The Roots of the Counterculture

An Online Professional Development Seminar

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Understanding

While the counterculture reacted against the conformity, exploitation, and apathy of an earlier era, it also built on the innovations of earlier activists, artists, and movements. In this seminar we will consider the roots of 60's radicalisms—both political and personal—and ask how the upheaval and experimentation of the counterculture grew from earlier trends.

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Nineteenth- and twentieth-century American culture, war and violence, African American literature, documentary studies.

John Brown's Body: Slavery, Violence, and the Culture of War
(2004)

Experiments in Radical Documentary
(In progress)

What is the Counterculture?

The term was coined by Theodore Roszak, a history professor at California State University, in his 1969 book *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society.* Roszak argued that the rational, science-based society of the twentieth century alienated men and women, especially the young, and propelled them into a search for meaning in drugs, spirituality, and dissent. Strictly speaking, a counterculture can be any confluence of social forces that oppose a "mainstream" culture. In the United States the term is typically applied to the opposition many young people mounted in the 1960s to aspects of social life. They redefined the conventions of public and private life through political protest, new forms of self-expression, and experiments in lifestyle. The counterculture of the 1960s challenged what were considered traditional attitudes toward politics, art, music, religion, sexual mores, and race. Characterized by experimentation, the 1960s counterculture protested racism, sexism, and war, even as it explored drugs, rock music, spirituality, and communal living in an effort transform their inner lives and personal relationships.

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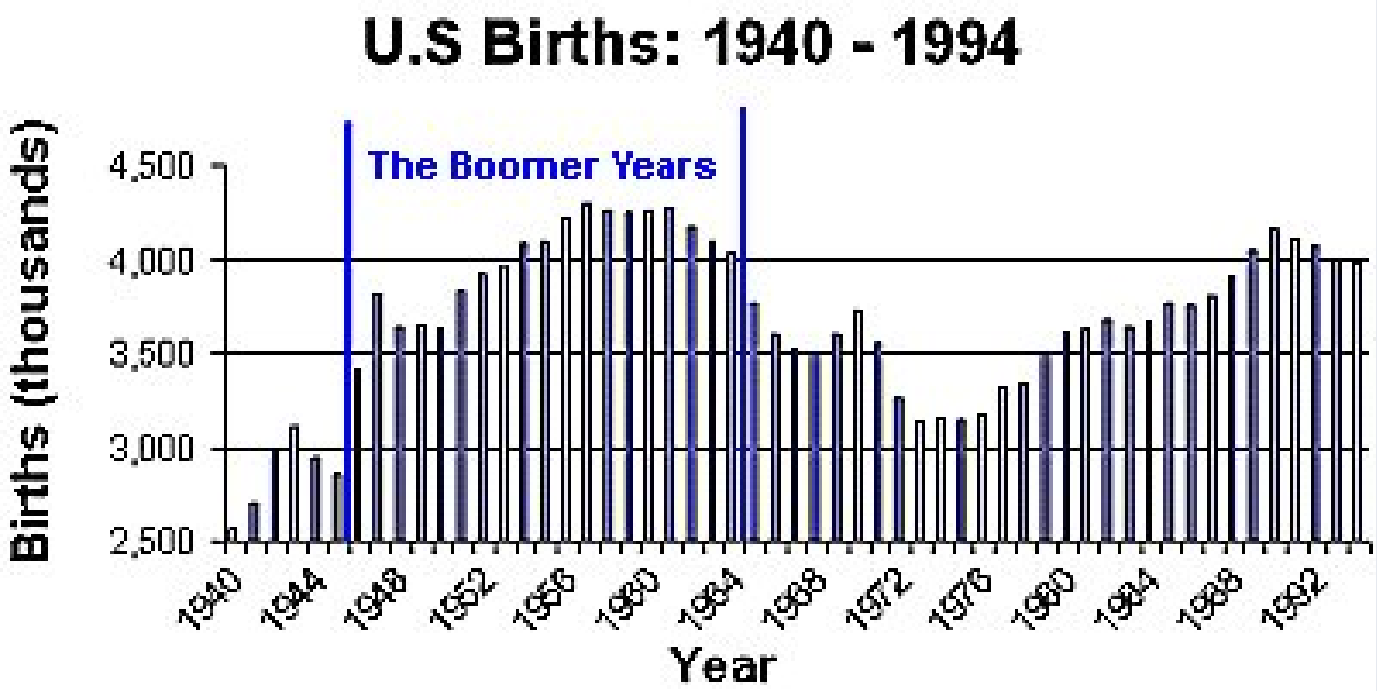
The Social Forces that Came Together

