

# Hippies: An abortion of Socialist Understanding

*Everybody seems to think I'm lazy.  
I don't mind - think they're crazy.  
Running everywhere at such a speed.  
Till they find there's no need . . .*

Ever since the explosion of "Flower Power" in Summer 67, the world's working-class has been aware of the Hippy movement, or as it is now more frequently called, "The Underground". Attitudes to the hippies have varied from amused fascination to angry revulsion. Many people have grown more hostile to them over the past two years, as their emphasis on such harmless-sounding words as "Love" and "Beautiful People" has declined, and their tendency to smoke pot has become more widely publicised.

In Britain the occupation of 144 Piccadilly confirmed the hippies' bad reputation—though the occupiers were not typical of the Underground by any means. TV news announcers put on their frowns for this item, were careful to identify the occupation with soccer hooliganism (both were "violence to property"), and equally careful to avoid dragging in irrelevant details like the fact of empty houses alongside homeless people.

A wave of horror swept the country at the realisation that there were people who not only wore long hair (and obviously smelt foul, as anyone could see by looking at their TV screens), but actually believed they had a right to live without working. In one television programme, David Frost, Hughie Green and Robert Maxwell—those highly productive labourers who toil so usefully to justify their existence—led an attack on the hippies for their conscientious objection to work. When Richard Neville (editor of the Underground magazine *Oz*) suggested that the idea of work as a duty hadn't a very ancient historical pedigree, that work in the modern world was "really a form of slavery," and that with today's productive techniques there could easily be more than enough wealth for everyone, he was devastated by Frost's crisply intelligent retorts: "Very high-flown I'm sure" and "I really am an old fuddy-duddy you know."

## **Hippy characteristics**

The hippy phenomenon is a movement, a set of attitudes, a subculture or a nuisance, according to your point of view. It consists of several hundred thousand people, drawn mostly from the working class, in the advanced regions of Capitalism. It is vaguely defined, fuzzy-edged—no one can draw up a hippy manifesto; no one can specify who is a hippy and who isn't. It differs from country to country: in America, for example, there are relatively fewer semi-hippies or weekend hippies than in Britain, for the simple reason that long hair is a much greater obstacle to getting a job in the States than in Europe. All the same, we can list some of the features which distinguish hippies from what they call "straight" society.

First, there is age—or rather, youth. Hippies are predominantly under-thirties. Second, they have an unorthodox pattern of drugs consumption—mostly pot, with occasional recourse to acid ("pot" is now common parlance for cannabis(marihuana), and acid for lysergic acid (LSD)) and minor use of amphetamines and other pills. Or as "straight"

society (gaily swilling down immense quantities of alcohol, nicotine, barbiturates, aspirin, etc.) usually puts it: "Hippies take drugs." Whatever may be the medical properties of the hippies' chosen stimulants, they do have the important social property that their use is, for the time being, prohibited by the State.

Third, hippies possess a typical style of appearance: long hair, casual-to-scruffy clothes, beads, etc. And fourth, like all minority groups they have their own language: "mind-blowing" (stimulating to the point of powerful hallucination); "hang-up" (unfortunate disturbance of tranquillity); "fuzz" (policemen), and so forth. It is a measure of the commercial cashing-in on hippies that virtually all of their jargon is very widely-known through its dissemination in pop music. Most of it was borrowed from other sources, not coined, by the hippies.

Fifth, hippies are preoccupied with certain forms of art, for example beat music accompanied by displays of coloured, flashing lights. Sixth, they aim at an inversion of the values of "straight" society. They embrace spontaneity rather than self-control; childlikeness rather than sophistication; love rather than power; "dropping-out" rather than careerism; "doing your own thing" rather than imposed uniformity; admiration for the destitute rather than for "affluence"; disorder rather than method—and of course, Indians rather than cowboys.

Seventh, hippies often show a greater than average susceptibility to superstition. They are generally against established "organised religion," but fall for all sorts of religious and mystical clap-trap which have an exotic flavour ; astrology, transcendental meditation, palmistry, sunspots, or Krishna-consciousness.

Lastly, many hippies advocate a revolutionary change in society, though both the manner of achieving this, and the nature of their proposed new system, (sometimes described as "tribal" or "communitarian") are extremely vague. An example of this vagueness was the slogan advanced in one Underground paper: "Alternative Society Now!"—its urgent tone somewhat cancelled out by the woolliness of its descriptive content, which could scarcely be less informative. At least many hippies are clear that the major social evils of today are all bound up together, and can be removed only by a total social change. Both of the important politically-oriented offshoots of the hippy movement, the Diggers and the Yippies, make specifically Socialist proposals, such as the abolition of wages and of money. In our opinion, both these groups are doomed to futility because of their methods, but they do constitute an advance on the previously fashionable assortments of youthful radicals. This groping towards Socialist understanding is particularly impressive when set against the temporary direction of trendy Leftism in the US: flirting with black racism, romantic idolising of Guevara and similar state-capitalist prophets, or the demagoguery and vanguardism the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS).

