

Beyond Sex, Drugs, and Rock and Roll: The Legacy of the Counter Culture

By Jon Hunner, New Mexico State University and Fulbright Fellow at Växjö University

Far Out! Flower Power. Sex, Drugs and Rock Roll. Tune In, Turn On, Drop Out. America Love it or Leave It. Make Love, not War. Do your Own Thing. Don't Trust Anyone over 30. The 1960s were full of slogans like these that distilled the turbulent times down to sound bits, that encapsulated the contested visions on America's future into a short phrase. What was behind the rhetoric? Was the counter culture truly revolutionary? Did it help bring about a radical change in American society? Or was it a flash in the pan, a brilliant explosion of social experimentation and creativity that like an experience with psychedelic drugs, faded away once the drug wore off?

To decide the legacy of the counter culture, we first need to look at what was counter about the counter culture and then we will explore the lasting legacies from that time.

Mainstream American Culture in the early 1960s reflected the consensus attitudes of the 1950s - a capitalistic, materialistic culture, a belief in government, and an abiding faith in Christianity. By the 1960s, the Cold War was several decades old. The United States had emerged from the World War triumphant and ready to assume its place as a world; however, not everyone was content with Consensus America. In 1955, Allen Ginsberg wrote *Howl*, the anthem to the Beat Generation: "I saw the best minds of my generation/ destroyed by madness/ starving, mystical naked/ who dragged themselves through the angry streets at/ dawn looking for a negro fix."

Coming out of the post war and the 1950s, four general trends merged in the 1960s. First, the baby boom. During the 1930s, for every 1,000 people, only 19 babies were born. After World War II, this birth rate soared dramatically so that by the baby boom's peak in 1957, there were 25 births per 1,000 and in that year alone, 4.3 million babies were born. The U.S. population in the 1950s grew by 29 million, double the rate of increase in the late 1940s. This population bulge helped fuel the postwar economic surge as families bought new houses, new cars, new clothes, and communities built new schools to house all of the children. The baby boomers started to come of age in the 1960s.

The second factor was university education. More of the baby boomers went to college than any previous generation. In 1900, 1 in every 25 Americans went to college; in 1937, 1 in 7. By 1968, 1 in 2 attended some form of higher education.

Third was the protest movements of the 1950s and early 60s. David has covered the Civil Rights movement already. Another protest movement was the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. The debate over the health affects of nuclear testing and the questioning of the sanity of the nuclear arms race helped force a ban against the above ground explosions of nuclear weapons in 1963. The discovery of radioactive Strontium 90 in the milk on Americans' dining room tables created a doubt in the public that the government could be trusted. People began to suspect that much of their lives - politics, economics, race relations, even sexual behavior - were shaped by a shadowy Establishment only interested in power and wealth. The struggle by African Americans to gain basic political and social rights and the protest against nuclear weapons paved the way for a mass questioning of the authority of the American government.

The fourth trend that emerged in the 1960s was the technological and scientific discoveries that brought about change in society. Past periods of rapid changes due to mechanization made people feel like a cog in the wheel. This round of transformation made people feel like a punch card or binomial number in a computer program. This alienation fueled the youthful discontent. In medicine, an anti-pregnancy pill transformed sexual behavior. As one woman commented: "No longer is it 'oh I can't sleep with anyone because sex is sinful or risky'.... It is rather 'do I want to sleep with this person' and if I do, how will it affect me or the relationship." The pill combined with the work by Masters and Johnson on human sexual responses changed how Americans viewed and engaged in sex.

Medical experiments in Switzerland in 1943 by Dr. Albert Hoffman also created a new drug that radically changed one's doors of perception. Drugs that altered one's consciousness and sensibilities have always been a part of subcultures of Western society. The discovery by Dr. Hoffman of Lysergic acid diethylamide - LSD - and the increased usage of a previously working class drug - marijuana - by middle class youths, fueled the rebellion of the baby boomers. Unlike most drugs, LSD did not produce predictable results. An acid trip altered a person's perception of space and time and disassociated them from their normal reality. Many people had mystical experiences that previously had only been felt by religious saints or artists. As Aldous Huxley wrote about his experiences with LSD, "To fathom hell or soar angelic/ just take a pinch of psychedelic." Because LSD and other drugs like psilocybin and peyote allowed a person to step outside of themselves and their society, these drugs forced people to question mainstream society.

