

Cultural arguments reflect political struggles

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the 14th of 15 articles on popular culture the United States. It was written for Courses by Newspaper, an extension program developed by the University of California, San Diego. The series constitutes the text for an Oakland University course taught by Prof. Jesse Pitts. The views are the authors'.

By BENNETT M. BERGER

Popular culture embraces far more than the TV shows, movies, magazines, books, newspapers, recordings, sports and other theatrical events that engage our time and attention.

It also includes the games we play, the pictures on our walls, the clothes on our backs, the furniture in our homes and the food we consume, from McDonald's hamburgers to organically grown rice.

From the enormous variety of such things that are available, we select some (but not others) to watch, read, listen to, hang, eat, wear, sit on, play with and otherwise buy or participate in.

Our selections usually have some consistency or coherence to them.

IF ONE knows a person's taste in TV or music or cuisine, can predict with some probability what his or her taste is likely to be in reading, clothes or clothing.

The particular pattern of selections constitutes an individual's (or a group's) style of life, for "style" in anything refers to recurrent motifs or patterns which make a variety of objects or events recognizably "like" each other in some sense.

But how or why people go about selecting their lifestyles in the ways they do requires an understanding of their resources. For their selections (and therefore their lifestyles) are strongly affected by such things as their income, education and age, as well as by other features of their social background.

Sociologist Herbert Gans has pointed

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out, for example, that shows appealing to the lowest "taste-publics" are gradually disappearing from network TV because the younger generation of even the lowest income groups is far better educated than their parents were, and their tastes are consequently more sophisticated.

As the size and characteristics of audiences change, so does the popular culture.

SOME OF the most interesting changes in the popular culture over the past decade or so have been introduced through the so-called "counterculture," a taste-culture promoted mostly (but not exclusively) by the young.

But even so unusual a lifestyle as this can be understood in terms of the social backgrounds and circumstances of the people who shared it.

They were, in a sense, a leisure class: well educated, with direct experience of financial insecurity, with disposable incomes provided largely by parents. Unbound by institutional commitments to job, family, community or career, they were free to "do their thing," which they did with great abandon.

The culture they created was dominated by an antipathy to the imper-

Sexual freedom asserted liberation from restraints on physical pleasure. Psychedelic drugs were used to transcend the conventional limits of consciousness and achieve breakthroughs to the perception of "other realities."

Exotic, ecstatic, and occult religions were used for similar spiritual purposes.

THEIR MUSIC, too, was ecstatic: enormously amplified guitars producing sheets of sound composed and played by the young themselves in rhythms alien to most of the older generation.

Its lyrics preached love, sex, drugs, and criticisms of "establishments" which represented liberation.

Dress and personal adornment had flamboyance, flash, and glitter, or expressed other modes of disavowing conservative, middle-class clothing.

Residences were often communal, putting sometimes large groups in intimate daily contact with each other in "interstitial families," providing a kind of continual mutual psychotherapy in which utter "openness and honesty" were affirmed as liberation from repressed guilt and shame.

Add to these the great moral crusade of the civil rights movement and the movement against the most detested war in the history of the United States, and a political dimension was added to the cultural rebellion of the young against an "establishment" identified with war, death, repression, money-grubbing and the oppression of colonial peoples at home and abroad.



A lifestyle revolution is illustrated by Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis. At left, the First Lady of the United States conducted a tour of the formal, estab-



lishment White House. At right, barefoot and casual, she walks on the Isle of Capri in 1970 accompanied by Valentino, the king of Italian fashion.

THESE MOVEMENTS coalesced briefly in the late 1960s, attracted worldwide attention, and then rapidly declined.

Although the distinctive lifestyle of the "youth culture" of the 1960s was severely weakened, its influence is still visible throughout other American lifestyles and taste-cultures.

Sexuality is now more open and candid in books, magazines, films and storefront massage parlors. Marijuana became so widespread that many states have "decriminalized" (if not legalized) it.

Flamboyant clothes and jewelry are now a familiar part of middle-class male dress, even as blue jeans and work shirts become chic and expensive.