### **Causes of hippies**

The Socialist argument that the majority of workers must arrive at a clear understanding of Socialism before they can get it, that a Revolution in ideas must precede the Revolution in politics and economics, is often sneered at by those who say that the mass of the population (except, for some reason, the extraordinary people who

make this statement) are brainwashed robots, puppets manipulated by TV , and the press.

But Capitalism is not a conspiracy. It cannot be controlled by set of individuals, not even the Capitalist class. Current ideas provide a support for capitalism (though the "mass media" are only a part of their reinforcement), yet Capitalism is dynamic, constantly advancing and frequently unpredictable in detail. The very ideas which defend capitalism have to be adjusted or replaced, to fit new conditions. Workers must be trained, not only to do their jobs, but also to be versatile, because their jobs are changing all the time, and also to make radical criticisms of the way capitalism is run, because otherwise inefficient and unprofitable blunders would result. As the *Communist Manifesto* put it:

The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production . . . All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their trains of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned . . .

Today, traditional ideas about work, leisure and "the purpose of life" are under attack, and in retreat. Capitalism has killed God stone dead, and is stamping on the twitching corpse. Capitalism extends the juicy carrot of the "Leisure Society"—a golden age of short working-hours and automated abundance, which is ever imminent yet never arrives. Capitalism holds aloft an image of glamour, high-powered pleasure, rest and freedom—whilst the worker's mind and body are reduced ever more thoroughly to instruments of accumulation. From the belief that work is a grim duty, consumption its reward, capitalism is shifting emphasis to the view that consumption is a duty, work something to be made rewarding.

It is in this context of irresistible change that confused vortices of rebellion like hippyism must be seen. The hippy movement has been centred in California—the most technically advanced region of the world, the window on the future. That is not an accident: it is just what Socialists and historical materialists have predicted. The embryo of Socialist ideas is constantly gestating in the womb of advanced capitalism: the foetus is aborted repeatedly, but the fertility of working-class consciousness cannot be lost, and the insemination of Socialist organisation must grow more copious. The hippy movement is one of those abortions.

Hippies are a product of the youth cult, the commercialisation of young people and the "generation gap." But this gap is not only a construct of the publicity men: the new generation does live and think differently from its elders. Many of the things our fathers and mothers were *grateful* for (and that is a measure of the servile depths to which the working-class has sunk), we *take for granted*. Young people in the advanced countries have never been brought to heel by a major slump, nor by a war at home. Their standard of consumption has generally risen steadily throughout their lives, and they confidently expect it to go on doing so indefinitely. Given this outlook, mere technical progress and fatter wage packets lose their capacity to impress. Young workers are more likely to ask "What's it all *for*, this endless treadmill? When do we start to live?"

The rapid dissemination of hippyism throughout the advanced world is a consequence of the similarity of conditions in these countries, plus the globe-shrinking communications network: any fad, fashion, doctrine or cult, once it has popped up in one nation is almost instantly mirrored in all. This buttresses our case that the notion of a Socialist revolution in a single country is ludicrous.

The hippies' deliberate irrationality, and their earlier Love worship, are a protest against "straight" reasonableness and logic. (In fact the very term "straight," like the archaic "square" reveals this). Capitalism manifests very thorough rationality in the service of inactive irrationality—scientific means to insane ends. Those who don't understand capitalism's structure often find its "logic" oppressive, and retreat into gooey, mindless sentimentality. This is a very common modern theme, exemplified in things like Godard's early films, such as *Alphaville*.

Mysticism is favoured by a reaction against modern institutional Christianity, seen as a cover for the "straight" virtues of ambition and conformity, and mysticism links up with drug-induced hallucinations which provide escape from an aimless and insecure reality. It is romantically pretty, a source of poetry, in attempt to give back to life a lost "depth," and in its imported forms it has the flavour of more primitive societies in which alternatives to the score-card mentality of "straight" achievement compulsion can be found.

The hippy movement is now virtually finished. Certain aspects—the dress, the jargon, the music—are steadily incorporated into a much broader and less rebellious area of commercial youth culture. "The Underground", always a term with a more political slant, becomes infiltrated by Leftist reformists and insurrectionaries. It is to be hoped they will learn something from the Underground, for they have little to teach it.<sup>1</sup> A feeling of community, and a common set of values, will persist among those who smoke pot (and therefore dislike policemen), but this becomes vaguer as the habit spreads. The really important question of future movements, perhaps partly hippy-derived, perhaps bigger, perhaps more explicitly antagonistic to the economic system.

