

The Emergence of a Counterculture

What was the impact of the counterculture on American society?

Introduction



Bob Dylan became a famous folk musician in the early 1960s. His first big hit, “Blowin’ in the Wind,” protested the racial discrimination that had persisted in the United States despite the civil rights movement. Dylan’s socially-aware lyrics resonated with millions of Americans at the time.

Bob Dylan grew up listening to rock ‘n’ roll on the radio and wanted to become a rock star as a teenager. His dreams shifted while attending the University of Minnesota in 1959, when he became passionate about traditional American folk music. Dylan dropped out of college, moved to

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New York City, and started performing as a folk singer in tiny Greenwich Village nightclubs.

Unlike other musical performers, Dylan was not showy or handsome, nor did he have a strong singing voice. Still, people engaged with his music. Playing accompanying guitar and harmonica, Dylan sang about racial injustice, nuclear war, and other issues that defined this period of social change. His lyrics were more similar to beat poetry than to the simple rhymes of current teenage love songs. In one of his early hits, he predicted an imminent moral clash between young adult baby boomers and their parents:

Come mothers and fathers throughout the land
And don't criticize what you can't understand.
Your sons and your daughters are beyond your command.
Your old road is rapidly agin'.
Please get out of the new one if you can't lend your hand,
For the times they are a-changin'.

—Bob Dylan, "*The Times They Are A-Changin'*," 1964

Dylan's lyrics resonated with millions of people in the 1960s, regardless of age. His fans observed racial discrimination, riots, poverty, and political assassinations in the United States and concluded that society must change. As some people experimented with new ways of living, they personally redefined traditional ideals of freedom and democracy. In this way, they created a **counterculture**, or a group with ideas and behaviors very different from those of the mainstream culture.



This poster advertised the counterculture concert that famously became known as Woodstock, which about 400,000 people attended in the summer of 1969.

1. Baby Boomers Launch a Cultural Revolution

The postwar baby boom created the largest generation of children in American history. The oldest baby boomers were nearing their twenties in the early 1960s. Most baby boomers anticipated futures full of opportunity, but some felt guilty for having advantages denied to many Americans. They believed American society was deeply flawed—rife with materialism, racism, and inequality—but that it could change.

Activists on College Campuses Form a New Left In response to poor Americans' plight, small groups of student activists created a movement called the **New Left**. In the Depression-era "Old Left," some members were radicals who supported a worldwide communist

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revolution. However, the students who comprised the New Left rejected communism. Inspired by the civil rights movement, they were committed to upholding democratic American ideals, like ensuring all citizens had a say in government.



Mario Savio addressed a massive crowd of students during the 1964 Free Speech Movement rally at the University of California at Berkeley. Protests against the ban on campus political activity lasted three months. The students' success in overturning the ban is still seen as a victory for First Amendment rights on college campuses.

The strongest subgroup of the New Left was called Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). In 1962, SDS founders met to develop their vision of a just society, and they declared, "Freedom and equality for each individual, government of, by, and for the people—these American values we found good, principles by which we could live. We would replace power . . . rooted in possession, privilege, or circumstance by power and uniqueness rooted in love, reflectiveness, reason, and creativity." During the group's first year, SDS membership grew to include more than 8,000 college students.

A 1964 student protest at the University of California at Berkeley radicalized masses of students across the country. The **Free Speech Movement** developed in protest to a university ban that barred groups

like SDS from expressing political ideas on campus. Freedom of expression, declared student activist Mario Savio, “represents the very dignity of what a human being is.” Comparing the university to a factory, he urged his fellow students to “put your bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels.” Thousands of students joined the Free Speech Movement, which shut down the campus for weeks and eventually pressured the university to lift the ban.

Berkeley’s student uprising was the first of many college protests nationwide. Some protests centered on local issues, while others reacted to the growing U.S. military presence in Vietnam. Student activists called on college officials to ban military recruiters from campuses and end weapons-related research. In 1965, SDS organized an anti-Vietnam War rally in Washington, D.C., attracting nearly 25,000 people. You will read more about this war in upcoming lessons.

