Mannheim's "Problem of Generations" Applied
Counterculture, and Formative Factors in Socio-Historical Analysis

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ABSTRACT: This paper seeks to analyze Karl Mannheim's generational approach to social history by applying it to the Boomer-led 1960s counterculture movement. This paper examines the extent and limitations of Mannheim's theory that generations can be a study of historical analysis by examining how race plays into generational cultural participation. This paper examines the Boomer's generational break from G.I and Silent Generation life and values in their dress, living conditions, and sexual practices. It also examines how race and the civil rights movement prohibited or dissuaded Black youth from participating in the counterculture movement. This paper analyzes to what extent generational study is useful in historiography when considering important variables such as race in cultural movements and participation.

Perceptions of generational ideologies, such as dominant beliefs about gender roles, change over time as old generations disappear and new generations continuously emerge. Karl Mannheim's "The Problem of Generations" undertakes this concept by explaining how temporal location influences generational ideologies and their behaviors.[1] Mannheim considers generations as a category of social-historical analysis. Karl Mannheim's 1923 work has, however, been critiqued for being overly simplistic and theoretical. Hans Jaeger notes that Mannheim's theory can only be applied to generations experiencing major events such as revolutions, wars, or pandemics because there is a significant unifying factor between people and generations. Although individuals within each generation hold different local and personal values, the collective generation is impacted by national war efforts or political and institutional upheaval. Another critique of Mannheim's work, and one which this essay will examine further, is his underestimation of the role of formative factors (race, class, and religion) that take precedence over generational identity. Race, a socially constructed category, has been used to draw and reinforce significant differences between ethnic groups in socio-politics throughout American history. Mannheim's socio-historical framework does not allow for a proper recognition of race as a crucial factor in generational studies. If generations are studied without acknowledging race as a formative factor, historians will create gross generalizations in their conclusions. To fully grasp the risks and rewards of Mannheim's generational theory, an explanation and a case study applying his theory will prove useful. The case study will examine 1960s American counterculture while also examining how race was a determinant in counterculture participation.

The term "generation" carries many connotations, and therefore, must be defined before further analysis. Brent J. Steele and Jonathan M. Acuff provide a well-suited definition of generations:

> as a cohort of individuals in a particular setting (local, corporate, national, or transnational) that is shaped by a set of interrelated processes, including specific formative experiences and a set of cultural tropes constituting a collective set of ideas, causally relevant assumptions, and expectations about the world within a particular historical period. [2]

This definition highlights the social significance of generations: they not only share biological, age-based commonalities but also undergo "interrelated processes" and experience "cultural tropes" at the same time. This definition provides a foundation for Mannheim's useful categorization of generations in three ways: generation locations, generational units, and generational poles.[3]

Generation location, as Mannheim writes, "is based on the existence of biological rhythm in human existence" such as the "limited span of life and aging."[4] This biological rhythm is shared between individuals with the same year or range of birth. However, its implications are greater than shared existence and age-commonality; generation location implies a shared experience and temporal limitation——"a common location in the historical dimension of a social process."[5] This limited range of experience and exposure to historical phenomena creates a mode of thought that is unique to that generation's location. Mannheim writes that there are two modes of generation location within a historical process: emerging and disappearing.[6] Emerging generations have less exposure to cultural processes and thus, form their thoughts based on limited experience, selecting and rejecting modes of thought from former generations. In contrast, disappearing generations have a greater range of exposure to cultural processes. As they leave the temporal range of existence, so too does their mode of thought and memory. Both emerging and disappearing generations have unique modes of thought that influence and overlap with each other. Generations coexist and overlap — time is a continuous process of emerging and disappearing generations. The idea of generations forming their modes of thought on exposure or hypothetical location within cultural processes is logical and useful for generational studies.

