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SUBCULTURE RISING: THE TRANSITION FROM SUBCULTURE TO HEGEMONY IN CHUCK PALAHNIUK'S *FIGHT CLUB**

ABSTRACT: As a cultural phenomenon, subculture represents a reaction of a group of people to the dominant culture at a certain moment in history. It involves appropriating the resources from the dominant culture and transforming them so as to fit the need of the subculture that is evolving. However, once certain features of any given subculture are brought to extremes, it can be perceived as a basis for the development of hegemony. In this paper, a process of a subculture becoming hegemony is discussed on the example of Chuck Palahniuk's novel *Fight Club* in which a small all-male community rises to follow destructive orders of a lunatic dictator in development embodied in the protagonist's alter ego Tyler Durden.

Key words: subculture, popular culture, hegemony, *Fight Club*, Chuck Palahniuk

Introduction: From a Subculture to Hegemony

When discussing social and cultural groups, one of the perhaps most relevant points in the contemporary cultural studies is the way people react to the dominant culture and the subsequent responses by which they establish themselves in relation to the said dominant culture. Most frequently, such reaction implies differentiating oneself or one group of people from the culture they are reacting to, thus forming an individual subculture.

One example of an emerging subculture is depicted in Chuck Palahniuk's novel *Fight Club*. The story revolves around the nameless narrator who meets Tyler Durden and together they engage in constructing a subculture of Fight Club in order to create a space where they can express their true nature. As the novel progresses, however, we witness a fatalistic transformation of this subculture, as it gradually

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turns into hegemony, or at least an attempt at it. Fight Club and its successive social group Project Mayhem qualify as subculture and hegemony respectively on various different levels, some of which are discussed in this paper.

In order to be able to properly discuss the different ways in which any given subculture is created, we should first try to define the term “culture” itself. As a starting point, Hebdige mentions the original, classical definition of culture as “the best that has been thought and said in the world” (Hebdige 2011: 3). This definition, however, focuses exclusively on sophisticated and refined artistic forms. Later definitions seem to be more inclusive of other aspects of social life. Hebdige quotes Williams who defines culture as a “particular way of life which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning, but also in institutions and ordinary behavior” (Hebdige 2011: 3). A proper definition thus should include all the aspects of social experience, in particular, its forms of expression in terms of language, style, and behavior. Most frequently, even though the term “culture” should be inherently neutral, it is somehow used to refer specifically to the culture that is dominant in a particular society. In relation to that, any culture or social group that is regarded as subordinate to the dominant culture is referred to as “popular culture”. More often than not, this term is interchangeably used with the term “subculture,” mostly due to the fact that popular culture came into being as a reaction to the mainstream culture and social system; i.e. the same way a subculture is created (Fiske 1989a: 1-2). In their essence, such social and cultural groups are marginalized in relation to the dominant culture. Their creation is always closely connected to the dominant culture since they emerge specifically as a reaction to the culture that they are excluded from. Various practices are employed in the process of differentiation from the dominant culture and its practices. Mainly, these differences rely on the style of a particular social group. People who constitute subcultures express their difference through fashion and lifestyle, but rely on commodities of the dominant culture while doing so. Fiske argues that such subordinate groups rely on “the art of making do”; i.e. subcultures do not necessarily reject the heritage of the dominant culture in general, they rather use the goods and transform them in one way or the other so that they fit their expression and style (Fiske 1989b: 15).

However, apart from being purely related to lifestyle and style in general, Fiske argues that subcultures are “inherently political” or that they are “involved in the distribution [...] of various forms of social power” (Fiske 1989a: 1). Although they can often seem as spontaneous, Hebdige argues that they are “characterized by an extreme orderliness” (Hebdige 2011: 113). Such orderliness often comes from ideologies. Ideology can also be used for the purpose of what Storey calls “masking,

distortion, or concealment” of reality, which eventually work for the benefit of the power holders rather than those who are subordinated, which was the original idea (Storey 1998: 3). Moreover, what Storey highlights as the most important feature of any given ideology is the way it “conceals the reality of subordination from those who are powerless” (Storey 1998: 3). As argued in this paper on the example of Palahniuk’s novel, this can lead to the establishment of hegemony.

