement with cognitive value and a prescriptive statement with practical value is one of relevance, therefore of competence. There is nothing to prove that if a statement describing a real situation is true, it follows that a prescriptive statement based upon it (the effect of which will necessarily be a modification of that reality) will be just."[72]

If the process of "delegitimation" is followed even to a little extent and if its extent is expanded, it will pave the way for a significant aspect of postmodernity: science operates independently and cannot provide legitimacy to other forms of language games. The game of prescription, such as evading it, eludes understanding. However, most importantly, it lacks the ability to establish its own legitimacy, contrary to what speculation had expected. The social topic seems to disintegrate among the proliferation of linguistic games. The social relationship is primarily verbal, yet it is not formed by a single thread. It is a system created from the convergence of at least two linguistic games, each following distinct regulations. As Ludwig Wittgenstein stated, "Our language can be seen as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses."[73] Wittgenstein's contribution has offered an alternative means of validation via his notion of language games, which does not depend on performativity. This postmodern worldview transcends the sentimentality and yearning for a bygone overarching narrative. Instead, it acknowledges that legitimacy arises from language practices and communicative exchanges. Science, with its pragmatic approach, has instructed humans to embrace this fragmented condition without descending into savagery, suggesting that contemporary people recognize that their sense of credibility stems from their active participation in these many linguistic activities.

To summarize, Jean-François Lyotard contends that the collapse of metanarratives signifies a profound shift in the understanding of knowledge, truth, and legitimacy within

[72] Lyotard, p. 65.
[73] Ludwig Wittgenstein, **Philosophical Investigations.** John Wiley and Sons, West Sussex, 2010, p. xiv.

postmodern society. Historically, grand narratives have served as universal frameworks that legitimize scientific advancement, educational institutions, and social order. However, in the postmodern age, these narratives have diminished in influence and no longer convey absolute truths. As a result, knowledge has transitioned from a holistic structure originating from a singular center to one that is constituted through various discourses, local narratives, and diverse linguistic practices. Drawing upon Ludwig Wittgenstein's concept of language games, Lyotard posits that legitimacy is now derived not from universal truths but from the multilayered, dynamic interactions established through communication. This perspective also exposes the limitations of science, as it no longer possesses the capacity to independently validate moral or social values. Nonetheless, the postmodern context does not engender a nihilistic worldview in which meaning is entirely absent; rather, it unveils a more fragmented yet inclusive understanding of reality, wherein differences, pluralism, and multiple perspectives may coexist.

e. Subculture

Subcultures are a colorful mosaic of variation within society; they stand out from the larger mainstream culture with their own unique set of values, conventions, behaviors, and artifacts. They provide people with a feeling of belonging and identification across a wide range of social, economic, and historical settings. It is important to understand subcultures because they reveal the many ways people and groups respond to social conventions and express who they are.

Subcultures arise when a smaller group inside a larger culture creates distinct and original patterns of behavior and belief. These organizations often emerge in response to the prevailing culture, either as a form of opposition or as a manifestation of an alternative way of life. Sociologist Dick Hebdige argues that subcultures may be seen as a form of symbolic defiance against dominant societal standards, often expressed through distinctive styles and language. Youth subcultures, in particular, distinguish themselves from mainstream culture through their fashion, language, music preferences, and daily rituals. According to Hebdige, groups such as teddy boys, mods, rockers, skinheads, and punks are sometimes seen as threats to social order and at other times as insignificant or entertaining formations. Therefore, the meaning of subculture is not fixed; rather, it is a field of struggle that is constantly redefined among social actors and becomes visible especially through "style".[74]

[74] Dick Hebdige, **Subculture The Meaning of Style**, Routledge, London and New York, 2002, p.2, 3.

Subcultures are characterized by a shared dedication to pursuits, passions, or ideals distinct from those of the larger culture. Through distinctive symbols such as clothing, music, vocabulary, or rituals, members of a subculture often foster a sense of belonging and community. Both within the organization and to outsiders, these symbols convey identity and membership. Subculture serves as a powerful means of challenging dominant influences. Hegemony, as defined by Antonio Gramsci and expanded upon by Stuart Hall, is the capacity of the prevailing social group to exercise influence not only through direct force but also by molding consensus and establishing its values and standards as seemingly inherent and valid.[75] The dominant group maintains this control by consistently shaping alternative meanings within its own ideological framework. Nevertheless, this level of control is never fully complete or lasting; it is a fluid and contested process, susceptible to being challenged and disrupted by subcultural groups. The ruling class's power is maintained via hegemony because it is seen as natural and unchanging. The essential function of Roland Barthes's "Mythology" in this context is to show how commonplace things and signals acquire ideological meanings that serve to maintain the dominant order. For example, commodities may acquire symbolic meanings that support societal norms, but these meanings can also be subverted and altered by subcultures.[76] Subcultures subvert dominant power structures by using symbolic opposition rather than engaging in direct confrontation. Subcultures express their dissent against the prevailing ideology by means of their own style and daily routines. The subcultures demonstrate their resistance via symbolic actions, which may be seen in how they adopt and transform ordinary items, giving them fresh and opposing connotations. For example, the punk subculture challenges and disrupts the mainstream culture's standardized forms and meanings via its unusual fashion choices, such as using safety pins and Vaseline, in ways that vary from their customary objectives. It is highlighted that this appropriation is "magical," underscoring its revolutionary ability in upending conventional wisdom and

> *Style in subculture is, then, pregnant with significance. Its transformations go 'against nature', interrupting the process of 'normalization'. As such, they are gestures, movements towards a speech which offends the 'silent majority", which challenges the principle of unity and cohesion, which contradicts the myth of consensus.* [77]

Through Gramsci's idea of a "moving equilibrium," it is demonstrated how hegemonic power is intrinsically unstable and needs constant renewal and modification.[78] Subcultures may

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[75] Stuart Hall, "Culture, The Media and the Ideological Effect", **Contemporary Sociology**,(Ed. Michael J. Sullivan, et al.), The Open University Press, Berkshire, U.K., 1977, p.316.

[76] Roland Barthes, **Mythologies**, Hill and Wang, New York, U.S.A., 1972, p. 28.
[77] Dick, p. 18.
[78] Stuart Hall, Tony Jefferson, **Resistance Through Rituals**, Psychology Press, East Sussex, U.K., 1993, p.52

take advantage of this volatility to subvert and question the prevailing worldview. The consensus is never completely safe since subcultures may constantly come up with new methods to show dissent due to the dynamic nature of hegemony.

In conclusion, it is illustrated how subcultures serve as crucial spaces for contesting and resisting hegemonic authority. Subcultures such as punk not only voice their dissatisfaction with the mainstream social order but also actively disrupt the process of normalization through the appropriation and reinterpretation of ordinary symbols and practices. The significance of this symbolic resistance lies in revealing the disputed and dynamic character of hegemony. It is noted that agreement is never fully established and is constantly vulnerable to opposition and fragmentation.

f. Counterculture

In its simplest definition, counterculture is a cultural movement that opposes and works to subvert the prevailing norms, values, and customs of the general public. In order to rethink how people and groups connect to power, identity, and social structures, it is a reaction against the existing quo that is often extreme and disruptive. The American counterculture of the 1960s is regarded as one of the most significant and pivotal periods in contemporary history. During this time, activists, intellectuals, artists, and young people aimed to challenge established power structures and raise issues ranging from racial inequality and sexual freedom to consumerism and war. According to Peter Braunstein, “this casual inflation of the term 'counterculture’ into a nebula of signifiers comprehending bongs, protest demonstrations, ashrams, and social nudity rear its head at seemingly any Sixties retrospective.”[79] The term "counterculture" has its roots in the scholarly work of sociologists throughout the middle of the twentieth century. J. Milton Yinger, a sociologist, originally popularized the idea in the early 1960s. The phrase "contraculture" (later abbreviated to "counterculture") was used by Yinger in a 1960 paper to characterize a cultural phenomenon that openly disapproved of the standards, norms, and values of mainstream society. Due to his interest in the psychological aspects of social deviance—a subject that had become popular in sociology in the 1950s—Yinger used the word. The sociological term "subculture," which describes discrete groups within a broader society with their own identity, values, and customs (such as ethnic or religious communities), served as the foundation of Yinger's work. Countercultures were seen as oppositional, aiming to subvert and

[79] Peter Braunstein, and Michael William Doyle. **Imagine Nation: The American Counterculture of the 1960s and ’70s.** Psychology Press, 2002, p.6.

alter the prevailing social order, while subcultures were perceived as neutral or even complimentary to the larger culture:

> *His research was at the time anchored in the previous decade's preoccupation with the psychological dimensions of social deviance (reflected outside academe by such pop cultural productions as The Wild One (1954), Rebel Without a Cause and Blackboard Jungle (1955), West Side Story (1957), and the like). Yinger proposed the term "contraculture" to distinguish it as a sociological phenomenon from the more familiar category "subculture," which he defined as a neutral subset of a larger society, as for example, racial, ethnic, or religious groups.*[80]

The Vietnam War, racial relations, sexual morals, women's rights, traditional authority, and a materialistic view of the American Dream were among the many issues that fueled generational divides in American society as the 1960s progressed. Today, the clearest historical links of the term are with the hippies, who supported communal or itinerant lifestyles, rejected corporate nationalism and the Vietnam War in the 1960s and 1970s, and embraced aspects of Eastern faiths like Buddhism and Hinduism. The word “hippie” was first used by the media in the 1960s to describe young people rejecting conventional values in an effort to appear or be 'hip.'[81] An important and challenging period in American history that had a lasting impact was the Vietnam War. One significant contradiction to this view is its timing, even if it seems to have triggered ideological shifts. Several reasons support this perspective. For example, the war caused an unprecedented change in liberal opinion toward U.S. foreign policy. Before Vietnam, the term "liberal" mainly described nonviolent protests, but the chaotic and dispersed protests during Vietnam signaled a shift away from that perception. The social movements that emerged after the Vietnam War significantly transformed what the term "liberal" meant in America. In particular, the counterculture movements of the 1960s challenged the image of the disciplined, hardworking, rule-following liberal citizen cultivated during the Franklin D. Roosevelt era. During this time, the idea of "liberal" increasingly became associated with "hippies, peace protesters," and individuals seen as disconnected from mainstream American society. Today, it represents not only a political stance but also a cultural identity, reflecting the youth movements and alternative lifestyles of that era.[82]

Therefore, in the 1960s, a rising discontent with America's ostentatious postwar achievement gave rise to the counterculture that would come to define the era. The bohemian societies of the 1950s in the United States and Europe were the breeding grounds for this

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[80] Braunstein, and Doyle, p.6.

[81] Scott MacFarlane, **The Hippie Narrative: A Literary Perspective on the Counterculture.** McFarland, 2015, p.28.

[82] Christopher Ellis and James A. Stimson. **Ideology in America**. Cambridge University Press, 2012, p.84.

dissatisfaction. The “Beats” were the pioneers in associating this criticism of established culture with a specific group of cultural rebels.

> *Although their numbers never approached the status of a true "Beat Generation," as commentators often referred to them, their vigorous denunciation of cold war militarism, anticommunist demagoguery, racial segregation, social regimentation, and rampant, near-orgiastic consumerism articulated most of the themes that adherents of the 1960s counterculture would echo and amplify.*[83]

The impact of the Beat Generation on the 1960s counterculture is apparent in the common themes of opposing militarism, racial segregation, and materialism, despite the Beats not being a huge, unified movement. Their critiques established the foundation for the subsequent, youth-led counterculture. Although characterized as a "youth movement," some prominent proponents of the counterculture were exposing a conflict within the movement. As the 1960s advanced, the idealistic and utopian "Flower Children" era transitioned into a more disjointed reality. The name "hippies" ultimately lost its original significance, while it continued to symbolize the enduring impact of counterculture on fashion, lifestyle, and attitude. This transition illustrates that the counterculture was more of a changing phenomenon than a static movement.

In summary, the American counterculture of the 1960s was a complicated and multidimensional phenomenon that represented a profound discontent with the postwar nation's standards and ideals. The counterculture, which was inspired by previous cultural rebels like the Beats and rooted in the theoretical foundations established by sociologists like J. Milton Yinger, aimed to subvert authority, challenge conventional wisdom, and provide alternative social visions. The movement was driven by key concerns including civil rights, the Vietnam War, and the opposition to consumerism and traditional lifestyles. Although the name “hippies” became a well-known representation of this time period, it was more of a transient ideological designation than a permanent identity. The utopian aspirations of the counterculture started to give way to a more complex and disjointed reality by the late 1960s. However, the counterculture's influence—its challenge to authority, its search for social and personal freedom, and its criticism of materialism and traditional values—left a long-lasting legacy that still shapes social and cultural movements today. In the end, it is better to see the counterculture of the 1960s as a dynamic process of social and cultural experimentation that aimed to reinterpret identity, power, and society in the face of rapid change and upheaval rather than as a single, cohesive movement.

[83] Braunstein, and Doyle, p.8.

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

This chapter analyzes the significant historical events that contributed to the rise of sects, cults, and counterculture groups in the United States. Instead of depicting religious pluralism, modernization, immigration, and socio-political discontent as ambiguous interrelations, the chapter considers them as generative forces that broadened the religious marketplace, undermined traditional authorities, and fostered the emergence of new religious expressions. This chapter delineates the evolution from colonial America to the twentieth century, illustrating how doctrinal discord, demographic shifts, legal reformation, and intermittent social turmoil fostered the emergence of alternative religious movements. Comprehending these formative processes elucidates the transformation of American religion from a landscape of inflexible denominations to a dynamic arena of competing ideas, laying the groundwork for subsequent legal, cultural, and ideological studies.

2.1.The Sects in Colonial America

The history of religious sects in Colonial America is closely tied to the broader story of religious freedom and diversity that defined the colonial era and the founding of the United States. Early sectarian movements challenged mainstream Protestant authority and established the foundations of American cult discourse through religious innovation, social separation, and public controversy. From the colony's founding, "the principled pursuit of the liberty of conscience yielded a lush religious variety... Protestantism itself was far from homogenous." This diversity also intensified anxieties surrounding religious fragmentation and doctrinal deviation, particularly among dominant Protestant communities that perceived dissenting groups as threats to social and religious order. Since the inception of European colonization, several religious factions endeavored to evade persecution, create new religious communities, and practice their beliefs unimpeded.[84]

The term "sect" can refer to 17th-century religious groups like the Puritans, Baptists, Quakers, and Separatists, who sought to separate from the established Church of England to practice a purer form of Christianity—all of whom had varying opinions on how to reform or break away from the official church—are referred to by this word.[85] The increasing impact of sectarian religious groups, shown by the enduring presence of Baptists and the concerning emergence of Quakers, underscored the potency of religious dissent in New England. These

[84] Edwin S. Gaustad, and Leigh Schmidt. **The Religious History of America: The Heart of the American Story from Colonial Times to Today.** HarperCollins, 2015 p.45.
[85] Gaustad, and Schmidt p. 32

movements presented a considerable challenge to the Puritans, compelling them to address the divisive and unorthodox aspects within their own theological framework, especially their separatist inclinations The Puritans, who founded the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630, were a sect that seceded from the Church of England, or Anglicanism. Notwithstanding their own divergent roots, they exhibited little tolerance for other sects or persons who opposed their religious practices and ideas:

> *For all the vigor and power of New England's Puritan order, such impulses toward a "free church" ultimately proved uncontainable. They reached quintessential expression with the bounds of New England itself in Roger Williams's Rhode Island, which became both receptacle and refuge for independent-minded dissenters from the more establishment-minded Puritans in Massachusetts and Connecticut.*[86]

Williams arrived in Boston in 1631 with the intention of serving a Puritan congregation. However, he quickly became dissatisfied with the Puritans because they had not fully separated from the Church of England. He believed the Puritans were still tainted by their ties to Anglicanism and called for a clean rupture between the two groups. In addition, he questioned the authority of the Puritan leaders, arguing that civil judges lacked jurisdiction to impose religious regulations on society. He advocated a concept considered revolutionary at the time: "the separation of church and state".[87]

Roger Williams' advocacy for the separation of church and state in the early 17th century laid the foundation for subsequent developments in American religious and political ideology. His radical call for a clear division between religious and civil authority foreshadowed debates that would intensify during the American Revolution. Established sects such as Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and Anglicans (later Episcopalians) were weakened by the Revolution, accelerating sectarian divisions. In this context, Thomas Jefferson played a major role in the disestablishment of the Anglican Church in Virginia by promoting religious freedom and the separation of church and state through the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom and *Notes on Virginia*. James Madison later strengthened these principles by guiding the bill through the Virginia legislature and helping establish church-state separation within the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights.[88]

Many Americans have seen religious variety as a point of pride, with early proponents emphasizing the rights of diverse religious groups, including Catholics, Jews, and Native

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[86] Gaustad, and Schmidt, p.32

[87] Stephen J. Stein, **Alternative American Religions: A History of Alternative Religions in America**. Oxford UP, 2003, p. 23.

[88] Richard Buel Jr, and Jeffers Lennox. **Historical Dictionary of the Early American Republic**. Rowman and Littlefield, 2016, p. 229.

Americans, to practice their beliefs without restriction. Notwithstanding these objectives, it is recognized that the pursuit of religious freedom was fraught with challenges, since early colonial intolerance and persecution rendered the establishment of a genuinely diverse society a protracted and arduous endeavor. This indicates that while America's religious landscape was transformative, it was also influenced by a multifaceted history of conflict and advancement.

The First Amendment's establishment clause, which was enacted in 1791, specifically forbade the creation of a national church but left state-established churches intact. In states where such facilities still existed, any attempt to do so at the time would have encountered strong hostility. By the time the amendment was ratified, churches had been formed in several states. Some exploited their newfound power to oppress others, while others, like the Puritans, sought religious freedom in the New World. In Massachusetts, for instance, Puritans persecuted Quakers and other deemed heretics, which led individuals like as Roger Williams to escape and make Rhode Island a sanctuary for religious liberty. Congregationalism[89] thrived in New England because of this setting, which reflected its focus on autonomous church communities with members making decisions together. In line with communitarian ideals of shared duty and cooperation, this autonomy promoted close-knit communities and moral accountability. Congregationalism was mostly religious but also echoed the principles of certain religious settlements by sharing an underlying conviction in community governance and social well-being with communitarianism. Despite their opposition to established churches, Baptists and other rebels often believed that public institutions would remain predominantly Protestant. Regional differences in religious domination were evident: Quakers were very powerful in the Middle States, the Church of England (later the Episcopal Church) was dominant in the South, and Congregationalism was common in New England. The Episcopal Church was eventually established in Maryland, which had been first established as a haven for Roman Catholics.

Aligning their lives with their convictions was a struggle for religious communitarians who sought to live apart from society. Despite criticism, these organizations were inspired to innovate by the First Amendment's 1791 guarantee of religious freedom. They established settlements, reconfigured family structures, changed sexual relationships, pooled resources and shared property, and physically isolated themselves from civilization. Despite constitutional rights, these actions turned communitarians into the objects of assault, mockery, and

[89] A section of the Protestant Christian Church that was formed in the 17th century, believing that each church should organize and govern itself, rather than being under the authority of a bishop or other church official. "Congregationalism." *Cambridge Dictionary*, Cambridge University Press & Assessment, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/congregationalism. Accessed 1 May 2026.

condemnation. One of the most prosperous communitarian organizations in the early 19th century was the Shakers, led by Ann Lee. They were exuberant worshippers who publicly attacked the established church and disrupted Anglican services to propagate their views. They originated in England as a cult known as the Shaking Quakers. They maintained their faith in the morality of their cause in the face of arrest and incarceration: The Shaker movement, which emerged in England in the 18th century and later spread to America, has drawn attention as one of the radical religious communities. Known as the “Shaking Quakers,” this group criticized the established church order and organized public meetings to spread their religious understanding. Especially under the leadership of Ann Lee, the Shakers, who operated in the New York and New England regions, aimed to gain new members and strengthen the commitment of existing members. The community argued that salvation was only possible within their religious congregation; they required members to confess their sins, reject worldly desires, and abstain from sexual relations, which they referred to as "natural generation." They also argued that achieving holiness was possible by rejecting bodily desires.[90] Following the Civil War, the Shaker movement gradually declined as its strict communal structure and rejection of conventional family life made it increasingly difficult to attract new converts and sustain its population.

[90] Stephen J Stein, **Alternative American Religions**. Oxford University Press, New York, 2000, p.60.



