

## COUNTER CULTURE: SOME ANTHROPOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

R. M. HOLMES

A novel development in the social sciences is the possibility of the idea of a counter-culture, evolving within the framework of western culture, which owes its development to a supposed rejection of traditional western values and a display of alternative styles of life, contrary to the customary norms. The essential questions that the counter-culture concept poses are of current importance to the prevalent conceptions of the culture model itself, and it is a concept which necessitates examination in terms of present anthropological approaches to American urban anthropology, in order to test its viability and relation to existing concepts of the American urban scene. Since little scientific data-gathering has been done in order to document the actual status of counter-cultural groups, the counter-culture concept must still be regarded as a hypothesis, and it is my intention to discuss some of the anthropological implications of this concept in terms of its relationship to current anthropological variables in order to determine whether these implications merit study of the subject as a valid anthropological concept.

Although little actual cultural data has been recorded,

---

R. Michael Holmes is a graduate student at Wichita State University.

the counter-culture concept has been approached in a broad theoretical sense by Theodore Roszak (1969), and its relationship to current theories of cultural change has at least been suggested by Mead (1970) with cross-cultural comparisons. However, the main source of information, scientific or otherwise, has been provided by the public media, and an examination of the media can suggest at least the notions that exist in the public mind concerning the groups that may be counter-cultural in formation. The conceptions that people have of each other constitute the cultural matrix of their social reality, and the media, including newspapers, books, magazines, radio, television, and movies, form an enculturative device of increasing efficacy, the implications of which may, as McLuhan suggests, have far-reaching consequences. Due to the fact that the popular media has been the primary source of information on possible counter-cultural behavior, it may also be said that the media have been instrumental in the creation and development of counter-culture groups as the source of feedback, with and without reinforcement, of the patterned behavior that those groups are purported to display. Although the journalist is not committed expressly to scientific objectivity, journalistic data may be considered in a scientific context as long as the potential biases are considered. At any rate, if the amount of journalistic space and time devoted to the

activities of unconventional and reactionary groups are indicators of the cultural reality of these groups, it suggests the possibility that a sizable and significant force is operating contrary to traditional American and western cultural traditions. Whether these groups constitute a contrary and alternative life style developed as a reaction to traditional norms, or merely a continuation of customary cultural styles is the essential question of the "counter-culture" concept.

The counter-culture concept implies a dialectic opposition of cultural traditions, and the source of the opposing norms is a crucial factor in assessing the viability of the concept. Behavior which is contrary to the norms of one's elders implies a failure of enculturational processes, assuming that the success of these processes is determined by the stability and consistency of the behavior patterns of the succeeding generations involved. However, if successful enculturation results in alternative life styles which provide some obviously superior adaptation to the social environment, then an extensive investigation of the new behavior patterns would provide evaluative information of contemporary western enculturative processes.

The essential thesis of Margaret Mead's book Culture and Commitment, centers around the concept of the world-wide development of a "co-figurational" culture of youth who find the

contemporary culture of their parents untenable and who seek alternative styles of life among their peers. Mead attributes the development of this unique cultural form of peer group primacy to the breakdown of the three-generational family unit caused by the increased mobility in modern cultures. The traditional American value of "progress" serves as reinforcement to the search for alternative life-styles. Due to an increased awareness of alternative styles of life, the child is no longer required to relive the traditional cultural experiences of his parents. The dissimilation of the extended family unit exemplified by modern western culture, she contends, has weakened the traditional continuity and conservatism of cultural transmission, resulting in patterns of deviance among the young. Mead does not discuss this "youth culture" in terms of a counter-culture, and whether or not the patterns of behavior this "youth culture" displays are actually contrary to the existing norms in a dialectic fashion remains to be documented by ethnographic inquiry. However, her work in this area does offer some broad theoretical concepts in which the concept of counter-culture may be explored, and offers some explanation for the increasing deviance in western culture which is typical of so-called counter-cultural groups. She emphasizes, however, that the youth culture of the world today represents a qualitative change from traditional post-figurational

cultures, and she suggests that any attempt to analyze youth by analogy with the past may prove futile. Mead's "youth culture" model suffers from the fact that her writing is largely impressionistic, and she fails to identify concretely the group that she is describing, other than defining the group as "the young".

