



The Sixties

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Feed your head

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CONFERENCE REVIEW

Revisiting the Summer of Love, rethinking the counterculture: an academic conference on the 50th anniversary of the Summer of Love, San Francisco, Northwestern University Center for Civic Engagement and the California Historical Society, July 27, 2017–July 29, 2017

The season has passed into myth: San Francisco's 1967 "Summer of Love," a sybaritic outpouring of song, sex, dance, poetry, and drugs when tens-of-thousands of young people flooded into the Haight-Ashbury district in search of a hippie utopia. That winter the Human Be-In marked a "gathering of the tribes" in Golden Gate Park: Allen Ginsberg chanted, the Grateful Dead provided the soundtrack, the Diggers distributed free food, and Timothy Leary enjoined the crowd to "Turn on, tune in, drop out." By then the North Beach beat bohemia had flowered into the Haight-Ashbury's psychedelic subculture, with musicians, poets, and artists living semi-communally in rundown Victorian houses. The "San Francisco Five" designed iconic acid rock posters for performances by the likes of the Doors, Jefferson Airplane, and Country Joe and the Fish at the Avalon Ballroom and The Fillmore. The Monterey Pop Festival made legends out of then relatively unknown performers, Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix.

Fifty years later, another "gathering of the tribes" convened in San Francisco – nearly 175 scholars, students, archivists, activists, and counterculture veterans – to make sense of what had happened half-a-century earlier. Northwestern University's Center for Civic Engagement partnered with the California Historical Society to present "Revisiting the Summer of Love, Rethinking the Counterculture," an interdisciplinary academic conference with the stated goal of "celebrating and reexamining the Summer of Love and its associated events, contexts, and implications." Director of the Center, Dan Lewis, outlined some of the ambitions for the conference in his introductory remarks. He hoped that participants would model new methods and approaches to a period too often caricatured in pop culture or dismissed in academic circles. He issued, in effect, an institutional mandate for universities to get serious about the counterculture, to "reset the agenda," in his words. In his plenary address, historian Michael J. Kramer (Northwestern University) suggested a methodology drawn from the counterculture itself: a "kaleidoscopic" openness to history as multifaceted, open-ended, and variegated, oscillating psychedelically between micro- and macrocosmic perspectives.

Over the course of the three-day conference, two questions predominated: What was the counterculture? What were its politics? When Theodore Roszak popularized the term "counterculture" in *The Making of a Counter Culture* (1969), he seemed to have a pretty clear definition in mind, spelled out in the book's subtitle: *Reflections on the Technocratic Society and its Youthful Opposition*. The technocratic society (reminiscent of Eisenhower's military-industrial complex) stood on one side of the equation, while "counter" to it stood the "Youthful Opposition" in open Oedipal rebellion – burning draft cards, dropping acid, staging protests, joining communes, and so on. For Roszak, this youth-based counterculture, while somewhat inchoate, admirably rejected competitive individualism,

careerism, conformity, and blind obeisance to what Ken Kesey, in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962), called “The Combine” – the dehumanizing system of social indoctrination and control. While Roszak discussed the movement’s thought leaders (Allen Ginsberg, Alan Watts, Norman O. Brown, et al.), he also celebrated practical attempts to realize a “thousand fragile experiments” blossoming throughout the country: “communes rural and urban; voluntary primitivism; organic homesteading; extended families, free schools; free clinics; handicraft co-operatives; community development coops; Gandhian ashrams; neighborhood rap centers; labor gift exchanges.”¹

Appropriately, then, “community” served as the conference’s overarching theme. In keeping with the sponsorship of the Center for Civic Engagement, the lectures and discussions emphasized the counterculture as a *civic* phenomenon, exploring new ways of imagining community, participatory democracy, and expanded forms of citizenship. What emerged was a history-from-below in which few of the usual suspects appeared – Ginsberg, Kesey, Timothy Leary, Jerry Garcia, et al. – and few of the grand narratives were rehearsed: the flashpoints of the Human Be-In, the Monterey Pop Festival, and Woodstock. The myth of the fall from the Sixties paradise into the hell of the Seventies (courtesy of Richard Nixon, the Hell’s Angels, Charles Manson, and the National Guard at Kent State) barely registered. Instead, conference presenters largely eschewed these calcified metanarratives in favor of microhistories of local, grass-roots community organizing and coalition building.

