

**How useful is the term “counter-culture” to describe developments in Western Society during the 1960s? Discuss with reference to any three of the five disciplines represented in Block 6.**

The sixties was a “period of exceptional cultural and social change (Arthur Marwick, (Block 6, Pg 23). A young decade, which saw the coming of age of the post war baby boomers generating an unusually large and due to a rise in economic standards - affluent youth culture who challenged the established values and ideals of “mainstream” society. “Counter-culture” is a useful term to describe a cultural group whose values and behavior run “counter” to those of mainstream society. The sixties was indeed a time when the “counter-culture” challenged the “mainstream views on issues including authority, racism, subordination of women and introduced a new found tolerance, acceptance and a greater freedom of expression.

Protests, movements, drugs, rock n roll, sexual liberation, freedom of expression and unconventional modes of dress were all characteristic of the sixties “counter culture” often seen by “mainstream society” as a rebellious and destructive force systematically destroying the moral fabric of society. However, although the “counter-culture” was opposed to many aspects of “mainstream” society they were not an organized threat against the political or economic foundation of society. Although convenient terms to use the “mainstream” culture and “counter-culture” existed together and many facets of “mainstream” society allowed the “counter-culture” a place to voice their opinions, such as Art, Music and Cinema. Movements considered “counter-cultural” were also supported by many who did not consider themselves part of the “counter-culture”, opposition to the Vietnam War, Nuclear War, and concerns for the Environment were concerns, which existed throughout society.

This new freedom of expression and concern for Human Rights began in the late fifties but saw an acceleration of change during the sixties and continued into the early seventies. This period categorized as “the long sixties by Eric Hobsbawn, in his work “Age of Extremes” (Block 6 pg 31) was a time when developments attributed to the “counter-culture” reached a climatic stage, movements for Civil and Women’s Rights and Protests against the Vietnam War gained prominence. Thousands moved by the brutal injustice of the Vietnam War protested in the form of rallies, gatherings and concerts, the fight against the war intensified due to the introduction of the compulsory military draft and as the war dragged on what started out as protests attributed to the “counter-culture” now encompassed most of American society, public opinion polls showed that by 1967 the majority of Americans now opposed the war

After the Second World War the West benefited from an economic recovery and for the first time the young benefited from a more affluent society. However, poverty and inequality continued for many, especially Black Americans who had

not benefited from the Civil Rights and Social Change they'd been promised. The Civil Rights movements emerged and proved many victories during the sixties. After a decade of protests and marches beginning peacefully with the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955-56 to the student-led sit-ins of the 60s and the march on Washington in 1963, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Act of 1965 guaranteeing basic Civil Rights for all Americans regardless of race. The movement for Civil Rights grew increasingly violent in the late sixties resulting in the death of several prominent civil rights activists, including the leaders, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King.

Inspired by the Civil Rights movement saw the emergence of women's rights movement who questioned the unequal treatment of women and fought for equal educational and employment opportunities. They also challenged the perceptions of female sexual behaviour and encouraged "sexual liberation". The introduction of The Contraceptive Pill and the Abortion Act of 1967 allowed women greater sexual freedom and liberation as well as opening the door to more liberated discussion. This more tolerant environment opened the doors for Gay liberation and in 1967, Britain legalized homosexual acts between consenting adults. The sixties also brought about the relaxation of the censorship laws with the introduction of the New "permissive" Obscene "Publication Act of 1959. And in 1960 *"Lady Chatterley's Lover"* previously deemed obscene and banned since the twenties won its case in court and is ruled not obscene. Although these changes affected "mainstream" society, this liberation further gave a voice and outlet for the "counter culture".

Music was an important backdrop to the sixties; it was both influential and influenced by society. The dug culture, religion, Civil Rights Movement, Vietnam War all the major issues of the day were either written about or adopted by the "counter-culture" movement. With its strong ties to youth culture much of the music of the sixties had strong elements of rebellion and anti establishment potential but there was no real rebellion against society, more an outlet for teenage expression. "Mainstream" music continued to thrive and more traditional styles of music co-existed along side new sounds, musicians such as Bob Dylan helped bring about a folk music revival and the Civil Rights movement adopted Dylan's, radical lyrics of *"Blowin in the Wind"*, while Dylan's *"The times they are a-Changing"* gives us a sense of the mood of the decade.

