

1971

The Philosophy of the Counterculture

William F. Averyt

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Averyt, William F. (1971) "The Philosophy of the Counterculture," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 24 : No. 3 , Article 4.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol24/iss3/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

The traditional American framework for political and social action is being increasingly challenged by members of a "counterculture" calling for a radically different society. Aside from immediate political controversies such as the war in Vietnam or the issue of civil rights, the causes of this dissatisfaction are seen to be deep misgivings about the quality of life in a highly advanced industrial society. The theoretical basis of the movement—the works of Marx, Freud, and Marcuse—provide the intellectual underpinnings of a sharp critique of contemporary industrial society.

THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE COUNTERCULTURE

An article prepared

by

Ensign William F. Averyt, U.S. Naval Reserve

We are all familiar by this time with the external manifestations of the counterculture—differences in dress, music, and sexual mores—yet these differences often blind observers to the more deep-seated changes occurring in the United States today. During the first Seminar on Current Views and Attitudes, conducted by the Naval War College in the spring of 1970 and including students from the School of Naval Warfare, the School of Naval Command and Staff, Officer Candidate School, Brown University, and the University of Rhode Island, we all realized that the difficulties in communication resulted from something more than opposing views. As one naval officer put it during the postmortem panel evaluation of the seminar, it seemed that connotations of the words were different; half of each discussion was spent in becoming aware of these different languages, underlying which were evidently very different concepts of American reality.

Since the seminar will be held again this year at the Naval War College, it might be valuable to mention briefly some of the divergent attitudes that surfaced last year. This will lead to the main theme of this essay, the "philosophy of the counterculture" which I believe underlies the views of many of the civilian college students who participated. I think the attitudes of the civilian college students who participated in the seminar represent fairly well those of the general college population, and if this is true, they foreshadow some basic changes in young Americans' conceptions of what constitutes the good life.

The discussions centered, naturally, on the Vietnam war, the plight of the blacks, the condition of the inner cities, and the quality of the environment; but they quickly moved to a deeper level, revealing very different ways of conceiving American reality. How are major changes accomplished in society? How is pressure for change created and

mobilized? To what extent are our lives determined by the complex technology of contemporary America? What is the purpose of education?

The naval participants in the seminar generally espoused a formalistic theory of change, i.e., changes occurred because voters requested them, laws were passed, and thereafter citizens' conduct and values changed accordingly. Education, for them, was a formal sequence of instruction, culminating in the degree, which in turn opened the doors to a career, which itself was structured in ascending levels of wealth, power, and responsibility.

The civilian college students and some junior naval officers tended to have a fundamentally different way of conceiving these things. Their view of society and social change laid more stress upon the social forces supporting the status quo and the clash of interests when a rearrangement of these forces was in question. Education was viewed as an open-ended process, the aim of which was the development of the ability to take advantage of many different alternatives. Hopefully this difference in outlook will be clearer during the following discussion.

Briefly, what is the "counterculture"?¹ There is no need to place too strict a definition on the word, but we can use it to describe the increasingly radicalized version of reality that American youth and others were concocting in the 1960's which made the end of that decade so different from the beginning.* The young generation of the 1960's was special in several ways: They had seen no major war in their lifetime;

the nuclear balance of terror prevented a major war from erupting between the two superpowers. Incidents which in earlier times would have sparked a major conflagration failed to produce a single conflict in which the two great powers battled each other directly.

Second, they came to maturity in an era of increasing wealth (although by the 1960's the great accumulated wealth of the United States served to highlight the great disparities in its distribution).² Furthermore, an increasing share of this wealth was at the disposal of the young, giving them greater mobility and independence.

Finally, this generation benefited from a much greater degree of leisure than did previous ones. Perhaps "leisure" is not the most accurate term; in any case, the pattern of growing up now included, for a large part of American youth, long stretches of academic work in college and graduate school before the final exercise of a trade or profession.

