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1. Concepts and Practices of the Underground

*Christoph Lindner and Andrew Hussey*

**Paris-Amsterdam**

The post-war histories of Paris and Amsterdam have been significantly defined by and frequently encounter each other in the notion of the ‘underground’ as both a material and metaphorical space. The underground traffic between the two cities has most often occurred in avant-garde movements. For example, the CoBrA movement, although centered in Amsterdam, Brussels, and Copenhagen, also exerted a strong influence on the Parisian *Nouveaux Réalistes* in the 1950s. Throughout the 1960s, the work and activities of the Situationists, Constant, and the Provos were an important part of the counterculture in both Paris and Amsterdam, often in parallel or simultaneous moments. What all of these projects had in common was a radical reinvention of city space that was both political and aesthetic.

This insight is at the center of this book, which seeks not only to interrogate the interrelating countercultural histories of Paris and Amsterdam in the mid- to late-twentieth century, but also to cast those forward to twenty-first-century realities, where the notion of the underground has also come to include the problems of violence and integration in the Parisian *banlieues* and Amsterdam suburbs, the sex and drugs trade in both cities, the re-imagining of city limits, globalized boundaries, and, in the most literal sense, the impact of the Paris and Amsterdam metros on urban mobility and the heterogeneity of city life. Shuttling back and forth between Paris and Amsterdam – as well as between post-war avant-gardism and twenty-first-century global urbanism – this book seeks to create a mirroring effect over the notion of the underground as a necessarily dissonant but also culturally-binding force in the making of the contemporary European city.

**Hipsters and Counterculture**

The origins of the first usage of the term ‘underground’ – meaning, in this context, cultural resistance to mainstream power structures – are notoriously unclear. Most cultural historians agree, however, that the word probably first took on this meaning at some point in the 1950s in the United States (see Green; De Groot; Sandbrook). Indeed the various anxieties and dissident currents which course
in an underground fashion through post-war America were most famously given a wider public in Norman Mailer’s extended essay *The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster*, published in 1957. The aim of this essay was to give an account of young white people from the 1920s to 1940s who had fallen so deeply in love with jazz music that they had adopted black culture as their own. Mailer’s essay was not the first to document this phenomenon. As far back as 1948 *Partisan Review* had published an article by Anatole Broyard called ‘A Portrait of the Hipster’ which hailed the Greenwich Village jazz fan as a ‘kind of Surrealist’ and ‘an underground poet’ (43).

Mailer’s essay went one step further, however. Drawing upon his recent readings of Jean-Paul Sartre, Mailer defined the hipster as ‘an American existentialist’ (11) who rejects all forms of conformity as the enemy of real culture. More than this, Mailer’s hipsters, with their own secret language (based on the jive talk of their jazz heroes) and a nihilistic philosophy of total freedom, were ‘wise primitives’ (11) who had declared war on the orthodoxies of the McCarthy era. From this point of view, *The White Negro* is not mere journalism, nor just the uncomfortably-titled self-indulgences of a swelling writerly ego, but also, and more importantly, a call to arms.

The sociologist Bernice Martin has described what happened next in Western society as an ‘Expressive Revolution’. By this she meant the explosion of the counterculture in the 1960s, as the hip American ‘underground’ went ‘over ground’. Across all of the arts, in politics, philosophy, psychoanalysis, the term ‘underground’ became a codeword to designate a way of thinking and behaving which, if it was not always totally new, was always at odds with received ideas. Martin has described this impulse as being driven by what she calls ‘anti-structure’ as the guiding principle of all ‘underground activity’, from art to aesthetics, from cinema to ‘happenings’ and ‘anti-psychiatry’ (132-3). This cuts across all oppositional movements and personalities of the era, she implies, ranging from the Beats to Timothy Leary to the Black Panthers. More precisely, she defines all of this activity as drawing together ‘the pitting of freedom and fluidity against form and structure … a long and concerted attack on boundaries, limits, certainties, conventions, taboos, roles, system, style, category, predictability, form, structure and ritual. It was the pursuit of ambiguity and the incarnation of uncertainty’ (133).