Kramer, in his keynote address, dispensed with the typical view of Haight-Ashbury hippies as unruly, ragtag dropouts, pointing instead to the way the radical theater troupe, the Diggers, self-organized an ad hoc response in the summer of 1967 to the sudden and overwhelming demand for food, shelter, and medical treatment with the incoming tide of young people. A panel on “Human Service Innovation in the Summer of Love” featured speakers from the Haight-Ashbury Free Medical Clinic, Huckleberry Youth Programs, and Hospitality House discussing the counterculture’s civic commitment to health care. (One panel member insisted that the now-familiar motto, “health care is a right, not a privilege,” is the most enduring legacy of the counterculture.) Robyn Spencer (Lehman College) emphasized the rank-and-file members of the Black Panthers as much as the Party’s charismatic leaders in her account of the group’s activities – a “politics of fellowship” premised on human connection and caretaking: health care, childcare, food distribution, and education. Several speakers adopted an intersectional approach to history, attending to the politics of fellowship that developed among loose coalitions of marginalized social groups: gays, feminists, civil rights advocates, environmentalists, Black Power militants, Native American tribes. Gretchen Lemke-Santangelo (St. Mary’s College of California), for example, traced “The Origins and Legacy of Countercultural Feminism,” and Sherry L. Smith (Southern Methodist University) reversed the standard narrative of white hippies appropriating Native American culture by investigating the way Native American activists strategically used this phenomenon to advance their own political interests and causes.

In keeping with the history-from-below historiographic trend, there was also an emphasis on the “tools” of the counterculture, opening up a material culture analysis treating small-scale technologies and objects – acid, geodesic domes, school buses, rock posters, record players, slide projectors, shortwave radios, etc. – as vital tools for building alternative communities. David Farber (University of Kansas) spoke of acid, for example, as an essential countercultural tool that delivered a “hard kick” to wipe clean the doors of perception. Similarly, a panel on the “San Francisco Poster Renaissance” treated acid rock posters by the “San Francisco Five” as both art and artifact, drawing on histories of the book as a way to reinterpret a medium that falls somewhere between art and ephemera. Maria Cichosz (Stanford University) explored how material objects become invested with symbolic meaning through a particularly resonant case study: Further, the yellow school

bus converted by the Merry Pranksters into a vehicle for antic disruption and consciousness raising. Fred Turner (Stanford University) reminded us that the “tools” promoted by Stewart Brand’s *Whole Earth Catalog* for establishing rural communes consisted mostly of books.

Books might seem a counterintuitive resource for a counterculture suspicious of “bondage to the authority of books,” as Norman O. Brown put it.² Aldous Huxley promoted the “nonverbal humanities,” in place of the “exclusively verbal” approach to the humanities he found prevalent in the modern university.³ An academic conference, with its format of prewritten talks delivered by an acknowledged expert to a politely attentive audience, inevitably invites the question of whether the academy nurtures/encourages or absorbs/neutralizes countercultural impulses, movements, and energies. Brown, a classics professor turned counterculture icon, felt convinced that renewed civilization “leads out of the university, out of the academy.”⁴ This proved true of high-profile defectors, Timothy Leary and Stephen Gaskin, both of whom abandoned the classroom for careers as counterculture gurus. But of course it’s not so simple: counterculture and the academy are intertwined, as the cases of Brown and Herbert Marcuse bear out, or Yale Law School professor Charles Reich, whose *The Greening of America* (1970) became one of the era’s surprise bestsellers. For Kramer, speaking on “Theodore Roszak’s Countercultural Criticism,” Roszak modeled a form of critical countercultural thinking that paradoxically embraced “non-intellective capacities” even as it engaged deeply with ideas, theory, and social criticism. Dan Lewis, in his talk on the same panel, made the provocative, geographically grounded claim that the university itself – or at least Bay Area universities like Stanford, Berkeley, Hayward State, and the University of California, Santa Cruz – incubated the counterculture through the work of German émigré scholars exploring the relationship between social institutions and human personalities.