1. The demographics of the baby boom
2. The looming threat of atomic annihilation
3. Experimentalism in the arts
4. The growth of psychology
5. Drugs and the exploration of mind
6. A template for dissent: the civil rights movement
7. Television's coming of age

The Demographics of the Baby Boom



In 1964 more than a third of the population was under 19 years old.

What would such a preponderance of young people mean to a society?
What values and attitudes would be amplified?

The Looming Threat of Atomic Annihilation

By the mid-1950's, the advent of atomic weapons, and the subsequent arms race, threatened global annihilation. As a result, young people felt a new sense of urgency as they contemplated the problems of contemporary society, and a new willingness to take risks.

The Looming Threat of Atomic Annihilation

August 6, 1945: The United States unleashes the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima, killing an estimated 140,000 residents.

August 9, 1945: The United States drops the second atomic bomb on Nagasaki, killing an estimated 70,000 residents.

1947: President Truman describes the antagonism between capitalism and communism as a global struggle between good and evil, freedom and tyranny, giving birth to what is known as the "Truman Doctrine."

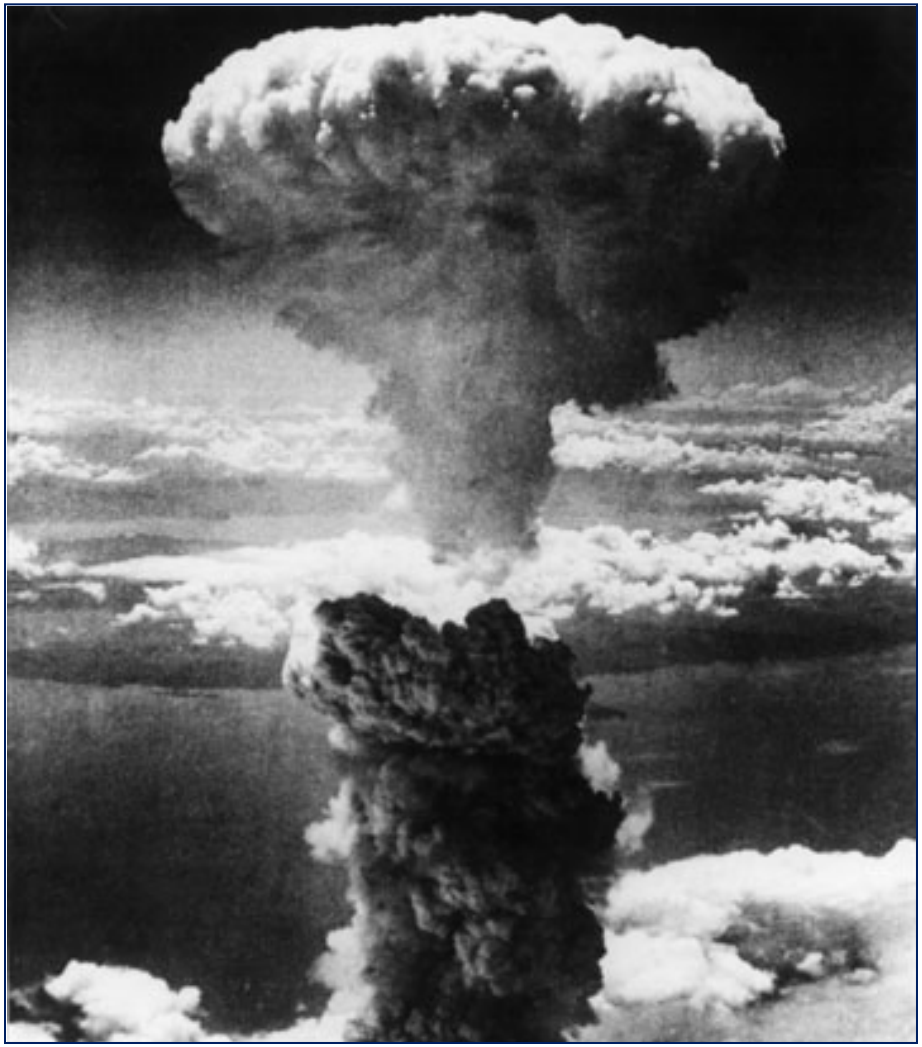
1949: Soviet Union detonates its first atomic weapon.

