

The Late Cold War and Cracks in the Iron Curtain for Georgian Youth in the 1980s: The Subcultural Nature of the “Jeans Generation”

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Abstract

The paper analyzes the phenomenon of the “Jeans Generation” as a part of cultural memory in Georgian society, through the prism of subcultures and countercultures theories. It locates the analysis within the broader geopolitical settings of the late Cold War period in order to explain the subcultural nature of this ‘generation,’ juxtaposed to the Soviet regime. The group of Georgian youngsters from the late 1970s, their style and their beliefs about reality and ‘jeans’, as ascribed to them in the cultural memory, are analyzed vis-à-vis the scarcity of information affecting their perceptions of ‘America’ and ‘the West’. The theoretical part of the article goes through the main traditions within the research field of subcultures and countercultures, outlines analytical differences between these two concepts, and establishes a working conceptualization from a constructivist perspective. Subsequent analysis of the phenomenon enables to conclude that this group of youth, although lacking any apparent ideological motives, ought to be categorized as a youth subculture according to the persistency and commonality of their visions on certain matters. The article also shows how this group has inspired a more tenacious belief counterculture, which has come to be associated with the phenomenon of the “Jeans Generation” in post-Soviet Georgia after the Cold War. Considering the political circumstances in the late Cold War period is also important for the analysis of the case.

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Introduction

Since the premiere of the play “Jeans Generation” in May 2001, the hall of the “Free Theatre” in Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia, is crowded whenever the performance is held. The book of the same title was published in 2008 and became a bestseller from 2014 to 2016. Following suit, a movie with an ambiguous title – *Hostages* – was released in 2017, and was nominated to take part in the competition at seven international film festivals, winning two awards and returning the topic to the forefront of attention in Georgian society.

All of these works adopt their script from a true story dating back to 1983, when a group of seven young people tried to hijack a plane (Aeroflot Flight 6833) from Tbilisi to flee the Soviet regime and escape to ‘the West’. The attempt was unsuccessful. The pilot of the aircraft resisted the hijacking, and eventually returned the plane to the Georgian capital (capital of the Georgian SSR at the time). After Soviet special forces took the aircraft on the ground by storm, four surviving members of the group were arrested and ultimately tried in Soviet court (three hijackers, three crew members and two passengers were killed in the firefight on board). The ending of the story – the death penalty – was not unexpected, but even so it was a gruesome judgement, even by the communist regime’s standards, which kept the story hidden from the public for seven years. The generation of late socialism became symbolically associated with *freedom, music, art* and *jeans* only a decade after the demolition of the Iron Curtain. Since then, as the author of the bestselling book mentioned in my interview with him, the views of the public have been divided: one part of society perceives this group as brave heroes, seeking their freedom beyond the Iron Curtain, while another speaks of them as a terrorist group, endangering people’s lives on the plane and actually killing innocent passengers.

Even as these issues are still the subject of continuing public discussions in Georgia,² there has been, to my knowledge, no academic attention devoted to comprehending the phenomenon of the ‘Jeans Generation’ as such, which is undoubtedly

² And possibly in the countries where the book was translated. By 2018, it has been translated into 14 foreign languages, although published under a different title. As the author mentions, it was not easy, for example, for Canadian or Dutch publishers/readers to understand what the notion of the “Jeans Generation” meant, and he was asked for permission to change the title.

part of the collective cultural memory of post-Soviet Georgian society. While the hijacking of the plane and the death penalty for this group have long been the subjects of discussion, not many have asked who these youngsters represented before the events of 1983, and what was left of this group after the collapse of Soviet Union? How could their subcultural perception of “freedom” be explained considering Cold War history? Departing from this question, I intend to analyze the above-mentioned phenomenon within the theoretical prism of subcultures and countercultures to find out whether these theories help to illuminate and explain key characteristics of this group, their style and beliefs about reality, and why ‘jeans’ ended up being ascribed to them in the cultural memory of society. I locate the analysis within the broader geopolitical setting of Cold War politics in Soviet Georgia in order to explain the subcultural nature of this ‘generation’ juxtaposed to the Soviet regime. In this sense, I propose that this group should be categorized as a *youth subculture*, although the phenomenon they established is connected to a *belief subculture*. Such an approach follows the tradition of Chicago School tradition of approaching subcultures not as a static ‘thing’, but rather as constructed and negotiated belief systems and styles of action. Pertinent to this analysis is the understanding the lack of an alternative which this group of youth had to face in every aspect of life, affecting their perceptions of ‘America’ and ‘the West’ – understandably, the latter were built in their minds from what could be seen through the few cracks in the Iron Curtain.

