

# In Search of Nature and Community: The Mixed Legacy of the 1960s

Thomas Storck

**T**here are some who like to set the beginning of all evil in the culture of the United States in the mid-1960s. Before that all was fine: the gray, conformist world of short hair and predictable advice from Ann Landers. Then came the 1960s and with it a tribe of evils that threatens to overwhelm American culture: casual and accepted unchastity, wide use of drugs, a me-first attitude; all things that are rapidly destroying whatever is good about America. This is a view that those who never liked anything about the sixties in the first place can now proclaim with considerable self-satisfaction as we see the bad fruits of that decade engulfing the culture.

And indeed it seems to me that one must concede a certain point to this view. Widespread unchastity and drug use (along with rapacious economic injustice and environmental destruction) are among the most baneful things in this country today. They are chief causes of some of our worst problems, such as broken families and abortion. But, nonetheless, there is much more to recall about the sixties than that. Fairness, and the effort to understand what has happened to Western culture since the sixties, require that what was good as well as what was bad in that decade be remembered.

I was born in 1951 and thus during the late sixties and early seventies (I put the end of the "sixties" at about 1973, the beginning around 1964) much of my intellectual formation was taking place. I consider it a great grace to have grown up then, because there were unique good things taking place, most notably a reaction against the Cartesianism long prevalent in the West, and, as a result, something of a throwback to an earlier and healthier era in Western civilization. But before discussing that, I think it is important to say what was at the root of what occurred during the decade of the sixties.

The most basic description of what the sixties were all about, I think, is that they were an attempt to find out what was "by nature" in human affairs and what was simply by convention. What was really true or right, always and in every place, and what was simply a custom, even though some might mistake it for an eternal verity?

Now, before the sixties, considerable confusion had arisen in this regard. Ann Landers or Dear Abby, for example, might condemn women not shaving their legs with the same vehemence with which they condemned adultery or divorce. For a man to grow a beard could cause him to lose his job. Whatever was odd was bad, and what was unimportant was held to be as sacred as what was important. In fact, probably what was unimportant was held to be the more sacred. If one

professed a vague religiosity, it did not matter if one disbelieved every article of the creed. Provided that one shaved one's face and otherwise conformed to middle class norms, it was okay.

The late Protestant writer, Francis Schaeffer, described well the situation in the early sixties:

It became obvious to students in the early sixties that we were living in a post-Christian world. As students in Berkeley shouted in 1964, we are living in a plastic culture. The beat generation before them had been saying that, and now an entire student generation had become convinced of it. Students would return home from the university and ask their parents questions and would get only superficial answers: You must work like mad to get into the university. Why? So you can make some money. But why should I want to make money? So you can send your children to the university. All too often personal peace and affluence were the only values that these young people saw in their parents, and they rightly were turned off.

With a culture that was so shallow and that was determined to enforce conformity in both essentials and nonessentials, it was natural, and important, for those who saw the error of this to try to discover what was true by nature and what was merely convention. Even in the errors and excesses of the sixties this was the case.

The matter of sex, for example. Obviously sex is natural to the human race, and in a culture that at that time tended officially to pretend that sex did not exist (remember the old TV shows with married couples sleeping in separate beds), it was natural to affirm the naturalness and goodness of sex. This was particularly the case when an official ethic of denying sex coexisted with widespread hypocrisy. The young observed their parents' conduct and openly demanded what their elders practiced in secret. Of course, given the strength of our concupiscible appetite, an appetite that is good but blind, such an effort was bound to lead to considerable unchastity. But the unchastity was, in a sense, a by-product of the affirmation of sex. Of course such unchastity was wrong, but it was not a purely self-centered thing. It often involved elements of the search for the natural as well as a search for community.

Obviously sex is a way of connecting to another individual, of creating a community. This effort to establish community was both predictable and good in a society that had atomized everyone with its economic competition, its fractured neighborhoods, and its intellectual compartmentalization. Sex and drugs, and music as well, seemed like ways of overcoming that fundamentally atomized culture, though it is ironic that the counterculture did not see that the establishment culture's advertising slogan, "Better Living Through Chemistry," applied just as much to their use of drugs as to middle-class abuse of over-the-counter sedatives and pain killers. But it is always easier to discern evils than to discover their true remedy, so one should judge the counterculture no more harshly than one does the establishment culture. The atomization of society that by the end of the fifties had become so overwhelmingly oppressive was as great an evil as the mistaken attempts to overcome that atomization by the false sense of community created by drugs, the cult of music, and unchastity.

Drugs and music, however, promised to overcome more than a human community broken into parts. They also promised to overcome what was seen as a life dominated by a rationality that focused only on process and was uninterested in ultimate ends or in truth. Now in fact this was not true rationality, but only a counterfeit, a counterfeit that is still very much with us.

Since the time of Descartes, human reason has more and more been seen as merely a device that enables man to manipulate nature and other men for the sake of some end chosen by the will. The world was like the grid of Cartesian geometry. Given an equation on the X and Y axes, rationality could help one solve the equation and thus obtain one's desires, but could not help one recognize what was the good or what was the true goal of human life. Whether it was bigger bombs, faster cars or more potent drugs, the equation could be solved using the techniques of what was considered reason. Reason was nothing but the solving of equations against the background of the neutral, featureless world of Descartes, simply a method for gaining whatever one desired. With such a conception of reason and the intellectual life, it is no wonder that young people in the early sixties revolted against the very idea of the intellect.