The Looming Threat of Atomic Annihilation

1955: United States and Soviet Union both develop and detonate hydrogen bombs.

1961: In his last speech in office, President Eisenhower warns Americans against the growing power of the "military-industrial complex."

1962: In their "Port Huron Statement," founding members of *Students for a Democratic Society* name the bomb as one of the biggest influences on their radical politics.



"Farewell Address," President Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1961

"We have been compelled to create a permanent armaments industry of vast proportions. Added to this, three and a half million men and women are directly engaged in the defense establishment. We annually spend on military security more than the net income of all United States corporations. This conjunction of an immense military establishment and a large arms industry is new in the American experience. The total influence -- economic, political, even spiritual -- is felt in every city, every State house, every office of the Federal government. We recognize the imperative need for this development. Yet we must not fail to comprehend its grave implications. Our toil, resources and livelihood are all involved; so is the very structure of our society. In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist. We must never let the weight of this combination endanger our liberties or democratic process."

The Looming Threat of Atomic Annihilation

> "If we appear to seek the unattainable, as it has been said, then let it be known that we do so to avoid the unimaginable."
>
> —"Port Huron Statement"

Fugitive Days, Bill Ayers

I don't remember America dropping the Bomb, of course, because as I said I was just a baby at my mother's breast. But I've lived my whole life in its thick and sticky shadow, and I grew up on the noble story of this most excellent and worthy A-bomb: A for American; A for Atomic; A for Amnesia. I was born into an orgy of explosions.

The Russians stole the secret of the Bomb from us just before I went to kindergarten, and I learned then that the whole world could blow up at any moment. My first-grade teacher, Miss Loving, taught us that wherever we were—at home with our families, on a picnic, or right here in our classroom—we should stay alert to the possibility of a nuclear attack. It could come at any time. Once, as a group of us boys wrestled across the playground, Miss Loving reprimanded us for being too rowdy, adding that we weren't in any position to respond properly to a nuclear attack. We all knew the response by now: Duck! And cover! Whenever we saw the bright flash, wherever we were, we were supposed to drop everything, duck and cover. Under our desks, beneath a beach towel, below our beds—the key was to close our eyes, cover our heads, and wait for the blast to pass over us. And then, when it was all over, Miss Loving told us, we should always wash thoroughly.

I knew what supplies we were supposed to keep in our basements—tuna, dry fruit, evaporated milk, canned chicken, tomato juice—and I was a little bothered about why Mom frowned and said not to worry, we didn't need it. In Cub Scouts we were taught to encourage everyone in our neighborhood to stock up, so that those of us who were prepared wouldn't be in the uncomfortable position of denying canned chicken to our less responsible neighbors, but Mom wouldn't budge. I kept quiet on the subject at Cub Scout meetings. That was OK, because it wasn't long before Dad and I went to an award ceremony and heard a man from the national Cub Scouts tell a confusing story about a boy from Boise, Idaho, who had found out that his parents were soft on the Russians and that the boy had turned them in to the police—I didn't know if that was a good thing or a bad thing—and Dad said I couldn't go to Cub Scout meetings anymore. I was baffled.