This, then, was the generation which spawned the counterculture—a way of life going beyond "life styles," more aware of disparities between what society claims itself to be and what it actually is, between the official facade an individual wears and his true self. The shortcomings of American society now fell under the scrutiny of students with enough time and money to study them—an explosive combination. The black movement and the Vietnam war provided the political activation, with results too well known to be enumerated.*

*For a good view of the diverse movements involved and a brief historical summary, see Theodore T. Leber, Jr., "The Genesis of Antimilitarism on the College Campus: a Contemporary Case Study of Student Protest," *Naval War College Review*, November 1970, p. 58-96.

*For detailed account, see the following reports of Presidential commissions: *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, 1968*; *Violence in America: Historical and Comparative Perspectives, a Report to the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence*, June 1969; *Report of the President on Campus Unrest, 1970*.

And yet there have been other periods in American history in which American realities have been contrasted with American ideals and found wanting. Is this period of dissent different from others—the pre-Civil War abolition movements, the labor violence of the late 19th century, the muck-raking, trust-busting, et cetera? We do see, indeed, strains of a very American type of anarchism and individualism in today's counterculture. The young people who retreat to their desert commune in New Mexico—are they so different from Thoreau in his retreat from "bustling" Concord to Walden Pond? Nevertheless, even granting this indebtedness to an earlier American tradition of individualism, it does seem that there is something qualitatively different in today's counterculture. It is different because the conditions in which man lives today are so radically different from anything that has ever gone before. "Cultures," "life styles," and "schools of thought" do not grow in a vacuum: they are intimately related to the material world around them; they spring up in response or in opposition to it; they justify and exemplify it; or they condemn it.

This is not to say that all of today's college students could or would articulate this outlook as will be done below, although many of the New Left spokesmen do explicitly acknowledge their intellectual forebears. This is not to say, either, that it is only today's youth which has been attracted to the philosophy to be presented below; it has evidently influenced profoundly a large number of intellectuals, professors, writers—in short, it has significantly penetrated the groups of people who analyze, discuss, and communicate to others the developments of contemporary America.

The members of the counterculture, like almost all Americans today, are trying to come to grips with a complex, technologically advanced industrial

society, searching for ways to humanize the world in which man works and plays. It is not surprising, therefore, that they have borrowed heavily from sociologists and economists who have analyzed the workings of advanced industrial societies, especially the more critical thinkers. And here a caveat is in order: we must not commit the fallacy of supposing that certain thinkers of doctrines "converted" the young and sparked their opposition:

The fact that a growing number of people—especially students both here and abroad—are becoming more radical in their politics is a result of contemporary conditions and not a response to printed words. Those words may reflect or reinforce existing sentiments, and to that important extent they deserve examination.³

It is in this spirit that I will examine those thinkers from whom the spokesmen of the counterculture have borrowed theories and gained insight.

One could say that the debates now raging among New Left intellectuals center about the "miscegenation of Marx and Freud."⁴ The question has more relevance for us today than at first glance; essentially, it asks whether the advanced industrial order is liberating or enslaving man. The counterculture borrows heavily from Marx's analysis of the nascent industrialism of the Victorian era. The industrial order, said Marx, divides work into meaningless units, dehumanizes the worker, splits apart the family, and wipes out the natural patterns of rural life which man has previously known. Work becomes meaningless and boring; the laborer turns off his mind during the workday, waiting for the weekend when he can "really" live: "[Work] is not the satisfaction of a need but only a means to satisfy other needs. Its alien character is obvious from the fact that as soon as no physical

20 NAVAL WAR COLLEGE REVIEW

or other pressure exists, labor is avoided like the plague.⁵ The remedy, for Marx, was a drastic reordering of the political powers to bring them into line with the advances of the economy, to bring the relations of production into line with the forces of production. This would involve most probably a violent overthrow of the bourgeois capitalist regime (although toward the end of his life Marx foresaw the possibility of a peaceful change through the activity of strong labor unions, especially in Great Britain).⁶ Without delving into the complexities of Marxian analysis, the main point to stress is that this political reordering would liberate man, represented by the vast mass of the proletariat, and permit him to *direct* the course of economic and social development; it would reassert man's primacy over the great economic machine that was already sweeping across Europe in the mid-19th century and drastically altering centuries-old ways of life.

