

# The sixties- mainstream culture and counter-culture

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In this essay I am going to examine Arthur Marwick's argument that the sixties were characterised by counter-cultural movements across a number of areas. I will consider the extent to which counter-cultural movements can be identified, see what impact they do or do not have or have not on mainstream culture and see if there is any evidence to support Marwick's view. The areas I am going to use to analyse his argument are history of science and religion. In this essay the 1960s will include the periodisation of developments and movements of Britain, France, Italy and America between 1958 and 1973.

So how can counter-cultural movements be identified? To be able to identify a counter-culture we must first define what we mean by 'culture' and define what 'mainstream' culture is. Marwick describes 'culture' as a totality of attitudes, values and practices of a group. This could be a small and specific group like 'youth culture,' which could refer to important issues involving the young in a period like the sixties, or big like the 'Western Culture,' which describes the Western way of life through the twentieth century.

Mainstream culture is the attitudes, values and practices that are established in Western countries. The counter-culture of the sixties, as described by Marwick, is something that counter's or significantly modifies, what had been prior to 1958, the 'mainstream' (or dominant) features of Western culture. Marwick suggests that in the Sixties the mainstream culture included, almost other things; a rigid social hierarchy, subordination of women to men and children to parents, repressed attitudes to sex, respect for authority and complacency over technological advancement.

Therefore we can identify counter-culture in the sixties as something that is opposed to or trying to challenge some part of sixties mainstream culture in some way. I am going to look briefly at history of science and religion to see if any counter-cultural movements can be identified, to begin with looking at if there were any scientific counter-cultural movements. During the sixties there was a science counter-cultural movement that emerged, in opposition to the scientific community, with the claim that science was becoming more militarised.

This accusation was more widespread in America as prestigious institutions like MIT worked alongside the armed forces to develop new weapons on university campuses. There was prolific growth in the number of universities who were funded and given contracts for research by the military during the sixties in America. The opposition to this militarisation was some scientific teachers and students who believed that the universities had sold out. They were 'strong[ly] against the involvement of science within the military and ... bitterly critical of the scientific establishment, which includes universities'.

But it was not just the scientific community that were part of the counter-culture, other members of society were also expressing their concerns.

Scientific counter culturalists like Theodore Roszak had extreme views of science, his solution to combat the ideology of sciences, which he claimed was an instrument of domination, was to abolish science altogether.

However the counter cultural movement was not just driven by extremists, journalist Edward Shils, stated that 'Scientists... are indifferent to the well-being of man-kind, basically because they are subservient to the ruling powers of government, the military and private industry. 2 and the former

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president of America, Dwight Eisenhower, also supported the opposition with his concerns of the growth and influence of the 'scientific elite. '

Some of the opposition took form as protests that arose throughout American universities expressing opposition to America's involvement in the Vietnam War. This included the students of MIT who had worked with the military developing weapons for the war. In a statement signed by MIT graduate students for strike action they requested that 'technology should be redirected from destructive to constructive ends'<sup>3</sup>.

Another scientific counter-culture that emerged was created when young women discovered the pill. The counter-culture hostile to science through war-making, 'embraced science in its love making'<sup>4</sup>. Previously illegal, oral contraceptives liberated women by giving them the control of their own fertility. The management of their own body gave them a freedom that had not been previously experienced, and this was welcomed by ten million women by the end of the Sixties. The promotion of the pill was spread by sexual active young women at University.

Previously only available to married women, the Universities helped spread the pill to single women by supplying oral contraceptives to protect their female students. Sex in the sixties did become more free and experimentation of all types took place, this was quite a widespread occurrence with 40, 000 people attending 'love fests' where drug taking and sexual experimentation took place. One of the counter movements in science was opposed to the links with science and the military; it believed that science should be geared to liberating society not dominating it.

Changes that had an impact on mainstream culture were taking place in the relationships between science and society, society wanted science to become more responsible socially and politically with its power. Student protests did have a limited effect, although the protests did not sever the ties between the military and universities, it did help reduce military contracts and have military scientific funding investigated. The other scientific counter-culture I examined did help to make sexual liberation public and political, but the pill did not start a sexual revolution, it was just an accompaniment.

It may have been a scientific innovation at the time but this changed in the 1970s when criticisms regarding the safety aspects of the pill were raised. During the Sixties we have evidence that the attitudes to sex were already changing, more sexually explicit material, such as *Lady Chatterley's Lover* was published in 1960 in Britain. The pill might have helped to liberate attitudes towards sex, but we can't say that society wouldn't have changed its attitudes anyway if the pill hadn't been invented.

It could be theorised that in every decade there has been an argument about the moral responsibilities of science and technology. The Sixties were no different and this argument will continue into future decades whether the scientific counter-cultural movements of the sixties had happened or not. I have identified only two of the counter movement in science; there were others such as abortion and challenging women's roles in science which should also be examined to get a fuller picture of scientific counter-cultures during the Sixties.

So were there any religious counter-cultural movements? Susan Mumm suggests that in the 1960s the religious counter-culture was a reaction towards typical mainstream values of western materialism and political systems. Love, acceptance and personal transformation was the messages broadcast by the New Religious Movements (NRMs) which sprang up everywhere during the 1960s. Several thousand counter-cultural communes were formed at this time in North America alone, and over half of these were religiously motivated. (Bates and Miller, 1995, p. 371).