So, the counter culture of the 1960s came out of a generation of young people endowed with an abundance of material goods; locked into an educational system for 20 years, cordoned off in multiversities, buffeted by the draft and the Vietnam War, troubled by its prospects in a world seemed increasingly bureaucratized and technologically driven. Joseph Heller, the author of *Catch 22*, said about the 1960s: "There was a general attitude that the platitudes of Americanism was horseshit."

At its core, the counter culture was anti-modern and anti-establishment. Rationality was questioned and quickly rejected. Capitalism was derided as responsible for the ills of contemporary society, for alienation, pollution, the Vietnam War, poverty. Especially as the Vietnam War intensified, the government in general and the military in particular were challenged. The counter culture questioned not just the U.S. government and institutions like 20th century capitalism, but the western way of life since the 18th century - the scientific, enlightenment world view and modernism. So in that sense, the counter culture can be looked at as a mass post-modern social movement.

The baby boomers came together on university campuses, big city street corners, and suburban lawns and created a critical mass, a chain reaction that threatened to blow apart the traditional paradigms of American society. What resulted was a social protest movement based on an anti-modern critique of American society that challenged many of the beliefs and attitudes of mainstream society from clothing and hair styles to capitalism, and from faith in the government to gender roles and race relations. The vanguards of this wide spread protest movement were not the rock and roll musicians who quickly isolated themselves from their raving fans, but a group called the hippies. Hippie = in beatnik terms, hipster = one who posed as a cool person. By 1965, hippie meant a young person who preached peace and love, who had dropped out of society and who usually used drugs. Peter and Brigitte Berger wrote: "The troops of revolution are not the toiling masses of the Marxist prophecy but the naked children of nature dancing to the tune of primitive drums." The hippies borrowed their philosophy from many sources - part of it came from Henry David Thoreau, who called for people to return to nature and simplify their lives. The hippies borrowed more ideology from the Native Americans, whose ancestral religions offered alternatives to Christianity and capitalism.

The counter culture was a world wide movement and even in the United States, too vast to discuss in full this afternoon. But there are several key events that signify the counter

culture. First, the Summer of Love. Beginning in the 1950s, parts of San Francisco and New York had become islands first of the Beat generation and then in the 1960s, of the counter culture. In the summer of 1967, hippies and drop outs, runaways and activists converged on San Francisco and New York to celebrate new modes of behavior and new forms of consciousness. The national media began running stories about the young people flocking to Haight Ashbury in San Francisco and the East Village in New York, living an alternative lifestyle fueled by drugs and a belief in peace and love. In May of 1967, Scot Mackenzie's song "Are You Going to San Francisco?" entered the music charts and inspired people to head for the Bay Area that summer. For the media, hippies made colorful good stories. And so the national media publicized the counter culture and young people from around the country adopted hippie fashions and beliefs. By rejecting the society and life styles of their parents, the hippies became the very people that their parents had warned them about.

The summer of love was followed by more drop outs, protests, drugs, and be-ins. On the last day of 1967, a group of Hippies led by Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin created the Yippies; The Youth International Party, a combination of counter culture and political theater (Hoffman dumped money from the gallery overlooking the trading floor of the New York Stock Market and watched as business ground to a halt as traders scrambled for dollar bills). Civil rights and anti-war protests increased and riots occurred in American cities, especially after the murder of Martin Luther King on April 4, 1968. The summer of 1968 was a pivotal moment in U.S. history. Thousands of walkers in the Poor People's Campaign marched toward Washington, D.C., Robert Kennedy was assassinated during his campaign for president in California and thousands of hippies, yippies and political activists disrupted the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. When tear gas used on the protestors in the streets wafted through the halls of the convention, mainstream America feared that barbarians were at the gates and those barbarians were their own children.

But political action was not a priority for many hippies. A guru of the counter culture, Dr. Timothy Leary, had experimented with LSD at Harvard along with his colleague Richard Alpert. Leary's advice - Tune In, Turn On, and Drop Out - became the anthem of the counter culture as many people took drugs partially to get high and escape but also to expand their minds and consciousness. Taking a trip with LSD or getting stoned with marijuana also became a symbol of solidarity. To feel connected with the counter culture scene, people took drugs and communed with the oneness of it all or opened themselves up to the alternative realities. Jerry Rubin - one of activist hippies called Yippies - said that drug use "signifies the total end of the Protestant ethic: screw work, we want to know ourselves. But of course, the goal is to free oneself from American society's sick notion of work, success, reward, and status and to find and establish oneself through one's own discipline, hard work, and introspection."