Discussion Question

What impact do you imagine the advent of nuclear weapons had on young Americans?

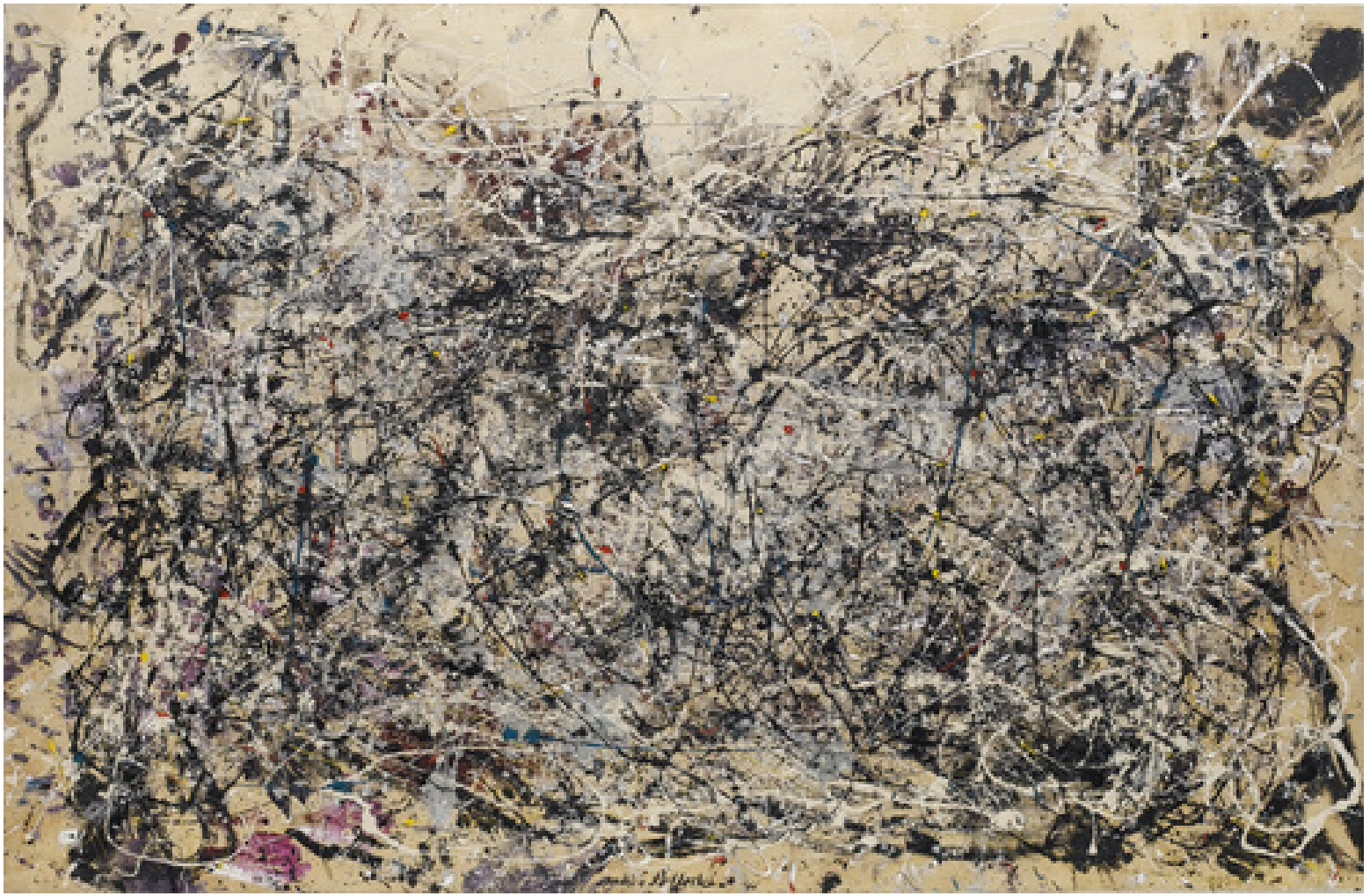
Experimentalism in the Arts

Experimentalism in the arts had a huge impact on the counterculture as youth of the 1960's immersed themselves in beat writing; developed rock music that drew on the improvisations and intensities of hard bop; and took inspiration from painters and performers who had challenged the boundaries between "life" and "art."