This view is essentially utopian—it foresees the solution not only of man's economic and social difficulties through a liberating revolution, but also the solution of his deeper psychic problems, e.g., his inability to commune with nature and with his fellowman. This quest for a lost sense of brotherhood and community runs like a nostalgic refrain through the early writings of Marx, especially his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* of 1844. At times we are reminded of the laments of Wordsworth and Blake as they confronted the "dark Satanic mills" then covering the English countryside. But Marx only glimpsed later transformations of the industrial order, of which we shall select two as the most salient: the separation of ownership and control and the increase in the standard of living of the working classes.

In the classical Marxian analysis there was no doubt about who was the enemy: the bourgeois capitalist, the owner of an industrial enterprise who

arbitrarily controlled the lives of hundreds or thousands and who, through one way or another, convinced the legislatures of those European countries with constitutional governments to outlaw associations of workmen because these would "infringe" upon his right to bargain as a free individual. The enemy was evident, as was the squalor of the working masses.*

However, from 1890 onward, significant changes occurred in capitalism, drastic enough to alter fundamentally its prospects. First, with the growth of joint stock companies, there occurred the separation of ownership and control which has continued to the present.⁷ Who was now the enemy, the manager of a firm or its hundreds of shareholders? With this change, we shall now shift from the term "capitalism" to that of "industrialism," for the economic order assumes a faceless, Kafkaesque quality in which it is difficult to identify those individuals who exercise power. Increasing bureaucratization and rationalization affected practically every area of life, bringing "cradle to grave" security, under the aegis of the nation-state, demanding the aid of thousands of anonymous, efficient clerks.** (It is interesting to note in passing that the first modern system of social welfare was not passed by any of the liberal democracies of Europe, but by the

*Europe at that time was undergoing the pangs of the period of primitive capital accumulation, which is a necessary step in any region's economic development—consumption must be restrained so that profits may be plowed back into the economy, building up the industrial plant. A close reading of the *Communist Manifesto* reveals that Marx never disputed the necessity of this stage, merely condemning the human misery which was its byproduct. See George Liebhain, *Marxism: a Historical and Critical Study* (New York: Praeger, 1961), p. 157-58, 185, 197.

**The classic treatment of the subject is Max Weber, *Economy and Society: an Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (New York: Bedminster Press, 1968), v. III, p. 956-1005.

Second Reich under the strong pressure of Bismarck, who was anxious to mollify the growing labor movement and who was desirous of extending the power of the central government, Germany still being a new amalgam of principalities.)⁸

Second, the standard of living of the working class rose considerably from the late 19th century onward. This improvement in its material conditions lessened the danger of proletarian revolt, but was nevertheless accompanied by other ills, to be analyzed below.

With this shift in the character of industrialism, we are moving closer to the second school of thought which has profoundly influenced the counterculture of contemporary America: the pessimistic assessment of the industrial order (even when it brings affluence), and of its capacity to enrich and improve human existence. The dominant thinker was Sigmund Freud, whose diagnosis of industrialism was considerably less optimistic than that of Marx. Freud concluded that civilization and human happiness are incompatible, even contradictory. Man accomplishes feats of civilization by disciplining himself, working, and postponing immediate gratification. In Freud's terminology, he must repress his sex drive, *eros*, and sublimate it in practical or artistic works. But *eros* is not so easily mastered or disciplined; it is a force of great strength, ready to burst the bounds imposed upon it at any moment. Consequently, civilized societies, as they become increasingly complex, must impose greater and greater restrictions upon this potentially dangerous force, limiting where and when and how it may be used. Civilization also requires that man sacrifice his love of aggression, according to Freud. Indeed, the disciplining of these two urges, sex and aggression, accounts for man's unhappiness in a civilized state:

If civilization requires such sacrifices, not only of sexuality but also of the aggressive tendencies in mankind, we can better understand why it should be so hard for men to feel happy in it. In actual fact, primitive man was better off in this respect, for he knew nothing of any restrictions on his instincts.⁹

Civilization, because of its demands that these two urges be curbed, can therefore be said to rest upon neurosis, just as the individual whose basic urges remain unsatisfied experiences neurosis.¹⁰

We are thus confronted with two contradictory assessments of the industrial order. The debate, so far, hinges on the question of the psychic strain exacted by the building of so complex a society. Before proceeding to examine the thinker who has tried to establish a synthesis of these contradictory views, we might pause to consider the importance of the analyses considered above. These lines of thought might appear unrelated to the "real" concerns of today's naval officer, but I would argue that this is due to the peculiar perspective provided by a naval career, which of necessity centers around sea duty and shore establishments, most of which are removed from the great urban and industrial centers of modern America. This was one of the most glaring differences in attitude to surface during the Seminar on Current Views and Attitudes held at the Naval War College in the spring of 1970, i.e., the fact that the participants from the Navy had difficulty in grasping the gravity of the situation in the great industrial cities of America today.

Regardless of whether one feels closer to the optimistic or pessimistic views of the industrial order, one is still bound to seek ways to improve the existing situation. The optimist would seek to implement programs

restructuring the society; the pessimist would endeavor to impede its further advancement. This leads us to the final stage of analysis of the philosophical bases of the counterculture, an examination of the political structure of advanced industrial societies. We will focus on the works of Herbert Marcuse because, in spite of their complexity and their adherence to a Hegelian tradition of criticism that is quite foreign to the American mind, he has nevertheless provided a powerful critique which has deeply influenced the thinking of the counterculture.

Marcuse is living in a period which has disproved Marx's predictions about the collapse of the capitalist order: class antagonisms have lessened, and the living standard of the worker has risen. The working class in the United States has little sympathy with the New Left. What is the New Left's response to this unforeseen development? Marcuse holds that the contradictions of capitalism still exist, the work it demands is still demeaning and unsatisfying. The people, he says, have been pacified by a surfeit of consumer goods and the all-pervading communications media which provide undemanding diversions during their leisure time.* The fact is that they are actually not "people" but "personnel"; their lives are still not fulfilled. Yet the immediate goods to revolt have been removed. Their lives are manipulated by impersonal bureaucracies which touch every aspect of their existence. Marcuse lists these recent developments in industrial society which account for this dehumanization:

... (the) transition from free to organized competition, concentration of power in the hands of an omnipresent technical, cul-

*The stifling of dissent through affluence is treated in Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964).

tural, and political administration, self-propelling mass production and consumption, subjection of previously private, asocial dimensions of existence to methodical indoctrination, manipulation, control.¹¹

No real threat exists from any quarter, so the meaningless exchange of views continues:

Under the rule of monopolistic media--themselves the mere instruments of economic and political power--a mentality is created for which right and wrong, true and false are redefined wherever they affect the vital interests of the society.¹²

When strange or different manifestations of individuality do surface, such as different styles of dress, the society engulfs them, amoebalike, exploiting them commercially within the bourgeois cash nexus:

It isolates the individual from the one dimension where he could "find himself": from his political existence. Instead, it encourages non-conformity and letting-go in ways which leave the real engines of repression in the society entirely intact, which even strengthen these engines by substituting the satisfactions of private and personal rebellion for a more than private and personal, and therefore more authentic, opposition.¹³

What are the possibilities for liberation? Since the present structures of industrial society work to anesthetize the people, they see no need to alter these structures; and they feel no need to change them because they are anesthetized. Commenting on this vicious circle of

repression, Marcuse confessed to students in Berlin in 1967, "This is a dialectic from which I have found no issue."¹⁴

