



SUBVERSION AND STEWARDSHIP

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WHAT IS STEWARDSHIP IN CYBERSPACE?

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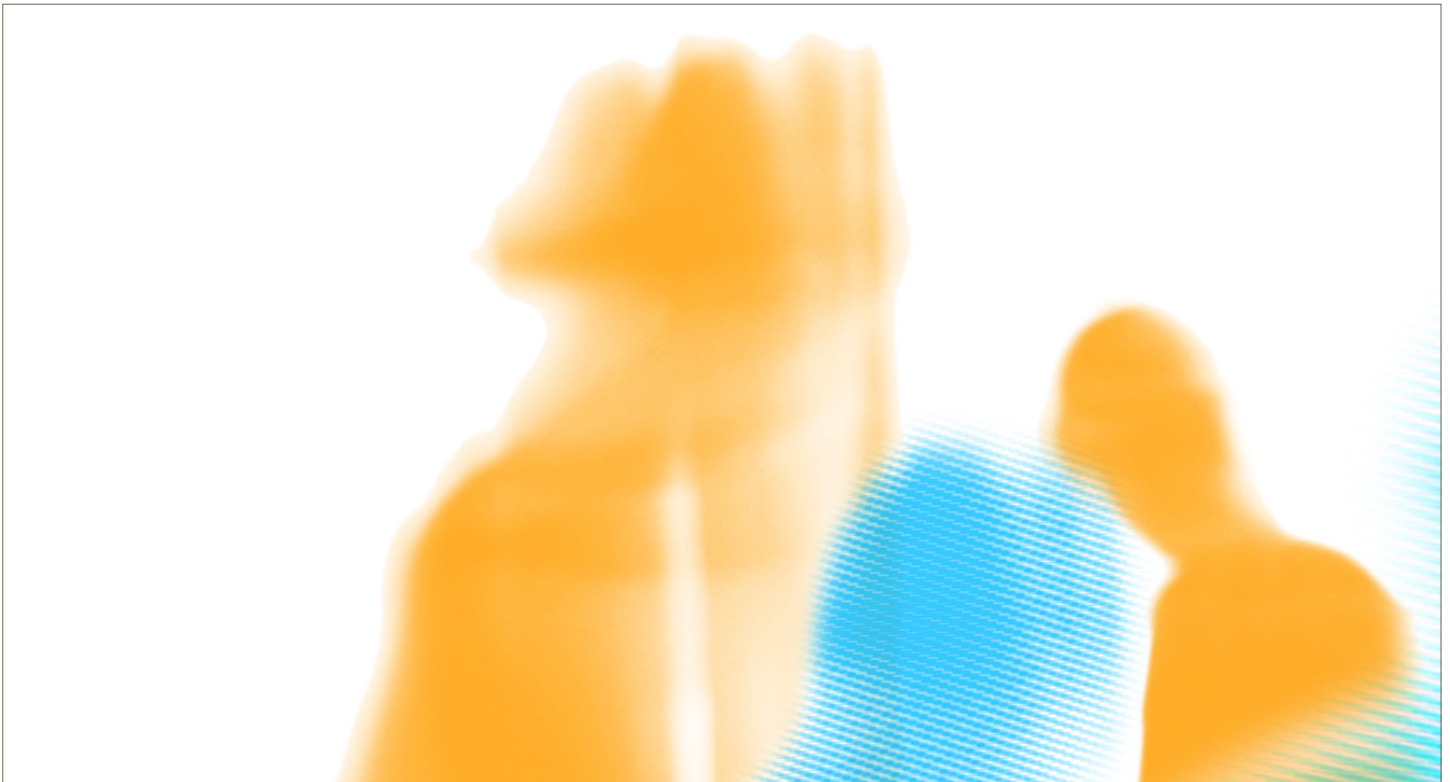
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The first dozen years of the twenty-first century have seen an explosion in protest and political violence. The most extreme and cataclysmic expression of this trend was al-Qaeda's attack on New York's Twin Towers. One decade later and only a few blocks away, but in many ways on the opposite end of the political spectrum, the Occupy Wall Street movement arose. The panoply of subversive movements in between includes Arab youth rising up against brutal despots, the alter-globalization movement, animal rights activists, anonymous hackers, and various social-media-enabled protest movements in Russia, China, Iran, and elsewhere. At first glance these phenomena have little in common: some are seen as a force for progress and overdue change, others as an expression of perfidy and barbarism. The amount of legitimacy in all cases is contested – this, after all, is the very essence of political conflict.

