Patty Hearst: A Media Heiress Caught in Media Spectacle

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PATTY HEARST: A MEDIA HEIRESS CAUGHT IN MEDIA SPECTACLE

SUBMITTED TO

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AND

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To Professor Jennifer Friedlander for her mentorship and guidance; and to my parents for fostering my tenacity and paying my tuition. Thank you.
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When the past no longer illuminates the future, the spirit walks in darkness.

- Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*

When the real world changes into simple images, simple images become real beings and effective motivations of a hypnotic behavior.

- Guy Debord, quoted in Douglas Kellner, *Media Spectacle*

Well, you know, it’s really been, you know, quite a trip for me.

- Patty Hearst, quoted in “Interview With Patty Hearst” by Larry King
INTRODUCTION:

THE MEDIA SPECTACLE AND CULTURAL PARABLE OF PATTY HEARST

In 1974, decades before foreign terrorists became a fixture in the American consciousness, the Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA), an American domestic terrorist group, abducted nineteen-year-old media heiress Patricia (Patty) Hearst. The abduction kicked off a four decade multi-faceted media spectacle. The media and public raptly followed Hearst’s imprisonment as a hostage, apparent conversion to SLA revolutionary and criminal, eventual rescue and arrest, trial and conviction, presidential pardon, marriage to her bodyguard, half-hearted career as an actress, and ultimate withdrawal from the public eye. Along the way, the media portrayal of Hearst twisted and turned. She was the heiress, the hostage, the criminal, the victim, depending on the moment in time. The varying depictions of Hearst reflected evolving events, but also specific images of Hearst that captured the attention of the American public and the media. Resonant images of Hearst from her kidnapping, arrest, trial, and release – spanning the five years from 1974 to 1979 – demonstrate that the heiress’s case became a magnification of American anxieties of the time concerning celebrity, feminism and gender, the radicalization of youth, and terrorism. In a time dominated by print, radio, and television media, Hearst’s portrayal showcased the media spectacle as cultural parable for a controversial time.
Douglas Kellner’s writing regarding the media spectacle as a defining feature of contemporary society provides a useful guide to the story of Patty Hearst. Kellner harkens back to Guy Debord, a French Marxist, who theorized about the society of the spectacle in the 1960s and 1970s, “describ[ing] a media and consumer society organized around the production and consumption of images, commodities, and staged events.”¹ He enhances Debord’s abstract definition and ideas of media spectacle by creating a concrete construction of contemporary media spectacle and its implications and impacts. Kellner interrogates what significant examples of media spectacle can reveal, “attempt[ing] to discern what media culture discloses about contemporary society, as well as carrying out ideological critique of the specific politics of a text or artifact.”² In support of his views, Kellner examines and critiques specific examples of American media spectacle in the contemporary moment and contemporary society (though by now some of his work describes the past rather than the present). This paper undertakes a similar type of interrogation, bridging the work of Kellner and Debord to investigate the Patty Hearst media spectacle of nearly four decades ago.

Though the Hearst case is of a time period in which Debord developed his theories, it is nonetheless relevant to Kellner’s work on media spectacle in a time of the Internet, infotainment society, and modern terrorism. In many aspects, the Patty Hearst spectacle was a precursor to these developments. In examining “what [the Hearst] spectacle tells us about [past] society and culture, in developing readings that illuminate the [past], and in decoding ‘signs of the times’ that allow us to grasp better the defining,

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² Ibid., 16.
characteristics, novelties, and conflicts of the [past] era,” this paper sheds light on the development and functions of modern media spectacles. Like the more contemporary events Kellner analyzes, the examination of Hearst’s media images provides an opportunity to interpret and more fully understand the “articulations of salient hopes and fears, fantasies and obsessions, and experiences” of the recent past. Whereas Kellner focuses on the contemporary moment, this paper will consider a defined historical moment, analyzing “how media culture articulates dominant discourse and circulates opposing political positions around class, race, gender, sexuality, politics, and other crucial concerns.”

Implementing a diagnostic critique, this paper “uses history to read texts and texts to read history. Such a dual optic allows insight into the multiple relations between texts and contexts, between media culture and history.” More specifically, the following analyses describe certain resonant images from the media spectacle surrounding the heiress, consider them in their historical and cultural context, and, in turn, draw insights regarding the “signs of the times” from the 1970s American experience.

The first chapter addresses the details of Hearst’s kidnap, conversion, and arrest saga, interspersing information related to media coverage. The second chapter considers Hearst’s contrasting images in relation to celebrity and ‘the real.’ The third chapter

3. Ibid., 27.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

examines how Hearst exemplified anxieties surrounding 1970s women and gender roles, particularly the image of Hearst wielding a gun. The fourth chapter builds on this discussion, focusing on the ideas of choice and agency, while considering contrasting perspectives in photos of Hearst taken from bank security cameras. Finally, chapter five interrogates Hearst’s connections to counterculture, radicalization of youth, and 1970s generation gaps. In delving into the past, this paper will examine the media spectacle of Patricia Hearst as a cultural parable for its time.
CHAPTER 1:

THE MULTIPLE MEDIA IDENTITIES OF PATRICIA CAMPBELL HEARST

On February 4, 1974, SLA members dragged Patty Hearst, wearing a bathrobe, out of the Berkeley, California apartment that she shared with her fiancé, Steven Weed. The SLA was a relatively small, multi-racial domestic terrorist group opposed to social injustice, and led by an African-American man called ‘Cinque,’ after the slave who led the Amistad rebellion. The group seized Hearst as a hostage, hoping to exchange the young heiress for the release of several jailed SLA members. As the granddaughter of William Randolph Hearst, the man who became a media mogul by building an American journalistic publishing empire (and ironically a promoter of media spectacle of his era), Patty Hearst was a strategic target. When their prisoner exchange plan failed, the SLA demanded that the Hearst family provide seventy dollars worth of food to every Californian in need. Frustrated by media depiction and coverage of their organization, the SLA also demanded that Hearst new outlets publish its propaganda.

