

Book Notes: Reading in the Time of Coronavirus

By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence
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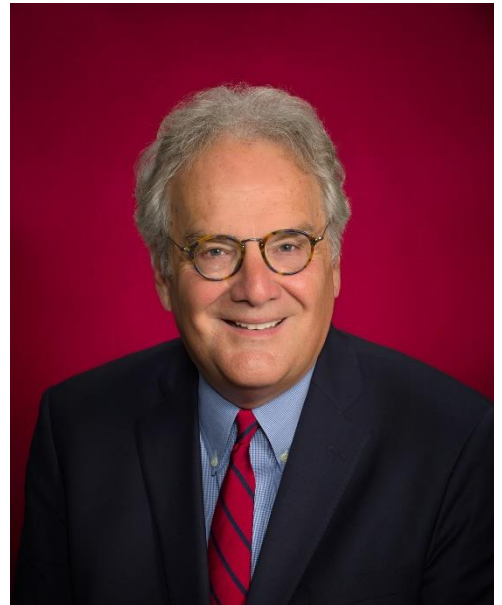
A Generation of Sociopaths: How the Baby Boomers Betrayed America Bruce Cannon Gibney

After one of my talks about *America in 1968: The Far Side of the Moon and the Birth of the Culture Wars*, an audience member asked me “What ever happened to the counterculture?” By which the person meant the “sex, drugs, and rock ‘n’ roll” contingent, who had their apotheosis in August 1969 at Woodstock and their “Aha, this is some serious shit” moment at Altamont Speedway in December 1969.

At Woodstock, Jimi Hendrix closed the festival with a rendition of “The Star-Spangled Banner” that allegedly changed the world; it didn’t.

At Altamont, the Hells Angels murdered (it might have been self-defense) a concert-goer attempting to climb on stage as the Rolling Stones played on in either their own Marie-Antoinette moment or a feeble attempt at crowd control. Regardless, it did change the world, kinda, for it signaled the end, maybe the beginning of the end, of the “Peace and Love” era as flower-power wilted under the pressure of the real.

The “real” has a way of doing that.



Frankly, not listening to the question with the seriousness it deserved, I hastily answered, “They lost.”

I was wrong.

Continuing my research into “America in 1968” and its consequences – *Smithsonian* magazine said it was the year “America Shattered” [1] – I began to ask: “Is there a direct connection between the ‘60s “*do your own thing*” and “*I gotta be me*” and the ‘70s “Me Decade” and the ‘80s “Greed is Good?”

The answer is “Yes,” because the counterculture, or, maybe more accurately, certain of its core ideas and attitudes, won.

I’d like to tell you that this is a purely original observation on my part; it is, or is becoming, a major thread in my *The American Tapestry Project*. As long ago, however, as Aug. 23, 1976 in a *New York* magazine article, novelist Tom Wolfe coined the phrase “The Me Decade.” The article, “The ‘Me’ Decade and the Third Great Awakening,” can be found [here](#). Wolfe described, or at least some ‘60s versions of what we might now call “woke-Americans,” attitudes shifting away from social responsibility and political activism to a hyper-individualism and self-absorption – “I gotta be me” – chanting “Om,” and missing the point, as [Joan Didion](#) would have told them, at ersatz Esalen workshops littered across the landscape.

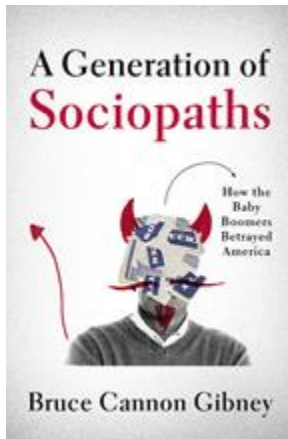
Working the same terrain, but with considerable less glibness, David Brooks in *Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There* fused the words bourgeois and bohemian into “BoBos” who wanted to have it, and managed to get it, both ways: hedonistic, countercultural, artistic while at the same time being white-collar capitalists with a vengeance.

