What do they want? Critical Perspectives on the 1960’s in the United States

Curriculum Unit 83.04.01
by Karen Wolff

Introduction

The 1960’s started off with the spirit of hope and prosperity. Great wealth and vast growth in the industrial sector of the United States gave the nation a general sense of security and prosperity. Our affluent society was setting standards for the whole world. American technology was being exported with American money. We were leaders in technological development and investments throughout the world. Multinational corporations were transforming our economy and our sense of importance. Many more Americans were experiencing a new sense of economic advancement into the middle classes and into white collar employment.

However, within these developments the seeds of criticism and change soon took root. People from many different sectors of the society—Blacks, women, college students and professionals—were challenging the system from their perspectives. People were looking below the surface of affluence and found a growing contradiction between a vast accumulation of wealth and persistent poverty; between a greater security and a growing sense of alienation and restlessness. In this unit I want to explore the nature of these criticisms and the people who were making them because the challenges that they presented have influenced the values and cultures of the American people today.

I have chosen to explore the ideas of five movements: the Civil Rights movement, the students radicals of SDS, the Women’s Movement, the cultural radicals and LSD, and the Vietnam Protest. Clearly the information on each one of them alone could be a unit. Thus, my focus will be on giving students a feeling for these criticisms of Americans and the people who made them. I have chosen to present the ideas of each group through analyzing documents that I believe reflect significant perspectives. These readings will be supplemented with other readings, lectures and a traditional textbook in American history. Students will be asked to understand how people’s perspectives grow out of their life experiences.

This unit will be used in an upper level class at the High School in the Community (HSC). The bulk of the curriculum at HSC is taught in Block classes which meet three hours daily for eight weeks. These courses are interdisciplinary and team taught. This unit will be used as half of a block class on the 60’s. The other half will cover American literature of the period. Although I have a particular course in mind I do feel that all or parts of this unit can be adapted for use in other schools.
Objectives

1. Students will learn that history is a field of study that can help them understand themselves and the people around them. By reading sources by and about people with many of the same interests and concerns that they have and learning to see how these issues were dealt with differently at different historical times they will see that history shapes people’s lives and that people shape the changes in history.
2. Students will learn about the major events, people and social movements of the 1960’s in the United States. They will have a broad overview of the social issues that seem to have made that epoch particularly significant.
3. They will learn to read a variety of materials as sources in the study of history. Each document has a particular perspective and makes certain assumptions which shape the argument. These aspects of the document will be worked with extensively.
4. Students will develop certain academic skills in writing and discussion. They will understand the difference between writing a summary, a criticism and a comparative paper. They will also learn to take positions on certain issues and write out a position paper as well as present their position in the class.

Strategies

One approach to making history come alive for high school students is to choose readings which are emotionally charged and/or deal with issues close to home. Most of the readings chosen for this unit were chosen as much for their style as for their content. I have included first person accounts, autobiographical sketches, biographical sketches, political tracts and a few interpretive essays. Together these readings should give the students a real feeling for the major social issues of the 1960’s and for the authors of the readings.

These documents will be read, analyzed and discussed for different kinds of information. Students will be asked to write a summary of some readings so they will learn to pick out the major ideas and put them in their own words. They will be asked to write a criticism of some pieces. After picking out the basic assumption of each writing they will present an alternative assumption and use it to present an opposing viewpoint, regardless of their personal opinion. Each week they will be given a test which will consist of writing their personal opinion on the topic. These essays will be shared with the class. During the discussion I hope to draw out the effect of these issues on life in the 1980’s.

For term papers, students will be asked to write a short paper in which they compare the ideas of two different views of life in the 1960’s. Different people experiences the 1960’s very differently. These variations, too, will help students see history come alive.

These assignments will be supplemented with regular assignments in an American History textbook.