Yet at second glance these diverse examples have at least two common characteristics, to all observers, regardless of their allegiances. The first is that they all share the goal of undermining the authority of an existing order. Activists may not share one vision of what the despised existing order should be replaced by, but they share the belief that the establishment should be forced to change its ways, if not its constitutional setup. Whether extreme or mainstream, whether peaceful or violent, whether legal or criminal, these movements were all subversive. The second common characteristic is that all these movements or groups benefitted from new communication technologies. Taking action seems to have been enabled, at least initially, by the new-found ability to send and receive information, often interactively and often personal, on platforms that were no longer controlled by the very establishment activists were up against, like their country's mainstream media, state-run or not. Whether radical or conventional, whether nonviolent or militant, whether legitimate or outcast, these movements all had a virtual trait.

Subversion is an old idea that arose in Europe's own democratic revolutions at the turn of the nineteenth century. Its virtual dimension was added only two hundred years later, with the rise of the interactive Internet at the turn of the twenty-first century. Yet subversion is well suited to generate fresh and more adequate perspectives on the phenomenon of political violence in a globally networked age. Once subversion is conceptually fleshed out, a number of illuminating questions become visible. Under what conditions is subversion a productive social phenomenon? When is subversion likely to become illegitimate? When is subversion likely to become violent? When is it likely to mature into insurrection? And under what conditions is subversion likely to lose momentum, peter out, and disappear again? What determines the stage at which subversion ends?



This short text does not attempt to answer these questions. Its goal is to articulate the questions and contribute to a discussion, clearing the way for a theory of subversion that may help cast the foundation for a larger research program.

Subversion comes with a number of added benefits when compared to the concepts of activism, protest, rebellion, insurgency, or even terrorism. Adding conceptual ingredients from stewardship theory may enhance these benefits. First, subversion is more abstract and therefore a lower common denominator than rebellion or insurgency, concepts that are often seen as phases of transition leading to either victory or defeat. Subversion, by contrast, is also about identity—about who people are and who they want to be. Subversion enables a broader comparison across a larger set of diverse contemporary cases that might, at first, appear as somewhat of a motley crew of examples. Second, the study of subversion brings into fresh focus the

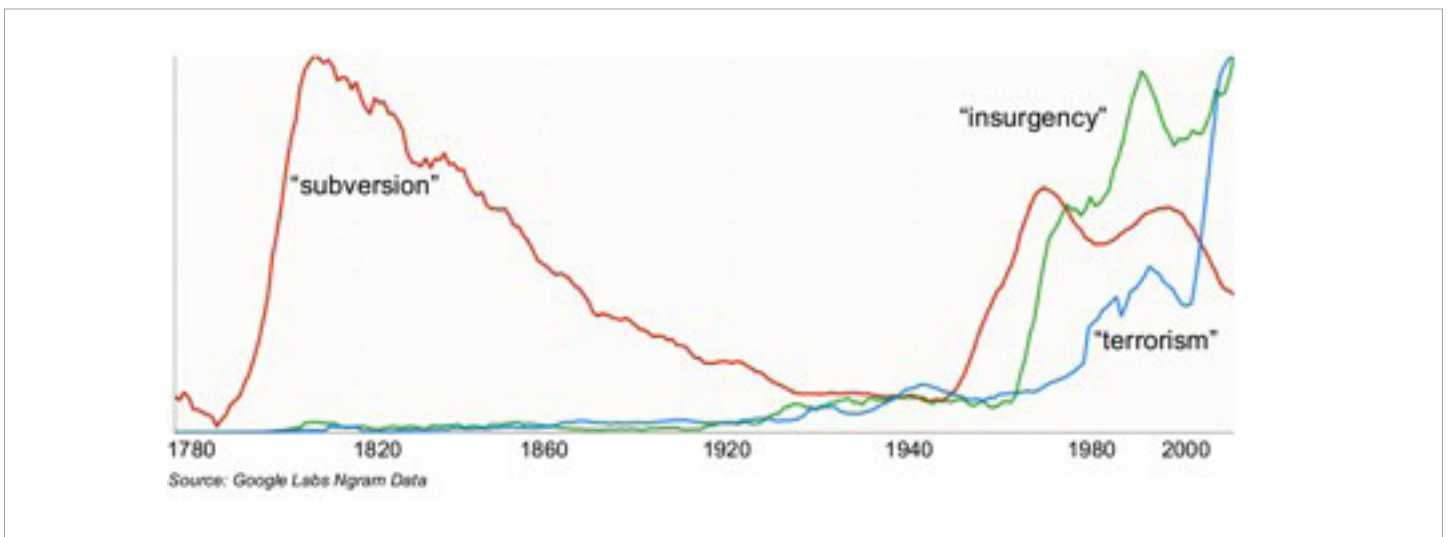
enhancing as well as limiting role of networks, the significance of emotions, and the variations and characteristics of different types of causes that can effectively motivate activists to cross a series of lines that can lead them from legitimate subversion to revolutionary violence. Third, this approach opens up a fresh way to explain the likely lifespan and endurance of resistance movements, especially when aided by stewardship theory. Subversion brings to light the limits of instrumentality and the limits of politics, and appreciates the mobility of membership and the incoherence of movements. Subversion cannot be defined in negative terms, by focusing on violence and counterforce. Subversives see themselves in positive terms, as stewards of a larger cause, as empowered individuals that found a new unity and collective drive toward a common goal. Conceptualizing subversion's positive side is necessary to empirically explore the allegedly enhanced strength of subversion in a networked twenty-first century.