Another key significance of the counter culture was music. The Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and Janis Joplin and the Holding Company provided the driving rhythm and power and poets like Bob Dylan or John Lennon put to words and rhyme the hopes, dreams, and fears of the baby boomers with songs like Blowing in the Wind, Truckin', White Rabbit, and Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds.

The counter culture culminated in 1969 at Woodstock, with "Three Days of Music and Peace." Close to half a million people went to Yasgur's Farm in upstate New York and peacefully listened to Santana, Jimi Hendrix, Crosby Stills and Nash, and Janis Joplin (among others). They shared drugs, made love in public, and splashed around in the rain and mud. Some consider it the finest moment for the counter culture.

As with any popular culture subjected to the whims of the media and fashion, rapid change occurred for the counter culture and the contradictions to the message of peace and love quickly came to the surface. Four months after Woodstock, on the day before Christmas, 300,000 people attended a free concert by the Rolling Stones at Altamont in California.

The Hells Angels were hired to provide security and maintain control. The result was that Meredith Hunter, a 19 year old black man, was beaten to death by the Hell's Angels as the Rolling Stones played. Music critic Greil Marcus commented: "A young black man murdered in the midst of a white crowd by white thugs as white men played their version of black music - it was too much to kiss off as a mere unpleasantness." The flip side of Peace and Love, Violence and Hate emerged at Altamont in this explosion of destruction.

The counter culture was also quickly co-opted by the very establishment that it rejected. After the summer of love, hippie fashion was hot. Tie-dye hippie clothes, hippie beads and head bands, songs like "Are You Going to San Francisco?" and groups like the Mamas and the Papas and the Jefferson Airplane all cashed in on the popularity of the counter culture. Enterprising hippies soon found that they could make money on their life style. And so capitalism moved into the counter culture and the forces of commercial exploitation surrounded hippies in Haight Ashbury and the East Village. Millions of young people throughout the country rejoiced as they bought the latest hippie fashions and argued with their parents about dropping out of life, but the core of the hippies like Emmet Grogan of the Diggers in San Francisco was dismayed and soon other proponents became disillusioned with the loss of idealism and the impact of drugs on lives. The counter culture in the 1960s illustrated how even an anti-capitalist and anti-consumer movement could be quickly coopted and how even the smallest scraps of cultural life could be commercialized into mass entertainment and crass consumption.

What is the legacy of the counter culture? The counter culture had dreams that were lofty and ambitious - to change society so that it was more equal, more tolerant, more free and less violent. A student told historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.: "Mostly students know what they don't want to be: they don't want to be tied down to a hopeless, boring regimen. They don't want to give into the establishment, after spending most of their youth avoiding it; they don't want to profit through special interest groups and to the detriment of people in need. Mostly they want to make the society they live in better, richer for all and more fun. The problem is they lack the plans to accomplish the ends."

Granted the counter culture lacked the plans and the organization. And yes, it was full of a lot of foolishness. Its elitist, hedonistic, arrogant, and self absorbed nature alienated many Americans and disillusioned even its supporters. But the counter culture loudly challenged the status quo and as a social movement, it marks a transition in American society. The counter culture did not revolutionize the structures of the United States but it shifted the cultural paradigm and introduced into mainstream America peoples, cultures, religions and experiences previously alien to the American public. Along with the Civil Rights movement, the environmental movement, the New Left politicians, and the women's movement, the counter culture helped create a new awareness of alternatives to mainstream America and thus, helped create a new identity for America. This cultural awareness was embraced by some and rejected by others. Let me be more specific about the legacies of the counter culture by first looking at how it was rejected.

The first legacy of the counter culture was its impact on politics. In facing the threat from the Soviet Union during the Cold War, the United States established a policy of containment. At home, the counter culture was among those who threatened the American way of life. In response, the moderate and conservative members of the country struck back to contain the threat at home. They focused their backlash on the excesses of counter culture, which can be summed up in the phrase "Sex, drugs, and rock and roll." The backlash continues even today, where for some conservatives, the 1960s means "get the liberals." This attack of the excesses of the counter culture - by reducing the era to "Sex, Drugs, and Rock and Roll" denies the progress made in the 1960s through the efforts of the civil rights movement, the environmental movement, the woman's movement as well as the counter culture to improve the United States. The movement is often seen by both those baby boomers who lived through it and by subsequent generations not as a valuable critique of a troubled society, but as the root of many of the today's societal problems.

