The Youth Culture

An Anarcho-Communist View

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1970

The "hip culture"—the word is really the youth culture and I will use it from now on—does not really need any "defenders".[1] As an elemental phenomenon, its own existence and development must eventually constitute its only "defense". What the Youth Culture *does* need, however, is a better interpretation than it has received up to now—and this would be impossible to achieve without dealing with its critics.

Bourgeois critics may be dismissed out of hand. Generally, criticism of this kind takes the form either of a patronizing psychoanalysis (the classical image of the "rebellious sons" slaying their "fathers") or simply a brute condemnation directed against the "impudence" of young people. The most serious criticism, or at least the most systematic, comes from the orthodox Marxists, who usually complain that the Youth Culture is not sufficiently "revolutionary". On close inspection the criticism from this quarter centers around the notion that the Youth Culture is "elitist", "escapist", "bourgeois", "anti-rational" and should all else fail—nonpolitical.

Here, one comes up against a vexing problem. Polemics with orthodox Marxists usually appear in a false light—and for *both* sides of the argument. Any revolutionary who attempts to interpret the Youth Culture from a non-marxian viewpoint tends to appear like a spiritualized vapor, or "worse" (horror of horrors!), a "petty bourgeois hedonist" who is far removed from the bread-and-butter issues and oppressions of daily life. The Old Left "critic" of the Youth Culture, in turn, seems to live in an unreality of his/her own, patently ignoring the brute fact that long-hairs and students are far in advance of the workers on all the critical issues of the day. The two sides become polarized into "either... or" positions, as though oppression can be defined in only one of two ways: spiritual *or* material, psychic *or* economic, alienative *or* exploitative. This, or course, is pure bullshit. Both go together. They interpenetrate in varying degrees and assume different degrees of weight, depending upon the situation in question. The crisis of bourgeois society is *universal',* it can no longer be boxed into the neat little compartments that the orthodox Marxists have constructed, polished, and labored to preserve for nearly a century. As women and blacks well know, every form of material oppression is marked by spiritual oppression and every form of spiritual oppression by material oppression. In the case of many white young people, material oppression may not have as much *weight* as spiritual, but it is nonetheless real and particularly visible on campuses, where students are processed by an "educational" system that operates along factory lines.

The most astonishing thing about the traditional Marxists is their utter inability to see how enormously the terrain of the revolutionary struggle has expanded with the development of capitalism. Marxian orthodoxy is still fighting the battle of "socialism": a very specific historical terrain, delimited by the old coal-steel technology of the Industrial Revolution, the cry for "justice," the killing exploitation of the "factory hand," and a conception of revolution mediated by "transitional stages" (the "proletarian dictatorship" and "socialist state") designed not only to deal with counterrevolution but, in the words of Marx and Engels, "to increase the total of productive forces as rapidly as possible." In the century and more since Marx and Engels penned these words, capitalism itself has increased "the total of productive forces" to a point where even toil, not only material scarcity, is being brought into question—and these new "productive forces" could easily be extended to the Third World following a revolution in America and Europe. What the traditional Marxists can't get into their heads is that capitalism has finally created the material preconditions for *communism (libertarian* communism, flttflrctocommunism), not "socialism"; for *freedom,* not "justice" (or what used to be called "social democracy").

This enormous change has profoundly affected all the issues and movements of our time. Owing to the explosive tensions between "what-is" and "what-could-be," between the potential for a post-scarcity society and the actuality of an enforced system of scarcity, capitalism and all its values now seem more irrational, indeed, more *artificial,* than ever before. The system seems like an immense madhouse-

[1] The term "hip culture" is confusing because it includes a pseudo-bohemia of well-heeled "in-people" who have *always* parasitized the external features of rebellious cultural trends. By the Youth Culture I refer to the drop-out youth whose culture forms an organic whole, not a detachable compendium of cultural traits. Moreover, the Youth Culture is marked by different levels of commitment, each of which overlaps and passes into the other. My concern in this article is with the most advanced and committed level-the level which directly or indirectly orchestrates the others.

