

THOMAS MOLNAR

The Counter-Culture: An Historical Perspective

I do not know if I compliment or offend the adherents of the various sub-cultures of today: hippy-culture, New Left, counter-culture and others, when I say that they are reviving a very ancient phenomenon known to all civilizations. The terms of self-identification used by the members of these modern sects are extremely significant: in America they are the "drop-outs," not only from school but generally, from their station in life, and principally from its organized and structured forms, the family, occupation, even leisure and culture. True, many call themselves members of the "New Left"; yet, how different they are from the carbonari, the *babouvistes*, and the anarchists of the last century, and even more from the leftist political parties and labor unions of this one. Nor do they constitute a political phenomenon, but rather a cultural one (in fact, they scorn "politics"), with fields of action in the world of art, fashion, literature, sex, universities and the mass media. And they certainly do not recruit members among workers, but among marginal people: youth, racial minorities, disgruntled churchmen, unemployed artists, sex deviates, various

un-anchored men and women, and the ubiquitous lumpen-intelligentsia.

The above description is merely a general one, a way to identify our object. I began by pointing out that the counter-culture, etc. are an ancient phenomenon; it is significant, then, that this fact would be vehemently denied by the people we are speaking about, who, on the contrary, regard themselves as not only totally new but also revolutionary in the sharpest sense of the term. They reject the "old" world, its bourgeois values, its industrial-consumer society, its labor politics, even the Marxist parties. Their philosophers, Sartre, Marcuse, Reich and Franz Fanon violently criticize everything in the "old" world and impatiently announce the coming of the "new"; their heroes—Chè Guevara, R. Debray, Dr. Habbach, the maquisards of South America, the ex-maquisards of Russia (Trotsky) and of China (Mao, as leader of the Long March)—are depicted in the cult as drop-outs themselves, as un-organized and un-attached terrorists who do not follow a doctrine, a scholarly system, but are pure activists like the Tupamaros, the Chinese Red Guards, the Al Fatah, the Ceylonese rebels—or simply the university groups in the West. The image so obtained may or may not be true; what counts is that it is believed, that it is the result of a myth.

Thus what we are here examining is by no means a movement of social criticism, a reform movement. It is a messianic current expecting to renew the world after destroying, and more: abolishing it in its so-far accepted forms and meaning, not only socially and politically, but also philosophically. As John Passmore writes in *Encounter* (November, 1970), these "new mystics" want Paradise Now! Not a return

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to Eden, I would add, but access to one invented spontaneously: *l'imagination au pouvoir!* Yet it is here, when the cry for absolute newness is voiced, that, unknown to them, they join history and re-enact its earliest episodes.

Consider indeed the following examples. The Gnostics of the first Christian centuries regarded the world as *evil*, their own sects as belonging to a distant *good* God with whom they shared one substance. They wanted to abolish the created evil world, time itself, and the rules of rationality which, in their eyes, served the evil Master. They despised matter, including their own bodies, and aspired to a state where their spiritual nature (*pneuma*) would merge with God's. Some of these sects lived an ascetic existence, showing their contempt for material life, but others chose extreme license and sexual freedom, saying that they, the *elect*, were pure, and that not even sexual excesses could soil the divine light in them.

The gnostic attitude runs through the entire Middle Ages. The Brethren of the Free Spirit, in the 12th and 13th centuries, consisted of "drop-outs" from the Church to whom marginal people both of the lowest station (unemployed artisans, fugitive serfs) and of higher (wives and daughters of burghers) attached themselves. In the words of Professor Gordon Leff, these people "believed they were the poor in spirit because they had abandoned everything, including individual choice; in this state they claimed to have suppressed all needs and virtues. They engaged in sexual orgies, had women in common, and lived from begging. Yet they believed they were free from sin and could yield to desire with impunity."¹

This movement was mostly alive in the Rhine Valley. In Italy around 1300, the movement of the "Apostles" under the leader Dolcino showed signs of great activity. The Apostles claimed that the power of the Church (the "Establishment" of the

times) was transferred to them; that they were free from authority; that they were absolved of sins; that carnal relations were not sinful; that all priests were corrupt; and that churches were no more worthy of prayers than pigsties.