The primary sources of my analysis are as follows: the interviews that I conducted with the author of the above-mentioned book – Mr. Dato Turashvili³ – and the documentary titled “*The Boys of the Airplane*”.⁴ In order to create a theoretical framework, I will firstly review the secondary literature on theories of subcultures and countercultures.

Theoretical discussion: What constitutes subcultures and countercultures?

As in almost every field of the social sciences, the study of subcultures and countercultures is shaped by basic conceptual debates. Their conceptualization generally

³ The interview was conducted online on March 30, 2018. It consisted of four open-ended questions, to which Mr. Turashvili responded in a written response. Interviewer: Nino Gozalishvili. Consent was presented before starting the interview and no circumstances in reference to the consent form changed since then.

⁴ The documentary, consisting of six parts, was produced by Zaza Rusadze. It is available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CB5_QlbpYnE (retrieved on 12.04.2018).

depends on the researcher's epistemological and ontological perspectives. Different approaches and research traditions result in different visions not only regarding the meaning of concepts, but also as to the analytical value of these concepts and the specific comparative methodological tools to be deployed. In this sense, authors classify three stages in the evolution of studies of subcultures and countercultures throughout the 20th century. The first stage emerged within the tradition of the Chicago School between the 1920s and 1960s (e.g. Clifford Shaw, Robert Park, Claude Fischer). The second phase refers to the Birmingham School researchers under the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in the 1970s involving Richard Hoggart, John Clarke and Dick Hebdige.⁵ Since then, this field of study has been progressing through reflections on these two traditions, and nowadays a post-modernist perspective has come to the fore in a response to intensified globalization and interdependence. The meaning and connotations of 'subculture' have thus undergone major transformation throughout this period.

In the 1920s, subcultures were mainly territorially determined, which paved the way to a long tradition of explicitly or implicitly taking territoriality as an analytical tool within the study field. In this regard, Blackman cites Vivien Palmer as to how her research primarily aimed at creating "maps of subcultural groups".⁶ In her handbook for sociology students, Blackman warns: "Subcultural groups which display variations in the *prevailing culture* of the land are much more difficult to discover."⁷ Ultimately, this kind of approach was supplemented by a constructivist vision, which situates the abstract concepts of *belief system*, *communicated groupness* and the symbolic dichotomy of 'us' and 'them' in the center of analysis. By the same token, John Irwin points out this shift in studies of subcultures from seeking to identify territorially fixed social groups towards the study of specific lifestyles or systems of beliefs and actions.⁸ Another distinguished researcher in the field, Albert Cohen, similarly looks at subcultures as "behaviorally rather than demographically based".⁹ In this sense, subcultures are perceived to be mainly constructed through interaction and common interests, rather than givens such as ethnicity, locality and so on. For Williams – perceived to be a semiotician – subcultures are first and foremost social constructions and cultural phenomena resulting from social

⁵ Gelder, *The Subcultures Reader*.

⁶ Palmer, *Field Studies in Sociology*, 73. *Emphasis added*.

⁷ Blackman, "Subculture Theory," 497.

⁸ Gelder, *The Subcultures Reader*.

⁹ Williams, *Subcultural Theory*, 7.

interactions, rather than detached ‘things’ out there of which people ‘become members.’¹⁰ He thus places communication and culture at the center of his symbolic interactionist theory of subculture. I adopt this approach for the case analysis and suggest that it relates and explains the abstract phenomenon of the ‘Jeans Generation’ the best.

