IS THE COUNTER CULTURE REVOLUTIONARY?

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There seems to be some confusion amongst marxists in Australia as to how to regard the emergence in the late 'sixties and early 'seventies of a substantial group of disillusioned young people, intent on exploring non-materialist life styles. Reactions to the counter-culture have ranged from uncritical enthusiasm to outright contempt. Lyn Donaldson (ALR, No. 35) is certainly correct in her view that bourgeois society can tolerate the counter-culture, and absorb it into its own ethos. She then states, however, that:

"... despite antagonistic polemics between the culturo-revolutionaries and the political-revolutionaries, it is inevitable that their coalition will provide a triumphant assault on capitalist bourgeois society."

Well, maybe, but maybe not. I have been involved in the counter-culture for several years, and over that time developed some major doubts as to its revolutionary potential.

We have made so many mistakes, the artificial divorce of culture from politics being only one of them. In doing so we followed Leary up a blind alley, right into an exiled hole in Algeria. We created a grotesque caricature of straight society, little Wah-roongas in Balmain or Glebe. A dope market which is an exact sickening replica of Wall Street. We enabled the hippie-capitalist to rationalise his behavior - rip-off your friends for fun and profit, especially profit. We engaged in pretentious ego tussles and called them consciousness-raising. We justified structured and hierarchical movements - and the voice of the "anarachists" became more frenziedly fascist. Pretence became more important than content, and as Richard Neville laments, the advertising campaign was a resounding success, but there was nothing inside the wrapping paper. We sought happiness within unhappiness, consolation within the status quo. But the source of that unhappiness, the capitalist State, did not change.

One of the most consistent themes of the counter-culture is that the great bulk of the population are shits (anyone who disagrees is a super-shit). They are all "sold-out, screwed-up, mindless materialists, grey-flannel skinheads." The concept of a bourgeois consensus society stems from Marcuse. But before him, curiously enough, this theory was developed by American sociologists who are considered to be ultra-conservative. Writers like Seymour Martin Lipset and Talcott Parsons optimistically and complacently asserted that all the conflicting forces in society had been smoothed out and the whole structure was functioning because of an almost universal acceptance of common values. Herbert Marcuse argued that this consensus was a symptom of moral and political decay. In One Dimensional Man he argued that this condition had been brought about by the use to which technology was being put in capitalist society. Capitalism, he correctly perceives, must expand in order to survive, and this growth is ensured if, among other things, the level of consumption is pushed higher and higher within existing incomes (and the consumer "durables" have built-in obsolescence). Marcuse emphasises strongly the power of a technological society to manipulate and mould the whole life-style and aspirations of mankind in its own image, and in accordance with its own objective requirements.

Counter-culture sophists have certainly accepted this thesis uncritically. Moreover, in its popularised form, it is usually argued that this bourgeois, consensus has been produced by the "conditioning" powers of the media, and that consumption is stimulated by "psychic manipulation." Certainly advertisers use psychological gimmickry, but it is not so much this as the objective social reality which surrounds advertising that determines consumption patterns. Could anyone deny that in this age of inadequate public transport and rapacious landlords with poor quality houses to offer, a car and a home are desirable things to own? More specifically, while many advertisers stress male dominance as a selling point, the ideology of male supremacy originated in the property relations of the economy. The media reflects this ideology, and in turn reinforces it, but does not determine it. As capitalism has expanded, and the division of labor and mechanisation has increased, more and more workers are required for tertiary activities. Hence the ideology of male sup-
remacy is becoming obsolete, as illustrated by the acceptance of the women’s liberation movement. No amount of “psychic manipulation” can change this process. Thus, consumer capitalism was a logical extension of a culture which already stressed aggrandisement by property, although obviously abetted by the media.

