Imagination, Politics and Culture:

The Counterculture and the New Left Movement

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1. Introduction

The 1960s were a decade marked by a persistent search for alternatives to traditional society. As a result of widespread dissatisfaction among American youth, several movements emerged that sought to transform the social, political, and cultural systems of the United States. The countercultural movements of the United States are often studied separately, as the methods through which different groups attempted to achieve their goals differed significantly. Despite these differences, however, all youth who resisted American society formed part of a broader countercultural generation and constructed a shared identity, whether they identified as New Left activists or as hippies.

By examining the various countercultural movements alongside the political and cultural climate of the United States, it can be argued that these movements strongly influenced one another and that the ideals of radical political and cultural movements were mutually reinforcing. Richard Flacks argued that "the great personal hopefulness of the sixties was the belief that one could lead a life of continuous self-examination, a life grounded in principle and social responsibility, a life of service, care, and commitment to social justice and improvement" (Flacks and Whalen, 1989:2, translated from Afrikaans). This hopefulness lay at the heart of the countercultural identity of the 1960s, namely the belief that by improving oneself, the system itself could be improved.

2. The 1960s United States: The Origins of Unrest

The countercultural generation of the baby boom grew up in relative affluence and did not need to accept societal ideals with the same caution as the Depression and wartime generations (Fischer, 2006:331). The values and norms imposed by an industrialized society were rejected by younger Americans, leading to the questioning and resistance of traditional ways of life. One major source of resistance was the rise of technocratic society, in which technology compensated for human shortcomings and individuals were expected to work and produce continuously in order to sustain society and themselves (Roszak, 1969:5).

This technocratic system, combined with conservative American politics, resulted in what was perceived as a political system suppressing culture and approaching totalitarianism (Roszak, 1969:9). Technocrats, who possessed specialized knowledge, wielded power over others. These values stemmed from capitalism, another target of youth opposition.

Malvina Reynolds's song *Little Boxes* vividly captured post–Second World War suburbia:

"Little boxes on the hillside... and they all look just the same"
(Reynolds, cited in Roszak, 1969:9).

The lyrics depict American society as mechanized, highlighting alienation from work and inner needs due to capitalism and technocracy. The Vietnam War further intensified resistance. By 1965,

widespread protest had emerged, particularly among liberals (Snow, 2005:50). American involvement in Vietnam is now regarded as the most traumatic episode in U.S. military history (Fischer, 2006:322).

3. Counterculture

Drawing on Manuel Castells, counterculture can be understood as "the deliberate attempt to live according to values and norms different from those institutionally enforced by society, and to oppose those institutions on the basis of alternative values or beliefs" (Castells, 2004:174, translated from Afrikaans).

The American New Left and countercultural movements of the 1960s have been conceptualized in various ways by scholars. Through comparison and synthesis of these interpretations, the youth culture of the 1960s can be understood as a cohesive phenomenon.

3.1 Academic Interpretations of Countercultural Movements

3.1.1 Braunstein and Doyle's Phases of Counterculture

Braunstein and Doyle identify two phases of the 1960s counterculture (Braunstein and Doyle, 2002:5–13). The first, the Flower Children phase, was white, youth-dominated, and highly optimistic. Rooted in post-scarcity utopianism, it assumed that the United States would reach a stage where labor was unnecessary and individuals could pursue self-actualization and creativity (Braunstein and Doyle, 2002:12).

The second phase emerged in the early 1970s amid economic downturn and the Nixon presidency. Political institutions became openly hostile, and counterculture fragmented into various cultural liberation movements. Members believed American society could be radically transformed through politics, revolution, or cultural alchemy (Braunstein and Doyle, 2002:12).

3.1.2 Cavallo's Radical Typology

Cavallo distinguishes between cultural radicals and political radicals (Cavallo, 1999:186). Cultural radicals, such as the Diggers and serious hippies, withdrew from mainstream society to construct alternative lifestyles. Political radicals, by contrast, formed the New Left, aiming to reform American institutions from within rather than withdrawing entirely.

3.2 Radical Movements of the 1960s

3.2.1 The New Left Movement

The New Left emerged as a response to crises within socialist and communist movements and to international political developments (Levitt, 1979:641). It advocated direct democracy, reduced elite power, and a redefinition of America's global role (Rossinow, 2002:99). Student movements were central, mobilizing marginalized groups such as non-whites, the poor, and unemployed youth (Cavallo, 1999:192).

Rejecting orthodox communism and distancing itself from the Soviet Union, the New Left emphasized cultural transformation alongside political action (Elbaum, 2002:20).

3.2.1.1 Students for a Democratic Society (SDS)

Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) was the most prominent New Left organization of the 1960s. Originating from the League for Industrial Democracy, SDS aimed to establish a decentralized democracy grounded in individual participation (Rossinow, 2002:100).

Former SDS president Paul Potter articulated this critique in 1965, condemning a system that prioritized material values over human values and perpetuated war and inequality (Potter, cited in Rossinow, 2002:106). Internal factionalism and ideological divisions eventually led to SDS's disintegration in 1969, with splinter groups such as the militant Weathermen emerging (Elbaum, 2002:33).

3.2.2 The Hippie Counterculture

John Robert Howard identifies four types of hippies: visionaries, freaks and heads, midnight hippies, and plastic hippies (Howard, 1969:43). Visionaries sought to create alternative societies free from materialism and social hierarchy. Freaks and heads embraced LSD as a means of transcending mainstream reality. Plastic hippies were associated with flamboyant fashion, while midnight hippies were older sympathizers (Howard, 1969:45–48). Hippie culture flourished in areas such as Haight-Ashbury and New York's East Village.

3.2.3 Other Radical Movements

The Black Panther Party was a progressive political organization advocating revolutionary change and was labeled by the FBI as the greatest threat to U.S. internal security (Black Panther Party, 2009). Modern gay liberation movements also emerged in the 1960s, particularly following the Stonewall riots of 1969 (Valocchi, 2001:445). These movements aligned closely with New Left ideals of identity formation and personal freedom.

3.3 Parallel Development of Counterculture and the New Left

Although the New Left was overtly political, activists increasingly recognized cultural activism as a powerful vehicle for change (Rossinow, 2002:104). Both political radicals and cultural radicals belonged to the same countercultural generation, sharing a belief that "the revolution is about our lives" (Rossinow, 2002:106). Austin's SDS exemplified this fusion of politics and counterculture, with activists participating in both radical politics and hippie culture (Rossinow, 2002:107).

4. Conclusion

Although radical movements of the 1960s are often categorized separately, they collectively formed the identity of the countercultural generation. Shared opposition to mainstream society and collective memory distinguished them from dominant culture. The New Left's political radicalism was deeply influenced by cultural individualism, while hippie culture itself became politicized. Despite differing methods, these movements profoundly shaped one another, united by the belief that societal change began with self-transformation.

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