Media coverage of these events was national, intense, and ongoing. Patty’s father, Randolph Hearst, quickly complied with SLA demands, including giving the SLA space in Hearst publications. Attempting to meet the ransom demand, the Hearst family arranged for two million dollars worth of food to be provided for low-income residents of the San Francisco Bay area. Additionally, the Hearst Corporation pledged to make four million dollars available to the SLA after Patty’s release.
The food distribution efforts did not go according to plan. People mobbed the distribution trucks. Instead of an organized handout, food was thrown into the crowd and chaos ensued, with people fighting for whatever they could get. Television coverage showed street scenes of chaos and mob rule. What may have been a matter of lack of organization appeared to be a lack of respect for the poor of Northern California. Though the Hearsts expected an announcement of the time and place of their daughter’s release in response to their efforts, the SLA was far from pleased.

In the months that followed, Patty Hearst remained an SLA captive. During much of this time she was imprisoned in a closet. Cinque, the leader of the group, repeatedly raped her, and Hearst eventually entered into a ‘relationship’ with SLA member Willie Wolfe, known as Cujo. However, much of this was not known until much later. After nine weeks of silence, on April 3, 1974, the SLA released a photo (fig. 1) and tape recording of Patty Hearst to a local progressive radio station. In the tape, released two months into her captivity and played extensively on local and national radio and television, Hearst’s voice sounded meek and timid as she shocked the public, the media, and her parents by denouncing her family and announcing her decision to become a revolutionary: “‘I have been given the choice of being released in a safe area, or joining the forces of the Symbionese Liberation Army and fighting for my freedom and the freedom of all oppressed people… I have chosen to stay and fight.’”

Hearst also declared that she had been given a new name: she was now Tania Hearst. Media coverage of Hearst’s apparent conversion from hostage to revolutionary was provocative and

pervasive. The media was both bewildered and titillated by the strange and hostile message.

What happened next was even more bizarre. On April 15, 1974, shortly after the release of the ‘Tania’ tape, Hearst participated in an armed robbery of Hibernia Bank in San Francisco’s Sunset District. Grainy bank time-lapse photos of Hearst holding an M1 carbine circulated throughout the American media, although some scenes also appeared to show SLA guns trained on Tania herself. *Time* magazine’s coverage at the time referred to “The Hearst Nightmare.” With the tape and photos as evidence, it seemed that Patty Hearst had truly become an SLA revolutionary. After the robbery, as the FBI issued a warrant for her arrest, the hunt for Patty Hearst took on a different tone. She immediately transitioned from hostage and victim to criminal suspect, radical, and terrorist, wanted by the FBI.

On May 17, 1974, the FBI located an SLA hideout. An intense shootout ensued, and the house was set ablaze. Six SLA members, including Cinque and Cujo, were killed. The shootout was broadcast live on television, with many broadcasters reporting that Hearst was in the building. Meanwhile, Hearst, with other SLA members, watched the broadcast from a motel room. It seemed that Hearst was no longer being hunted *for*, and instead was being hunted *down*.

Hearst spent the next year and a half on the run before she was finally apprehended and arrested in September 1975. However, that was far from the end of her saga. As she was booked in jail, Patty Hearst continued to denounce her family and listed
her occupation as “unemployed urban guerrilla.”

Hearst made the cover of Time magazine (again), appearing in an unflattering photo with a banner reading, “APPREHENDED,” and a caption saying “Patricia Hearst, alias Tania” (fig. 2). The article inside was headlined “Radicals: Patty’s Twisted Journey.” After the Hearst family hired criminal defense lawyer F. Lee Bailey, whose previous clients included Dr. Sam Sheppard, Hearst seemed to suddenly have a change of heart, renouncing her revolutionary ways. She reconnected with her family and changed her listed occupation to unemployed.

Patty Hearst’s trial for armed robbery began on January 15, 1976 and was widely covered in the media. The jury, consisting of seven women and five men, was charged with determining whether or not Hearst was a willing participant in the armed robbery of Hibernia Bank. Bailey’s defense for his client was that she was coerced and under duress by the SLA at the time of the robbery. This was a legal characterization of what the media and the public had been speculating about for months in lurid coverage: the young heiress had been brainwashed. Several psychiatrists, some specializing in prisoners of war, were called to testify as to Hearst’s mental state. Bailey made the risky and ill-fated decision to put his client on the stand to defend herself and tell her own side of the story. Hearst pled the fifth (so as not to self-incriminate) 42 times in 45 minutes as she was cross-examined. Before sending the jury to deliberate, the Judge urged the jurors not to

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be influenced by their emotions, reminding them that, “‘The law does not permit jurors to be governed by sympathy, prejudice or public opinion.’”

At its core, the jury’s decision depended on whether or not they believed Hearst’s testimony. The twelve men and women on the jury, after only twelve hours of deliberation, agreed that Heart’s story of coercion was not credible and found her guilty of robbery. Hearst was originally sentenced to seven years in prison. Ultimately, however, President Jimmy Carter commuted her sentence. The young heiress was released on February 1, 1979, and returned to her family’s home for the first time in five years. At the time of her release, *Time* reported, “Patty is Free and Older.” Shortly afterward, Patty Hearst married her former bodyguard, Bernard Shaw, started a family, and had two daughters. Several films have been made about the Patty Hearst kidnapping and case. Hearst herself even had a brief, relatively unremarkable acting career before quietly slipping away from the public eye. Finally, on January 20, 2001, nearly 27 years after Hearst’s abduction, President Bill Clinton granted her a full pardon.

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CHAPTER 2:

CELEBRITY HEIRESS: PATTY HEARST’S CHANGING IMAGES VERSUS ‘THE REAL’

As Hearst’s peculiar saga unraveled, and Patty the victim seemingly became Tania the revolutionary, the American media and public were continually struck by the fear that if it could happen to an heiress, it could happen to anyone. The logic of this prevalent idea was somewhat flawed; wealth and celebrity had little to do with the ability to prevent Hearst’s kidnapping and apparent conversion. Rather, her social prominence and family fortune were precisely why she was a prime target for the SLA. The pre-established visibility of the Hearst family to the media spectacle and anxieties surrounding Patty’s case – combined with her very public kidnapping, arrest, and trial – made Hearst a celebrity of sorts. Hearst’s contrasting images and questions regarding her ‘real’ self became topics of discussion in both the courtroom and American media, ultimately contributing to her criminal conviction for bank robbery.