Hegemony is defined as “leadership or dominance, especially by one state or social group over others”¹. When discussing Gramsci’s theory of hegemony and its later readings, Morton defines it as “the articulation and justification of a particular set of interests as general interests” (Morton 2007: 113). In this sense, it can be said that hegemony does not necessarily refer only to political and economic dominance. Morton further argues that hegemony today represents “coercive dominance” of one country or culture over the others (Morton 2007: 112). Thus, as far as culture is concerned, the aspect of hegemony that is relevant for this paper is its ideological and cultural dominance. As Hebdige argues, hegemony does not even need to represent the overt imposition of rules and prescribed behavior, it can be realized as a process of “winning and shaping consent so that the power of the dominant classes appears both legitimate and natural” (Hebdige 2011: 16). Fiske, among others, believes that popular culture does not necessarily include social activism and revolutionary endeavors (Fiske 1989b: 19). Rather than that, it could serve as a means of expressing one’s discontent and disagreement, without any action against the dominant system, or what Morton often calls “passive revolution” (Morton 2007: 112). Hence, it can be said that once such active and aggressive steps are undertaken, subculture seemingly turns into everything it stood against, or in other words, it begins to acquire and imitate the patterns on which any given hegemony operates. In terms of hegemony, the interaction is much more aggressive, and the particular group that is trying to establish it tries to universalize its main ideas and interests and impose them on the subordinate as something that is for their own good. In these terms, the subculture that attempts such actions stops being a subculture because it comes into conflict with the essential idea of any subculture – the idea of being different, individual, and being able to think for oneself.

¹ Definition as seen in The Oxford Dictionary, available at <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/hegemony>

Fight Club and the Birth of Postmodern Hegemony

Chuck Palahniuk's novel represents how a subculture is born on the example of the Fight Club movement which surpasses the framework of a social group as subculture precisely at the moment when it turns into Project Mayhem. This symbolic change of name signals the change in the group's nature as well – it stops being a group of subordinate people who seek ways of differentiating themselves and defying the dominant culture and starts being a strongly politically and ideologically premised movement. Its rise to hegemony, however, is gradual and established in various steps.

Fight Club as Subculture

Before discussing its transformation into hegemony, a closer look into how Fight Club qualifies as a subculture, to begin with, is required. It can be argued that the motive behind its emergence has very little to do with social grouping as such – when Tyler and the anonymous protagonist first start it, they do so in order to filter out their frustrations, but are not yet aware of the subculture that is to emerge from it. However, on various other main points, it fits the definition of a subculture.

First of all, one of the main features of popular culture and subculture is that it is closely related to the contemporary moment, “relevant to the immediate social situation” (Fiske 1989b: 25). In Palahniuk's novel, the specific circumstance that is the cause of revolt is the capitalist society that the protagonists inhabit. Tyler Durden seems to personify an ideology and through his embodiment we could trace the coming of age of any given ideology. He starts off as a simple critic of the contemporary society preaching on how people should abandon social norms and patterns of behavior. As opposed to Tyler, when we come to meet the nameless narrator, he is undoubtedly part of the dominant culture. He works as a recall campaign coordinator, owns a condominium filled with modern furniture and seemingly fits the social norms of what a young, white upper-middle-class man should be. His consumerism fits perfectly the definition of mass culture, since it creates passive recipients, who not only avoid questioning the doctrines of the culture they are a part of, but are not even able to grasp their passivity and helplessness. Yet, as the novel progresses we witness his transformation as he liberates his inner angry man and abandons his previous life.

What Palahniuk starts constructing here is a subculture almost entirely oriented towards men and especially towards liberating their inner masculinity in the