Figure 1 Edward Hicks, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, ca. 1833–1834.[91]

Different methods of religious expression and cohabitation in America are highlighted by the Shakers of the early 19th century, headed by Ann Lee, and the pluralistic thoughts of the mid-19th century that are shown in Edward Hicks' artworks based on his Quaker beliefs, depicts a vision of peaceful coexistence among many communities, in contrast to the Shakers, who aggressively opposed existing conventions by interfering with regular Anglican ceremonies and demanded strict devotion to their faith. One of the most well-known visual depictions of pluralism is the painting that Edward Hicks believed to be "the first major manifestation of the Peaceable Kingdom," based on Old Testament prophecy, which portrays a serene scene of white settlers, Native Americans, lions, and lambs living side by side, and was reproduced by Hicks in more than a hundred variations; though the painting suggests the rapid rise of religious freedom in 17th-century America, Hicks, a Quaker, viewed this progress as more gradual.[92] Pluralists acknowledged the difficulties colonists faced, including bigotry and persecution. American Presbyterian leader Robert Baird chastised the founding fathers for limiting the practice of other faiths in the middle of the 19th century. He emphasized the challenges individuals faced in paying fees, hosting public gatherings, and attending church. The majority of states have eliminated government financing for religious organizations and religious requirements for public officeholders, according to Baird, who also noted substantial legal

[91] Edward Hicks, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, ca. 1833–1834, oil on canvas, Brooklyn Museum.
[92] William R. Hutchison, **Religious Pluralism in America: The Contentious History of a Founding Ideal**. Yale UP, 2008, p.16.

progress. These legislative advancements, which mirrored the then-common perception that the United States had made impressive progress in promoting religious freedom, served as the foundation for his optimism about the future.[93] There is a complicated link between the growth of the Second Great Awakening and the progression of religious plurality in the United States, as shown in both the symbolic art of Edward Hicks and the commentary of Robert Baird. Both Hicks's peaceful vision of coexistence and Baird's study of legal and sociological strides reflect an overall narrative of progressive development toward equality and religious freedom. Hicks's concept of coexistence is at peace with society. However, conflicts emerged between old institutions and the developing dynamics of competitiveness and self-expression as a result of the awakening of individualistic and egalitarian ideas during the Second Great Awakening. In spite of the fact that evangelical movements promoted equality and justice by means of creative communication and accessibility, they also mistakenly undermined traditional mediating institutions, so exposing society to the hazards of new kinds of institutional control. The growth of freedom often reshapes social institutions in ways that both expand and expose possibilities and weaknesses. These analogies highlight the dual-edged nature of development, indicating that progress is not without its shortcomings.

Sects have been essential in the development of evangelicalism and the democratization of religion throughout the history of the United States. To reach people, they often relied on itinerant preaching, revival assemblies, and readily available communication channels. Particularly during the Second Great Awakening, evangelical groups such as the Methodists and Baptists experienced intense growth. Because of their charismatic preachers, nomadic ministry, and emphasis on personal conversion, they attracted large numbers of people, ultimately transforming Christianity in the United States. Religious movements that emerged during the Second Great Awakening, particularly charismatic preachers, itinerant missionary activities, and an emphasis on individual transformation, reached wide audiences. During this period, Protestant groups aimed not only at religious revival but also waged an organized struggle against social fragmentation, indifference, and secularization. With the establishment of various religious associations, educational institutions, and voluntary organizations, Protestant movements gained a more institutional structure; formations like Bible societies sought to create a common "united evangelical front" that transcended denominational differences. Thus, in the rapidly growing American society, religious unity, moral order, and evangelical expansion were sought to be strengthened.[94]

[93] Hutchison, p.18.
[94] Gaustad, and Schmidt, p.80

During the Second Great Awakening, rebel religious leaders in the United States of America adopted contemporary, individualistic ideals. They rejected the hierarchical moral economy and envisioned a future that was characterized by equality and justice. By cultivating spiritual and personal well-being, these movements worked to level aristocratic privilege, thereby creating peace and equality. Competition, self-expression, and free enterprise were all made possible by this effort to maintain the supernatural in everyday life, which accelerated the collapse of conventional social institutions.[95] On the other hand, these religious leaders failed to anticipate how the disintegration of mediating institutions may open the door to new types of tyranny that are imposed by powers that are entrepreneurial and institutional. The success of evangelical movements depended, to a greater extent than on conventional community institutions, on the use of creative and aggressive communication strategies to attract public attention. It was the supply-side dynamics of the evangelical religion in Baltimore that drove its success. In this city, competing "vendors"[96] made revivalism more accessible and attractive to the public.

Evangelism, the promotion of revivalism, and the spread of information about equality, justice, and personal salvation all played key roles during the Second Great Awakening, especially through sects such as Baptists and Methodists. The public was engaged through innovative communication tactics and grassroots efforts, enabling them to bypass traditional church hierarchies. As a result, religious activity became more accessible to a wider audience, thus democratizing it. Their competitive and entrepreneurial techniques led to the decline of traditional institutions, prompting issues such as market-driven religious expression. This dynamic strengthened the flexibility of evangelical movements, but it also opened the door for new forms of institutional and societal control. In the constantly evolving religious landscape, the interaction between sects and evangelism fueled both the development of religious pluralism and societal tensions. Revival movements during this period emphasized the importance of individuals personally responding to Christian teachings, significantly boosting church membership. In this voluntarist religious environment, churches could no longer rely solely on their traditional social standing. Consequently, religious institutions actively engaged in evangelism to attract new members, grow their communities, and sustain their finances. Revivalism proved effective in this effort, strengthening religious commitment and supporting the organizational continuity of churches. Simultaneously, these developments contributed to

[95] Nathan O Hatch, **The Democratization of American Christianity**. Yale UP, 1991, p.15.
[96] Joyce Appleby, **Capitalism and a New Social Order: The Republican Vision of the 1790s**, NYU Press, 1984, p.61.

the democratization of American religious life by allowing more segments of society to participate in religious practice.[97]

Ultimately, evangelism during the Second Great Awakening raised questions about commercialization and control within the church while also democratizing religious practice by making it more accessible to a wider audience. The revivalist approach transformed the religious landscape, encouraging both religious diversity and conflicts over institutional power and authority, even as it helped churches grow and thrive. Revivalist movements not only promoted religious revival but also played a key role in the development of American educational institutions. Especially in the 19th century, various Protestant denominations founded numerous colleges and schools to spread their beliefs. While institutions like Western Reserve and Knox were established by Congregationalists and Presbyterians, Methodists played a significant role in founding frontier schools such as McKendree and DePauw. Similarly, Baptists contributed to the establishment of educational institutions such as Denison and Shurtleff. These developments show that religious movements are effective not only in worship but also in education and social authority.[98]

The dynamics that emerged highlighted the struggle between growth and control, which continues to influence American Christian identity formation. Lastly, the Second Great Awakening was driven by revivalism, which was deliberately planned and promoted.

The history of religious sects in early America illustrates the complex connection between religious freedom, diversity, and the ongoing struggle between church authority and individual expression. The rise of evangelical groups (a Protestant movement emphasizing personal conversion and biblical authority), especially during the Second Great Awakening, played a major role in making religion more accessible to a wider audience. Through creative methods like traveling preaching and community outreach, groups like the Baptists (a Christian tradition stressing adult baptism and personal faith) and Methodists (a Protestant denomination started by John Wesley, emphasizing disciplined spiritual practice and social reform) not only grew in influence but also challenged traditional theological ideas. This shift also brought new problems, such as turning religion into a commodity and the rise of competing religious groups. Although these movements promoted values like equality, justice, and personal redemption, they also sparked debates over authority and the future role of established institutions. The Second Great Awakening was a key period in American religious history, encouraging growth

[97] Gaustad, and Schmidt, p.82.
[98] Gaustad, and Schmidt, p.83.

and conflict, and laying the foundation for ongoing religious diversity and freedom in the United States.

2.2. The Rise of Cults

Cults in America are connected to larger cultural, social, and ideological shifts that have been happening since the early 1800s. Rather than appearing suddenly or universally, these movements emerged during periods when existing theological and moral frameworks were challenged by rapid societal changes. This section examines the historical and cultural factors that led to the rise of distinct groups, such as Mormonism and later Jehovah's Witnesses. The beliefs and organizational methods of these groups challenged the norms of their time and introduced new ideas about religious community, authority, and identity. This analysis focuses on the historical and cultural contexts that helped bring about these unique groups—mainly Mormonism and later Jehovah's Witnesses—whose doctrines and organizational structures contested established norms and offered alternative views on religion, authority, and community. Understanding the development, core beliefs, and societal responses to these groups is essential for this research, as it provides a foundation for exploring how American narratives depict, interpret, and often challenge unconventional or dissident movements. By studying the history of cult formation, this work aims to analyze literary and cultural representations "against the grain," highlighting the conflicts between mainstream American culture and the countercultural, restorationist, or separatist tendencies that these organizations embody.

Cults are a key part of a worldwide trend of ideological totalism or fundamentalism, characterized by charismatic leaders, thought reform, and member exploitation. "While most sects follow familiar cultural patterns, cults largely follow an entirely different religious structure, one foreign and alien to the predominant religious communities." Then, the question is why does a person join a cult? Jim Willis, in his book *American Cults, Cabals, and Charismatic Leaders*, addresses the question of why people join cults:

> *People join cults because they're looking for love and acceptance. They want answers to the personal problems in their lives. When a person feels lonely and alone, when they feel unloved, or when they feel no one cares about them, they are susceptible to a manipulator who fills the void. These are all very human needs. Even religious groups capitalize on them. A person who feels "lost" needs a savior. That's how Christianity spreads, for instance. The song "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so" is a powerful marketing tool. It assures people that a loving savior cares about them and at the same*

time promotes the group's guiding text, the Bible, in a very short soundbite that comes attached to a singable tune.[99]

Examining the historical development of cults helps explain how alternative religious movements emerged in response to changing social, cultural, and ideological conditions.

The first manifestations of what would subsequently be termed "cults" arose during the theological turbulence of the early nineteenth century, especially after the Second Great Awakening. This period of religious transformation and social instability created conditions in which alternative religious groups could challenge established Protestant authority through new revelations, restorationist beliefs, apocalyptic expectations, and highly organized communal structures. In this era of rapid spiritual innovation, movements such as Mormonism and Jehovah's Witnesses emerged by presenting alternative religious identities that often conflicted with mainstream American values and institutions. Collectively, these early movements demonstrate how religious innovation became closely connected to broader cultural and ideological tensions within American society.

Mormonism

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), commonly known as Mormonism, is a distinct religious movement that began in the early 19th century in the United States. It was initiated by Joseph Smith's revelations in upstate New York in 1820. Founded in 1830, the religion centers on the belief that Smith was called as a prophet to restore Jesus Christ's original message. Its core sacred text, "The Book of Mormon," is based on a manuscript Smith claimed to have translated from golden plates shown to him by an angel. Mormonism has unique beliefs about the nature of God and Jesus, emphasizes family and community, and recognizes ongoing revelation through modern prophets.

Mormonism incorporates elements from both Christian theology and Old Testament traditions while presenting itself as a restoration of original Christianity. Besides studying the Old and New Testaments, Latter-day Saints recognize the authority of the Book of Mormon, often called "Another Testament of Jesus Christ." Starting with the Hebrews' migration to the Americas before Jesus was born, the Book of Mormon continues the story of Israel by expanding the biblical narrative to the New World.

Mormonism developed a strong missionary tradition and a highly organized communal structure, both of which contributed to its rapid expansion in the United States and abroad. The movement's distinct theological claims, including Joseph Smith's prophetic revelations, the

[99] Jim Willis, **American Cults: Cabals, Corruption, and Charismatic Leaders**. Visible Ink Press, 2023, p.3.

introduction of plural marriage, and the migration to Utah under Brigham Young, significantly shaped public perceptions of the religion. As a result, Mormonism became one of the most debated and controversial new religious movements in American history.

Some see Mormons as virtuous and family-oriented, while others consider the church secretive or authoritarian, often labeling it a cult. These conflicting views demonstrate the ongoing controversy surrounding Mormonism as a part of American religious life. Specifically, Joseph Smith's prophetic claims, the practice of polygamy, and the movement's communal structure contributed to public suspicion and criticism.

In addition to its theological structure, Mormonism also emphasized family life and communal organization. Mormons see marriage as an essential element in the pursuit of everlasting life. The ultimate form of marriage is everlasting marriage conducted in temples, where the officiant declares the spouses bonded together for time and all eternity.[100] Furthermore, family is the primary unit of both this life and the next, according to the Mormon society. Sacred temple ordinances unite members in their belief that families last forever. To cultivate love, faith, and moral integrity, the LDS Church promotes activities, scripture study, and prayer to strengthen family ties. Families who practice loyalty and faithfulness tend to be more stable, content, and productive, according to Latter-day Saints.[101] Temple rituals reinforced the belief in eternal family unity and strengthened communal cohesion within Mormon society.

Theologically, Mormonism distinguished itself from mainstream Christianity through its restorationist claims. The question of whether Mormonism followers can be considered Christians is a contentious one. Mormonism distinguishes itself from mainstream Christianity through its restorationist claims and self-identification as the restored church of Jesus Christ. As Stephen Robinson argues, Latter-day Saints do not seek acceptance as orthodox Christians but rather emphasize their distinct religious identity. Dr. Stephen Robinson argues that Latter-day Saints do not aspire to be accepted as orthodox Christians or Evangelicals but rather acknowledge their unique religious identity.[102] This acknowledgment highlights the deliberate separation Mormonism has established from mainstream Christian traditions, both in theological claims and self-perception.

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[100] Davis Bitton, and Thomas G. Alexander. *The A to Z of Mormonism*. Scarecrow Press, 2009, p.132
[101] Claudia L Bushman, **Contemporary Mormonism: Latter-day Saints in Modern America**. 2008, p.55.
[102] Blomberg, Craig L., and Stephen E. Robinson. *How Wide the Divide?: A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation*. InterVarsity Press, 2009, p.21.

Mormon doctrine presented the movement as a restoration of original Christianity through the revelations of Joseph Smith. The concepts of Zion and the "restored Israel" became central elements of Mormon identity and reinforced the belief that the movement represented a divinely chosen community.[103]

Polygamy became one of the most controversial aspects of Mormonism and significantly shaped public perceptions of the movement. Although defended by church leaders as a religious practice, it generated strong social and legal opposition in the United States. As one contemporary account states, "Opponents mounted a national campaign. They denounced the Church in the press, from the pulpit, in the halls of Congress."[104] Anti-polygamy campaigns intensified throughout the nineteenth century, and in 1890 the LDS Church officially abandoned the practice through the Manifesto issued by Wilford Woodruff.

Overall, Mormonism illustrates how early alternative religious movements in the United States became associated with social tension, public suspicion, and debates over religious legitimacy. Its theological distinctiveness, communal organization, and controversial practices contributed to the emergence of modern American cult discourse.

During the early twentieth century, Mormonism gradually expanded beyond its relatively isolated religious community and became more visible within American public life. As the Church's membership, institutional influence, and economic power increased, it began to place greater emphasis on public representation and social integration while continuing to preserve its distinct religious identity.

Certain smaller factions guided by authoritarian male prophets exhibit a more extreme and anti-modern persona. The LDS Church, based in Salt Lake City, finds a balance between these extremes, merging traditional beliefs with more progressive aspects. [105] Armand L. Mauss, a devout Mormon and sociologist, delineates a fluctuating trajectory of assimilation from 1900 to the present. By 1950, Mormons had assimilated into mainstream America, exhibiting unparalleled patriotism and embodying the American Dream. The conservative shift in American society after World War II facilitated the onset of assimilation, with the Church exemplifying the grassroots sentiments of the country. As regional bounds diminished, Mormons drew upon their cultural distinctiveness to establish their limits and promote a retrenchment mindset. [106]

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[103] Claudia L Bushman, p.16.
[104] Davis Bitton, and Thomas G. Alexander, xxiv.
[105] Richard L. Bushman, p.15.
[106] Armand L.Mauss, **The Angel and the Beehive: The Mormon Struggle with Assimilation**. University of Illinois Press, 1994, p.116.

This reversion to some elements of classic Mormonism occurred among the societal transformations of the Civil Rights Movement, an increase in tolerance, a general relaxation of conventional morality, and drug misuse issues. Jan Shipps in, a non-Mormon emeritus professor of history, contended that Mormonism is not conventionally Christian but constitutes a new religious tradition in her collection of essays *Sojourner in the Promised Land Forty Years Among the Mormons*.[107] Shipps contends that the portrayal of Mormons as exemplary Americans was established by juxtaposing their radical image with that of orderly, humble, moral, family-oriented, conservative, and patriotic individuals. This transition from a quasi-foreign, alien aesthetic to a distinctly American representation in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when Mormons adopted an identity that was more American than that of the Americans themselves. This prominence engendered hostility, making Church members seem more dangerous than other indigenous American cults, including Christian Scientists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Seventh-day Adventists.

As a result, Mormonism illustrates how early alternative religious movements in the United States became associated with social tension, public suspicion, and debates over religious legitimacy. Its theological distinctiveness, communal organization, and controversial practices contributed to the emergence of modern American cult discourse.

Jehovah's Witnesses

Jehovah's Witnesses emerged in the late nineteenth century as a restorationist religious movement "began as an informal Bible study group initiated by Charles Taze Russell in the 1870s that sought to recover first-century Christian beliefs and practices."[108] As adherents of the Bible Student movement, they rejected traditional Christian teachings like the Trinity in favor of a rigorous monotheism centered on Jehovah. Their distinct traditions placed them on a path of legal challenges and social exclusion throughout both World Wars. Their passionate preaching brought them immense prominence. Rutherford's restructuring included a centralized leadership structure, a legalistic reading of the Bible, and the sharing of stories of persecution.

Over its 130-year existence, Charles Taze Russell's Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society has experienced both expansion and conflict. The movement has grown in popularity and influence worldwide despite skepticism and conflicts with secular organizations. Influenced

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[107] Jan Shipps, **Sojourner in the Promised Land: Forty Years Among the Mormons.** University of Illinois Press, 2000, p. 243.
[108] George D Chryssides, **Jehovah's Witnesses: Continuity and Change.** Routledge, 2016, p. 22.

by restorationist and Adventist ideas, Russell developed a movement centered on biblical literalism, apocalyptic expectations, and the recovery of what he considered authentic early Christianity. The movement quickly spread throughout the United States; by 1880, approximately thirty congregations had emerged, and in 1884, the Watch Tower Tract Society was officially established.[109] With the help of thousands of preachers and millions of copies printed, the organization grew swiftly. The apocalyptic beliefs and highly structured worldwide organization of the Jehovah's Witnesses drew both attention and enemies to them around the middle of the twentieth century.