In *Heavenly Bodies*, Richard Dyer outlines theories of stardom and celebrity culture. He focuses on appearances and the dichotomies of private versus public life and the individual versus society. Though Patty Hearst was not a movie star, Dyer’s ideas are nonetheless relevant to her treatment and case, which hinged upon image and reality. Using Dyer in combination with Hearst extends the notion of celebrity far beyond the
film industry. According to Dyer, media representations of stars are concerned with notions of reality and the real:

Stars are obviously a case of appearance -- all we know of them is what we see and hear before us. Yet the whole media construction of stars encourages us to think in terms of ‘really’ -- what is Crawford really like? which biography, which word-of-mouth story, which moment in which film discloses her as she really was? The star phenomenon gathers these aspects of contemporary human existence together, laced up with the question of ‘really.’

Such questions plagued Americans’ minds during the hunt for Hearst, as well as her trial. Had Patty really joined her captors? Was her denial of brainwashing really a confirmation of it? Was she lying in order to seem like an unwilling victim? What had happened to Patty during her captivity and time eluding law enforcement? A *Time* magazine article from October 6, 1975, shortly after Hearst’s arrest, posed the quandary: “Which Patty to Believe?” Because Hearst’s actions and statements during her kidnapping and arrest sent contradictory messages, her trial became a battle over the cultivation of her image.

According to Kellner, “Celebrity too is manufactured and managed in the world of media spectacle. Celebrities are the icons of media culture, the gods and goddesses of everyday life [...] Celebrities have their handler and image managers who make sure that their clients continue to be seen and positively perceived by the public.” In Hearst’s case, the SLA, her attorney, and the prosecution were image manufacturers, though not all seeking positive public perceptions.

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The spectacle swirled as the defense attempted to prove that Hearst was a young woman who had been coerced and manipulated into cooperating with her captors, while the prosecution painted her as an heiress-turned-committed-revolutionary who only regretted her actions because she had been caught and faced serious consequences. Like Dyer’s movie star subjects, Hearst’s image was made up of many fragmented pieces. However, instead of interviews, candid photos, red carpet appearances, and films, Hearst’s image consisted of SLA propaganda, recordings from jail visits, affidavits, and testimony. As in the case of movie stars, Hearst’s image was not just created from these primary texts, but from secondary texts, such as news reports and media commentary as well. Dyer maintains that star images are not typically easy to control: “[A] star’s image is also what people say or write about him or her, as critics or commentators, the way the image is used in other contexts such as advertisements, novels, pop songs, and finally the way the star can become part of the coinage of everyday speech.”

The New York Times printed varied headlines about Hearst such as: “A Girlish Fugitive In a T-Shirt, Smiling and Chewing Gum” (September 19, 1975), “The Truth About Patty Hearst” (February 20, 1976), and “Psychiatrist Testifies Miss Hearst Had Used Drugs” (February 26, 1976). As the lawyers on either side of Hearst’s case attempted to craft her image, they faced a media spectacle that contributed to her image in ways beyond their reach.

At the outset of the trial, there was consensus that Hearst had participated in the Hibernia Bank robbery, corroborated by the time-lapse photos that had been extensively played on television. The trial and contest in Hearst’s case centered on her character and how she as an individual interacted with societal forces – was she a willing participant or

a brainwashed victim? While the media created a mixed, ever-changing, convoluted image of Hearst, the jury’s decision came down to a choice between the two ‘concrete’ images of Hearst created by the defense and the prosecution. Ultimately, it was the jury’s selection of the prosecution’s image of a willing Hearst that sealed her conviction.

Dyer asserts that stars articulate a specific notion of individuality or “what it is to be a human being in contemporary society.” They represent the concept that though a person may be perceived by his or her social behaviors, roles, and actions, he or she has a constant inner core, unchanged by societal forces and circumstances. Individual consistency is opposed to societal flux: “However much the person’s circumstances and behavior may change, ‘inside’ they are still the same individual; even if ‘inside’ she or he has changed, it is through an evolution that has not altered the fundamental reality of that irreducible core that makes her or him a unique individual.” Here, Hearst’s experience breaks from Dyer’s theories. While stars can slip in and out of character, but remain themselves, the roles Hearst played during her kidnapping and trial did not appear temporary or external. She was an actor, a player, in a twisted reality (rather than film), so her changing identities and actions undermined the idea of an immutable individual core. Hearst seemed to be altered by societal forces, which, according to Dyer, typically do not affect the perceived reality of stars. Her behavior changed so drastically that it seemed her irreducible core must have been changed as well. In joining a domestic terrorist group, Hearst shifted from acting as an example of a well-adjusted, affluent 1970s college student, to supporting a violent and radical American counter-cultural

4. Ibid., 7.
5. Ibid., 8.
organization. Such behavior was neither typical nor widely accepted. Stars shape their audiences in that they “represent typical ways of behaving, feeling and thinking in contemporary society, ways that have been socially, culturally, historically constructed.”

Patty Hearst represents a further departure from Dyer in her failure to publicly display mainstream modes of action and thought.

As a result of Hearst’s image of inconsistency and unreliability, her claims to an inner core of innocence and manipulation under duress were unconvincing to the jury. Her testimony, during which she repeatedly invoked her Fifth Amendment rights against self-incrimination, reinforced the perception of her role as criminal. Under the circumstances, Hearst fared worse than a celebrity under Dyer’s theories. She was sentenced to prison for her failure to convince the jury of the image her attorney promoted – that of a young, impressionable, brainwashed young woman. Yet over time, as Hearst’s public image continued to evolve, her conviction itself became perceived as a miscarriage of justice. Through her pardon and return to ‘normal’ life, Hearst seemed to ultimately demonstrate that her irreducible core had never changed. The public and media may have incorrectly interpreted who the real Patty Hearst had been all along. The inconsistencies they perceived were just an illusion or fabrication – a twisting of reality encouraged by her ‘celebrity’ notoriety.

