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Research Paper

Counterculture: The Generational Gap and Reaction to the 1950s

Although today, the word “hippie” is often satirized, the counterculture movement of the 1960s was much more complex than the simple tie-dye shirt and peace necklaces of a Halloween costume. The growth of the counterculture movement, both moderate and radical, in the 1960s was a slow development over time, building over many issues, and spanning many definitions. The roots of the movement stretched earlier than the 60s themselves. Although of course the phenomenon had multiple causes, the movement was above all, a youthful reaction to the culture of the post-war period. The counterculture movement of the 1960s was a direct response to the older generation’s conservative values of the 1950s, and thus, grew and developed from this original tension.

The post-war era of the 1950s saw a flood of repressive culture. Conservative values and lifestyles became the norm. With the help of the GI Bill, many soldiers returned home from the war and moved into new suburbs to live the *perfect* lifestyle. More Americans were getting married and more Americans were having children than “any other time in the twentieth century.”¹ The birthrate skyrocketed. There was a pressure to live in this perfect family- to live in Levittown with a spouse, kids, and white picket fence. People were very eager to leave the past few decades behind them and live in this comfortable peace.² Society had strict rules about what to do and not do, to not rock the boat. Folk singer Carole King wrote in her memoir that “the right way to look was exemplified by pop idols such as Frankie Avalon and Fabian, who were wholesome... boys aspired to be as cool as James Dean, Natalie Wood embodied everything girls

¹ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 3.

² *Ibid.*, 4.

wanted to be.”³ The repressive pressure to be perfect would soon blow up once the children of the 1950s grew up.

As they got older, the baby boomers began to question their parents’ generation, “a reaction against the cultural priorities of the postwar generation.”⁴ Since they grew up post-World War II, many looked at the injustices of the WWII era and saw the hypocrisy of how their parents lived. They were raised in a society praising the perfection of America. After WWII, civics classes, and the general American society, lauded all American values, and painted the nation as impeccable. But here they were fighting for freedom, when freedom was restricted at home. Here they were telling the kids of the 1950s to not do drugs or to not have premarital sex, yet they were far from perfect themselves.⁵ The younger generation critiqued the trapping corporate life of the adults around them, and the loss of freedom, autonomy, and personality that came with it. This generation, as they hit college, began to question the norm.

This movement was more than just a phase of teenage angst, like any other generation would go through; this generation saw “all straight culture to be harmful to their mental health.”⁶ Of course not every 20 year old in the country was revolting, but a larger portion of this generation than usual was frustrated with the way things were. And although the potential for movements like this were present in other times of history, the counterculture was truly shaped by this post war atmosphere- the affluence of the 1950s provided the perfect platform for these voices. There was not a depression or stock market crash that they had to worry about. Society was, seemingly, running along smoothly. It provided the ground to explore deeper. They were

³ Carole King, *A Natural Woman: A Memoir* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2012), 74.

⁴ John Robert Green, *America in the Sixties*, 137.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 138.

more liberated from monetary struggles, and thus they were able to think on their own. They saw, and questioned, the inequalities of the world around them. This generation, as they questioned the generation of their parents, began to shape the counterculture movement as they began to break free of authority, through the freedom of art and culture. They believed “how one lived one’s life and the power of art in the world were crucial to an emerging social transformation as any political activity”⁷ Although there was definitely both moderate and radical strands, the counterculture- and the way of life that the group lived- followed a total rejection of the formal, and hypocritical, nature of straight society.

This generation, and the subsequent counterculture, was shaped first and foremost by the music of the era. Many of the artists at the time appealed directly to the disenfranchised youth. They were losing faith in the system, and listening to this music was their silent rebellion. The music of this era helped unite people and get them thinking. Rock created distinct separation between “the young from the old”⁸. In the article “Rock as Rebellion,” John Sinclair, a manager of a 1960s political rock band, explained how music and politics fit hand in hand. “Music is Revolution” that makes people feel “alive again.”⁹ For these artists, music was about more than the money, it was about the message. Sinclair made a call to students to stand up and plan for what they will do when they left their parents.¹⁰ They must gather together around something, stand for something, and Sinclair believed this could be rock music.¹¹ Music, he said, is “immediate,” it is the “model” of the revolution.¹² It helps to “free people” and it encourages

⁷ “‘Eight Miles High’: The Counterculture,” in *“Takin’ It to the Streets”: A Sixties Reader*, ed. Alexander Bloom and Wini Breines (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 227.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 225.

