

Nonconformity Is Skin Deep

By DAVID BROOKS

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We now have to work under the assumption that every American has a tattoo. Whether we are at a formal dinner, at a professional luncheon, at a sales conference or arguing before the Supreme Court, we have to assume that everyone in the room is fully tatted up -- that under each suit, dress or blouse, there is at least a set of angel wings, a barbed wire armband, a Chinese character or maybe even a fully inked body suit. We have to assume that any casual antitattoo remark will cause offense, even to those we least suspect of self-marking.

Everybody who has been to the beach this summer has observed that tattoos are now everywhere. There are so many spider webs, dolphins, Celtic motifs and yin-yang images spread across the sands, it looks like a New Age symbology conference with love handles.

A study in *The Journal of the American Academy of Dermatology* showed that about 24 percent of Americans between the ages of 18 and 50 have at least one tattoo, up from about 15 percent in 2003. Thirty-six percent of those between 18 and 29 have a tattoo. Pretty soon you'll go to the beach and find that only the most hardened nonconformists will be unmarked. Everybody else will be decorated with gothic-lettered AARP logos and Katie Couric 4-EVER tributes, and Democrats will have their Kerry-Edwards bumper stickers scratched across their backs so even their morticians will know which way they voted.

The only person without one of those Pacific Northwest Indian tribal graphics scrawled across his shoulder will be a lone 13-year-old skater scoffing at all the bourgeois tattoo fogies.

Traditional religions have generally prohibited tattoos on the grounds they encourage superficial thinking (what's on the surface is not what matters). But it turns out that tattoos are the perfect consumer items. They make people feel better about themselves. Just as Hummers make some people feel powerful, tattoo-wearers will talk (and talk and talk and talk) about how their tattoos make them feel strong, free, wild and unique.

In a forthcoming essay in *The American Interest*, David Kirby observes that there are essentially two types of tattoo narratives, the Record Book and the Canvas. Record Book tattoos commemorate the rites of passage in a life. Canvas tattoos are means of artistic expression.

So some people will have their kids' faces tattooed across their backs, or the motorcycle that belonged to a now-dead friend, or a fraternity, brigade or company logo. In a world of pixelated flux, these tattoos are expressions of commitment -- a way to say that as long as I live, this thing will matter to me. They don't always work out -- on the reality show "Miami Ink" a woman tried to have her "I will succeed thru Him" tattoo altered after she grew sick of religion -- but the longing for permanence is admirable.

Other people are trying to unveil their wild side. They're taking advantage of the fact that tattoos are associated with felons, bikers and gangstas. They're trying to show that far from being the dull communications majors they appear to be, they are actually free spirits -- sensual, independent, a little dangerous.

The problem is that middle-class types have been appropriating the symbols of marginalized outcasts since at least the 1830's. This is no longer a way to express individuality; it's a way to be part of the mob. Today, fashion trends may originate on Death Row, but it takes about a week and a half for baggy jeans, slut styles and tattoos to migrate from Death Row to Wal-Mart.

What you get is a culture of trompe l'oeil degeneracy. People adopt socially acceptable transgressions -- like tattoos -- to show they are edgy, but inside they are still middle class. You run into these candy-cane grunge types: people with piercings and inkings all over their bodies who look like Sid Vicious but talk like Barry Manilow. They've got the alienated look -- just not the anger.

And that's the most delightful thing about the whole tattoo fad. A cadre of fashion-forward types thought they were doing something to separate themselves from the vanilla middle classes but are now discovering that the signs etched into their skins are absolutely mainstream. They are at the beach looking across the acres of similar markings and learning there is nothing more conformist than displays of individuality, nothing more risk-free than rebellion, nothing more conservative than youth culture.

Another generation of hipsters, laid low by the ironies of consumerism.