In the England of 1630 and 1640, at the time of religious conflicts between a pro-Catholic monarchy and the Puritan burghers, the so-called "Ranters" made their appearance. They were mystics, writes Norman Cohn in *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, "who believed they were so wholly united with God that they could not sin. All things were permitted to them—sexual promiscuity above all, but also lying, stealing, even murder." A leading Ranter, Clarkson, wrote a tract to show that "Scripture, Churches, Saints are no more than the cutting off a dog's neck," that sin is only in imagination, that blasphemous and obscene words can be freely used. Another Ranter, Winstanley, convinced that the old world was "running up like parchment in fire," set up an anarcho-communistic settlement called the "Diggers" (1649). It was an attempt, Cohn writes, to restore mankind to its virgin state, where private property, class distinctions and human authority would be unknown.

These were some illustrations of what appear to be a main theme in Christian Western history. The reader may be assured that this is only a very modest random selection, and that a mere list of similar sects, movements and communes would fill dozens of pages. At any rate, the West has no monopoly on them. Mircea Eliade reports² on a cult which emerged in 1944 on one of the New Hebrides islands. A native leader, called Tsek, ordered the villagers to throw away their clothes, including the cache-sexe and pearl necklaces, to destroy all their possessions, mats and basket-making tools, to burn down their huts and to slaughter their domestic animals. Instead, the villagers were to build communal dormitories and kitchens, take to the woods, share all women, and generally discard ancient tribal customs.

1. Gordon Leff, *Heresy in the Later Middle Ages* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1967), Vol. 1, p. 358.

2. Mircea Eliade, *The Two and the One* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), p. 125ff.

All this was done in the expectation of the arrival of "America" (the white god of abundance and carefree existence), bringing enormous quantities of food, the permission never to work and the gift of immortality.

Now what is common to these millennial, utopian expectations? We saw that the adepts of these sects think of the world as evil, of themselves as the elect to whom everything is permitted. They are god-like, exempt of the Church's moral precepts or of the tribal taboos (for example, Tsek abolished the prohibition of marriage within the totemic group), and also of the ordinary rules and processes of everyday life. True, next to these universal features, the elect are also stamped with the characteristic language and experiences of the civilization in which they emerge: in the Middle Ages their language was Christian eschatological, in the New Hebrides it expresses itself in the terms of the cargo cult.³ The Gnostics made use of neo-platonist, Jewish apocalyptic and Christian terminology, the Ranters and Thomas Münzer's Anabaptists bathed in the specific moral ambiance of the Reformation. Yet, beyond these differences, the *genus* is the same, it transcends cultural and ethnic particularisms, it represents what seems to be a permanent temptation for man under certain circumstances. The temptation is to reject what civilization has added to the naked, "natural" man. The choice is then between the road to spiritual life leading to God, or "back to nature" and to animality. We saw that the two roads easily converge, and that the millennial behavior and its verbal manifestations partake of both.

Why should the rejection of the "non-natural" stop at casting off of the loin cloth, a preference for nudity, sexual promiscuity, the abolition of private property and the family, in favor of anarcho-communistic

3. I refer to what anthropologists and historians of religion call the "cargo cult" of Polynesia: the islanders witnessing the delivery by boats of all sorts of goods, concluded that the white men to whom these goods were delivered were blessed in this manner by their gods.



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groups? Indeed, the elect intends to go much further: with the civilizational restraints lifted, there is no reason for him to stop at any one degree of the *ascent* towards divine status or *degeneracy* to animal level.

Consider in the light of these features the present hippy culture. It too is a manifestation of the permanent temptation, of the *genus* utopia, and it also partakes of the civilization in which it was born: democratic, bureaucratized yet permissive, materialistic. It was born, like most gnostic-millennial movements, in an age of transition and catastrophe, of the transvaluation of values. Gnosticism appeared at the intellectual confines of Christianity, Judaism and the Hellenistic speculative systems; the late medieval sects emerged when society, organized by the Church, began to disintegrate under the impact of laicization; the Polynesians saw their tribal existence challenged by white inroads represented by traders, missionaries and soldiers (the adventure of Tsek and his islanders took place during the war in the Pacific); and the Anabaptists and Ranters flourished between two religious blocs, Catholic and Protestant. In turn, counter-culture is a symptom of Western self-doubt; perhaps it is also a symptom of the *nee plus ultra* to which the proudest product of Western rationality, science,

seems to have arrived in a blind and confused state.