⁹ John Sinclair, “Rock and Roll is a Weapon of Cultural Revolution,” in *“Takin’ It to the Streets”: A Sixties Reader*, ed. Alexander Bloom and Wini Breines (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) 242.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 242.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 244.

¹² *Ibid.*, 243.

people to work together, to unite, especially against capitalism.¹³ He called to the younger generation to organize themselves, and to speak out. “Part romantic escape, part physical reaction, and part cultural anthem,” rock spoke to this generation and was the soundtrack to the “political activities of the time”¹⁴. To Sinclair, it was all one in the same.

Music at the time was very influential and drew upon the younger generation. Singers, like Bob Dylan, were political singers. His contemporaries claimed he “spoke for an age.”¹⁵ Dylan drew in that counterculture generation through his critiques of the society around him. His “anger” brought “recognition” for them.¹⁶ He was considered a “philosopher” to some, a “hero” to others, and made a “fetish out of authenticity” for all.¹⁷ As popular as he was with the younger crowd, Dylan epitomized the generational divide. While he encompassed the youthful, rebellious energy, those of the older generation were not as impressed, and thus, Dylan created mixed reactions. After a story published in the *New York Times* about Dylan, several letters to the editor came back from angry parents. He was labeled an “expendable misfit” and even called the “picture of decadence” in society.¹⁸ This truly displayed the polarizing effect Dylan had on society. However, he was lauded among the counterculture, and he helped shape the movement that gave music a place in the counterculture.

Bob Dylan was one of many artists that helped shaped the thoughts and movements of this upcoming generation of open and rebellious youths. Music became a platform for their

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ “‘Eight Miles High’: The Counterculture,” 225.

¹⁵ “The Evolving Views of Bob Dylan: 1963-1968,” in *‘Takin’ It to the Streets’: A Sixties Reader*, ed. Alexander Bloom and Wini Breines (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) 232.

¹⁶ Ibid., 233.

¹⁷ Ibid., 232.

¹⁸ Ibid., 232-233.

views.¹⁹ San Francisco became a very popular scene for the counterculture movement, especially rock. As rock from the 1950s faded, rock came back in the 1960s as political. The younger generation helped keep this music alive.²⁰ It became about more than just the money. The entire scene in San Francisco developed, and “musical ideas were passed from group to group like a joint.”²¹ People would run in the same crowd, and help each other write and record. It all melted into one. The “law thinks it will fade out a whole scene.”²² But everyone started falling into “the same stream,” and there was “visible cohesion”²³ This underground world helped form the community, and it created a platform for these nonconformist views.

This nonconformity would thus spread into societal ideas. At the same time, “just as the lines between art and politics blurred, so, too, did the lines between political and social movements.”²⁴ As this generation was breaking away from the restrictive norms of the generation before, they began a search for something new. They wanted more freedom, more autonomy. They critiqued the generation before them and sought for more liberation, which they would especially find in college. The counterculture especially searched for more sexual liberations. This led to more experimentation and more birth control, which had “near-100 per cent effectiveness” and “wide availability.”²⁵ Free sex and cohabitation became more acceptable. They rejected the conservative sexual norms that their parents held. There was a rise of cohabitation among college students, which many students did simply because it was easier.²⁶

¹⁹ Richard Goldstein, “San Francisco Bray,” in *“Takin’ It to the Streets”: A Sixties Reader*, ed. Alexander Bloom and Wini Breines (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) 236.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 237.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ “‘Eight Miles High’: The Counterculture,” 226.

²⁵ “Unstructured Relations,” in *“Takin’ It to the Streets”: A Sixties Reader*, ed. Alexander Bloom and Wini Breines (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 265.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

As curfews slowly abolished, there were more liberal students housing regulations, and students found more freedom, more life, in cohabitation.²⁷ Parents were often very removed from these decisions, did not even know their children were cohabitating with the opposite sex, or would simply look the other way.²⁸ Many students commented that marriage, and the traditional ways to do relationships, was boring, and breaking the norms was more fun. Bill, a male student who lived with his girlfriend, declared that in “ ‘living together, you feel young, and you’re not tied down by joint possessions.’ ”²⁹ The counterculture sought more freedom from the traditional in sexual liberation as the generation gap started to grow.

