

Procter & Gamble or General Mills. The result was that DuMont producers had much freer rein than their counterparts at the other networks, and—for better or for worse—they used it.

That freedom was never more obvious than at 7 p.m. Monday through Friday, when Captain Video whipped out his nucleomatic pistols and thermal ejectors to do battle with evil across the galaxy. Arriving on the DuMont airwaves in 1949 and sticking it out until the network shut down six years later, *Captain Video* was the first, the last, and certainly the mightiest (he had to be; the prop budget was just \$25 a week) of the rocket-jock heroes who magnetically, mesmerically drew America's kids to those early TV sets.

Forget that *E.T./Close Encounters* we-come-in-peace stuff; Captain Video's policy was to use the atomic rifle first and ask questions later. Spouting outlandish technogibberish—"Throw out the interlocks! Hand me the opticon scillometer!"—and brandishing equipment made from surplus auto parts, he warred ceaselessly on sinister life forms from every corner of the universe, including a few (like the Black Planet, where tyrannized workers slaved away on collective farms) that sounded suspiciously close to home.

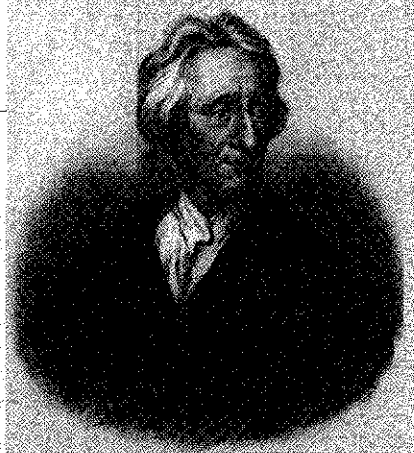
Cheapjack sets (It was not uncommon for the camera to catch sight of the pots of hot water and dry ice that produced the mysterious mists that cloaked so many of *Captain Video's* alien worlds) were one of the show's signatures. Hopelessly inane scripts were another. *Captain Video's* original writer, Maurice Brockhauser, was a hack of such prodigious proportions that a frothing producer

banned him from the set: "I don't want to see him, I don't want to talk to him!" Eventually such budding science fiction authors as Arthur C. Clarke and Damon Knight helped churn out scripts. Even so, filling a daily half-hour slot proved so difficult that the producers began inserting a bit where Captain Video would check his televiewer to monitor the activities of his rangers around the world—an excuse to toss in 10 or 15 minutes of shootouts, fistfights, and cattle stampedes clipped at random from old Westerns in the DuMont library. (Are you beginning to understand 2001: *A Space Odyssey*?) Adults found this stuff terrifyingly incomprehensible, but kids adored it; toy companies took in \$50 million a year from sales of Official Captain Video decoder rings, crash helmets, and atomic weapons long before Walt Disney went into the coonskin cap business.

Captain Video may not even have been DuMont's weirdest character; that distinction probably belongs to Dennis James, the host of the daytime women's show *Okay, Mother*, a pre-Hefner ladies' man who was fond of double entendres and spent much of his airtime hitting on his pretty 18-year-old female sidekick. That show was so successful that DuMont lost it in a bidding war with ABC. Apparently we've been somewhat misled about the relative kinkiness of Eisenhower America.

But there was more to DuMont than eccentricity. The network developed several comedians, including Gleason, Morey Amsterdam, and Ernie Kovacs, who would later go on to stardom at other networks doing essentially the same material. It anticipated *Sesame Street* by two decades with a smarter-than-it-sounds program called *Your Television Babysitter*, and its *Your Television Shopper* was around way before cubic zirconium was cool.

Most intriguing of all was *Life Is Worth Living*, a weekly chat by the Catholic bishop Fulton J. Sheen on ethics and philosophy that for many Americans was probably an introduction, however cursory, to the thought of people like Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas. Sheen's plain-talk approach, soft peddling Catholic doc-



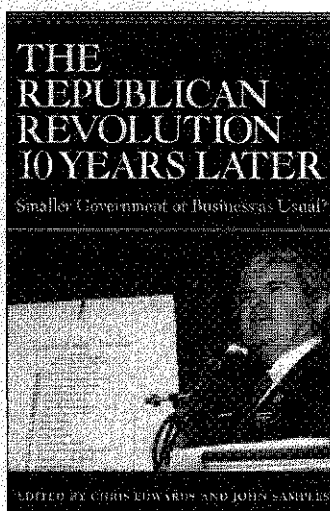
John Locke, Original Hipster The Enlightenment roots of counterculture

Nick Gillespie

In a country where one of the most popular genres of music is called "alternative," the great refusenik Henry David Thoreau is a national icon, and acknowledged pot smokers have served as president (Bill Clinton) and speaker of the House (Newt Gingrich), would the last unabashedly mainstream American please turn off *The Lawrence Welk Show*? When the subversive has gone mainstream, does it make sense to talk about a "counterculture" anymore?