The real paradox at work here, however, is the extent to which this activity made its presence felt – even visible – in mainstream culture, where it disrupted but did not dislodge established power structures. It is hard to find a better example of this than the Beatles’s song ‘Revolution 9’, a dislocated and sinister sound collage, influenced by Stockhausen and John Cage, which was owned by millions around the world within days of its release in 1968, and then listened to mainly with indifference and boredom from a public who probably preferred commercial pop but who could also just about put up with the self-indulgent noise of the ‘underground’.

This apparent problematic was one of the many reasons why so many European avant-garde groups at first kept their distance from the ‘pop revolutionaries’ in Britain and America, who seemed only to confirm and to consolidate
the spectacle of commodity culture, against which these Europeans – many still steeped in the language of classical Marxism – had been fighting their own long war. More to the point, what this ironic dead end seemed to highlight was that the ‘Expressive Revolution’ of the Anglo-American counterculture was not at all the same thing as the concrete, concerted action of a real political Revolution. There was of course much talk of ‘Revolution’ in underground circles in the Anglo-American world, but for the most part this was focused on liberating sexuality, awakening the unconscious mind, and dreaming up myriad varieties of utopianism.

Nonetheless it was inevitable that the seismic shifts which were taking place in the ‘Anglosphere’ would eventually have an impact within Europe, as the sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll culture met the dialectical rigor of European Marxists head-on. The twin capitals of this encounter were Paris and Amsterdam.

### Urban War Games

In Paris, until the mid-1960s, the post-war underground most often meant resistance to the French Communist Party, the monolith that dominated working-class politics during this era. Other ‘underground’ movements included the French and Algerian supporters of the FLN (Front de Libération Nationale), which were determined to bring the Algerian war to Paris. These insurgents had their corollary on the right in the form of the OAS (Organisation de l’armée secrète) and their armed proxies who were fighting their own war against the French government, whom they saw as the betrayers of the Algérie Française. Against this background, the avant-gardists of the period – including former Surrealists, Lettrists, and Situationists – were forced through necessity to conceive of their work in hard political terms.

Similarly, in Amsterdam, the avant-gardists of the Vrij Beelden, the Nederlandse Experimental Groep, the early CoBrA group, and others had been marked by their own experience of war, occupation, and resistance. The most persistent motif in the work of these interrelated groups was building on the wreckage of post-war Europe: art and architecture had a political mission to replace the failures of the ‘old civilization’. One of the key texts of the era for Amsterdam avant-gardists was Johan Huizinga’s Homo Ludens, first published in Dutch in 1938. This was translated into French in the early 1950s and was devoured just as eagerly by their Parisian counterparts. Essentially, the appeal of this text was Huizinga’s argument that all true civilizations emerged from play and not work. Writing in the 1930s, Huizinga seemed to have analyzed and predicted the demise of homo politicus and homo economicus. In the post-war period, to his readers in Paris and Amsterdam, Huizinga was laying out the blueprint for a new form of city, a new way of existing.

Interestingly, both Paris and Amsterdam provided a ready-made home to ludic traditions of resistance. In Paris, this tradition went back to the 1940s, to the jazz-addicted youth of Paris who hated the Germans who occupied their city with the same venom that they had traditionally directed at teachers or priests. The
Most fervent disciples of the American jazz masters adopted the baggy zoot suits and greasy, lank hairstyles they had seen in the Hollywood movies that made it through the German censor and called themselves ‘Zazous’ – apparently a Gallic corruption of the ‘zah-zuh-zah’ phrase used by the much-cherished bandleader Cab Calloway. As far back as 1942, a journalist called Raymond Asso had written in the collaborationist newspaper La Globe of the ‘Zazou Menace’. Asso was referring to distinct groups of young people whose main aim in life seemed to be irritating the German authorities as much as was humanly possible.

They were mostly under twenty-one years of age (the ‘Zazous’ also nicknamed themselves ‘J3’ – a reference to the ration books which were assigned to those Parisians who had not attained the age of majority). ‘Zazous’ haunted the terraces of the Champs-Elysées – at the Pam-Pam or La Capoulade – or the Latin Quarter, at the Dupont-Latin, Le Petit Q or Café Cluny. They were distinguished not only by their American suits and tendency to invent slang out of the remnants of English that they took from jazz songs, but also by dandified details, such as wearing a miniscule knot in a necktie or always carrying an umbrella. Female ‘Zazous’ were unashamedly sexy, sporting the reddest lipstick, thin dresses adorned with big modernist squares, short skirts, and high heels. Both sexes adopted incomprehensible but modish fads as a mark of tribal belonging. These included drinking beer with grenadine or, most bizarrely of all, ordering carottes râpées, or grated carrot salad, with every meal.