Classroom Materials and Student Bibliography
A. The Distribution of Wealth and Power—America in the 60’s

B. The Civil Rights Movement

C. Student Radicals

D. Women’s Movement

E. Counter Culture and LSD

F. Vietnam and the Limits of Power

G. Crisis in American Culture
**Course Content**

**A. The Distribution of Wealth and Power—America in the 60’s**

The America of the 60’s was a society quite divided by class—the economic basis of life and life choices. Gabriel Kolko surveys the distribution of wealth in the United States and discovers that the vast majority of wealth was concentrated at the very top of the economic scale and that this process must continue for the economy to remain stable. In “Trends in the Distribution of Income” Kolko makes a crucial distinction between income and wealth. He explains that at the beginning of the 60’s there was an apparent increase in the redistribution of wealth based on an analysis of income distribution. However, this was misleading because these statistics ignored the growing number of ways made available to the rich to hide their wealth.

Michael Harrington on the other hand “rediscovered” the vast extent of poverty in the United States in 1963. *The Other America*, published in 1963, shocked many Americans because it too documented that the economic distribution in this country was extremely unequal. Harrington found that one fourth of the American population was living below the official government poverty line—below subsistence. In this excerpt, “The Invisible Land,” he discusses the process by which the poor of the 60’s were being made “invisible.” This new poverty in the midst of an expanding “Affluent Society” was being denied any place through the process of automation which replaced the need for much labor power. He suggests that one must reassess the American priorities for economic growth before a significant sector of the society is destroyed.

**Discussion Questions**

What is wealth? What is poverty? is it defined by economics or psychology?
What is the distinction between income and wealth?
How do they influence people’s class identity?
What is the impersonal process of impoverishment that Harrington refers to?
How does this new poverty differ from the poverty of the 30’s?
What is the meaning and significance of aspiration?

**B. The Civil Rights Movement**

Although the Civil Rights Movement in the United States had been very active before the 1960’s, it did receive its greatest public recognition then. With the Brown decision of 1954, the Supreme Court publicly recognized that racism was a serious and profound problem in this country. Racism was sustained not only by separation of the races but also by more subtle denials of access to participation in the major institutions and opportunities available in the United States.

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) had been fighting the struggle for desegregation through the courts for the last half century. Now young Black college students were determined to see more tangible results sooner. As their numbers grew, so did their constituency. Sharecroppers, and
urban ghetto residents brought new and different demands. The nonviolent direction action of Martin Luther King, Jr. and his people in Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) was initially adopted by Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). However, SNCC soon became divided as it became the object of racist violence. As the movement moved north and into urban areas, new, more militant approaches were expounded. The Black Panther Party was founded in New York and California and quickly spread to other areas. When the Black Panther Party marched on the Sacramento Court House in uniforms carrying rifles, they shocked, if not frightened, most Americans. Was a civil war going to erupt between Blacks and whites?

With the reading I have chosen for this section I want to show the students the logical progression from an approach of nonviolent direct action for integration to the recognition for the need to advocate Black Power. It is crucial that the students understand that both approaches toward becoming “equal” participants in the American society meant great compromises for both Blacks and whites. The readings were chosen because they give the picture from a “Black” perspective. M. L. King, S. Carmicheal, E. Cleaver and J. Foreman were leaders and spokesmen for activist groups of the 60’s. These readings should give the students an understanding that racial issues in America are more than skin deep. People’s opinions are shaped by their life experiences.

In this chapter of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s, Why We Can’t Wait, King outlines the forces that made 1963 such a significant year in the struggle for equal rights for Blacks. On this centennial the realities of life for Black Americans were in a crisis. The promises of the Civil Rights Movement of the 50’s seemed to be empty—school and housing desegregation was moving along very slowly—if at all. Automation and enormous unemployment among Blacks were pointing out the heightened conflict between the claims of the economic development and the realities of expanding poverty. World affairs were also a dynamic influence on Blacks consciousness. Many Black African nations were winning independence and by example, were challenging Black Americans to take more control over their destinies. These were the forces that King saw leading the Civil Rights Movement to look to non-violent direct action as a means to greater participation in the United States.