The traditional Western idea of the intellect and reason, however, is far from the Cartesian notion of a mere technique for problem solving, unconscious of ethical norms. For Aristotle and other thinkers of antiquity and the Middle Ages, reason can apprehend what is good and what is true. Thus reason itself, properly understood, proclaims the sterility of the fragmented life of the modern West. It is true that things had gotten so bad that men could feel that something was wrong, but it does not follow from that that our feelings are trustworthy guides to what actually is the right way to live. It is easy for our feelings to deceive us, and when joined with our bodily appetites (good in themselves but blind guides), they produced a hedonistic, irresponsible life that very soon

gave up whatever was good and idealistic to become the self-centered pursuit of private pleasure that characterized the seventies and eighties.

Earlier in this article I said that, as a result of the rejection of Cartesianism during the sixties, there was something of a return to an earlier age of Western culture, something that was healthy and worthy of continuation. This might be called a pre-bourgeois manner of life. Several Catholic writers, most notably Christopher Dawson and John Lukacs, have called the bourgeois spirit, which is one of the major aspects of modern living, essentially alien to the Catholic spirit or the traditional life of the West. Dawson characterizes bourgeois culture in the following terms:

...[T]he distinctive feature of the bourgeois culture is its urbanism. It involves the divorce of man from nature and from the life of the earth. It turns the peasant into a minder of machines and the yeoman into a shopkeeper, until ultimately rural life becomes impossible and the very face of nature is changed by the destruction of the countryside and the pollution of the earth and the air and the waters.

Now the counterculture of the sixties was clearly opposed to much of the bourgeois culture described by Dawson. Though environmentalism is again popular today, at least some of its current vogue arises simply from the fact that there is no alternative. Even the most selfish exploiter of nature can be made to see that if he continues his present course he himself will be inconvenienced eventually; better to recycle than to die. There need not be any real desire for a right relation with God's creation in this. But the counterculture did embody a real anti-bourgeois spirit, which can be most clearly seen, I think, in its attitude toward craftsmanship.

The desire to create artifacts by hand using tools and simple machines can be simply a nostalgia for the past, or it can be something deeper. It can involve a recognition that the relation between man and his work was fundamentally changed by mass production and the factory system, so that the products of nature were no longer worked *with*, as when one shapes wood into a bowl or a dulcimer, but were, in a sense, violated by massive machines in massive factories. Modern technology, the direct fruit of modern science, is interested in bending any reality totally to its will. Anyone who doubts that need only look at its dreams, though to me they seem like nightmares (for example, slabs of meat "growing" in vats, divorced from any living animal). But how different it is to work by hand with wood or metal, not to mention living things, to know and respect their "whatness," that is, their nature, what they are in themselves.

In *The Abolition of Man*, C.S. Lewis wrote that he desired a science that "would not do even to minerals and vegetables what modern science threatens to do to man himself." And in its return to craft industries and rural

communes, the counterculture was instinctively seeking a way of life that revered the things that God made, as God made them. It is true that we are to make use of things, both living and nonliving, for our welfare. We may eat plants and animals, we may chop down trees and dig up rocks and metals. But surely to raise chickens by letting them run free in the yard, even though we may subsequently kill and eat them, is a far cry from packing them into buildings with artificial light and no room to move about, as is common today. And it is an even farther cry from the grotesque and obscene vats of "growing" meat which we may well face in the future.

The desire to know what is natural, that is, what is really consonant with our humanity—with our human nature—and thus with all created natures; the desire for community, the desire to treat human work and the materials of human work with respect—these are what the sixties had to offer to Western man in the latter half of the twentieth century. But what Western man took instead was the mistaken means the counterculture used to try to attain the good that it perceived. Sex and drugs, as I said above, were misguided attempts to obtain the natural and to create community. But, however much one may be motivated by something good, original sin guarantees that, apart from grace, most people will not seek the good for very long. Sex desired as a means for community soon becomes sex desired for exploitative pleasure. Even during the heyday of the sixties women were exploited for masculine pleasure, however much slogans about destroying bourgeois hypocrisy or living naturally may have been mouthed. Indeed, though some few counterculture groups rejected contraceptives as the unnatural and anti-human devices that they surely are, it is hard to see how the widespread fornication of the sixties could have taken place without equally widespread contraceptive use. Thus the bourgeois products of bourgeois technology made possible the very centerpiece of the counterculture's attempt to regain nature.

And as the counterculture's decade gave way in the seventies to another era, the use of sex to tear down the edifice of hypocrisy became more and more an act of hypocrisy itself. For the establishment culture no longer bothered to pretend that sex did not exist or to pretend to be chaste. The establishment types simply decided that there was nothing wrong with all the sex of the counterculture, so why shouldn't



they join in the fun, too? It was the same with drugs. They no longer were the outward sign of a confused search for community, but now just something to do to keep from being bored. The establishment found that promiscuous sex and drugs could coexist well with MBAs and corporate jets. And as the members of the counterculture moved into their late twenties, they found there was little or nothing in their principles which prevented them from enjoying the best of both worlds, too. Keep the sex and drugs and take the money, too. It was too good to resist. Had there been more reason involved in the sixties rejection of the establishment, instead of just intuition and feeling, then more people might have seen through the massive sellout that occurred. Or had many turned to the Catholic faith, the only living thing in Western culture capable of withstanding the bourgeois spirit, then the recent history of our country and our civilization would have been very different. But as it is, the enduring value of the sixties lies in what the era can show us about actually living in a non-bourgeois manner, not in any living survivals of its spirit. With a few exceptions—of which this journal is in part an instance—what was valuable in the sixties has not survived, but the good that was achieved, amidst all its errors and excesses, always remains as an inspiration and illustration of what might be done. Even in the midst of the new bourgeois age, those who learned well the lessons the sixties had to teach, and have rejected its errors, can themselves point out truths our culture has never absorbed and thus can never transmit.

---

*Thomas Storck writes from Greenbelt, Maryland.*