Roszak's work on counter-culture is subject to basically the same criticism as Mead's--he does not concretely identify the group he is analyzing--other than referring to them as "children of the technocracy". Roszak presents a theoretical approach to the concept of a counter-culture, which he believes to be a synthesis of Freudian and Marxian social theory. Freud interprets the social reality as resulting from individual psychic contents; Marx explains the individual psyche in terms of "social modes of production". According to Roszak, internalization of these contradictory approaches results in a "dialectic of liberation" which sets the counter-culture apart from the established cultural traditions. In terms of concrete anthropological data, Roszak's work is of little value because his writing, like Mead's, is impressionistic, and he offers no concrete cultural data to document his theoretical approach. However, his work does suggest some very important issues in cultural dynamics of contemporary relevance, and illustrates the need for sound anthropological investigations

in this area, if only to prove Roszak wrong.

In effect, the published considerations of the counter-culture concept have been inadequate in establishing the viability of this concept as a social reality. No one, to my knowledge, has offered a concrete description, based on anthropological methodology, of the cultural specifics of the purported counter-cultural group. However, the fact that there are groups, primarily of the young, that exhibit radically different styles of life, in seeming opposition to traditional values, is obviously conveyed in national news media. As is generally true of the news media, however, only the extremes of human behavior make front page news, and this front page news lends itself to the tendency to stereotype group members according to the behavior of their most radical peers. Many who have never experienced first-hand contact with these unconventional groups are nonetheless convinced that they exist. It may be charged that these groups are actually created by the media, and have no concrete existence out of print, and the only counter to this argument is sound methodological investigation. Any analysis of the data conveyed by the media may be the analysis of an intangible stereotype, but the stereotype is nonetheless real to its beholder, and, in lieu of empirical data, it is our only source of information to date.

In the final analysis, there is at least a popular notion in America that a significant number of young people are establishing behavior patterns which are normally characterized as exhibiting a life style which is contrary to traditional American norms. This group is appropriately stereotyped with its own status characteristics and social placement which makes its members readily identifiable as a visible minority located primarily in the urban setting in specific dwelling areas and with equally specific value orientations. Many of the anthropological dimensions associated with what has come to be identified as a counter culture do not seem to be contrary to the traditional norms as illustrated by urban anthropological research. Counter-culture members, labelled by the media as "hippies", are thought of as unkempt and unshaven Bohemians, who live in oddly furnished homes in low income housing areas, and who constitute a conscious and willful commitment to lower class culture and life style. Counter-culture members apparently originate from all social class levels, with a large percentage from middle-class homes. Group members are readily identifiable by length of hair and style of dress. In some urban areas they have concentrated in ghetto areas such as the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco, and their sources of income vary from manual labor to more sophisticated professions in the arts.

Drug usage is the norm for this group, as it is for their parent generation, the main difference being the type of drugs used. A great deal of their jargon is drug-oriented with many loan words from hard-core narcotic drug subculture. In many respects, counter-culture groups display characteristics of a culture of poverty, with in-group egalitarianism and reverse snobbery typical of working class culture. Alienation is a key word often used in connection with these groups, with the suggestion that their group identity and membership is a step toward a social affiliation made necessary by a sense of alienation from traditional cultural norms. If it can be documented that counter-culture members voluntarily assume and accept minority status, then this, in some respects, is indeed contrary to the traditional notion of the status and success-seeking American popularized particularly by Warner (1949). Generally, a culture of relative poverty is thought of as a self-perpetuating blight on the social conscience, and willful assumption of poverty-limited life styles constitutes a radical alternative to traditional mores.

It is in consideration of dominating counter-cultural values that the idea of opposing cultural norms may be most fertile. The ethos of the "hippie" is considered to be rather infantile in that apparently these people place a higher value on "playing" than they do on "working", if



media reports of their entertainment habits are accurate. It has been suggested that a contrary orientation to the value of work may be the result of an overly permissive childhood and lack of discipline. It may be that these people favor the increased leisure that comes with sporadic employment over the materialistic security that derives from steady labor.

At least one writer interprets the counter-culture scene as a commitment to the abandonment of reason, illustrated by a rejection of the primacy of rational logic and an interest in occult and mystical philosophy. Thomas Meehan has written, in an article covering recent Woodstock Festival:

The occasion that drew my attention to the flight from reason was the so-called Woodstock Music and Art Fair. In Bethel, New York, on the week-end of August 15, 1969, . . . some four hundred thousand under-thirty Americans sat hunched in the rain on a drenched and muddy hill listening passively hour after hour to a concert of rock and folk music. For the most part they were under the influence of drugs--marijuana, hashish, amphetamines and LSD. This happening, or concert, which attracted the largest live audience of any kind in the history of the world, has been called the dawning of the Age of Aquarius, a time when love, peace, and tranquility will dominate the earth. Perhaps. More significantly, I'd suggest, it marked the dramatic rise to the surface of an Age of Unreason . . . The striking revelation of the Woodstock Music and Art Fair was that the United States had almost an entire generation--and not simply a relative handful,

as had earlier been assumed--of Dionysian anarchists who had abandoned reason (1970:6).

