

RECLAIMING THE SIXTIES

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Finger pointing is the ancient art of deflecting guilt towards a convenient target. It is an old ritual, also known as scapegoating, and is amply documented in scriptures from Abraham to Jesus. In a recent op-ed piece ("Almost Forgotten, Crime Wave Left Mark on Survivors and Society", NY Times, 5-18-10), David Brooks pointed his nimble finger at a convenient scapegoat, font of all our social ills since the dread 1960s: "...The crime wave killed off the hippie movement. Hippies celebrated disorder, mayhem and the whole Dionysian personal agenda. By the 1970s, the menacing results of that agenda were all around. The crime wave made it hard to think that special problems would be solved strictly by changing the material circumstances..."

The Dread Decade's hippies are surely handy, having coincided with one of the most turbulent period of cultural change and social upheaval in our recent history. Old entrenched verities of race, sex, gender, class, education, music, technology and religion were being vigorously challenged and rudely dismantled. In the ensuing chaos, what would replace the old order was not always clear, neither to the participant nor to the observer. Given the undeniable ubiquity of the so-called hippie movement, one cannot but wonder who exactly were those evil scourges and what exactly was their so-called agenda.

From the hindsight perspective of a participant observer, the Sixties' hippie agenda, re-christened as **The Seven Pillars of Hippidom**, turns out to have been surprisingly traditional.

1. **Love:** Our pied pipers, The Beatles, told us "all you need is love". Bob Dylan, beloved shining beacon, rejoined with "love is all there is, it makes the world go round". How great a departure is this from traditional preaching such as "...Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself..." (Matthew, 22.37-39) or "...This is my commandment, That ye love one another as I have loved you..." (John, 15.12)? True, the Sixties de-coupled loving one another from loving God, a serious doctrinal conundrum. But loving one's fellow humans is still love.

2. **Sex:** The best--most ancient, most effective, most enjoyable--love medicine ever devised by either God or Evolution is sex. Here is what the Bible has to say about it: "...Therefore shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall cleave onto his wife, and they shall be one flesh. And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed..." (Geneses 2.24-25). True, the Sixties de-coupled sex from procreation, guilt, control, repression and dirt. They also liberated sex from the patriarchy. It was not easy at the time to predict what the eventual effect of these new freedoms would be on marriage, family and child rearing (see (vii) below). But what is so reprehensible about the ancient premise that love is a pleasure, that it can be fun?

3. **Freedom:** The Sixties' clarion call to freedom, America's bedrock, was indeed

ambiguous, spanning the range from Bob Dylan's over-optimistic "You can have your cake and eat it too" to Kris Kristofferson's (c/o Janice Joplin) dark, nihilistic, crypto-revolutionary "Freedom is just another word for nothing left to lose". But the Sixties, with enthusiastic hippie participation, were also responsible for extending the American dream of freedom and equality across hitherto impenetrable barriers of race, religion, gender and sexual orientation. Rapid change invariably breeds chaos, strife and confusion. In 18th Century England and 19th Century Germany, rapid industrialization, rural de-population and urbanization engendered massive social disruption and moral chaos--crime, prostitution, poverty, greed, exploitation, homelessness and dissolution of the traditional family. Funny thing though--that period bears an uncanny resemblance to David Brooks' early 1970s New York. But freedom is hardly the culprit, being as quintessentially American as mom, God and apple pie.

4. **Work:** The Sixties are often blamed for the demise of the proverbial work ethic. But whose work ethics was demised, and what came to replace it? Tim Leary's indulgent mantra--"turn on, tune in, drop out"--was certainly inimical to hard work and self reliance. It was woefully unrealistic, never transcending youthful antics. Someone had to put roof over heads, food on the table, pay child support, raise the kids. Many so-called hippies lived off daddy's largess, or drug dealing, or blatant exploitation of their fellow humans.

But how long did this fools' paradise last? Soon, many of the wayward children went back to grad school, to eventual careers and marriage and family, turning into recognizable facsimiles of middle-class respectability--but with a peculiar, lasting sediment. What the Sixties taught them was that work could be enjoyable, spiritually rewarding, exciting or, God forbid, even creative. And that the compulsive workaholic pursuit of conspicuous consumption served neither sane personal goals nor cogent societal ends. The new environment-friendly ethics of "good enough, but enough" challenged the old rapacious ethics of "more, bigger, faster, flashier". But the new ethics is eerily reminiscent of older traditional wisdom--"What profits a man if he gains the whole world and loses his soul?"

5. **Mother Earth:** One lasting legacy of the Sixties is the evolving environmental ethic that views us all as stewards of a fragile planet and children of one Mother Earth. The impetus may be religious, invoking God's creation. Or it may be evolutionary, observing the destructive potential that one predator species at the top of the food chain, *Homo sapiens*, wields over our fragile biosphere. But spiritual or scientific, there is nothing but traditional wisdom in this hippie legacy.

6. **Spirituality:** The Sixties, with the hippies in the thick of the fray, saw a massive religious ground-shift. True, it began with rejection--of power hierarchies and empty rituals, of sectarianism and priestly monopoly, of patriarchy, misogyny and homophobia.

True, the Sixties wound up rejecting one central tenet of mainstream organized religion, the celebrated passage of John's Gospel: "...I am the way, and the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father but by me..." (John 14.6). This late-Gospel injunction was a sharp bone of contention in the Council of Nicea, convened in 325AD by the emperor Constantin for the purpose of making Christianity the streamlined, hierarchic state religion of the Empire. John's version of Christ won the day in Nicea against many competing early Gospels. Direct experience of God's Grace, unmediated by Christ or the clergy, was dumped.

The Protestant Reformation was, among other things, a rebellion against John's proscription against direct access to Grace, an attempted restoration of the people's early church.

Many other features of the Sixties' religious experimentation, however wild and woolly they seemed at the time, bore all the traditional marks of Christ's rebellion against the ritualistic, hierarchic, ethnocentric, misogynist, homophobic teachings of his contemporary Judaism. The Sixties' search for more clement alternatives, such as Buddhism, Taoism or Sufism, was not a rebellion against traditional values but rather their re-affirmation.

In the same vein, the Peace Movement of the Sixties, replete as it was with less-than-peaceful public display, may find its spiritual roots in the Prince of Peace's early, earthly preachings. While out in the streets it may have seemed politicized and bellicose, the peace movement's spiritual underpinnings were manifestly traditional.

7. **Family and community:** Here, lastly, one wishes that David Brooks had read an op-ed piece by his fellow Times columnist Ross Douthat ("Red Families vs. Blue Families: How Social Views Affect Stability", NY Times 5-11-10), especially the following passage: "...First, the sexual revolution overturned the old order of single-earner households, early marriages and strong stigmas against divorce and unwed motherhood. In its aftermath, the professional classes found a new equilibrium. Today couples with college (and especially graduate) degrees tend to cohabit early and marry late, delaying childbirth and raising smaller families than their parents, while enjoying low divorce rate and bearing relatively few children out of wedlock... In the underclass--black, white and Hispanic alike--intact families are an endangered species..."

Who exactly are Douthat's "professional classes" but the latest reincarnation the flower children? I see them all over the countryside, hard working, responsible, successful, but also loving, peaceful, considerate; communally inclined, spiritually awake and environmentally aware. I call them my Refugees from the Sixties. Whether certified hippies or fellow travelers, they bear the indelible marks of that turbulent, mind blowing, transformative decade.

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