

The US counterculture of the 1960s

A story of defeat and survival

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The Haight–Ashbury district of San Francisco, California, maintaining the 1960s counterculture aesthetic

What happened to the counterculture at the end of the 1960s? Find out how the counterculture formed, the pressures it came under as it grew, and one way in which it lived on in the decades that followed

Exam links

AQA 1K The making of a superpower: USA, 1865–1975

Edexcel paper 1, option 1F In search of the American dream: the USA c.1917–96

Edexcel paper 2, option 2H.2 The USA, 1955–92: conformity and challenge

Edexcel paper 3, option 39.1 Civil rights and race relations in the USA, 1850–2009

OCR Y319 Civil rights in the USA 1865–1992

segregation The practice of enforcing the separation of whites and African-Americans in housing, education, employment and many other spheres of life.

sit-in A form of protest in which protestors occupy a public space, business or institution by sitting down and refusing to move.

The 1960s was a time of social unrest in the USA. Young people in particular were protesting a range of political and cultural issues.

The emergence of youth protest, early 1960s

Political protest

One of the earliest groups to form was the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). SNCC

was founded in 1960 and soon became a large organisation working in several states. Members protested about segregation in public spaces by conducting sit-ins, helped to register black voters in southern states, and took part in protest marches. Along with other civil rights groups, the pressure that the SNCC put on the US government contributed to the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act that outlawed many forms of discrimination on the basis of colour, religion, sex or national origin.

Cultural protest

The early part of the decade also saw a rise in more cultural expressions of youth's dissatisfaction with the status quo. Some young people were inspired by the novels, poetry and non-conformist ways of living of the writers of the so-called Beat generation of the late 1950s and early 1960s, which included Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs. They were called 'Beatniks' by the news media and they rebelled against tradition and social rules.

As well as rebelling, young people in this era were looking for a deeper meaning in life. When it emerged in the early 1960s, the psychedelic movement was about finding spiritual meaning through taking hallucinogenic drugs. The movement began with the experiments of Dr Timothy Leary, a Harvard professor

who initially tried to use psychedelic substances to improve the psychological state of prisoners and reduce their likelihood of reoffending on release from prison. A later experiment on theological students at the university led to a rise in curiosity about the spiritual possibilities of such drugs. Leary was fired from Harvard in 1963 but he set up a foundation in which to continue his experiments. The International Federation for Internal Freedom, as it was called, became a commune that attracted young people eager to try the psychedelic experience offered by drugs like LSD.

The growth of the counterculture

In the mid- to late part of the decade the counterculture grew and began to attract significant numbers of young people. It is important to remember, however, that the counterculture never involved more than quite a small proportion of society — there were always more people who believed strongly in traditional, conservative values in this era.

The Vietnam war

One reason why more people were getting involved in political protests was the development of the anti-Vietnam war movement. From 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson's government sent increasing numbers of US troops to fight (and die) in Vietnam. Footage of the war seen on television and a lack of US progress led many to question the morality of it. Protests were widespread and took various forms. The biggest single protest occurred in October 1967 when 100,000 people, including student radicals, hippies and other groups, held a rally in Washington DC and marched on the Pentagon.



Protests against the war in Vietnam were widespread in the late 1960s

Hippie counterculture

Another factor in the growth of the counterculture in the late 1960s was the attraction of ever more people to alternative, 'hippie' culture. San Francisco, and particularly its Haight-Ashbury district, was a place where hippies from across the USA converged. A key year was 1967. The year began with a 'Human Be-In' held in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park where people watched bands like The Grateful Dead and Jefferson Airplane, and major counterculture figures like Timothy Leary and Allen Ginsberg took to the stage. Tens of thousands of hippies flocked to San Francisco over the summer of 1967, which became known as the Summer of Love. Many attended the nearby Monterey International Pop Music Festival, one of the first of its kind to be held in the USA.

Pressures on the counterculture

Violence

Problems began to afflict the counterculture as it grew larger. On the political side, the main problem was an increase in violence. When it came to civil rights, many people felt that changes to the law (like the 1964 Civil Rights Act) didn't go far enough to improve the lives of African-Americans and that a more militant approach was needed. New groups like the Black Panther Party (founded in 1966) organised community support programmes in towns and cities, but also carried guns and engaged in shootouts with the police who they felt were attacking their communities. Older groups like the SNCC also became open to more violent tactics. In 1969, the SNCC changed its name from the 'Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee' to the 'Student National Coordinating Committee' to reflect this.

civil rights The rights afforded under the law to citizens. African-Americans were often excluded from these protections and freedoms, and protested this in the 1950s and 1960s civil-rights movement.

psychedelic/hallucinogenic Describes a drug that produces hallucinations.

a radical A person who calls for fundamental and substantial change in society.



The hippie counterculture promoted hedonism, protest and new identity politics

hedonism The self-indulgent pursuit of pleasure.

Manson murders A chain of high-profile murders committed in California by a 'hippie' group based on an isolated ranch in the desert. The film actress Sharon Tate was the most widely known victim. The cult's leader, Charles Manson, died in prison on 19 November 2017 at the age of 83.

