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EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

## *Book Notes #107*

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### **1968/2022: The Seeds of Our Discontents** *(Part Six)*

*The Counterculture*





*“Perhaps the least understood dimension of the sixties’ tumult, the counterculture was long ago reduced by politicians, the media, and Hollywood to a cartoon image of hippies obviously awash in free love, psychedelic drugs and good rock and roll ...(U)nderneath the facile image of the counterculture lies not a movement, but a galaxy of ideas, impulses and inclinations that comprised one of the wildest adventures in American cultural history.”[1]*

– Chris Magoc

***A Progressive History of American  
Democracy Since 1945***

*“The Sixties are most generously described as a time when people took part – when they stepped out of themselves and acted in public, as people who didn’t know what would happen next, but who were sure that acts of true risk and fear and would do something different from what they had been raised to take for granted.” [2]*

– Greil Marcus

Rock ’n Roll historian

*“The all too powerful shadow of the adolescent ethos of the 1960s, a decade whose excesses led to a general denigration of adulthood, an unthinking disbelief in the existence of competent power, and the inability to distinguish between the chaos of immaturity and responsible freedom.” [3]*

– Jordan Peterson

***12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos***

*“In the 1960s, Americans were plunged back into “anguished scrutiny” of the meaning of their most fundamental beliefs and institutions in a renewed test of history. They reacted with varying degrees of wisdom and folly, optimism and despair, selflessness and pettiness. ...” [4]*

– Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin  
*America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s*

Once, after one of my talks on America in 1968, a woman in the audience asked, “Whatever happened to the counterculture?” Admittedly not giving the question the attention it merited, I abruptly answered, “They lost.”

I owe her an apology, because, as I almost immediately recognized, I was wrong.

The counterculture won.

On both the right and the left, in various shades and shadings, in flavorings of differing intensities, vestiges of the counterculture stamp 21st century American society.

More accurately, evidences of it ranging from the banal: American men no longer wear hats (by which I do not mean baseball caps, but snap-brim fedoras that were once ubiquitous) and, if one wants to be generous about it, Americans’ 21st century sartorial casualness (if one wants to be snarky, the slobbification of American society) to the profound: the approaching legalization of marijuana and recreational drug use, the increased rate of interracial marriage, the decline of mainstream Christian denominations and the rise of evangelicalism (the 1970s Jesus Freaks go mainstream, which began in 1967 in, where else, California), and, far less positive, the libertarian hyper-individualism – greed is good – that dominates 21st century American culture. Not to mention shifting notions of gender, interpersonal relationships, co-splaying politics, music, music, music and an America so mediated it might no longer need medication.

As the four quotations above suggest, what can one say in a brief **Book Note** about the “making of a counterculture,” “the greening of America” (both of which phrases were titles of early-1970s books attempting to give the experience a philosophical underpinning) and the 1960s as cultural phenomenon?

Without descending into gibberish, the short answer is nothing much.

So, in today’s Part Six of “The Seeds of Our Discontents,” I’ll simply (and briefly) define what is meant by the counterculture, how it impacts American society down to today and its implications for the American Story and ***The American Tapestry Project***.

“***The ’60s***” as socio/political/cultural phenomenon, as distinct from the literal decade itself, refers to that period roughly between autumn 1964’s Free Speech Movement at the University of California (Berkeley) and the last helicopter leaving Saigon in 1975. We’ve examined aspects of it before beginning with the

very first **Book Notes** about Joan Didion's *The White Album*, still the best book ever written about the era's psychodrama, another on Bruce Cannon Gibney's *A Generation of Sociopaths: How the Baby Boomers Betrayed America*, in which a Gen-Xer lashes back at his parents' generation, and glancingly in a number of other **Notes**, all of which can be found [here](#).

As Chris Magoc writes, the counterculture is the least understood aspect of that phenomenon known as "*The 60s*." In the spirit of Marcus, it has celebrants who today, their ponytails graying, their gait now halting, still want to teach the world to sing; it has detractors on the political right, who, like Jordan Peterson, see in its excesses the roots of our current discontents. For, as we explore the seeds of those discontents, we discover that they reach back to that "anguished scrutiny" of core values Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin said defined "*The 60s*." A scrutiny that continues into the present as *The American Tapestry Project's* core plotline recounts the battle between the values of its inclusionary and exclusionary stories in their drive to be *the* American Story.