While there is some clear division and gradual development within theoretical approaches, a conceptualization of subcultures and countercultures, especially vis-à-vis each other, is far from being commonly shared. The main problem with the conceptualization seems to be the looseness of the term, which, on the one hand, diminishes the analytical value of the concept and, on the other, complicates distinguishing it from countercultures. According to Sarah Thornton, subcultures are “groups of people that have something in common (they share a problem, an interest, a practice) which distinguishes them in a significant way from the members of other social groups”.¹¹ Insofar as this conceptualization, alike other generic ones, tends to be analytically too broad, she attempts to draw the differences between ‘subculture’ on the one hand, and ‘society’, ‘masses’ or ‘community’ on the other. The latter is closely related to the abovementioned conceptualization, however, she explains: “subcultures differ from communities by the connotation of deviance against the *normative ideals*.”¹² Although thereby she highlights an important feature of subcultures (*deviance*), this conceptualization would still contribute to, as Honea put it, “diminishing the concept’s power as an analytical tool”.¹³

Due to the fact that subcultures and countercultures are still the contested concepts, post-modernists in the field sometimes neglect deploying them altogether and advocate replacing them with more concrete and contextual concepts such as *neotribe* or *emotional community*. *Indeed, subcultural groups create such a diversity that extracting a general model from the common features manifested in the studied cases takes place at the expense of analytical value.* However, Williams does not support the idea that the term has become outdated or irrelevant as an analytical tool. He treats *subculture* as an umbrella term encompassing different perspectives and studies within the field. Hence, Williams offers his conceptualization based on an analysis of the existing theoretical and methodological approaches to the study of subcultures, their limitations, and historical

¹⁰ Williams, 7-8.

¹¹ Thornton, “Introduction to Part One.” *Emphasis added.*

¹² Thornton, 2.

¹³ Honea, “Youth Cultures and Consumerism,” 3.

developments. Following a Weberian logic, he arrives at the following conceptualization: “subcultures refer to culturally bounded, but not closed, networks of people who come to share the meaning of specific ideas, material objects and practices through interaction.”¹⁴ Adopting a negativist approach to sociological enquiry,¹⁵ he analyzes subcultures as an ‘antithesis’ to *dominant culture*. In this case study, I follow William’s theoretical approach to subcultures.

Between *subcultures* and *countercultures*

Conceptual concerns become especially pertinent when trying to draw the line between subcultures and countercultures. The latter has been described as actively opposing the prevalent culture. In other words, countercultures aim at changing the existing cultural (might also be political) order, while subcultures are mainly associated with difference and uniqueness rather than identifying themselves via a rejection of the mainstream. As Randal Wright points out, those in the counterculture pursue radical ideas and seek to change the world.¹⁶ However, as Dowd and Dowd have observed during the analysis of textbooks, subcultures and countercultures are used interchangeably in describing some of the same groups. For example, groups such as Hare Krishna “are defined in some textbooks as subcultures and in other texts as examples of a counterculture”.¹⁷ Applying either category might also imply a normative connotation insofar as countercultures are associated with a more negative critique towards the dominant culture and acquire their own specificities via juxtaposing it,¹⁸ while subcultures are approached as parts of the dominant culture yet differing from it. In these terms, degree of opposition and the importance of societal changes seem to be the actual distinguishing factors between subculture and countercultures.

In the same vein, Sinclair Nicolas’ review is exceptionally useful as it concludes that another two distinguishing factors are the size of the group and its association with the dominant culture.¹⁹ Hence, countercultures might cross regional, age and/or class

¹⁴ Williams, *Subcultural Theory*, 39;

¹⁵ Negativist approach is understood here as a response to the thoroughly positivist bias in social sciences. Drawing from Friedrich Hegel, the combination of thesis (a statement) and its ubiquitous negative opposite (antithesis) leads to what he calls a ‘synthesis’ – the closest approach to the truth, as seen from an idealistic perspective.