James Foreman, one of the founders of SNCC, tells the story of his first violent confrontation with racism in the second selection I have chosen for this section. In his autobiography, The Making of a Black Revolutionary, he describes his introduction to police violence when he was arrested for a crime he did not commit and was interrogated so intensely that his only means of escape was to pretend to go crazy. He had not been raised to such violence, and this experience greatly influenced his future. I have also included a section on his life as a small child in Mississippi.

Eldridge Cleaver became a spokesman for the Black Panther Party in the mid 60’s. In his essay, “The White Race and Its Heroes” he attacks the morality of the white power structure as they try to present America as the land of opportunity but simultaneously deny Blacks all but the minimum of their rights. He commends the white youths who are rejecting their racist past and are standing up against their racist traditions. Cleaver suggests that whites begin to see that Blacks have made major contributions to white America and the hope of the future rests with the continued cooperation between Blacks and whites.

In Black Power, Stockley Carmicheal presents his understanding of why the Black Power Movement appeared when it did. In the chapter “Black Power, Its Needs and Substance,” he asserts that Black people must redefine themselves on their own terms and in their own way. Success and understanding have been defined in terms of white middle class values which have excluded Blacks, by definition. Carmicheal does not feel that the Black Power Movement has created the hostility that many white people have expressed; rather the
movement has exposed the racist assumptions of the American ways. Black Power will enable Blacks to gain strength from each other and figure out their needs, priorities and strategies so that they can return to the system with strength.

**Discussion Questions**

Explain the meaning of the following concepts: non-violent direct action, Black Power, racism, race and assumption.
Is Black Power an assertion of Black identity or a declaration of anti-white hostility?
What are the consequences of racism on how we think and act?
How is racism enforced by the organization of the society?

**C. Radicals**
The unequal distribution of wealth and opportunity might have spurred on the “underclasses” but what happened to push the “haves” to rebel as well? In the early 60’s middle class white students on many college campuses across the country were reevaluating their ideas and life expectations. This movement included many different types of criticisms of the society but they all did agree that new questions had to be asked about the quality of life in the richest country in the world. Although they too were critical of the unequal distribution of wealth and the extremes of wealth and poverty, their major orientation, as children of economic privilege was their alienation from the values of the society which they felt even though they were economically secure.

The student movement grew together around a variety of protest issues that had been confronting the dominant priorities of America. The testing of nuclear bombs and the acceptance of the idea of fallout shelters seemed to find many folks asking who would want to survive a nuclear holocaust? Why indeed are those the options? What are the real issues in the cold war? What does red mean other than a symbol for the enemy? Why is the world so divided? If we have the answers why does the world feel so attracted to the enemy? What does socialism have to offer? How can we too change to meet the needs of more of our people and the peoples of the world?

These questions were intensified by the events around the Civil Rights Movement which said to some that racism was a necessary part of America’s social structure, not only a product of individual ignorance or prejudice. We could watch racial violence on television as the nation debated whether the federal government had the right to force state and city governments to abide by the decisions of the Supreme Court. Who had what power? By whose standards should justice be defined and enforced?

Student radicals decided that the American people had to begin by redefining their priorities from wealth and power for greatest good for the greatest number. What then would an ideal society look like? How would we get there? What were rights? What were privileges?

With the “Port Huron Statement,” SDS declared that wealth should not be a goal in itself and that through participatory democracy all Americans needed to redefine our priorities and goals as a people. From their
perspective a shift in attitudes was to be the basis of change. Only later in their development did the power of economic and racial differences hit home. Abbie Hoffman’s book represents a more humorous approach to these questions.

The “Port Huron Statement” is a clearly written analysis of the students role in the America of the early 60’s. Tom Hayden and his organization, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), criticized the general passivity of students and challenged them to get involved in social change through participatory democracy. The statement presents a very positive, idealistic and hopeful approach to social change.