ancient sense of the word. In this sense, *Fight Club* exhibits another trait of a subculture – nostalgia for the past and past social norms. Presumably, in the past, men were able to act in a manly manner, such manner as represented by the stereotypical gender roles adopted from the ancient times, whereas in the contemporary society they are not. In other words, men seemingly adopted feminine patterns of behavior - they are “a generation of men raised by women” (Palahniuk 1996: 34). In this context, the *Fight Club* culture provides a space within which the current social norms are rejected. In other words, their unique subculture is excluded from the requirements of the dominant culture, which is yet another trait of subculture as such. Furthermore, this exclusion is depicted through the narrator himself once he starts actively engaging in fights. Namely, his boss starts moving him away from positions that involve interaction with other clients, at times quite literally pushing him into the shadows. Therefore, in this aspect, *Fight Club* fulfills yet another characteristic of a subculture – it is marginalized in relation to the central, dominant culture. Not only is it excluded, it is pushed into the dark, where it cannot be seen and from where it cannot pose a serious threat to the dominant society. All of this results in their becoming the guerilla terrorists, working against society in some minor ways. Now, even though this is an active participation in what appears to be open warfare against the dominant culture, these activities still belong to the scope of subculture activities. However, once they become more radical, they will grow into something else.

Concerning the reasons that qualify *Fight Club* as a subculture, this representation of them as members of the working class is extremely important because subcultures usually emerge from the working class. This idea is supported by Fiske who finds the reason of popularity of some stylistic weapon of an early subculture in the fact that they symbolized the erasure of class difference (Fiske 1989b: 2). Specifically for Palahniuk’s novel, the working class (especially the part on low wages) is put into focus mainly because it represents a subordinate social group in modern times. Although the narrator is depicted as a member of the white-collar society, we come to see that he is just a working bee, as he writes in his haiku poem. If his belonging to the working class is questionable, it is evident in his *Fight Club* comrades, among whom we meet waiters and physical workers. What also highlights their close connection to the working class is punk aesthetics which is present in the novel surrounding *Fight Club*. The *Fight Club* subculture, which was born from a subordinate social class (i.e. working class), attempts at establishing itself as the class in power. Throughout Palahniuk’s novel, support for such claims can be found, since Tyler frequently mentions that it is high time the working class

took over and showed that they are the ones who hold the position of power. Both Gramsci and Morton refer to such expressions as to “the power of the powerless” (Morton 2007: 171). Gramsci especially highlights the “political capacity of the working class” (Gramsci 1990: 10). Such capacity is arguably their greatest weapon, but also their doom, since the dominant system tries to control the working class in order to stop them from exerting it. This is precisely what calls Tyler and his comrades to express themselves, to show their uniqueness and, in that, show that they are alive and in power of at least their lives, which is the exact purpose of any subculture.

This differentiation from the masses takes place on different levels, but is most evident in their style and appearance. Fiske argues that “[c]lothes are more normally used to convey social meanings than to express personal emotion or mood” (Fiske 1989b: 2). This is considerably highlighted in the novel with punk and its aesthetics seemingly being the inspiration. Tyler is represented as a fashion chameleon, wearing everything from fancy leather jackets to ripped t-shirts and a quirky bathrobe. His style screams uniqueness, which is one of the main points of punk aesthetics, as adopted from the glam rock movement. As opposed to him, the narrator starts off as a typical white-collar class member, wearing a white shirt, ties, and trousers, but expresses his individuality by leaving blood on his shirts and gradually losing ties and wearing dirty clothes. Even more so, their physical appearance is what is also defining the style of their subculture. They all have bruises, dark eyes, wounds, and blood not only on their clothes but on their bodies and the narrator even has a hole in his cheek that he needs to block with his finger in order to be able to drink coffee without it leaking. In this regard, another aspect of punk aesthetics is employed and that is the one that implies dirtiness and decay.

All of this leads to another characteristic present in a subculture and that is excess. Excess as a phenomenon is present in almost all most famous subcultures. Fiske argues that this trait is important because “[e]xcessiveness is meaning out of control, meaning that exceeds the norms of ideological control or the requirements of the dominant ideology” (Fiske 1989b: 114). Excess is present in the novel in almost every aspect that is related to the Fight Club subculture. First of all, Tyler and the narrator almost completely reduce their way of living to a primitive platform of life. They reject plenty of modern commodities, squatting in a house that almost does not serve its purpose, avoiding media and all other entertainment except Fight Club. They seem to adopt Fiske’s belief that “we “live” capitalism through its commodities, and, by living it, we validate and invigorate it” (1989b: 14). Therefore, they try to completely exclude themselves from it, not only on a semiotic level, but