Mannheim's second term is the generational unit. A generational unit is a subgroup of a generation. This subgroup shares the same age range, and when exposed to the same problem, they react in the same way. Multiple generational units may exist within a specific historical context, as not all members of one generation think uniformly, though they share a specific set of cultural experiences. Mannheim explains that generational units can become "polarized into antagonistic 'generation units.'"[7] Formative cultural processes can further shape and separate generation units into poles characterized by different behaviors and ideologies that are distinct from other members of the same generational unit.

[1] Karl Mannheim, "The Problem of Generations," Essays (1972): 276-322.

[2] Brent J. Steele and Jonathan M. Acuff, In Theory and Application of the "Generation" in International Relations and Politics, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan 2012): 5.

[3] Mannheim does go into other elements (zeitgeist and entelechies) of studying generations but this essay will only focus on these three elements due to the essay length.

[4] Mannheim, "Problem," 290.

[5] Mannheim, "Problem," 290.

[6] Mannheim, "Problem," 290.

[7] Mannheim, "Problem," 24.

Mannheim's framework of generation location and generation units conceptualize how time, a continuous process, can be divided into segments of study. Mannheim's work is commonly referred to in many studies seeking to understand the historical significance of generations. Today, Karl Mannheim's work has lost the explanatory power it once held.[8] Many modern-day scholars agree that generations are a category that is limited to studies of social change over a short duration of time.[9] Some scholars examine specific, practical flaws in generational studies that Mannheim fails to absolve.

Hans Jaeger outlines a major classification issue when generational age groups intersect with other categories, such as class. Mannheim treats generations on the same level as class membership. Jaeger makes a distinction between these two categories: generations appear and disappear whereas class "exists across generations."[10] If one was to properly consider this cross-classification between age cohorts and class, their study would result in multiple complex combinations of small groupings. Likewise, if one was to ignore the intersection between age and class membership, then their study would result in generalized, false conclusions. Mannheim's theory can either cause the historian to lose the specialization of their study or find results that are too broad with no depth.

Alan B. Spitzer builds on Mannheim's generational framework by skillfully examining the relationship between age and collective behavior. By assuming that age and collective behavior are positively correlated variables, one can make generalizations without sufficient evidence to support their claims. However, Spitzer argues that in some cases "differences that began as political or ideological may end as generational."[11] This is explained by the generation cohorts aging without changing their ideologies. This explains how the once-considered radical Boomers are presently considered traditionalists: they and their ideologies have aged, and new ideologies have emerged with the younger Gen Z. Spitzer discusses the value of generational studies in specific historical research as it shows the interplay between age and collective behavior.

The Generational Divide in 1960s Counterculture Participation

A case study is necessary to fully grasp the extent to which Mannheim's theory can be used in historical analysis. Many scholars note that Mannheim's theory is best applied in revolutionary periods where the rate of cultural change is heightened. American 1960s counterculture represents this generational gap well: the 1960s countercultural youth represent a generation that completely rejected the ideas and lifestyles of their predecessors. Contrary to Mannheim's theory of ideas being selectively processed, the counterculture youth disavowed any resemblance of the norms and ideologies they grew up with. Instead, they advocated for change and resembled this rejection of norms through drugs, sex, and dress. The Haight-Ashbury and Woodstock Festival of the late sixties best characterize this section of youth. However, this outward rejection of norms was reflective of an inward rejection of old norms, a "breaking-away of a new culture from an old."[12] This case study will demonstrate how the counterculture youth of the 1960s represents a generational gap while also showing generational poles through movements such as the Young Americans for Freedom Organization (YAF).[13] Additionally, the study will decide whether race was a formative factor that determined youth participation in counterculture.

Mannheim's terminology of generational breaks helps explain the dress, sexual behaviors, and the larger ideological rejections by counterculture Boomers to the beliefs of their generational predecessors, the G.I. Generation and the Silent Generation. The countercultural (Hippie) movement gained recognition after news reports about the neighborhood Haight-Ashbury reached nationwide television. News articles described hippies by their "weird-o granny eye-glasses," bare feet, long hair, and dirty bodies.[14] Appearance played an important part in displaying a generational gap: for example, the short hair of the Silent and G.I. generations was associated with military service and support in the Second World War.[15] Long hair of the 1960s was a symbolic defiance against war and militarism.