The role of the academy in the counterculture points to larger questions: how is history written? Archived? Experienced? With many living witnesses and engaged actors in the counterculture in attendance, the conference highlighted the tension between “written” history, on the one hand, and history as lived by participants. When a woman in the audience challenged Fred Turner during the Q&A on the basis of her own experience, he dismissed her firsthand account as irrelevant to the process of historical inquiry. Certain panelists, however, productively blurred the line between academic and participant. Sarah Hill (Cardiff University) outlined a recent ethnographic project focused on recording and recovering the “sensory memories” of participants in the Haight-Ashbury’s psychedelic music scene. In a panel on “Media and the Summer of Love,” Rosie McGee reflected on her time photographing the Grateful Dead and the colorful denizens of the Haight-Ashbury district. Ramón Sender Barayón, co-producer of the 1966 Trips Festival and first resident at the Morningstar Ranch commune, is now an archivist for the community and argued that Morningstar Ranch – an “open commune” that denied access to no one and was quickly shuttered by authorities – was roughly two hundred years ahead of its time. Perhaps inadvertently, Sender took Kramer’s micro/macro-method to heart: on a micro-level, Morningstar modeled a vision of civilization as if seen from a macro-perspective: two hundred years in the future after the abolition of private property when human would live in harmony with nature. His comments also pointed to a lacuna in the conference programming: the micro/macro-effects of environmental destruction on communities both local and global. The power and urgency of the countercultural response in the Sixties – whether Rachel Carlson’s *Silent Spring* (1962), Pete Seeger’s album *God Bless the Grass* (1966), or the founding of the Environmental Defense Fund (1967) and National Resources Defense Council (1970) – merits revisiting at a moment when the effects of human-caused climate change are already having a catastrophic impact.

Like Sender, Timothy Miller (University of Kansas) and James Block (DePaul University) stretched the “Long Sixties” over centuries by reaching back to Henry David Thoreau, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Walt Whitman, and communal experiments Oneida, Brook Farm, and Fruitlands, as precedents for the Sixties counterculture. Stephen Eisenman (Northwestern University) traced the influence of William Blake’s visionary art and poetry, with its emphasis on libidinal emancipation and cleansing the “doors of perception,” through countercultural figures like Jimi Hendrix, Jim Morrison, and Bob Dylan. These scholars rejected approaches to history carved up by decades or generations. There have been multiple countercultures over the centuries, in other words, each of which represented a concerted effort to carve out an alternative space, actual or conceptual, to the mutating forms of hegemonic capitalism, from industrial to neoliberal.

So what is the counterculture today? One might say, following Mark Twain, that rumors of the death of the counterculture have been greatly exaggerated, at least since the Diggers staged their famous “Death of Hippie” funeral in October 1967. But the question of the counterculture’s legacy remains open and vexed. What figures or movements can legitimately lay claim to its legacy? Legalized marijuana? Gay marriage? Are neo-conservatives like Milo Yiannopoulos (whose new book is titled *Milo’s Dangerous*) the new counterculture opposing a largely tolerant, permissive, and liberal dominant culture? Is the counterculture to blame for Silicon Valley? In his lecture, “From Counterculture to Cyberculture,” largely drawn from his book of the same name, Turner gleefully shared a slide of Mark Zuckerberg’s geodesic dome, “Shady Waffle,” at the annual Burning Man festival, and traced a direct line of succession from the *Whole Earth Catalog* to the “bohemian factories” at Google and Facebook. As Kent put it in *King Lear*, “Is this the promised end”?

“Revisiting the Summer of Love, Rethinking the Counterculture” demonstrated how rethinking the past casts new light on the present. The “love” aspect of the “Summer of Love” meant more than the free love of pop culture memory, or even the emancipatory potential of *eros* in Herbert Marcuse’s *Eros and Civilization* (1964) or Norman O. Brown’s *Love’s Body* (1966). Anthony Ashbolt (University of Wollongong), in his excellent talk on “Hippie Culture as Radical Community,” argued that the hippies modeled a form of *agape* love promoted by Martin Luther King, Jr. – love as a verb, an act of the will, not simply an emotion or ephemeral feeling. He reminded us that hippies represented a radical challenge to consensus politics around the Vietnam War and the national security state. (In the Q&A Ashbolt also reminded us that Jeremy Corbyn’s recent Glastonbury Festival speech – to a mostly young, adulatory crowd numbering in the tens of thousands – touched on virtually every Sixties shibboleth: the hopefulness of youth, the emancipatory power of music and community, the healing balm of love and the environment.) These are timely reminders of the passion and vitality of a counterculture committed to peace and love not as airy, empty-headed abstractions, but as hard fought, on-the-ground values enacted by real communities. It is a movement that in spite of all its messiness and contradictions, or because of it, deserves more serious scholarly engagement and institutional investment in supporting further research, interdisciplinary dialog, and publications. The conference offered compelling evidence that this project is already well underway.

Notes

1. Roszak, *Where the Wasteland Ends*, 422–3.
2. Brown, “Apocalypse,” 5.
3. Huxley, “Education on the Nonverbal Level,” 281.
4. Brown, “Apocalypse,” 2.

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