In 1968 both political protestors and hippies took part in anti-Vietnam war demonstrations in Chicago, where the Democratic Party was holding a convention. Although the intention was to hold peaceful protests, the demonstration eventually descended into a riot as police beat protestors and protestors retaliated against police, leaving many injured. The use of violence by members of the counterculture can be understood as the result of feelings of frustration and injustice as the authorities tried to protect the social order. However, for protestors violence was ultimately self-defeating; it made it easier for the media to demonise counterculture groups and turn public opinion against them.

Hedonism

The early psychedelic movement had promoted the use of psychedelic drugs like LSD (which were legal

at the time), but Timothy Leary had been firm about the need to take these drugs in controlled conditions to make the experience as safe as possible. As the counterculture movement grew, however, drug use became more widespread and less controlled. In 1965 and 1966 the author Ken Kesey and his group of 'Merry Pranksters' organised a number of 'Acid Tests' in California. At these parties, LSD was freely available and often put into a punch that people would drink unaware of its contents. The aim of these events was no longer to gain spiritual understanding or revolutionise society but simply to have fun (**hedonism**).

Drugs and violence came together in events like the murders carried out in August 1969 by the members of a hippie cult led by Charles Manson.

The counterculture's legacy

After the **Manson murders**, it seemed that the hippie counterculture was over. It had lost its moral legitimacy. Important political groups including the SNCC and the Black Panther Party had also fragmented or disbanded by the early 1970s, partly because of government crackdowns.

Yet it is unclear exactly when, or whether, the counterculture 'ended'. Certain groups collapsed and hippies no longer massed in San Francisco in such numbers. But the degree to which the ideals and values of the counterculture, as well as their protest tactics, persisted into the 1970s and beyond has been the topic of much scholarly debate.

Case study: identity politics

One important legacy of the 1960s counterculture could be said to be the **identity politics** of the next two decades.

Gender and sexuality

The women's movement had, in part, grown directly out of the experience of women in organisations where all too often men were the leaders and women the secretaries. Comprising a wide variety of feminist perspectives on the kind of social change needed to promote female equality, the women's movement had a huge impact on attitudes in the USA throughout

Questions

- What do you understand about the relationship between cultural expression and political protest in the 1960s? In what ways did the cultural and the political overlap?
- What were some of the reasons why the counterculture struggled to sustain itself when it became a mass movement?
- To what extent are the ideals, values and lessons of the 1960s counterculture still relevant to young people in the twenty-first century?

the 1970s and into the 1980s. It won several changes to the law in favour of women, including banning gender discrimination in education, fairer divorce laws and legalising abortion.

Another particularly significant political identity movement was the gay liberation movement. A major starting point for this movement was an uprising at the Stonewall Inn in New York in June 1969, in which the gay community stood up against the regular police raids that targeted them. Following this, activist groups sprang up and fought for gay rights. Like the women's movement, the gay liberation movement was influential on both public attitudes and the law. Persisting through the 1970s, it gained new impetus in the 1980s following the AIDS epidemic, and has fed into contemporary LGBTQ+ activism.

Race

Identity politics also includes movements for equal rights on the basis of racial identity. For African-Americans, major civil-rights gains had been made in the 1960s, and, as mentioned earlier, the more militant groups had dissolved by the early 1970s. The black-arts movement, however, had a little more staying power. It consisted of artists, writers and musicians who celebrated their power to express themselves politically through art and challenge the white mainstream. Although it lost its impetus around 1975, the black-arts movement helped bring into being more recent forms of black artistic expression like hip hop.

Native Americans were also protesting racial discrimination and mistreatment in the counterculture era. The American Indian Movement was a national

Further reading

- Underground newspapers of the counterculture: www.eastvillageother.org; www.berkeleybarb.net.
- Charters, A. (2003) *The Portable Sixties Reader*, Penguin.
- Gair, C. (2007) *The American Counterculture*, Edinburgh University Press.
- Gitlin, T. (1987) *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*, Bantam.

organisation whose most well-known action was the occupation of Alcatraz Island in San Francisco bay from 1969 to 1971. This protest highlighted the question of the rights of US citizens to 'occupy' land previously possessed by Native American tribes.

Conclusion

The 'identity politics' of the era immediately following the 1960s has a lot in common with the counterculture. Like the counterculture, it involved both moderates (people who wanted gradual changes to the law) and radicals (people who wanted to completely revolutionise society). It too included attempts to create change through cultural and artistic expression, as well as through direct protest. Identity politics is just one of several ways in which the counterculture of the 1960s lived on into the late twentieth century and beyond.

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identity politics The grouping of political activity around an issue of identity such as gender, sexuality or race.

Using this article in your exam



How could this article be useful in your exam?

The recent tragic and untimely death of the US rap artist Lil' Peep should remind us of the link between music and youth subcultures, the hedonistic use of drugs and the wider economic and social changes that are occurring. This has strong echoes of the US counterculture of the 1960s. It would be an interesting exercise to chart patterns of change and continuity between the 1960s and the present with respect to popular culture.

Joanna Freer's article raises some important questions about the significance of 1960s US counterculture and the extent to which it was determined by identity politics. How does this analysis help us understand present popular cultural developments in the USA? How far did the counterculture of the 1960s provide a base for later countercultural events? Is the USA still in a period of counterculture? These are the kinds of questions that emerge from this engaging article on social and cultural change in the USA in the 1960s.