not so much because a mystical insight "suddenly" makes its social features intolerable, but because they become intolerable in the light of the new potentialities. Hence the remarkable fact that many social features of the system which were passively "endured" only two or three decades ago become utterly insufferable today. One has only to look at the *scope* as well as the growth of black liberation movements, women's liberation, gay liberation, and high school liberation groups, indeed, the upheavels in some of the most staid professional organizations, to see how *every sensibility to oppression and domination is awakened.* What the present social development brings into question *is domination,* not only exploitation; *hierarchy,* not only political inequality; *toil,* not only material want; *alienation,* not only repression; *psychic oppression,* not only class and racial oppression; *patriarchalism,* not only the abuse of women; the *monogamous family,* not only the patriarchal family; the *city,* not only the megalopolis; the *myth that nature can be dominated by man,* not only the domination of man by man. In this universalization of issues, the social development brings into question the institutions and values of hierarchical society as these have existed for thousands of years, not only the institutions and values of capitalism.

To deal with this universalization of the issues properly, to take them from the realm of books and articles into the language and musculature of everyday life, requires a communist mentality, communist values, communist life-styles, and communist relations. In response to this problem, traditional Marxists offer a formalistic, highly schematic outlook, the most pedestrian bourgeois values and life-styles, and hierarchical modes of organization and relations. Having preconceived the revolutionary project in crassly bourgeois terms, the traditional Marxist finds it virtually impossible to *understand,* much less interpret, a development whose goals are inherently no n-hierarchical and non-statist. Accordingly, all of these issues and the movements which form around them are "re-interpreted" by means of categories that can no more grasp their essence than Ptolemaic theory can account for the astrodynamics of the solar system. The very limitations of the traditional approach thus place the issues and movements in a false light. It is not the reality that is distorted but the lenses through which it is seen.

We must break away from the traditional Marxian outlook, with its limited interpretation of the class struggle, of the motive forces for revolution, and of the revolutionary process, to understand the revolutionary implications of the Youth Culture. The most important feature of the Youth Culture is the most obvious one-notably, it is created by relatively affluent white middle class youth. These young people have never experienced an economic crisis, nor have they acquired anywhere near the terrifying material insecurities that shaped the mentality of their depression-haunted parents. Their rejection of commodity values, of alienated relationships, or hierarchical structures, of the work ethic, and of all the puritanical mores that fester in the bourgeois family is a function of a relative material affluence, not of severe material want. This is an extraordinary phenomenon, if one seriously thinks about it. It represents the very opposite trend that the liberals and Marxists expected during fifties; notably, that young people would become more *assimilated* by bourgeois and bureaucratic values as capitalism continued to "deliver the goods." Expectations of this sort formed the basis for works like Orwell's "1984" and Marcuse's "One-Dimensional Man." The incredible fact—all the dour predictions of the fifties to the contrary—is that the very opposite occurred. It was not poverty but rather relative affluence that broke the reactionary solidity of the fifties; not the proletariat but the middle classes; not the old who ostensibly were "steeped" in the "revolutionary traditions" of the thirties but the young, who have to make their own revolutionary poetry out of the future. And here we come to the nub of the issue: the sixties were a watershed in the sense that, for the first time, a youth came of age that was not completely shackled by a scarcity mentality, by the bourgeois values which the proletariat shares with its masters and the tradition-bound "radicals" with their "opponents." Nourished by the relative abundance produced by a new, potentially revolutionary technology, young people began to develop a post-scarcity outlook—however confused, rudimentary, and intuitive its forms—that has slowly been eroding the ages-old psychic complicity between oppressor and oppressed—a complicity that had made hierarchy, domination, patriarchy, renunciation, and guilt a condition of the human spirit, not only the institutional and psychological instruments of class-rule and the state.