Jehovah's Witnesses distinguish themselves from mainstream Christianity through a unique theological framework centered on strict monotheism, restorationism, and apocalyptic belief. The theology of Jehovah's Witnesses presents a consistent but unique framework that significantly departs from conventional Christian orthodoxy. At its foundation, there is a strict belief in one God: only Jehovah is called Almighty God, and ideas like the Trinity are clearly denied. This doctrinal stance is connected to what the Witnesses refer to as a restorationist mission: the conviction that mainstream Christianity fell into heresy after the apostolic period, and that their organization aims to restore the fundamental beliefs of first-century Christianity. As a recent academic review indicates "Jehovah's Witnesses began as an informal Bible study group in the 1870s that sought to recover first-century Christian beliefs and practices."[110] Doctrinal revisionism and restorationist zeal create a unique confessional identity and idiom of practice and discourse that outsiders might misinterpret. The disciplinary language, evangelistic routines, and institutional limits of Jehovah's Witnesses are evident but conceptually unknown to others because they define themselves against long-standing creeds and maintain an ethic of isolation. The movement's public visibility paradoxically deepens its theological ambiguity. According to George D. Chryssides "the Witnesses are one of the best known yet least understood of religious movements." [111] Jehovah's Witnesses' worldwide exposure contrasts with their doctrinal opacity, illustrating their complexity. Their doctrines—particularly their non-Trinitarian Christology, rigid eschatology, and moral exclusivism—remain poorly understood by outsiders despite their constant public preaching and door-to-door missionary work. The movement's purposeful disengagement from spiritual discourse and interfaith

[109] Andrew Holden. **Jehovah's Witnesses: Portrait of a Contemporary Religious Movement**, Routledge, 2012, p.18.
[110] Chu, Jolene, and Ollimatti Peltonen. "Jehovah's Witnesses." *Cambridge Core*, Cambridge University Press, n. pag. Web. <www.cambridge.org/core/elements/jehovahs-witnesses/605AED05C9FA13DC68BB74FE3D2C651D>. 11 Nov. 2025.
[111] George D. Chryssides. **Jehovah's Witnesses: Continuity and Change**. Routledge, 2016, p. 22.

participation strengthens this misconception, dividing the secular world from what believers believe is divine destiny. This separation for members is not a sign of alienation but a sign of spiritual authenticity; it reaffirms their belief that they are chosen participants in God's Kingdom and that their uniqueness is a test of faith and a sign of divine favor.[112]

The rejection of the immortality of the soul, meaning that death is the termination of being rather than a passage to everlasting suffering, and the anticipation of the eventual installation of God's Kingdom on earth are two of the most important theological concepts. Andrew Halden, for instance, points out that according to Jehovah's theology, the soul and the body are connected, which means that the soul passes away along with the body, and accordingly, "there is no such thing as an immortal soul." [113]

As a result, the theology of the Witnesses is characterized by a combination of rigorous monotheism, a rejection of orthodox Christian ontology, a restorationist-eschatological framework, and a moral code that is centered on the preparation for the imminent Kingdom of God. In addition to providing a fertile environment for both internal cohesiveness and external criticism, this constellation of ideas clearly differentiates the movement from other similar movements. Similar to Mormonism, Jehovah's Witnesses became associated with social tension and public controversy because of their distinct beliefs, organizational discipline, and conflicts with mainstream institutions. Their emergence demonstrates how early alternative religious movements contributed to broader debates surrounding religious freedom, social conformity, and national identity in the United States.

Jehovah's Witnesses' global presence and unique social practices have placed them at the intersection of legal controversy and changing public perception. From their founding in late-19th-century America, the Witnesses' political neutrality and exclusive loyalty to Jehovah clashed with civil institutions and national ideologies. Their legal cases advanced constitutional protections for freedom of religion and conscience in the US, especially in the early and mid-20th century. Jehovah's Witnesses helped define First Amendment rights through litigation over door-to-door evangelism, printed materials, flag saluting, conscientious objection to military service, and blood transfusions. According to Penton (1976), there is little doubt that the Jehovah's Witnesses have made a significant impact on the legal definition of religious freedom in North America. This is supported by seminal cases like "West Virginia State Board of

[112] Chryssides, p. 23.
[113] Andrew Holden, **Jehovah's Witnesses: Portrait of a Contemporary Religious Movement**. Taylor and Francis, 2012, p. 24.

Education v. Barnette (1943)" and "Martin v. Struthers (1943)", which upheld their right to disseminate religious literature and refrain from mandatory patriotic rituals, respectively. These cases established long-lasting precedents for religious liberty.[114]

The legal challenges of Jehovah's Witnesses show that the movement's beliefs have had effects that go well beyond its own religious borders. Their political neutrality and distance from mainstream society frequently made people suspicious of them, but these same obligations forced judges to think about how far the government may go with people's consciences. The Witnesses not only protected their own activities by changing basic interpretations of the First Amendment, but they also made the law more open to other minority religions. Their heritage exemplifies the contradiction of a minority often neglected in public perception but vital to the development of contemporary religious liberty.

2.3.Modernization and Cultural Changes

The modernization of American society significantly transformed the nature of cult discourse by altering patterns of religious authority, social identity, and public communication. While earlier movements such as Mormonism were largely shaped by theological dissent, twentieth-century cults and NRMs emerged within broader contexts of industrialization, technological development, and social change.

Modernization, encompassing the social changes driven by technological, economic, and cultural progress, has had a significant impact on the United States. New possibilities and challenges have emerged from these shifts in religious relations. Modernization revealed and intensified social and political dissatisfaction, often fostering the emergence of new sects and cults, and religious diversity thrived as a result of immigration, diversifying the nation's spiritual environment. Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish were the three categories into which views of variety had constricted by the middle of the 20th century.[115]

Despite the apparent religious unity of postwar America, these dominant religious categories also reinforced social boundaries that shaped public attitudes toward minority religions and alternative belief systems. Religion was generally perceived as a positive social force during the Eisenhower period, and Americans of Catholic, Jewish, and Protestant faiths were seen as the ones carrying the American experiment. Political democracy, economic

[114] M. James Penton, **Jehovah's Witnesses in Canada: Champions of Freedom of Speech and Worship.** Macmillan of Canada, 1976, p.115.
[115] Will Herberg. **Protestant--Catholic--Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology**. University of Chicago Press, 1983, p.47.

freedom, and social equality were all tenets of the "American Way of Life," a shared "religion" that this reflected. According to Herberg, when President Eisenhower said that the nation's founding should be rooted in a sincerely held religious faith, it was a recognition of the shared origins and shared mission of the three religions in advancing the American Way of Life. Due to a decline in immigration, Herberg contended that postwar America was a "triple melting pot". Marriage within one's own faith was most common among Protestants, Catholics, and Jews of various backgrounds. Religious differences became the "differentiating element" among Americans when European immigrants flooded the US, but cultural differences waned. The primary differentiator in the 1950s, when America was referred to as a "three religion country," was religious allegiance.[116] Religious affiliation increasingly became a marker of social identity and integration within American society. Therefore, alternative religious movements increasingly appeared outside the accepted religious framework of American society, contributing both to their social marginalization and to the emergence of modern American cult discourse.

The rise of cults in the 20th century has been closely linked to periods of social unrest and cultural change. These groups usually start when people feel alone and unsure. Social changes, especially in the middle of the 20th century, like the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement, and the sexual revolution, have questioned long-held beliefs:

> *The 1960s were a decade of social, political, and religious turmoil, a time when many Americans celebrated the unconventional, the alternative, and the radical. Social unrest gave birth to the counterculture and hippie communes; political agitation fueled the Civil Rights movement and opposition to the war in Vietnam; religious ferment found expression in a new interest in Eastern traditions and other spiritualities. The social, the political, and the religious were inseparable from one another.*[117]

This has led many people to doubt established institutions and to seek a sense of purpose and connection. During this time of disappointment, spiritual leaders have stepped in with new ideas that promise wisdom, forgiveness, or major changes in one's life. These leaders often created tightly organized communities centered on discipline, belonging, and spiritual transformation. He—usually a "he"—is a charismatic leader who can communicate in a language that his followers can comprehend. Charismatic leaders often played a central role in attracting followers during periods of social uncertainty by offering alternative spiritual explanations, communal belonging, and promises of personal transformation. Their authority and personal influence frequently shaped both the structure and continuity of cultic movements

[116] Herberg, p.23.
[117] Stein, p.129.

as stated, “the fate of a cult usually hinges on the caprice of a charismatic leader.” [118]Clarence Klug, founder of the movement Self-Initiation, developed a spiritual program that promised union with God through disciplined spiritual exercises. Although his movement initially attracted a wider audience, over time it evolved into a smaller and more devoted community of followers.

The emergence of New Age spirituality reflected growing dissatisfaction with traditional religious authority during the modernization period. Its individualized structure and emphasis on personal spirituality contributed to broader transformations in American perceptions of religion and alternative belief systems. By combining Western esotericism, Eastern spiritual traditions, and countercultural values, the New Age movement presented itself as an alternative to established religious institutions.

During this time of spiritual exploration, charismatic leaders like Clarence Klug achieved success by providing direct communication with the divine and personal enlightenment. By fusing traditional methods with contemporary psychological understanding, they took advantage of a rising need for nontraditional knowledge. Klug often said that he had special access to secrets and offered organized systems as means of achieving transcendence. By incorporating concepts of reincarnation, monism, and global awareness, the New Age expanded upon older groups such as Theosophy and Spiritualism. But unlike conventional structured faiths, the New Age was personal and flexible, giving its adherents a feeling of agency. Dependence on the charisma of a single leader has turned out to be both a strength and a weakness.

Although the New Age movement lacked a unified doctrine, it generally emphasized personal spirituality, self-transformation, and alternative understandings of divine experience. Influenced by Eastern spirituality and Western esotericism, it challenged traditional religious authority and reflected broader cultural shifts toward individualized belief systems.

As cult movements became more publicly visible, religious conservatives increasingly interpreted them as theological threats to mainstream Christianity. Renowned theologian Walter Martin viewed cult movements as challenges to both mainstream Christianity and social stability, arguing that the boundaries separating Christianity from cults were becoming increasingly blurred. In *The Kingdom of the Cults*, Martin argued that cult movements frequently adopted Christian terminology while assigning different theological meanings to

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[118], Marc Petrowsky, and William W. Zellner, **Sects, Cults, and Spiritual Communities: A Sociological Analysis,** Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 1998.

core doctrines, creating confusion even among evangelical communities. For instance, while Christianity emphasizes an eternal and unchanging God, Mormonism teaches that God was once a man and that humans may eventually become gods. [119] Martin emphasized the importance of directly addressing these doctrinal disagreements in order to defend orthodox Christian theology against alternative religious interpretations. These reactions helped reinforce the negative public perception of cults within American religious discourse.

Over the past 30 years, religious involvement in the US has become more personalized and informal, leading to a surge in conversion rates, particularly in Third World nations and among Americans seeking spiritual fulfillment through cultic teachings. Walter Martin claimed that the Christian church's inability to comprehend cult doctrine and create practical strategies for evangelizing and disproving it is one factor contributing to the cults' rise. [120] Cults' beliefs are especially deceptive because, while they include certain scriptural truths, they are tainted with human error. By highlighting topics the church has overlooked, such healing, prophecy, and other doctrines, cults have also gained popularity. Accordingly, the fact that cults find it difficult to establish traction in settings where the gospel of Jesus Christ is authoritatively and pertinently preached emphasizes how essentially theological the problem is. Dr. Lee Belford highlights that

> *The problem is essentially theological where the cults are concerned. The answer of the church must be theological and doctrinal. No sociological or cultural evaluation will do. Such works may be helpful, but they will not answer the Jehovah's Witness or Mormon who is seeking biblical authority for either the acceptance or rejection of his beliefs.* [121]

Thus, the church's response must be grounded in theology and doctrine, since the biblical concerns of cult members cannot be adequately addressed by sociological or cultural methods. As religious diversity in the United States continued to expand, traditional religious classifications became increasingly insufficient. In addition to Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish identities, sociologists began using broader categories such as “none” to describe individuals with no formal religious affiliation and “other” to encompass alternative religious movements and minority belief systems. This category encompasses a wide range of religious movements, including but not limited to: Moors, Satanists, Moonies, Scientologists, Lemurians, Druids, Sufis, Vedantists, Swedenborgians, Flying Saucerians, Baha'ists, and Divine Scientists. However, after the Jonestown tragedy in 1978, public attitudes toward alternative religious movements became increasingly shaped by fear, suspicion, and anti-cult reactions. As a result,

[119] Walter Martin, and Ravi Zacharias. **The Kingdom of the Cults**. Baker Books, 2003, p.8.
[120] Martin, p. 19.
[121] Martin, p. 19.

state legislators are contemplating anticult legislation and professional deprogrammers are courting parents who want their children rescued from cults..[122]

Benton Johnson's notion of friction between religious groups and their environments distinguishes sects and cults from churches.[123] This phrase replaces rejection, since it conceals the reciprocal connection between sects and society. Johnson used Russell Dynes' church-sect scale as a tension-measurement tool; the former group, the Church, incorporates cultural concepts into its ideology, while the latter group, the Sect, rejects societal order, forms a distinct subculture, and stresses strict behavioral standards for its adherents. However, according to Johnson, Russell Dynes's church-sect scale is inadequate for evaluating individuals' commitment to certain sects. [124] Sects are subcultures marked by divergence, animosity, and seclusion. These groups challenge prevailing beliefs, norms, and practices, leading to social dynamics characterized by insular, cohesive group formations. Under significant pressure, sects and cults may experience social isolation, demonstrating little engagement with nonmembers. Defining subcultural deviance in terms of difference, antagonism, and separation facilitates organizing deviance indicators into a cohesive framework, thereby enhancing their analytical accessibility. Deviant subcultures create alternative norms and articulate dissent against mainstream society, leading to strained social relations and a societal divide.

A person's social interactions may be affected by their strong opinions or unorthodox conduct, which, in turn, can lead to high social tension. When things get out of hand, some communities cut ties with the outside world and even isolate themselves. Several ancient communities maintained their own identities far into the twentieth century, including the Hutterites, Amish, and Mormons, and in addition to that, members of some sects, especially those who hold the view that marriages between people of other faiths are immoral, tend to become quite close-knit and attached to one another. [125]As a result of this social isolation and the tightening of internal relationships, the sect is able to operate as its own independent social universe.

Due to immigration and the competitive religious marketplace of the United States, religious pluralism expanded significantly after 1965, creating conditions in which many new

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[122] Rodney Stark, and William Sims Bainbridge. **The Future of Religion: Secularization, Revival and Cult Formation**. Univ of California Press, 2023, p. 48.
[123]Anthony J. Blasi. **Social Science and the Christian Scriptures, Volume 1: Sociological Introductions and New Translation.** Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2017, p. 155.
[124] Stark and Bainbridge, p. 49.
[125], William Sims Bainbridge. **Satan's Power: A Deviant Psychotherapy Cult**. University of California Press, 1978, p.240.

religious movements could emerge and attract followers. As mentioned, the Jonestown tragedy in Guyana in 1978 serves as an example of how contacts with new religious organizations can include mistrust and conflict. The People's Temple was founded by Jim Jones as a collective organization that promoted racial justice, but his leadership became more dictatorial, apocalyptic, and paranoid, ultimately leading to a mass suicide. During this process, Peoples Temple, founded by Jim Jones in the 1950s with an emphasis on racial equality and social justice, stood out as an inclusive religious community. The movement, especially, shared similar social ideals with the counterculture and civil rights movement; however, over time, Jones's leadership became more authoritarian, apocalyptic, and paranoid. As a result, the mass suicide in Jonestown, Guyana, in 1978, which led to the deaths of over 900 people, along with Jones, caused a serious fear and distrust toward new religious movements in American society.[126] The public's opinion of new religious movements was severely impacted by this occurrence, which contributed to the development of suspicion and terror when it came to unusual religious organizations, especially those that were seen as cults.

New religious groups were generally seen as harmful in the wake of Jonestown, and the word "cult" was used with increasing worry. Cult leaders were singled out by authorities for crimes such as polygamy, immigration fraud, and tax evasion. The 1993 siege of the Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas, is a prime illustration of a conflict with a sectarian religious organization. Federal officials used Bradley vehicles and M-60 tanks during a 51-day siege, which resulted in a devastating inferno that killed 74 people, including 21 children.[127] Therefore, it is possible to see how pluralism in the United States has enabled the development of many religious expressions while also giving birth to conflicts. This exemplifies the fact that religious innovation often occurs in a complicated connection with problems that are more widespread in society.

The media significantly influences popular opinion of emerging religious movements, often perpetuating negative stereotypes and oversimplifying intricate religious identities. Jeffrey K. Hadden contends that the media's representation of new religious movements is excessively negative, frequently amplifying themes of mind control, violence, and deception.[128] In the United States, the public dispute that surrounds alternative religions continues to remain strong, and three terrible occurrences that occurred in the latter half of the 20th century have

[126] Gaustad, and Schmidt, p. 220.
[127] Gaustad, and Schmidt, p. 221.
[128] J. Gordon Melton, **Melton's Encyclopedia of American Religions,** Cengage Learning, New York, 2009, p. xi.

highlighted the widespread lack of knowledge that exists about sects and cults. A permanent and unfavorable view of sects and cults has been imprinted on the public mind as a result of three incidents: the suicide and murders committed by Jim Jones in 1978, the blazing inferno committed by David Koresh[129] in 1993, and the collective suicide committed by Marshall Herff Applewhite[130] in 1997.

News outlets often employ alarmist language, utilizing terms such as brainwashing, mind control, and doomsday cults, which oversimplify the intricate beliefs and motivations of these movements.[131] As previously stated, Jim Jones' Peoples Temple, was the cause of over 1,000 mass suicides in Jonestown, South America and Americans' thoughts were consumed by "dangerous cults,"[132] as the media called them. Media portrayals of cults frequently emphasized themes such as charismatic leadership, psychological manipulation, social isolation, authoritarian control, and apocalyptic belief systems. These representations contributed to widespread public perceptions of cults as inherently dangerous and socially deviant.[133]

After the Jonestown event, print media coverage of cult movements was condemned for being derogatory and lacking historical context. This matches anti-cultist papers more than mainstream social-scientific theory and empirical findings. Social scientists' conceptions of cult movements differ from the media's, resulting in value-free conceptualizations of "sect" and "cult" that conflict with public perception. In print media, "sect" and "cult" are more in line with anti-cultist texts than mainstream social-scientific thought and findings from observation. Social scientists' and media conceptions of cult movements differ. Irrelevant definitions of "sect" and "cult" sometimes conflict with popular perceptions of such organizations. Two-thirds

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[129] **Koresh, David**
(1959-1993), charismatic religious group leader.
Koresh, David (1959-1993), charismatic religious group leader.
Born Vernon Wayne Howell, David Koresh was the charismatic leader of a Seventh-Day Adventist sect called the Branch Davidians between 1985 and 1993 at Waco, Texas, and is best known for defying federal authorities in a standoff that ended in a fiery assault by the FBI that killed eighty-four people. "Koresh, David (1959-1993), Charismatic Religious Group Leader", *Encyclopedia.com*. Web, 17 March 2025, <www.encyclopedia.com/religion/legal-and-politicalmagazines/koresh-david-1959-1993-charismatic-religious-group-leader.>

[130] **Heaven's Gate**, religious group founded in the United States on a belief in unidentified flying objects. Under a variety of names over the years, including Human Individual Metamorphosis, Bo and Peep, and Total Overcomers Anonymous, the group advocated extreme self-renunciation to the point of castration. It burst into public consciousness following the suicide of 39 of its members in a suburb of San Diego, California, in March 1997. "Heaven's Gate | UFOs, Suicide, Marshall Applewhite," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Web. 4 Feb. 2025, <www.britannica.com/topic/Heavens-Gate-religious-group.>

[131] Van Driel, Barend, and James T. Richardson. "Categorization of New Religious Movements in American Print Media." ***Sociological Analysis***, vol. 49, no. 2, Jan. 1988, p. 172, doi:10.2307/3711011.

[132] Benjamin E. Zeller, **Prophets and Protons: New Religious Movements and Science in Late Twentieth-century America**. NYU Press, 2010, p. 22.

[133] Van Driel, p. 171.

of newspaper and news weekly issues included “sect” and “cult” according to Lindt (1979). The media has shown little hesitation in labeling various New Religious Movements (NRMs) as "sects" and "cults." Nonetheless, significant distinctions exist based on the time periods and groups in question. Only from November 1978 to April 1979, just after the Jonestown disaster, is the word "cult" used; there is no distinct preference for other labels before to or during this time frame.[134]

A charity called Inform was founded to prevent this kind of misinformation and manipulation in the media. Inform, established in 1988, offers impartial and current information on minority faiths, including New Religious Movements (NRMs) and cults. Their motto on their website was written as such: “We are an independent educational charity providing information about minority religions and sects which is as accurate, up-to-date and as evidence-based as possible.”[135] It educates authorities, journalists, and the public about these emerging religions. Inform's worldwide network of professionals and practitioners is crucial, with the British government and mainstream churches sponsoring its database of nearly four thousand religious groups. Since its founding, Inform has answered thousands of government, journalistic, academic, and public inquiries, covering topics such as law, children, women, media, violence, prophesy, possession, and money in its twice-yearly seminars.

> *Throughout the 1970s and 1980s there had been a growing concern in some quarters that there was an unnecessary amount of suffering due to ignorance and misinformation about NRMs that had emanated from the media, the movements themselves and their opponents. Although there had been a considerable quantity of relevant work carried out by scholars, their conclusions were rarely communicated beyond the bounds of academia. The idea behind Inform was to draw on this material and, relying on the methods of the social sciences, attempt to assess the flood of often conflicting reports from other sources in order to be able to provide more reliable descriptions of the various religions and of the so-called ‘cult scene’ in general.*[136]

Furthermore, the sensationalized coverage of cult-related violence and allegations of sexual assault as reported by the media contributed to a rise in the level of public fear. According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Koresh's theological responses were dismissed as “Bible babble,” and the agency instead characterized him as a dangerous individual who was preoccupied with provocative sexual activity and militarism.[137] Concerns have been raised about religious liberty in the US and the state's capacity to break cults.