6. Ibid., 15.
CHAPTER 3:

PATTY HEARST: DOMESTIC CONFORMIST ‘CONVERTED’ TO GUN-TOTING FEMINIST?

Before her kidnapping, arrest, and trial, Patty Hearst was already cultivating her own image, though for a more limited audience, largely maintaining an aura of domesticity and tradition. Such an image was evident in the presentation of her relationship with Steven Weed (fig. 3), whom she referred to as her fiancé. At the time, it would have been fairly scandalous for a young woman of Hearst’s age to live with a boyfriend: “She was a woman so moored in the proprieties of her Catholic mother that when she entered an ongoing sexual relationship, she legitimized it (in her own heart, if not her mother’s) by placing it within a domestic context, and by sealing its niceness with the promise of a wedding.”¹ Contriving an engagement would have been a simple way for Hearst to establish a more conventional situation and avoid questions of impropriety, encouraging positive development of her familial and media image. The apartment she shared with Weed served as both an actual and symbolic starting point for the changes Hearst’s image underwent after her kidnapping. As she was held at gunpoint and forced out of her apartment, Hearst’s image as a conventional, engaged woman was irretrievably

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altered. With fitting symbolism, the headshot used for her FBI wanted poster (fig. 4) was created by cropping the photo taken for her engagement to Weed.

One of the most iconic images of the young Patty Hearst comes from the April 1974 SLA robbery of Hibernia Bank in San Francisco. In the grainy, security video footage, Hearst, wielding a semi-automatic carbine, appears both menacing and incongruous. At the time of the robbery, the participating SLA members, one black man and four white women, did not disable the bank security cameras, seemingly deliberately, and further ensured public awareness of Hearst’s presence by shouting, “We’re from the SLA. This is Tania Hearst!”2 The entire event appeared to be more of a strategic publicity stunt than a well-thought out plan to acquire money for the domestic terrorist group, contributing to the image of Hearst as a conventional heiress now converted to threatening revolutionary. As Time reported, “the robbery had all the earmarks of a macabre publicity stunt, staged principally to demonstrate that the S.L.A. has tightened its grip on the millionaire’s daughter”3. The photograph from the robbery (fig. 5) highlights some of the underlying debates and anxieties surrounding 1970s women and gender roles that arose during the Hearst trial and case.

In 1972, just two years before the Hearst kidnapping, the U.S. Congress passed the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), which was intended to guarantee equal rights for


3. Ibid.
women. The campaign for the ERA, however, never quite gained enough support, and eventually failed just short of the required number of state ratifications when the ERA expired in 1982. Despite the failure of such broad new legislation, the roles of women in American society were changing:

[E]ven as the ERA stalled in the face of organized opposition and grassroots resistance, opportunities for women in American society were growing almost exponentially. The calls for revolution had begun in the 1960s, and much of the legal and political groundwork for change had been laid during that era. But it was during the 1970s that Americans confronted what was arguably a revolution in gender roles.

While some women benefited from the new opportunities of the 1970s, other women and men found their views and societal roles turned upside down. The women’s liberation movement of the time “freed women to compete with men and, in so doing, upset what [many Americans] believed was the proper relationship between the sexes.” The sweeping changes associated with the 1970s women’s movement contradicted, questioned, and undermined the established mainstream American cultural perspectives on gender relations. In a time when women in the military were strictly limited in role

4. “‘Section 1. Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.
‘Section 2. The Congress shall have the power to enforce, by appropriate legislation, the provisions of this article.


6. Ibid., 119.
and numbers, the image of Hearst clutching a gun presented a graphic image of this societal disruption.

On its own, the gun Hearst brandishes signifies the threat of violence or force. Perhaps more so today than in the 1970s, with debates over gun violence and rights at the forefront of American consciousness, it is a telling reminder that the nation’s history has been riddled with and marked by events of gun violence and intimidation. The visual presence of the gun invokes the American Constitution that protects the right to bear arms, but gender has influenced the perception of this right. Even today, guns and gun violence are more often associated with men than women, but this was even more the case in the 1970s when Tania Hearst brandished her weapon. After the draft ended in 1973, the United States began efforts to more fully integrated women into the military. In 1975, President Ford signed a measure that required U.S. military academies to admit women. 1976, therefore, was the first year that institutions such as West Point admitted women. This was also the first time that military women were required to undergo weapons training. Before the 1970s, women largely could not receive the training necessary to become military leaders. Patty Hearst entered Hibernia Bank holding a gun just before these changes took place.

The interpretation of and reaction to the images of Hearst during the bank robbery might be different if she were a young man, rather than a young woman. As noted above, gun use, and, by extension, gun violence, are traditionally gendered as male in the United States: “The legal authorized possession of a gun has historically been a radicalized and gendered privilege – a right of citizenship reserved for White men and later extended to
White women for most of U.S. history.”7 The image of Hearst holding a gun disrupts this history. She stands at odds with the societal construction of the man as the aggressor or protector of the American family. Indeed, Hearst’s use of the gun is somewhat masculine. She is not using it to protect herself against an attacker, but rather she has adopted the role of attacker for herself. Just after the robbery, a bank guard who witnessed the event reported of Hearst that, “‘There was no doubt in [his] mind she would shoot’ […] Asked why, he said, ‘It was her stance. Her position. It was so, uh, so tough.’”8 Instead of holding or using the weapon defensively, Hearst appears empowered and transformed by the gun into an aggressor who should be feared. The image of young Patty Hearst with a gun (and her subsequent trial for armed robbery) raised fundamental questions about American society: “The trial of Patty Hearst was about more than her participation in a bank robbery. It was a proxy for a national debate that asked how affluent White girls became armed insurgents, anti-racists and anti-capitalist political dissidents. How did it happen?”9 Hearst, with the help of a gun, became an exaggerated symbol for other young white women from conventional, mainstream backgrounds who rejected their privilege and rebelled against their families and their values. It appeared to be a breakdown of American economic and social structures.