It is difficult to convey what a historic breach this emerging Youth Culture produced in the social desert that once was America. Let there be no illusion that the thirties was a particularly revolutionary decade. Despite the growth of the "Communist" Party, its front organizations, and especially the labor movement, the "radicalization" of the country occurred *entirely* on bourgeois terms. Precisely because its entire mentality was orchestrated by material want, by notions such as the "nobility of toil," by a respect for the party hierarchy, and by puritanical values, the thirties' generation was no more capable of *basically* changing the social order than of building socialism on the moon. Its very concepts of "socialism"—not to speak of its elitist notions of how to achieve it—were bourgeois to the core. They could be summed up in two demands—"nationalization of industry" and a "planned economy"—both of which, in part or whole, appear today as nothing more than state capitalism. Young people of the thirties lived completely under the thumbs of the adults, as little more than mere extensions of the past into the present. So much were adult values their values that they, the American "radical" youth of the 1930's, would have been perfectly intelligible to young English radicals of the 2&3O's and perhaps even young Puritan revolutionaries of the 7630's. The institutions of American capitalism, although shaken by the Great Depression, were completely intact, indeed, the object of a mindless reverence in fairly radical, working class districts. As one who participated actively in the "radical" movements of the thirties, my own personal experiences may not be amiss here. I vividly recall how often movies of the Statue of Liberty and the flag were enthusiastically applauded in theaters of neighborhoods that were to send "Communist" representatives to the New York City Council. July 4th and the National Anthem were too sacred to question even implicitly, much less by acts of transgression—hence the stupifying shock with which most older people today respond to flag-burning. As to the "Left," the political structures, the human relations and the format of our meetings abjectly emulated the forms of bourgeois parties-and, as we now know, the apparatus of the very state machine we were expected to "overthrow." If one considers the pompous mein, stuffiness, and self-importance of our leaders, not to speak of the prescribed party literary style, we more than fulfilled the bureaucratic norms of bourgeois administrators. Had society fallen into our hands, it would have been a world-historical disaster.

"Life-style?"—the word was simply unknown. If we were asked by some crazy anarchists how we could hope to change society without changing ourselves, our relations to each other, and our organizational structure, we had one ritualistic answer: " ... after the revolution." "After the revolution ...''—this was our magic talisman. It expressed our incredibly naive belief that merely by "abolishing" the economic relationships and institutions of capitalism we would thereby abolish the bourgeois family, the bourgeois state, and bourgeois attitudes toward sexuality, women, children, indeed toward people and life as a whole. (The gross deception here—a deception which lies at the very core of Marxism—is that changes in the *pre-conditions* of society and life are equivalent to changes in the *conditions* of society and life, a fallacy which blatantly mistakes the sufficient reason for the necessary reason.) And this "beautiful revolution" we aimed for, was to be achieved by using *bourgeois* methods of organization and involved *bourgeois* relations between people. We totally failed to recognize that our methods and relations were subverting our goals, indeed our very personalities as revolutionaries.

Could people like ourselves have made a revolution that was worth a damn? My reply is a categorical *No!* Not surprisingly, the history of the "radical" thirties is a massive debris of heart-sickening betrayals which began with Germany in 1932 and ended with Spain in 1939.

Not surprisingly, too, the movements of the thirties virtually disappeared by the fifties. The story exists that the decline of these movements is due entirely to McCarthy's persecution of the "Left" and the atmosphere generated by the "Cold War." Perhaps. But remember that the American Socialist Party, which had a very sizeable membership in the thirties and was not persecuted by McCarthy, dwindled to sect-like dimensions. I think it would be closer to the truth to say that the movements of the thirties were assimilated by the fifties—assimilated by the "affluence," the "full employment" and the suburban life-styles that so closely approximated the thirties' image of "socialism." To a generation spawned by the Great Depression, the Eisenhower Era was the realization of the "American Dream." Since traditional Marxism had no quarrel with hierarchy, domination, and patriarchy in praxis, however hortatory

and resplendent its critique of these institutions in theory, it was simply irrelevant under a system of "managed" capitalism with its cornucopia of plastic commodities. In all fairness to Marcuse, "One-Dimensional Man" was painfully relevant to a generation that had experienced the Great Depression and shopped for ideologies as though they were lawnmowers.