KEY FEATURES OF EXPERIMENTAL ART OF THE 1950'S

1) Rejects tradition
2) Engages materiality of the medium
3) Emphasizes interaction
4) Prizes spontaneity
5) Conveys emotionality
6) Difficult to consume

Experimentalism in the Arts



Number 1A, 1948. Jackson Pollock. Oil and enamel paint on canvas, 68” x 8' 8” Purchase. © 2013 Pollock-Krasner Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Experimentalism in the Arts

1947: Jackson Pollock paints his first “drip” paintings.

1955: Allen Ginsburg reads “Howl” out loud at the Six Gallery in San Francisco

1964: Yoko Ono performed “Cut Piece,” during which she invited audience members to cut off her clothes.

1969: Jimi Hendrix performs “The Star Spangled Banner” at Woodstock.

Experimentalism in the Arts

Discussion Question

From what you now know of 1950s experimentalism, what did it bring to the counterculture?

The Growth of Psychology

The rapid growth of professional psychology and its popularization during the 1940's and 50's paved the way for a counterculture that believed "the personal is political," and advocated a new openness about the complexities of emotional life.

The Growth of Psychology

1940-45: The Second World War marked a watershed in the institutionalization and dissemination of therapeutic practices, as psychiatrists and psychologists were called upon to test the mental health of soldiers entering the military, and to treat the estimated 504,000 U.S. soldiers who suffered “psychiatric collapse” during the war.

The military had a psychiatric staff of 25 when the war began; at the war’s close it employed 1,700.

1946: Mental health becomes a major concern of the federal government with the passage of the National Mental Health Act.

The Growth of Psychology

1954: The U.S. Supreme Court uses the language of emotional well-being, appealing explicitly to "psychological knowledge" in their decision to end legal segregation, Brown vs. Board of Education.

"To separate them [African American children] from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone... Whatever may have been the extent of psychological knowledge at the time of Plessy v. Ferguson, this finding is amply supported by modern authority. Any language in Plessy v. Ferguson contrary to this finding is rejected. We conclude that, in the field of public education, the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place."

The Growth of Psychology

In her 1963 best-seller *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan launches an attack on psychological experts who profit from the malaise of unhappy women, and claims the power of women to name their own "problems." Known as the "mother of liberal feminism," Friedan paved the way for the consciousness raising groups, where second wave feminists shared their problems and concerns with one another.

"On an April morning in 1959, I heard a mother of four, having coffee with four other mothers in a suburban development...say in a tone of quiet desperation, 'the problem.' And the others knew, without words, that she was not talking about the problem with her husband, or her children, or her home. Suddenly they realized that they all shared the same problem, the problem with no name. They began, hesitantly, to talk about it. Later, after they had picked up their children at nursery school and taken them home to nap, two of the women cried, in sheer relief, just to know that they were not alone."

Drugs and the Exploration of Mind

During the late 1960's, members of the counterculture increasingly turned to drugs for quick access to alternate realities. Experimentation with hallucinogenic drugs, pioneered in secret by the U.S. military, was popularized by writers and advocates like Aldous Huxley, Timothy Leary, and Ken Kesey. In combination with rock music, meditation, and other mind-altering practices, these drugs gave young people a chance to explore the nature of consciousness.

Drugs and the Exploration of Mind

1952: Aldous Huxley tries mescalin at his home in Los Angeles under the supervision of British psychiatrist Humphry Osmond.

1954: Huxley publishes his account of his mescalin experience, *The Doors of Perception*.

1959: Ken Kesey participates in government sponsored experiments with LSD and other drugs at Stanford University.

1964: Kesey and his Merry Pranksters tour the country in their bus, “Furthur,” and throw big parties that they call “Acid Tests” in Northern California.