Hearst’s image as an angry woman with a gun also reinforced the media images of the time regarding revolutionary groups such as the SLA, sometimes with racial overtones. During the 1960s and 1970s, several left wing organizations adopted the use of guns as a key tool for both publicity and intimidation. In California, it was legal for residents to carry a gun in public. In response, the Black Panthers seized the opportunity to carry and openly display weapons. This practice was deliberate, designed for both publicity and protection, and like the Hibernia Bank robbery, an opportunity to create an image threatening to the establishment. The Black Panthers provided weapons training for both male and female members of the organization. Like Hearst, the radical leftist women involved in similar efforts in the 1970s were not uneducated:

The gun women of the late 1960s and 1970s were often university-educated visionary feminist activists on the left. They regarded themselves as revolutionary political dissidents, who intended to transform the United States into a more egalitarian, human, and democratic nation.10

Such ‘gun women,’ like their male compatriots, often believed that violence was a necessary and justified response to the violence inflicted on the people by the state. White women were often singled out for their visible roles in such organizations:

A number of White women, including well-known revolutionaries […] self-identified as feminists and were members of the New Left, armed themselves and participated in violent armed struggles. Their motivations for arming themselves and using weapons were inspired by political ideologies regarding social justice, anti-imperialism, and anti-capitalism. They were engaged in what they considered to be emancipatory political action.11

10. Ibid., 14.
11. Ibid., 20.
The armed image of Hearst reflects the conflation of liberation, feminism, and revolutionary action. Following her arrest, Hearst anticipated having to give a public statement, telling a friend visiting her in jail, “it’ll be a revolutionary feminist perspective totally […] I guess I’ll just tell you, like, my politics are real different from way back when.” Such statements perhaps indicate Hearst’s, as well as the American public’s confusion about what it meant to be a feminist or revolutionary.

Feminism was and is a term fraught with cringe-worthy connotations and misperceptions, from bra burning to causing a widespread male identity crisis. Feminism was revolutionary in that it questioned the societal status quo and pre-established ideas about women. It was not inherently revolutionary in a violent upheaval sense of the term. Hearst’s statements and photos of her from the bank robbery reinforce the fear that spurring a change in the existing social and political climate implies the use of violent force. Hearst provided an image of the feminist or liberated woman as armed, irrational, threatening, and angry. These women would hold the country at gunpoint not simply to gain equality or freedom, but also to exercise power and control, changing the natural order of things.

If the gun is a tool or symbol of power, then the iconic image of Hearst wielding a gun also represents the threat that the empowered woman poses to American culture. Implicit in the 1970s confrontation of societal gender roles was not merely a challenge of the place of women, but also a newly generated competition with men. The armed

woman was a threat to the patriarchal systems of power that were already in place. Empowering women did not seem to simply be a positive promotion, but also an overthrow or demotion of men:

When *Ladies’ Home Journal* asked a male and a female author to respond to the question ‘Do Strong Women Frighten Men?’ both answered with a qualified ‘yes.’ […] Added to this new competition, men now have to wrestle with their conditioned feelings that the people they’re forced to compete with are, well, inferior.’

The photos from the Hibernia Bank robbery showed Patty Hearst and three other female SLA members in traditionally male roles as outlaw bank robbers. Though perhaps indirectly, the photos helped reinforce the perspective that changing ideas of gender roles were a threat to and attack upon American male identity.

Nonetheless, Hearst’s trial for armed robbery presented some contradictions or cognitive dissonance related to guns. The gun became the representation of Hearst’s willing participation in the Hibernia Bank robbery, for which she was chastised. She also faced criticism for not escaping when she had access to guns. During the trial, it came out that Hearst had taken turns standing guard for the SLA, and had easy access to weapons. She also had been alone in a van and provided gun ‘cover’ to members of the SLA. The prosecution pointed to such situations as opportunities when Hearst chose not to flee and save herself. In other words, while Hearst faced condemnation for her use of a gun during the Hibernia Bank robbery, she was also attacked for failing to use weapons as tools for escape. The photos of Hearst made her a complex figure: threatening because of her radical employment of the gun, but also blameworthy because of her passivity and failure

13. Bailey, 120.
to use a weapon to defend herself. Hearst both failed to empower herself with a gun, and transgressed the boundaries of empowerment via gun by becoming a social threat.

Ultimately, the gun-toting image of Patty Hearst as a feminist revolutionary turned out to be an unintended and unfortunate side effect of Hearst’s equally unfortunate experience. When she was released from prison in 1979, Patricia Hearst came full circle, returning to her image of domestic fiancé by marrying her bodyguard.
CHAPTER 4:

ARMED AND DANGEROUS OR ARMED AND IN DANGER?

At the core of the 1970s women’s movement and other liberation movements of the time was the concept of individual choice. These movements characterized themselves as working for universal equality and freedom, rather than for specific groups of people. They resisted pre-established ways of thinking or social constructions in order to achieve their goals:

[I]t was not women who needed liberation from men but men and women who needed liberation from the stifling stereotypes and confining sex roles that thwarted their true human potentials. Difference here was individual, falling along a continuum of masculine and feminine traits. And choice remained central.1

The women’s movement focused on ensuring the ability of all individuals to make their choices. This contemporary idea of choice is particularly interesting in the context of Patty Hearst’s case and, specifically, photos of the heiress from the bank robbery. Some photos show a close up of just Hearst, wielding a gun and exercising or abusing this right to individual choice. Others, however, show Hearst clutching a gun, with two or three SLA members pointing guns at the heiress. These different camera angles visually frame the competing readings of Patty Hearst: was she a sweet young heiress, compelled by force to help the SLA? Or was she an angry young woman, intentionally rebelling against

1. Beth Bailey, "She ‘Can Bring Home the Bacon’: Negotiating Gender in the 1970s" in America in the Seventies, edited by Beth Bailey and David Farber (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas, 2004), 123.
her family and society? These two contradictory readings hinge on the idea of agency. Who was directing Hearst’s actions? Was she a voluntary participant who willingly armed herself, or was she coerced?