on a more literal one, which seems to be a definite foundation for their further extremist evolution. Secondly, excess is seen specifically in relation to the way Fight Club emerged. The very first fight that sets off Fight Club appears more as a whimsy of two drunken men than the foundation of a social group. However, it escalates quickly and along with the formation of the group, the violence present in it escalates, as well. Violence, especially the repressed one, is an important part of a subculture specifically because it is a reference to “class or social conflict” (Fiske 1989b: 135). In a more extreme interpretation, violence represents resistance and revolt. Schultz supports this idea by claiming that violence is “the solution to the personal and social problems” Palahniuk’s characters have (Schultz 2011:596). Yet, this is only somewhat true. In Palahniuk’s novel, violence stands for resistance and even to some extent for gaining one’s individuality and self-expression only at first, but it quickly becomes something gruesome. The fights only appear to be reasonable at first; however, we soon see that the violence that takes place in Fight Club is everything but healthy and natural, let alone reasonable.

Yet, Fight Club appears to be the second level of social reaction towards the society, the first one being various support groups that the narrator attends. It is an essential part of any subculture to form its own space within the official institutionalized places established by the dominant culture. In *Fight Club*, the first space that emerges as a safe place for subordinate people are the various support groups. Perhaps the most interesting one is Remaining Men Together, a group that gathers men with testicular cancer. This artificial space for the narrator is “better than real life” (Palahniuk 1996: 12), much like Fight Club will be. It represents space within which he can be free. Furthermore, it represents space in which he, an anonymous nobody, is finally acknowledged as a legitimate person, stating that “if people thought you were dying, they gave you their full attention” (Palahniuk 1996: 75). Now, this group is interesting and relevant to Fight Club on various levels. First of all, it gathers men who are stripped off their masculinity, much like Fight Club will do later on. It provides the space where they can open up and show their true feelings, but it follows strongly feminine patterns of behavior, with its main activity being the urging of men to cry while embracing one another. Precisely because of this, this support group will fall apart once the Fight Club subculture is established and starts growing because it provides a space within which men are allowed to be men, in the ancient sense of the word, a sense that is widely accepted as being that of one’s true nature.

Fight Club fulfills the role of the space of the subcultures since it does not exist for the real world, but only for those who participate in it and, more

importantly, while they participate in it; it “exists only in the hours between when fight club starts and when fight club ends” (Palahniuk 1996: 33). It too is located in various basements, symbolically representing how subculture is not only pushed to the margin and shadows – it is pushed underground. However, this artificial space enables its members to express themselves in all the ways they are not able to in the real world.

Fight Club as Hegemony

Fight Club starts as a social reaction to the dominant society and its mass culture. However, its doctrines inevitably grow into something entirely different, and it surpasses the purpose of merely giving its members opportunity for expression by turning into something that resembles more a terrorist group than a subculture. Following the aforementioned definition of hegemony, it can be argued that Tyler Durden has all intentions of establishing one. Indeed, Fight Club is never entirely realized as one before the eyes of the reader, but has various traits that qualify it as at least a movement that is extremely similar to hegemony. The strategy that Palahniuk employs in this transformation is bringing to the extremes almost all of the previously mentioned traits of a subculture.

First of all, their social grouping starts as a gathering of like-minded men. However, what starts as a way of individual expression turns into blinded imitation once all the members start acting as Tyler Durden. Tyler assumes the position of their god, a living legend, and the high level of fascination with him is evident in all of them, especially the narrator, as seen in the following paragraph:

I love everything about Tyler Durden, his courage and his smarts. His nerve. Tyler is funny and charming and forceful and independent, and men look up to him and expect him to change their world. Tyler is capable and free, and I am not. (Palahniuk 1996: 130)

This is the first step of Tyler becoming somewhat of a dictator, it seems, only to become a complete one later in the novel. He becomes the dominant force, the power-bloc that he was so vehemently against, but fails to recognize this. He also becomes all-inclusive, since he embodies the movement and everyone that participates in Project Mayhem is described as being a part of him. Once they start imitating Tyler, one can no longer talk about their individuality. Not only do the members act accordingly to what the narrator calls Tyler Durden dogma, but they

completely reject individuality without even realizing it. Adopting the title of space monkeys, they dress the same way, wearing all black as a uniform, and repeat the mantra that Tyler has taught them, saying that they are not unique snowflakes. The uniformity goes to that extent that they are stripped of their names; much like the narrator is during the whole novel. "Only in death will we have our names since only in death are we no longer part of the effort," they say (Palahniuk 1996: 132).

