

Mirror, Mirror

ASK THE AVERAGE AMERICAN UNDER 50 what he knows about our nation's history, and it's an even bet that the bulk of his "knowledge" will be about the 1960's. Sure, he'll be able to identify George Washington and the Civil War in the Before category, and in a pinch *might* be able to name Gerald Ford's vice president from the After; but nothing looms so large in his memory, or indeed the nation's, as the sixties. Even the emptiest Generation X'ers—you know, the kids who can't make change from a dollar bill and think America was discovered by "some old sailor dude"—know all about the love-ins and Vietnam, King and Kennedy, *Sgt. Pepper* and Motown. I myself remember them like it was yesterday, which is strange. During 1967's Summer of Love, after all, I was only four years old.

THE OLD JOKE IS THAT IF YOU CAN REMEMBER that zonked-out decade, you weren't there then. But the reality is almost the opposite: if you *don't* remember the sixties, you couldn't possibly be here now. The sixties are everywhere around us—it's the first decade to last for more than thirty years. We're endlessly reliving its battles, listening to its music, watching its documentaries. Politicians and activists on both sides of the aisle reflexively use it as the ultimate arbiter of the morally pure: pro-affirmative action forces invoke the memory of Martin Luther King, while their opponents call on the memory of, er, Martin Luther King. The Democratic Party keeps trying to re-light the Kennedy flame; Al Gore still carries the torch for Rachel Carson. The campaign to legalize pot goes on and on, and men—even when they're portly, and wearing suits—are still sporting ponytails. The Rolling Stones, for God's sake, are still on tour.

WHY ARE THE SIXTIES THE DECADE THAT won't go away? Partly it's because the Boomers just never grew up; and if their childhood decade is still going on, it makes sense that their childhoods are too. Look at Hillary Clinton: at age 50, she's traveling around the world like a coed fresh out of college, searching for something meaningful to *do* with her life. She's been a high-powered attorney, a high-powered politician's wife, mother of a daughter at one of America's finest universities, and First Lady of the United States. You'd think that would be enough to turn anyone into a grown-up, or at least make them sound like one. But Hillary sounds like a hippie chick straight out of the Age of the Groovy. On her recent trip to England—and it wasn't ever clear what exactly the point of her trip was—she couldn't stop talking about hope, and joy, and everybody coming together.

IT SOUNDS OKAY, EXCEPT THAT, in large measure, the sixties were not when everybody came together as much as when they fell apart. I can never forget going to one of the big music festivals (with my rather older brother) in 1967. There were spaced-out people wandering through the streets and fields. Unwashed masses of people—they might have been straight out of Dickens—were smoking dope and dropping acid and generally frying their brains. I vividly recall one emaciated guy—he had hair down to his rear end—talking to himself and nodding his head in a stupor. His T-shirt bore the Coca-Cola label, but with different words: "Enjoy Cocaine." I remember feeling shocked: I didn't think this was how adults (and they were surely all adults to me) behaved.

YET IT'S FUNNY HOW SEAMLESSLY THE anti-establishment impulse behind the sixties upheaval has itself become part of the establishment. Back then, the radicals expressed their hatred of the United States by burning the flag; now they do it by making Hollywood movies and writing for the *New York Times*. Hey, one minute you're growing a beard and protesting the war; the next, you're President.

BUT THAT'S WHAT'S BEEN TRULY REVOLUTIONARY about the flower children. They've given up everything they once believed, and become all that their youthful selves detested—and yet they somehow won't face up to the fact that they were, well, *wrong* about a lot of things. When you've spent your formative years screaming you'll never "sell out," how do you look in the mirror and admit you've done just that? Rather than make that unpleasant admission, the social revolutionaries have simply kept their *faux* rebellion alive, wherever they may happen to be: in Tinseltown, and corporate boardrooms, and major newspapers, and all the other places you'd expect the best and brightest to end up. It's the next step in narcissism—instead of being captivated by your own image, you keep up a false one, just to allow yourself to be able to look in the mirror.

AND THAT'S WHY, EVEN IN 1997, THE FIRST LADY is still mumbling about joy and love and everyone coming together. She and her generation can't quite accept that they didn't exactly manage to improve the world; and they can't admit they may have made things worse. Psychologists call it cognitive dissonance—the discomfort you feel when you're aware of a gap between what you know the truth is and what you choose to believe anyway. I bet the ex-radicals who are now driving Volvos and managing companies and writing television commercials must feel a lot of it. I bet Hillary Clinton does too. ❁

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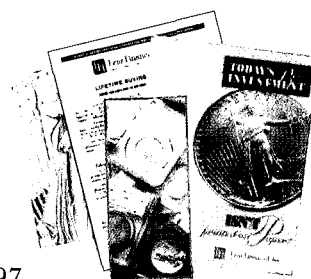


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