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[134] Van Driel, p. 177.
[135] “Inform”. *Homepage – Inform*, n.pag, Web. 10 Jan. 2025,10 March 2025. https://inform.ac.
[136] James T Richardson, and François Bellanger. **Legal Cases, New Religious Movements, and Minority Faiths.** Routledge, 2016, p.xii
[137] Gaustad, and Schmidt, p. 221.

David Koresh, who arrived at Mount Carmel in 1981, quickly gained authority among the Branch Davidians as the messiah with a divine mission to interpret the Seven Seals of Revelation and establish a new spiritual lineage.[138] His leadership contributed to the 1993 Waco siege, which resulted in hundreds of deaths, as mentioned earlier. The Branch Davidians trace their origins to the religious teachings of Victor T. Houteff in the 1930s. Emerging from the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Houteff believed he was delivering a divine message and started a reform movement focused on gathering the 144,000 mentioned in Revelation 7:4. Later, the Mount Carmel Center in Waco, Texas, became the core of this religious community. The main goal of the movement was to prepare for a divine order before the Messiah's Second Coming by creating a holy community. However, in the following years, the group's leadership became more radical and isolated; especially during David Koresh's era, these developments led to the 1993 Waco siege. The conflict with federal forces, which resulted in the loss of many lives, further deepened the fear and distrust toward religious movements seen as "cults" in American society.[139]

The public increasingly associated cults with deception, fanaticism, and destruction due to these disastrous incidents and extensive media coverage. This perception prompted various legal and governmental interventions, including investigations of cult leaders for tax evasion, fraud, abuse, and illegal activities. In this respect, David Koresh was accused of child abuse, illicit relations with minors, and the stockpiling of illegal weapons and explosives. Informants, surveillance, and covert infiltration were used in a nine-month the ATF (The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms Agents) investigation. The desperate circumstances of women and children prompted search and arrest orders on February 28.[140] Then, the situation of women and children served as the impetus for the inquiry.

Within “45 minutes of the ATF's standoff with Howell's followers, four agents, fifteen injured, and three cult members were killed. Howell reported an abdominal shot”. The ATF blamed the incident on a tip and the control tower's absence of “a. 50-caliber armor-piercing machine gun”. Since the complex had its own well and water supply, residents were accustomed to living without power or indoor plumbing. Howell said, “106 people were remaining in the facility after five days of negotiations with federal authorities to free twenty youngsters and two adults”. To get his recorded messages heard on a live national chat program on “the Christian

[138] Martin and Zacharias, p. 53.
[139] J. Gordon Melton, **Melton’s Encyclopedia,** p. 572.
[140] Martin and Zacharias, p. 55

Broadcasting Network", Howell made promises. [141] Howell changed his mind and said God instructed him not to go. Ex-members and cult specialists worried the standoff would end in violence. As a result, Howell's ATF and law enforcement's ideological and tactical differences drove their confrontation. Initial fatalities suggest well-armed followers and deep-seated hostility to authority. Howell's refusal to surrender shows that he views the conflict as spiritual rather than legal. Independence from mainstream society shows the group has secluded itself to strengthen control and resistance against outside intrusion. Howell's bargaining techniques, including broadcasting messages, imply he wanted to influence believers and the public. The group's history of extreme conduct suggests violence was anticipated, according to ex-members and cult specialists. Resolution was difficult since the standoff included ideology, authority, and media manipulation as well as law enforcement.

These developments demonstrate that modernization not only transformed religious life in the United States but also altered public perceptions of alternative belief systems. As new religious movements became increasingly visible through social change, media expansion, and charismatic leadership, debates surrounding religious legitimacy, social conformity, and cultural authority intensified. In this context, the expansion of religious pluralism created both new opportunities for religious expression and new anxieties concerning social cohesion and religious difference.

2.3.1. Religious Pluralism and Immigration

Beginning in the late nineteenth century, the United States underwent rapid modernization, marked by industry, urbanization, and extensive migration. These developments reconfigured not just the nation's economic and social frameworks but also its religious landscape. Contemporary cities attracted diverse people into communal areas, facilitated interactions across cultural and ideological divides, and diminished the dominance of traditional Protestant practices. Immigration exacerbated these transformations by bringing new belief systems, while the expansion of legal safeguards and the evolution of cultural attitudes further facilitated religious expression in public life. American religious plurality emerged within the larger setting of industrialization, urban expansion, and demographic transformation. Thus, immigration, legal transformation, and cultural change have all significantly shaped religious diversity in the United States, expanding both the visibility of minority religions and the public debates surrounding religious pluralism.

[141] Martin and Zacharias, p.56.

Immigration has impacted US religious plurality by bringing multiple faith traditions and challenging established norms. Puritans, Quakers, and Catholics desired religious freedom from colonial times, followed by Irish and Italian Catholics, Eastern European Jews, and Asian Buddhists and Hindus in the 19th and 20th centuries. Anti-Catholic prejudice and restricted immigration policies historically opposed religious pluralism. Between the end of the 19th century and the middle of the 20th century, religious organizations of all types and from all nations typically experienced a period of slow but steady expansion. By the mid-20th century, Scientology, Hare Krishna, and Pentecostal and charismatic Christian groups complicated religious plurality. An increasing cultural openness (even desire) to identify with a religious group was a contributing factor in this rise, along with immigration and population growth throughout the country during the countercultural movements of the 1960s and 1970s, many young Americans became increasingly interested in Eastern spirituality, New Age thought, and alternative religious movements. Religious diversity became a hallmark of American culture with the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act and increased legal safeguards for religious minorities. In the United States, religious pluralism has accelerated, especially after the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, and the visibility of different religious communities has significantly increased. In addition, the Supreme Court's decisions applying the First Amendment to both the federal government and the states have sparked intense legal debates over the relationship between religion and the state. As the country becomes increasingly pluralistic, organizations such as Americans United for Separation of Church and State, the American Jewish Congress, and the American Civil Liberties Union have taken an active role in discussions of religious freedom and secularism. Especially since the 1960s, demands for a more secular state have strengthened; issues such as prayer practices in public schools and tax exemptions for religious institutions have been intensely debated. During this process, the Supreme Court has handled an unprecedented number of church-state cases in American history and has reshaped the boundaries between religion and public life.[142]

New religious practices have entered the U.S. through immigration, challenging established norms and fostering growth and resistance. From colonial protest groups to immigrant faiths in the 19th and 20th centuries, the expansion of religious diversity has had both positive and negative effects. By the mid-20th century, as new spiritual movements appeared, religious life in America became more complex. These feelings are evident in court cases about religious freedom and atheism, especially in the Supreme Court. The struggle to

[142] Gaustad and Schmidt p.183

balance religious freedom and secular government shows that religious diversity in the US is not just due to immigration but also to ongoing legal and social debates that shape the country's identity.

The way societies handle religious diversity and the extent to which they accept other faiths in public life vary widely. This recognition may take the form of informal concessions or explicit legal privileges, reflecting stronger religious, public, and state ties. Legal and constitutional frameworks outline religious groups' civil responsibilities, such as recording life events or supporting state education. In addition to legal structures, unwritten customs often default to religious organizations as the primary representatives in public and civic matters, such as official ceremonies and disaster responses. Acceptance and acknowledgment of religion differ across societies and eras, shaped by historical, cultural, and political factors.

In the sociology of religion, plurality is often mentioned but rarely defined. The distinction between its descriptive use—referring to religious diversity—and its normative use—advocating for it—needs to be clarified. Ole Riis stresses that religious variety does not imply moral acceptability. A clearer definition of pluralism might mean the ideal of peaceful variety, freedom of religious choice, integrating features from many traditions, or conflicts between these qualities.[143] However, more flexibility to shift or mix religious affiliations may erode social cohesiveness, resulting in a fragmented, postmodern plurality rather than a stable, liberal one.

The First Amendment's "free exercise" clause has always protected acts driven by moral or religious convictions, and by opposing a number of laws, such as those that prohibit preaching in public places, the distribution of religious literature, breaking Sunday "blue laws"[144], trespassing, and denying municipal licenses, the Jehovah's Witnesses have been instrumental in broadening the definition of free exercise.[145] They have mostly relied on religious practices to protect their religious beliefs. The ongoing legal struggles of the Jehovah's Witnesses to defend their religious beliefs serve as a reminder of the larger conflict between social systems and human agency. Although their acts show how strongly held beliefs may influence conduct and defy external pressures, the problem goes beyond religious conviction to the broader issue of identity formation and maintenance.

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[143] James A Beckford, **Social Theory and Religion**. Cambridge UP, 2003, p.80.

[144] **Blue Laws,** regulations that prohibit individuals from engaging in certain private and public activities on Sundayand that impose legal sanction on violators are referred to as "blue laws," "Sunday legislation," "Sunday closing laws," or "Sunday statutes." Restricted behavior covers a broad spectrum.
Fugate, Tally D. "Oklahoma Historical Society." *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture", OHS*. Web. January 2010. <www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry?entry=BL014.>

[145] Gaustad and Schmidt p.184

When considering the social science aspect of the issue, people are shaped by external social systems like the media, the government, and market forces, which determine whether they are consumers, citizens, or employees. “In jargon terms, private individuals are ‘interpellated’ or called to account for themselves by the daily experience of being, for example, consumers of mass-media products and market goods, citizens of a State, employees of organizations, members of categories identified by age, ethnicity, gender, social class, ‘lifestyle,’ and so on.” People can think critically about these identities, however, and choose to accept, reject, or resist them.

This contradicts Peter Berger's fixed idea that “privatization” is an unavoidable result of modernity, driven by streamlining, industry, and bureaucratization. [146] Therefore, people are not simply passive products of their cultural and social environments; instead, they actively negotiate and challenge the identities assigned to them. In modern society, building an identity is not solely controlled by external forces; it is also shaped by personal choice and resistance. People continually negotiate and oppose the identities imposed on them by outside influences like the media, the government, and market systems, just as the Witnesses have vigorously opposed laws that limit their ability to express their religion. This interaction between imposed identities and individual agency challenges the idea that modernization inevitably leads to the passive acceptance of predefined roles by suggesting that people are not only shaped by their surroundings but also actively negotiate, resist, and define themselves.

According to Peter Berger, pluralism reflects the fragmentation of religious authority and the decline of a shared sacred framework in modern society. This process increases encounters with competing belief systems and contributes to theological uncertainty. Berger therefore emphasizes the importance of “intermediary associations,” organizations that mediate between individuals and the state while representing shared interests. An alternative understanding of pluralism, however, focuses less on religious fragmentation and more on issues of justice, inclusion, and equality. From this perspective, pluralism aims to reduce discrimination and address social and economic inequalities within diverse societies. [147]Religious diversity in the United States has been shaped by immigration, legal transformation, and ongoing debates concerning identity, power, and belonging. It results from the relationship between established power structures, public opinion, majority standards, and minority opposition.

According to Diana Eck,

[146] James A Beckford, p. 89.
[147] James A Beckford, p. 154.

> *Pluralism is not just another word for diversity. It goes beyond mere plurality or diversity to active engagement with that plurality. Religious diversity is an observable fact of American life today, but without any real engagement with one another, neighboring churches, temples, and mosques might prove to be just a striking example of diversity. One can study this diversity, complain about there being too much diversity, or even celebrate diversity. But the diversity alone is not pluralism. Pluralism is not a given but must be created. Pluralism requires participation, and attunement to the life and energies of one another.*[148]

Increasing secularization, global migration, and digital communication have further expanded the visibility of religious diversity in contemporary American society. Global migration, international connections, and digital communication as well as additional factors today has successfully generated the religious expression.

The modern doctrine of religious freedom has been much shaped by minority groups such Black Muslims, and Jehovah's Witnesses. Sarah Barringer Gordon pointed out that "The Nation's own story, while acknowledging the role of Jehovah's Witness belief and tactics in Black Muslim history, illustrates how a new group of outsiders spoke truth to power, combining religious innovation with legal action to carve out a distinct space for believers."[149] Their legal conflicts caused courts to consider the First Amendment's wideness and government power's restrictions. The struggle between social structures and personal liberty creates a change of religious power.

> *Americans are committed to the protection of religious freedom. After all, the First Amendment to the United States Constitution opens with the importance of religion: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." These commands (known as the religion clauses) have inspired and infuriated Americans ever since they took effect in 1791.*[150]

The interplay of imposed identities with human activity refutes Peter Berger's notion that Pluralism relativizes concepts and diminishes their taken-for-granted status. Modern civilizations maintain communal values within a pluralistic context through the employment of intermediate groups that facilitate a balance between individuals and large societal institutions. Ultimately, the American experience with religious pluralism challenges the definition of a religiously diverse society—one that not only tolerates differences but also institutionalizes respect, grants access, and fosters understanding. From this standpoint, pluralism should not be interpreted as disintegration but as a framework for justice that negotiates the principles of freedom, equality, and community belonging.

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[148] Diana L. Eck, **A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Has Now Become the World's Most Religiouly Diverse Nation.** 2004, p. 70.

[149] Sarrah Barringer Gordon, **The Spirit of the Law: Religious Voices and the Constitution in Modern America**. Harvard UP, 2009, p.97.

[150] Gordon, p.1.

In closing, religious plurality in the United States has been complexified by factors such as immigration, legislative modifications, and cultural negotiations. Legal actions, challenges to prudence, and increased social awareness have contributed to statistical changes in religious diversity and prompted evolutionary developments. Immigration has introduced foreign cultures that have limited public religion and civic participation, while judicial disputes have delineated and reinforced constitutional rights concerning belief and practice. Highlighting the importance of active engagement within pluralistic societies, cultural advancements have fostered tolerance and stimulated more profound interactions among diverse groups. Currently, religious pluralism in the United States maintains a balance within community dynamics rather than signifying the dissolution of freedom, equality, and liberty. It reflects a tension between institutional authority and personal conviction, especially when religious identity is actively chosen rather than inherited. Consequently, pluralism remains both a tangible reality and an ongoing effort to uphold justice by integrating diversity into legal, political, and social frameworks.

2.3.2. Social and Political Discontent

During the 20th century, political instability and cultural unease in the US sparked unusual religious groups that redefined identity, community, and transcendence. During the twentieth century, political instability and cultural unease in the United States prompted the rise of unorthodox religious groups aimed at redefining identity, community, and transcendence. Periods characterized by warfare, economic instability, civil rights conflicts, and institutional scandals undermined existing moral frameworks and revealed the vulnerability of American confidence in conventional authority. In this tumultuous climate, a conducive setting arose for charismatic leaders and separatist factions presenting alternative spiritual avenues.

As Philips Jenkens mentioned, approaching the modern scene of “fringe groups”—often branded as “destructive cults” or “doomsday cults”—from a historical perspective helps one to properly understand the ongoing currents of social and political dissatisfaction that have defined American society throughout its existence.[151] Thanks in great part to well-known events like the Manson Family murders and the Jonestown catastrophe, the word “cult” has evolved as synonym with violence and fanaticism until 2000s. This has created a narrative that presents these groups as deviations within a generally stable social structure:

> *Notorious cult outbreaks during the 1990s included the confrontation at Waco, the violent deaths of the Heaven's Gate and Solar Temple groups,... For the media, each of*

[151] Jenkins, Philip, **Mystics and Messiahs: Cults and New Religions in American History**, Oxford UP, 2000, p.4.

> *these events spoke eloquently of blind fanaticism, megalomaniacal leaders, and the following of incomprehensible dogma. Even if we do not focus on the most aberrant groups, the existence of so many unorthodox fringe religions can be seen as a symptom of social malaise or fragmentation.* [152]

Significant theological innovation emerged in the 19th and early 20th centuries during times of spiritual awakening that spawned many organizations experimenting with communal living and alternative lifestyles. Captivating people from all social levels, the late 19th-century spiritualist movement brought Eastern religious concepts into the American spiritual terrain. The recurrent surges of anticult feeling accompanying the emergence of fringe organizations illustrate even more the cyclical character of social and political upheaval. Jenkins contends that unusual beliefs fit a long American history of discontent and spiritual inquiry. These groups are not particularly contemporary events; they questioned accepted norms and sometimes faced condemnation and charges reminiscent of present anti-cult discourse.

During Vietnam and Watergate, public trust in the media and government eroded. Extremist religious voices might provide authenticity and truth by virtue of this trust vacuum. Generation discontent and alienation at this period drove the Children of God, the Hare Krishna movement, and the Unification Church.[153] Many such groups gained appeal by offering an alternative to what was seen as the moral and cultural decline of American society, as Anne Eyre discusses in her study of cults in twentieth-century America. The rapid rise of New Religious Movements (NRMs) in the 1960s and 1970s was heavily influenced by the social and political climate of the era. Events like the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal led many young people to feel disillusioned with America's materialistic values and political system. Some expressed this frustration through protests or drug use, while others sought different lifestyles found in the religious marketplace. Moreover, changes in immigration laws in the 1960s brought Asian immigrants and Eastern religious teachers to America, introducing alternative spiritual ideas and spreading Eastern faiths and philosophies. These developments helped make new religious movements more attractive, especially to young people. As a result, throughout the 20th century in the US, social and political discontent led to the rise of cults and other religious groups. These spiritual yearnings, protests, and acts of resistance were often tied to specific times. They flourished when cultural fragmentation, political disillusionment, and institutional religion broke down.

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[152] Jenkins, p.5.

[153] **"Religious Cults in Twentieth Century America.",** *American Studies Resource Centre*, 5 Dec. 2013,Web. <https://americanstudiesrc.wordpress.com/vol-01-1994/religious-cults-in-twentieth-century-america/?>

In this light, the cults and new religious movements that emerged in the twentieth century should be viewed not only as marginal religious formations, but also as responses to political distrust, cultural fragmentation, and social alienation in American society. Crisis periods have weakened trust in traditional institutions; this has created a suitable environment for alternative religious communities to present themselves as sources of meaning, belonging, and identity. As a result, American cult discourse has increasingly come to be associated not only with religious differences but also with broader societal concerns regarding authority, national identity, moral decay, and the stability of modern society.

3. IDEOLOGY, COUNTERCULTURE, AND CULTS IN AMERICA

The emergence and multiplication of cults and countercultural groups in the US after World War II necessitate an understanding of how they fit into American social life's ideological systems. Cults and countercultures are ideological forms that mirror and challenge liberal-capitalist modernity. Ideology is an "imaginary representation of the real conditions of existence," a framework that hides and discloses material social connections, according to Louis Althusser.[154] This dual logic of illusion and allusion explains how cults and countercultures are both products and critiques of prevailing ideologies.

Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony sheds further light on this process by highlighting that social dominance is created and maintained within civil society through agreement rather than compulsion. The "spontaneous consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life" is how the ruling party, according to Gramsci, maintains power.[155] Cultural structures, moral discourses, religious conventions, and intellectual practices that make domination normal and acceptable mediate this consent. When these mediating organizations become untrustworthy, counter-hegemonic formations start to emerge, especially during times of institutional collapse, cultural fragmentation, and political disenchantment.

Cults and countercultural movements should be seen as ideological reactions to divisions within hegemonic consensus. They often posture themselves against prevailing social and religious organizations, while also creating alternative frameworks of meaning, authority, and discipline. at this way, they are at a strange place in the ideological field: they are fighting against the existing standards while also creating new ways of being and collective identity. This chapter examines cults and countercultures not just as forms of protest but as ideological

[154] Althusser, **Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses**, p. 182.
[155] Gramsci, **Prison Notebooks**, p. 12.

frameworks that engage in the continuous struggle of power, belief, and cultural validity within American society.

This chapter analyzes how cults and countercultural movements express dissent against prevailing religious and social systems, their role as ideological apparatuses, their capacity to create counter-hegemonic opportunities, and the commodification of their symbols and practices within capitalist culture. It examines how American narratives—especially in cinema, news media, literature, and documentaries—create and disseminate images of these movements, influencing public perception via ideological framing and moral control. This chapter illustrates that cults and countercultures, positioned amid overlapping ideological processes, are not marginal aberrations but key elements in the cultural and ideological formation of contemporary American society.