The counterculture’s search for freedom, especially in the generational gap, was very clearly depicted in the cinema of the time. Even in the 1950s, the writers of *Rebel Without a Cause* reflected on what caused juvenile delinquency, and its links to the family and parenthood. Movies like *Bonnie and Clyde* show a distrust of authority figures and a glorification of those who work against the system. *The Graduate* depicts the growing generational gap and the hypocrisy of the older generation. The movie *Easy Rider* very clearly and overtly depicts this youthful new search for freedom. In the movie, the two main characters, one dressed as “Captain America” and one dressed as a cowboy, travel across the country looking for a “new frontier.”³⁰ These men, Wyatt and Billy, spend some time on a hippie commune trying to find themselves. They then come across another man, George Hanson, who gives a very impassioned speech about how people in their society were afraid of people like them, simply because they were looking for freedom. It is an overt call upon the counterculture. Wyatt and Billy end up in a

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 266.

³⁰ Gene Moskowitz, “Easy Rider [Movies],” in “*Takin’ It to the Streets*”: *A Sixties Reader*, ed. Alexander Bloom and Wini Breines (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 248.

brothel in New Orleans and go on a LSD trip in a graveyard. The movie drastically ends with senseless violence and the inability of these men to find their freedom. This story about going against straight culture and searching for freedom was very popular with high school and college aged kids.³¹ Those in the counterculture believed there was finally a movie that spoke to them, about living against the system and fighting disillusionment with society.

The characters in *Easy Rider* were on a search for truth, something that many in the counterculture were trying to do. This search for truth in the counterculture transformed all parts of life, including even religion. Many of this generation turned towards different religions, like many Eastern religions, to explore “deeper meaning.”³² Even the Beatles sought out truth in Eastern religions. There was a deep call to find oneself, apart from society’s norms. They believed that “ignorance obstructs” and that the “free world” is screwed up.³³ Their “modern societies...distort potentials” and true faith, like that that Buddhism brings, provides “deep insight.”³⁴ Only once one attains this level can there be true “social change,” and Buddhism was the “network” which transformed that way of life.³⁵ Those in the counterculture tried everything to find their true selves, their most authentic beings, apart from what society pressured them to do in the 1950s.

While some turned to Eastern religions to discover themselves, others in the counterculture turned to drugs to “tune in, turn on, drop out.”³⁶ While mainstream America

³¹ Roger Ebert, “Easy Rider [Movies],” in “*Takin’ It to the Streets*”: *A Sixties Reader*, ed. Alexander Bloom and Wini Breines (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 249.

³² Gary Snyder, “Buddhism and the Coming Revolution,” in “*Takin’ It to the Streets*”: *A Sixties Reader*, ed. Alexander Bloom and Wini Breines (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 250.

³³ *Ibid.*, 251.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Donovan Bess, “LSD: The Acid Test,” in “*Takin’ It to the Streets*”: *A Sixties Reader*, ed. Alexander Bloom and Wini Breines (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 259.

turned to alcohol and cigarettes, LSD became most popular among “hippies [and] college students” to open up the mind and find oneself.³⁷ Many attributed LSD to helping them explore their “inner space,” and they turned to these drugs when they were “fed up” with normal society.³⁸ LSD was simply a “fact of the time.”³⁹ Some in the counterculture used LSD to help reach a spiritual level as well. In the movie *Easy Rider*, the characters see religious images in their LSD trip. It helped to explore religious experiences. Others claimed that LSD helped them see the Holy Spirit. Those in the counterculture believed that on these drug trips, they went to a higher place where they could truly be themselves. Many believed it “changed [their] life.”⁴⁰

Between music, movies, sex, religion, and drugs, the counterculture created a culture of their own. They created a community. They ran in the same groups. Gatherings like concerts and happenings became huge events where the entire counterculture would unite under a common love. They shared “free food, free clinics, free lodging, free rock concerts”... which came together to create this “counterculture institution”⁴¹. In her article, Helen Swick Perry described a happening at the Human Be-In in San Francisco on January 17th, 1967. Music was playing throughout the day, artists were everywhere, and people walked around sharing food and drugs. Everyone could just be free. Children and animals ran around without supervision. There was a feeling of “participation” everywhere.⁴² The huge community was described as “mystical,” for everything just seemed to be happening.⁴³ It was both spiritual and political. Everyone gathered united in the search to be fully authentic, to not succumb to the norms of their society, to stand

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 260.