That's one of the questions raised by Ken Goffman and Dan Joy's enjoyably antic if slightly cracked *Counterculture Through the Ages: From Abraham to Acid House* (Villard). The book's short and provocative answer is this: In a post-9/11 world, one in which religious and neo-Luddite fundamentalists at home and abroad seek to stymie individualism and technological advances, it's more important than ever to understand and appreciate what might be called the »

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trine while twitting himself with gentle self-deprecatory humor, turned *Life Is Worth Living* into a genuine hit: It ran Frank Sinatra's CBS show in the same time slot off the air and made enough inroads against Milton Berle on NBC that the comedian was moved to remark that if you were going to tank in the ratings, it might as well be against a show written by the guy who scripted the Bible. *Life Is Worth Living* is virtually the only DuMont show to have survived the network's plunge into obscurity; reruns still air on the Eternal Word Television Network, the Catholic Church's cable channel.

Bishop Sheen stayed with DuMont until the day it went dark

Radio networks wanted to extend their hegemony to the new medium of TV, and the FCC was their Praetorian Guard.

before moving his show over to ABC. More typically DuMont built a star's reputation, then watched him bolt to another network with deeper pockets. For most of its life, DuMont tottered on a financial abyss, too poor to promote its programs or to fund them properly. (The stark, seedy look of Jackie Gleason's *Honeymooners* apartment had as much to do with the poverty of DuMont's props department as with any creative impulse.)

Part of the problem was Allen DuMont himself, a visionary engineer but an uncertain businessman and a political naif. A polio victim whose bed-bound childhood was spent putting together crystal radio kits, he went to work after college manufacturing radio tubes first for Westinghouse, then for DeForest. When the latter went bust, he set out on his own

in 1929, building cathode-ray tubes in his garage. Initially the fragile tubes were used mostly in medical and military equipment, but as DuMont improved their shelf life, television became a practical possibility. In 1938 he started manufacturing sets. Two years later he set up New York City's second TV station, hoping to stimulate sales.

DuMont had little experience with the retail public and none with show business, and it showed. He staffed his boardroom with military men—one former admiral regaled everyone who would listen with tales of the epic battles he staged nightly in his bathtub with model ships—and his network with their cronies and kids. He funded his move into television by selling part of his company to Paramount in a disastrously structured deal that gave the penurious studio virtual veto power over his spending.

But DuMont's real problem was the FCC, long a lackey of the big radio networks, NBC and CBS. (ABC—only recently spun off from NBC, where it had been one of the company's two radio nets—was somewhat less powerful.) Those years were what one FCC commissioner would later recall as “the whorehouse era,” when mythic network lobbyists like Scoop Russell and Earl Gammons magisterially strolled Washington hallways, dispensing cash and instructions to their federal minions. The networks were determined to extend their broadcast hegemony into the new medium of television, and they used the FCC as their Praetorian Guard.

The FCC's target of choice was affiliations. The commission, arguing that television needed to be local, had already capped the number of stations that could be owned outright

by any one network at five. Because its partner Paramount owned an independent station in Los Angeles, DuMont could have only four, a 20 percent competitive disadvantage. (Curiously, the FCC's concern for a healthy television industry did not extend to the blatant ways the networks retarded the development of TV. For years there was no television during daylight because CBS, NBC, and ABC didn't want to cut into their daytime radio audiences; only when DuMont began making money with its daytime lineup did the other nets reluctantly join in.)

DuMont was free to seek affiliation agreements with other stations. But its disadvantages were even greater when it came to affiliation. About 80 percent of television station owners also owned radio stations, and they were not willing to risk losing profitable network radio shows by linking their TV channels to

DuMont, which had no radio programming to offer.

The killing thrust was yet to come, though. In 1945, with only a handful of TV stations on the air, the FCC—whether through cupidity or stupidity is unclear—had ruled that only 13 channels in the very-high-frequency (VHF) portion of the broadcast spectrum would be set aside for television. (That was later reduced to 12.) The commission's blunder was soon apparent. As more stations began setting up shop, their signals banged into one another. First stations in the same city were for the most part prohibited from broadcasting on adjacent channels (for example, 8 and 9), which cut the available channels in half. That didn't solve the problem; stations as far as 150 miles from one another suffered interference if they broadcast on the same channel. That effectively limited most metropolitan areas to three channels—meaning one network would lose out. Almost inevitably, that would be DuMont.