3.1. Resistance

In the decades after the Second World War, American cults and countercultural groups arose mostly as expressions of dissent against the prevailing social, theological, and intellectual framework. These movements were not only responses to political events or cultural changes but were also grounded in broader discontent with the structural circumstances of postwar American modernity. The combination of governmental capitalism, the proliferation of technocratic rationality, and the heightened institutionalization of religion engendered a feeling of spiritual alienation and social burnout, especially among the younger generations. As conventional sources of authority—namely, the state, the church, and the nuclear family—diminished in their ability to provide purpose and legitimacy, alternative groups emerged that overtly repudiated conformity, materialism, and institutional dominance.

This protest was expressed not just via political opposition but also through critiques of dominant epistemologies and moral frameworks. The counter-culture movement, as analyzed by Theodore Roszak (1969), criticized the "Technocratic Society" for its structural constraints, rejecting its emphasis on bureaucratic logic and materialistic efficiency in favor of spiritual and communal existence. He argues that the uprising was not just political but constituted a profound repudiation of the West's essential “Myth of Objective Consciousness.” [156] This myth, which regards scientific logic and measurable competence as the only determinants of reality, was seen as a dictatorial framework that stifled human potential. Thus, the counterculture sought redemption in the subjective and the irrational, shifting towards "a mystical, psychedelic,

[156] Theodore Roszak, **The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition,** Univ of California Press, 1995, p. 10.

and communal quest for inner reality." The inclination towards spontaneous, non-hierarchical communal living as opposed to institutional bureaucracies functioned as a direct operational critique of a society where, as Roszak articulates, “everything human... is quantified and subjected to the rule of efficiency”.[157] Thus, the preference for impromptu, non-hierarchical communal life over formal bureaucracy served as an embodied criticism of a society where, according to Roszak, "everything human..." is measured and subject to the rule of efficiency. Countercultural and cultic formations sought to recapture aspects of human consciousness suppressed by liberal-capitalist modernity and challenge the cultural legitimacy of technocracy by stressing inner experience, Eastern mysticism, and ecological harmony. In this way, these groups functioned as hubs of existential and intellectual resistance, aiming to bring transcendence, community, and authenticity back to a society that was becoming more and more characterized by instrumental reason.

This ideological dissent corresponds with Herbert Marcuse's examination of advanced industrial society, where genuine freedom is suppressed not only economically but also within the domains of "ideological, cultural, and political control"[158] illustrating that the conflict is fundamentally about consciousness. The retreat into New Age spiritualties, pushed by the “ethic of authenticity,” challenged religious orthodoxy by shifting spiritual authority from institutional dogma to the inner self:

> *In the era after the Second World War, that this ethic of authenticity begins to shape the alt look of society in general. Expressions like “do your own thing” become current; a beer commercial of the early 70s enjoyed us to be yourselves in the world of today. A simplified expressivism infiltrates everywhere. Therapies multiply which promised to help you find yourself, release your true self, and so on. [159]*

After World War II, this ethic molded American culture by emphasizing self-expression, personal satisfaction, and subjective significance. Taylor notes that “do your own thing” and other popular cultural themes in the late 1960s and early 1970s normalized the concept that authenticity was attained via self-discovery rather than inherited traditions. This simplified version of expressivism penetrated commercial culture and therapy methods that promised access to one's “true” or “real” self. New Age spiritualties thrived in this culture because they were experiential, individualistic, and non-institutional, aligning with the cultural focus on personal authenticity. These movements rejected traditional religious authority and reflected a wider ideological shift toward personal choice rather than communal obligation in identity,

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[157] Roszak, p. 11.
[158] Herbert Marcuse, **One-dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society,** Boston : Beacon Press, 1966, p. 63.
[159] Charles Taylor, **A Secular Age**, Harvard UP, 2007, p. 475.

morality, and transcendence. The rise of New Age spirituality was both a symptom and a catalyst of the postwar reconfiguration of religious life, reflecting the complex relationship between countercultural values, expressive individualism, and religious authority in late 20th-century America.

The resistance to established norms was not just destructive in purpose but also productive in its outcomes. By rejecting traditional religious ideas and prevailing social norms, these groups established alternative frameworks for identity, ethics, and community development. Their focus on community living, spiritual exploration, and individual development revealed a core contradiction regarding the concepts of freedom and authenticity in postwar American society. The dissent expressed by cults and countercultures should be perceived as an intellectual and ideological challenge to the prevailing social and religious framework—one that exposed the contradictions of American modernity while endeavoring to envision alternative ways of existence beyond its normative limitations. However, although these movements first arose as counter-responses to existing religious and social institutions, they did not confine themselves exclusively to the realm of protest. Cults and countercultural movements were able to exist as relatively independent ideological formations rather than just oppositional movements because they developed unique belief systems, power structures, disciplinary procedures, and ritual practices over time. The shift from resistance to organization requires a thorough analysis of how these movements function not just in opposition to prevailing ideologies but also as alternative ideological frameworks—a job addressed in the subsequent section.

3.2. Ideological Apparatuses

Cults and countercultural movements initially emerge as responses to dominant social, religious, and political institutions; however, their enduring existence depends on their capacity to establish meaning, regulate conduct, and maintain belief over time. In this context, they gradually transcend their origin as mere protests and begin to function as autonomous ideological systems. This evolution invites a thorough examination of Louis Althusser's concept of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), offering a valuable framework for understanding how ideology operates not solely through coercion but also through everyday practices, rituals, and modes of subject formation.

Cults and countercultural groups in the United States cannot be seen just as marginal or unconventional expressions of religious life. They are ideological formations that arise in response to the structural tensions of liberal-capitalist modernity. Utilizing Louis Althusser's

definition of ideology as an "imaginary representation of the real conditions of existence," these movements demonstrate ideology's dual function as both illusion and allusion. [160] Although these belief systems may seem disconnected from practical reality, they still represent—at times symbolically and sometimes mythically—the experienced concerns, exclusions, and dislocations generated by dominant social structures. Cults and countercultures simultaneously reproduce and challenge dominant ideological frameworks via alternate narratives of authority, morality, and identity. Their symbols, rituals, and collective practices do not only oppose mainstream ideology; instead, they reorganize ideological components into cohesive worldviews that provide meaning, belonging, and transcendence in the absence of effective institutional frameworks. In this regard, such movements operate as ideological constructs that reveal the fragility of dominant norms while suggesting alternate methods of subject construction.

Althusser's intervention redirects the investigation of ideology from abstract belief to the practical actions that shape people. He posits that ideology "exists in institutions and the practices specific to them".[161] From this viewpoint, ideology operates not primarily by convincing people via logical discourse, but by structuring daily existence—via rituals, conventions, repetitions, and embodied behaviors that make certain worldviews seem self-evident. However, when seen through this lens, cults and countercultural movements may be regarded as functioning in a way that is structurally comparable to that of Ideological State Apparatuses, despite the fact that they are not under the official authority of the state. These groups create their own institutional settings, which include communal living arrangements, ritual calendars, ethical standards, and educational systems. These environments govern behavior and mold perception according to their characteristics. Not only does participation in such movements need belief, but it also requires obedience to a regimented manner of life in which ideology is lived rather than deliberately decided or chosen by the individual.

One of the most important aspects of this process is what Althusser refers to as interpellation, which is the process by which people are "hailed" as subjects inside ideology.[162] By providing followers with identities that are founded on spiritual authenticity, moral superiority, or esoteric knowledge, cults and countercultural organizations are able to effectively interpellate their members. Individuals are treated as subjects who have been chosen, enlightened, or awakened, which results in the internalization of a worldview that redefines

[160] Althusser, **Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses**, p. 182.
[161] Althusser, **Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses**, p. 112.
[162] Althusser, **Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses**, p. 118.

obedience as emancipation and discipline as self-realization. Instead of being restructured via the use of external pressure, subjectivity is reconstructed through the awareness of ideological principles.

One thing that should be taken into consideration is that this sort of ideological operation makes interpretations more complicated, particularly those that romanticize countercultures as being intrinsically liberated. In spite of the fact that these movements are opposed to prevailing institutions like bureaucratic religion, technocratic rationalism, or capitalist materialism, they often recreate alternative regimes of power and discipline. Organizations that were originally rejected are often replaced with organizations that are characterized by charismatic leadership, rigorous theological limits, and ritualized obedience. It is also shown by Max Weber's examination of charismatic power that charisma does not eradicate dominance; rather, it reconstructs it in forms that are more individualized and emotionally intense.[163]

This tension is especially evident when charismatic leadership is analyzed not as a redeeming force, but as a distinct sort of sovereignty. Max Weber's concept of charismatic authority enables an understanding of cults and counter-cultural religious movements as not merely opposing the existing order but also as entities that generate new forms of ideological discipline. Weber describes charisma as a remarkable trait associated with an individual's personality, noting, “The term “charisma” will be applied to a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities.” Weber asserts that these qualities are beyond the reach of ordinary individuals, highlighting that these traits are “considered to be of divine origin or as exemplary” and that, as a result, the individual is “treated as a leader”.[164] Max Weber maintains that the fundamental attribute of charismatic power is in the conviction of the adherents, rather than in intellectual or ethical criteria. Weber clearly asserts: “The sole significance lies in how the individual is perceived by those under charismatic authority, by his ‘followers’ or ‘disciples’” [165]. Charismatic authority operates independently of formal legal and institutional structures and requires ongoing validation, as the leader “gains and retains his authority solely by proving his powers… [and] if the people withdraw their recognition, the master becomes a mere private person”.[166] Thus, charisma functions mostly as a socially manufactured legitimacy rather than an intrinsic human attribute.

[163] Max Weber, p. 241.
[164] Weber, p. 241.
[165] Weber, p. 242.
[166] Weber, p. 114, 115.

This elucidates the focus on steadfast allegiance, rigorous compliance with dogma, and the enactment of ritualized obedience under cult leadership.

Weber's analysis portrays Joseph Smith as a compelling illustration of charismatic authority, embodying it in a historical context. Weber describes Smith as "Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism," illustrating him as a clear instance of charismatic leadership centered on a claim of prophecy.[167] While Mormonism began as a nonconformist religious movement in opposition to American Protestant orthodoxy, it gradually transformed into an institutionalized structure centered on Smith's charisma, establishing disciplinary mechanisms and creating a new system of authority. This process validates Weber's observation that charisma must ultimately result in organization and routinization to ensure sustainability.
In this context, Weber's analysis of charismatic authority illustrates that cults and counter-cultural religious movements are not simply a reaction to dominant ideologies; they can also serve as alternative yet equally compelling ideological frameworks. Charisma disrupts the current structure while also paving the way for the creation of a new power, compliance, and set of norms.

This paradox uncovers a significant theoretical understanding: ideology does not vanish during times of opposition; instead, it restructures itself. Cults and countercultural movements function not beyond ideology, but rather within its framework; they provide alternative ideological responses to the meaning crises of modernity. Althusser highlighted that ideology reflects how individuals perceive their connection to their actual circumstances of existence, rather than the circumstances themselves.[168] As corporate structures dissolve, alternative ideological formations gain strength by transforming structural ruptures into experiential coherence, thereby producing narratives of meaning, belonging, and transcendence.

Nonetheless, the rise of these movements and their ability to garner support also highlights instances of ideological instability within prevailing systems of consent. The allure of these movements, especially, underscores the shortcomings of established ideological frameworks, including religion, education, and family, in producing legitimacy. In this context, cults and countercultural formations should be regarded not merely as alternative ideological structures but also as indicators of wider hegemonic fractures within civil society.

The Althusserian structure does a great job of showing how thought is spread through different organizations and daily actions. This way of thinking does not go far enough, though, to explain how consent is broken, when authority falls, or how resistance groups gain historical

[167] Weber, p. 242.
[168] Althusser, p. 109.

strength. At this point, a Gramscian analysis is needed that focuses on the concepts of hegemony, consent, and counter-hegemonic struggle rather than ideological reproduction. The next section will analyze cults and countercultural movements as domains of social renewal and resistance to hegemonic dominance.

3.3. Counter-Hegemony

Building upon the previous discussion, American cults and countercultural movements have emerged not merely as temporary reactions to dominant social and religious structures, but also as alternative formations that demonstrate the reproduction of ideology through everyday practices, rituals, and processes of subject formation. Althusser's conception of ideology as a practice embedded in daily life, together with Weber's analysis of charismatic authority, helps explain the mechanisms of internal discipline and legitimacy within these movements. Nevertheless, these theoretical approaches remain insufficient on their own to explain why such movements gain widespread resonance at particular historical moments and expand in relation to crises of social consent. In this regard, Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony provides an important framework for understanding not only how ideology functions, but also how moments of instability within dominant structures create space for counter-hegemonic formations. Gramsci's argument that hegemony is maintained not only through coercion but also through consent produced within civil society helps explain the emergence of cults and countercultural movements during periods in which hegemonic narratives begin to weaken. Within this framework, countercultural formations should not be understood merely as ideological deviations, but rather as counter-hegemonic practices that emerge when the dominant order loses legitimacy and alternative forms of social meaning become possible.

3.3.1. Hegemonic Crisis

Gramsci argues that hegemony transcends simple dominance enforced by governmental institutions; it is a tenuous consensus forged via cultural, moral, and intellectual leadership cultivated within civil society. The perspective of the ruling class is deemed "natural" and "inevitable" only when it corresponds with quotidian experiences. Gramsci characterizes this process as the governance of society by the rulers not through coercion, but through consent, articulating it as: "The supremacy of a social group manifests itself in two ways, as 'domination'

and as 'intellectual and moral leadership'".[169] When this leadership deteriorates or becomes incongruent with societal realities, hegemony encounters a crisis, creating a conducive environment for counter-hegemonic formations.

American cults and countercultural movements emerged prominently during periods of hegemonic disruption. The escalating bureaucratization, consumerism, technocratic rationalism, and the entrenchment of institutional religion in the post-war era have resulted in a significant deterioration in the domains Gramsci identified as "mechanisms of consent production." Conventional ideological institutions, including school, family, religion, and media, have increasingly proven insufficient in offering people purpose, belonging, and ethical guidance. This condition has diminished the efficacy of dominant narratives in elucidating everyday experiences, leading to the emergence of the NRMs and cultural forms that assert their capacity to fill this hole. Cults and countercultures should be seen not just as outcomes of individual alienation, but also as communal expressions of the legitimacy crisis of the hegemonic system.

The idea of "organic crisis" by Gramsci helps us understand this process very well. Organic crisis does not just mean a breakdown of the economy or government; it also means a time in history when the main philosophy stops making sense of social life. "The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born" says Gramsci to describe this situation.[170] During these times of in-betweenness, American countercultures sprung up, creating new ways of understanding things that catered to a strong but not yet established social desire. People who want to create a new social vision that is not based on hegemonic rules use communal living, alternative family arrangements, a focus on spiritual experience, and non-hierarchical ways of organizing.

This anti-hegemonic view should be looked at both from the point of view of Gramsci and as a place where different cultures are fighting. Raymond Williams's description of culture as "a whole way of life" clarifies why countercultural groups not only created ideas but also ways of doing things that became commonplace. Williams contends that dominant culture does not only repress dissent but actively interacts with it, as it "must be especially alert and responsive to the alternatives and opposition… [seeking] to control or transform or even incorporate them". [171]In this context, American countercultures represent a disputed domain

[169] Gramsci, **Prison Notebooks**, p. 57.
[170] Gramsci, **Prison Notebooks**, p. 276.

[171] Raymond Williams, **Marxism and Literature**, Oxford Paperbacks, 1977, p. 114.

that simultaneously confronts the prevailing social order while being marginalized, confined, or assimilated into commercial structures.

As a result, these groups are not just idealistic escape routes or pure freedom projects that can be idealized. In fact, they are counter-hegemonic movements that form in the gaps of the hegemonic order and aim to change what it means to join, what power means, and what meaning there is. It is clear from these projects that the ideological battle in American society is not just happening at the state level, but also in people's daily lives, in their faith routines, and in the arts. So, by looking at cults and countercultural groups as both ways to bring about social change and to stop it, it aims to show how culture shapes the fight for power.

3.3.2. Revitalization

Gramsci's hegemony theory and Althusser's ideology theory effectively clarify how dominating forces impose their ideals on society and sustain their domination. Nevertheless, these ideas inadequately explicate how marginalized groups in society deliberately create their own 'alternative' worlds of meaning from scratch.

This is where Wallace's notion of revival movements becomes relevant. This notion was introduced not as a competitor to prior theories, but as a supplementary viewpoint. Wallace enables a clearer analysis of the cultural reasons behind countercultural groups and New Religious Movements, as well as the mechanisms through which they establish these 'new ways of life'. The possibility of "social revitalization" of countercultural movements was another benefit of this approach. The idea of "revitalization movements", as proposed by Anthony F. C. Wallace, highlights that NRMs are deliberate cultural endeavors that arise in response to failing meaning systems rather than being either deviant or escapist. According to Wallace, these movements are “a deliberate, organized, conscious effort by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture”.[172] To reintegrate the fractured subject generated by modernity, cults and countercultures have offered alternative ethical, spiritual, and social arrangements in the American setting.

Wallace's definition of "revitalization movements" as deliberate, collective cultural responses to a meaning crisis makes it useful. Wallace calls these movements a reaction to "mazeway disintegration." "Mazeway" is a mental map of how people see, comprehend, and place themselves in the environment. When this map crumbles, people lose direction, morality, and meaning.[173]

[172] Anthony F. C. Wallace, p.265.
[173] Anthony F. C. Wallace, p.266.

With this concept, cults and countercultural groups may be seen as logical cultural endeavors that attempt to reconstruct failing meaning systems rather than as illogical or aberrant forms. The convergence between people's everyday experiences and prevailing ideological narratives has been eroded in the American setting, especially in the post-World War II century, due to growing bureaucratization, technological rationalism, consumer culture, and the hardening of institutional religion. The "mazeway disintegration" that Wallace described has resulted from this circumstance; New Religious Movements and cultural groups have arisen with the promise of addressing this gap.

In an effort to reintegrate the disjointed modern subject, these groups have put forward new social structures, spiritual cosmologies, and ethical frameworks. Intense rituals, communal life, charismatic leadership, and a focus on the "true self" have all served as efforts at societal restructuring as well as personal salvation. Wallace claims that revitalization movements fundamentally alter people's daily routines, social roles, authority dynamics, and beliefs. In this way, both cultural regeneration and social discipline might result from these movements.

Wallace's method does not, however, romanticize these movements. Conversely, it makes it abundantly evident that there are inherent inconsistencies in revitalization initiatives. These movements, which arose on the pretext of cultural regeneration, have the potential to create new kinds of power, hierarchical structures, and strict rules over time. Wallace uses the following to convey this tension: Revitalization movements commonly involve “the reorganization of authority” and the “redefinition of social roles”.[174]

This discovery is essential for exploring the reasons behind the shift of American cults and countercultural movements between language of freedom and disciplinary practices. Consequently, these movements cannot be seen only as means of escape or pure freedom initiatives. They are counter-hegemonic and also innovative cultural efforts that try to change the way people think about meaning, belonging, and authority.

In this context, Wallace's notion of "social revitalization" engages directly with Gramsci's examination of hegemony. Gramsci discusses the structural conditions that foster the emergence of countercultural movements, particularly during crises characterized by the erosion of consent and the disintegration of hegemonic stability. In contrast, Wallace delineates the objectives of these movements and the cultural orientations they employ to forge new interpretations of meaning, belonging, and wholeness. When these two techniques are analyzed concurrently, American cults and countercultural movements may be seen not only as marginal,

[174] Anthony F. C. Wallace, p.267.

deviant, or transient phenomena, but as structured cultural responses to crises of legitimacy, identity, and meaning. This synthesis unequivocally demonstrates that ideological conflict in the United States occurs not only within political apparatuses and economic relations but also through quotidian activities, religious rites, community experiences, and artistic creation. Based on this theoretical framework, the following section will use examples such as countercultural groups, New Religious Movements, and communal experiences to show how these processes are present in American society.

3.3.3. Countercultural Experiments

When American countercultural and New Religious Movements are regarded as revitalization movements in the way Wallace defines the term, it becomes abundantly evident that these formations are concrete cultural experiments aimed at restructuring everyday life rather than abstract ideological responses. These movements have offered alternative ethical, spiritual, and social arrangements at both the individual and community levels. They have manifested themselves at historical times when the hegemonic order's potential to provide meaning is diminished. Hippies, New Religious Movements (NRMs), and communal living experiences are among the most prominent instances of these revival efforts that have occurred within the United States.