However, if revolutionary change ever does occur in industrial society, Marcuse is quite optimistic about the results: with the perfection of automation and the passing of capitalism, man would truly be transformed, no longer forced to struggle for his existence, to prove his worth through competition, or to repress his instincts. There would be a qualitative break in history, a leap into the realm of true freedom and fulfillment.¹⁵

It is time to summarize the debate. Three salient points in the above discussions are of vital concern to all of us living in industrial society:

• **Technology and Human Happiness.** Do the fruits of a technologically advanced industrial society compensate for the regimentation and discipline it requires? The American Left in the 20th century has supported the increasing centralization of power in order to obtain social reform as well as orderly economic growth. Now the New Left is having second thoughts, and its critique resembles in many ways the traditional American conservative suspicion of centralized government. In this area the New Left seems to blend with a "New Right"; the concern for individual freedom in the face of powerful organized interests in government and the economy has once again become paramount in political debates. An example of this blurring of political labels is furnished by Karl Hess, the one-man "brain trust" of Senator Goldwater's movement and coauthor of the Republican platform in 1964. Hess has now left the Republican Party, works for the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington, D.C., a New Left research organization advocating active resistance to government interference in one's private life.¹⁶ Another case in point is provided

by the Young Americans for Freedom, a Republican organization for college students, which recently experienced a split when a minority seceded and formed the "Libertarians," dedicated to preserving individual freedom and calling for active draft resistance. A final comment on this point of technology and human happiness: the current criticism of the news media, from Left and Right, surely springs from the same concern about these immensely powerful molders of public opinion that motivated Marcuse.

• **Changing Technology.** It is the point which probably provokes the greatest confusion in the counterculture today. Fundamental disagreement centers on the basic question of whether it is even possible to effect such a humanizing change; we have seen above that Marx foresaw a radical rearrangement of industrial society when the proletariat, either through violent revolution or peaceful change through labor's political power, obtained control of the instruments or political domination and used them to liberate man. This radical political change, which in turn would "reform" technology, would occur only when industrial society was sufficiently developed so that human drudgery was no longer necessary. A more pessimistic analysis, provided by Freud, held that *any* complex civilization required a great degree of discipline by its members, including some regimentation, repression of instincts, and postponement of immediate gratification. In economic terms, who will organize the payroll, deliver the letters, drive the buses, and decide where to build the monorails and heliports for the desired utopian society? There seem to be certain basic social mechanisms that are very difficult to eliminate—patterns of control and dominance, ways of allocating power, wealth, and status, et cetera. For Marcuse, who is a fervent admirer of Freud, it is possible to

humanize technology, although he does not specify how the future society will actually work. Man's hope for liberation, says Marcuse, rests on the fact that, with increasing automation and computerization, less and less human labor is necessary to run society. Marcuse has not theorized about the new society; he is skeptical of people's ability to realize the need for a radical change. The only possible agents for such a change are the racial minorities, the students, and the peoples of the Third World, none of whom at present have the necessary power or numbers.

• **The Desired Utopia.** But, one may well ask, if we could render the present system of government more efficient and the distribution of wealth and power more just, would this not be a humane society? Why is there this talk of revolution and liberation, when it is apparent that the industrialized nations of the West have achieved that which previous generations have long yearned for?

The spokesmen for the counter-culture would reply that "the affluent society" is not enough. It vulgarizes man while depriving him of joyful fulfillment. Many thinkers of the New Left rely on the early writings of Marx in their analysis of the deadening effects of the affluent society: man has so alienated his labor and the objects of his labor that he is now incapable of enjoying the natural world except insofar as it is a "commodity" to be bought, used and discarded. Marx uses the image of a starving man, devouring food like an animal—he does not know whether he is eating roast duck or Pabulum, he merely uses food as an object to satiate his animal hunger:

For the starving man food does not exist in its human form but only in its abstract character as food. It could be available in its crudest form and one could not

say wherein the starving man's eating differs from that of *animals*. The care-laden, needy man has no mind for the most beautiful play. The dealer in minerals sees only their market value but not their beauty and special nature; he has no mineralogical sensitivity.¹⁷

