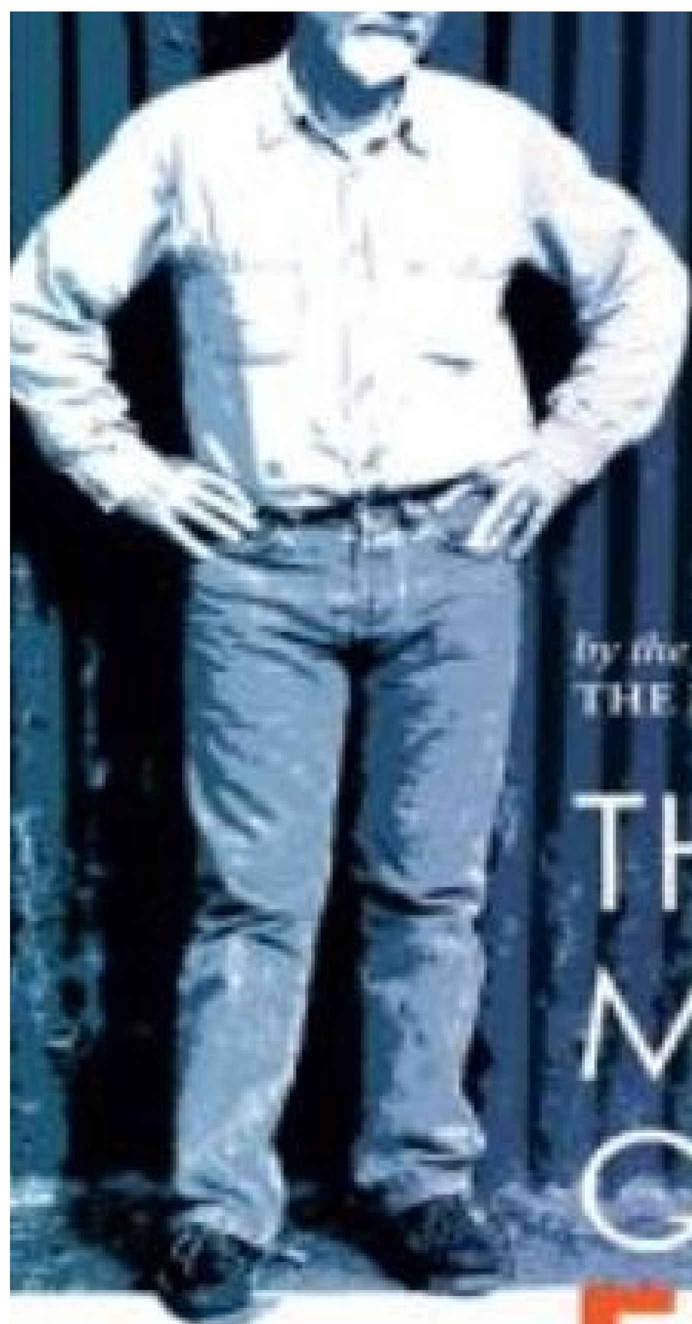
by the author of
THE MAKING OF A COUNTER CULTURE

THE MAKING OF AN ELDER CULTURE

Reflections on the Future of America's Most Audacious Generation

THEODORE ROSZAK



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THE MAKING OF AN ELDER CULTURE

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NEW SOCIETY PUBLISHERS

“Well... I’ve had *that* experience,” she said, smiling a bit sadly.

“What experience is that?” I asked, having no idea what she meant.

“Death of the second parent. My mother died this year. That’s what started me thinking about...wel about everything.”

I offered some kind words, noting that my mother died just a while ago. She expressed her sympath but then reminded me that, “I was born in 1946,” as if I ought to know that made a difference.

1946, the first year of the baby boom. “So, you see,” she said, her smile growing more wistfu “there’s no way to avoid it any longer. *I’ve* become the older generation.”

Acknowledgments

Without the help of the good people at Second Journey — and especially Bolton and Lisa Anthony – this book would never have been able to climb out of my computer and go walking in the world. elder culture is going to begin anywhere, it will be with groups like Second Journey.

I am also grateful to the Gray Panthers of Berkeley and their comrades across the country f keeping the heart and soul of Maggie Kuhn alive. They are the best example I can offer of an eld insurgency that serves old and young alike.

