

## Chapter 50

# The Emergence of a Counterculture

*What was the impact of the counterculture on American society?*

### 50.1 Introduction

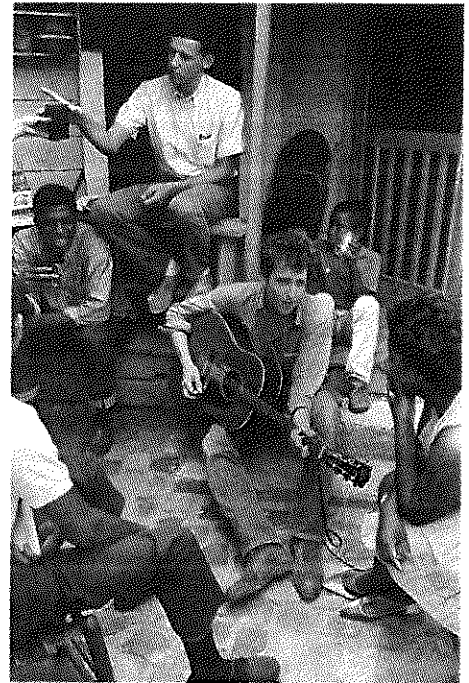
Bob Dylan grew up listening to rock 'n' roll on the radio. As a teenager, he thought he wanted to become a rock star himself. However, while attending the University of Minnesota in 1959, he became passionate about traditional American folk music. Dylan dropped out of college, moved to New York City, and began performing as a folk singer in tiny Greenwich Village nightclubs.

Unlike many performers, Dylan was not showy or handsome, nor did he have a strong singing voice. Still, people paid attention to his music. Accompanying himself on guitar and harmonica, Dylan sang about racial injustice, nuclear war, and other serious issues that engaged people living in a time of social change. His lyrics held more in common with beat poetry than with the simple rhymes of teenage love songs. In one of his early hits, he warned of an emerging clash of values between parents and their baby boom children:

Come mothers and fathers throughout the land  
 And don't criticize what you can't understand.  
 Your sons and your daughters are beyond your command.  
 Your old road is rapidly agin'.  
 Please get out of the new one if you can't lend your hand,  
 For the times they are a-changin'.

—Bob Dylan, "The Times They Are A-Changin'," 1964

In the 1960s, the themes of Dylan's lyrics resonated with millions of young people, as well as with many of their elders. They considered the racial discrimination, riots, poverty, and political assassinations occurring in the United States and concluded that society had to change. As some people experimented with new ways of living, they redefined old ideals, such as freedom and democracy, on their own terms. They created a **counterculture**—a group with ideas and behaviors very different from those of the mainstream culture.



Bob Dylan, seen here playing his guitar, became a famous folk musician in the early 1960s. In his first big hit, "Blowin' in the Wind," he protested racial discrimination, which persisted in the United States despite the civil rights movement.

→ Poster advertising the counterculture concert that came to be known as Woodstock

## 50.2 Baby Boomers Launch a Cultural Revolution

The postwar baby boom created the largest generation of children in American history. By the early 1960s, the oldest baby boomers were nearing their twenties. Most looked forward to futures full of opportunities. However, some baby boomers felt guilty about growing up with advantages denied to many Americans. They believed American society was deeply flawed—rife with materialism, racism, and inequality—but they also believed it could change.

**Activists on College Campuses Form a New Left** Responding to the plight of the poor, small groups of student activists formed a movement called the **New Left**. Some members of the Depression-era “Old Left” had been radicals who supported a worldwide communist revolution. The students who made up the New Left rejected communism. Inspired by the civil rights movement, they were committed to more traditional American ideals, such as the democratic goal of allowing all people to take an active part in government.

The strongest voice in the New Left was a group called Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). In 1962, SDS founders met to craft their vision of a just society. “Freedom and equality for each individual, government of, by, and for the people—these American values we found good, principles by which we could live,” they declared. “We would replace power . . . rooted in possession, privilege, or circumstance by power and uniqueness rooted in love, reflectiveness, reason, and creativity. During the first year, SDS membership grew to more than 8,000 students—a small fraction of all college students.