⁴¹ “‘Eight Miles High’: The Counterculture,” 226.

⁴² Helen Swick Perry, “The Human Be-In,” in *‘Takin’ It to the Streets’: A Sixties Reader*, ed. Alexander Bloom and Wini Breines (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 271.

⁴³ Ibid.

up for what they believed in. A true, “renewal of the spirit of man.”⁴⁴ It was the place to be, and it brought “people from so many walks of life, some come in curiosity, some in search of something, some in worship of an idea, some to be initiated into a new rite.”⁴⁵ The culture that the counterculture of the 1960s created became an interconnected web, which joined together to celebrate life.

While many moderate countercultures might be found at events like this, hippies were the most radical of the counterculture. While “many young Americans chose to reject completely the culture of their parents,” very few were indeed true “hippies.”⁴⁶ True hippies were more than just an angsty teen in a tie-dye shirt and ripped jeans. They lived in communes, shared everything, and searched for the world’s truth. They believed that straight culture “prey[ed]...mercilessly”⁴⁷ True hippies refused to “camouflage” into regular society, and this was seen as a “sin” to those around them.⁴⁸ There was an absolute and total rejection of their parents’ generation. “They have seen their parents slave for years, wasting away a lifetime to make sure that the house was paid off, that the kids got through school in order to get ‘good’ jobs so that they could join the frantic scramble later on,” and even after all that, their parents did not seem any happier.⁴⁹ They believed that society brainwashed people, and in actuality, very “little [was] required for happiness.”⁵⁰ They believed society was ruined by advertising and the social pressure to own so much. True hippies “[saw] madness in the constant fight to sell more washing machines...than the other fellow. He [was] equally horrified at the grim ruthlessness of the men who

⁴⁴ Ibid., 272.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 273.

⁴⁶ Green, *America in the Sixties*, 137-138.

⁴⁷ Guy Strait, “What Is a Hippie?” in *Takin’ It to the Streets’: A Sixties Reader*, ed. Alexander Bloom and Wini Breines (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 269.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 269-270.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

participate[d] in the fight.”⁵¹ Hippies lived a completely different way of life in their search for truth despite the dehumanization of straight society, and they made up a very radical section of the counterculture community.

Another radical section of the counterculture movement was the Youth Internationals Movement, also called Yippies. The Yippies were a true accumulation of both the youth and the counterculture movements. They actively worked against society. They united on a call to activism. Yippies believed that “the American election represente[d] death”⁵² They planned to protest the election day with a “festival of life.”⁵³ They were so cynical about the society around them, especially politics, that they wanted a revolution- total anarchy. They called for “LSD in the drinking water,” blockades, and protests.⁵⁴ They believed that “pigs control[led] the world.”⁵⁵ They refused the world around them. The Yippies were a very radical group that clearly reflected the generation gap and the rejection of the conservative 50s values. They called all to “resist opposition as you felt it.”⁵⁶ They saw themselves as the ones to start the revolution against conservative society.

This counterculture, this reaction to change, can also be seen in Providence College’s own history. Even a private Catholic school like Providence College felt the effect of the counterculture’s change. By looking through two decades worth of yearbooks, from 1950-1970, there is a drastic change in the youth culture of the college (see pictures below). Simply looking at appearances, there is a clear change. In 1950, the students were very clean cut and formal.

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵² “Yippie Manifesto,” in *“Takin’ It to the Streets”: A Sixties Reader*, ed. Alexander Bloom and Wini Breines (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 279.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 280.

Dance attire was very classy. Advertisements focused on looking and feeling proper. Even by 1960, the yearbook looked less formal. The font is more natural and the spacing of the pages is clearer. The students, however, still looked very similar, and the advertisements focused on the same formal look. The counterculture had not started to formulate. The hair is a little less slicked back, but the students were still very clean cut.