Subversion is the deliberate attempt to undermine the authority, integrity, and constitution of an established authority or order. The ultimate goal of subversion can be to overthrow a society's established government. But subversive activity may also have more limited causes, such as undermining and eroding an organization's or even a person's authority. The modus operandi of subversive activity is eroding social bonds, beliefs, and trust in a government, a company, or other collective entities. The means used in subversion may not always include overt violence. One common tool of subversion is propaganda, for instance pamphlets, literature, and film. The vehicle of subversion is always influencing the worldviews and loyalties of individuals and uncommitted bystanders, and the way they interpret relationships of authority and power vis-à-vis their own political, social, and economic situation. The purpose of subversion is to make resistance more likely, whether

nonviolent or violent. If violence is used, decision makers are the prime targets, not technical systems. In other words: even when violence, sabotage, or arson is explicitly targeted at technical installations or property, not people, it is the mind and the cost-benefit calculations of politicians, owners, managers, or consumers that is the actual target of such attacks.

The concept of subversion, for many observers and some contemporary historians, misleadingly conveys a mid-century feel. Indeed the term arose — again — in the 1950s and '60s, when the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States resulted in global proxy conflicts where both sides employed all means at their disposal to undermine the influence of the other ideological block. Subversion was one of those means, then applied by one state clandestinely against the established order in another state. But historically, the heyday of the subversion was much earlier (figure 1).

FIGURE 1: SEMANTIC RISE AND FALL OF THE TERM "SUBVERSION" 1750-2008¹



1 The curves reflect the frequency of the use of the word *subversion* in printed books and periodicals in the English language from 1750 to 2008 (from Google's Ngram Viewer, <http://bitly.com/wIBTHt>).

The concept of subversion came to be used more widely in the English language around the time of the French Revolution of 1789 and the crushed Irish Rebellion of 1798. Many words can alter their meaning in the course of over two centuries. But subversion did not significantly change its meaning. “To make a revolution is to subvert the ancient state of our country,” wrote Edmund Burke in 1790 in his famous conservative manifesto, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, “and no common reasons are called for to justify so violent a proceeding.”² Indeed the term was imported into the English language via the French, although it was in widespread use already before Paris descended into insurrection, mutiny, and then civil war. In earlier sources, to subvert was to overthrow, to overturn, and to corrupt, said one authoritative dictionary of the English language of 1768.³ A thesaurus of 1806 gave the synonyms: overthrow, destruction, ruin, end.⁴ (The term *insurgency*, for instance, was not in common English use at the time and does not appear in historic dictionaries.) A book about George III, who reigned Britain in turbulent times from 1760 to 1820, has several fleeting remarks about attempts at subversion: of the government, of the state, of the constitution, and of the “established faith.”⁵