As stated above, Marcuse has not outlined the specifics of the new society which he calls for. He has, however, given some indication of its broad characteristics: it would address itself to man's need for peace, "the need for calm, the need to be alone, with oneself or with others whom one has chosen oneself, the need for the beautiful, the need for 'undeserved' happiness."¹⁸ Technology would be joined with art, work with play: "even socially necessary labor can be organized in harmony with the liberated genuine needs of men."¹⁹

Once again, however, we are obliged to counter these optimistic hopes with the pessimistic comments provided by Freud, who specifically commented on the Marxian analysis; regardless of economic or social changes, some pattern of dominance will remain:

BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY



Ens. William F. Averyt, U.S. Naval Reserve, did his undergraduate work in American studies at the University of Alabama. He holds master's degrees from the University of Strasbourg in European studies and from Johns Hopkins University in international relations. Ensign Averyt gained his commission in the Naval Reserve through the Officer Candidate School at Newport, was an officer candidate participant of the Seminar on Current Views and Attitudes, and is currently assigned to the faculty of the Naval War College, School of Naval Warfare.

... I cannot inquire into whether the abolition of private property is advantageous or expedient. But I am able to recognize that psychologically it is founded on an untenable illusion. . . . It in no way alters the individual differences in power and influence which are turned by aggressiveness to its own use. . . .²⁰

Although Marcuse has attempted to reconcile Freud's pessimism about the possibility of creating a "liberated" industrial society in one of his earlier works, the question of social organization in the desired utopia remains one of the key questions debated by the counterculture.

I have tried to outline the main lines of the philosophy of the counterculture;

there are divergences within this philosophy, as we have seen, yet all of the thinkers examined here have been concerned with the problem of creating a modern (and therefore industrial) society in which man may live the good life. The Founding Fathers, too, considered this goal paramount, including "the pursuit of happiness" in the Declaration of Independence as one of man's inalienable rights. The members of the counterculture have ranged widely in search of theories capable of explaining what is happening in contemporary America; they have also returned to an earlier American tradition of intense individualism in their search for a more humane society. Their debate among themselves and with American society as a whole deserves the attention of everyone concerned with social change in the United States.

FOOTNOTES

1. The term is from Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture* (New York: Doubleday, 1969).

2. Robert Heilbroner, "Benign Neglect in the United States," *Transaction*, October 1970, p. 15-22.

3. Andrew Hacker, "Philosopher of the New Left," *The New York Times Book Review*, 10 March 1968, p.1.

4. David L. Bronwich, "The Counter-Culture and Its Apologists: 3," *Commentary*, December 1970, p. 56.

5. Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts" in Lloyd D. Easton and Kurt H. Gaddat, eds., *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society* (New York: Doubleday, 1967), p. 292.

6. George Lichtheim, *Marxism: an Historical and Critical Study* (New York: Praeger, 1961), p. 98-99.

7. Ralf Dahrendorf, *Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1959), p. 41-48.

8. Carl Landauer, *European Socialism: a History of Ideas and Movements* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959), v. 1, p. 275-77.

9. Sigmund Freud, "Civilization and Its Discontents" in *The Major Works of Sigmund Freud* (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952), p. 788.

10. *Ibid.*

11. Herbert Marcuse, *Five Lectures* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), p. 46.

12. Herbert Marcuse, *Repressive Tolerance* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970), p. 109.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 129.

14. Marcuse, *Five Lectures*, p. 99.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

16. James Boyd, "From Far Right—to Far Left—and Farther—with Karl Hess," *The New York Times Magazine*, 6 December 1970, p. 48-49 ff.

17. Marx, p. 316.

18. Marcuse, *Five Lectures*, p. 67.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 68. Marcuse here draws on the doctrines of the 19th century French social theorist Fourier.

20. Freud, p. 787-88.