THESE explanations are useful, but they remain limited; they describe an atmosphere, they do not go to the roots. Let us now analyse the hippy culture's behavior, words and aspirations.

We know of the orgies in which various sects, earlier described, engaged in as a sign of vanished restraints. And we note now the hippy predilection for drugs, sex, terror and violence, verbalized (for example, obscenities) and practiced. These do not seem, however, to be ends in themselves, but rather instruments and methods (techniques) of abolishing the words, the rules, the practices, the mores, and the ethos of the "old" world. The objectives, no matter how hazily outlined, are the non-family, the non-nation, the non-reason: the promiscuous commune, the "Woodstock nation," the fusion of the selves in one hedonistic nirvana, and ultimately the disintegration of reason as the principle of individuation and as the privileged faculty of Western mode of thinking.

In other words, the orgiastic element in the counter-culture is a *technique*, not the objective, although the individual may feel subjectively at home in a life of excesses. *Per se*, the hippy is no more sex-ridden or violent than others; what stimulates him is the (gnostic) passion to dissolve the structure of the world accepted by the non-elect, the profane man. If the hippy, like the Gnostic, demands *paradise*, it is to dissolve the rational self, the obstacle to the fusion of individualities; if he demands *paradise now*, it is to overcome *time* in which, again like the Gnostic, he sees the element preventing instant salvation. It is to be noted that drugs and other orgiastic tools are used for this purpose, but not alcohol: alcohol induces drunkenness, hence euphoria, but not a different kind of perception.

In one of the representative books of counter-culture, Norman Brown's *Life Against Death*, we find, indeed, some relevant pointers for the abolition of time and rationality. Time is neurotic, he maintains,

and so are formal logic, quantified science and industrial production. Why discredit rationality? Because then we may enter a world of carnival and hallucination in which all things become their opposites—the mystic's and the alchemist's *coincidentia oppositorum*. "In the world of carnival," writes W. H. Auden, "there is absolute equality. All distinctions of rank and even of sex are abolished. Women dress up as men, the men dress up as women. We discard our selves; we wear masks. It is also a world of grotesque and parody. It is a world of mock obscenity, mock abuse, mock blasphemy."⁴

If the function of the rational intellect is to separate things in order to differentiate among them, the irrational impulse at the core of the hippy culture intends to fuse things and selves. This is what Rimbaud attempted to do with the *dérèglement systématique de tous les sens*, and also Aldous Huxley, an even more obvious ancestor-figure of the hippy culture, together with Herbert Marcuse and Timothy Leary. With the help of mescaline, Huxley obtained not only a sharper perception of external objects, but, as he reports in *The Doors of Perception*, he became *one* with them. Moral problems, he writes, suddenly have no meaning when we gain the "higher vision," and personal relationships cease having any importance. The mundane world is transcended.

"We do not pray to anyone up there," Leary used to intone at his psychedelic rallies, "but to what is inside ourselves. Let us reincarnate Jesus Christ, every one of us, right now! Then we are all through with the good and evil thing, and we will be reborn." Go back to the world, he advised his disciples at the end of LSD ceremonies, and free it from good and evil. Marcuse too, like the Brethren of the Free Spirit, suggests that the "new men" of the post-revolutionary society will abolish the compulsory and painful character of work by activating the erogenous zones of the body: work will then become libidinal pleasure. (*Reason and*

4. From Auden's conference in Stockholm, 1969, sponsored by the Nobel Foundation.

Revolution). Concentration on genital sexuality, writes Norman Brown also, is unnatural and the creator of neuroses in the human ego.⁵ Enjoyment, in other words, should not pass through the mind; it should be an immediate, animal experience. Beyond enjoyment, as also beyond good and evil, there looms Paradise, the home of past and modern Elect. "*L'homme est un dieu en fleur*" asserts Roger Garaudy, summarizing the Elect's expectations.