Life magazine, which appealed to everyone, is gone (in its weekly form), but Rolling Stone, which appeals to the heirs of the counterculture, is successful.

ENCOUNTER GROUPS and similar instant therapies are available every weekend as recreation at countless community centers.

Communal experiments in solar heating and waste disposal are now part of a mainstream environmental movement.

The "hippies," who loved wilderness and went "back to the land," were a vanguard that has produced the first

net increases in rural population in many decades. Natural foodstores are everywhere. Students carry their books not in briefcases or book bags but in knapsacks made for hitchhiking or camping in the wilderness.

Bob Dylan or The Rolling Stones may never have a prime-time TV series, but Sonny and Cher had, as well as other performers who adapt elements of counterculture music to more traditional pop forms to create a mix that successfully appeals to much larger audiences.

THOSE WHO adopt a particular lifestyle frequently attempt to influence other groups to adopt that culture and pass it on.

"Country and Western" music, formerly part of a taste-culture limited largely to Southern and Western rural people, has in recent times been transformed into a music with national, even international, appeal.

Obscure or declining styles in popular culture may be revived through fashions for nostalgia, as happened recently with ragtime music (through the film "The Sting") or rural family life ("The Waltons") or the teenage culture of the early 1950s ("Happy Days," "American Graffiti").

SUCH CHANGES are the more or less temporary outcomes of perpetual

conflicts over the "politics of culture."

So long as the moral or aesthetic standards of some groups are offensive or threatening to the standards of other groups, these struggles will continue. Conflicts over sex or violence on TV are only the most blatant examples of much more widespread (and more subtle) struggles over what should be legitimately available in the popular culture.

The diversity of popular culture and lifestyles, then, represents the diversity of American social groups.

At the same time, it is as true of popular culture as it is of other "goods," that the interests of some groups are better represented than other groups, and the less well represented groups continually make claims that will be resisted by the more established groups.

Out of these struggles over cultural pluralism, one can hope that some balance can be achieved between the common culture that defines us as Americans, and the plurality of life styles that defines us as the particular kinds of Americans we are.

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Next week: Alvin Toffler, author of "Future Shock," predicts the future of American popular culture.

They run in packs

Media condemn lavishly

By JESSE PITTS
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Today we shall analyze the role of the mass media in the development of cultural streams and the movements which originate from them. We shall conclude by some speculations as to the impact upon the citizenry of "debunking" journalism and art forms.

In discussing cultural streams and their movements, three factors emerged as important: form, potential, rate of application and "objective" success.

How do the media affect these three factors?

THE MASS MEDIA do not have much impact upon form potential, unless we include universities in the mass media, which may well be justified. A cultural stream, which benefits from the efforts of professors, will be more deeply "mined" for new forms (ideas, solutions) than one which does not benefit from such efforts.

It will secure higher prestige, will weed out its contradictions sooner and camouflage better its weaknesses. On the other hand, it would seem that a cultural stream mined by professors might suffer a higher rate of "exhaustion."

NEVERTHELESS, there is a process in Academia, especially since the 19th century, whereby a belief not supported by experiments or observations is likely to get dropped from the body of accepted scholarship. And after a decent—or indecent—interval, the mass media will cease to relay it to the general public.

This seems to have happened to the myth of "rehabilitation in prison." In 1973, thanks to a lawsuit, Robert Martinson was able to force the State of New York to release his 1,400-page analysis of "rehabilitative" programs.

Since many civil service jobs depend upon the myth of rehabilitation, these programs will not end today or tomorrow, but it will be harder to expand them.

More durable have been the beliefs that poverty and lack of gun control are major causes of crime, or that more money for education (i.e., for educators) produces more learning by students.

IF THE MASS media, exclusive of Academia, do not have much impact on form potential, they seem, on the other hand, to have a real impact on the fate of diffusion and application of these forms. An analogy would be what happens to combustion when it is done under pure oxygen instead of air.

The mass media can offer instant diffusion of an idea or to the movement carrying it, independently of any felt need by the public. And this will often happen before the movement has had time to "clean up" the idea, remove its more obvious weaknesses, refine it, strengthen its factual base.