*Revolution for the Hell of it* was written by Abbie Hoffman to declare the need for a revolution. He saw that it was a time for real change in America. Written in the late 60’s as a reflection of the “hippe” approach to social change, Hoffman jumps from topic to topic incisively pointing out the internal contradictions of commonly held assumptions. The pushes for a revolution in values through redefining reality in new and different terms. Although it is not a serious book, it does give a clear feeling for the spirit of a revolution in feelings and attitudes.

**Discussion Questions**

- What are the priorities of America?
- How does alienation grow out of these priorities?
- What alternative priorities could we have as a nation?
- How could they be changed?
- What are socialism and communism?
- Why would we care about world opinion?

**D. Woman’s Movement**

What is a woman? Is she defined by her sexual organs? Is liberation a rejection of men or is the women’s movement calling for the recognition of prejudices which seriously and erroneously limited women and men so that people could redefine problems, issues and questions from a “female” perspective? Or at least with the recognition that one’s sexual orientation might influence or bias one’s point of view?

The Civil Rights Movement raised the consciousness of many Americans to the realization that although the predominant culture was one of affluence, Blacks as a group had been denied access. The radicals had pointed out that although there was greater wealth, often human priorities were being replaced by the profit motive. Basic assumptions about American priorities, values and life styles were being challenged. Women had been relegated to a secondary status. Like Blacks they had been defined by their physical characteristics and denied support of the culture for their development as thinking and working individuals.

The women’s movement grew out of this environment and then developed a dynamics of its own. At first as women joined together they pushed for equal opportunities within the system as it existed. Then, as women...
explored the existing literature and social structure they began to see the profound nature of sexism. The society was not just biased but had so defined its ideas from the “male perspective” that all assumptions had to be redefined: social customs, family structure, sex roles and yes, even human sexuality. Women learned from talking to each other in consciousness raising groups that their actions and ideas seemed to conflict with what they had been taught. Why?

For many, not all, the answer lay in the fact that men had defined the world in their image—from a “male perspective.” Thus they could maintain their position of dominance. For some this meant that they had to liberate themselves from their past—divorce, sexual preference and/or seclusion. Women needed to stop learning from men and unconsciously accepting their perspectives and find their own ways with other women. The women’s movement like the Civil Rights Movement then went through a period in which many activists called for separation from men until they as women could believe in their ideas and ways and reject their own basic tendencies to male chauvinism.

For this section I chose three readings that were published during the first few years of the movement when women were working at understanding the nature of male domination. Through analyzing the assumptions about women’s roles either sexually or in the home women found new questions to ask. These basic questions challenged the traditional assumptions of the society and enabled women to see that women might indeed see many issues differently from men because they had different needs than the men. Here again by pointing out the fundamental nature of the controversy over women and their rights students will learn that assumptions are founded on societal values and can be challenged.

In the “Myth of the Vaginal Organism” Ann Koedt gives a detailed description of why female sexuality has been defined in terms of male needs and experiences. Men and women seem to have very different interpretations of what gives pleasure to women. Koedt suggests that these differences reflect a difference in physiological and psychological needs.

The “Politics of Housework” is a humorous dialogue between a husband and wife over the distribution of household chores. This selection by Pat Manardi was chosen because it points out the unspoken assumptions about women’s “innate” superiority for housekeeping.

“Double Jeopardy” is a direct challenge to the suggestion that women’s liberation is really only for white women. Some people had been asserting that the movement could not represent Black women in America because Black women must stand behind their men since they had been most seriously oppressed in the United States. Frances Beal rejects this and asserts that Black women can and must join with all forces to combat the basic causes of racism and sexism, capitalism and imperialism. People must join together to change society. Revolutions are not determined by sex. Black and white women have had different histories but there is a place for some of them to work together.