Moreover, their marginality is brought to extremes as well. They are no longer only the middle children of history, they are no longer only trash of the contemporary society, they are the object of hate for God. "What you have to consider [...] is the possibility that God doesn't like you. Could be, God hates us. This is not the worst thing that can happen" (Palahniuk 1996: 103). In fact, this hate is even a better scenario, since, as Tyler says, God can also be indifferent to them. God here symbolically stands for every dominant force, every power holding bloc of society and culture.

How Tyler saw it was that getting God's attention for being bad was better than getting no attention at all. Maybe because God's hate is better than His indifference.

If you could be either God's worst enemy or nothing, which would you choose?
[...] Which is worse, hell or nothing? (Palahniuk 1996: 103)

He further elaborates the reasons for their dissatisfaction. Those rest mainly on the consumerist society and the way it treats them. There is also a sense that, belonging to what theoreticians usually call the Generation X, they have never experienced any real catastrophe like people of the early 20th century had. Rather than that, they have been led their whole lives on a more subtle level, dazed by ideologies that were served to them as right and in their own interest without them even realizing. Precisely because their frustration has reached such a great level, they believe they have no other choice but to violently respond to the dominant culture, yet they sadly end up imitating it. The point at which Tyler establishes himself as a full dictator is depicted in the scene when he yells: "This is our world, now, our world [...] and those ancient people are dead" (Palahniuk 1996: 5). His plans sound crazy and fatalistic, starting with a seemingly positive intention of breaking up the current society and civilization in order to make one that is better, some kind of utopia. However, they quickly escalate into something entirely lunatic and extremely negative, having nothing to do with revolution, but, rather than that, with destruction.

Destruction as such seems to be the only purpose of Project Mayhem. The narrator calls their house “the nouvelle cuisine of anarchy” (Palahniuk 1996: 138). The main project that they are trying to realize is the destruction of several buildings that are representing the financial centre of the world, so that people can have a fresh start. Symbolically, this attack on these particular high buildings, the skyscrapers, is an attack on everything that is considered high in terms of culture and civilization. Thus, in a way, this can be interpreted as a battle between high and low culture, or rather an attack of the low culture on the high one. As they see it, there is no purpose of replacing the existing social system with anything other than destruction at this point of the project. What started as a somewhat positive revolutionary ideology quickly became a fatalistic, extremist ideology of destruction with Tyler’s saying that he wanted “the whole world to hit bottom” (Palahniuk 1996: 88) and that “the goal of Project Mayhem [was] the complete and rightaway destruction of civilization” (Palahniuk 1996: 90). Such destruction is at times even treated as art, like in the space monkeys’ task including the pumpkin with a face of a Japanese demon. Moreover, towards the ending, we see the narrator and Tyler preparing to see the explosion as if it were some kind of a performance, a show.

What is very peculiar about *Fight Club*’s hegemony is its secrecy. Project Mayhem heavily relies on it even at the level of Fight Club, with its first two rules being that “you do not talk about Fight Club”. What appears to be innocent secrecy at first glance will, however, grow into a full-time dictatorship with the first two rules of Project Mayhem being that “you don’t ask questions about Project Mayhem” (Palahniuk 1996: 84). Not only are the participants denied the possibility to know what is happening, but they are denied the possibility of doubting the movement and its leader as well. “The fifth rule about Project Mayhem is you have to trust Tyler” (Palahniuk 1996: 90). The space monkeys are at this point turned into the same working bees they were before Fight Club; it is only that the power-bloc changed its position, but that does not have any effect on them. Tyler even sees them only as mere parts of his greater scheme, saying that “no one guy understands the whole plan, but each guy is trained to do one simple task perfectly” (Palahniuk 1996: 94).