Brooks describes his BoBos driving Volvos, wearing Birkenstocks, doing yoga, shopping at Whole Foods, sending their children to Montessori, pursuing this or that do-good opportunity, all the while pursuing the most rapacious capitalistic aims. [2] They believe, or want to believe, that America is a meritocracy, that they are the ‘meritocrats’ who have earned their cossetted place in American society all the while ignoring, like the mud-splattered concert-goers in Max Yasgur’s fields at Woodstock, the immense privileges with which they were born.

Chief amongst which is generational. As “Boomers,” they enjoy the immense privilege of having been born at the exact moment when American society reached its apex – the post-World War II economic boom that lasted from 1946 until 1970. It wasn’t only an economic boom, for America today is much richer than post-WWII America. But post-WWII America not only had an economic boom, it was also a socio-politico-cultural

moment of unchallenged ascendance. Indeed, there were clouds – the threat of nuclear annihilation, the Soviet menace, Sputnik, some exotic skirmish in South East Asia on the fringes of national awareness, unfinished civil rights issues at home – but for the moment it was an America in which, as the old song had it, ‘...everything was coming up roses...’ and only promised to get better.

It didn’t.



Bruce Gibney’s *A Generation of Sociopaths: How the Baby Boomers Betrayed America* fleshes out Wolfe’s protean insight explaining in much finer granularity than Brooks exactly how the Boomers broke America. Perhaps more importantly, Gibney illustrates its consequences for successor generations leading to the Millennials “Ok, Boomer. . .” calling the debt due.

The nature of the debt, how it accumulated, and how it might be rectified are, paradoxically, some of the book’s strongest yet least readable sections. With copious, if not smothering, data, Gibney, as

Jane Smiley said in a review in *The Guardian*, drives home his essential point “that by refusing to make the most basic (and fairly minimal) sacrifices to manage infrastructure, address climate change, and provide decent education and healthcare, the boomers have bequeathed their children a mess of daunting proportions.” [3]

Gibney details that mess in exquisite detail sorting out how financial manipulation replaced knowing how to get things done at the core of America’s economic engine; how several decades of underfunding education has created not only a “school-to-prison” pipeline in America’s inner cities, but also an eroding educational system in its suburban and exurban gardens; how eroding family life amidst a culture of divorce fractured the American family; and how the self-annihilating impact of a consumerist society in search of never-ending pleasure has, in Neil Postman’s memorable phrase, led Americans to “amusing themselves to death.” [4]

In short, the core ‘60s values that have survived are variations of the “*if it feels good, do it*” ethos characteristic of the cliched images of hippies (an odd, now old-fashioned sounding word), smoking dope, ‘*getting down*’ (in all senses of the phrase), and reveling in whatever. There is, however, an intriguing variation, for those BoBos now sipping wine (and maybe smoking the odd joint), ‘*getting down,*’ and reveling are **not** the same Boomers who 50 some years ago wanted to change the world and failed.

Those boomers – the world-changers – are still with us; they’re still trying to save the world whether as teachers, social workers, ministers, and caregivers. They lead things like art museums and symphonies, voting leagues, and soup kitchens – they might even

be your child (grandchild's) youth soccer coach. And that it's soccer and not football or baseball might be more than a coincidence, but that would be another essay. These boomers, however, have been co-opted by their generational siblings.

Let's call it "the revenge of the nerds."

How did that happen?

At the outset, it's important to note that "Baby Boomers," like any generation, are not homogeneous. Boomers come in a variety of flavors, beginning with who exactly qualifies as a "Baby Boomer." The conventional definition is those born between 1946 and 1964. That group sub-divides between the "Viet Nam Era" boomers born between 1946 and 1955 (some say 1953) because they were draft-age eligible at the height of the Viet Nam War. Those born between 1956 and 1964 were too young for the war and the draft, making their experience qualitatively different than their older siblings. That lack of angst, however, might partially explain the right-leaning tilt of the younger cohort. Gibney back dates the oldest boomers to 1940, but that is a weakness in his argument allowing him to claim boomer status for some latter-day war-hawks, like Dick Cheney (born in 1941), and scorched-earth politicians, like Newt Gingrich (born 1943).

Boomer dates, however, are a quibble.