Drugs and the Exploration of Mind

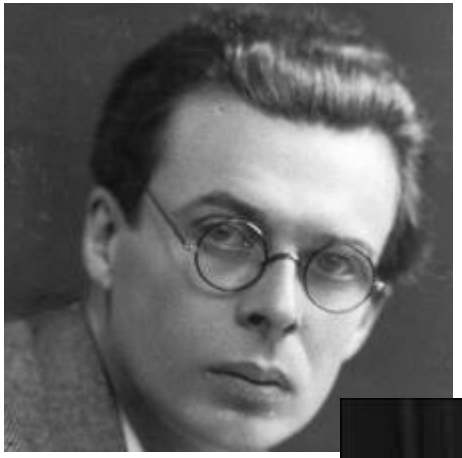
1968 Tom Wolfe publishes *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, which, along with Huxley's *Doors of Perception*, a cherished text of the drug culture.

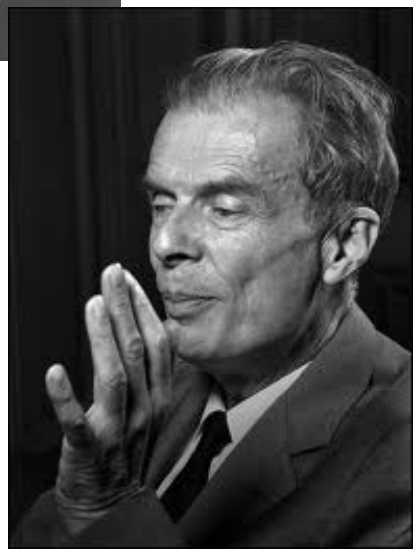
"In a short time he and Lovell had tried the whole range of drugs, LSD, psilocybin, mescaline, peyote, IT-290 the superamphetamine, Ditran the bummer, morning-glory seeds. They were onto a discovery that the Menlo Park clinicians themselves never—mighty fine irony here: the White Smocks were supposedly using *them*. Instead the White Smocks had handed them the very key itself."

The Doors of Perception, Aldous Huxley

Aldous Huxley
1894-1963

"Each one of us is potentially Mind at Large. But in so far as we are animals, our business is at all costs to survive…That which, in the language of religion, is called 'this world' is the universe of reduced awareness, expressed, and, as it were petrified by language."





Discussion Question

Aldous Huxley's account of his experiments with mescaline became a primer of sorts for drug enthusiasts. What can "Doors of Perception" tell us about how drugs were viewed, and used, by later generations?

A Template for Dissent: The Civil Rights Movement

Many activists of the 1960's learned about direct action and nonviolence from their predecessors in the Civil Rights movement. From Civil Rights activists they learned the power of both grass roots organizing and telegenic displays of vulnerability and commitment. The utopianism of the social movements of the 1950's and 60's went hand in hand with the threat of social unrest.

A Template for Dissent: The Civil Rights Movement

1954: The Supreme Court strikes down the legal doctrine of "separate but equal," and the practice of segregated schooling, in Brown v. Board of Education.

1955: While visiting his uncle in Money, Mississippi, Chicago teenager Emmett Till is kidnapped and murdered by Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam. His mother, Mamie Till Bradley, holds an open-casket funeral for her son that is attended by thousands of mourners in Chicago. Photographs of Till's mutilated corpse are published in Jet Magazine. Circulated in the national press, these images are credited with radicalizing a generation of African Americans.

1955: The Montgomery bus boycott begins when Rosa Parks, working in concert with the local chapter of the NAACP, refuses to give up her seat on the bus. Led by the young pastor, Martin Luther King, the boycott lasted over a year.

1956: In response to pressure brought by the boycott, the Supreme Court rules in Browder v. Gayle that racial segregation on buses is illegal.

A Template for Dissent: The Civil Rights Movement

April 1963: King leads demonstrations in Birmingham to demand equal access to public accommodations and fair hiring practices.