What is also interesting about hegemony in this novel is that its ideology seemingly continues to live even when its creator is gone. At one point, Tyler disappears and the narrator tries to stop the whole project. However, the control is already out of his hands, and the participants of one Fight Club literally throw him out of the basement when he tries to chase them away. Not only do they throw him out, but they even attempt to assault him. However, the fact that his life is spared

does not mean he regained control – the movement continues to exist without him. The ending is another important point for the notion of hegemony. Namely, the narrator shoots himself and Tyler is proclaimed dead. The planned explosion never happens, but given the fact that he is now guilty of murder, the scene ends with him being taken away by the police. In the last chapter, we see him in what he calls Heaven (and what is clearly some kind of a sanatorium). However, what leaves the ending open is something that he tells us. Namely, he is occasionally visited by some space monkeys who dress up as workers and tell him that “[e]verything’s going according to the plan” (Palahniuk 1996: 155). In these terms, the novel only confirms the theory that the movement continued living even with its creator currently absent. Yet, given that he is in a sanatorium, such visits may be interpreted as hallucinations of a lunatic. In other words, the ending offers the reader a chance to decide whether the destructive movement continues to exist or not.

Conclusion

Fight Club seems to be one of those novels which are never sufficiently explored and discussed. Its unique representation of the inner working of a subculture, starting from its foundation to its transformation into something that resembles more the resented dominant culture rather than its counter-movement, gives us insight into important cultural phenomena that deserve more attention.

The story gathers the people that strongly resemble those we meet every day. These people, driven by disillusion and disappointment with the world they inhabit, construct for themselves a subculture which allows them to express themselves. The vast majority of critical writings, especially those who discuss social questions in *Fight Club*, dwell considerably on the masculine aspect of the story. Many critics, Schultz among them, have often put perhaps too much focus on the significance of *Fight Club* and *Project Mayhem*’s being an all-male community (Schultz 2011: 586). However, while *Fight Club* may start off as an exclusively masculine subculture, its main points are familiar to everyone who belongs to the subordinated, regardless of their gender. The main ideas of *Fight Club* – the liberation of one’s individuality, self-expression, and freedom of speech and act – may as well be universal for everyone who ever struggled with social rules, norms, and patterns of behavior. However, *Fight Club* also shows what happens when these ideas are repressed for too long.

In Palahniuk’s novel, we meet the subculture that is unique, as any subculture should be – it has its own sets of aesthetics, ideology, and patterns of

behavior. Still, not to make everything about it positive, it also carries within itself a fatalistic grain of ideas that will eventually lead to the construction of something extremely violent and inherently evil. Therefore, the transformation from subculture to hegemony may be proclaimed as gradual, but it is not unexpected.

In the end, it should be stated that Project Mayhem never actually fulfills its role of entirely establishing itself as hegemony because the plan partly fails. The dictator loses his power, the financial centers never get destroyed, but somehow the ideology behind the movement survives. Yet, even though we do not witness the complete rise of Project Mayhem hegemony, it still does not mean that all of its traits of hegemony are non-existent. Project Mayhem indeed qualifies as hegemony, and Tyler does establish power over an entire social group – he just fails to do the same on a global level. The fact that the ending is open can only mean that there is still a possibility of hegemony being established in the future. That, however, remains to be seen in the sequel. Meanwhile, we should probably not talk about Fight Club, just in case.

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USPON SUPKULTURE: PRELAZ IZ SUPKULTURE U HEGEMONIJU U ROMANU
BORILAČKI KLUB ČAKA PALAHNJUKA

Rezime

Kada govorimo o kulturološkom fenomenu supkulture, možemo reći da ona nastaje kao reakcija izvesne grupe ljudi na dominantnu kulturu u jednom istorijskom momentu. Ona uključuje prisvajanje dobara kojima dominantna kultura raspolaže i oblikovanje tih dobara tako da odgovaraju potrebama supkulture koja nastaje. Međutim, onda kada pojedine odlike neke supkulture budu dovedene do ekstrema, može se govoriti o njenom razvoju u hegemoniju. Ovaj rad prati upravo proces pretvaranja jedne supkulture u sistem koji ima gotovo sve odlike hegemonije na primeru romana *Borilački klub* Čaka Palahnjuka. U romanu, omanja zajednica muškaraca postaje poslušna militantna grupa kojom zapoveda diktator u nastanku oličan u alter egu glavnog junaka i naratora, Tajleru Dardenu.

Ključne reči: supkultura, popularna kultura, hegemonija, *Borilački klub*, Čak Palahnjuk