In 1964, a student protest at the University of California at Berkeley radicalized large numbers of students across the country. The **Free Speech Movement** developed in response to a university rule banning groups like SDS from using a plaza on campus to spread their ideas. Freedom of expression, declared student activist Mario Savio, “represents the very dignity of what a human being is.” Comparing the university to a factory, he urged his fellow students to “put

your bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels.” Thousands of students joined the Free Speech Movement, shutting down the campus for weeks. Eventually, the university lifted the ban.

The student uprising at Berkeley was the first of many protests at colleges across the country. Some protests revolved around local issues. Others were reactions to the growing U.S. military presence in Vietnam. Student activists called on college officials to ban military recruiters from campuses and to end weapons-related research. In 1965, SDS held a rally in Washington, D.C., against the Vietnam War, attracting nearly 25,000 people. You will read more about this war in Unit 15.

Mario Savio addressed a mass of students at the 1964 Free Speech Movement rally at the University of California at Berkeley. Protests against the ban on political activity on campus lasted three months. The students’ success in overturning the ban is still seen as a victory for First Amendment rights on college campuses.



**An Emerging Counterculture Rejects the Establishment** In another form of rebellion against social expectations, many young people dropped out of school and rejected the “rat race” of nine-to-five jobs. Known as **hippies**, they developed a counterculture seeking freedom of expression. Shunning conventions, hippies dressed in jeans, colorful tie-dyed T-shirts, sandals, and necklaces called love beads. They wore their hair long and gave up shaving or wearing makeup. Many lived on handouts from their parents, by begging, or by taking short-term jobs.

Although no organization united members of the counterculture, a number of beliefs did. One was distrust of the **Establishment**, their term for the people and institutions who, in their view, controlled society. Another was the sentiment embodied in the counterculture motto of “never trust anyone over 30.” Members of the counterculture also shared the belief that love was more important than money.

Many members of the counterculture rejected political activism in favor of “personal liberation.” As one hippie put it, “Human beings need total freedom. That’s where God is at. We need to shed hypocrisy, dishonesty, and phoniness and go back to the purity of our childhood values.” Hippies talked of creating a new age of peace and love in which everyone was free to “do your own thing.”

In the late 1960s, counterculture members of the Youth International Party, known as yippies, tried to combine their hippie lifestyle with New Left politics. Led by Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin, the yippies attracted media attention by carrying out amusing pranks. In one of them, they poked fun at the Establishment’s love of money by throwing dollar bills off the balcony of the New York Stock Exchange. As the money floated down, the stock traders below dropped their work to scramble for free cash. Hoffman called such stunts “commercials for the revolution.”

### **A Generation Gap Opens Between Rebel Youth and Mainstream Parents**

Hippies were a minority of 1960s youth. But media coverage made their values known to other young people, many of whom responded sympathetically. To their parents’ distress, these youth let their hair grow long, wore hippie clothes, and criticized the Establishment, especially the war in Vietnam. The result was a growing **generation gap**, or difference in attitudes and behaviors between youth and their parents.

Adults who had lived through the Depression and World War II often dismissed “long-haired hippies” as spoiled rich kids. They resented the counterculture’s focus on hedonism, or pursuit of pleasure, and its lack of concern for their future. The majority of young people, however, adhered to mainstream values. Like their parents, they wanted a good education, a decent job, a successful marriage, and their own home.

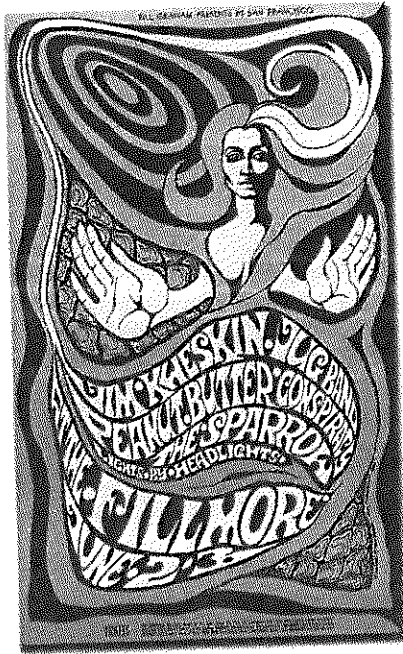
Peggy Noonan, a presidential speechwriter and newspaper columnist, was one of those mainstream youth. While hippies were dreaming of personal liberation, Noonan accepted the idea that “not everything is possible, you can’t have everything, and that’s not bad, that’s life.” Rather than chanting anti-Establishment slogans such as “Make love, not war,” her motto was “Show respect, love your country, stop complaining!”



