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Honors Program

2012

The Counterculture Movement

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Recommended Citation

Fink, Hannah, "The Counterculture Movement" (2012). *A with Honors Projects*. 67.
<https://spark.parkland.edu/ah/67>

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HIS 105-002

Course Project Paper

November 28, 2012

Dr. Marsh Jones

The Counterculture Movement

The 1960's were a time in U.S. History that will never fade away and be forgotten. Drugs, sex, and rock n' roll fueled this common known era as did rage and hatred toward the Vietnam War. Youth set out to change the consumerism lifestyles of most into a more alternative lifestyle, deeming this the counterculture movement. It is not right to talk about the music and free spirit of the counterculture without first discussing the reason behind it, the Vietnam War.

In 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson had officially taken office after Kennedy's assassination. His ideas for the country were fresh and expansive. He helped fuel the "War on Poverty" by starting programs such as Medicare, Medicaid, Head Start, and Job Corps. Unfortunately, these programs were expensive and soon became too much to bear as the government's main concern was the involvement in the Vietnam War. Johnson was very involved in the American anti-communist beliefs and soon took action. Congress gave power to Johnson to protect American soldiers and their allies from Vietcong and in 1964 the draft began. In the beginning the war was well supported by the liberals and conservatives. After all, many jobs were created in education, government and industry from all of the military spending.

The anti-war beliefs began to form when people and groups that had formed in 1950's war conflicts came out of the cracks. These people were the first to begin protesting the war and they went about it with a personalist perspective. This perspective believed all around on the emphasis of peaceful methods to get to peace. Therefore, all of the strategies for the activism at this time were done in a peaceful manner. When the war escalated from 1965 to 1967 so did the antiwar beliefs throughout the personalists. The leaders of these anti-war groups shifted their strategies to a more mass-communication tactic. This brought on the protests at a national level.

The value of human life was the main concern of these anti-war groups and they often judged the current status of the war on the current body count of deaths. As the war took its toll on the destruction of people, the anger of these anti-war groups, which were now being referred to as New Lefts, kept rising. They began to believe that the personalism views were no longer significant in gaining followers and it wasn't doing anything to change government policies to stop the war. This caused many leaders to resort to revolutionary violence; make the changes happen quickly and end the war. The creation of the anti-war and draft group called the Resistance came from this mentality. The group was a combination of seventy-five local anti-draft groups. They went about their resistance in what seemed to be the opposition of personalism. Violence and demonizing people came into play and chants such as "Hey, hey, LBJ, how many kids have you killed today?" were used.

Another group of New Lefts came from the college age adults. This organization was called the Students for a Democratic Society and they believed that

colleges were the roots in which social change came from. They hosted sit-ins and presentations at college as their form of protest and in 1965 they did a campus tour campaign. This tour involved draft-card burnings and hostility towards military recruiters. The best known protest of the SDS was at Columbia University in April 1968. They were protesting black rights but nonetheless protesting and 700 students were arrested, with 150 being injured.

It seemed as if the war was the only focal point of the sixties, and it was to most, but not so much to a particular group of young college age adults. In a book titled, *The Spirit of the Sixties*, the author James J. Farrell states, "Some sixties people objected conscientiously to the instrumental politics of protest, resistance and revolution, and "dropped out" to "live the revolution now."" (Farrell 202). These people were fed up with the violence and hateful aura that the anti-war groups were letting off. They were, in a way, turning back to the personalist views that the protesters used to believe in. For the most part, they were not involved in the politics as most of them instead "turned on, tuned in, and dropped out" (Farrell 204) as Timothy Leary, a famous psychologist and writer, once said in a speech.

In the mid-1960's the counter-culturists, who were referred to as Beats or hippies, were "tuning on" in the sense that they were discovering their inner selves. Instead of listening to anti-war leaders telling them who they are and who they should be, they were their own breeds. Many of them took to religion to find themselves but drugs also assisted them in this "finding yourself" period. LSD and marijuana became the drugs of choice for many reasons. Marijuana offered wisdom and LSD offered what seemed like all of the answers to the universe. "LSD was the

countercultural sacrament, the ritual communion for and evolving consciousness and community.” (Farrell 210). People were dropping acid to return to the real world. For example, the League for Spiritual Discovery, which was founded in 1966 by Tim Leary, became the social movement for hippies. It stood by consciousness awareness and social change, and many were in the movement such as Ken Kesey and Neal Cassady. Ken was a novelist and user of LSD since the 50’s. In 1963, Ken and Neal formed the Merry Pranksters together and saved up money to buy a bus. They took this bus cross-country from California to New York performing “acid tests” and turning their followers onto poetry, strobe lights, and the Holy Grail, which was music.