The ‘Zazous’ were pranksters and teenage rebels a decade before these attitudes were properly codified in the pop culture of post-war Europe. It would be a ludicrous exaggeration to say that they represented anything like a true threat to the occupying forces, but they were a genuine nuisance and a rallying point for disaffected youths who, precisely because they were below the age of majority, were harder to police and control than other sections of the population.

Twenty years later in Amsterdam, the Provos, a group of anarchistic young people who took their name from the verb ‘provoke’, turned the antics of disaffected youth into a series of serious insurrections that by 1967 had become a direct challenge to the Dutch government. The Provos had their roots in the variety of anti-consumerist campaigns which became popular among students in Amsterdam from 1962 onward. One of the most playful ways to attack the rigidity of post-war Amsterdam culture during this period was to invoke magic, poetry, and play as weapons against the stultifying rationality of mainstream consumer culture. Throughout the early 1960s, mysterious graffiti appeared across the city: ‘Gnot’, ‘K’, ‘Klaas comes’ or ‘Warning’.

The Provos at this stage probably had no more than a dozen adherents at the hard-core of the group. But their style had a massive influence – their name was adopted as ‘geuzen’, a rebel name, while a new hip language emerged around it, including ‘vogel’ (boy), ‘chick’ (girl), ‘blowen’ (to smoke a joint), ‘te gek’ (crazy), and ‘kip’ (policeman). Most importantly, the Provos had a firm grip on the power of signs and symbols in the culture wars of the 1960s: their occupations and demonstrations were all characterized by a willful, antic spirit which was the most effective way of wrong-footing the authorities, whether at the royal wedding in 1966, or the various riots and sit-ins at Vondelpark or Dam Square. For a genera-
tion, in the Netherlands and in the wider world, the Provos were the very emblem of underground Amsterdam made into the most spectacular forms of mutiny.

**Projections, Mobility, Visibility**

This, however, is not just a book about the extended, interconnected history of the underground in Paris and Amsterdam. Indeed the very notion of the underground as defined above actively militates against nostalgia. This does not mean, however, that the passage of time should eradicate memory. With this in mind, the essays that follow aim to engage with the particular nature of the underground in each city and how they speak to each other in the past and present. Reflecting the recurring concerns of the authors, the book is organized into three interlocking sections which focus, respectively, on ‘projections’, ‘mobility’, and ‘visibility’.

The essays in Part 1 (projections) focus on the aesthetic, performative, and socio-philosophical strategies used by underground artists, groups, thinkers, and activists to re-imagine dominant, established images of Paris and Amsterdam in the urban imaginary. The essays in Part 2 (mobility) focus on the underground as both a material and metaphorical space of movement, diversity, encounter, refuge, and political action. The essays in Part 3 (visibility) offer new critical insights into the existing underground cultures of Paris and Amsterdam in the early-twenty-first century and reflect on these cultures’ relation to the so-called ‘surface’, to the dominant, visible, and increasingly commodified dimensions of urban space and experience. While some essays specifically address either Paris or Amsterdam, and some work comparatively across the two cities, all retain a sharp focus on how concepts and practices of the urban underground animate countercultural spaces, scenes, moments, and movements.

The opening essays by Sophie Berrebi and Andrew Hussey begin in the 1940s and 1950s and seek to excavate from those periods a sense of the material nature of the underground. In the case of Dubuffet in the Paris metro, Berrebi identifies the central ambiguity of Dubuffet’s work during this period as the slide, or swerve, between the notion of the underground as a literal space and a metaphorical experience. This ambiguity is unresolved in his painting, and therefore remains a defining tension in revisiting these works.

In a similar way, Andrew Hussey establishes the conflict and tension between the Parisian Situationist Guy Debord and the Dutch artist and architect Constant as the crucial dynamic in the early history of the Situationist International. The word ‘Situationist’ would of course go on to have great significance in the underground histories of both Paris and Amsterdam: this essay identifies the key debates and points of divergence and suggests that this history is still shaping debate about urban space in both cities.