The Hippies and the Reconstruction of Daily Life

During the American counterculture of the 1960s, hippies formulated a profound criticism of consumerism, bureaucratic rationalism, the nuclear family model, and organized religion, which are the foundational elements of contemporary capitalist society. This critique transcended language and manifested in lifestyle, body politics, music, aesthetics, and the production of communal space. Raymond Williams' characterization of culture as "a whole way of life" elucidates the countercultural practices of the hippies. Williams articulates the conflict between the prevailing culture and alternative, dissenting cultures in the following manner:

> *The dominant culture, so to speak, at once produces and limits its own forms of counter-culture. Any speculative or theoretical or artistic work which goes beyond the existing boundaries is at once interpreted, in this sense, as 'alternative' or 'oppositional', and is thus, in the very act of its definition, incorporated or at least brought into a recognizable and manageable relation with the dominant.*[175]

Williams' observation shows how the system "domesticates" threats against itself by using those threats as part of its own language. The Hippie movement, which started in the 1960s, however,

[175] Raymond Williams, **Marxism and Literature**, Oxford Paperbacks, 1977, p. 121.

is very different from this "manageable opposition."[176] In order to imagine a new life, hippies didn't follow these rules; instead, they purposely broke them.

This break, which turns down the system's "alternative" place, is more than just a protest; it is a new way of living. As a way to fix the broken modern subject, ideas like shared ownership, sexual freedom, drug experiences, and a focus on Eastern spirituality have come up. These habits make it hard for the "articulation" process that Williams talked about to happen. When Theodore Roszak talked about the counterculture, he said that it was a movement that fought against "technocratic consciousness." [177]This resistance says that the human spirit and experience are limitless, unlike the modern world that is logical, measurable, and bureaucratic: *"*The counterculture explores a mode of consciousness and experience that is explicitly opposed to the scientific world view and the technocratic society it has produced." [178] Hippies, in this sense, might be seen as a component of an organized effort to construct a "more satisfying culture" in opposition to the collapsing systems of meaning, as outlined by Wallace.

In the United States, New Religious Movements stand out as one of the best instances of religious counterculture. NRMs have emphasized personal experience, charismatic leadership, and direct spiritual interactions while challenging the authority of formal church organizations. Currently, the following is an explanation based on Max Weber's understanding of charismatic leadership: "Charismatic authority is specifically irrational in the sense of being foreign to all rules."[179]

Weber additionally stated that charisma may free people, but it can also set the stage for new kinds of discipline. American NRMs clearly show this dual nature. They provide people a feeling of purpose, belonging, and direction, but they also create new norms and power dynamics. Philip Lucas says that the visibility and popularity of current NRMs are strongly tied to modern communication networks and the way that cultures become more mainstream: "New religious movements have become increasingly normalized through media exposure, legal accommodation, and their integration into consumer culture." [180] In this perspective, NRMs need to be seen as both an indicator of the crisis inside the hegemonic system and as a creative cultural reaction to this crisis.

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[176] Williams, **Marxism and Literature**, p. 121.
[177] Theodore Roszak, **The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition,** Doubleday, 1969, p.5.
[178] Rozsak, p.5.
[179] Weber, p. 244.
[180] Phillip Charles Lucas, **New Religious Movements in the 21st Century,** Routledge, 2004, p.12.

The countercultural revival was most distinctly manifested in communal living situations. Communes served not just as alternative lifestyles but also as micro-social laboratories that changed connections concerning property, work, family, and authority. These encounters may be seen as a deliberate challenge to the perpetuation of consent via quotidian behaviors, within the context of Gramsci's notion of hegemony.

The aspect of deliberate cultural rebuilding that Anthony F. C. Wallace highlighted in his definition of revitalization movements is especially apparent in the case of communes: "A revitalization movement is a deliberate, organized, conscious effort by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture." [181]

By opposing collective life to modern individualism, sharing to competitive production relations, and horizontal organization to hierarchical authority, the communes directly challenged hegemonic norms. However, these projects have often been slowed down by disagreements within the group, threats from outside, and concerns about how to keep the economy going. The current situation shows both the strengths and weaknesses of countercultural renewal.

This section has analyzed American cults and countercultural groups not only as marginal aberrations or transient youth responses, but as deliberate efforts at cultural reconfiguration that arise amid periods of crisis within the hegemonic system. Gramsci's idea of hegemony helps us understand why these movements started, especially when the ways we make meaning were less strong. Wallace's idea of revitalization movements revealed that these groups were not only important but also made up of important things. Hippies, New Religious Movements, and communal experiences have unequivocally shown that ideological battle transcends the confines of the state and the economy; it persists via cultural practices and lifestyles, redefining perceptions of everyday existence, authority, belonging, and holiness. In this regard, countercultural movements need to be seen as historical labs that elucidate both the potential for social renewal and the inherent constraints of such potentialities.

It is essential to consider countercultural and religious experiences not just as ideological or cultural alternatives, but also as pragmatic arenas that illustrate the construction and internalization of power. Max Weber's notion of charismatic authority elucidates the formation of movements centered on influential leaders, whilst Michel Foucault's analysis of power and discipline facilitates comprehension of the effects of these structures on everyday existence.

[181] Wallace, p. 265.

Weber asserts that charismatic power arises in opposition to conventional and rational-legal frameworks; yet, this kind of authority ultimately gets institutionalized and generates new norms when it becomes enduring. Conversely, Foucault sees power not just as a system that enforces oppression, but as a network of interactions that influences and guides people. Power functions via quotidian behaviors, discourses, and disciplinary procedures, rather than being enforced by a superior authority. In this context, American cults and countercultural societies have a contradictory nature: Although they arise with the assertion of liberty by contesting the disciplinary structures of the prevailing order, they ultimately establish their own norms, rituals, and systems of obedience. This scenario corroborates Foucault's central argument that power is not an entity external to itself. In this context, counterculture should not be seen as a retreat from power, but rather as a reconfiguration of power. This synthesis theoretically establishes that counter-hegemonic battles, to be examined in the subsequent chapter, serve as both political resistance and processes of remaking the subject, the body, and quotidian existence.

Countercultural and religious movements initially arise as attempts to reconstruct meaning and resist prevailing ideological frameworks; however, their enduring presence in capitalist societies inevitably subjects them to processes of appropriation, commodification, and commercialization. The next part looks at how American countercultures, even though they started out as oppositional, end up being absorbed into market logics and turned into cultural forms that can be bought and sold.

3.4. Commodification of Counterculture

The countercultural and religious movements are analyzed in Section 3.3 as alternative efforts that emerged during times of crisis within the hegemonic system. These groups sought to establish meaning, a sense of belonging, and an identity. It is not a total rupture with the prevailing order that will determine the destiny of countercultures; rather, it is their internalization, reframing, and commercialization that will determine their future. However, the historical development of these movements demonstrates that counter-hegemonic activities transcended simple opposition; they were progressively transformed by the cultural, economic, and symbolic dynamics of the capitalist system. The fate of countercultures is currently determined not by a total break from the prevailing order, but by its assimilation, recontextualization, and commercialization.

Capitalist modernity possesses a malleable framework capable of disseminating not only economic production relations but also cultural diversities, aesthetic expressions, and alternative lifestyles. In this context, while countercultures initially generated alternative

lifestyles that contested prevailing norms, they ultimately became commodities within consumer culture; their symbols, discourses, and aesthetic forms were reinterpreted by the market. Resistance has evolved from an external threat to the system into a cultural asset that guarantees the system's continuity.

This transformation has been discussed in the critical theory tradition, especially by those from the Frankfurt School. Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, via their notion of the culture industry, illustrate how contemporary capitalism suppresses critical thought by homogenizing cultural creation. They assert that culture has ceased to be a domain of freedom and has become a mechanism for perpetuating domination: "Culture today is infecting everything with sameness."[182] From this viewpoint, the aesthetic and intellectual components of countercultural movements are reduced to edible and commercial formats, so forfeiting their distinctiveness.

Guy Debord's concept of "the society of the spectacle"[183] is essential for comprehending the constraints of countercultural resistance to mere representation. According to Debord, in modern culture, social relations are perceived through representations rather than directly: "The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images." [184]Within this framework, counterculture transforms from a lived experience into a representation that is visual, artistic, and symbolic, paving the way for the dilution of its radical essence during the representation process.

This theoretical framework explains why religious and countercultural movements were not entirely suppressed throughout history. Instead, they were transformed and integrated into the system. Capitalist hegemony perceives these movements not just as foreign threats but also as cultural assets that may be reinterpreted. Consequently, counter-hegemonic discourses are reduced to aestheticized, commodified, and consumable forms, thereby eradicating their radical significance. In this process, the critical potential of countercultures is diverted rather than entirely eliminated. The historical fate of countercultures is shaped not by a total separation, but by the complex, negotiated, and transformative connection they establish with the prevailing order.

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[182] Theodor W Adorno, **The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture.** Psychology Press, 2001, p. 94.
[183] Guy Debord, **Society of the Spectacle***: Pocket Edition*. Pattern Books, 2005, p. 7.
[184] Debord, p.12.

3.4.1. From Resistance to Consumption

The relation between countercultural movements and the capitalist system should not be seen only as a process of repression or destruction, but as a more intricate mechanism of absorption and refunctioning. Capitalist hegemony may not totally block out criticism of capitalism; instead, it may change and spread it. In this context, countercultural resistance ceases to function as an external opposition to the system; rather, it becomes a cultural phenomenon aestheticized, depicted, and commercialized within market dynamics. In this process of change, resistance is no longer seen as a danger, but as a resource that can be used to create new things and make things more diverse.

This transformation takes place not through the outright eradication of the ideological substance of countercultures, but rather through the disintegration of their meanings, their detachment from context, and their reconfiguration for individual appropriation. Collective practices of life, political assertions, and critiques of systems are, over time, diminished to discourses centered on style, lifestyle, and individual preference. Therefore, countercultural symbols are deprived of their critical context and redistributed by the market. This process embodies the essential dynamic that accounts for why countercultures were not historically entirely marginalized; in fact, it explains how they were able to integrate into mainstream culture.

The commodification of countercultures should now be understood as both an economic process and an ideological reshaping. Capitalist modernity reduces counter-cultural critiques by keeping them within the system's boundaries, shifting resistance from a collective political movement to a space for individual consumption and identity building. As a result, counterculture serves as proof of the dominant order's flexibility and adaptability, rather than as a force that destabilizes it.

The American countercultures of the 1960s, especially the hippie movement, exemplify how an idea can be reinterpreted and placed in a new context. Initially, the hippie movement challenged capitalist modernity by opposing consumerism, ownership, war, and institutional authority. It also advocated for group living. However, rather than establishing a lasting alternative outside the system, the capitalist market has reinterpreted this challenge on an aesthetic and symbolic level. Countercultural lifestyles have been stripped of their political meaning and turned into commodities centered around personal concepts like "freedom," "authenticity," and "self-expression."

In this change, style and aesthetics have been very important in turning resistance into a commodity. Hippie clothes, music festivals, psychedelic art, and alternative body politics

swiftly gained popularity with regular people. Thomas Frank states that countercultural language has slowly shifted from a critique of capitalism to an ideology that reveals its new, "libertarian" side. As Frank argues in *The Conquest of Cool*:

> *Many in American business… imagined the counterculture not as an enemy… but as a hopeful sign, a symbolic ally in their own struggles… They welcomed the youth-led cultural revolution… because they perceived in it a comrade in their own struggles to revitalize American business and the consumer order generally.*[185]

Building on Frank's analysis, resistance is no longer seen as an external force but rather as an integral element of the capitalist system's renewal processes. Capitalism can create and rearrange not only economic production relations but also cultural meanings, symbols, and modes of identification. As a result, although countercultural movements begin as radical alternatives that challenge the ideological basis of the present order, they are eventually re-coded by this system and converted into consumer goods. During this phase, resistance ceases to be a serious threat to the system and becomes a resource that demonstrates the system's flexibility and adaptability.

Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, two of the most influential intellectuals associated with the Frankfurt School, have explained this process as the "culture industry." They claim that capitalism is responsible for the standardization of cultural output, rendering critical thinking ineffective and turning people into passive consumers. This dilemma is expressed by Adorno and Horkheimer in the following:

> *The culture industry perpetually cheats its consumers of what it perpetually promises. The promissory note which, with its plots and staging, it draws on pleasure is endlessly prolonged; the promise, which is actually all the spectacle consists of, is illusory: all it actually confirms is that the real point will never be reached, that the diner must be satisfied with the menu.*[186]

This remark demonstrates how culture has transformed from a space for social criticism and freedom into a mechanism for the systematic replication of ideologies. People are approached by the culture business with the promise of independence, genuineness, and "being oneself," but what they really get is an identity controlled and standardized to meet commercial demands. Every time a person thinks they are creating something special, they are just buying into a lifestyle template that the business has already created.

As part of this process, aesthetic counter-culture forms are meticulously eliminated of any political or radical element that may undermine the system. Elements of "style" consistent with the system have replaced symbols that traditionally represented social divisions. Adorno

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[185] Thomas Frank, **The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism,** University of Chicago Press, 1997, p.8-9.
[186] Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, **Dialectic of Enlightenment**. Verso, 1997, p.111.

highlights the irony that, even while aware of this process, contemporary consumers are unable to avoid it. To maintain their social survival, consumers consent to this loop even when they perceive the system is deceitful: “The triumph of advertising in the culture industry is that consumers feel compelled to buy and use its products even though they see through them.”[187]

In this case, it is clear that people's cultural and economic actions contribute to the system's reproduction. Rather than being powerful weapons in the fight against the system, counterculture symbols are becoming items of consumption that guarantee the system's survival. Herbert Marcuse also explained how the system absorbs opposition in industrialized nations. Modern capitalism, argues Marcuse, sustains its supremacy by repression and the provision of regulated areas of personal freedom. Marcuse provides the following explanation of the situation:

> *The people recognize themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home, kitchen equipment. The very mechanism which ties the individual to his society has changed, and social control is anchored in the new needs which it has produced.*[188]

This phrase illustrates how people today identify themselves more through material possessions than through political or social struggles. Even countercultural identities are turning into commodities within the system, shifting from symbols of freedom outside it to elements of consumption. A more revealing perspective on this change is provided by Guy Debord's concept of the "society of the spectacle." Debord argues that in modern capitalism, representations replace genuine social interactions. Instead of experiencing social reality directly, people are mediated by images. Debord's description of this process is as follows:

> *In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. All that once was directly lived has become mere representation. The images detached from every aspect of life fuse into a common stream in which the unity of this life can no longer be reestablished.*[189]

This remark shows that the spectacle serves as a tool for the current system to legitimize itself, as well as a depiction. Here, capitalism does more than just strangle the counterculture; it reproduces, changes, and incorporates it into the system to make sure it stays in place. Although counterculture arose as a criticism of capitalism, Thomas Frank argues that it is now an integral aspect of capitalism's inventive and dynamic nature: “Hip became central to the way American

[187] Adorno and Horkheimer, p. 167.
[188] Herbert Marcuse. **One Dimensional Man: studies in the ideology of advanced industrial society**. 1964, p.9.
[189] Guy Debord. **The Society of the Spectacle**. (Donald Nicholson-Smith tarafından çevrilmiştir,) Zone Books, 1994, p.19, Tez:24.

capitalism understood itself and explained itself to the public."[190] The paradoxical nature of counterculture: initially, it challenges the established order, but over time, it becomes part of that system and takes on a new role, thereby supporting the status quo. Consequently, what begins as resistance shifts into a mechanism that sustains and reaffirms the existing system.

3.4.2. Spirituality

The commercialization of countercultural dynamics may be seen in religious and spiritual areas as well as in aesthetics and lifestyle. The New Religious Movements (NRMs) and New Age spirituality that emerged in America, especially in the 1960s, were the first ways of finding meaning that differed from institutional Christianity, secular logic, and the feeling of being alone in the contemporary world. These movements have fought against hegemonic modernity by promoting individual inner change, fostering communal awareness, and rejecting materialist principles. But as time has gone on, these spiritual ideas have been changed to fit the logic of the market economy and made into things that can be bought and sold.

Jeremy Carrette and Richard King explore how spirituality has evolved within the neoliberal economy. They argue that modern capitalism has detached religious experience from social change and communal ethics, placing it in the realm of personal growth and individual achievement. According to Carrette and King, "spirituality has become a cultural resource for neoliberal capitalism." It serves as the new frontier for capitalist ventures, "providing a psychological 'fix' for the stresses of the corporate world," while also "simultaneously legitimizing the very structures that cause the stress." In this sense, "spirituality is the 'silent takeover' of the language and practice of religion by the forces of the market."[191] This method illustrates that spirituality is used to make people more productive and mentally strong in the market, rather than to foster awareness that goes against the system. Meditation, yoga, energy therapy, and other activities that expand awareness have gone from being part of group change efforts to being ways to improve individual health and performance.

Currently, spiritual experience undergoes three stages of transformation as it becomes commercialized: first, extracting doctrines from their historical and cultural backgrounds; second, personalizing social redemption into narratives of individual victory and inner peace; and third, marketing spiritual practices as sellable items such as books, courses, seminars, and

[190] Thomas Frank, **The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism**, University of Chicago Press, 1997, p. 31.
[191] Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, **Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments**, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002, p.1, 2.

digital media. This evolution renders countercultural religious groups less radical while still shaping the neoliberal subject. Spirituality is no longer viewed as a critique of the system but to enhance one's effectiveness within it. This process also aligns with Herbert Marcuse's analysis of sophisticated industrial civilizations. Marcuse states that the system does not actively suppress rebellious energy; instead, it incorporates it into itself. He explains that contemporary civilization addresses the need for dramatic change by providing people with limited spaces of freedom. One of these controlled areas of freedom is how spirituality influences the economy.

Guy Debord's idea of the spectacle is also vital for understanding how modern spiritual culture spreads via the media. Spiritual experience is changing from a direct, lived experience of existence to a picture seen and digested. Spirituality, which is spread via social media, movies, self-help programs, and popular culture, is increasingly more about how it is represented than how it is experienced. At this stage, spirituality is more about how someone acts than about freeing themselves from inside. Thus, New Religious Movements and alternative spiritual currents are to be seen not just as religious or cultural occurrences, but also as exemplars of the ideological adaptability of capitalist modernity. These groups, which at first offered alternatives to institutional religion and rational-bureaucratic authority, have been moved into market processes throughout time. The spiritual aspect of counterculture has evolved from a method of resistance outside the system to an identity and consumption category inside it.

As previously mentioned, the development of countercultural and New Religious Movements within capitalist society is both an economic process of commodification and a cultural process of reproduction, in which ideological values are reinterpreted. Capitalist modernity may not directly stop countercultures but influences them by spreading its symbols, ideas, and perspectives. The market gradually alters how people view cultural activities that originally challenged the system.

3.5. Representation

The commercialization of countercultural movements and New Religious Movements (NRMs) within capitalist society cannot be understood only as an economic or cultural process. It also depends on representation, because these movements enter public consciousness largely through the images, narratives, and discourses produced about them. Media outlets, popular culture, film, and literary narratives do not merely describe cults, NRMs, or countercultural

movements; they frame them within particular ideological meanings. For this reason, the question is not simply how these formations are portrayed, but what kinds of social judgments these portrayals produce.

This section therefore examines representation as an ideological process. The selected films, news reports, and literary texts are treated as primary sources through which the cultural meaning of cults and countercultural formations is constructed, contested, and reproduced. Rather than approaching these narratives as neutral reflections of historical reality, the analysis reads them as sites where American anxieties about freedom, authority, deviance, authenticity, violence, and social order become visible. Each example is examined in relation to its historical context, the ideological contradiction it makes visible, and the representational strategies through which alternative belief systems are rendered meaningful.

Within this approach, representation serves as a bridge between historical experience and cultural interpretation. Cults, NRMs, and countercultural groups become publicly intelligible not only through their practices, but also through the language, images, and narrative patterns used to describe them. Terms such as “dangerous cult,” “brainwashing,” “charismatic leader,” “commune,” “alternative lifestyle,” or “spiritual freedom” are not innocent descriptions; they organize perception and position these formations either as threats to social order or as signs of resistance to dominant ideology. Therefore, the following analysis focuses not only on the content of selected narratives, but also on how they construct meaning, produce ideological distinctions, and shape the cultural memory of cults, NRMs, and countercultural movements in the United States.