Music was already popular in the early sixties because rock n’ roll had really taken off in the late 50’s. However, in the counterculture it became a new way to connect to the consciousness with or without the company of LSD. This is also where “tuning in” came into play. FM radio became popular in the sixties and soon all of the hippies were tuning in. “On FM, people heard what AM radio wouldn’t play: albums and long tracks, bands too different to make the charts, songs too controversial to pass the AM censors, and music too political for the programming of commercial radio.” (Farrell 211). Along with the radio, which was playing bands like The Grateful Dead, music festivals became popular. Music festivals were the place for mind-altering drugs and music. The Merry Pranksters joined up with the likes of the Beatles and the Grateful Dead in 1965 to throw the first music festival; their first “acid test.”

The acid tests were essentially giant parties that connected everyone as a giant family. The goal of the night was to let the music and the drugs free your mind and everyone was your brother. This behavior is where “dropping out” fits in. Dropping out meant to disconnect from the current world and connect with those around you and the peaceful society of counter-culturalists. In terms of dropping out, hippies were resulting to nature, love, and anti-hard labor for their form of being off the grid. If you were growing up in the mid-sixties your parents expected you to do the typical lifestyle: get an education, get a job, get married, and have children. The hippies despised this “plan” and they set out to do the exact opposite. For one, they got right with nature. They did not like that the world was becoming greedy and consumerism was getting out of hand with all of the new technology. They were so adamant on protecting mother earth that in 1970, Earth Day was created as a result of the counter-culturalists. In addition to the hatred of consumerism came the hatred of the work force. The hippies believed that the work ethic was demeaning and impersonal. It seemed to them that more work meant more consumption and that did not seem right to them so they avoided it. Instead they went for “here and now revolution” ideology. They believed in enjoying the pleasures of life now instead of way later.

The counterculture also dropped out in terms of relationships and families. They disagreed that males and females should be pressured into marriage and sharing their lives together. This is because they believed in complete individualism and sexual freedom. Love in terms of monogamous relationships took on a whole new meaning for the hippies, as they believed in open-relationships and marriages.

They believed monogamy was the population's way of constraining love to only one person for your whole life. In the same way that the hippies viewed music and drugs, sex was a euphoric escape from the world as well. The increase in sexual relationships led to the creation of contraceptives such as the pill. This decreased birth rates and abortions up until the AIDS crisis in the 80s. Because sex was such a simple thing to the hippies, they practically demolished gender roles. Men became less masculine by wearing their hair long and dressing similar to woman but this was not necessarily a bad thing. Men had scads more of respect for women and their place in this world.

Men and women were coexisting in the counterculture movement and in many ways they were doing everything alike. The hippie men and women were ditching traditional garbs and wearing clothes that allowed them to be free and comfortable. Men wore jeans and tunics and let their hair grow long enough to flow in the wind. Women ditched their bras and whipped up some earthy toned tunics and skirts. Anti-hippies would normally look at the counter-culturists in disgust because they were so publicly defying the norm. However, there was a place where these hippies were able to live in peace and harmony for one of the greatest summers of their lives. In 1967, a period known as the Summer of Love was in full swing on Haight-Ashbury Street in San Francisco. The hippies took over this neighborhood that bordered the Golden Gate Bridge and made it their ultimate escape.

Haight-Ashbury became popular in no time because it had low rent and the young broke hippies were obviously attracted to that. They turned old Victorian

homes into community wide shelter and the streets into non-stop festivals. The entire community would share every item that could be possessed such as money, food and drugs. This is because the hippies believed they were all extended family. (Farrell 218). Haight Street became one continuous party that summer with music and drugs flowing continuously. To keep up with the anti-work force beliefs, many hippies were not working and instead they would be found blowing bubbles or drawing murals on sidewalks with chalk; ultimately enjoying life and having a good time. A group of guys that were genuinely enjoying life in the confines of a house on Haight-Ashbury were the band members of the Grateful Dead.