### **Criticism of hippies**

A few young workers, whose anti-Capitalist tendencies were initially stirred by the Underground have progressed in their understanding to the point of embracing revolutionary Socialism, and joining the Socialist Party of Great Britain. But much more could have been accomplished if there had existed a bigger Socialist movement

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<sup>1</sup> *One of these Bolshevik reactionaries, D. Widgery, recently remonstrated with the Underground, via the columns of IT (Oct. 10): 'IT would still be publishing its twee pop-star interviews two months after workers' soviets were declared on Merseyside and Clydeside.' Widgery's delusional system is so fantastic that he imagines an administrative apparatus which was a symptom of Russian backwardness half a century ago has some relevance to the working-class problems in the 1970s! Notice how his two chosen regions are centres for manual workers, that proportionately declining section (soon to be a minority) of the working class - a section which the Bolsheviks invest with unlimited Romantic potential. Compared to the fairytale world of the Bolsheviks, Tolkien's fables are scientific sociology, twee pop-star interviews the last word in revolutionary politics!*

with the resources to put its case more loudly. As it is, a potentially fruitful upsurge of critical and anti-authoritarian idea has in the main been diverted into reformism, anarchism and mysticism.

The hippies' emphasis on a style instead of a programme, whilst in many ways endearing, and possessing an obvious advantage for propaganda, is a grave obstacle to their progress in understanding. Distinctions of dress, hairstyle and musical taste are, after all, fairly trivial—and many hippies come dangerously close to regarding them as fetishes. Flickering lights, a psychedelic design, a whiff of incense, a Clapton guitar phrase—such things can be combined into a powerfully unified appeal to all the senses, yet Capitalist society has no difficulty in prostituting this as it prostitutes all art and all enjoyment. Whereupon the market, having squeezed the Underground dry, moves on to the next short-lived modish fad. As Wilde put it, the trouble being very modern is that you become old-fashioned very quickly.

With the first, naive realisation that a new society is necessary, three elementary errors are committed in turn. First, it is supposed that the adoption of attitudes appropriate to the desired society will bring it closer—hence the "Love" phase. This is quickly seen to be largely unsuccessful, since the conditions of the present system generate completely opposed attitudes. To the extent that it is successful it merely helps to reconcile people to the existing state of affairs. The next stage is to go beyond mere attitudes, to try and act as though the new society were already here. This is like trying to get out of a prison by ignoring the bars, and equally futile. After this, attempts are at last made to overhaul the system, but only piecemeal, by changing bits at a time. However the nature of the bits is mainly determined by the nature of the whole, not vice versa—as student militants are among the most recent to discover. Thus, what started out as something really radical, and in its implications revolutionary, has been shepherded back into the fold of orthodox reformist politics. Only clarity of thought, and courage in the face of the jeers about "sectarianism" which are always hurled at revolutionaries, can break out of this vicious circle.

Now the Underground veers between two courses of action: assaults on Capitalism and attempted withdrawal from it: respectively symbolised by the occupation of 144 Piccadilly, and the move to Saint Patrick's Isle. But Capitalism will not fall before sporadic demonstrations and happenings, however defiant or amusing these may be. Neither will it let anyone drop out.

It may be argued in defence of the Underground that this is the age of exploration rather than of Principles, and that there is much value in looseness, informality, and even incoherence. But exploration is worthwhile only if it leads to discovery, looseness if it leads to firmness, informality if it leads to definable formal organisation, and incoherence if out of it emerges a new coherence. The Underground is incapable of making these advances because, though often expert at dramatising its criticism of "straight" society, it seems quite incapable of criticising itself.

Hippies then, are only the symptoms of a sick society: Socialists the cure. Yet to those workers infuriated by the hippy way of life, we say: Don't look for scapegoats. A few "spongers" are nothing compared to the vast wastage of Capitalism: the arms/space race, built-in shoddiness, the unnecessary monetary system, the "sponging" of the

owners of industry. To blame hippies (students, immigrants, unofficial strikers) for your troubles is to lose sight of the actual cause—which is precisely what your masters the capitalists want. Anyway, the view that people ought to work to "earn" their subsistence is out-of-date in a world which could easily provide more than enough for everybody, with a tiny fraction of the work done today. Everything should be free; all work should be voluntary—that is Socialism.

To hippies themselves, we say: Pulling faces at Capitalism is not enough. Even talking about "tribal" alternatives is not enough. An uncompromising stand on Socialist Principles is required before we can start to bring about the new moneyless world society.

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