¹⁶ Wright, “Strategy Inversion,” 53. His conceptualization of countercultures: “A *counterculture* is a *subculture* whose values, ethos, and aspirations differ substantially from those of the mainstream.”

¹⁷ Dowd and Dowd, “The Center Holds,” 27.

¹⁸ Honea, “Youth Cultures and Consumerism,” 2.

¹⁹ Nicholas, “Subcultures and Countercultures.”

dimensions and encompass bigger numbers of members than subcultures. The latter are also predominantly understood as a part of the prevalent culture, which is not always the case when analyzing countercultures. Shankar and Honea point out that countercultures, being always in opposition, are not very persistent and either die out or assimilate/adopt into the dominant culture.²⁰

The “Jeans Generation” could be categorized under both and neither of these concepts at the same time. Taking the above theoretical discussions into consideration and analyzing the motives of the group, I argue that it is close to a subculture as it was a negotiated and interactively constructed group sharing the meaning of certain ideas, objects, practices and problems. However, the *dominant culture* and its policies had their significance in shaping the group even as the mainstream culture is also dependent on perceptions and processes of construction by the members of a subculture.²¹ For this case study, the dominant culture is associated with restrictions and censorship. Consequently, the construction of the subcultural group’s own identity was part suppressed, part enhanced by the dominant order, which encompassed not only the domestic but also the global political circumstances of the Cold War. For this reason, the case should be analyzed in the broader geopolitical context.

“The Jeans Generation” and the crack in the Iron Curtain

The group of youth from the late 1970s acquired this symbolic label only after as much as two decades. However, once the term Jeans Generation became associated with them, it became an inseparable part of society’s collective memory concerning the horrific case from 1983. But how did the group of youth in their 20s arrive at the decision to flee across the Iron Curtain in an attempt to “achieve freedom”? How could their subcultural perception of “freedom” be explained considering Cold War history?

All of them being young adults from middle or upper-middle class families, members of this ‘generation’ were friends united under a “conspiracy” inspired by U.S. and Western products and phenomena such as *Marlboro*, “real” Jeans, *Led Zeppelin*, *The Beatles*, the radio channel *Voice of America*, and the shared symbol “One Way” (the latter indicated that the only way to the West). Their beliefs towards all these items and ideas

²⁰ Canniford and Shankar, “Marketing the Savage”; Honea, “Youth Cultures and Consumerism.”

²¹ As an added emphasis on each attempt to describe the concepts, the issue of the dominant culture is as ubiquitous as the discussion about its existence. Insofar as this matter is not a main point of this study, William’s analysis was adopted: “*the boundary between subcultures and mainstream cultures exists wherever and whenever people collectively agree it exists*”. Ibid. (p.9)

of ‘America’ were significantly shaped by the late period of the Cold War and the lack of any alternative to the Soviet system. The regime was involved in every aspect of life. This included personal leisure preferences as well. To draw a parallel to the Serbian case discussed by Gordy, under the circumstances of limited alternatives, “musical taste became an important signifier... of orientation towards the regime...”²²

As Turashvili also mentions in the interview:

“As the Soviet Union was isolated from the entire world, people tended to have misperceptions about the West: part of them, following Soviet propaganda, associated Europe and the US with malice, while the lack of information tempted others to idealize and romanticize the West, being hidden from them so elaborately.”

Restrictions on access to information and possibilities were not acknowledged by the witnesses in the trial and in wider society, part of which was constantly asking: “*What were they lacking here?*” As reflected in the abovementioned documentary, part of the older generation used to see this case predominantly through the prism of deviance. What is more, a part of society nowadays still does not question the label of ‘terrorists’ ascribed to the group by the regime back then.