As to the young people of the Eisenhower Era, they were even more of a disaster than their parents. No one typifies the mental and emotional equipment of the fifties' youth more exasperatingly than Pat Boone. There was even a religious revival in those days on the spiritual dimensions of a Billy Graham. Not only were the institutions of American capitalism more intact that ever, but the political mood wafting through the universities was arrogantly conservative ("reactionary" would have been terrifyingly "extremist"). I should qualify this judgment by saying that politics, generally, was subordinate to grades, sports, panty raids, dating, and the employment applications of large corporations. Never before had the myth of the "American Dream" seemed more palpable than in the fifties, when a boy was dating his "life-time partner" at fifteen and taking on a mortgage for his "dream house" at twenty-one.

The explosion of the Youth Culture shattered this decade-long edifice and its mythology to their very foundations and, almost alone, is responsible for the massive alienation that permeates American youth today. For the first time in the history of this country, every verity not only of bourgeois society but of hierarchical society as a whole is now in question. Mere critique of the kind so endearing to the orthodox Marxists might have produced nothing more than a sense of cynical disengagement, so similar to Salinger's young hero in "Catcher in the Rye." But the Youth Culture went further—into the realm of positive, utopian alternatives. In its demands for tribalism, free sexuality, community, mutual aid, ecstatic experience, and a balanced ecology, the Youth Culture prefigures, however inchoately, a joyous communist and classless society, freed of the trammels of hierarchy and domination, a society that would transcend the historic splits between town and country, individual and society, and mind and body. Drawing from early rock-and-roll music, from the beat movement, the civil rights struggles, the peace movement, and even from the naturalism of neo-Taoist and neo-Buddhist cults (however unsavory this may be to the "Left"), the Youth Culture has pieced together a life-style that is aimed at the internal system of domination that hierarchical society so viciously uses to bring the individual into partnership with his/her own enslavement.

It is easy to carp at this elemental phenomenon, so lacking in "precedents," so dependent upon youthful experimentation to find its way. Hence the continual toying of the Youth Culture with old techniques, the improvisation of new ones, the perpetual tossing and turning that characterizes its developments—and, of course, produces such condescending sneers on the faces of its critics. Yet despite the complaints of its orthodox Marxist critics, the fact remains that this culture has yet to betray the revolutionizing social forces that brought it into being. It has yet to exhibit that almost unrelieved history of treachery and desertion of principle that has distinguished the Marxist movement almost from the day it became an international social phenomenon. If a balance sheet were to be drawn between the number of hippie cop-outs and Marxist capitulators to counterrevolution, Marxism would be damned for a hypocrisy that compares only with that of Christianity. I will ignore, here, the flourishing market Marxism has generated for the publishing industry, not to speak of its insurance funds, "cooperatives," and "labor" bureaucracies of earlier times. Isn't it really time for the Marxists to wash their own dirty linen before they probe the undergarments of the Youth Culture for "hip-capitalists," "stars," and "leaders"?

Actually, Marxian predictions that the Youth Culture would fade into a comfortable accomodation with the system have proven to be false. Years have passed since the pontiffs of Marxism opined that the "love generation" would evaporate into mere "petty bourgeois escapism." Since then the "love generation" has marched through Chicago's streets and into the chambers of the Conspiracy trial. Years have passed since the same pontiffs opined that hippies would disappear into government-sponsored dope dens, consuming their substance in drugs, occultism, "sensitivity training," and psychedelic art. Since then the hippies (now renamed the "street people") have turned People's Park into a battleground, "TDA" into a landmark on the radical calendar, and Powder Ridge (music festival) into a mockery of "hip capitalism." The hippies of the sixties have since become the radical collectives of the seventies,

perhaps the focal centers of revolutionary energy in the present period. Far from being co-opted by the rock stars and rock festivals, the Youth Culture has increasingly assimilated the stars and the festivals to its own purposes. The Youth Culture has spread from the Haight-Eastside axis into the most remote towns of the United States, areas that no radical movement in the past could have hoped to colonize, disrupting all the time-honored ties, institutions, and values of these communities. Owing to its increasing influence on working class youth, the cluture has now begun to rework the labor reservoirs of bourgeois society itself—the reservoirs from which it recruits its industrial proletariat and soldiers—until recently, perhaps the most intractable element to radical ideas and values.