Cultural studies has strongly emphasized the ideological role of representation. Stuart Hall argues that representation is not merely a neutral way of depicting reality; rather, it is an ideological practice central to the production of meaning. Hall argues:

> *Representation is the production of meaning through language… The concept of representation has come to occupy a new and important place in the study of culture. Representation connects meaning and language to culture. [...] Meaning is what gives us a sense of our own identity, of who we are and with whom we 'belong'—so it is tied up with questions of how culture is used to mark out and maintain identity within and difference between groups.*[192]

In this context, cultural narratives do not explicitly depict reality; rather, they establish certain perspectives that shape perceptions. These portrayals influence perceptions of countercultural groups and new religious movements. Frequently, such groups are depicted in American

[192]Stuart Hall, **Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices**, SAGE Publications Limited, 1997, p. 16, 17.

popular culture as dangerous cults, irrational organizations, or manipulative leaders. These depictions, grounded in historical facts, also serve to maintain the prevailing social order. Moreover, these representations may be associated with Michel Foucault's analysis of the relationship between knowledge and power. Foucault asserts that the production of knowledge is inherently biased, shaped by power dynamics. He emphasizes this point by stating, “power and knowledge directly imply each other,” indicating that these concepts are inseparably linked. Media narratives function as ideological instruments that reshape and reinterpret social reality within certain boundaries. In these narratives, some ways of living are regarded as "normal," "rational," and "legitimate," while others are labeled as "other." Popular narratives can portray countercultural movements as irrational, destructive, or strange, thereby stigmatizing them effectively. Films, journalism, and popular literature often depict these groups as led by charming yet controlling leaders, with followers who are passive and easily influenced, or as isolated societies threatening societal stability. Such portrayals constitute stereotypes that oversimplify and obscure the historical and heterogeneous nature of countercultures. These movements are not regarded as social processes to be understood but rather as peculiar phenomena to be controlled or marginalized. This form of representation, implicitly or explicitly, upholds the dominant social system. Countercultures are portrayed as irrational and dangerous; meanwhile, institutions such as the state, family, education, and religion are depicted as rational, safe, and essential. This dichotomy reinforces the perception that social order is both vital and impervious to change. Consequently, media narratives marginalize countercultures, thereby reinforcing existing social structures and producing an ideological map that delineates which identities, beliefs, and lifestyles are deemed acceptable. To fully comprehend how these movements are perceived, how society perceives itself, and which values underpin its self-validation, it is crucial to analyze the manner in which countercultures are portrayed.

Edward Said's analyses of representation are crucial for comprehending the ideological aspects of cultural narratives. Said maintains that representation transcends cultural description; it is a political process that delineates and classifies certain groups. At this point, Said suggests the following: “Representation is itself implicated, intertwined, embedded, interwoven with a great many other things besides the ‘truth’.” [193] In this case, the way that American stories show countercultures is not only because people are interested in them, but also because it helps to

[193] Edward W Said, **Orientalism**. Vintage, 1979, p. 272.

keep societal standards alive. These stories typically portray countercultures as crazy, extremist, or dangerous groups, which makes the principles of mainstream society seem more valid.

Consequently, the portrayal of countercultures in media and literary narratives serves a dual ideological function. These movements become significant components of popular culture through unusual and dramatic tales. Simultaneously, these modes of representation alter the social order by defining what forms of existence are considered "normal" and "legitimate." Therefore, countercultures evolve not only economically but also symbolically and narratively.

3.5.1. Film

American cinema both reflects and shapes the ideological meanings attached to countercultural movements and New Religious Movements through its representations. In order to make complex social and historical processes more intelligible, films often organize countercultural formations and cultic groups into recognizable narrative patterns. This tendency is especially visible in cinematic portrayals of "cults." In many American cult films, these groups are represented as closed or semi-closed communities built around a charismatic leader, separated from the outside world, and structured through rituals, obedience, emotional dependence, and the gradual weakening of individual autonomy. Such portrayals do not merely describe alternative groups; they translate them into moral and ideological narratives through which American culture negotiates anxieties about freedom, authority, belonging, discipline, and manipulation. One way to read this narrative pattern is through Max Weber's concept of charismatic authority. Weber defines charisma as a quality "recognized as extraordinary" that enables a leader to inspire trust and devotion among followers: "Charisma is validated through the recognition of personal proof by those who are ruled. This was originally affected through the performance of a miracle, bringing about a voluntary dedication to a revelation, to hero worship, to absolute trust in the leader." [194] In this formulation, charisma is not simply a personal trait possessed by the leader; it is a form of authority socially produced and collectively acknowledged by followers. It is founded on recognition rather than direct force, and it is maintained through voluntary belief. [195] However, cinematic representations rarely preserve this theoretical neutrality. Instead, films often transform charisma into a visual and narrative sign of danger, seduction, and ideological control. The charismatic leader becomes not only a religious or spiritual figure, but also a symbolic embodiment of the fear that the desire for

[194] Max Weber, **Economy and Society,** p. 374, 375.
[195] Max Weber, **Economy and Society,** p. 242.

belonging may turn into dependence and that the search for freedom may produce new forms of submission.

Conversely, cinema typically portrays this connection through manipulation, deception, and control rather than offering impartial societal criticism. Then the traditional conception of the charismatic leader is seen not as an effective means of acquiring power, but rather as a detrimental deviation. This method of presentation is intricately connected to narrative structures in films. David Bordwell claims that conventional narrative cinema simplifies complex social dynamics through individual characters and causal relationships, noting that "classical narrative cinema tends to represent causality through psychologically defined individuals".[196]

Cults are often portrayed as stories of personal wrongdoing, while their social and historical backgrounds are ignored. When collective movements, especially those involving systemic critique, are discussed, they are usually explained in terms of individual psychological issues or the leader's deviations. This simplification masks the true ideological core of counterculture, turning it into a spectacle that is more entertaining and marketable. American movies have been deeply influenced by historical events. After the Jonestown Massacre, films depicting cults became notably dark and intensely frightening. The media and cinema crafted a compelling narrative around this event, linking cults to collective paranoia, brainwashing, and mass murder. These portrayals evoke both fear and fascination in viewers, while also undermining the social legitimacy of countercultural movements.

At this juncture, film functions not merely as a medium of representation but also as an environment that fosters a distinct emotional regime. Linda Williams' study of affect and melodrama demonstrates how popular narratives influence and manipulate audiences' emotions. As Linda Williams argues, melodrama is driven by "the quest to forge a viscerally felt moral legibility in the midst of moral confusion and disarray".[197]

Cult representations operate in the same way; they set the boundaries between "good" and "evil," "normal" and "deviation" by providing the audience with a unique moral framework. Because of this, countercultures are considered as not just different but also perhaps dangerous. Still, American movies rarely portray counterculture in a one-sided way. In particular, a number of movies from the 1960s and 1970s examined countercultural movements with a greater critical and empathetic perspective. Still, these representations frequently have a strange

[196]David Bordwell, **Narration in the Fiction Film**, Univ of Wisconsin Press, 1985, p. 157.
[197] Linda Williams, **Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson,** Princeton University Press, 2001, p.17.

structure: a story that alternates between the search for freedom and truth and the fall into chaos and loss of control. This two-part structure makes counterculture both captivating and perilous. Thomas Elsaesser defined cinema as a medium in which societal tensions are vividly relived and meaning is perpetually redefined. This description, drawn from New German Cinema, demonstrates how the modern cinematic environment operates in general. Elsaesser posits that cinema functions within "different sets of debates or ideological fields, in which the contradictions were negotiated, contained and even temporarily resolved". [198] From this stance, American film not only portrays countercultures but also simulates and manages the ideological disputes they generate. In these narratives, counterculture is portrayed as an emblem of freedom, yet is simultaneously constrained by the perils of exceeding its boundaries.

This representational structure may be analyzed more concretely via certain films in American cinema. *The Master* (2012)[199] suggests looking at the rise of New Religious



Movements not just as a "deviation," but as closely related to the modern person's need for meaning. The movie highlights the charismatic leader as a powerful figure who guides his followers in living their lives, going beyond the usual "cult leader" stereotype of someone who uses manipulation.

[198] Thomas Elsaesser, **New German Cinema: A History,** Rutgers University Press, 1989, p.3.
[199] **The Master.** Directed by Paul Thomas Anderson, performances by Joaquin Phoenix, Philip Seymour Hoffman, and Amy Adams, The Weinstein Company, 2012.

Figure 2. Lancaster Dodd and Freddie Quell during the "processing" scene in *The Master* (2012).[200]

In this context, the movie demonstrates that charisma can be used to manipulate people and to help them find meaning and a sense of belonging. This portrayal aligns with the Weberian paradigm, which emphasizes that charismatic power is both an external force and a bond established through the followers' conviction. This relationship is particularly evident in the "processing" scenes between Lancaster Dodd and Freddie Quell. Charisma is constructed more on the basis of psychological dependence and spiritual belonging than on physical pressure, as evidenced by repetitive questions, protracted eye contact, and moments of emotional vulnerability. The film intentionally blurs the boundaries between guidance, confession, and control through the use of lengthy close-up views and narrow framing.

From this standpoint, the film's "processing" scenes not only show Lancaster Dodd's personal influence over Freddie Quell, but also reveal how a sense of belonging is ideologically produced. Freddie's fragility is not presented merely as an individual weakness. Rather, it is associated with the identity crisis, the crisis of masculinity, and the difficulty of reintegrating into society in the postwar period. As a war veteran who has gone through traumatic experiences, Freddie cannot fully return to everyday life, and therefore becomes receptive to Dodd's discourse of healing, discipline, and spiritual transformation. The film thus situates the rise of charismatic authority within a historical context in which dominant institutions can no longer provide individuals with a stable sense of meaning and direction. At first glance, Dodd's movement offers a possibility of release from psychological disarray and social alienation. However, this promise gradually turns into a new relationship of dependency. The fundamental ideological contradiction that the film reveals emerges precisely at this point: the promise of healing becomes intertwined with mechanisms of control. The discourse of self-knowledge produces obedience; the community that promises belonging reshapes the individual around the authority of the leader. Dodd's later statement, "If you figure a way to live without serving a master, any master, then let the rest of us know,"[201] crystallizes the film's central ideological problem. The sentence suggests that mastery is not limited to the cultic leader alone; rather, subjectivity itself is organized through dependence, service, and authority.

Similarly, *Martha Marcy May Marlene* (2011)[202] examines the inner workings of a countercultural community through individual experience, making visible how discipline is

[200] **The Master.** Directed by Paul Thomas Anderson, performances by Joaquin Phoenix and Philip Seymour Hoffman, Annapurna Pictures, 2012.
[201] **The Master,** 01:48:20–01:48:45.
[202] **Martha Marcy May Marlene.** Directed by Sean Durkin, performances by Elizabeth Olsen, John Hawkes, and Sarah Paulson, Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2011.

internalized. In the film, community life is initially presented as an opportunity for freedom, belonging, and an alternative way of living, but over time, it transforms into a structure that dissolves individual identity through repetitive rituals, daily practices, and norms. Especially the regulation of the body, time, and behavior shows that discipline operates as an internalized control mechanism rather than an external coercion. This situation reveals that countercultural movements are not only spaces of liberation but also structures that produce new forms of subjectivity.



Figure 3. Representation of communal discipline and collective life in *Martha Marcy May Marlene* (2011).[203]

The film's fragmented editing style and its abrupt transitions between the past and the present make Martha's psychological fragmentation visible and show that even after leaving the community, the mechanisms of discipline continue to shape the individual's perception. Repeating daily rituals, shared living spaces, and the constant regulation of behavior concretize Foucault's understanding of discipline on a visual level.

At this point, the most important aspect of the film is that it does not merely depict the cult structure as a closed community exerting external pressure; rather, it shows how this pressure gradually becomes internalized in the individual's perception and body. The repeated circulation of the names Martha, Marcy May, and Marlene functions as a primary textual sign

[203] **Martha Marcy May Marlene**. Directed by Sean Durkin, performances by Elizabeth Olsen and John Hawkes, Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2011.

of identity fragmentation.[204] Naming is not treated as a simple form of address; it becomes a mechanism through which the community reorganizes Martha's self-perception and weakens the continuity of her individual identity. Martha's name within the community, her body, sexuality, eating habits, sleeping patterns, and daily behaviors are constantly regulated and reconfigured. Thus, the film shows that individual identity is not destroyed all at once; it is slowly dissolved through repeated small practices, silence, obedience, communal living, and the authority of the leader. Although Martha physically separates herself from the community, she cannot fully escape from it mentally. The sharp transitions between the past and the present make her trauma visible not only as a psychological issue, but also as the internalized result of discipline. Therefore, the fundamental ideological contradiction in the film lies between the promise of freedom and the re-subjugation of the subject. The community seems to offer Martha belonging and an alternative way of life; however, this belonging ultimately causes her to lose authority over her own body, desires, and decisions.

Once Upon a Time in Hollywood (2019)[205], on the other hand, exposes how movies have historically altered and defined counterculture via the Manson Family murders. The movie juxtaposes the image of the 1960s counterculture, associated with freedom, experience, and other ways of living, with the concerns of society at the time. The way the Manson family is shown in movies is an example of how countercultural groups are often seen as radical and dangerous.



Figure 4. Countercultural paranoia and the cinematic reconstruction of the Manson Family in *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* (2019).[206]

[204] **Martha Marcy May Marlene**, 00:32:10–00:33:05.
[205] **Once Upon a Time in Hollywood.** Directed by Quentin Tarantino, performances by Leonardo DiCaprio, Brad Pitt, and Margot Robbie, Sony Pictures, 2019.
[206] "David Fincher's Once Upon a Time in Hollywood Follow-Up Will See Brad Pitt Return as Cliff Booth in a Connected Story Set 8 Years Later." Maxblizz, 8 Apr. 2025.

In this sense, the movie not only presents the story of a historical event, but it also changes how people remember counterculture. In this case, counterculture is not seen as a space for criticizing the system; instead, it is viewed as an irrational and uncontrollable force that threatens order. Tarantino reproduces the cultural paranoia surrounding the Manson Family through the contrast between the atmosphere of tension, spatial isolation, and Hollywood glamor and the countercultural collapse. The film's alternative ending rewrites the historical trauma of the Manson murders, presenting countercultural violence as a suppressed and controlled threat.

Once Upon a Time in Hollywood can be read not merely as a nostalgic Hollywood film that refers to the Manson Family murders, but also as a narrative that reveals how the counterculture of the 1960s has been re-coded in American cultural memory. In the film, counterculture is no longer represented primarily as a historical movement associated with freedom, experimentation, and alternative lifestyles; instead, it is depicted as a dark and uncontrollable force that threatens the order of Hollywood. The Spahn Ranch scenes are particularly significant in this transformation because the space no longer functions as a symbol of free communal living, but becomes a site of unease, suspicion, and social disintegration. Thus, the film pushes the liberating potential of counterculture into the background and associates it with images of violence, deviance, and moral decay. The film's fundamental ideological contradiction emerges precisely at this point: the promise of freedom and alternative living in the 1960s is transformed within the narrative into an image of chaos that threatens social order. Tarantino's alternative ending symbolically suppresses this threat and re-establishes Hollywood as a realm of order that triumphs once again in the face of historical trauma.

When considering these three instances collectively, it becomes evident that American cinema does not merely depict countercultural movements straightforwardly; rather, it presents them within the confines of ideological frameworks. Counterculture is portrayed as an alluring pursuit of freedom, purpose, and alternative lifestyles. Nevertheless, transcending these boundaries of freedom is associated with violence, chaos, and a loss of control. This duality demonstrates that films can serve as ideological battlegrounds, both by depicting counterculture and by situating it within predefined interpretative frameworks.

3.5.2. News Media

The news media functions as an ideological sphere that both reflects and actively influences the societal importance of countercultural and New Religious Movements. Unlike

fictional narratives such as films, news discourse claims to serve as an "objective transmission of reality", rendering its ideological impact both more subtle and more profound. Therefore, the media's depiction of countercultures goes beyond mere storytelling; it also encompasses the processes through which reality is defined, categorized, and constrained.

In this context, countercultural movements and New Religious Movements responded to individual searches for meaning while simultaneously challenging the boundaries of the existing social order, a process that media discourse frequently reframed through narratives of danger, irrationality, and social deviance. Modern media theory has clearly demonstrated that news is not a neutral transmission of information. Todd Gitlin explains this process as follows: "Media frames are persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse, whether verbal or visual."[207] Regarding countercultural movements, this framing often appears overly simplified and sensational. The American media clearly highlighted this after the Jonestown Massacre in 1978. Headlines from that period emphasized that the event was not merely a tragedy but also demonstrated the potential danger of countercultural groups.

[207] Todd Gitlin. **The Whole World Is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left**. Univ of California Press, 1980, p. 7.



INSIDE JONESTOWN CAMP -- THE MASS POISONING

San Francisco Chronicle

The Largest Daily Circulation in Northern California

114th Year No. 260 ★★★★ TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 21, 1978 777-1111 20 CENTS

Rev. Jones Found Dead

400 Stood in Line to Die

The Temple's Rehearsals for Mass Suicide

FBI Probing Temple After Death Threats

Hundreds Fled Into the Jungle

THOSE WHO DO NOT REMEMBER THE PAST ARE CONDEMNED TO REPEAT IT.

The 'throne' used by the Rev. Jim Jones, leader of People's Temple

Experts Look at Cults and Suicides

Index

Figure 5. *San Francisco Chronicle* headline regarding the Jonestown mass suicide.

The San Francisco Chronicle headline[208] shown above — "Hundreds Dead as Jonestown Mass Suicide" — clearly reveals the nature of the language used in the representation of the event. Such headlines do more than provide information; they establish a specific ideological framework through which the event is read. What is significant here is not only that the tragedy is reported, but also that it is immediately organized through a particular vocabulary. The term "mass suicide" positions Jonestown primarily as a scene of collective irrationality and directs the reader's attention toward the shocking moment of death rather than the historical, political, racial, economic, and theological processes that preceded it. In this way, the language of the headline classifies the event before it explains it. The group is no longer perceived as a complex religious and social formation, but as a dangerous and incomprehensible "cult" located outside the boundaries of modern rational society. This form of representation pushes broader questions

[208]Ron Javers and Keith Poacer, *"*Hundreds Dead as Jonestown Mass Suicide*."* **San Francisco Chronicle**, 21 Nov. 1978, https://www.sfchronicle.com/chronicle_vault/article/Chronicle-Covers-Jonestown-massacre-s-10596984.php, 25.03.2026.

of leadership, responsibility, poverty, migration, racial inequality, political disappointment, and social exclusion into the background. Therefore, the headline does not function as a neutral transmission of information; it acts as an ideological threshold that predetermines how the event should be understood. In the case of Jonestown, the media does not merely announce a tragedy; it also reproduces the category of "cult" through fear, deviance, and collective loss of reason. This kind of representation is closely connected to Stanley Cohen's concept of "moral panic":

> *The mass media, in particular, play an indispensable role in the process of moral panic, not just in reporting events but in actively shaping and amplifying them… The media can both reflect and create moral panics, presenting folk devils in a stylized and stereotypical fashion.* [209]

To gain a deeper understanding of how countercultural and New Religious Movements in the United States have been influenced by media discourse, this paradigm proves valuable not only in the context of the Jonestown incident but also for subsequent periods. The visual presentation in Figures 6 and 7 emphasizes the consistent portrayal by the media of a religious group as a threat to public safety, notably during the Waco Siege.


Guide to Great Outdoors Adventure Fair
SPORTS FINAL
San Francisco Chronicle
MONDAY, MARCH 1, 1993
4 Agents Die in Battle With Cult
Dynamite Suspected In N.Y. Blast
16 officers injured in Texas siege
GOP Deals Setback to Religious Right
State leader says abortion shouldn't be political issue
Violent Cult Had Faith in Twisted Leader
Followers allege abuse, tell of weapons stockpile
U.S. Begins Airdrop of Aid To Bosnia
2 Film Legends Die — Lillian Gish, Ruby Keeler
Pesticide Makers Sued for Water Cleanup Costs
WEATHER
INDEX
SATURDAY, February 27, 1993
100th Year Serving The Heart of Texas
WACO TRIBUNE-HERALD
A Cox Newspaper
9-minute solo makes Van Halen CD come alive
Bears' Sublett can't keep hands to himself
Waco girl wins at stock show for 2nd year
The SINFUL MESSIAH
Part One
THE LAW WATCHES, BUT HAS DONE LITTLE

Figure 6. *San Francisco Chronicle* headline on the clash between federal agents and the Branch Davidian cult [210]

Figure 7. Front page of the *Waco Tribune-Herald* reporting on David Koresh.[211]

[209] Stanley Cohen, **Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers**, Routledge, 1972, p.26.