Military jargon had a similar understanding. One military dictionary of 1810 compiled by Charles James, a major in the Royal Artillery Drivers, described subversion as “a state of total

disorder and indiscipline; generally produced by a neglect of small faults at the beginning, and a gradual introduction of every sort of military insubordination.”⁶ Only in the few decades after 1950 was subversion identified as a strategy used by one state to subvert the government of another state. J. Edgar Hoover, then-director of the FBI, said in 1957 that the United States confronted a “two-headed monster of subversion and lawlessness.”⁷ Hoover’s fear was communist subversion of American political culture, as a result of tens of millions of immigrants from Eastern Europe who came during and after the Second World War. John F. Kennedy later integrated “counter-subversion” into a larger strategy to push back against communism worldwide. But the Cold War focus on state-sponsored subversion was the exception to the historic rule.

Subversion goes beyond violence. The concept has not merely a military meaning, but also a political and philosophical one. To date, military writers and security scholars neglect this aspect, but this literature is nonetheless a helpful point of departure. One useful author on subversion was Frank Kitson, a well-known British general who had seen action in the Kenyan Mau Mau Uprising, the Malayan Emergency, and in Northern Ireland. Kitson defined subversion in a narrow and rather linear way, as “all illegal measures short of the use of armed force,”⁸ essentially as nonviolent political crime. A subversive campaign of nonviolence, Kitson argued, may fall into one of three classes: it may be intended as a stand-alone instrument, without

2 Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (London: J. Dodsley, 1790), 243.

3 Samuel Johnson, *Dictionary of the English Language* (Dublin: G Jones, 1768).

4 James Leslie, *Dictionary of the Synonymous Words and Technical Terms in the English Language* (Edinburgh: John Moir, 1806). <http://j.mp/juTVRk>

5 William Belsham, *Memoirs of the Reign of George III to the Session of Parliament Ending A.D. 1793*, vol. I (London: J. Robinson, 1795), 123, see also 221; 303.

6 Charles James, *Military Dictionary, in French and English* (London: Egerton, 1810).

7 Lee Bernstein, *The Greatest Menace: Organized Crime in Cold War America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009), 9. <http://j.mp/jhXhnl>

8 Frank Kitson, *Low Intensity Operations: Subversion, Insurgency and Peacekeeping* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), 3.

ever becoming violent; it may be intended to be used in conjunction with full-scale insurgency, for instance to divert limited government assets away from another, more violent battle; or subversive action may be intended as a phase in a larger progression towards a more intensive violent insurrection.⁹ Kitson aptly recognized that subversion is much broader than insurgency, but like great military writers before him who highlighted political aspects of war, he had rather little to say about these political aspects.¹⁰ But by defining subversion as illegal yet nonviolent, the British general manoeuvred himself into conceptually murky territory that is difficult to reconcile with an open and democratic political order, as will become evident shortly.

A second aspect is that subversion may have more limited goals than political violence more generally. A subversive movement may never progress and mature into a full-fledged insurgent group—not for lack of strength, but for lack of intention, even when some more extreme members and cells resort to systematic violence. Activists may simply not want to make revolution. Indeed historical examples of regime change or revolution through nonviolent subversion alone are extraordinarily rare.¹¹ Again it is useful to consider Kitson, who aptly pointed out that the goal of subversion may either be to overthrow an established economic or governmental order — or “to force them to do things they do not want to do.”¹² The first objective is revolutionary and existential; the second is

evolutionary and pragmatic. Here one of the main defining features of subversion becomes visible. The objective of insurgency is always to overthrow an existing order, nothing less. The objective of a subversive movement attempting to get an organization to change its behaviour — but not attempting to overthrow an existing order — can be limited. Yet radical activists may well resort to systematic violence. Subversion can therefore take two principal forms: it may be intended as a nonviolent prelude to insurrection and revolution, or it may evolve into a campaign with a non-revolutionary dynamic, be it violent or non-violent.¹³

A third aspect is that subversion conceptually starts earlier than political violence. Consider the concept as well as the sequence of violence: violence is a clumsy arbiter.¹⁴ Abducting and capturing an individual against her or his will is clearly a violent act. In the case of merely threatening physical harm, perhaps by letter or e-mail, even if the threats are credible, it is less clear if violence was “used.” The damage of property, especially if it is carefully designed not to hurt or kill persons, is also not the same as physical violence against persons. In cyber activism, vandalizing a public website or staging a distributed-denial-of-service attack, in order to block online access to a government or company, cannot be called violence without using the word metaphorically. The focus on violence is not productive; it

9 Ibid., 82–83.

10 Carl von Clausewitz may be the prime example of a military writer highlighting political aspects of war yet failing to analyze them in detail. See Carl von Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege* (Berlin: Ullstein, 1832, 1980), book 1, chapter 1.