Not surprisingly, the 1970 yearbook was drastically different. Even the inside cover was colorful and informal. Students had much longer hair and long sideburns- much less formal looking. However, the biggest shock was in the content of this yearbook. The students used this yearbook to truly reflect not only on their time at college, but the world around them as well. The captions underneath the pictures were incredibly cynical and biting. At this time, Providence College was an all-boys school, but they were making a direct critique of their school for not allowing women in (women would be admitted in the 1971-1972 school year- the decision was made just months after this yearbook was released). The yearbook was edgy and radical. There were pictures of beer bottles, scantily-clad women, and couples making out. The captions made fun of the college. It felt less like a yearbook and more like a manifesto. There were commentaries on Woodstock, hunger strikes outside of Raymond Hall for Gandhi, and countless quotes from counterculture icons like Bob Dylan, John Lennon, and Paul McCarthy. They critiqued everything from the school's ROTC program, to formal wear, to the restrictive, right-winged nature of the college, to Richard Nixon, to the theology programs, to the Vietnam War, to the all-male atmosphere.

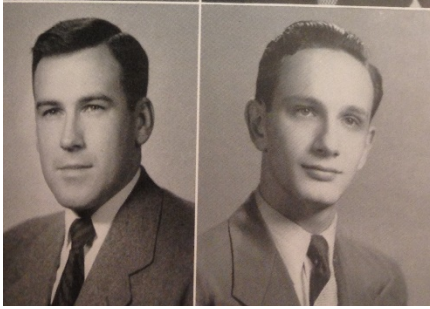
The students reflected on their experience in college during the 1960s. Although at first they believed college meant freedom, they were quickly shut down by the conformity of society. They realized it was societal pressures that forced them to come to college in the first place.

Nevertheless, the college life awakened them and helped them grow up. They discovered the importance of questioning the world around them, true to the nature of 1960s youth.⁵⁷ This yearbook provided a clear transition from the 1960s to the next decade. Although these students criticized their parents and authority figures, they wanted to tell the younger generations to not simply criticize, but act and to not waste away in teenage radicalism or idleness. They held a surprising amount of American pride, calling on their generation to respect their country, as frustrating as it can be. They touched on the line between leftist idealism and practical activism.

Counterculture, both moderate and radical, became a reaction to the conservative values of the 1950s. As the children of the 50s became older, they used movies and art to express themselves to give their generation a voice, and they turned to drugs, sex, and community to feel fully liberated. They believed that the older generation was trapped, and they wanted to break free of the society that the post-war generation had created for them. Although this was hardly a new phenomenon, it accumulated and caught more ground, which snowballed into an entire movement unlike anything the nation has seen before. As quickly as it started, it seemed to end, but the 1960s counterculture, nevertheless, shaped a generation and left its mark for generations to come.

⁵⁷ Providence College Yearbooks, Providence College Archives (1950-1970).

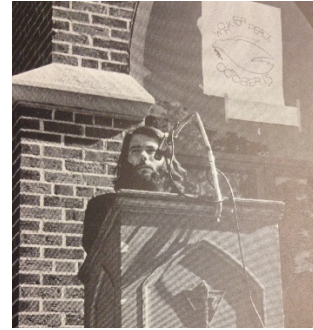
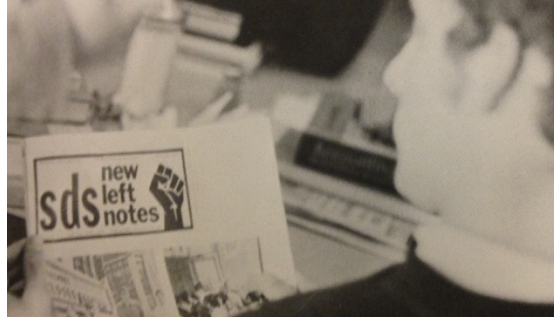
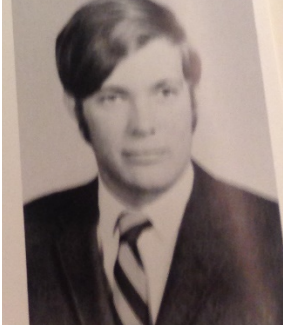
1950



1960



1970



"All who enter, abandon all hope."



"Wishful thinking, Fruedian projection, Hallucination..."



"It may not have been Woodstock, but it was good for P.C."



"Interest + Motivation = Our 'Progressive' Corporation"

"We are the children our parents warned us against."

—Graffiti

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