An Emerging Counterculture Rejects the Establishment In another form of societal rebellion, many young people dropped out of school and rejected the “rat race” of nine-to-five jobs. Called **hippies**, these people developed a counterculture that sought expanded freedom of expression. Shunning convention, hippies dressed in jeans, colorful tie-dyed T-shirts, sandals, and necklaces called “love beads.” They wore their hair long and quit shaving and wearing makeup. Many were funded by their parents, begging, or short-term jobs.

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Hippies envisioned a world that emphasized peace, love, and freedom as its dominant values. Compared to mainstream Americans, they were more relaxed regarding money, work, and the pursuit of pleasure. They also wore colorful clothing rather than conventional dress.

Although no single organization united the counterculture, certain beliefs did. One was distrust of the **Establishment**, a counterculture term encompassing the people and institutions who they believed controlled society. Another was the sentiment expressed in the counterculture motto: “never trust anyone over 30.” Counterculture members also believed love was more important than money.

Many of the counterculture rejected political activism in favor of “personal liberation.” As one hippie explained, “Human beings need total freedom. That’s where God is at. We need to shed hypocrisy, dishonesty, and phoniness and go back to the purity of our childhood values.” Hippies discussed creating a new age of peace and love in which everyone was free to “do [their] own thing.”

Counterculture members of the Youth International Party, called yippies, tried to combine their hippie lifestyle with New Left politics in the late 1960s. Led by Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin, yippies drew media attention by conducting amusing pranks, including mocking the Establishment’s love of money by throwing dollar bills off the balcony of the New York Stock Exchange. As the money floated down, stock traders below dropped their work to scramble for free cash. Hoffman called such stunts “commercials for the revolution.”



Mainstream Americans loyally upheld traditional values during the 1960s. They supported family bonds, hard work, and respect for God and country. These Americans often viewed counterculture youth as irresponsible and immoral.

A Generation Gap Opens Between Rebel Youth and Mainstream Parents Although only a minority of 1960s youth were hippies, the media broadcasted hippie beliefs to other young Americans, many of whom were supportive to the movement. To their parents' dismay, these youth let their hair grow long, wore hippie clothes, and criticized the Establishment—especially in regards to the Vietnam War. This resulted in a widening **generation gap**, or difference in attitudes and behaviors between youth and their parents.

Older adults who had lived through the Depression and World War II often dismissed “long-haired hippies” as spoiled rich kids. They resented the counterculture’s focus on hedonism, or pursuit of pleasure, and its lack of concern for the future. But the majority of young people did adhere to mainstream values— like their parents, they wanted a good education, a decent job, a successful marriage, and their own home.

Peggy Noonan, former presidential speechwriter and current newspaper columnist, was one such mainstream youth, and was unsympathetic to hippie ideals. Noonan did not support personal liberation, stating that “not everything is possible, you can’t have everything, and that’s not bad, that’s life.” Rather than chant anti-

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Establishment slogans such as “Make love, not war,” her motto was “Show respect, love your country, stop complaining!”



Hippies experimented with new forms of music and new styles of art. Mainstream adults worried that counterculture’s “psychedelic rock” genre encouraged drug use. Concert posters and album covers often sought to evoke the colorful visions that counterculture artists sometimes had while high on music or drugs.

2. A Culture Clash

In January 1967, an event dubbed the “Human Be-In”— a lighthearted

twist on a sit-in—drew various counterculture factions to San Francisco, attracting nearly 20,000 young people. News reports pictured festivalgoers holding one another, using drugs, and dancing to rock music. Many young Americans viewed the event as an invitation to enjoy sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll, while stories about the Human Be-In confirmed adults' worst fears of society's moral decline.