11 William Rosenau, *Subversion and Insurgency* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 2007), 5.

12 Frank Kitson, *Low Intensity Operations: Subversion, Insurgency and Peacekeeping* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), 3.

13 Clutterbuck and Rosenau develop a similar thought: “subversion needs to be conceptualized as one facet of a broader campaign that employs in a non-linear fashion a range of violent, less-violent, and non-violent instruments that serve to reinforce each other,” Lindsay Clutterbuck, and William Rosenau, “Subversion as a Facet of Terrorism and Insurgency,” *Strategic Insights* 8, no. 3 (2009).

14 The *U.S. Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* defines subversion as, “actions designed to undermine the military, economic, psychological, or political strength or morale of a governing authority.” See “Subversion,” *JP 1-02*, 31 January 2011, 351.

distracts from the essence of subversion.¹⁵

Every society has members with subversive potential, whether the government allows economic and political innovation or not. Ideas and activities acquire subversive character not through inciting violence yet remaining nonviolent, but when these activities undermine and erode established authority. This thought immediately leads to a conclusion that is as surprising as it may be discomfoting for most students of political violence: subversion may not just remain entirely nonviolent; it may remain entirely within the boundaries of the law, especially in free and open democracies. In sharp contrast to Kitson's ideas, neither nonviolence nor illegality can successfully delineate subversive activity in its earliest stages. Subversive thought is not necessarily radical or militant, but it is always political. Put differently: democracies are political systems designed to accommodate a certain amount of subversive activity — if warranted, by changing the legal and even constitutional foundation of a political community. Subversion therefore spans the philosophical and the practical; the legal and the illegal; the non-violent and the violent; and the non-revolutionary and the revolutionary.

Stewardship may illuminate the study of subversion in several ways. Agency theory assumes that human beings are rational maximizers of self-interest — stewardship theory makes an additional assumption: that human behaviour is often rationally geared toward maximizing the benefit for

a larger body. That larger body can be an organization, a company, or a social or political community. "The steward," as one of the most influential articles of stewardship theory put it, "perceives greater utility in cooperative behavior and behaves accordingly."¹⁶ In the 1990s, management scholarship developed the theory to better understand collaborative processes in companies. As one particularly widely quoted article put it,

In stewardship theory, the model of man is based on a steward whose behavior is ordered such that pro-organizational, collectivistic behaviors have higher utility than individualistic, self-serving behaviors.¹⁷

Stewardship theory, in short, understands that individuals are embedded in communities and that the community motivation may trump, or at least modify, individual motivation. Approaching subversion from the point of view of stewardship theory has two significant benefits.

The first benefit is that stewardship theory may help recognize institutionalized subversion. Stewardship embodies the willingness to be responsible, and accountable, for some larger body than just one interest-maximizing individual. That body can be an organization, a community, or a political group. Stewards think more like proactive small entrepreneurs than passive conveyor-belt workers. Or in political terms: stewards believe in bottom-up liberal democracy, not top-down authoritarian control. "We cannot be stewards of an institution and expect someone else to take care of us," says Peter Block, an author whose 1997 book *Stewardship* popularized the argument beyond the narrow

15 Kitson's and Rosenau's works, cited above, may be read as examples of such an overly narrow conceptualization of subversion.

16 James H Davis, "Toward a Stewardship Theory of Management," *The Academy of Management Review* 22, no. 1 (January 1997): 20-47; 24.

