



THE COUNTER CULTURE AS DYNAMIC MARGIN

*This previously unpublished article draws on themes of informal presentations and discussions over a number of years at our Permaculture Design Courses about permaculture as a counter cultural social movement. It relates strongly to my thoughts on the social applications of the permaculture principle **Use of Margins and Edges** and is as close as I get to a political manifesto.*



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The counter cultural movement of the late 60's and early 70's was extraordinary in many ways. For a significant minority of the baby boomer generation, the counter culture was about a lot more than sex, drugs and rock and roll, although those were the prime expressions of a rejection of materialism, a desire to reconnect with nature, the search for the correct place of love, peace and wisdom in the world, voluntary simplicity and other notions which have become themes in a continuing struggle to reinvent ourselves over the last thirty years.

Permaculture was one of the more pragmatically focused concepts which emerged in the mid 70's in response to the questions and possibilities raised by the counter culture. The question which permaculture specifically addressed was whether it was possible to redesign our world and ourselves in nature's image.

Today it is common to hear and read in the mass media, put downs of the nativity and stupidity of hippies and the failure of the counter culture. It is a great irony that many of the sources of innovations which have reinvigorated the cultural and economic mainstream over the last twenty years have their roots in the counter culture. Even the most powerful cultural innovation, the computer revolution owes much to the counter culture¹.

Many of the talented and energetic individuals who rejected standard career paths and followed their hearts, are today leaders in making those innovations the mainstream.

Over the years I keep coming across more examples. While teaching a permaculture course at the Kolding Folk High School in Denmark in 1994, I stayed in a "zero energy house" built in the 1970's when the school was a centre of counter cultural innovation. The wind turbine which had powered the house was no longer standing and more recent construction had not followed the technological innovations explored in those early days. Overall, the zero energy house and its wind turbine were a failure. On the other hand, the giant 2 Megawatt wind turbine which provided power for hundreds of people at another Danish community, Twind was a success. It was designed and built by the community (apparently with gender balanced work teams and regular readings from Mao's Little Red Book).

Today Danish wind turbines are acknowledged as the best in the world as wind power becomes the most rapidly growing and profitable renewable energy source. Danish academia, industry and government is proud of this very important export industry in a tiny country renowned for design and knowledge based industries. The impression I got was that outside of a small circle of wind energy enthusiasts, few Danes are aware that little known counter cultural successes like Twind as well as failures like Kolding were as much the wellspring of the Danish wind power industry as universities and research institutions.

1 See twenty years of *Co-Evolution Quarterly* and its successor *The Whole Earth Review* as well as the better known *Whole Earth Catalogue* (founding editor Stewart Brand) for the unfolding history of the computer revolution from a counter cultural perspective.

Closer to home, back-to-the-land self reliance has been the central focus of the Australian counter culture over the last thirty years. In thinking about thirty years of back-to-the-land movement it is hard to say it has been a great success.

The key factors in the limited success of the back to the land movement in creating self reliant rural households and enterprises include;

- Historically low commodity prices undermining all farming enterprises and making consumer lifestyles very economically attractive.
- Easy social welfare options reducing drive to generate home and land based livelihoods.
- Very limited information and demonstrations of sustainable systems.
- Cheap land and individualist culture encouraging isolated households rather than effective community development.

On the other hand, the spin off effects of the back to the land movement on regions where it was focused is both surprising and largely unacknowledged. I have argued² that the rural resettlement in the more desirable coastal and high rainfall parts of Australia is a major social and economic force which runs counter to the accelerating decline of rural economies and communities generally. There is little doubt that on the north coast of NSW as well as other rural focal points of the counter culture³, the cultural and economic foundations of the diverse and vibrant economy is built on the cultural and economic infrastructure created by the counter cultural pioneers.

It is very ironic that some of those who abandoned jobs or university study to buy marginal dairy farms on the beautiful north coast for the purpose of becoming new age farmers, have become successful local business people, artists, Shire councillors, health practitioners and even organic and biodynamic farmers. Many of those buying in are the peers of the pioneers who stayed in city, making conventional careers and money but are now seeking the cafes, art galleries, health food shops, and alternative health clinics along with alternative schools and community activities for their children. This rural cosmopolitan culture flourishes wherever the counter culture was able to generate a critical mass of successful rural resettlement. The burgeoning development and tourist industries and the planning and policy bureaucracy which has grown up to feed off and control this social and economic up welling, are barely aware of the goose which has laid the golden egg of cultural vitality.