The counterculture, driven by the children of prosperity, for as the Students for a Democratic Society's (SDS) original draft of their 1962 Port Huron Statement said, "We are people of this generation, in our late teens and early- or mid-twenties, bred in affluence, housed now in universities, looking uncomfortably to the world we inherit" [5] grew out of the anti-Vietnam War protests, which themselves were inspired by Black student sit-ins and protests in the South. By the time of its apotheosis at January 1967's Human Be-In in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park, it had morphed into a general protest against materialism: the sense that life had to mean something more than the old 9 to 5 drill, a house in the suburbs and in one of his *Sixty Stories*, the precise reference to which I can't find, Donald Barthelme's wisecrack that life ends for the married man at 7 p.m., which from the vantage point of 2022 meant that in his male myopia Barthelme missed the fact that for his housebound wife it never began at all.

It's now a cliché to observe, but the counterculture's anthem, well, it actually had several, but the overarching anthem was Bob Dylan's "The Times They Are A-Changin'." If the times were indeed changing, what changed? Setting aside for a moment the politics of the anti-Vietnam War movement, the civil rights movement and the nascent women's rights movement, the more amorphous counterculture, in many ways, was a protest against the '50s "organization man" – a protest that this generation would not subsume its individuality within a gray corporate half-life.

Oh, irony of ironies, that by the greed is good 1980s, they became the most corporate of corporatists!

Still, 20 years earlier, following Ralph Waldo Emerson's lead, they sought the "blessed magic" within each person; like Henry David Thoreau, they sought solace in nature; like Walt Whitman, they wanted "to celebrate myself, and sing myself" – in their own slang, they wanted "to do their own thing": escaping into a soft narcotic haze – Jimi Hendrix's "purple haze" – seeking enlightenment in a hash pipe, seeking fulfillment in back-to-the-earth communal living, seeking solace in experimental relationships, seeking grace in Eastern religions and seeking satisfaction in sexual exploration, of which Mick Jagger famously said he couldn't get "No."

By the late-1960s and Woodstock, it was an overwhelmingly Baby Boomer phenomenon. But Boomers, although they grabbed it and ran with it, the protests of their children and grandchildren notwithstanding, did not invent the counterculture. In another irony, it was the Boomer's parents – The Greatest Generation – who birthed the counterculture. Or, at least, its members who abhorred "Main Street," who would not be "Babbit," who hit the road with Jack Kerouac and Neal Cassady, who bopped to Thelonious Monk, who dripped paint with Jackson Pollock, who "howled" with Allen Ginsberg and who, dropping acid, went "Further" with Ken Kesey and his Merry Pranksters, it was these elders who fashioned what became "the counterculture." [6]

If one wants to explore the cultural artifacts of the era, there are numerous books, videos – You Tube is awash with them – websites, etc. that can satisfy that nostalgic need. I'm more interested in that era's impact on contemporary 21st century American culture and *The American Tapestry Project*, in particular how the values of that era **are** "the seeds of our discontents." Today echoes of that "anguished scrutiny" of fundamental values and beliefs that Isserman and Kazin referenced define our 21st century culture wars. The culture wars began in the 1960s, for what is a 'counterculture' but the refutation of another culture? Although we're not at Ben & Jerry's, another double-edged artifact of that era, echoes from that time come in five essential flavors with another one or two ironic notes subsuming the others.

The first flavor, a shrinking minority, finds aging counter-culturalists, their pony tails gray, their granny gowns now tattered (probably not – probably they found them laundered and well-ironed at a slightly offbeat but trendy consignment shop) still vibing to the beat, not yet "one toke over the line" and, perhaps less than they were a decade ago when President Barack Obama won his second term, smugly satisfied at their apparent cultural victory.

The second flavor echoes from the first group's children and, incredibly enough, grandchildren on the progressive left who, not content with their elders' apparent cultural victory, push for even more progressive stances on gender, sexuality,

women's role, diversity, equity and inclusion, the economy, alternative faith traditions (or none at all) and grow frustrated at the slow pace of progress.

The third flavor echoes from that vast middle ground where folk see the shifting cultural values as being a version of "it is what it is," which easily slides into the fourth and fifth. The fourth flavor, for which I have no catchy name, simply sees things having moved a bit too fast, looks for anchors in older verities and wants everything to just slow down while everyone gets their bearings.

But the fifth flavor, a minority like the first, but an energized, focused minority abhors the changes the aging counter-culturalists wrought. "Yesterday's Children," they work feverishly to seize the political levers to undo the changes unleashed 60 years ago, to turn back the clock to that time before "The 60s" when "father knew best," mom was at home, minorities of any hue and gays were neither seen nor heard and the church pews were full.

Rolling back the counterculture's apparent victory is the temper of our times, but what is it that "Yesterday's Children" want undone? What is it they want rolled back?

It's complicated.

As each of the four quotes with which this **Note** began suggest, it's all about values. Actually, it's really about only one value – liberty that frees one to do, well, do one's "own thing." As The Rascals sang in 1968, "People Got to Be Free":

*from People Got To Be Free*

All the world over, so easy to see  
People everywhere just wanna be free  
Listen, please listen, that's the way it should be  
There's peace in the valley, people got to be free ... [8]

Free from what? Free to do what?