August 1963: Civil Rights leaders organize the "March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom," where King gives his "I Have a Dream" speech. Their stated demands: a $2 minimum wage; the desegregation of public schools; a federal public-works job program; federal action to bar racial discrimination in employment practices.

1964: Congress passes the Civil Rights Act, outlawing racial discrimination in hotels, restaurants, and other public venues.

1965: Congress passes the Voting Rights Act, authorizing federal examiners to register voters, and suspending literacy tests and other measures used to defraud black voters. By the end of the year 250,000 new black voters had registered to vote.

"I Have A Dream," Martin Luther King, Jr.

"It would be fatal for the nation to overlook the urgency of the moment. This sweltering summer of the Negro's legitimate discontent will not pass until there is an invigorating autumn of freedom and equality…And those who hope that the Negro needed to blow off steam and will now be content will have a rude awakening if the nation returns to business as usual. There will be neither rest nor tranquility in America until the Negro is granted his citizenship rights. The whirlwinds of revolt will continue to shake the foundations of our nation until the bright day of justice emerges."

"I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood...I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character"

Discussion Questions

Two-thirds of the way through his famous "I Have a Dream" speech, King abandoned the remarks he had prepared for that day and began to improvise from recollection a speech he had given many times before ("I have a dream that one day…"). Compare this passage from his prepared speech to the more famous final riff. Why do you think that King decided to shift gears? Why do you think we tend to remember and celebrate the later part of the speech?

Television's Coming of Age

During the 1950's, owning a television was a badge of middle-class prosperity. With the advent of the Civil Rights movement, the new medium of television began to broadcast scenes of political violence into the privacy of the home, provoking outrage, as well as apathy. Scholars continue to debate the effect of television news, which came packaged alongside sitcoms and advertisements, on the habits and views of Americans during the 1950's and 60's.

Television's Coming of Age

1946: There were 7,000 television sets in American homes.

1952: First televised presidential nominating conventions.

1960: There were 50 million--one in nine out of every ten homes.

1960: 87% of American households own a television.

1963: Americans get more of their news from television than from newspapers.

1963: Police Chief Bull Connor unleashes massive retaliation on Civil Rights demonstrators in Birmingham, blasting children with fire hoses and turning dogs on them. These scenes are televised on the nightly news.

1968: At the Democratic Convention in Chicago, police attack anti-war demonstrators, as well as journalists, in front of television cameras. Demonstrators chant "the whole world is watching," and indeed televised footage from Chicago further polarizes pro and anti-war Americans.

Television's Coming of Age

Streets of Chicago, outside the Democratic National Convention, August 1968.

Detroit, summer 1967

Alabama, May 1963

Television's Coming of Age

"Television's War," Michael Arlen

"Vietnam is often referred to as 'television's war,' in the sense that this is the first war that has been brought to the people preponderantly by television. People indeed look at television. They really look at it. They look at Dick Van Dyke and become his friend. They look at a new Pontiac in a commercial and go out and buy it...They look at Vietnam. They look at Vietnam, it seems, as a child kneeling in the corridor, his eye to the keyhole, looks at two grownups arguing in a locked room—the aperture of the keyhole small; the figures shadowy, mostly out of sight, the voices indistinct, isolated threats without meaning; isolated glimpses, part of an elbow, a man's jacket (who is the man?), part of a face, a woman's face."

Discussion Questions

During the post-WWII era, television, like drugs, was a technology that altered perception. How do Arlen and Rosler portray the effect of televised coverage of the Vietnam on the mind of the American viewer? What other arguments might one make about the impact of televised coverage on a wartime audience?

Television's Coming of Age

Red Stripe Kitchen. Photomontage, printed as a color photograph. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. © Martha Rosler

Makeup/Hands Up. Photomontage. Art Institute of Chicago.

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Television's Coming of Age

Last Shot

Have we addressed your questions?

Use The Forum

To continue the discussion.

To share fresh approaches and discussion questions that work.

We will monitor the forum until June 4.

Check out the fall seminar schedule
americainclass.org/seminars/

Please submit your evaluations.
Thank You