CHAPTER 1

Maturity Rules

We are not "senior citizens" or "golden-agers." We are the elders, the experienced ones; we are maturing, growing adults responsible for the survival of our society. We are not wrinkled babies, succumbing to trivial, purposeless waste of our years and our time. We are a new breed of old people.

— Maggie Kuhn, A Dialogue on Age

Ready or not, like it or not — the modern world is tilting steadily toward gerontocracy. Irresistib trends in family life, medical science, public health, and fiscal economics all run in the direction senior dominance. Those trends, growing stronger with each passing year, begin to appear permanent a condition as our species has ever known, the long road into a future nobody anticipate until the latter years of the 20th century.

Not that elders stand ready to take over the day-to-day tasks of government or to lord it over the re of the population. Rather, what we must now expect is that their priorities will soon have a claim political power and our economic resources that few elected leaders will care to question or obstruc There will always be many issues governments must face — war and revolution, poverty an terrorism, domestic strife, the ups and downs of the world economy. But for as far as we can see in the years ahead, all these affairs of state will have to play out against a very different, total unfamiliar background that makes the needs and values of the old paramount.

How can it be otherwise? In another generation most industrial societies will have arrived at unprecedented condition: Their populations will number more people above the age of 50 than belo Some nations will take a bit longer joining this "quiet revolution," as the United Nations has called but the United States, western Europe, and Japan are already within sight of senior dominance. As the first decade of the 21st century in the United States, 8,000 people who were born between 19 and 1964 — the baby-boom generation — began turning 60 every day. By 2011 that number rises 11,000 — which is the number of American babies currently being born each day. Already, there one person over the age of 60 in the United States for every child below the age of four.

Move ahead 50 years. By 2050, there will be ten people over 60 for every three children below th age of four. Wait another generation or so, and there will be more people above the age of 60 tha below. Wait another generation beyond that, and... well, beyond that, things grow somewh

speculative, as life expectancy becomes more dependent on breakthroughs in biotechnology aimed identifying the exact source of aging. But breakthroughs there will be. Geneticists are alread competing to produce a Methuselah Mouse that will live the equivalent of human centuries. If the succeed, they will receive handsome rewards and much acclaim. Can we doubt that people will clam to have the same blessing? And once this longevous vermin's genes are grafted into the huma genome, who can say how many people will survive to age 160, 200, or beyond? Would that be a goo thing? I admit to being uncertain. I cannot envision such a world, nor am I sure I would want to live it. But it is even harder to imagine anyone willing to demand that we call off the effort.

Meanwhile, even without the aid of advanced genetic tinkering, societies that are preponderant youthful today will not be so in another 20 years. When we hear that 60% of the population in India below the age of 30, or that 40% of Iranians are below 25, we should bear in mind that all those you people are grist for the senior mill. They are growing older every day and, like our own boomers, w eventually become the largest senior population in their country's history. Such is the fate of bab booms. (Remember: When the Summer of Love was happening in San Francisco in 1967, there we 90 million people below the age of 25 in the United States — nearly half the population. Yout seemed in a permanent ascendancy. And see where we are today.) Unless we can imagine a science fiction scenario in which the world is devastated by a plague that primarily targets the elderly, th modern world can only grow older. But, by an ironic twist of fate, the only plague we have going the world today is AIDS, which strikes at the sexually active young and their afflicted offsprin leaving a disproportionate number of the elderly to inherit the ravaged societies of Africa and Asia.

We lose sight of the demographic force behind mass longevity when we view the baby boom in short-sighted perspective — a transient demographic bulge rather like a pig being swallowed by python. Seen in that way, we might imagine that at some point in the course of the 21st century th python will have digested the pig and things will return to their normal state of youthfulness, a socie of young families, newborn babies, growing children, citizens in their middle years... and here an there some marginal grandparently boomers helping with the kids or retired to a galaxy of their ow far, far away. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Since the late 19th century, aging has been th normal state of all industrial societies; it is *a sustained trend*. Societies designed to cater to the nee of aging populations will soon become the accepted political condition of our species. Acknowledgin that fact will, at some point, slide so smoothly into the conventional wisdom that future generation may not realize that this is a major new feature of modern life, this is different, this is not what huma culture was ever meant to be — and it all started now.