Discussion Questions

What is a woman? What defines her—biology, sociology, psychology?
What are the consequences of male chauvinism on women’s sense of self worth?
How does sexism work? How can it be compared to racism?
How do you think the women’s movement was influenced by the Civil Rights Movement?
E. The Counter Culture and Drugs

The growth of critical ideas soon spread to criticisms of basic psychological assumptions as well. If so much of the objective reality—politics, economics, life styles, race relations and sexual behavior were shaped by the perspective of the person or people in power, maybe all human feelings too were being defined by external forces in the society and their question for wealth and power.

Who is the real you? How can you find out? Certainly we are more than our race, class and/or sex. How can we come into contact with our true feeling self, ourselves as true individuals?

Marijuana, drugs and especially LSD seemed to meet this need. Many felt that LSD could liberate the true you. The chemical could break down the walls that socialization had built around you by the society to force you to assimilate. The fact that LSD was a drug that had originally been discovered in the synapses of schizophrenics seemed to be disregarded. After all who defines reality, sanity and insanity.

Tom Wolfe’s portrayal of the LSD culture in the Electric Kool Aid Acid Test gives a lively and effective picture of the dynamics of the discoveries of these people.

In 1964, when Ken Kesey started off on his new adventure into the psychedelic world, he had already established himself as a significant American author with One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest. In these excerpts, Tom Wolfe gives a first hand account of the individual and group changes that these drugs fostered. Wolfe’s journalistic style called the “New Journalism” often reads more like a novel than a non-fiction account and forces the reader to “feel” the material. For this unit I picked two sections, one describing Wolfe’s first meeting with Kesey, the second an account of the bus trip across the country in which the drug users get more and more involved in the power of LSD.

Discussion Questions

- What influences shape an individuals character?
- Why would drugs, either marijuana or LSD, change peoples behavior?
- Why might many social activists find drugs to be contrary to real social change?
- Why did LSD remain a drug used primarily by the middle class whites?
- What relationship is there between individual change and social change?

F. Vietnam and the Limits of Power

Vietnam! Where is it anyway? We all learned as more and more American soldiers and equipment were being sent there. The communists were trying to take over Southeast Asia. Many felt that we had lost China to the Communists because we failed to act decisively. Never again. So from the early 60’s on, just around the time of the Bay of Pigs invasion, President Kennedy started sending more soldiers and weapons to Vietnam—that strange agricultural country on the other side of the globe.

We watched the war on TV. We listened to body counts. There were debates on TV over whether to spend
more and more money on the war. People were demonstrating against the draft, against the war and even on occasion against a society which was forcing its young to fight this undeclared war in a country which might not want our “help.” We were told that it was a civil war between the Communist north and the democratic south. Then who were the Viet Cong? Why were we getting such bad press in the world? Many neutral countries were criticizing our role in Vietnam. After all, if we were so sure of our role that 50,000 American soldiers were dying, why had we refused to declare war on Vietnam officially.

The Vietnam War was an extremely ugly war. Both sides seemed to be breaking all the conventions of war. America, a powerful, technologically advanced nation was spraying chemicals, napalm, and shooting fragment bombs. The Viet Cong seemed to be everywhere, ambushing and sniping. They appeared indistinguishable from the general population—they were not uniformed nor did they openly identify themselves.

The Tet Offensive challenged the hegemony of the United States and drew great attention to the significance of guerrilla warfare in the struggle against the domination of the third world by the United States. The American view of its role in the world was being forced to change.

*Dispatches* is a powerful first hand account of a reporter’s feelings and observations about the dynamics of the Vietnam War. The power of this book is the author’s ability to present the human feelings and experiences about the war and its violence without being melodramatic. One is forced to question the human experience of war in general and the extreme nature of the struggle for survival in Vietnam. This book is also an example of the “New Journalism” so popular in the 60’s. It enabled the author to share his feelings and reactions not just his observations.

*Inside the CIA* caused a great controversy when it was published. The US government tried to block the publication because they felt it could threaten the security of the American intelligence system. Nevertheless, Victor Marchetti and John Marks, two former CIA agents pushed on and after some censorship were permitted to publish this exposé of their experiences with the CIA. In the excerpt, “The Cult of Intelligence” they describe the people and the general attitude of the agency as it determines its targets in the world. The authors feel that the agency has too much wealth and power with far too little accountability to the American people.