The conflicting media images derived from the same security camera photos were central to Hearst’s arrest, trial, and conviction on the one hand, and her ultimate pardon on the other. If, as some of the photos seem to show, she decided of her own volition to arm herself, then she had individually chosen to be a domestic terrorist and criminal. Alternatively, considering the images of SLA members aiming guns at Hearst during the bank robbery – or the image of the closet in where Hearst was held and bound as a captive for months – exposes different issues. They encourage the image of Tania as a young woman under constant threat and duress, who was just trying to survive, a virtual prisoner of war.

The issue of choice or agency is further implicated by the oppressive nature of the SLA itself. The group included many female members, and claimed to support feminist aims, but was largely led by men. This patriarchal structure reflected the common societal patriarchy of the time. However, the SLA’s form of patriarchy was extreme and beyond oppressive: “The SLA was probably the first band of revolutionaries to marry a commitment to radical feminism with the use of systematic rape as a means of recruitment.”  

Hearst was repeatedly sexually assaulted and kept in a closet before she declared that she had joined the SLA. She was not the only young woman to become part

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of an abusive, male-dominated, violent organization in the 1960s and 70s. Charles Manson, for example, wooed many young women into his ‘family.’ During her trial, Hearst was seen as similar to these women, “[A]s an extreme example of the phenomenon of white, middle-class (or rich) girls turning to violence to strike at society. Starting in the late ‘60s, a few joined such organizations as the ultra-left Weathermen, the nihilistic and murderous ‘family’ of Charles Manson, and the S.L.A.”3 The actions of these women were inherently startling, representing both actual and symbolic attacks against American society. In Hearst’s case, despite evidence that she underwent sexual abuse and inhumane treatment tantamount to brainwashing, including a viewing of the closet where she was imprisoned, a jury of her peers found the heiress guilty of willful participation in the Hibernia Bank robbery.

In 1974, the singer Patti Smith recorded a version of the song “Hey Joe,” exemplifying the two potential perspectives on Patty Hearst. Smith explicitly references Hearst, beginning and ending the song with monologues about the heiress, who was still a fugitive when the song was released. The opening of the song sounds misogynistic, completely sexualizing Hearst’s involvement with the SLA:

Patty Hearst, you’re standing there in front of the Symbionese Liberation Army flag with your legs spread. I was wondering: were you gettin’ it every night from a black revolutionary man and his women or were you really dead? And now you’re on the run what goes on in your mind?4

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Smith’s harsh words seem simultaneously critical of Hearst, and questioning of her motives and experiences. There is a sense of confusion, of asking what was going through Hearst’s head at the time – a question that circulated throughout the media in 1974. Smith provides some theoretical answers at the end of the song by speaking as if she were Hearst in a sympathetic, though somewhat incriminating manner:

I’m standing there under that flag with your carbine between my legs. You know, I felt so free of death beyond me. I felt so free, the F.B.I. is looking for me baby. But they’ll never find me. No, they can hold me down like a dog and I’m still on the run and they can speculate what I’m feelin’. But daddy, daddy, you’ll never know just what I was feelin’. But I’m sorry. I am no little pretty little rich girl. I am nobody’s million-dollar baby. I am nobody’s patsy anymore.5

Smith adds a sexual element to Hearst’s rebellion and indicates that Hearst was drawn to the SLA by a desire for freedom from patriarchy and social pressure. Smith also implies that Hearst chose to help the SLA in order to experience this liberation. She was not committed to their cause, but she was committed to freeing herself. Still, there is a definite sense of intention, not coercion, referencing the public and media speculation about Hearst. Ultimately, however, Smith’s monologue comes down to Hearst’s father, as well as her upbringing. In Smith’s portrayal of Hearst, the heiress struggles with her image as heiress. She feels used, patronized, and constricted by her own image. Patti Smith exposes the tensions of young womanhood, Hearst’s image, and American society at the time. In just a few sentences from Hearst’s point of view, Smith references generational misunderstanding, patriarchy, and the oppressiveness of having little control over one’s own image. Like the jury that convicted her, Smith’s “Hey Joe” presents Hearst as a willing convert to revolution, reclaiming ownership of her image.

5. Ibid.
Thus, the image of Hearst as a revolutionary was so strong and pervasive that it promoted the delusion that she acted with freedom of choice, despite her coerced incorporation into an unrepentant terrorist group. Operating within the SLA’s particularly oppressive patriarchal system under the leadership of Cinque, abused and in danger, Hearst was still held responsible for her actions. Hearst’s vulnerability, representative of the larger American cultural vulnerability of women, was not seen as a systemic problem to be addressed by society as a whole, but rather was viewed as individual weakness. In other words, the SLA was not to blame for Hearst’s actions; Hearst herself was at fault.
CHAPTER 5:

PATTY HEARST: TALKING ABOUT HER GENERATION

In her ostensible conversion to SLA revolutionary and denunciation of her family, Patty Hearst also became a representation of the gap between the older and younger generations, between parents and their grown children in the cultural tumult of the late 1960s and early 1970s. After the Hibernia Bank robbery, Patty’s father, Randolph Hearst, was quoted about Patty in the American news media, saying, “It’s terrible! Sixty days ago, she was a lovely child. Now there’s a picture of her in a bank with a gun in her hand.”

These sentiments were indicative of the 1970s parental fear of their children embracing a lifestyle or worldview perceived as radical and in opposition to both dominant American societal values and the dominant values of the older generation. Patty Hearst’s apparent willingness to turn against the establishment represented by her family underscored the power of the counterculture to divide the generations.