Although never acknowledged, the “conditioned consumer” theory owes its debt to J.B. Watson, who demonstrated that the human being consisted of nothing but a few stripped muscles and some conditioned reflexes. Today Watson musters few defenders for his extreme views, and yet so many young rebels believe that if you ring a bell, the consumer salivates. This view is popular amongst intellectuals as well. As Ellen Willis states, “because it appeals to their dislike of capitalism and their feeling of superiority over the working classes. This elitism is evident in their conviction that they have seen through the system while the average working slob is brainwashed by the media.” (1) No matter how much fuel the “conditioned bourgeois consensus” theory provides for elitist fantasies, it is an over-simplification of reality. It denies the existence of substantial groups in society who live in completely different and often antagonistic ways to that of the middle-class materialist ideal propagated by the all-powerful conditioning media. Different groups have varying degrees of awareness, as one author notes: “Those of us who talk to workers of all political lines will know if they have tried that when the question of domination by their property is brought up, you frequently strike an instant response.” (2) Obviously, the conditioning process is not as efficient as is commonly believed by counter-culture sophists, but then affluent youth are far removed from working-class social reality. It is easy to forget that in May, 1968, workers and revolutionary students came close to overthrowing the French government. Presumably they were “conditioned” not to do that. At what point did the chosen few of the counter-culture cast off this conditioning? Those who claim that it was LSD, that magical substance guaranteed to turn a bourgeois child into a revolutionary, are surely putting the cart before the horse. And the thesis, common amongst students, that it is a matter of intelligence, is certainly an elitist one.

Intellectual snobbishness has been with us for a long time. A decade ago Allan Ashbolt described the “proles” as being no more than glutinous masses of second-hand sensations and ad-fed desires, morons manipulated by faceless organisation men and Anderson ratings researchers. That sort of view is on par with the one which suggests that all our contemporary social problems like drug-use are communist plots, devised by faceless men in the Kremlin. Yet so many, so many of the coffee-table counter-culture set would agree with Ashbolt, and so it seems does their current mentor, Yale professor Charles Reich. He writes:

“Look again at a fascist, tight-lipped, tense, crew-cut, correctly dressed, church going, American flag on his car window, a hostile eye for communists, youth and blacks. He has had very little of love, poetry, music, nature or joy. He has been dominated by fear. He has been condemned to narrow-minded prejudice, to self-defending materialism ... he has fled all his life from consciousness and responsibility.” (3) Reich urges his readers to be “tolerant” and “loving” to the blue-collar worker because the poor creature hasn’t had an artistic-cultural background. And this comes from a self-announced agent of a superior consciousness, so prepared to dismiss the lives of ordinary people as beneath contempt. His heart might be in the right place, but this is, as Craig McGregor notes, “the authentic voice of the aristocrat indignant at the failure of others to be as high-brow, as cultivated, as intelligent as himself.” (4)

And this, too, is the voice of the so-called revolutionary counter-culture. It has grown so far apart from the society which spawned it that it cannot possibly accurately portray it. To rely on smart witticisms and snobbish generalisations is hardly a sign of intellectual strength or cultural superiority.

It is important to note that the counter-culture is almost entirely made up of the young affluent middle class. A study of American students found that amongst politically radical groups, and those exploring alternative life styles, individuals from high-income families were disproportionately represented. Students from blue-collar backgrounds were more likely to have adopted the norms and aspirations of conventional society. (5) This tends to disprove the old cliche of the generation gap. Since affluence is its base, it is not surprising that the counter-culture developed an elitist outlook. Also it is no accident that this developed at the same time as there has been an unprecedented number able to avail themselves of tertiary education. The position of students involves an invidious degree of dependence for most. The student has a feeling of being in the society, but not of it, a feeling which quite accurately reflects the student’s relationship to the economy. At the same time youthful idealism convinces many that their work is futile. So just at that time when assertion of independence becomes important, the society consigns the student to the role of an object of indulgence. (6) Not surprisingly, a significant proportion of them turn with fine savagery on the society responsible. This does not imply maladjustment, a theory much beloved by social scientists, but rather that there is something very wrong with the society which causes such alienation. Very few individuals are able to examine objectively their own position in society, or analyse the reasons for the way
they feel, and radical students are no exception. Instead there is just a feeling of helplessness.