[8] Hans Jaeger, "Generations in History: Reflections on a Controversial Concept," In History and Theory, (n.p.: Wesleyan University, 1985), 280.
[9] See Jaeger, Spitzer. Like a revolution or war.
[10] Jaeger, "Reflections," 285.
[11] Alan B. Spitzer, "The Historical Problem of Generations." in The American Historical Review 78, no. 5 (1973): 1353–85.
[12] W. J. Rorabaugh, American Hippies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 99.
[13] "Young Americans for Freedom." Omeka RSS. Accessed April 9, 2022.
[14] Mark Harris, "The Flowering of the Hippies," in The Atlantic, September 1967.

In this way, long-haired men also represented hostility towards the Vietnam War. Additionally, men's feminine dress represented a generational break in terms of gendered norms and expression: necklaces, brightly colored jeans, and purses––traditionally feminine items––represented a challenge to the formerly accepted masculine dress of collared shirts and ties.[16] This hippie dress defied against traditional gender norms, which wanted men's dress to ideally represent their strong, rational, and business-like demeanor.

Women's dress also challenged traditional ideas of femininity by disrupting notions of sexual purity and modesty through wearing low-cut shirts and abandoning bras. W. J. Rorabaugh writes that elders reacted in disproval, arguing that barely-covered breasts were seductive and inviting promiscuity.[17] Other women wore masculine, collared work shirts as a challenge to traditional feminine dress. The hippy dress also rejected the reservation of gendered expressions of femininity and masculinity to their respective sexes; dressing overly feminine could counter notions of what was considered culturally appropriate. Male and female defiance of gender norms through their dress reflected a rejection of larger ideologies such as decency, masculinity, femininity, and sexual purity. Hippy dress was a generational break and a creation of a new youth-led culture.

Additionally, the invention and widespread use of the anti-contraceptive pill in universities enabled young people to engage in sex without anxieties about the risk of pregnancy. In a way, the pill, though initially designed for married women, allowed single women the ability to end the double standard around sexual 'promiscuity.'[18] Both parties could engage in sex without worrying about an unplanned pregnancy. This, in turn, increased the commonality of premarital sex: "sex became a matter of opportunity, whim and taste."[19]

The new sexual freedom of all genders was tied to anti-Vietnam War ideology. Violence and war were both associated with sexual repression, while Love and peace were associated with sex. Sex was also tied to liberation––casual sex was an act of liberation from traditional morals and cultural constraints. Counterculture rejected abstinence, saving sex for marriage, and traditional heterosexual ideals. The sexual revolution, endorsing more than promiscuity, was a collapse of traditional American sexual mores.[20] The sexual revolt against traditional mores represents a generational break: hippies completely discarded traditional views of sex and marriage. An anti-contraceptive pill was a variable that allowed this to occur, and places such as communes and neighborhoods like Haight-Ashbury were also important variables for sexual liberation, as like-minded individuals could congregate and sleep in masses.

The communal living of hippies also reflected a generational break. This break was tangible––an existence geographically separate from the influence of older generations and their ideologies. Communes were a "counterculture sanctuary."[21] They were a community of like-minded twenty-somethings that wanted a lifestyle based on a "new social ethos."[22] This new social ethos varied between each commune (there were over 3,000 communes in early seventies America) but the common feature throughout them was the principle of sharing.

Sharing materialized in food, finances, clothes, cars, clothes, and––more often than not––sex. This principle of sharing everything countered the post-war habits of individualized consumerism that were apparent in the G.I. and Silent generations. The suburban, nuclear family homes with TVs and two cars did not appeal to the young Boomers.