Many changes in popular music in the mid sixties were caused in part by the drug scene, Acid Rock and the more mellow psychedelic rock gained prominence, while the musical phenomenon of Woodstock Festival gathered together 400,000 young people in a spirit of love, peace, and LSD. 1967 saw "The Summer of Love" when mass celebrations in San Francisco caused the "counter-culture scene to gain momentum, drug experimentation and unconventional lifestyles continued to contributed to the vibrant music scene. Jim Haynes, a leading figure in 'counter-cultural' activities explained that:

*"Young people suddenly had an important voice; they were being listened to, followed even. 'What we were doing in the colourful clothes and long hair in the sixties was telling everybody that we were tolerant, we were all having fun'"*

An opinion echoed by Maureen Nolan and Roma Singleton in "Mini-Renaissance" (Resource Book 4, Page 25), who agreed that "Young people suddenly had an important voice, they were being listened to, followed even"

Although often depicted as a rebellious reaction against mainstream values, by the late sixties, the "counter-culture" were advocating equality, experimentation and tolerance of new and alternative lifestyles. This new open way of thinking as well as a search for self-identity and self-fulfilment encouraged the acceptance of New Religion Movements (NRMs) and as the Sixties progressed many young people turned away from "mainstream" religions to more mystic eastern religions such as Transcendental Meditation and the Spiritual Regeneration movement (SRM). Theodore Roszak stated in *The Making of A Counter Culture*, that the 'cultural constellation' was changing in favour of 'the psychology of alienation, oriental mysticism, psychedelic drugs and communitarian'. (Resource Book 4, page 41)

The different religious groups explored in the sixties were categorised as 'world rejecting' 'world affirming' or 'world accommodating' by the Wallis's typology (Block 7, page 127). These categories are based on how each particular religion saw the world and how it responds to society. The eastern religions such as the Spiritual Regeneration Movement (SRM) were perceived as world affirming as they saw the world not as evil or corrupt but unawakened. The various Jesus People Movements (JP's) often represented the "world" rejecting religions as they favoured community alienation and abandonment of communal lifestyles

The popularity of NRMs was increased by the association of music groups such as The Beatles, who became devotees of the Spiritual Regeneration Movement (SRM), later known as Transcendental Meditation. The NRMs success was also attributed to the fact that idealistic and naïve youngsters were easy recruitment targets for the high commitment groups. In 'Jesus Now: Hogwash and Holy Water', James Nolan described how "...drug blown, pop-freaked, ego-defenceless kids (...), can easily become the victims of a desperate evangelism..." going on to compare these groups to "...predatory birds who swoop down on weak life in distress (Resource Book 4 pg 86-88)

The Jesus Movement was also an interesting phenomenon, which grew out of the "counter-culture", and although originating from the freedoms attributed to the "counter-culture" some people became disenchanted with the drugs and unconventional lifestyle and turned to the The Jesus movement as a reaction against the "counter-culture" from which it originated! Language attributed to the "counter-culture" was adapted, "Just Drop Jesus" or "high on Jesus" replaced

“dropping acid” and youths were often recruited at “counter-culture” rock concerts, coffee houses etc

Similar high commitment groups, such as the Children of God (COG), appealed to the “counter-culture” because their anti-establishment attitude, protesting against an anti-God society led by parents and the church was appealing to the young. In ‘Who are the Rebels?’ David Berg wrote *“The kids are rebellious against society because the society is anti-God (...), they’re trying to return to the peace-loving religions of old.* (Resource book 4 page 8)

The religious scene and drug scene was an important part of the “counter-cultural” lifestyle and pioneers such as Timothy Leary and Aldus Huxley also considered drugs and religion to be also closely interlinked. Leary saw the LSD trip as a religious pilgrimage and Huxley arguing that drugs lead to spiritual enlightenment. However, most of the people who engaged psychedelic drugs or with the Eastern spirituality did so while retaining the core values and social norms of their often middle-class upbringings, however some who became involved with the drug and “counter-culture” turned to these new religions in order to gain some control over their lives. Some saw the New Religious Movements as ‘adaptive and integrative, rehabilitating dropped and retraining them to enter back into society.

To sum up there was no single counter culture but several movements which posed challenges to “mainstream society” I agree to a degree with Ray Davis of the pop group the Kinks who said *“that the so-called “Freedom of the Sixties was a myth, that the so-called “counter-culture” never really infiltrated society and that the establishment continued to rule”* (Block 6, pg 175) I agree that the establishment did continue to rule and that the sixties did not witness a political or economic revolution but it had great impact on personal and social life .

In his autobiography Jim Haynes’, ‘Thanks for Coming!’ shows the deflation felt by many at the end of the sixties. He says ‘the end of the sixties came as an incredible collapse [...][we weren’t going to change the world. We could only maybe change ourselves a bit. And I think that this resulted in a depression.’ (Resource Book 4, page 24)

I think this shows that many involved in the “counter-culture movements felt they were trying to change the world and its thanks to their “disanchantment with mainstream culture that has allowed future generations new freedoms in morality; tolerance, equality and acceptance.

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