

“The Hippie riots” & other youth rebellions

Excerpt

Mike Davis

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In Southern California, the wild summers of 1960 and 1961 were a prelude to a series of famous youth insurrections: the watts riot of 1965, the so-called “Hippie riots” on Sunset Strip between 1966 and 1970, and the Eastside high school “blowouts” of 1968–69. [In the early sixties], Black youth in Los Angeles and elsewhere began to fight spontaneously for substantive control over community space—a thrust that would later become enshrined in the Black Panther Party’s program for “self-determination.”

The real engine room of the sixties, both politically and culturally, was not the college campus but the urban ghetto, and the transformation of young transplanted Southerners into a militant “New Breed” was the decisive event. 1961, moreover, seems to have been the watershed year in this process of generational definition.

The social trajectory of white teenage riots, and their possible contribution to the later appeal of the New Left, is of course far less clear. Indeed most historians of the 1960s ignore the wave of teen unrest at the beginning of the decade that created so much anxiety among police chiefs and professional anti-communists.

I am claiming...that the white teen riots of the early 1960s were largely driven by the hidden injuries of class colliding with an overweening ideology of affluence: an affluence, that is, that we reinterpreted with the help of beatniks and surfers as the possibility of free time and space beyond the program of Fordist society. This reinterpretation was a radical seed, made all the more compelling by nuclear showdowns and Cold War apocalypticism. This quest for freedom, however inarticulate and inchoate, gave a dignity and historical purpose to our small rebellions, and, in conflict with the suburban police state, generated a powerful revolution against arbitrary authority. Indeed anti-authoritarianism, trending toward a new romanticism of revolt and disobedience, was the vital cultural substrate of the sixties. And it was inevitable that the most courageous and intransigent anti-authoritarians—Black ghetto youth—would become potent models for everyone else.

For example, in the long struggle against curfews and crowd control on the Sunset Strip in the late sixties, white youth increasingly were persuaded that their resistance to a violent sheriff’s department was a second front to the battle then being waged by the Black Panther Party in South Central LA. The culminating showdown between thousands of white kids and the sheriff’s deputies in 1969 was mobilized by a psychedelic leaflet demanding “Free the Strip! Free Huey!” The battle of the urban Night had joined forces with the Revolution.

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