These movements were popularised by celebrities such as the Beatles and the Rolling Stones and the youth culture 'turned on, tuned in and dropped out' to these NRMs for many different reasons. All the NRMs offered its recruits an alternative lifestyle compared to the traditional mainstream lifestyle they had previously experienced, whether it be through oriental mysticism, psychedelic drugs or communitarian experiments. Mumm argues that the counter-cultural youth liked the fast results to spiritual knowledge that could be reached by using drugs such as LSD.

It could be argued that what really launched the counter-culture as it is commonly understood was its interest in the expansion of consciousness through chemical and psychological means<sup>5</sup> On the other hand Roszak argues that this sort of interest in drugs is not a counter-culture, 'One does not unearth the wisdom of the ages by shuffling about a few exotic catch phrases - nor does one learn anything about anybody's love or religion by donning a few talismans and dosing on LSD'<sup>6</sup>. Drug experimentation was only linked to some alternative religions and began to become more disagreeable as time went on for many drug users.

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Some former drug users turned to more disciplined religions to try and make sense of their overwhelming experiments with drugs. Many of the more disciplined and fundamentalist NRMs offered Jesus as a cure for addiction. 'Many of the converts have come to Christ from the fraudulent promises of drugs. '7 These groups originally aimed at drug addicts, street people and counter-cultural dropouts, held communal experiments, which demanded total commitment and discipline from its devotees.

Many of these groups preached to the young a world rejecting message against the mainstream values of society, but were not counter-cultural as they also rejected the parts of counter-cultural activities such as drug use, promiscuity and feminism. Nolan states one of the problems for those caught up in this sort of NRM, 'once Jesus has brought them down from drugs, what's going to bring them down from Jesus? '8 It was world rejecting religions such as the Children of God, who were out of the counter-culture and the mainstream culture that created public hostility towards NRMs.

They were labeled as 'cults' who posed a threat, especially to the young who they brainwashed asking that devotees relinquish all possessions and family ties. 'We go by no name, but we are Christians living the way the Bible teaches, clinging only to the Lord'9 During the early seventies there were several anti NRM groups formed as moral panic swept through society, but as Eileen Barker's statistics show, cults never posed any real threat as their ideologies were too extreme to be accepted by the mainstream.

These religious counter-cultures did have any impact on the on mainstream culture. There was a vast surge of interest in NRMs who were 'offering a

series of alternatives to the traditional life patterns and the tensions over life choices. '10 The drug culture was a counter-cultural didn't have a great impact on the mainstream, it was practiced by many and could be argued to have led counter-cultural members to religion but as Wolfe argues 'it was quite easy for an LSD experience to take the form of a religious vision, particularly if one was amongst people already so inclined. 11 He also suggests that there was nothing intrinsic to LSD and that people found what they were looking for in drugs either spiritually or religiously because they were already looking for it. Even though drug use was publicly advocated by people like Tim Leary and novelist Aldous Huxley, LSD was still made illegal in the mid 1960s, it was not accepted by the mainstream and still isn't accepted in today's society.

The sixties was a significant cultural phenomenon for many of the young people of the time, religion could provide a sense of belonging, an escape from drug abuse, family deprivation, or guidance for someone looking for the answers to the meaning of life. It could be argued that some of the impact from the religious counter-culture on the mainstream culture was the fact that some liberal mainstream churches did accept some of the aspects of counter-cultural religions as they saw it as hope for the future of belief.

The NRMs of the 1960s and the early 1970s can be seen as closely linked to the counter-culture, and it is also possible to argue that some later NRMs are in part, successor movements to the counter-culture. '12 Another argument for counter-cultural impact could be that belonging to these religions meant that children were no longer subordinate to their parents. On the other hand, world rejecting religions could break family ties, encouraged the

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subordination of women to men and repressed attitudes to sex that the counter-culture was trying to change.

Looking at Marwick's argument again, did some events, structures and attitudes become more distinctive and significant during the sixties? To really examine Marwick's statement that counter-cultural movements emerged across a number of different areas in the sixties we would need to analyse all the disciplines included in this module about the sixties. I do believe though that there is evidence that supports Marwick, that the sixties were 'a period of exceptional cultural and social change'<sup>13</sup> characterised by counter-cultural movements and that these movements can be identifiable as points of change.

As was suggested earlier, in the Sixties the mainstream culture included, amongst other things; a rigid social hierarchy, subordination of women to men and children to parents, repressed attitudes to sex, respect for authority and complacency over technological advancement. We have seen all these values challenged by the counter-cultural movements I selected in the history of science and religion.

Not all the counter-cultures were successful, such as the drugs culture, but some of the challenges made have had a significant impact, like the empowerment for women in the terms of contraception and abortion, which is now accepted by mainstream society. There was no single movement in the sixties that instigated cultural revolution but there were lots of different movements that created a cultural evolution, which was equally as

important. I do think that the biggest movement during the sixties that had an impact over all the disciplines was the youth culture.

Economic stability left over from the 1940s and 1950s created a breed of young people from all classes who were eager to change old ideas. Shils, Roszak and Krige supports this theory within the history of science, Krige sums it up by saying 'the counter-movement in science was spearheaded by the first post war generation of young men and women. '14 Changes to mainstream culture reached its peak in the sixties when behaviours and shifting ideas created counter-cultures. This was a time when an accumulation of circumstances made change possible.