Changing Views of Love and Marriage The counterculture's openness regarding sexual behavior reflected society's changing views on love and marriage. The era's **sexual revolution** was catalyzed by the introduction of the birth control pill earlier in the decade. More couples were living together outside of marriage and obtaining divorces after marriage. In this period, millions of Americans began to believe that loveless marriages were worse than not marrying at all, so many states mitigated divorce laws. Between 1960 and 1970, the annual divorce rate rose from fewer than 10 couples per 1,000 to almost 15. The number of children living in single-parent families increased with the divorce rate.

While numerous young people experimented with the freedom engendered by the sexual revolution, mainstream adults emphasized the problems it created. They worried that young people were being pressured to engage in sexual behavior and were alarmed by the rapid increase in children born out of wedlock. Similarly shocking to them was the rise of sexually transmitted diseases.

Hippies Experiment with Freer Lifestyles Many hippies created mini-communities in which they could live by their own values. Some congregated in crash pads, or free and usually temporary places to stay, while others experimented with more permanent group-owned living arrangements called **communes**. Commune dwellers shared responsibilities and decision-making power. About 2,000 communes arose in the 1960s, mostly in rural areas. Many mainstream parents strongly rejected communal modes of living. Through such unconventional lifestyles, some parents believed their children could jeopardize their future success.

The counterculture was also tolerant of recreational drugs. At the 1967 Human Be-In, psychologist Timothy Leary urged the crowd to “turn on, tune in, and drop out.” Young people's casual attitudes toward illegal and mindaltering drugs appalled mainstream adults, who noted that some drug users experienced “bad trips,” leading to panic attacks, depression, violence, and death. Government spending on antidrug programs increased from \$65 million in 1969 to \$730 million in 1973.



The counterculture's societal impact was reflected in a variety of media genres. Pop artists, such as Andy Warhol, influenced the direction of visual arts. Warhol was known for his paintings of everyday objects, particularly cans of soup.

Rock 'n' Roll Gives Voice to the Counterculture Hippies also embraced a changing music scene, in which counterculture rock bands developed a new genre known as psychedelic rock. Hippies experimented with free-flowing songs and used elements of jazz and Indian music, sound distortion, and light shows to create vivid musical experiences. Many mainstream adults worried that this music promoted drug use.

The counterculture was at its height during **Woodstock**, a 1969 concert that took place in rural upstate New York. About 400,000

people convened at the festival—far more than anticipated. Despite rain and food shortages, the gathering was peaceful.

Woodstock helped popularize a new generation of rock performers, and drew media attention to the counterculture. In August 1969, *Time* magazine reported, “The festival . . . may well rank as one of the significant political and sociological events of the age.” A few months after Woodstock, four people died at a rock festival staged by the Rolling Stones in Altamont, California. Mainstream Americans cited this event to underscore the dangers of rock ‘n’ roll.

The Impact of the Counterculture on Mainstream Media By the end of the 1960s, countercultural ideas and images were appearing in mainstream magazines, movies, and television. Experimentation with new forms of expression occurred in the visual arts, where abstract expressionism of the 1950s gave way to “popular art,” or **pop art** for short. Pop art depicted images of everyday life, commenting on consumer culture by classifying mundane objects as highbrow art.

Summary

Members of the counterculture valued individual freedom and expression over materialism. Their values created a generation gap between themselves and older, mainstream Americans.

The New Left Politically active college students formed a movement known as the New Left. In 1964, the Free Speech Movement challenged the University of California at Berkeley.

Hippies Members of the counterculture, called hippies, believed in peace, love, and individual freedom. They shunned the Establishment and its materialistic values.

Sexual revolution Due in part to the onset of the birth control pill, couples living together before marriage and getting divorced became more accepted in the 1960s. The national divorce rate increased, as did the number of children living with a single parent.

Drug use Casual attitudes toward the use of illegal drugs shocked mainstream America.

Rock ‘n’ roll Psychedelic rock combined certain musical styles with light shows to create vivid audience experiences. The music festival Woodstock drew media attention to the counterculture.

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Impact of the counterculture The media broadcasted countercultural values to mainstream America through television and radio, as well as art, music, and theater.