For me these invisible successes in reinvigoration of the mainstream represent both an endorsement of radical ideas and sobering lessons on how radical ideas are absorbed and digested by the cultural mainstream. That absorption has involved compromise of cherished values and the shedding of foolish or impractical notions. Most significantly it

² See *Rural Landuse Review submission* (Article Six) for exploration of these issues

³ Eg Daylesford area in central Victoria, the Willunga area in SA, the Maleny area in S. Queensland and Margaret River in W.A. and Far South Coast of NSW

shows how establishment power never acknowledges that it is the fringe rather than the centre which is the source of inspiration in the modern world. While that maybe a cause for bitterness on the part of crusading radicals who are never acknowledged, it is also a lesson of how anarchistic experimentation and apparently directionless movements can be successful in changing society through invisible infiltration and subversion of the mainstream.

On a more explicit level, the counter culture of the baby boomer generation continues to provide an inspiration for successive generations of young people who believe they can help create a better world by changing the way they live. Despite the baggage of another thirty years of dysfunctional affluence, the minority of young people committed to adaptation to a low energy future are more focused and capable as they stand on the shoulders of those who came before. Despite the high failure rate, there is a constant stream of people, young and older, wanting to be more self reliant on a rural properties as couples or in community. Working as a consultant advising people on rural self reliance over 20 years I am constantly inspired by how relatively well informed young people are today compared to their parent's generation of pioneers.

Perhaps fewer of us in the 60's and 70's who were able to stand on the shoulders of parents and other role models, knew the exhilaration of realising that you are part of a cultural tradition which has its roots in the birth of the modern world in the late nineteenth century and the political and social tumult of the 1930's.

The 1890's and the 1930's were periods when the roots of environmentalism, organic agriculture, feminism, a variety of utopian and economically progressive ideas and renewed spirituality flourished at the margins of society before they entered and changed the mainstream. Mostly those changes were for the better although there are sobering examples of the contribution of counter cultural ideas to the cultural maelstrom that was Nazi Germany.

The idea that the counter culture has no history and no future is simply an expression of ignorance. Many historians would caution against the dangers of revolutionary leaders⁴ who have sought to create a history suitable to current political aims. If I were a revolutionary zealot seeking to rouse the faithful, I would assert that "the counter culture has a history of persistence and gathering strength in the face of adversity while the current establishment has no history or cultural vitality."

More realistically I accept that the history of the counter culture is a tenuous thread connecting us to the past but no more so than the thread which connects the cultural mainstream to its past.

4 Creative use of history in the late 19th century by revolutionary zealots to support Basque separatist and Jewish Zionist causes can be seen as contributing to the intractable nature of these long running ethnic conflicts.

Ironically today it is the political and cultural establishment which is constantly asserting its own traditions and history as a way of bolstering the crumbling faith of the general population in the notion that today's politics, technology and economy represent a "steady as she goes" progression from a familiar past⁵.

If Ben Chifley and Sir Robert Menzies were alive today to judge today's politicians they would probably have exercised bipartisan agreement that the likes of Paul Keating and John Howard should be put on trial for treason on the grounds that their economic policies have destroyed the national sovereignty of Australia. The merits of the various opinions on this massive gulf in values and action between mainstream politics and its historical antecedents are less interesting to me than the opportunities it provides for creative innovation from the fringe.

Never have the structures of establishment power exhibited so much hubris and superficial confidence and yet been so porous to corrosive influence, subversion and overturning. More than ever before, the task is to create the alternative possibilities rather than battering at the ramparts demanding change. The revolution in the mainstream is coming fast enough. The quality of that revolution will be determined by the diversity of living and working models that we have the energy and vision to create. The action is at the edge.

5 The success of the current Australian prime minister John Howard is in part due to his ability to convey this "steady as she goes" cultural continuity while accelerating the dismantling of the economic foundations of national democracy and culture.