IT is now time to examine the differences between the various past manifestations of gnostic, millennial and utopian sects and the hippy culture of the present. We should not be surprised to see that the differences are not detected in the ideological content or in the life-style: they are derived from external circumstances.

During much of the two thousand years of the Christian era the activities of millennial sects were severely curtailed by ecclesiastical and secular authority. This cannot surprise us when we find that the Brethren of the Free Spirit, Dolcino's Apostles, the Ranters, etc. intended to set up not mere communes, but a veritable counter-Christianity (as we say today "counter-culture"), denying one by one every part of the Church's teaching and society's *raison d'être*. The repression was severe, whether in Catholic Europe or in Protestant England, and it encompassed even the Catharist cult in 13th century Provence although this creed permeated the entire culture of a large area.

The efficacy of measures against such sects is much lower when they pursue their activities in a pluralist society in which a multiplicity of creeds and ideologies is tolerated. Such a society was, for example, the Late Roman Empire where the formalistic and purely external cult of the Emperor was all that remained of official religion. The gnostic sects, in consequence, knew a period of extraordinary expansion, they converted each other's candidates to initia-

5. This is a reversal of the process Freud claims takes place in early childhood. The child's body is indistinctly erogenous, Freud holds, and with the advance of his training he gradually concentrates on his genitalia.

tion, quarreled among themselves, and generally acted like ideological movements do in our own time. It is interesting to read what Iraeneus said in the second century, A.D. about them in his work against heretics, "Every day each one produces some novelty, for no one is considered 'perfect' among them who does not propose a great lie. Since they disagree with one another, and the more recent converts pretend to find something new every day and to produce what no one ever thought of, it is difficult to describe the opinions of each."

Western society today is also pluralist in the same sense as the Roman Empire was from the third century on. In fact, it is more so since in addition to cultural pluralism, the prevailing economic systems promote an unlimited multiplication of industrial production and consumer demands for goods and services. Such a convergence of cultural and economic life is certainly new, and thus it is no wonder that much of the counter-culture is immediately absorbed by society's official channels, whether through the communications media or through the advertising and distribution of consumer goods.

The question we must ask is then the following: can this absorption be complete, is society able to assimilate endlessly the many counter-cultures engendered in its entrails? American society seems to have given its answer in the positive. American opinion-leaders, confident in a pluralist structure which has assimilated in the past all kinds of minorities, races, creeds, sects and ideologies, think that counter-culture poses no different problem. Instead of repression or curtailment, politicians, businessmen, media-men and, last but not least, educational officials have begun to adjust their programmes and activities (books, advertisements, editorials, art format, fashion, school curriculum, etc.) to what they regard as the irresistible demands of the counter-culture. Ultimately they intend to domesticate, articulate and officialize these demands, and meanwhile to draw certain tangible benefits from them in terms of sales in business and popularity in politics.

At this point it may be difficult to predict whether this approach will prove successful. We witness the interpenetration of the manifest culture and counter-culture, the visible signs of which, however, seem to favor the latter. In the eyes of society's leaders and decision-makers the outcome must be the strengthening of plurality; they only see a culture-creating mechanism at work, supposed to renew the old structures by exerting its influence openly. They fail to see that the counter-culture may not be a socially positive phenomenon, and that in fact it chooses to remain essentially underground, its natural milieu. Society may watch, amused, its expressions which seem original because they are juxtaposed with the normal rhythms and processes of daily existence: incongruity appears then as originality. But the expressions of counter-culture do not announce a genuine interruption and relaxation of normal existence: the member of the counter-culture lives in an eternal present permeated by pleasure, mostly sharp sexual enjoyment. This is also what an emphasis on "youth" indicates: gnostic sects always need an elect class, and what we see today is simply this need parasitically attached to the officially encouraged and exploited cult of youth.