Spearheaded by college students and other youth, the counterculture movement was at its height in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It embraced and promoted individuality, community, peace, and tolerance, and was also characterized by anti-capitalist tendencies and disregard of previous social conventions. It was a time of ‘sex, drugs, and rock and roll’ as well as political action – all threatening the American cultural

mainstream. By the close of the Vietnam War era in August 1973, American parents had watched their children organize and rally against the war, participate in civil disobedience, burn their draft cards, and face off against the police and the National Guard. Some were even gunned down at Kent State in 1970. Alternative lifestyles and viewpoints were also taking hold, challenging the conventional wisdom regarding sex, marriage, drugs, and employment. California colleges and universities, especially Berkeley, the University that Patty Hearst attended, had strong, active anti-war and free speech movements. All of the elements of the counterculture were on display and examined in the American mass media of the times, which had the contradictory effects of spreading its reach among youth, while simultaneously alarming their parents.

Governmental leaders and members of the older generations were shocked as young Americans mobilized, asserting and fighting for their opinions and beliefs. In a speech at a South Dakota college in 1969, President Richard Nixon synthesized this perspective:

> We live in a deeply troubled and profoundly unsettled time. Drugs and crime, campus revolts, racial discord, draft resistance--on every hand we find old standards violated, old values discarded, old precepts ignored. A vocal minority of our young people are opting out of the process by which a civilization maintains its continuity: the passing on of values from one generation to the next. Old and young across the Nation shout across a chasm of misunderstanding, and the louder they shout, the broader the chasm becomes.  

In his 1969 address, Nixon pinpoints the sense of generational misunderstanding present in the nation at the time. He places the blame squarely on the youth rather than the older

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generations and institutions. The young Americans were the ones disregarding or destroying traditional values and systems, instigating revolts, protests, and discord, and participating in criminal activities.

Though most of these movements and ideologies promoted peace and nonviolence, some were more radical and promoted violent resistance. Among these latter groups were the Weather Underground, the Black Panthers, and the SLA. In the public eye, the line between non-violent and violent groups was often blurred by viewing them collectively as ‘radicals.’ With their non-violent counterparts, they shared a view that the establishment culture was, at best, uncaring and, at worst, corrupt and unjust. From this perspective, social disruption and violence were not considered a far cry from radical ideals.

Patty Hearst’s ‘conversion’ to Tania put her at the more extreme end of the spectrum of radicalized youth of the 1970s. Unlike many of her peers, Hearst did not simply disagree with American involvement in Vietnam or want equality and social reform. In joining and participating in the SLA’s efforts, Hearst demonstrated a more defiant rejection of the American system and legitimate avenues for change. The SLA was not just a protest or social reform group; it relied heavily on terrorism, force, and scare tactics. Hearst seemed to have become an irrational radical – something that both the government and parents feared in their children: “The rise of a youthful counterculture, hostile to what the President considered ‘fundamental values,’ now
threatened ‘the process by which a civilization maintains it continuity.’ For Nixon, the student shout seemed self-evident proof of the loss of reason. If student protests were considered a loss of reason and civilization, then Hearst joining the SLA represented a total loss of order and logic in American society.

Patty Hearst’s notorious participation in the SLA’s revolutionary actions seemed to epitomize the disintegration of previously accepted codes and standards of American society. Hearst openly rejected her parents and family, trading in her silver spoon for a gun. In a tape released in June 1974, Hearst denounced her family and the American values her parents had attempted to instill in her. Hearst chastised her parents, distancing herself from them: “Dad, you said that you were concerned with my life, and you also said you were concerned with the life and interests of all oppressed people in this country. But you are a liar in both areas, and I know for sure that your and Mom’s interests are never the interests of the people.” Hearst paints her parents as selfish and rich, interested in only themselves and their family, disregarding the interests of the populace. She also depicts herself as one of the people, equating her own interests with those of the greater whole. After her arrest, Hearst spoke to a friend, concerned about the results of posting bail: “Well, what I don’t want to do is I don’t want to have the bail thing where I

3. These statements by President Nixon are also from his address at General Beadles State College in 1969.


am a prisoner in my parents’ home, which is possible.” Though she was a prisoner of the SLA for months, kept in a closet and sexually abused, the ‘radical feminist’ Hearst feared being trapped in her parents’ house. This even more personal rejection of her family was an extreme representation of the 1970s trend of youth rejection of the values and lifestyles of their parents.

The same year Nixon spoke at the South Dakota college, Jefferson Airplane, an American band formed in San Francisco in 1965, released the record album “Volunteers” (the original intended title was “Volunteers of Amerika”). In “We Can Be Together,” they displayed the flip side of Nixon’s views, and could have been speaking for Patty Hearst:

We are all outlaws in the eyes of America
In order to survive we steal, cheat, lie, forge, fuck, hide, and deal
We are obscene, lawless, hideous, dangerous, dirty, violent, and young
We should be together
Come on all you people standing around
Our life’s too fine to let it die
We should be together
All your private property is target for your enemy
And your enemy

Is we
We are forces of chaos and anarchy
Everything they say we are, we are
And we are very proud of ourselves
Up against the wall\(^7\)

Similarly, in the title song from the album, the group describes the revolutionary nature of the youth movement in opposition to the older generation. The song highlights the generational gap of the time from the perspective of the American youth, Hearst’s generation:

One generation got old
One generation got soul
This generation got no destination to hold
Pick up the cry
Hey now it’s time for you and me
Got a revolution, got to revolution
Who will take it from you?
We will and who are we?
We are volunteers of America, volunteers of America.\(^8\)


Though the American government and older generation may have viewed the youth as out of control and destructive, these two very popular anthems of the time illustrate that the youth viewed themselves as spirited revolutionaries, stalwart under attack. They present the American youth as people with the energy and drive to generate change in a country with an out of touch, passive older generation. The songs express a sense of urgency for joining the movement (though the nature of that movement is unclear) and defiance against the status quo:

[Y]outh experienced deep feelings of revulsion and disaffiliation from the policies of the national leadership. In subsequent years, other events traumatized different segments of American society, producing a similar sense of betrayal, disgust, and anger. ‘They feel they must remake America in its own image,’ the Scranton commission said of the nation’s youth.⁹

As an “outlaw in the eyes of America,” Hearst fell completely within these views of her generation. In a tape released before the Hibernia Bank robbery, Hearst announced that she was joining the SLA, adding, “One thing I have learned is that the corporate ruling class will do anything in their power in order to maintain their position of control over the masses even if this means the sacrifice of one of their own.”¹⁰ Hearst uses extremist rhetoric, unrelatable for the older generation of Americans. (However, her statement about killing or sacrificing to maintain control rings true in the wake of Kent State.) The statement seems to also anticipate the SLA safe house shootout that would occur a few months later, broadcast live on national television. At the time, the information


circulating in the media was that Hearst was in the house, confirming her view that society would sacrifice its own people for the sake of maintaining order and continuity.