But at least most are aware of the exploitative nature of capitalist society, and its outward manifestations of imperialism, pollution and poverty. But socialism as a means of overcoming these has not become a sustaining ideology for most. Firstly, because of the class origin of the radicals themselves -- and, secondly, there is widespread acceptance of the thesis of convergence between capitalist and socialist economies. In fact, crude technological determinism is a strong current of thought within the counter-culture. Technology itself represents a "death-trip." Theodore Roszak, who first coined the phrase "counter-culture," has consistently emphasised technology's destructive and dehumanising aspects. While Marcuse argued that it was those who owned and controlled technology who were responsible for its dehumanising effects (but in turn this domination was so strong that virtually nothing could be done about it), Roszak considers that it is the responsibility of technology per se. He states: "It is essential to realise that the technocracy is not the exclusive product of that old devil capitalism. Rather it is the product of a mature and accelerating industrialism." (7)

Roszak sees in the counter-culture a vision of a future world at one with nature and mankind's own spirit. He argues that this liberation will occur not when the means of production have been removed from capitalist exploitation, but when they have been abandoned. How this will "liberate" the lives of 220 million Americans, let alone the population of the rest of the world, Roszak never really considers. A few words about Indian mysticism and tribal culture is all he includes. Presumably he has in mind a non-technological society, with its high death rates, and stifling dependence on primitive means of subsistence. It's a rather naive vision of Utopia -- history has shown what happens when a primitive society comes in contact with a technologically advanced one. Roszak's is the voice of the reactionary, like the Luddites of the 19th century, who urged the industrial workers to smash the machines and return to the idyllic rural past (and presumably back to the chains of feudal oppression). Nevertheless, this philosophy lies behind all the current counter-culture "back to the earth" movements.

Not only Roszak, but much of contemporary economic and sociological theory is strongly influenced by technological determinism. Robin Blackburn describes this as "bourgeois fatalism" whose function has been to "create a morbid paralysis of social will, undermining the belief that man can ever transform society." (8) It certainly seems to have succeeded in doing just that. The counter-culture has turned its back on technological society, given it up as beyond redemption. Almost fatallyistically, in their thousands they flee the urban monster, expecting to find peace in the countryside, and their emigration is met by hundreds of thousands of peasants travelling in the opposite direction. And as one writer points out:

"It is almost hypocritical to say at the same time that one sympathises with the starving peoples of the third world and that one opposes the technology which offers the only way out of that starvation." (9)

For Marx, human liberation could not be achieved by anarchistic acts or by withdrawing into isolated communities. Technology itself held the key. In a socialist society, in the absence of market forces playing a decisive role, welfare, environmental and social considerations can be incorporated into the decision-making process of the productive enterprise. Within a capitalist framework, however, such matters are described as "externalities," unable to be calculated, and hence ignored. But, the counter-culture is oriented toward a process of "maximum social utility is utopian, and certainly doesn't occur in contemporary socialist countries. It's like the "withering away of the State," it's claimed: no communist party in the socialist world has so far shown any signs of declaring itself superfluous. According to Roszak and many others, technological determinism explains this, and no further historical and sociological scholarship is considered necessary.

Indeed, in Richard Neville's view, the study of historical and social processes is part of the problem, and not part of the solution. In Playpower he describes a discussion group led by Ernest Mandel: "It was obviously a solemn occasion... The man in the chair was speaking heavy Marx with a German accent... In the discussion which followed, tense for those involved, three hours were spent arguing over the definition of neo-capitalism." Neville comments: "One man's revolution is another man's purgatory." (10) I can understand his frustration, but nevertheless true analysis of society is essential if social action is to be effective. In a later paper, entitled Counter-Culture Crap, Neville laments the failure of the counter-culture revolution, a fact which surely emphasises this point. Like the Yippies, Neville believed in smashing the capitalist State, and both believed the youth of the world would be the revolutionary agency. This notion is now well and truly dead. Time magazine's polls have indicated that over 50% of the 18-24 year olds in the US are voting for Nixon...