**Discussion Questions**

Why did we get involved in Vietnam? Why was this nation so divided over this war?
What criticisms were made of the CIA? What is the function of an intelligence system? Who should decide matters of national security and foreign policy?
How can people develop trust in a government?
How do they lose this trust?

**G. Crisis in American Culture**

The 60’s certainly shook many of the foundations of America’s identity. Her foreign involvements and her domestic policies had been criticized both from within its population and by the world community. At a time when the United States could proudly declare herself the richest and most powerful nation in the world, she
was being torn apart by people who wanted to see real changes immediately—who wanted a piece of the pie sooner rather than later or wanted to redefine the nature of the pie itself.

The 60’s left the United States torn apart by its own contradiction. Many feel that it was so divided that the growing individualism of the 70’s “me generation” was a necessary outcome. Any real solutions to the profound social problems of the 60’s would take such a long time. The threat of nuclear war made real planning for the future appear naive.

Where would America go to next? How would these questions and contradictions be dealt with? Philip Slater deals with these questions in his book *The Pursuit of Loneliness*. In the conclusion “Your money or your life,” he clearly defines the choices confronting the American culture. Slater calls upon us to recognize our strengths and weaknesses together and to draw on them as we admit to our collective need to redefine all of our priorities. Survival must bring us together or we will destroy ourselves. Although changes might indeed be inevitable, their direction is not.

Slater’s call for unity and action is direct and powerful. He recognizes the need to work with American attitudes. We must continue to recognize the positive aspects of individualism as we recognize that the enormous inequalities found in the United States undercut our best ideals and our potential. The social problems that he defined as needing immediate attention—ecology, education, employment and the redistribution of wealth—however are still haunting us today in the 1980’s. Can these problems and the contradictions they represent be disregarded forever? Does the threat of nuclear war become less real because we live with it longer? Does growing unemployment become less painful to the whole society because the few at the top are making greater and greater profits? Can we learn from the events of the 60’s or is it just “history?”

**Discussion Questions**

How have these cultural criticisms of the 60’s influenced life in the 80’s? What solutions to these problems can you come up with?

**Lesson Plan #1: Writing a summary**

After answering the questions listed below, write a short summary of the reading *Black Power* by Stockley Carmicheal. Include the information from the questions.

Who is the author?
From what book is this reading taken?
When was it written?
What is Black Power?
What is the major thesis of the essay?
What is the purpose of the essay?
List the major points of the essay?
Write summary.
Lesson Plan #2 Making an argument

Based on your understanding of *Black Power* by Carmicheal I want you to make an opposing argument. After writing a summary you should recognize his basic assumptions.

Identify an argument that would come to opposing conclusions. Then give three reasons for your assumption and explain each reason in a clear paragraph. You should write out 5 clear paragraphs. Use the form below.

**Statement of Position:**

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**Reason #1**

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**Reason #2**

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**Reason #3**

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**Concluding Statement**

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Lesson Plan #3: Working with words and concepts

Define the words listed below. Then use them in a paragraph.

- Integration
- Segregation
- Desegregation
- Inherent
Separate but equal
Non-violent direct action
Brown vs. Board of Education
Black Power
Civil Rights Movement
Jim Crow Laws

Teacher’s Bibliography

Review of ideas and evolution of this student organization.

An interesting interpretation of the cultural changes of the 60’s in the United States.

Interviews with different Black people about their lives. Interesting oral history.

An interesting textbook of modern American History from 1945 to the present.

A collection of oral histories by active participants in the events of the 60’s.

Lukas, Anthony, Don’t Shoot—We are your children. New York: Random House, 1971.
Collection of biographies of different social activists in the 60’s. Very Interesting.

Maucauley, Robie, and Ziff, Larzer, America and its Discontents. A collection of essays on the 60’s by involved observants.