More important is that, even amongst those born between 1946 and 1964, there is more heterogeneity than generally recognized. Of that immense cohort – roughly 75 million people – most estimates of the percentage that were "countercultural" in the "sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll" sense or were political activists protesting Viet Nam, protesting for civil rights, or just protesting for looser campus inter-visitation rules is around 15 percent and sometimes as low as 5 percent or even a scant 1 percent. These are all guesses. The point is that the hardcore counter-culturalists were few, but they had legions of imitators and "free-riders."

Who?

The real counterculture, Gibney doesn't overtly argue but clearly demonstrates, turned out to be the "straight kids" (by which neither he nor I mean sexually, but they probably were) who knew a good time when they saw it, who wanted in on the party, and who then welded "*do your own thing*" and "*if it feels good, do it*" to right-wing political dogma, some half-digested Ayn Randian libertarianism, Goldwater/Reagan hyper-individualism, and anti-government sentiment (which they shared with their left-leaning fellow boomers) and, as Kurt Vonnegut would have said, "Hey, Presto" you have the Republican ascendancy. To be fair, Democrats, once they caught on, although they had reservations about tax cuts – some lingering but easily sidestepped concern

about how do you pay for all of this – quickly joined the “spend and borrow” brigades. Which is to say, Bill & Hillary, W. & Newt are the obverse and reverse of the same coin!

It's more complicated than that, but the above scenario combined with a revived neoliberalism has dominated the politics, economics, and cultural values of the past 40 years. I am admittedly oversimplifying, but neoliberalism is a difficult term that deals primarily with economics and free markets. It also has policy implications for bridging politics, social studies, and economics, seeking to transfer control of economic factors to the private sector from the public sector. Although he does not do a particularly good job defining neoliberalism, Gibney, who I would describe as a recovering libertarian, does an excellent one tracing America's rightward tilt through the administrations of Reagan, Bush I, Bill Clinton (not a liberal but a center-rightist), Bush II, and Donald Trump. Barack Obama was a partial hold-out for an older liberalism, but, on balance, he could not stem the neoliberal tide.

Gibney does an excellent job tracing the counterculture infused, rightward arc of America's three boomer presidents: Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Donald Trump. All born in 1946; all graduated from college in 1968. None served in Viet Nam; in fact, none served in the military, having perfected their generation's art-of-dodging – draft dodging, that is. To be fair, W. was in the Air National Guard, whose meetings he allegedly had difficulty making. But as anyone who lived through the era knows, serving in the Air National Guard was a privileged form of “dodging.”

Clinton, who famously sought a middle-way between conservatism and liberalism, ended up muddled and mired in scandal. Bush II promised compassionate conservatism adding prescription medicine benefits to Medicare, but his compassion if not his conservatism ran aground in Iraq. Trump is not really a conservative but more an opportunistic populist opposing immigration and ingratiating himself to his evangelical base, who themselves are a curious offshoot of '60s spiritual yearnings.

So, centrist Clinton to rightist Bush to opportunist Trump.

Regardless of how you dice it, not exactly Lincoln, Washington, and Roosevelt, either one!

Gibney's great insight, then, is that the convergence of the '60s “*do your own thing*” and “*if it feels good, do it*” ethos with a resurgent neoliberalism, anti-government political philosophy, and exaltation of the individual at the expense of the common good led to a half-century of neglected infrastructure, military adventurism, eroded social mores, and an exploding national debt.

In short, metaphorically speaking, the Students for a Democratic Society's "Port Huron Statement" pivoted right, and here we are.

Space does not permit detailing Gibney's analysis of boomer voting preferences, but as the largest demographic cohort those preferences drove everything, from Nixon's establishing a draft lottery to the 26th Amendment granting the vote to 18 year-olds to Reagan's "Morning in America" election in 1980 to all stops in between to Boomer Trump's defeat of former "Goldwater-Girl" Boomer Hillary Clinton in 2016.

Ironically, the book's least satisfying part is its sociopathic metaphor, not for lack of aptness, but because Gibney insists on beating it to death by constant repetition. Nonetheless, there is enough truth in the metaphor's central conceit to make even a marginally attentive boomer squeamish.