The media can give an idea "premature" exposure on the basis of its novelty, its "man bites dog" potential. It tends to play up the entertainment value of an idea to the possible detriment of its serious implications.

Ideas require a period of quiet maturing, a sort of crossing of the desert, if they are to be able to resist the trials of broad popularity and application. Premature success may lead to premature obsolescence. This may have happened to the Freudian movement, which is now suffering an eclipse which may be as excessive as its early success was unwarranted.

THE THIRD influence of the media is on the evaluation of the adaptive significance of the new forms—i.e., their "objective" success. "Objective" is in quotes because social and cultural affairs are inherently ambiguous.

Failures and successes are rarely either absolute or obvious. There are so many factors which enter into a social complex that it is not too difficult to find scapegoats and unforeseen events to

explain why promised improvements have been slow in coming.

To a surprising extent, success seems to be in the eye of the beholder, although, in the long run, I guess Abraham Lincoln's statement remains true.

If academics are vulnerable to their biases when they evaluate social "reality," journalists are even more vulnerable. They tell us what has been happening far away from us.

What has happened is what they say has happened. And to describe is already to evaluate.

A little more than social scientists, journalists and stockbrokers tend to run in packs, because the penalties for being wrong by yourself are much greater than are the rewards for being right by yourself. Hence mass media evaluations will tend to be excessive, either in praise or in condemnation.

IN THE PAST 15 years or so, the mass media, especially through the power of the movies and TV, have been more lavish with condemnation than with praise. They have promoted an inside-dopester, a septic, even negative view of our major institutions.

• They have held our ancestors in contempt for their treatment of blacks and Indians by judging 19th century actions on the basis of 20th century norms.

• They declared that it was all of us (meaning none of them) who killed the Kennedys.

• They have degraded the military effort in Viet Nam, degraded the FBI and the CIA, attacked the oil companies and other major businesses.

• They destroyed Presidents Johnson and Nixon, crippled President Ford and could well destroy President Carter.

Mass media executives will reply that they have only reflected the realities of our time and that they are unfairly treated as the harbingers of bad news they did not create.

There is some truth to this—and yet there is also truth to the fact that the 1968 Tet offensive, which was a major Viet Cong disaster, was turned into an American disaster through gross distortions in the reporting and network editing.

THE HARRIS polls show a continued decline in the percentage of citizens expressing "some" or "a lot of" confidence in Medicine, Higher Education, the Military, the operations of Major Business, of Organized Labor or of the Federal Government.

Does this decline reflect the citizen's personal experience or does it reflect what he has been told about these institutions by the media and his hip teachers? Were the evaluations fair? As the point of comparison, did they take other countries or heavenly Utopias?

Is the loss of confidence real or merely a speech reaction to young pollsters. Has a sense of the sacred, which holds society together and makes its citizens willing to die for its defense, been lost or simply become less visible to pollsters?

When I ask my students, "How many of you would be willing to die for your country?" and only 10 to 20 per cent of the hands go up, what does it mean?

Does it mean they are more mature, less glib than their forefathers? Or does it mean that they are simply glib to different messages?

Does it mean, "There is nothing in this country which is worth the sacrifice of Me" or does it simply mean, "Today it is not hip to waive the flag"? Will the fans of "Catch 22," "M.A.S.H.," "Nashville," "Animal House" rush to the ramparts if the alarm is sounded? Will they have the time? Or is a national peril—outside of Joseph McCarthy, the American Nazi Party and Richard Nixon—a thing of the past?

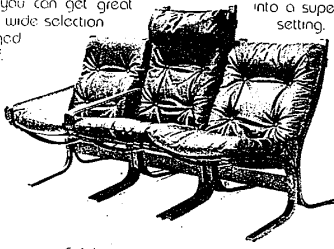
In the fog of news, the ambiguities of research results, the bombardment by conflicting data, where is the truth? We shall keep on searching for it, but our allegiance to our values and to our country must never waver. The Center must hold.

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