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[15] Rorabaugh, American Hippies, 99.
[16] Rorabaugh, American Hippies, 103.
[17] Rorabaugh, American Hippies, 104.
[18] Rorabaugh, American Hippies, 109.
[19] Rorabaugh, American Hippies, 109.
[20] Rorabaugh, American Hippies, 111.
[21] Rorabaugh, American Hippies, 189.
[22] Rorabaugh, American Hippies, 169.

Instead, counterculture youth shared almost everything, pooling finances in an effort to avoid employment outside of the commune. For example, the Twin Oaks commune produced hammocks as a way to sustain their community without having their members seek employment from the outside.[23] Mannheim would explain this geographical break as the hippy generation removing themselves from the ideological influence of other generations, another example of the generational break between Boomers and their predecessors. The teacher-student like interaction between generations was disrupted by the communal living design that separated younger from older generations, therefore, blocking the flow of ideas between generations.

The counterculture of the 1960s is a perfect case study that puts Mannheim's theory to work. It is a generational break that shows an emerging generation releasing themselves from the constraints and the transmission of disappearing generational ideologies and culture. In another way, the Boomer generation conforms to Mannheim's theory in its antagonized generational poles. Though there was counterculture youth, there was also youth pushing for adherence to traditional norms. A generational pole opposing counterculture was the Young Americas Foundation (YAF). The YAF was an organization that promoted conservative American values such as free-market capitalism and limited government regulation.[24] This widespread youth movement spread across campuses, presenting a contrasting ideology to the counterculture youth. Mike Yeager, a 1970 student at the University of Connecticut and Vietnam veteran stated the following: "In a couple of days I'll start growing a beard and letting my hair go…I'll look like a radical but talk like a conservative."[25] Yeager was one of many students involved in the still-present YAF organization. YAF is an example of a subsection of the Boomer generation that selectively accepted older generational ideologies and culture. Instead of rejecting ideologies and traditional politics altogether, YAF transformed their politics to represent the anti-government, free-market ideologies of many Boomer, university-age youth.

Though generations are an important category of study, Mannheim underestimates the power of formative factors that transcend the conscious or unconscious generational membership. Race plays a role in ideological participation and exclusion from contemporary movements.

For African Americans, the struggle for civil rights and equal opportunities in the 1960s United States took precedence over a generational (Boomer) rejection of the *status quo*. Black people, young and old, were fighting for the same opportunities that White counterculture youth easily rejected. Race as a factor in counterculture participation is evident in the demographics of the Haight-Ashbury hippy neighborhood:

> Once the visual scene was ignored, almost the first point of interest about the hippies was that they were middle-class American children to the bone…these were not negroes disaffected by color or immigrants by strangeness but boys and girls with white skins from the right side of the economy in all-American towns… After regular education, if only they'd want them, they would commute to fine jobs from the suburbs, and own nice houses…[sic][26]

White people, arguably the most privileged individuals in 1960s America, rejected the countless opportunities available to them for successful careers and established lives. Instead, White youths left home to live in communes and join the hippie movement—living in "voluntary poverty."[27] Notably, people of color and immigrants were not a large demographic in Haight-Ashbury and the wider countercultural movement. Few African Americans were present in Haight-Ashbury, even though the adjoining neighborhood, Fillmore, was predominantly African American.[28] This demographic insight refutes the idea that the counterculture was a collective generational idea—if it was, wouldn't have *all* youth participated equally in it? Race, I argue, took precedence over generational and ideological commonality, and instead, shaped an individual's countercultural participation over generation identity.

There are two words that can be attributed to the distinction of racial participation; power and privilege. The upbringings of White American and Black American families during the 1950s were drastically different. Black families, still existing in the era of Jim Crow laws and segregation, existed differently than White families. Where White families typically experienced material wealth and opportunities, Black families were still exiled to segregated suburbs and commuting to work for White men. Where success was viewed as brainless conformity to a capitalist system for White youths, success was viewed as a step forward for many Black people.