Hearst’s revolutionary counter cultural actions and statements were reflective of a symbolic strike against the system. They represented unsettled American youth spurning mainstream American culture. However, they were also a literal threat against the system. After all, in joining the SLA, Hearst adopted their motto as well: *Death to the fascist insect that preys upon the life of the people*. As Americans watched Patty Hearst rob a bank and join a pro-violence domestic terrorist group, she became a negative symbol of what could happen to the radicalized youth of the country. It yet again seemed to the American public that if such radicalization could happen to an heiress, it could happen to anyone.
EPILOGUE:

THE INCREDIBLE PATTY HEARST BECOMES CREDIBLE

Through a guilty verdict, society punished Patty Hearst as a misbehaving child, holding her responsible for her actions. The verdict echoed what SLA members had told Hearst before she was arrested: “‘If you go back, society is going to be very harsh, and they are going to punish you.’”\(^1\) Hearst served 22 months in prison before President Carter commuted her sentence and she was released. President Carter was a strong advocate for Hearst, encouraging later presidents to pardon the heiress. Finally, on his last day in office in 2001, President Clinton granted Hearst (along with 139 other individuals) a pardon. At the time, Clinton did not comment on Hearst’s case in particular, but did express that, “The word ‘pardon’ is somehow almost a misnomer. You’re not saying these people didn’t comm[i]t the offense. You’re saying they paid, they paid in full.”\(^2\) Hearst had paid her dues to the system.

At the time of her release, in an iconic photograph (fig. 6), Hearst was captured beaming and standing next to future husband and former bodyguard Bernard Shaw, wearing a t-shirt that half-jokingly reads *Pardon Me.* The back of the shirt, not visible in

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the photo, said *Being Kidnapped Means Always Having to Say You're Sorry.*³ The humorous shirt succinctly captures the ironies of Hearst’s case.

While the front of the shirt may have girlishly indicated that Hearst desired American society to forgive her and allow her to return to a ‘normal’ life, the back of the shirt subtly expressed bitterness or resentment of the system: she was the victim who ended up having to apologize. Nonetheless, Patty Hearst emerged from prison, became Patricia Hearst Shaw (not Patty Hearst Weed), and since has had a relatively normal life like any other well-adjusted mainstream American. In some ways, she demonstrates the system’s success. Her prison sentence appeared to be an effective form of punishment, eventually enabling her to return to American society without any residual revolutionary tendencies (although it is ironic that she married her bodyguard, another ‘man with a gun’ like her former SLA captors). However, these results also seem to indicate that Hearst likely was not a willing member of the SLA and participant in the Hibernia Bank robbery. Radical terrorists generally do not receive presidential pardons. Though the events of her case illuminated and amplified certain social anxieties, the court’s punishment of Hearst and her eventual return to normalcy ultimately allayed or suppressed these fears. In 2002, Patty Hearst’s credibility was further restored when she was called to testify against former SLA members. While Hearst’s own testimony had been offered, but ultimately not trusted, in her trial several decades earlier, it was somehow deemed reliable by the prosecution in the case against the SLA. Such circumstances beg the question: if Hearst

was credible enough to testify against SLA members in 2002, should she have been convicted for her incredibility in her own trial? However, the more recent trial against SLA members was of a different era than Hearst’s trial. By that time, many of the 1970s anxieties, fears, and expectations regarding feminism, the counterculture, and radicalization of youth had greatly dissipated and been absorbed into mainstream culture.

Before the verdict was announced in Hearst’s trial, a *Time* magazine article commented, “In the end, the great irony of Patty Hearst may be that the self-proclaimed revolutionary will depend for her freedom on a family fortune raised in a system that she vowed to overthrow.” In many ways, this statement was true. The media spectacle surrounding Hearst had generated and exacerbated concerns about the heiress’s disruption of American societal structures and values. Ironically, the very systems that Tania vowed to dismantle were the systems that allowed the grown up Patricia Hearst to slip out of prison and back into a normal lifestyle. Her family connections ultimately both triggered and soothed her unfortunate path, for her saga would never even have begun if she were not the heiress to a media fortune.

Patty Hearst was once a household name, due to the bizarre circumstances generated by her kidnapping and the events that played out over ensuing decades. Almost 40 years later, the story and various media images of Patty Hearst – heiress, hostage, terrorist, criminal, wife – have faded over time and been replaced by images of new media spectacle ‘celebrities’ such as O.J. Simpson, Osama Bin Laden, and Elizabeth

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Smart. To many in the current generation of college students, the name Patty Hearst means nothing. Yet her experience remains a modern media spectacle with details that seem almost too strange to be true, a parable of misfortune followed by redemption with cultural themes of celebrity, feminism, and radicalism that still resonate today.
ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig. 1. SLA propaganda photo of ‘Tania’ Hearst in front of the SLA’s symbol.

Fig. 2. Patty Hearst on the September 29, 1975 cover of *Time* magazine.

Fig. 3. Patty Hearst and Steven Weed’s engagement photo.

Fig. 4. FBI flyer containing information about the SLA.

Fig. 5. Patty Hearst holds a gun in this security camera photo from the 1974 Hibernia Bank robbery.

Fig. 6. Patty Hearst with Bernard Shaw after her 1979 release from prison.

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