One does not have to go further than Agnew to see how fearfully the bourgeois views this development. Rock festivals are being eliminated, hippie streets cleared, the "leaders" ruthlessly hounded and imprisoned. The press and media generally have never been more churlish and hostile to hippies; the hippies, in turn, are being hounded out of their districts and jailed. Fortunately, the Youth Culture has gone too far to be contained, at least by the present political framework. Its base has widened into high schools and elementary schools, its perimeter is already beginning to touch the factory gate and the barracks wall. Youth, in effect, has become the "class," more properly the "non-class" of *revolutionaries* that may well achieve in real life what Marx, in theory, assigned to the industrial proletariat.

If a "class-based" analysis is needed by the Marxian pundits, it may be well to remind them that just as capitalism began with a lumpen class, from which it created its proletariat, so it may end with a lumpen class, from which it may create its executioners. This lumpen class will include not only "street people" but young workers who no longer respect the factory hierarchy, industrial discipline, and work ethic that tamed their social progenitors into obedience. It will also include millions of black people, brown people, and in large numbers, red and gay people. Cutting across the traditional class lines, it will recruit not only the young of the bourgeoisie, petty bourgeoisie, and proletariat, but also "their" women. So the dialectics of *reality* will mock the "dialectics" of *theory,* perhaps rehabilitating the broader class analysis of a Mikhail Bakunin than the narrower class analysis of a Karl Marx.

To speak quite bluntly, I am now convinced that one of the greatest obstacles to the unfolding of this historic dialectic is the Neanderthal "Left." Infiltrating the Youth Culture, these cavemen have detoured thousands of young people into Bolshevik-type organizations and satrapies, manipulated by ego-tripping "ministers," "general staffs," and ministerial "cabinets." That the organizational models are borrowed directly from bourgeois society makes it all the easier for the more naive kids to dress themselves in "revolutionary" apparel without changing any of the hierarchical and macho habits into which they have been socialized by the family, the school, and the state. More than ever, the Youth Culture needs the consciousness and self-confidence to withstand the Neanderthal elements that threaten to block is historic work of de-institutionalization, so indispensable to a revolutionary development in America. More than ever its intuitive hostility to hierarchy and domination must be firmed up by insight and self-awareness.

The most hopeful development that could promote this consciousness, self-confidence, and soundness of intuition is the women's liberation movement and, to a lesser degree, the nascent radical ecology movement, which between them speak to the need for entirely new, unalienated human relations and for utopia. As to Marxian orthodoxy—it has woefully overstayed its time. If the revolution comes, it will be in spite of this threadbare ideology, not because of it. The magnificent achievements of Karl Marx—his contributions to dialectical philosophy, his theory of historical materialism, his superb analysis of the commodity nexus—are imperishable. They now belong to the revolutionary project as a whole and certainly need no "movement," much less a lumbering horde of Neanderthal cavemen, to litanize the advances Marx scored in social theory. We are all "Marxists" and together with Marx we can rightfully repeat the words he so scornfully uttered against his "disciples" in the closing years of his life: "Je ne suis pas une Marxiste!" ("I am not a Marxist!") The time has come to bury the hierarchical elements of the ideology together with the society from which it emerged.

Salud!

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1970

<https://archive.org/details/HipCulture>
Published in *Hip Culture: 6 Essays on Its Revolutionary Potential; Yippie, Third World, Feminist, Marxist, High School Student, Anarchist.*
Times Change Press (New York)