Hippies dreamed of a world in which peace, love, and freedom were the dominant values. They wore colorful clothing rather than conventional dress. Compared with mainstream Americans, they adopted more relaxed views regarding money, work, and the pursuit of pleasure.

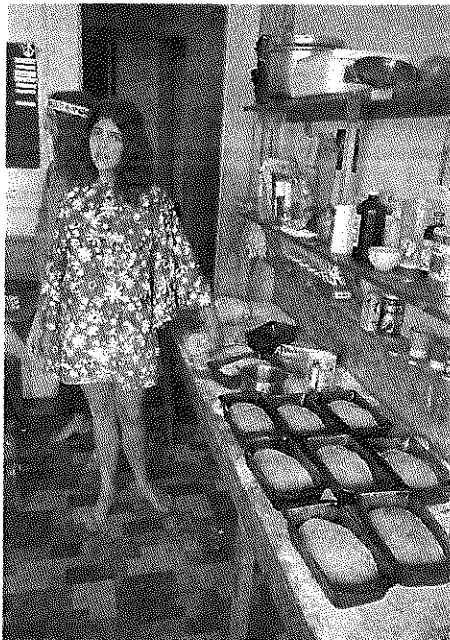


Mainstream Americans remained loyal to traditional values during the 1960s. They believed in family ties, hard work, and respect for God and country. They often viewed youth of the counterculture as irresponsible and immoral.



Hippies experimented with new sounds in music and new styles of art. Concert posters and album covers often sought to evoke the colorful visions that counterculture artists sometimes had while high on music or drugs.

Some members of the counterculture hoped to create a new society by creating communes. Living together and sharing their labor and resources, they rejected both capitalism and materialism.



### 50.3 A Culture Clash

In San Francisco in January 1967, an event dubbed the “Human Be-In”—a fun-loving twist on a sit-in—drew together various counterculture factions. The festival attracted nearly 20,000 young people. News reports showed young men and women holding one another, using drugs, and dancing to the music of rock bands. For many young people, the gathering looked like an invitation to enjoy sex, drugs, and rock ‘n’ roll. For parents, stories about the Human Be-In confirmed their worst fears of a society in moral decline.

**Changing Views of Love and Marriage** The counterculture’s openness about sexual behavior took place amid rapidly changing views toward love and marriage. The **sexual revolution** was a by-product of the introduction of the birth control pill early in the decade. More couples were living together outside of marriage, and more marriages were ending in divorce. Millions of Americans came to see a loveless marriage as worse than no marriage at all. As a result, many states eased divorce laws. Between 1960 and 1970, the annual divorce rate rose from fewer than 10 couples per 1,000 to almost 15. The number of children living in single-parent families rose along with the divorce rate.

While numbers of young people experimented with the freedom the sexual revolution brought, mainstream adults focused on problems it created. They worried that young people were being pressured to engage in sexual behavior. Adults also expressed alarm at the rapid rise in the number of children born out of wedlock. Just as shocking was an increase in sexually transmitted diseases.

**Hippies Experiment with Freer Lifestyles** Many hippies created mini-societies in which they could live by their own values. Some congregated in crash pads, free and usually temporary places to stay. Others experimented with more permanent group-owned living arrangements, called **communes**. Members of communes shared responsibilities and decision making. During the 1960s, about 2,000 communes arose, most often in rural areas. Many mainstream parents reacted strongly to communal modes of living. Some parents felt that by choosing such unconventional lifestyles, their children may have been limiting their prospects for future success.