DuMont offered a plan that would have at the very least doubled the number of TV channels available in each city: The network proposed using VHF channels in some cities and

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countercultural imperative, whose chief characteristics are personal freedom and constant change.

Better known by his techno-hipster *nom de revolution*, R.U. Sirius, Goffman is in a particularly strong position to plumb the issue. As a co-founder of *Mondo 2000*, a magazine that, along with *Wired*, helped to define and mythologize digital culture in the 1990s, and as a collaborator with LSD guru Timothy Leary, Goffman is steeped in the history and practice of the individuals and groups that have long delighted in turning on, tuning in, dropping out, skewering the bourgeoisie, and otherwise monkeying around with convention. (Joy originated the book project and contributed at various stages, but the volume is primarily Goffman's, which is how I will refer to it.)

As the title suggests, Goffman wants to give us a long view of "transgressive, avant-garde movements" that "challenge authoritarianism in both its obvious and its subtle forms" and embrace continuous individual and social change.

The result is a madcap trip across time and myth, a sort of Ken and Dan's excellent adventure that stresses the Promethean impulse to steal fire and give it to the common man. When it comes to the countercultural, Goffman notes in a representative passage, "We think of Goethe's immortality-seeking bad boy Faust. We think of Robin Hood and his merry band of Weathermen. We »



the new UHF (ultra-high-frequency) channels (14 and higher) in others. Instead, the FCC decided to mix the two frequencies in each city, leaving established stations where they were and assigning newcomers to UHF. But that required viewers to buy an expensive new tuner and antenna to watch the UHF stations, and as DuMont predicted, most of them didn't. Why bother, when they could go on watching VHF for free?

The result was that just seven cities in America had four or more TV stations, and DuMont was frozen out. By 1952 its affiliates could reach only about 40 percent of American television sets. The network's final three years of operation were a tortuous end game, with DuMont selling parts of itself to stay afloat until there was nothing left.

Weinstein pulls no punches in

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describing the FCC's connivance with the dominant networks or the lethal effect it had on DuMont. But he also quotes without objection network executives such as ABC's Len Goldenson saying there was barely enough advertising to support three networks. That's the fox denouncing henhouse overpopulation. At the time the FCC was sticking a regulatory shiv in DuMont's back, television was taking off like one of Captain Video's runaway rockets. In 1947 the annual production of TV sets was 160,000; by 1950 it was 7.3 million. Advertisers could no more have ignored that than the *Titanic* could have ignored the iceberg.

Weinstein's book closes with the demise of DuMont. He would have had to continue for another three decades to give it a happy ending. The FCC continued to scamper alongside the feet of its network masters for another 30 years, a vigilant watchdog against competition. It battled cable television ("pay TV," the commission derisively labeled it) for years. In pre-satellite days, cable systems related their signals via microwave; the FCC denied licenses to microwave companies that did business with cable. Even when the outright ban was lifted, cable was blocked from the 100 biggest TV markets and forbidden to offer original programming. The FCC was forthright in saying it didn't want cable "siphoning off" viewers from the broadcast networks.

It wasn't until the mid-1970s that a series of court decisions began freeing up cable to compete. The result was not just cable-only channels such as CNN and HBO but a rebirth of broadcasting. On cable, UHF channels were no longer weak and fuzzy, and it was mostly on UHF stations that Fox,

the first new American network in 40 years, made its 1986 debut. (Ironically, Fox's VHF affiliates included several stations founded by Allen DuMont.) Since then, three more networks—the WB, UPN, and Pax—have been born, and in each case the umbilical cord leads straight to cable. Of the WB's 200-plus affiliates, more than half are essentially cable-only channels that cannot be picked up with an antenna.

Meanwhile, the lowest-common-denominator ethos of the three-channel world has been shattered; to compete with Tony Soprano and Carrie Bradshaw, the broadcast nets have been forced to come up with better, bolder programming of their own. And if you don't like it, then watch a ballgame (there are more than 30 sports channels these days), the news (around the clock, not just when Walter, Chet, and David feel like it) or even the Weather Channel. The days when Tuesday night meant choosing between *Petticoat Junction*, *Peyton Place*, and an old movie are gone forever. Forget what you hear from TV critics—this is the Golden Age of Television.

And the Trent Lotts and Olympia Snowes of the world want to unleash the FCC on it? As Captain Video used to say, "Let's blast them to space dust!" ■

Contributing Editor Glenn Garvin is author of Everybody Had His Own Gringo: The CIA and the Contras (Brassey's) and, with Ana Rodriguez, Diary of a Survivor: Nineteen Years in a Cuban Women's Prison (St. Martin's). He writes about television for The Miami Herald.