In June 1967, the Monterey Pop Festival occurred and helped confirm the Grateful Dead as the ultimate psychedelic band of the sixties. Before that, many had seen the Dead performing at Ken Kesey's acid test parties. The Dead, whose original band members included Jerry Garcia, Bob Weir, Phil Lesh, Ron McKernan, and Bill Kreutzmann, moved to Haight-Ashbury Street in 1967 and joined in on all of the action. In addition to the Grateful Dead, many other famous musicians had houses on Haight-Ashbury Street such as Janis Joplin, Graham Nash of Crosby, Stills and Nash, and Jefferson Airplane. Haight-Ashbury Street was no doubt the hip place to be in the summer of 67 but soon enough came the event that no one would ever forget.

“The Woodstock Music and Art Fair: An Aquarian Exposition,” offered a premonition of the counterculture's cooperative commonwealth.” (Farrell 214). In August 1969, the largest and most memorable music festival to date was thrown together in upstate New York. Woodstock attendees invaded Max Yasgur's small

family farm for the weekend in numbers ranging from 300,000 to 400,000. Those that were at Woodstock were the last remaining hopefuls that the sixties would carry on forever. The rest of the world had lost hope after the Democratic National Convention in Chicago in 1968 had gone under due to anti-war protests. To spread the love and remind all of the hippies what the counterculture stood for bands such as The Grateful Dead, Jefferson Airplane, Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, Creedence Clearwater Revival, and Joan Baez came out and played amazing sets to the huge crowds. However, the amount of people in attendance led to food, water, medical supplies and shelter shortages. This caused an overwhelming amount of distress on Bethel, the town in which Woodstock was located, and in the 1969 city election they threw out their leader for his aid in planning the festival. Up until recently, Bethel was still trying to block out the fact that Woodstock ever occurred but they have come to embrace it for all it was worth.

Woodstock was not only at the back end of the 1960s but it was also the last hoorah for the counterculture movement. Leading up to Woodstock, during the Summer of Love, a group titled the Diggers took control of the counterculture population and held Haight Street together. They were the most radical of the hippies and often gave a bad image to the peaceful hippies with their anti-American life views. "The disciplined practice of people like the Diggers gave way to capitalist cooption. And the innocent flower children attracted both drug pushers and petty criminals who succeeded the Summer of Love with a season of danger." (Farrell 221). Because of these scary times, the Diggers declared the death of the hippie and two leaders Emmett Grogan and Peter Berg began calling themselves Yippies (Youth

International Party.) They held protests of all sorts that involved violence and hateful ideas, which was unlike the hippie culture. This led them to explain that they were a “cross-fertilization of the hippie and New Left philosophies.” (Farrell 223). The work of the New Lefts and Yippies and all other anti-war radicals and counter-culturists got some serious public attention in the final years of the 60s. The mainstream Americans saw these anti-American life radicals as a serious threat to society.

The hippies set out to drop away from the anti-war radicalism while the New Lefts wanted people involved in it. The New Lefts were all around more radical and hated by America, but in time the Americans began to despise the Yippies as well. “Especially after 1968, the politics of Yippie complicated the course of the New Left and of the counterculture.” (Farrell 231). This began the general decline of the counterculture movement. “For all the hopes and dreams of the counterculture, they couldn’t escape human nature or American socialization, which backpacked with them wherever they settled.” (Farrell 231). The personalism that was so prevalent in the sixties counterculture faded into the 70s but for the most part the counterculture movement was over. The hippie culture had faded out by the mid-70s and most of the counter-culturists joined the environmental movements that were becoming popular.

There is no doubt that the counterculture had a huge impact on the outcome of the sixties and well as U.S. history as a whole. The hippies successfully dropped out of the American life culture for most of the decade and involved themselves in alternate activities. Drugs such as marijuana and LSD became popular and helped

the hippies find their inner selves. Music and festivals drew the hippies together and made them feel as if they were one big family. Love was passed around freely and monogamous relationships were considered torture. All of these things were brought together as one in events such as the Summer of Love in San Francisco and the music festivals such as Woodstock. The hippie culture ultimately came to an end at the beginning of the 70s but bits and pieces of it still remain today, and in a positive light instead of a negative, which is how the era ended. The music, culture, and fashion of the counterculture still linger to this day and hopefully will never fade away. If there is one thing that people can take away from the counterculture movement it should be “if you’re going to San Francisco, be sure to wear flowers in your hair.”