Later also known as an ungrateful child or even a terrorist, Gega was brought up in the family of his film director father²³ and his actress mother. His room was full of poems around the US flag, and there was a portrait of Reagan on the wall. This was the room where Gega, one of the initiators of the hijacking, would listen to difficult-to-obtain vinyl records of The Beatles in the company of his friends. Another member of this ‘generation’ and a close friend of Gega’s – Irakli Charkviani – is the author of one of the most popular Georgian songs called *I will swim across the sea*. In the documentary, he recalls how they talked about the shared desire to get across to the other side of the Iron Curtain. This song romantically reflects on those dreams and the actual attempts of many Georgians from that period who wanted to flee from the Soviet regime by swimming over the sea. Turashvili notices that out of 43 attempts that had taken place in Georgia before

²² Gordy, “The Culture of Power in Serbia,” 105.

²³ Gega’s father was banned from working as a director by the Soviet censors, and he did not stand up against the imposed restriction – perhaps he did not find any form of resistance possible or meaningful during this earlier period of Soviet rule. It is only possible to speculate about this now, but one may assume that his son and his friends may have been motivated to do what they did partly by this, even as they seem not to have quite reckoned with the brutality of the ruling system – maintained even in the wake of the essential political changes of the late 1970s and 1980s.

this group tried to hijack the plane, the majority of the people involved tried to swim across the sea.

In a way late Cold War politics inspired this generation to dare challenge what their parents would cope with by choosing conformity. Deficiency of alternatives in the sphere of culture or music enthused this generation to associate everything ‘good and real’ (from music to tobacco) with the West. The small cracks in the Iron Curtain already permitted them to see through, putting *The Beatles*, “real” Marlboro cigarettes and artistic freedom in their sight. Charkviani also points out that their group’s desire was especially intensified in the period when the Cold War order became shaky, bringing hopes and possibilities for them. Interestingly, by this time, Gega was starring in a movie directed by Tengiz Abuladze. The movie, titled *Repentance*, was the first that attempted to dissociate the Soviet regime from the Stalinist repressions. All of the scenes featuring Gega were confiscated later on, in the aftermath of the hijacking, and Merab Ninidze took over his role in the movie, who would in the future go on to become the director of the above-mentioned movie, *Hostages*, devoted to the subject of the Jeans Generation. Hence, the fate of this group of youth is still an actively discussed matter in Georgia, and their features resemble what the authors quoted in the theoretical discussion described as a youth subculture.

Throughout the literature, youth subcultures are the most widespread type of group studied. However, youth subcultures are perceived to be prone to assimilation when the members get older. Hence, they are even labeled as ‘temporary subcultures’.²⁴ According to Greener and Hollands, tightly defined groups, “distinguished by age and generation, bound around a homology of style, territory, music or other focal concerns” shape youth subcultures.²⁵ Youth subcultures have long been stigmatized by directly associating them with delinquency (especially in British theories²⁶), but by the 1990s terms such as “subcultural capital” came to the fore, emphasizing the uniqueness of these subcultures.

The ‘Jeans Generation’ is, at the same time, also a reflection of a belief subculture, standing for a unique perception of reality and a subsequent lifestyle. Even as the original ‘generation’ as a youth subculture might have assimilated into the dominant culture as its members aged, the phenomenon they created carries the characteristic of a belief

²⁴ Dowd and Dowd, “The Center Holds.”

²⁵ Greener and Hollands, “Beyond Subculture and Post-Subculture?” 396.

²⁶ Analyzed in details: *Blackman*, “*Subculture Theory*.”

subculture, a difficult-to-identify subcultural type least likely to become assimilated with a prevalent culture.²⁷ Perhaps this potential was sensed by the Soviet regime as well, at the time, when its representatives refused to consider the young age of the members of the group as a mitigating factor, sentencing the surviving members to death.

It is important to mention that insofar as this type of subculture entails confrontation with political order and state/regime agencies, drawing a line to label them either as a subculture or as a counterculture becomes very difficult.²⁸ Countercultures are associated with feelings of deprivation in comparison with an idealized situation or the situation of a privileged group.²⁹ Thus, countercultures, I propose, could be seen in historical perspective as a feeling, which delegitimizes existing political or cultural orders and inspires revolutions and rebellions. In the words of Russell, applied to countercultures by Hollander, it is: “The romantic movement...aimed at liberating human personality from the fetters of social convention and social morality”.³⁰ Accordingly, I would suggest considering the phenomenon of the ‘Jeans Generation’ as a manifestation of counterculture, the legacy of which is still kept and which was inspired by an original youth subculture (part of which later became assimilated into mainstream culture).