The whole malaise of counter-culture theory stems from this fundamental error. By concentrating on youth alone, it has ignored the role of the working class as an agency of social change altogether. Roszak, Neville and Reich can only look on in disillusionment as the counter-culture becomes swiftly and pain-
Reich praises the emergence of the youth rebellion in its rejection of the materialist values of capitalist civilisation, and lauds it as "the beginning of a superior consciousness" -- a state of mind which will eventually transform the capitalist economy and State independently of any political action. What Reich seems to be saying is that the capitalist State rests on nothing but consciousness. Now, normally when a writer is exploring relationships between the base of society and its superstructure, he should be aware that he is in contentious territory. But Reich is blissfully unaware of any problems. While it is true that to some degree there is a two-way relationship between the economy and ideology, each element having some degree of autonomy, so that obviously a change in consciousness is important, that cannot alone change the property relations of the economic structure. A society will function without crises provided that its productive processes are capable of meeting its essential needs, and its image of man and society are capable of rationalising those processes. A discrepancy causes conflict, and consciousness must be translated into action in order to transcend that crisis. But to Reich, like the hippies who preceded him, no action is required, just drop out, and dream of the day when General Motors is going to hand over its capital to its employees. Four years ago, John Lennon claimed "the war is over -- if you want it;" but it continues today with increased ferocity. The Yippies' ritualistic burning of the holy dollar on the floor of New York Stock Exchange did nothing to alter American acquisitive society. At any rate, Reich is forgetting that only a few have developed this change of consciousness, the children of the affluent middle class. The individual growing up surrounded by abundance correctly perceives that the traditional bourgeois morality of hard work, competitiveness and achievement is obsolete. And so on to university, paid for by parents or the State (which looks after members of its own class). It is quite logical that he should be unimpressed by the prospect of living like his parents. The point is that only the affluent have been able to develop this change of consciousness -- and that affluence is based on the inequality of capitalist society. To Marcuse, Reich's thesis is the Establishment version of the revolution -- not the real one.

But even if Reich's thesis was based on sound philosophical and sociological premises, history has already proven him wrong. Back in 1967, the "superior consciousness" of the hippies may have been a beautiful and ominous thing to feel, but it died a messy and horrible death. Methedrine and peace made uneasy partners. Violence and commercial exploitation marked the end of the era. Even the communes dried up, and those few which survived started to bear an uncomfortable resemblance to the surrounding society. While it was a minority movement, its culture could remain unadulterated. But as soon as it was transformed into a near consumer product, it was quickly absorbed by bourgeois culture. And yet so much of the counter-culture, dressed in Levis and riding "freedom machines," intent on making Dylan, Kubrik, Harry M. Miller, Mick Jagger, the Mafia, CBS, Abbie Hoffman and Peter Fonda all multi-millionaires, still naively holds that its adherents can remain aloof from bourgeois culture. But bourgeois culture is not static. It accommodates all but direct attacks upon itself. Instead of one cultural consciousness replacing another, the two fuse and interact. The counter-culture, by its very nature, was a confused and diffuse challenge. This, and the fact that its dominant characteristic is an elitist and fatalistic outlook, allow for few claims of revolutionary potential.

I realise that I have painted the counter-culture with a broad brush, but these impressions are based on my experience, and backed up by the scanty literature on the subject. Nevertheless, the counter-culture remains an ongoing phenomenon, and it does consist of a vast rejection of many of the norms and values of capitalist society. As such it provides the basis for acceptance of socialist ideas by young people. Already there are some signs that this is happening.