Youth cult is also the cult of play, and there again the society which extols leisure, indirectly invites all to join the carnival. Thus play-time and socially active time intersect and become indistinguishable: the youth-cult imperceptibly merges with the cult of the homosexual (the "gay people"), the woman-liberator, the sex-educated kindergarten; sensitivity training offered in schools and churches moves onto the stage and becomes the play *Hair* where sexual actions are indiscriminately directed at men and women, according to mere proximity. Even the preoccupation with ecological problems moves in the twilight zone of the counter-culture: New York's "earth people" on "earth day" re-enact ancient rites, propitiating, as it were, the disturbed spirits of fertility. Similarly, the "greening of America" (Charles Reich's fashionable thesis) means society's reduction to elemental parasitism.

not the creation of quiet places of rest and aesthetic harmony. Reich's "consciousness III," represented by hedonists and drop-outs, encourages individual eccentricity and the primacy of sensuousness over duty, but since it replaces temporarily the campus arsonist with the bum, it is welcomed by college presidents.

In sum, official acceptance does not neutralize the counter-culture, and the latter may have long-range effects on rational discourse and decent conduct. Professor Arnold Tibbetts reports that in American colleges one can now identify students whose "thinking, speaking and writing shows lack of concern with reason, logic and honest argument. They lack skepticism, and swallow any generalization on any subject. . . . They are their own authorities."⁶ Many professors also think that "the best for the student is to express himself through a vague, disordered spilling out of emotions." (*Idem*). Professors themselves increasingly use obscenities in class and make pronouncements about the "paroxysm of truth" and "cosmic orgasm." Finally, the counter-culture achieves total respectability with Professor McLuhan who indicts traditional education as "linear detachment" with "uniform sequential patterns" (in other words, organized learning) which "snatches the TV child away from in-depth involvement in the inclusive womb of television."⁷ One may say that this is merely academically conceited contemporary jargon; it is noteworthy, however, in its contempt for analytic reason and the predilection for fusionist terms intended to dissolve the individual.

WHAT is the over-all significance of the counter-culture in Western societies? Historians of religion, Mircea Eliade foremost among them, speak of great myths that sustain a community's self-identity and self-valuation for many centuries, but which become "coarse" when the truth behind

6. "To Encourage Reason on Campus," American Association of University Professors, *Bulletin*, Winter 1968, p. 468.

7. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).

them is no longer believed. The myth turns first into an allegory (this is why Plato opposed its inclusion in the education of youth), later into a counter-myth. What happens is that, as Martin Buber writes, "the image-making power of the human heart declines, so that the spiritual pupil can no longer catch a glimpse of the appearance of the Absolute. False absolutes rule over the soul, which is no longer able to put them to flight through the image of the true."⁸

From the statements made by hippies and their academic and journalistic cohorts we may reach the same conclusion. It appears that a rationalistic civilization has forced the "image-making power" underground and has compelled several generations to replace the "true story" (Plato's *alethes logos*) with a false one. Reality is no longer perceived because science, technology and the contending ideologies have created what various writers call a *second reality*. Ob-

8. Martin Buber, "On the Suspension of the Ethical," in *Eclipse of God* (New York: Harper and Row, 1952), p. 119.

scurely, the hippy, like the ancient Gnostic, perceives this discrepancy, or, to be more accurate, his culture is the symptom of the shift in reality. He becomes alienated, with uncertain loyalties. The key word in gnostic technical language, H. C. Puech remarks, was the "other," the alien, the *allogenes*: The Gnostic's decisive revelation was that he did not belong to the world but was born and came from elsewhere.⁹

It is admittedly difficult to have a dispassionate view of the counter-culture when it engenders such monstrosities as Charles Manson's "family" of murderers, recently tried in Los Angeles. And it is just as difficult to find the correct standard of judgment regarding the entire hippy phenomenon. It would certainly be foolish to evaluate it exclusively with sociological or economic yardsticks, nor does it belong to the psychoanalyst's couch. The history of "counter-cultures" shows, however, that they appear at times of deep crisis and civilizational decline.

9. *Annuaire du College de France* (1956), p. 194.

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