Beneath all the noise and glitter, beneath all the superficially crazy behavior, the media glommed onto reducing the counterculture to a cartoon of lava lamps, bedraggled hippies, sexual libertines and assorted crazies, lived a genuine quest for liberty and freedom. With an anti-elitist ("The Man"), anti-technocracy ("The Machine"), anti-materialism ("No gray flannel suit for me") common denominator, countercultural values emerged in four or five overlapping – issues isn't quite the right word – in four or five overlapping zones of cultural contention.

We've touched on several already in previous **Notes**, but they are politics, minority rights, women's rights (which, to a certain extent unfairly, gets inextricably intertwined with the sexual revolution), recreational drug use, and, what I call, seeking the sacred. The latter touches all of the points of contention, because in its secular form it means seeking meaning for one's life beyond the merely material and, ultimately, encroaches upon the metaphysical as it asks, "What does it mean to Be?"

So, then, the counterculture was all about personal freedom. It was all about the "personal" – having the liberty to choose how to live one's life. But, as feminist Carol Hanisch pointed out in an essay she wrote in 1969 but published in 1970 titled "The Personal is Political," everything is both personal and political, for in any society politics is the arena in which the boundaries of personal liberty are drawn. [8]

In the realm of practical politics, counterculturalists sought maximum involvement for the individual. They called it participatory democracy – giving the people a voice. Beginning with the anti-Vietnam War movement, it boiled over at the infamous 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago (where Yippies famously or infamously attempted to nominate Pigasus the Pig for President). One result of that "participation" was the creation of the direct primary system, which has so damaged our current politics. In the great civil rights moments of the era, counterculturalists put their lives on the line, as in the Mississippi Freedom Summer of 1964 voting rights drive. Disaffected women from both the anti-war and civil rights movements, offended at their male colleagues' condescension, generated the energy fueling Second Wave feminism.

But when one says "counterculture," most people of any age immediately think of some collage of recreational drug usage, communal living, and alternative religions all sauced with a heady sexual adventurism. If they do, they'd be both right and wrong; wrong because, as I hope I've sketched, it was more than that and right because, well, because for more than a few it was just such a collage. Although for many they became a dead-end from which there was no escape, originally recreational drug use (recreational in this context perhaps an unfair reductionism) sought a path to enlightenment, sought a path to the real shimmering just beyond the veil of mundane reality. Timothy Leary's and Richard Alpert's iconic admonition to "Turn on, tune in, drop out" was an invitation to leave the land of gray flannel suits behind (in their case, Harvard faculty members, literally) and discover a better, a truer world.

Indirectly, at their Millbrook "commune," they spawned a communal movement, although Helen and Scott Nearing and others need to be mentioned, of back to the earth shared living. Interestingly, it was scarcely a revolutionary American suggestion, for communes are an old American tradition – think the Oneida

Community, The Roycrofters of East Aurora, New York, the Shakers and Robert Owen's New Harmony. While other communards sought alternative styles of living rooted in the earth, Leary and Alpert sought the "ness" in human-ness, they sought the "is" in "IS." Leary ultimately copped out, but I've always respected Alpert, who took it all the way becoming Baba Ram Dass seeking to found a new religion fusing eastern and western beliefs in his *Be Here Now*.

Which is one of the main legacies of the counterculture – America's rich religious diversity. A diversity fueled, obviously, by the great post-1965 immigration of Middle Eastern, Far East and South Asian peoples and their faith traditions, but also by countercultural seekers reading Aldous Huxley's *The Doors of Perception*, which among other things gave a great rock group its name, and Hermann Hesse's *Steppenwolf*, the saga of the outsider, and *Siddhartha*, a novelized biography of the Buddha. But among those seeking the sacred in the late-1960s, the most important group for understanding 2022's polarized culture wars might have been one that sprouted in San Francisco in the Summer of Love – 1967.

When counterculturalists Elizabeth and Ted Wise, veterans of the 1960s' beat commune movement, opened their coffeehouse in Haight Ashbury called The Living Room and a commune in Marin County called the House of Acts, where they fed hippies needing sustenance, they set in motion the Jesus People Movement, sometimes called Jesus Freaks. All they asked in return for a meal or a cup of coffee was that you listen to a short Gospel or Bible reading. Not shedding their counterculture dress, vocabulary, music, or demeanor, they breathed new life into the evangelical movement, redefined how services were conducted – think gospel rock – and set in motion a process that resulted in today's megachurches. Of all the religious movements percolating in the late-1960s, theirs was the one that lasted. Its impact on 2022 American culture cannot be overstated.