Many counter culture veterans themselves became disillusioned. Their utopian dreams of Peace and Love and the dawning of the Age of Aquarius, a time of harmony and abundance died a quick death in the aftermath of Altamont, as friends overdosed on drugs, and as capitalism coopted the counter culture and cashed in on the hippie phenomena. A scepticism and cynicism continues to hover over the memories of the counter culture and at times, helps fuel the backlash against it.

There are segments of society which have continued the post modern critique of American society that the 1960s initiated. At least in university History Departments, some historians attribute their involvement in the protests of the 1960s as the cause of their revision of American history and their interest in post modern theory.

The second legacy of the counter culture concerns class. The counter culture allowed middle class youths to move outside of mass society, and to critique mainstream traditions. This was an activity that had only been available to people outside of the middle class, either upper class or working class youths prior to this. Often, the middle class baby boomers embraced the language, fashions, music and ideology of the working class, and particularly African Americans. Power to the People became a slogan not just for the Black Panthers, but for many in the middle class who sought equality.

The legacy of drugs is a troubling one. Yes, drugs opened new doors of perception and unified the diverse segments of the counter culture through a shared activity. It also opened the doors of addiction to drugs like heroin and cocaine and impaired people's ability to function in the world. Addiction, brain damage, and psychological trauma all are legacies of the chemically induced ecstasy of the counter culture.

Fourth, the counter culture helped liberate some of the restraints on American society. As the Women's movement attacked the barriers that existed against women, the counter culture challenged the country's sexual customs and showed how they were socially constructed and socially restrictive. Thus, the counter culture helped create a society less puritanical than previously.

The fifth legacy emerges from the identity that the baby boomers created as they moved out of their parents' houses. Through their massive numbers, the baby boomers held a lot of power in the democratic, consumer driven American society. The baby boomers came of age and burst onto the national stage challenging the status quo. They not only held power through their numbers, they also held power through rejecting the status quo which caught the attention of their parents. Under this barrage of counter culture criticism, mainstream America evaluated itself and became more aware of the inequalities and contradictions in society. Thus, the counter culture used its power to help create a new identity for the mainstream culture through its complaints of inequality and repression, and they called for a commitment by individuals to work for both self improvement and social improvement.

The sixth legacy of the counter culture has to do with the expansion of American cultural consciousness. With its embrace of other cultures, from black and Latino music to Hinduism to Native American religions and Zen Buddhism, Americans since the 1960s have become more interested in other cultures than their parents. From their experiments with alternative life styles and their search for meaningful cultures outside of mainstream America, the counter culture patched together ideals, religions, fashion, music, and mentalities from around the globe. In linguistics, when a person switches in conversation from one language to another, if only for a phrase, it is called code switching. The experience of the counter culture taught Americans to code switch with cultures - to insert in their lives parts of the diverse cultures that exist all over the world. This globalization of culture is too broad a topic to explore further this afternoon. But a quick observation - in today's societies, cultural code switching occurs with many peoples. Just visit the bowling alley (an American creation) in downtown Växjö and watch Swedish people bowl while you eat Thai food. Transcultural moments can be found in many places where the cultures of the world intermix and produce new ways of living life.

The final legacy is the longest lasting. People still listen to the music produced by counter culture bands, still read *The Electric Kool Aid Acid Test*, *Be Here Now*, or *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge*, still watch *Easy Rider* and the numerous other movies that came from the period, and still practice alternative religions that they first encountered in the 1960s. My 15 year old son, born in 1986, listens to the Beatles and Bob Marley. Imagine the Baby Boomers in the late 1960s listening to the music from 30 years earlier, from the 1930s. That is part of the continuing impact of the counter culture.

The counter culture did not radically change American society by overthrowing capitalism or democracy; however, the members of the counter culture were a form of shock troops that did rock the foundation of American society. Their challenge to the system did not create the structural reforms of the Progressive period of the early 20th century or of the New Deal. The counter culture did mark a transition in American history and culture, a shift away from a mainstream dominated by Anglo-American and Protestant values to one where cultural code switching is now an integral part of the mainstream. Today's culture of America is more reflective of its diverse population, and perhaps the counter culture helped prepare the country for that shift. As proponents of a freer society, unbound by the traditions of mainstream America, the counter culture lived an alternative life style and served as an example for the rest of the country to evaluate their own life styles.

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