Using the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th Edition, (DSM-V), Gibney connects every Boomer value and resultant activity to sociopathic behavior. As, for example:

- "failure to conform to social norms" (the sexual revolution);
- "impulsivity/failure to plan ahead" (the need for instant gratification requiring relentless debt fueled private and public spending);
- "irresponsibility, including failure to honor financial obligations" (public debt transference to future generations and private bankruptcy as an accepted business strategy);
- "lack of remorse" (refusal to give up unsustainable pension benefits, damn the cost to other social needs);
- "conduct disorder: deceitfulness, hostility, risk-taking, impulsivity and irresponsibility" (where to begin? dallying with interns in the Oval Office, lying as a matter of strategy, politics as 'beggar-thy-neighbor et. al.). [5]

Gibney is weakest when trying to explain how the Boomers became "*Boomers.*" The Greatest Generation's permissive parenting, the impact of TV, unprecedented levels of prosperity creating an illusion of safety, rock 'n' roll music, transistor radios, and loosening social and sexual mores have all been explored. The topic needs further refinement. Gibney deserves credit for going back to its roots in 18th century Romanticism. Still, there is work to do here. A good place to start might be Marshall McLuhan and Neil Postman, for, while the Boomers might not be the first *mediated* generation, they were the first when the *mediation* occurred at the speed of *now*, and therein lies a clue.

Generation of Sociopaths? Maybe, but Gibney's great value is in providing insight into how the New Left generation morphed into the most conservative generation in

American history. George Will would argue that they're not conservatives in the true, *Burkean*, sense and he would be right, the pun intentional.

Still, hearkening back to our opening question, the counterculture won but not in any way someone *'getting down'* in 1968 could have predicted. *OMG* – if that mythical someone had said that Richard Nixon would be the last liberal President, at the least they might have been laughed at, at the worst they'd might have been _____.

They, however, would have been right.

Bruce Cannon Gibney lays out how we got from “I want to teach the world to sing” to ‘I got mine, I don’t care if the rest can sing;’ from a world enthralled with science racing to the moon to a world of anti-vaxxers, science deniers, and suggestions that drinking Lysol might cure COVID-19.

To quote Jerry Garcia, Gibney provides the map to “What a long strange trip it’s been.”

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Born in 1976, a Gen-Xer, Bruce Cannon Gibney is a venture capitalist, lawyer, and author. His most recent book is a screed about the legal profession *The Nonsense Factory: The Making and Breaking of the American Legal System*. Information about Gibney can be found [here](#).

Born in 1946, **Dr. Andrew Roth** is a Boomer. He is certifiably not a sociopath but is a Scholar-in-Residence at the Jefferson Educational Society, where he's been on the team for the past couple of years after a decades-long career in academia both in the classroom and leading administrations. His lectures have included looks at non-boomer presidents (Washington and Lincoln), leadership (what we can learn from the Jesuits, in particular), the American narrative (which will be launched as a podcast soon), and 1968 (the year he, too, graduated college). You can find his past writings by clicking [here](#).

In a future Book Notes, I am planning on revisiting some “high school classics” following the theme of “Reflections on the Experience of High School Classics After a Lifetime of Experience”. Please share with me which “high school classics” you were required to read and what, if any, recollections and opinions you have about them. Please email me your suggestions at roth@jeserie.org. Thank you!

1. Twombly, Matthew. "A Timeline of 1968: The Year That Shattered America", **Smithsonian Magazine** (Jan/Feb, 2018) available at <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/1968-year-shattered-america-180967684/> accessed April 28, 2020.
2. Cf. Brooks, David. **BoBos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There**. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).
3. Smiley, Jane. "A Generation of Sociopaths review – how Trump and other Baby Boomers ruined the world", in **The Guardian** (May 17, 2017) available at <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/may/17/generation-sociopaths-review-trump-baby-boomers-ruined-world> accessed April 28, 2020.
4. Cf. Postman, Neil. **Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business**. (New York: Viking Press, 1985).
5. Gibney, Bruce Cannon. **A Generation of Sociopaths: How the Baby Boomers Betrayed America**. (New York: Hachette Books, 2017), pp. 357-360.

Image from <https://www.amazon.com/Generation-Sociopaths-Boomers-Betrayed-America/dp/0316395781>

Next week in ***Book Notes*** – explorations in contemporary American poetry.

