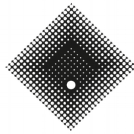

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Cultural outlaws, political organizers

Julie Stephens

One of the least contestable features of postmodernism is its refusal to accept the hierarchy of value and élitism implied in the distinction between high culture and popular culture. In the genealogies frequently circulated, postmodernism is pictured in opposition to two versions of modernism: a modernism codified and conquered by the academy and museum, incorporated as a high cultural artefact precisely because of its disengagement with the popular or commercial; and a modernism which lost its adversary status and entered mainstream chiefly through its contamination by mass production and culture industry.1

Leaving aside the paradoxical nature of these observations, Jameson and others identify as a central premise of postmodern art, literature, architecture or critical theory the effacement of key boundaries or separations, 'most notably the erosion of the older distinction between high culture and so-called mass or popular culture.2 This elimination of boundaries is executed not through 'quotations' from the popular, like a Joyce or a Mahler might have done (to use Jameson's examples), but through the incorporation of such quotes 'to the point where the line between high art and commercial forms seems increasingly difficult to draw'.3 Hence the postmodern fascination with advertising, motels, B-grade Hollywood movies, 'T.V. *Reader's Digest* culture', and the like.4

However, the exploitation of this fascination as an oppositional cultural strategy was not unique to postmodernism. The anti-disciplinary politics of the sixties counterculture was also based on deploying captivating popular culture themes in its language of protest. As already noted, the figure of the 'outlaw', borrowed from Hollywood film, became the conscious archetype for the anti-authoritarian revolutionary both parodied and revered by groups like the Diggers or the Weather Underground.

According to Hoffman, while the cultural view creates outlaws, politics only breeds organizers.5 As a further example, take Rubin's comments:

> 'I didn't get my ideas from Mao, Lenin or Ho Chi Minh', he brags, 'I got my ideas from the Lone Ranger'.6

And, in another context, the centrality of the popular radical imagination of the sixties is also evident:

> I am a child of Amerika [*sic*].
> If I'm ever sent to Death Row for my revolutionary 'crimes, I'll order as my last meal: a hamburger, french fries and a coke.
> I dig big cities ...

> I love to read the sports pages and gossip columns, listen to the radio and watch color TV ...
> I groove on Hollywood movies -- even bad ones.
> I speak only one language -- English.
> I love rock 'n roll.[7]

In the intersection between the counterculture and the New Left, attempts were made to fashion a new politics from popular ingredients. Moreover, importing these ingredients into the domain of politics represented not so much an attack on high modernism as on 'high Marxism' -- in either its old or New Left guises. 'Quotations' from the popular were incorporated as subversive elements in a politics which aimed to counter the piety of more conventional Left strategies, to taint the purity of movements supposedly based on selfless ideals and noble ancestry, and to playfully incorporate seductive items from the everyday into an arena often noted for its autonomy and specialization.

The anti-disciplinary assault on the autonomy of politics and culture was largely prefigured by wider political-economic developments. Efforts to confuse the lines between politics, art, culture and everyday life did not arise in a vacuum. The status of these categories and of 'the popular' itself had already been altered by post-war developments in communications technology and the related expansion of a prosperous consumer culture.

New definitions of the relationship between popular culture and a dominant high culture were fostered via the medium of television. And just as a once adversary modemism was incorporated into the mainstream through advertising, changes in technologies of production and the creation of mass markets in the fifties,[8] so a once marginal protest tradition embodied in folk music and culture was commercialized in the sixties not least through an expanding record industry.

In one sense, then, the anti-disciplinary revelling in the popular was merely a reflection of broader cultural changes So in harking back to the Lone Ranger as a begetter of radical ideas figures like Jerry Rubin illustrate that in the sixties a new political memory was in the making This is well expressed in a notable incident which took place on December 1966 at a mass meeting about a campus strike in Berkeley. Reporting at the time in the *San Francisco Examiner*, Lyn Ludlow records that after six days of demonstrations the students broke into song. She then notes incredulously that: 'They did NOT sing We Shall Overcome. They sang Yellow Submarine'![9]

Others have also documented this telling event. Todd Gitlin depicts this spontaneous outburst in part as evidence of the bridges being built between 'freaks' and 'politicos' at Berkeley:

> At a mass meeting about a campus strike, someone started singing the old union standby, 'Solidarity Forever'. Voices stumbled, few knew the words. Then someone started 'Yellow Submarine,' and the entire roomful rollicked into it, chorus after chorus. With a bit of effort, the Beatles' song could be taken as the communion of hippies and activists, students and non-students, all who at long last felt they could express their beloved single-hearted community.[10]

This episode epitomizes a rather unselfconscious turn to popular culture and is in contrast to the more deliberate manipulation of popular culture themes we see in the later antics of the Yippies. However, the incident also marks a significant historical moment where an essentially commercial product (the Beatles' song) overshadows

and is experienced as more powerful, resonant and palpable than the actual heritage of the American Left.

My point here is about a change in historical memory; not about the 'heritage of the American Left' as an unproblematic notion. Obviously, this 'heritage' involves a mythmaking of its own. In an interesting review essay of John Sayles' *Union Dues*, Marianne DeKoven observes that one of these myths revolves around a supposed continuity in the American Left and that sixties radicals were 'fighting the same good fight against the same oppression that the American miners fought in 1914'.11 The singing of 'Yellow Submarine' marks a departure from such myths.

As Gitlin suggests it is indeed possible to see in this collective singing an expression of the students' desire for a 'single-hearted community' and he quotes from a leaflet written at the time by Michael Rossman, who described this singing as a fusion of 'head, heart and hands'.12 Yet this would also be true if they had sung 'Solidarity Forever'! What sets this incident apart and thereby guarantees its retelling in retrospective accounts of the period is both the curious choice of song in an otherwise conventional form of political protest and the students' inability to remember the 'old union standby' and/ or their lack of enthusiasm for it.

This makes it possible equally to view the singing of 'Yellow Submarine' (the song itself being a fairly impenetrable collage) as a rudimentary' postmodern moment, signalling the demise of a certain kind of political memory where, to use Jameson's words: 'the past as "referent" finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether ...'.13

It is interesting to reflect on whether this commercial song would have been so readily embraced in a country with a different and perhaps more deeply embedded Left tradition. For example, it is hard to imagine 'Yellow Submarine' replacing the 'Internationale' at a demonstration in France in the sixties. This is where the cultural and historical specificities of sixties movements differ markedly. In America, particularly after McCarthyism, the political memory could hardly be described as socialist. This incident also tells us something about a certain attitude to commercialized popular culture which may have been more uncritical in America than in Europe at the time.

Doubtless, the Yippies were the sixties radicals who most thoroughly problematized the notion of a referent. Yippie rituals and writings repeatedly emphasised the extent to which there is nothing but myth in contemporary society. Political activity including their own was invariably depicted as being all about distortion myth-making and mediated images. And to theatrically illustrate these points popular culture themes were used by the Yippies to unsettle familiar distinctions between fantasy and reality The line separating politics from art was blurred because, like soap operas or advertisements or other items from popular culture, politics also involved myth-making, and was in essence, according to this logic, a fabrication.

Once again, the anti-disciplinary politics of the Yippies departed from both the old and New Left, which likewise drew on a fine tradition of identifying political misrepresentation and falsehood elsewhere but stopped short of extending this critique to include their own practices.

The Yippies thus turned conventional Left interpretations of ideology on their heads and instead maintained the position that the more distortion the better in politics. Instances of this conviction being broadcast are apparent in many of the extracts from the Yippie writings already cited in preceding chapters. Similarly, Abbie Hoffman's discussion of the relative merits of the popular Chicago tabloid the *Daily*

News and by comparison the high cultural artefact of *The New York Times* ends up offering a very positive view of media exaggeration. Hoffman asks which is closer to the truth: the *Daily News* description of 'Pot smoking dirty beatnik pinko sex-crazy Vietnik so-called Yippies', or *The New York Times* rendering of the Yippies as 'members of the newly formed Youth International Party (YIP)')?[14]

Hoffman in has no qualms about declaring his love for the former, hailing the *Daily News* as being the closest thing to TV ('it [even] looks like a TV set')[15] and hence, in his opinion, closer to the fake reality of American society in the late sixties.