In the next essay Gert Hekma looks at the history of the sexual underground in Amsterdam, tracing with a forensic eye the fast-moving and sometimes blurred evolution of the city from a provincial metropolis to the world capital of sexual freedom. This is linked to the ludic nature of Provo revolt and also the pre-histo-
ry of the subcultures that preceded them – the gay youth cultures of ‘Pleiners’ and ‘Sissies’, ‘Dijkers’ and ‘Nozems’. Here, the sexual underground is seen as the site of theory as well as activity. Reich, Sade, and Foucault are all regularly invoked by Hekma as avatars of the underground; but this is also, as he points out, a lost world in the fragmentation of twenty-first-century transnational realities.

The essays by Sudeep Dasgupta and Ginette Verstraete focus on the politics of spatiality in, respectively, Paris and Amsterdam, with an emphasis on mapping the margins as the center. In his reading of Karin Albou’s 2005 film La Petite Jérusalem, Dasgupta analyzes the Parisian metro as the space of transition for a young woman of Tunisian-French-Jewish origins, as she journeys daily between her home in the banlieue and her philosophy classes in the center of the city: a journey which takes her literally and metaphorically between worlds. Dasgupta’s innovation is to focus on how the film’s treatment of delay, detours, and diversions disrupts the hegemonic cultural dichotomy of fixity and mobility.

Verstraete presents a compelling history of the controversial project of the Amsterdam metro line. Most significantly, she situates the varying strategies of opposition to the project beyond the power-resistance divide, demonstrating how the ‘messy entanglement’ between the underground and institutionalized power functions as a motif in the experience of everyday life in Amsterdam. In particular, she considers how a countercultural art movement was ‘integrated’ by the municipalized underground space of the metro; and how, as a consequence, resistance was moved from margin to center with conflicting results.

In his essay on ‘The Beats in Paris and Beyond’, Allen Hibbard establishes the Beat writers of the 1950s and 1960s as the unstable center of a shifting network of like-minded dissidents, with their headquarters in Paris, but with floating islands of influence in Amsterdam, Tangier, and beyond. Hibbard looks to Deleuze and Guattari for a theoretical explanation of how flows of communication traverse the social field into the open space of the ‘rhizome’, the in-between where accelerated movement propels history forward. This, asserts Hibbard, is how the underground works – a kind of anti-dialectic which carries meaning through desire rather than ideology. Hence the emergence of the transnational underground network of the Beats and their followers, for whom geography is both an accident and an inspiration.

Carolyn Birdsall and Joyce Goggin focus on the visible/audible nature of underground activity in Amsterdam – especially the city’s tourist image, place-branding, and the Red Light District, the last of which is arguably the most conspicuous articulation of a normally clandestine activity. Both Birdsall and Goggin are concerned with the paradox of how Amsterdam sells itself as an underground capital, and how this process is sometimes validated, and at other times negated, by the consumerist nature of the spectacle on offer. Most significantly, both essays express an anxiety about Amsterdam’s countercultural self-image as mediated through the spectacularization of the underground.

Back in Paris, Anna-Louise Milne gives an account of how illegal immigrants challenge the legal and institutional framework of the city when they make themselves visible on their own terms. She reads this activity within the register of Parisian particularity and the universalism of the French concept of the Law.
The underground she describes is not just in opposition to these forces, but is also a defining component part of them. Also in Paris, Stephen Sawyer maps the underground as a matrix of metaphors and experiences, asking questions about how much is concealed and revealed in everyday Parisian life. The underground he encounters is both a place and a mechanism. More to the point, he argues that knowledge of underground activity in the city exposes the limits of urban experience, at the same as it traces the experience of liminality.

**Future City**

The meaning and nature of underground activity – already a fluid and elusive concept – has inevitably evolved and mutated in the twenty-first century. Yet, as many of the essays in this volume reveal, the questions asked by so-called underground artists and activists in the 1960s and 1970s have not yet gone away. Rather, their questions about the condition and future of urban space, commodity culture, sex, money, and identity have become ever more acute in the transnational, rapidly globalizing environment of contemporary Europe. What this book reveals in the end is that the underground is not an anachronism but an integral component of how we live in cities and how we will choose to live in cities in the future. That, indeed, is one of the lasting insights of this necessarily eclectic and challenging collection of essays, which reveals Paris and Amsterdam to be, albeit in increasingly complicated and paradoxical ways, enduring epicenters of cultural resistance, subversion, and diversion.