[23] Rorabaugh, American Hippies, 188.
[24] "Young Americans for Freedom." Omeka RSS. Accessed April 9, 2022.
[25] Wayne J. Thorburn, A Generation Awakes: Young Americans for Freedom and the Creation of the Conservative Movement. (Ottawa, IL: Jameson Books, 2010), 370.
[26] Mark Harris, "The Flowering of the Hippies," in The Atlantic, September 1967.
  The word used in the quote above is not politically correct. However, it is necessary to include in the quote because it shows the tone of 1960s America.
[27] Peter Braunstein, Imagine Nation: the American counterculture of the 1960s and '70s, 12.
[28] Rorabaugh, American Hippies, 99.

Journalist Peter Braunstein noted that the hippy "adoption of virtual poverty" was viewed as a:

> cruel mockery by the Black, Hispanic, and immigrant residents of these neighborhoods, who dreamed of attaining entry into the very material world the hippie children had casually — a provisionally— repudiated.[29]

Consumption of material goods were viewed in different lights by Black and White youths. Rorabaugh states that reporters found that many African Americans hated hippies for "renouncing the middle-class lifestyle that they could not achieve."[30] Additionally, the collective lifestyle of communes was also unappealing to people of color, as 99% of commune residents were Caucasian.[31] The absence of Black youth from the counterculture movements shows the importance of race over generational commonality. Additionally, race transcends generation location: it is shared between generations and shows a common struggle against oppressive historical and present forces. To apply Mannheim's theory of generations to the counterculture movement without recognizing race as a factor in participation would create a generalized history, privileging White-centered movements without acknowledging Black opposition to these movements.

The conceptual framework of Mannheim's theory of generations holds value in analyzing the counterculture movement compared to former generational ideologies. The counterculture movements of the 1960s and early 1970s show a generational break between the Boomer generation and its predecessors, the G.I. and Silent generations. The feminine dress by young people was a symbolic rejection of pre-existing gender roles and military intervention in Vietnam. Furthermore, the invention of an anti-contraceptive pill allowed for a generational break against the traditional constraints of sex within a marriage. The pill lowered the risks of unwanted pregnancies and enabled women's sexual agency. The sexual revolution broke away from the traditional abstinence-until-marriage narrative of previous generations. Additionally, communes were also a generational break from the intergenerational living norms of the past. Instead of living with family or in multi-generational neighborhoods, counterculture youth lived collectively while separate from their families and other generational influences.

Mannheim's theory best applies to comparing two generations to each other, examining how ideologies differ from one another according to their positions in cultural processes. A risk in applying his theory to form a historical claim lies in the absence of other formative factors and identities within generations. Not all individuals adhere to the same ideologies because of constructed differences such as race. As evident above, counterculture did not define the entire Boomer generation. Instead, generational poles such as the conservative YAF existed in opposition to hippie culture. Present-day scholars have critiqued Mannheim's framework because it undermines the formative factors of class, race, and sex. This case study has shown how Mannheim's theory does not understand how race transcends and takes precedence over generational thought. Evidence of this is seen in the lack of representation of African Americans in communes and in Haight-Ashbury. Instead, race and the movement for equality took precedence over a complete generational, counterculture break. Therefore, Mannheim's theory needs to be either analyzed with recognition of its limitations or revised to understand how larger systemic factors fit into generational studies. Mannheim's theory has clear value in the terminology used to distinguish between generational ideologies and the appearance of generational poles, as evident in the comparison between counterculture ideologies and the Silent or GI Generations' ideologies. Mannheim's theory, however, lacks an understanding of formative factors such as race and class which are a clear limitation in proper socio-historical analysis.

[29] Peter Braunstein, Imagine Nation: the American Counterculture of the 1960s and '70s, (New York: Routledge, 2002), 12.
[30] Rorabaugh, American Hippies, 180.
[31] Rorabaugh, American Hippies, 183.

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