Meehan illustrates a typical paradox of the counter-culture concept when he writes that:

Moreover, the young claim that their elders are equally as irrational as they are. To their minds, the exhausted Fairfield County commuter who downs three martinis after his return from his job in New York, and who then spends his evening glazedly watching television reruns of "Perry Mason" and "Run For Your Life" is behaving every bit as unreasonably as the marijuana smoker staring at a psychedelic light box in an East Village pad (1970:6).

He concludes his assessment:

Paradoxically, those young Americans who have chosen illogic as a way of life have used the classic process of reasoning to arrive at a rationale for their unreason. If reason has led man to create nuclear weapons and to fight wars that have since 1914 killed some one hundred million persons, they argue, then reason itself is suspect, leaving only the alternative of unreason (1970:9).

Kenneth Lamont, in covering an earlier festival of the counter-culture set, the Human Be-in in San Francisco, makes a perceptive distinction between facets of the counter-culture movement:

The political activists and the San Francisco hippies overlap at the edges, but they represent not a single, unified younger generation but an entire spectrum of movements that are widely different both in their objectives and their dynamics. To put it as simply as possible, the demonstrators on campuses, and at City Hall, and in the Viet Nam Day and civil rights parades are essentially political

animals, while the hippies--who sometimes call themselves the Love Generation--belong to what is in almost every conventional sense a religious movement (1967:103).

He expounds upon the religious dimensions of the counter-culture, concluding that:

New religions always begin as a rebellion against the existing, visible world, and this is as true of the hip movement as it is of Black Muslims . . . or, for that matter, of primitive Christianity itself. All of these religions share a conscious denial of the social and moral values of the workaday world and revolve around gatherings of the minority, who expect to be saved (1967:104).

Lamont suggests an intrinsic relationship between these religious implications and the poverty of its adherents:

Poverty too is, of course, a principal ingredient of any active religion . . . Clearly a good part of these kids don't have to wear grubby clothes and sleep in slummy rooms and take their soup bowls down to the park in the afternoon for a handout. Even when they're begging spare change, the accents of their speech give away the plain fact that they've been raised in warm, dry, roachfree houses in decent neighborhoods rather than in real slums and ghettos (1967:105).

Lamont offers an interesting comparison between the traditional culture and its counterpart:

It is becoming increasingly clear that this country is going through a social and technological revolution in which the upward drive of the Negro citizens and the far-reaching consequences of the circuitry of the computer are only two of the most conspicuous features. Other countries in

revolution have produced the Hitler Youth, the Komsomol, the Sons of Wolf, and most recently, the Red Guards. It has often seemed to me that the people who profess to be most outraged by the hip generation would probably be quite happy if our young people would, instead, dress in neat uniforms, march in great formations and sing patriotic songs (1967:106).

These journalists, and many others, have raised important points which merit ethnographic investigation to establish their validity. The question of whether or not there is an actual and real counter-culture formed as a reaction to traditional norms rather than by more conventional modes of culture change is an important one in terms of anthropological theory. In some respects, if the shock these groups cause to more typical Americans is any indication, the youth culture is an alien one in terms of some general value orientations toward status, class standing, philosophical and religious orientations. Some aspects of the counter-culture still lend themselves to analysis in traditional terms, such as evidences of alienation, poverty (although it may be voluntary and not circumstantial in origin), and social distance. There is at least a possibility that these groups may be considered in terms of a peasant culture, a culture in transition between traditional norms and new cultural alternatives in life style. Some of the more radical members have actually promoted re-establishment of earlier rural life styles, forming rural

communes on a primitive agricultural base and seeking to sever contact with modern urban life styles completely. This trend, although less significant in terms of numbers, is definitely contrary to the general trends toward urbanization more typical of modern cultural development. At any rate, the indications are that the formation of culturally unique groups of young people who exemplify, at least to some degree, values and behavior patterns not found in traditional assessments of American culture, is a social reality toward which anthropologists should address themselves in order to form a holistic view of contemporary American culture.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Lamont, Kenneth  
1967           A non-hip view of a human be-in. West,  
                  March 26, 1967.
- Mead, Margaret  
1970           Culture and commitment: a study of the  
                  generation gap. Garden City, New York:  
                  National History Press, Doubleday & Co.
- Meehan, Thomas  
1970           The flight from reason. Horizon, Vol. XII,  
                  No. 2.
- Roszak, Theodore  
1969           The making of a counter culture. Garden  
                  City, New York: Doubleday & Co.
- Warner, W. Lloyd, et al.  
1949           Social class in America. Chicago: Science  
                  Research.