Lastly, if we consider this group and the phenomenon as both a youth and a belief subculture, the question arises: What has been the symbolic role of Jeans for them? Do Jeans for this generation represent the same that Edwardian suits did for Teddy Boys, or what shaved heads represented for skinheads, and scooters did for mods? The short answer, according to the analysis above, would be that ‘jeans’ represented a liminal cultural position for this group, something through which they could ‘resist’ the regime and keep dreaming of being part of the world on the other side of the Iron Curtain – as jeans were simply not produced in the Soviet Union.

Ferdinand Saussure, among other researchers from different fields of study who acknowledge the importance of language structures in defining the surrounding world, speaks about signs as consisting of signifier and signified, and their relationship.³¹ In these terms, ‘Jeans’ as a simple signifier (jeans as a material, object) came to be applied to different mental concepts (the *signified*). For the group studied here, the “signified” included freedom, the West, music, and, perhaps, the manifestation of ‘difference’

²⁷ Dowd and Dowd, “The Center Holds,” 29.

²⁸ Nicholas, “Subcultures and Countercultures.”

²⁹ Hollander, “Explaining the Counterculture,” 30.

³⁰ Russell, *Western Philosophy*, 707 in Hollander: *Explaining the Counterculture*.

³¹ In Williams, *Subcultural Theory*, 27.

through style. By the same token, Dick Hebdige approaches the style of subcultures as “bricolage.” In explaining the *bricoleur* function of style, Hebdige refers to the example of Edwardian suits adopted by Teddy Boys to express their particularity, or, elsewhere, motor scooters, originally a means of transportation, becoming a symbol of solidarity within different subcultures. Style may communicate the qualities and/or ideological cleavages that the subculture intends to be associated with.³² Hence, we can conclude that jeans as a signifier of idealized symbols appeared to be a subcultural style for this group, reflected in the “Jeans Generation” phenomenon in the cultural memory of post-Communist Georgian society.

Conclusion

Through the article, I attempted to develop a new perspective on a long-discussed case in analyzing the phenomenon of the ‘Jeans Generation’ vis-à-vis late Cold War history and within the theories of subcultures and countercultures. Subsequently to describing the main approaches to this field of study, and the central conceptual discussions, the analysis arrived at adopting a constructivist vision on comprehending subcultures as a bounded group with shared beliefs on meanings of ideas, objects and reality, juxtaposed to a prevalent culture, towards which perceptions and attitudes are communicated, constructed and shared. Within the theoretical discussion, I also tried to distinguish between the two associated concepts of subculture and counterculture. Although this discussion is far from settled, several points might still be useful for analytical reasons: Firstly, countercultures encompass larger numbers of members, with a wider range of diversity than subcultures; Secondly, countercultures are *mainly* approached as a critique of the dominant culture, associated with more negativity and a short period of activity, while subcultures, especially within the post-modernist perspective, are perceived as unique formations, as “subcultural capital”. Subcultures are associated with concepts such as *difference* in contrast to countercultural *opposition* and *change*.

The consequent case analysis enables us to conclude that this group of youth – although lacking apparent ideological motives – can be categorized as a youth subculture according to the persistency and commonality of their visions on certain issues that became central to their lives. Their subcultural nature is a result of Cold War political circumstances that appears to be decisive for shaping these youngsters’ perceptions about

³² Hebdige, “Posing... Threats, Striking... Poses.”

reality as well as about life behind the Iron Curtain. In the aftermath of the Cold War, their perceptions of the West became translated into a more persistent *belief counterculture*, which has been embedded in the phenomenon of the “Jeans Generation”. The way cultural memory has preserved their legacy inspires countercultural feelings to this day.

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