The counterculture also held changing views on the recreational use of drugs. At the 1967 Human Be-In, psychologist Timothy Leary urged the crowd to “turn on, tune in, and drop out.” The casual attitude of young people toward illegal mind-altering drugs appalled mainstream adults. They pointed out that some drug users experienced “bad trips” that led to panic attacks, depression, violence, and death. Government spending on antidrug programs increased from \$65 million in 1969 to \$730 million in 1973.

**Rock ‘n’ Roll Gives Voice to the Counterculture** Hippies also embraced the changing music scene. Counterculture rock bands soon developed a new sound known as psychedelic rock. They experimented with free-flowing songs that used elements of jazz and Indian music, sound distortion, and light shows to create vivid musical experiences. Many mainstream adults worried this type of music promoted increased drug use.

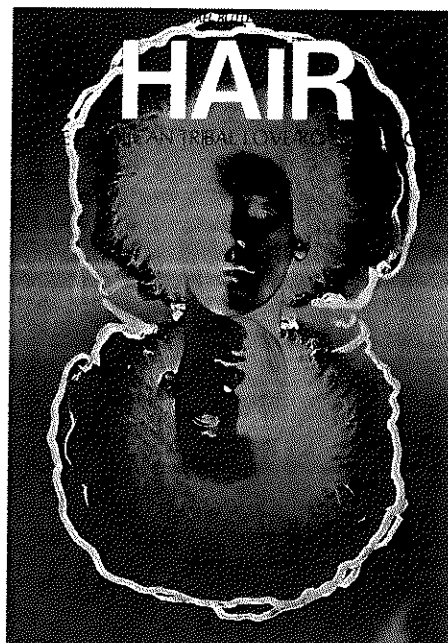
The counterculture was at its height at **Woodstock**, a 1969 concert in rural upstate New York. About 400,000 people convened at the festival—far more than expected. Despite rain and food shortages, the gathering was peaceful.

Woodstock helped popularize a new generation of rock performers. It also drew media attention to the counterculture. In August 1969, *Time* magazine reported, “The festival . . . may well rank as one of the significant political and sociological events of the age.” However, just a few months after Woodstock, four people died at a rock festival staged by the Rolling Stones in Altamont, California. The mainstream culture pointed to this event as an example of the dangers of rock ‘n’ roll.

**The Impact of the Counterculture on Mainstream Media** By the end of the 1960s, countercultural ideas and images appeared in mainstream magazines and movies and on television. Experimentation with new forms of expression spread to the visual arts, where abstract expressionism of the 1950s gave way to **pop art**, short for “popular art.” Pop art focused on everyday life, commenting on consumer culture by elevating mundane objects into high art.

Even musical theater was affected by counterculture ideas. The rock musical *Hair* opened in New York City in April 1968. “Aquarius,” a song from the play, described the kind of world the counterculture hoped to create:

Harmony and understanding, sympathy and trust abounding.  
No more falsehoods or derisions, golden living dreams of visions.  
Mystic crystal revelation and the mind’s true liberation.



**BILTMORE THEATER**  
261 WEST 47TH STREET, 582-5340

The counterculture’s impact on society was reflected in a variety of media. The Broadway musical *Hair* created controversy by sympathetically depicting men who avoided the military draft.

## Summary

**Members of the counterculture valued individual freedom and expression over materialism. Their values created a generation gap between themselves and older, mainstream Americans.**

**The New Left** Politically active college students formed a movement known as the New Left. In 1964, the Free Speech Movement challenged the University of California at Berkeley.

**Hippies** Members of the counterculture, known as hippies, believed in peace, love, and individual freedom. They shunned the Establishment and its materialistic values.

**Sexual revolution** As living together before marriage and getting divorced became more accepted in the 1960s, the divorce rate went up, as did the number of children living with a single parent.

**Drug use** Casual attitudes toward the use of illegal drugs shocked mainstream America.

**Rock ‘n’ roll** Psychedelic rock combined musical styles with light shows to create vivid experiences. The music festival Woodstock drew media attention to the counterculture.

**Impact of the counterculture** The media introduced countercultural values to mainstream America through television and radio, as well as art, music, and theater.