Hoffman's homage to media exaggeration is not without its irony. However the further he develops the contrast between the two newspapers the more the irony seems to diminish:

> I don't consider [the *Daily News*] the enemy, in the same way that I don't consider George Wallace the enemy. Corporate liberalism, Robert Kennedy, Xerox, David Susskind, *The New York Times*, Harvard University -- that is where the real power in America lies, and it's the rejection of those institutions and symbols that distinguishes radicals.[16]

Mass culture was therefore not the adversary of the radicalism to which Hoffman refers Moreover, the chimera-like qualities of popular culture, its talent for overstatement and ability to magnify and expand the 'real' was portrayed as somehow liberating and therefore a legitimate focus for countercultural politics.

But this was no artless celebration of the popular. In fact the relationship between the Yippies and mass culture was double: the Yippies, on the one hand, relishing in the fantasy world produced by popular culture and embracing it as being intrinsically antagonistic towards the dominant institutions of the day, and, on the other, obliquely drawing attention to the role of the popular in making everything appear equally as illusory. Ironically, the Yippies did their bit to encourage the media preference for spectacular politics which pushed conventional Left and social movement protests to the margins.

In many respects, the quotations from the popular which helped shape the language of an anti-disciplinary politics in the sixties simultaneously expressed modernist and postmodernist tendencies. If, in this instance, we take as valid one of Marshall Berman's definitions of modernism, as 'the variety of visions and ideas that aim to make men and women the subjects as well as the objects of modernization, to give them the power to change the world that is changing them, to make their way through the maelstrom and make it their own',[17] then even the most anti-disciplinary of groups did not relinquish such aims.

Embedded in their flamboyant use of motifs from popular culture was a critique of the dehumanizing nature of the mass culture industry: its uniformity absurdity and falsehood. The cultures of so-called élite and mass society were therefore not entirely blended into an equivalently inconsequential mix. Insinuated in the anti-disciplinary attempts to erase the distinction between high art and popular culture were a set of value judgements about both. And from the tacit critique of popular culture came the modernist promise implied in Yippie forms of political intervention: by amplifying and enacting the distortion at the heart of mass society (and linking this deception to high culture as well), transcendence, authenticity and change would become possible.

Like other forms of sixties radicalism, the anti-disciplinary politics of the Yippies shared a commitment to the idea of 'the streets'; faith that there was a space outside' and separate from the dominant institutions of mainstream culture. While this notion of the streets at times literally meant footpaths, roads and public places where guerrilla theatre could take place, at other times it took on a more metaphoric significance signalling an autonomous cultural sphere unclouded by the delusions of mass culture. According to Jameson, the very conceptions of 'negativity', 'opposition', 'subversion', 'critique' and 'reflexivity' (the stuff of radical politics) essentially rely on such a spatial conceptual separation . These ideas share:

> a single. fundamental spatial presupposition, which may be resumed in the equally time-honoured formula of 'critical distance'. No theory of cultural politics current on the Left today has been able to do without one notion or another of a certain minimal aesthetic distance, of the possibility of the positioning of the cultural act outside the massive Being of capital, which then serves as an Archimedean point from which to assault this last.18

So anti-disciplinary ideas about such things as guerrilla theatre in the streets were in one sense as much predicated on the logic of a critical distance -- the conviction that it was possible to stand outside and be a genuinely independent voice -- as were more disciplinary forms of sixties radicalism.

Yet, in another and just as compelling sense, the critical distance of the streets and, alongside it the emancipatory aims of modernity were effaced by these anti-disciplinary gestures. In this form of protest, nothing stood outside the popular. No domain of authenticity was granted existence in high culture, Left politics or elsewhere. The categories were genuinely muddled. Rather than a politics with a logically adversarial relationship to that which it purportedly resisted, this form of radicalism suffused itself with its opposite.

As the Yippies and similar groups mockingly immersed themselves in the most clichéd forms of the popular, so the possibility of distance became more unlikely. In this respect quotations from the popular were increasingly emptied of criticality; they were mere aesthetic embellishments in a politics which had turned in on itself, so that parody and play became ends in themselves rather than indications of alternatives to what Perry Anderson has called, in another context, 'the imperial status-quo of a consumer capitalism'.19

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15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Marshall Berman's definition, in *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London: Verso, 1983), p. 16, captures the relationship between Enlightenment notions of emancipation and what he calls the "dialectics of modernization".
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19. Perry Anderson, "Modernity and Revolution", *New Left Review*, no. 144, March-April 1984, p. 112