The Fever Swamps of Kansas

A leftist tries to make sense of grassroots conservatism.

Jesse Walker

What's the Matter with Kansas?: How Conservatives Won the Heart of America, by Thomas Frank, New York: Metropolitan Books, 306 pages, \$24

A SPECTER ONCE haunted the Great Plains of America: the specter of populism. The agrarian radicals of the People's Party carried Kansas in the election of 1892—the national victor, Grover Cleveland, didn't even place—and throughout that decade the Kansas Populists elected governors, legislators, and judges; the laws they passed ranged from a ban on Pinkerton strikebreakers to a pay cut for county officials.

The state establishment regarded the newcomers with all the horror of a dowager discovering her daughter in bed with a hobo. In 1896, in an essay called "What's the Matter With Kansas?", the Emporia pundit William Allen White attacked the upstarts with withering sarcasm. "We have an old mossback Jacksonian who snorts and howls because there is a bathtub in the state house; we are running that old jay for Governor," he wrote. "We have another shabby, wild-eyed, rattle-brained fanatic who has said openly in a dozen speeches that 'the rights of the user are paramount to the rights of the owner'; we are running him for Chief Justice, so that capital will come tumbling over itself to get into the state. We have raked the old ash heap of failure in the state and found an old human hoop-skirt who has failed as a businessman, who has failed as an editor, who has failed as a preacher, and

we are going to run him for Congressman-at-Large."

A century later, Kansas remains a hotbed of disreputable causes: It is headquarters for creationists, survivalists, militant anti-abortionists. But while the old populists, to the extent that they fit on the conventional spectrum, were a tribe of the radical left, their contemporary analogs are firmly rooted in the right. Like their 19th-century predecessors, they are a formidable force in state politics.

This puzzles Thomas Frank, a leftist pundit who has gradually moved from the world of self-published magazines to the op-ed page of *The New York Times*. His most recent book is *What's the Matter with Kansas?*, a jeremiad whose title is a deliberate, ironic echo of White's ancient rant. Across Middle America, but especially in the Sunflower State, Frank sees a "Great Backlash," a social-political trend that he doesn't define very precisely. Indeed, he never adequately answers the obvious question, "A backlash against *what*?" Frank says it began as a reaction to the ferment of the late '60s, but he also cites John Stormer's *None Dare Call It Treason* as "an early backlash text," even though it was published in 1964 and is much closer in spirit to the McCarthy movement of the '50s. (Of course, the McCarthyists themselves were a backlash of sorts.)

But it's not hard to see what Frank is getting at. Whatever precursors you might find in the McCarthy era and elsewhere, his Great Backlash begins with George Wallace's crusade against the "pointy-headed intellectuals" and Spiro Agnew's war on the "effete corps of impudent snobs." It encompasses the labor Democrats who supported Reagan in the '80s, and it now includes any Republican whose rhetoric evokes resentment of the coastal elites. Populist in its style but capitalist in its platform, it is, Frank argues, a genuinely grassroots phenomenon: "a working-class movement that has done incalculable, historic harm to working-class people." The point of the book is to understand why such a movement exists, focusing on Kansas as a bellwether but with an eye on all of Middle America.

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think of Alfred E. Neuman."

The book's cast of characters includes the familiar, with chapters on the likes of Socrates, the transcendentalists, the bohems of Paris' Cabaret Voltaire, the Beats, and Students for a Democratic Society. To his credit—and in keeping with the trickster quality he says defines counter-culture—Goffman consistently complicates received narratives that hinge on glib distinctions between East and West, ancient and modern, hip and square.

Discussing postwar drug culture, for instance, he asks, "what should peace idealists make of Al Hubbard, a former OSS agent with powerful right-wing establishment connections" who became known as the "Johnny Appleseed of LSD"? Goffman's sections on Jewish, Taoist, Zen, and Sufi traditions bring welcome global and historical perspectives to the topic. Sufism, he notes, offers up a compelling counterpoint within Islam to the practices of the Taliban and the Iranian republic, one that seeks intoxication and ecstasy as a means of bypassing such mind-numbingly repressive regimes.

Despite Goffman's apparent sympathies for left-leaning, anti-technological movements ranging from Mexican Zapatistas to Northern Californian eco-terrorists, at the core of *Counterculture Through the Ages* is an unabashed defense of Enlightenment ideas about individualism, science, and material progress. Enumerat- »