While all of that was happening, another movement – not the right word – engulfed the entire culture. Of course, I speak of the sexual revolution sung of in innumerable rock songs, but empowered by Enovid-10's introduction in the early 1960s, the first, practical birth control pill, which created sexual liberty. Some called it license, as we will see, but it changed everything. It is arguably one of the greatest culture-shifting developments in human history, because for the first time in human history women could control their fertility with a high degree of certainty. Which, I mean this as no denigration of women, granted them the same liberty and freedom as men to sate their sexual appetites. More importantly, it freed women to pursue futures other than domesticity. Some, like Timothy Leary, William Reich, Norman O. Brown, and, oddly enough, Susan Sontag (who said sexual orgasm was as close to a mystical experience as a non-mystic could ever experience) sought to make sex a sacrament. Others, the overwhelming majority,



just wanted to “get it on.” But *Enovid-10*, *Griswold v. Connecticut* in 1965, which made contraception legal for married couples, and *Eisenstadt v. Baird* in 1972, which made it legal for nonmarried couples, changed America.

Not everyone was happy.

Let’s bring this **Note** to a conclusion with several observations about how the counterculture’s success imprints 2022 America. First, the culture wars are largely the not so benign attempt by some inheritors of the Jesus Movement to rebrand and redefine America as a Christian nation, silencing or at least muffling those non-traditional (at least in the American sense) seekers of the sacred. Second, an offshoot, maybe a major piece of that reassertion of traditional Christian identity seeks two ends: 1) to put the sexually liberated freed by *Enovid-10* back in their box, which is why everyone should take Clarence Thomas in his concurrence to the *Dobbs* threatening *Griswold v. Connecticut* and other decisions at his word and 2) to reassert the old notion of woman’s domain as domestic, tossing her out of the workforce and sending her back home. In addition to its moral and ethical absurdity, this is a fool’s errand. Too much time has passed, women have made too much progress and are now too critical to the success of too many industries and professions to be dismissed.

Third, and much more abstract, America in 2022 is awash in an anti-government, anti-elitist, anti-science, and anti-technology sentiment that distrusts “experts.” Oddly, that is what the ’60s leftists preached, but today those anti-sentiments come from the right.

The right distrusts the government for liberating people. The right distrusts elites for dominating the government, directly by occupying its offices and indirectly by supplying it, from their sinecures in universities and think tanks, with its operating philosophy. And the right distrusts science for, well, I’m not sure what for, but anti-vaxxers abound. The right distrusts technology for empowering the elites to do what they do with greater efficiency and reach, and, of course, distrusts “experts” because, well, because they do.

In short, America in 2022 finds itself swimming (sinking?) in a culture war in which the values of the 1960s counterculture somewhere along the way morphed into a bizarre Ayn Randian libertarianism of hyper-individualism that turned against the very values that created it.

How did that happen?

This, as someone once said, “bears thinking about.” How did the children of the children of the 1960s, who only wanted to be free to teach the world to sing, how

did they morph into apostles of selfishness wanting only to be free to tell you what you cannot do?

For an insightful discussion and to ask your own questions about all of this, tune in (but don't drop out) to the "Seeds of Our Discontents" Livestream featuring yours truly, Phil Payne of St. Bonaventure University, and Ben Speggen of the Jefferson Educational Society on Wednesday July 20 at 4 p.m.. We're going to try to make it interactive, so we invite your comments and questions. With your input, we'll try to make some sense of all of this.



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### End Notes

1. Magoc, Chris J. *A Progressive History of American Democracy Since 1945: American Dreams, Hard Realities*. (New York: Routledge, 2022), pp. 162-163.
2. Marcus, Greil, "The Sixties..." at **Brainy Quote** available [here](#) accessed July 10, 2022.
3. Peterson, Jordan. *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*. (Toronto: Random House Canada, 2018), p. 119.
4. Isserman, Maurice and Michael Kazin. *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s*. 6th Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), p. 5.
5. "Port Huron Draft Statement" at **Students for a Democratic Society (SDS)** available [here](#) accessed July 10, 2022.
6. For a further, no pun on Kesey's "Furthur" intended, discussion of this issue cf. Louis Menand's "The Misconception About the Baby Boomers and the Sixties" in **The New Yorker** (August 18, 2019) available [here](#) accessed July 10, 2022 or my **Book Note** on Bruce Cannon Gibney's *A Generation of Sociopaths: How the Baby Boomers Betrayed America* (New York: Hachette Books, 2017), which can be found [here](#) accessed July 10, 2022.
7. Bignati, Edward and Felix Cavaliere, "People Got to Be Free" at **LyricFind** available [here](#) accessed July 11, 2022.
8. Hanisch, Carol. "The Personal Is Political" at **CarolHanisch.org** available [here](#) accessed July 11, 2022.

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