[210] "4 agents die in battle with cult", **San Francisco Chronicle**, 1 Mar. 1993, p.1, https://www.sfchronicle.com/chronicle_vault/article/Chronicle-Covers-Branch-Davidian-siege-violence-6861659.php, 29.03.2025.

[211] Mark England and Darlene McCormick, "The sinful messiah", **Waco Tribune-Herald**, 27. Feb. 1993, p.1. https://wacotrib.com/news/branch_davidians/sinful-messiah/article_eb1b96e9-413c-5bab-ba9f-425b373c5667.html, 29.03.2026.

During the Waco siege, media discourse framed countercultural religious movements not only as a different belief system but also as a crisis to be resolved and a threat to be controlled. The language used in the news of the time clearly reflects this representation. For example, in an article published in The Washington Post, the following expression is used. “As the siege of his compound entered its 44th day… cult leader David Koresh… far from ready to compromise, federal authorities said…”[212]This concise statement effectively illustrates the functioning of media discourse. The term "siege" explicitly categorizes the incident as a military confrontation, thereby framing a religious community as the target of a security operation. The term "cult leader" characterizes the leader not merely as a religious authority but also as an erratic and potentially hazardous individual. The expression "far from ready to compromise" attributes the disagreement solely to the community and portrays governmental involvement as a logical necessity. This type of depiction indicates that journalism not only reports on events but also imposes specific interpretative patterns on them. In this process, a countercultural movement is disconnected from its social context and reinterpreted as a "crisis," "threat," or "security problem." The media presents these movements not as social phenomena warranting analysis but as dangers to be managed.

A similar logic of representation was seen in the Heaven's Gate mass suicide; however, this time, the media is focusing on irrationality and "incomprehensibility" instead of security. The language used in the news stories from that time has established a framework that positions this movement outside contemporary civilization. For instance, the Los Angeles Times used this phrase in an article: “Thirty-nine people were found dead… in what authorities described as an apparent mass suicide… The dead were believed to be members of a cult.”[213] As reflected in the media coverage (see Figures 8 and 9 below), this way of representing the event puts it squarely into the "cult" category instead of looking at its social context. Terms like "apparent mass suicide" and "members of a cult" label the movement as something bizarre and deviant that cannot be explained by logic. This discourse situates countercultural movements as external and antagonistic to the prevailing social order, rather than attempting to comprehend them.

[212] Lena H. Sun, “Koresh Appears Defiant in Letters, Officials Say,” **The Washington Post**, 13 Apr. 1993, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1993/04/13/koresh-appears-defiant-in-letters-officials-say/d69edbba-d5c1-4762-b51a-a5d16518ede3/?utm_, 29.03.2026.
[213] Tony Perry, Michael Granberry and Anne-Marie O’Connor, “39 Dead in Apparent Suicide: Bodies Found in Rancho Santa Fe.” **Los Angeles Times**, 27 Mar. 1997, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1997-03-27-mn-43755-story.html?utm_, 29.03.2026.


VALLEY EDITION

Los Angeles Times

Sunday Final

VALLEY NEWSWATCH

Lives on the Fringe

Mentally Ill at Risk in County Jails, Study Says

Suicides' Specter to Weigh on Easter Messages

For Rwandan Refugees on Run, Home Beckons

Riordan Leads Hayden, Loses Black Support

Climbing Frozen Waterfalls

Firm Ordered to Leave Van Nuys Airport

Figure 8. Front page coverage of the Heaven's Gate mass suicide. *Los Angeles Times*, 30 March 1997.


San Francisco Chronicle

Cult Suicide Feared — 39 Die Near San Diego

Shrouded bodies found inside rented mansion

Cop Panel Shocker — Leader Quits

He's frustrated by lack of reform

Lungren's Tobacco Stance Could Dog Him Politically

He refused to join other states in suit

Two-Fisted Counterpunch To Welfare Law

The Problem With Software That Censors the Net

Justin Beck

Figure 9. The front page of the *San Francisco Chronicle* reporting the discovery of thirty-nine members of the Heaven's Gate cult.[214]

[214] Susan Ness, and Michael Taylor. "Cult Suicide Feared — 39 Die Near San Diego." **San Francisco Chronicle**, 27 Mar. 1997, p. A1.

Furthermore, the manner in which the media depicted the Heaven's Gate incident exemplifies that countercultures and New Religious Movements (NRMs) are not only characterized as perilous but are also portrayed as "incomprehensible" and "irrational" assemblies. Such framing inhibits analytical engagement and instead fosters a demeanor of distance and detachment. Consequently, counterculture ceases to be a phenomenon that warrants assessment within its social context and is diminished to an "anomaly" that necessitates no further elucidation. This context illustrates that media discourse portrays countercultural movements and NRMs concurrently as threats and, from an epistemological perspective, as "incomprehensible" and "other." When combined with the security-focused portrayal observed in the Waco case, this indicates that American media discourse reproduces countercultural movements along two principal axes: danger and irrationality.

When these three cases are evaluated collectively, it becomes apparent that American news media utilize recurrent narrative frameworks in their portrayal of countercultural movements and New Religious Movements (NRMs). The Jonestown example underscores the discourse of "moral panic" and collective irrationality; the Waco incident constructs a crisis narrative that legitimizes security measures and state intervention; and the Heaven's Gate case characterizes such movements as "irrational" and "incomprehensible" entities positioned outside modern society. Although these representations may seem diverse superficially, they ultimately serve the same ideological function: to detach countercultural movements from their social contexts and categorize them as deviant, dangerous, or anomalous.

These mechanisms of representation are not confined to news discourse; they are also reproduced in literary and fictional narratives. Accordingly, the subsequent section will scrutinize how countercultural movements and New Religious Movements (NRMs) are depicted in American literature and will analyze the ideological roles of these representations.

3.5.3. Literature

News discourse generally characterizes countercultural movements through simplified narratives that emphasize danger, irrationality, or social deviance. Conversely, literary narratives offer a more nuanced exploration of the internal dynamics, ideological appeal, and subjective experiences associated with these movements. American literature of the 1960s and 1970s presents counterculture not merely as a visible social phenomenon but as a broader quest for identity, meaning, and alternative states of consciousness. In this context, the novel serves as a significant platform for examining the relationship between countercultural movements

and New Religious Movements (NRMs), particularly concerning how both challenge prevailing social and ideological structures.

Louis Althusser's theory of ideology is especially useful for understanding these representations. As Althusser argues, "Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence". [215] From this perspective, literary narratives of the period can be read as explorations of alternative forms of subjectivity emerging in response to the limitations of dominant ideological systems. Countercultural fiction, therefore, does not merely depict rebellion against authority; it also reveals how alternative realities are imagined, experienced, and ultimately shaped through ideological processes.

Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* presents the psychiatric institution as a symbolic representation of modern disciplinary society, where individuality is regulated through mechanisms of surveillance, normalization, and psychological control. Rather than depicting authority solely through direct coercion, the novel illustrates how institutional power shapes perception, behavior, and subjectivity. Within this framework, McMurphy emerges as a countercultural figure whose resistance challenges the rigid structures of institutional conformity. His opposition to the ward's disciplinary order reflects a broader critique of modern systems that seek to standardize individual identity and suppress forms of nonconformity.

In contrast, Nurse Ratched embodies institutional rationality and ideological authority. Her power depends less on physical force than on patients' internalization of discipline. Through routines, surveillance, and therapeutic discourse, deviation is reconstructed as pathology, while conformity is presented as a condition of stability and social order. The institution, therefore, becomes more than a psychiatric space; it operates as a microcosm of a society organized around normalization and control. In this sense, the novel demonstrates how ideological systems regulate social reality by establishing and policing the boundaries between normality and deviance.

One of the most significant aspects of the novel lies in its interrogation of the relationship between truth, perception, and ideological reality. Chief Bromden's narration destabilizes the distinction between objective reality and subjective experience, revealing how reality itself may be ideologically mediated. Chief Bromden's early statement, "But it's the truth even if it didn't happen,"[216] is crucial in this regard because it shows that the novel does not define truth merely as factual accuracy. Instead, truth emerges through fear, perception, trauma, and the internalized experience of institutional power. This narrative uncertainty strengthens the novel's ideological

[215] Althusser, **Ideology and State Apparatuses**, p. 109.
[216] Ken Kesey, **One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest**. Viking Press, 1962, p. 8.

critique: reality is not simply given, but produced through the systems of discipline and control that shape the subject's consciousness. His recurring "Combine" [217] metaphor symbolizes a mechanized social system that standardizes thought, behavior, and identity through invisible forms of control. Rather than presenting oppression as merely external, the novel suggests that ideological structures become effective precisely when they are internalized by individuals and accepted as natural or inevitable. In this regard, the main significance of the novel lies in its portrayal of oppression not merely as a force imposed by the institution from the outside, but as an ideological process that transforms the individual's self-perception. Chief Bromden's "Combine" metaphor represents not only the functioning of the psychiatric hospital, but also the broader mechanical structure of modern American society that standardizes individuals. The patients are not only controlled by the institution; over time, they begin to believe in their own powerlessness, illness, and nonconformity. Therefore, Nurse Ratched's authority does not stem solely from rules or punishment; it is sustained by the patients' acceptance of this order as inevitable and natural. McMurphy's arrival, however, disrupts this seemingly natural order. His laughter, gambling, acts of defiance, and physical energy function as a countercultural intervention against the institution's normalizing language. The fundamental ideological contradiction of the novel emerges here: while the social order claims to cure or rehabilitate the individual, it actually transforms them into a more obedient, silent, and manageable subject. Thus, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* should be read not simply as a narrative of rebellion against authority, but as a broader critique of the ideological mechanisms through which modern institutions produce discipline, obedience, and conformity under the discourse of "normality."

Countercultural resistance therefore emerges as more than a simple rejection of institutional authority. McMurphy's rebellion represents an attempt to disrupt the ideological order that shapes the patients' understanding of themselves and their social reality. However, the novel simultaneously reveals the limitations of such resistance, since the system ultimately absorbs, disciplines, and neutralizes oppositional subjectivities. For this reason, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* should be understood not merely as a narrative centered on the conflict between freedom and authority, but as a broader ideological critique of how modern society constructs reality, regulates subjectivity, and restricts the possibilities of countercultural transformation. In this sense, the novel provides an important literary framework for examining the wider

[217] Ken Kesey, **One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest**. Viking Press, 1962, p. 31.

ideological tensions that also underlie cults, New Religious Movements, and countercultural formations in modern American culture.

While Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* focuses on institutional discipline and individual resistance, other contemporary texts shift attention from institutional spaces to the lived experience of counterculture itself. Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* is particularly important in this regard because it does not position the reader as a detached observer of the movement. Instead, the narrative attempts to reproduce the instability, immediacy, and collective intensity of countercultural experience from within. Wolfe's statement, "You are either on the bus or off the bus,"[218] functions as a primary textual sign of countercultural belonging. It does not simply describe participation in the Merry Pranksters' journey; rather, it establishes a symbolic division between those who share the group's altered perception of reality and those who remain outside it. In this sense, the sentence captures the exclusivity of this communal consciousness and reflects the extent to which participation is constructed as an all-or-nothing form of belonging.

Within the narrative, participation in counterculture involves more than physical presence or social affiliation. It requires a transformation in perception and a reconfiguration of identity through collective experience. The communal rituals, psychedelic experimentation, and shared journeys depicted throughout the text create a symbolic framework in which conventional distinctions between the individual and the collective begin to collapse. Reality is no longer understood through institutional structures or rational systems of knowledge, but through immediacy, intuition, sensation, and emotional intensity. In this sense, Wolfe's portrayal of counterculture parallels the experiential foundations of many New Religious Movements, particularly in the way they construct alternative forms of truth through direct lived experience rather than established institutional authority.

At the same time, Wolfe's narrative also reveals that these apparently liberating structures are not free from ideological constraints. The distinction between being "on the bus" and "off the bus" establishes a symbolic boundary between insiders and outsiders, producing its own mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. Although counterculture presents itself as an escape from dominant ideological systems, it can also generate new forms of conformity, collective discipline, and ideological belonging. Participation therefore becomes tied not only to freedom or experimentation, but also to the acceptance of a shared worldview. The ideological contradiction made visible in the text lies precisely here: the movement rejects mainstream

[218] Tom Wolfe, **The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test**. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1968, p. 68.

conformity, yet it produces another form of belonging that requires identification with the group's language, rituals, and collective consciousness.

In this respect, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* does not romanticize counterculture as a purely liberating space. Instead, it presents counterculture as an unstable formation in which freedom, experimentation, exclusion, and discipline coexist. Wolfe's narrative shows that alternative communities may challenge dominant ideology, but they may also reproduce ideological boundaries of their own. This makes the text important for the dissertation's broader argument: cults, New Religious Movements, and countercultural formations should not be understood simply as oppositional forces outside ideology, but as formations that reorganize ideology within alternative cultural frameworks.

Taken together, these literary analyses demonstrate that cults, New Religious Movements, and countercultural formations should not be understood merely as reflections of social reality. Instead, they function as cultural sites where ideological tensions over authority, belonging, identity, discipline, and resistance become visible. Similar representational patterns can also be observed in cinema and news media, although each medium constructs these movements through different strategies. News discourse frequently frames such groups through narratives of danger, irrationality, and social instability, thereby reinforcing the boundaries of normative social order. Films often frame these movements through stories centered on manipulation, charismatic leadership, psychological dependence, or the collapse of individual autonomy. Literary narratives, however, tend to provide a more layered exploration of countercultural experience by focusing on questions of subjectivity, alienation, collective identity, institutional control, and the search for alternative systems of meaning. Despite these differences, each mode of representation participates in the ideological construction of counterculture by assigning these movements particular cultural meanings. Certain groups are marginalized as irrational or socially threatening, while others are absorbed into popular culture and transformed into commodified symbols of rebellion. Counterculture therefore occupies an unstable position within American culture: it appears simultaneously as a challenge to hegemonic structures and as a cultural form that can eventually be reintegrated into those same structures.

From this perspective, representation cannot be understood as a neutral or passive reflection of reality. The representation of cults, NRMs, and countercultural movements actively shapes the ways in which legitimacy, deviance, freedom, and social order are culturally defined. In this way, cultural representation becomes one of the primary mechanisms through

which modern American society negotiates the boundaries between legitimacy and deviance, conformity and resistance, belonging and exclusion.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has examined the emergence, development, and representations of cults, New Religious Movements (NRMs), and countercultural movements in American culture through a multi-layered analytical framework. The central argument of the study is that these formations cannot be understood merely as marginal, deviant, or "fringe" structures. Rather, they should be read as significant cultural and ideological formations that reveal the contradictions, anxieties, and transformations of modern American society. Throughout the thesis, cults, NRMs, and countercultural movements have been analyzed as structures that are historically produced, ideologically shaped, and culturally represented within changing social conditions.

Cults and New Religious Movements emerged in response to the social, cultural, and ideological crises of modern American society. Processes such as secularization, political disillusionment, cultural fragmentation, and the weakening of traditional authority structures created conditions in which alternative religious communities and belief systems gained visibility and influence. In this context, cults and NRMs functioned not only as spiritual alternatives, but also as attempts to reconstruct identity, belonging, and meaning within modernity. Their emergence therefore reflects a broader search for alternative systems of meaning at moments when dominant institutions fail to provide stable answers to individual and collective anxieties.

When examined in relation to countercultural movements, this search for alternative meaning becomes part of a larger ideological process. Counterculture signifies not only a distinct lifestyle, but also a systematic critique of dominant value systems. However, this thesis has shown that these movements did not remain merely spaces of resistance. Over time, they also produced their own norms, symbols, rituals, and structures of authority, thereby becoming alternative ideological systems in their own right. This transformation reveals the dialectical relationship between resistance and institutionalization, emphasizing that opposition itself is often constructed within particular ideological frameworks.

The analysis developed in the thesis has drawn primarily on Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony. Hegemony helps explain both the persistence of dominant ideology and the emergence of alternative discourses that challenge it. Cults, NRMs, and countercultural movements may be seen as counter-hegemonic formations that arise during crises of the dominant order. Nevertheless, the thesis has argued that these formations do not remain completely outside the hegemonic system. Under certain conditions, they are absorbed, reinterpreted, commodified, and reproduced within the very structures they initially appear to oppose.

This process becomes clearer when considered together with Louis Althusser's theory of ideology and ideological state apparatuses. Cults and New Religious Movements function as alternative ideological systems that position individuals within specific subject roles through rituals, practices, language, and communal structures. The systems of meaning offered by these formations reshape the way individuals understand themselves and their relationship to reality. However, these alternative structures are not outside ideology. On the contrary, they may also produce disciplinary mechanisms, authority relations, and forms of obedience within themselves. In this sense, the thesis has demonstrated that alternative belief systems can both challenge dominant ideology and reproduce ideological control in different forms.

One of the important conclusions of the thesis is that capitalist modernity has the capacity to transform alternative and oppositional formations over time. The commodification of countercultural movements and alternative religious practices is one of the clearest indicators of this process. Many symbols, discourses, and practices that initially emerged as anti-systemic have gradually become part of popular culture and have been incorporated into economic circulation. This situation reveals that even resistance can be reproduced within the system and that the boundaries of ideological opposition are constantly redrawn.

In this context, the thesis has assigned particular importance to the role of cultural representation. Cinema, news media, and literature have been analyzed as crucial sites where the meanings of cults, NRMs, and countercultural movements are constructed, contested, and reproduced. Through close reading and critical discourse analysis, the study has examined how selected films, news reports, and literary texts frame these formations within specific ideological meanings. These narratives do not merely reflect reality; they actively shape social perception by producing distinctions between legitimacy and deviance, freedom and danger, belonging and manipulation, resistance and disorder.

The analyses of film, news media, and literature have shown that each medium constructs cults and countercultural formations through different representational strategies. News discourse frequently frames such groups through danger, irrationality, crisis, and social instability. Films often dramatize the tensions between charismatic authority, psychological dependence, the desire for belonging, and the collapse of individual autonomy. Literary narratives, by contrast, provide a more layered exploration of subjectivity, institutional control, alienation, collective identity, and the search for alternative systems of meaning. Despite these differences, all three forms of representation participate in the ideological construction of cults, NRMs, and countercultural movements in American culture.

At this point, representation cannot be understood as a neutral or passive reflection of reality. Narratives select, organize, and reproduce social reality within specific frameworks of meaning. Therefore, the cultural depictions of cults and countercultural movements actively influence public perception and sustain particular power relations. The repeated association of cults with danger, irrationality, and deviance, as well as the occasional romanticization and commodification of counterculture through discourses of freedom and authenticity, clearly demonstrates the ideological nature of representation.

This study contributes to the existing literature by examining cults, NRMs, and countercultural movements together within the context of American culture and representation. While sects are discussed as part of the historical and theoretical background, the main focus remains on the more fluid, flexible, and ideologically complex formations that became especially visible in modern American society. Such a focus provides a more explanatory perspective for understanding the relationship between religious pluralism, cultural dissent, ideology, and representation in the United States.

In line with the "reading against the grain" approach, the dissertation ultimately argues that cults, NRMs, and countercultural movements are not peripheral anomalies within American culture. Rather, they occupy a central position in the ideological and cultural dynamics of modern American society. They emerge from the contradictions of modernity, respond to crises of meaning and authority, challenge dominant systems, and are eventually reinterpreted, disciplined, or absorbed by those same systems. In this regard, the study not only examines specific cultural formations, but also contributes to a broader understanding of how ideology, culture, and representation interact in modern society.

Finally, this thesis also opens possible directions for future research. Further studies may examine how digitalization, social media, online communities, and globalization reshape the emergence, circulation, and representation of alternative belief systems and countercultural practices. In contemporary culture, many forms of spiritual experimentation, communal belonging, conspiracy belief, and anti-institutional identity are increasingly produced and circulated through digital platforms. For this reason, the transformation of cultic, NRM-related, and countercultural formations in digital environments constitutes an important area for future scholarship.

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