17 *Ibid.*, 24.

remit of management theory.¹⁸ Stewardship, in short, presupposes empowerment. According to Block, it “requires a belief that my safety and my freedom are in my own hands.”¹⁹ Any functioning democratic system, just like any functioning capitalist system, therefore requires a certain degree of institutionalized “stewardship.” In any democratic political system, some degree of legitimate subversive activity is a critical enabler of free, open, and innovative debate. The side effect must not be destructive and undesirable; subversion may be a constructive social force that is desirable from a systemic point of view. Productively challenging established authority helps bring about a dynamic, adaptive, and innovative order, in the social, cultural, economic, academic, and even the political spheres. Some of the demands of students and protesters in the 1960s and 1970s, for instance gay rights or the end of racial discrimination, were subversive at the time in the United States but broadly accepted across the political spectrum a few decades later. It is a mainstay of capitalism that even established market leaders are constantly challenged to stay innovative and drive competition. As soon as a firmly established authority, be it political or economic, is shielded from all criticism and challenges, it is likely to become stale, inert, and complacent.

Stewardship theory brings a second benefit to the study of subversion. It may help better explain the rise and trajectory of subversive movements *outside institutions*. If a system does not afford a sufficient degree of institutionalized renewal and innovation, both economically and politically, at some point the forces of change are likely to escape their institutional straight-jacket. “If the organization fails,” Block wrote

in *Stewardship*, “it is the leader’s head that we want.”²⁰ Under such circumstances subversion is likely to be more radical in its outlook, if not its methods. Such subversion always has two sides, a deconstructive and a constructive side, a negative and a positive side. Being subversive means being *against* the existing order and *for* a not-yet-existing order. “The antidote to self-interest is to commit and to find a cause,” Block wrote.²¹ He highlighted a sense of ownership, responsibility, participation, and connectedness — social connectedness, enhanced by technology or not. The more “stewards” a specific cause can attract, the higher the potential is for subversion to transcend a merely negative dimension.

The line between legitimate and illegitimate subversion is forever blurred and a subject of fierce disputes on both ends of the political spectrum. “The utopian is always part of the subversive,” argued Johannes Agnoli, a professor at Freie Universität Berlin and one of the intellectual forebears of the ‘68 student revolt, himself leaning quite far towards the left: “He who declares the end of utopia while criminalizing the subversive intends to avoid the possibility of new approaches.”²² Refusing innovation, Agnoli deadpanned in reference to Hegel, would be “pissing thought.”²³ The German idealist philosopher once compared the creation of new consciousness (*Bewußtsein*) and novel thought with siring new life — and staying within the boundaries of a used framework with “pissing.”²⁴ In a final lecture series before retirement, Agnoli grandly attempted to draw a positive theory and

20 Ibid., 6.

21 Ibid., 10.

22 Johannes Agnoli, *Subversive Theorie* (Freiburg: Ça ira, 1996), 12.

23 Ibid., 13.

24 G.W.F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie Des Geistes* (Berlin: Duncker und Humblot, 1832), 263.

18 Peter Block, *Stewardship* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1996), 6.

19 Ibid., 9.

history of subversion, from “Paradise” to the French Revolution. He depicted Eve as the mother of subversion. It was Eve, derived from Adam’s rib (which was in turn derived from God), who heard the voice of reason and subverted the two layers of hierarchy that had created her. Not God and not Man, but the subversive Eve, for the first time, made the step from the unconscious to the conscious, from *mythos to logos*, from object to subject.²⁵

It is easy to see how subversion as an overarching political idea appeals more to those in favour of change, perhaps even radical change, than to those in favour of keeping the social order as it is or as it has been. Subversion, in contrast to what some security scholars seem to think, is not principally illegal and it is not even principally illegitimate — only the most extreme forms of subversion are. Understanding subversion’s extreme form requires studying its moderate relatives. Much to the credit of French post-World War II philosophers, using the language of subversion became a trend in philosophy and the humanities during the 1960s and 70s.²⁶ By examining this trend a little more closely, a research program on subversion will progressively cross the boundary from conceptual analysis to empirical case study.

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25 Johannes Agnoli, *Subversive Theorie* (Freiburg: Ça ira, 1996), Another example of an author with a positive notion of subversion was Diedrich Diederichsen, a leading German-language pop theorist and art historian who described subversion as an artistic method with political goals. Diedrich Diederichsen, “Subversion – Kalte Strategie Und Heiße Differenz,” in Diedrich Diederichsen (ed.), *Freiheit Macht Arm: Das Leben Nach Rock’n’roll 1990-1993*, 33-52 (Köln: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1993), 35.

26 For a detailed examination of subversion in literary studies, see Thomas Ernst, *Literatur Und Subversion* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2011).