Odd that something so foreseeable has remained unforeseen for generations. The senior dominanc has been wholly predictable since at least the beginning of the 20th century. Smaller families, long life expectancy — one simply had to follow where the demographic numbers were trending. In the la 1930s, when hard times had placed a spotlight on the plight of the indigent old throughout the weste world, the American philosopher John Dewey predicted with some foreboding that our society wa headed toward unprecedented longevity — which in his time meant 60, 65, 70 years of age. In prescient 1937 essay written for the first conference ever held on aging in the United States, Dewe observed, "The changes which have brought about a great reduction of infant mortality and th lengthening of the span of life for those who survive the hazards of infancy have had important soci effects so that social conditions have been created which confront civilization with issues of the mo serious nature." He might have gone on to add that aging was a principal theme of the country history. Our society has never been younger than it was at the beginning of white colonization. The

the continent was experiencing an influx of young immigrant families from Europe who we determined to stock the land with all the children they could beget. Since then we have been growin steadily older, by Dewey's day reaching the point at which a third of the population was over the ag of 50. "The main purpose of these introductory remarks," Dewey wrote, "is to call attention to the fa that there is a *problem* and one of a scope having no precedent in human history." So start planning fo a longevous society now, Dewey advised.[1]

But nobody did. The war intervened, and then — fatefully — the postwar baby boom. After fashion that now seems little short of delusionary, policy makers and the public generally immerse themselves in the strange belief that the world was getting *younger* — exactly the opposite of wh should have been obvious. The baby boom should have been seen as a blip in the steady trend towa aging. But then the misapprehension is easy to understand. In the aftermath of horror, peop everywhere craved renewal and vitality. So the reproductive outburst that followed World War I eclipsed the underlying demographic reality of our time. People, wanting to start over again, we swept up in a cult of youth. The market rushed to reinforce their wishfulness. Here were millions pampered American kids on whom parents with fat paychecks were willing to lavish their postw affluence. And what prospering, victorious America was, other societies sought to become: youn young, young. Thanks to an advertising industry eager to move the goods, the youth of the natio came to be seen as prime consumers — in fact, the chief customers — for clothes, music, movie toiletries, magazines, cars, furnishings. At the same time, pundits, inspired by the country spectacular wartime achievements, were easily carried away by great technological expectation Novelty and innovation were in the air: faster means of transportation, more rapid communication more ingenious electronic gadgets, a new generation of household appliances, automated assemb lines, more glitzy merchandise, artificial intelligence, high-rise cities, the colonization of outer spac And because all these grand designs belonged to the future, they belonged to the young, who came be spoken of as if they were an ageless class, permanently endowed with vitality, daring, an optimism, a deathless Pepsi generation that would always be there. "What happened in the sixties the marketing analyst Thomas Frank observed, "is that hip became central to the way America capitalism understood itself and explained itself to the public.... Suddenly youth became a consumin position to which all could aspire.... The conceptual position of *youthfulness* became as great a element of the marketing picture as youth itself." Frank called this "the conquest of the cool. Unfortunately for his industry, it is a beach-head that cannot be held.

Once the cool had supposedly been conquered, the main marketing topic of the day — and for th next 30 years — was, "What are the young up to? What do they like? What are they reading, buyin wearing, talking about?" A profession of cool-hunters emerged, grown-ups who dedicated their live to the whims of adolescents. And perhaps those who spent so much time confabulating with th sensibilities of the young came to feel vicariously young themselves, people who were hot, clued i with it, and all the more unwilling to give up on the youthful market. In any case, this transito fascination has remained the great commercial topic of our economy, even as the young demograph became less numerous and less affluent. In such an intellectual ambience, those above the age of 4 simply dropped out of sight. Many elders who could not keep up with the pace were willing to yield the spirit of the times, ensconcing themselves (if they could afford to do so) in distant retireme communities in self-imposed exile. Thus, society was surrendered to the young. From the 194 through the 1980s, who could have imagined a world ruled by the elderly? And because such a futu was unthinkable, nobody spent much time thinking about it. Instead, as if the task of defining soci

reality belonged exclusively to entrepreneurs, market analysts, and engineers, those who specialized brainstorming world's-fair visions of things to come focused on an endless succession of scientif amazements, intoxicating visions that simply ignored the most obvious biological realities of o species. Yet all the while, steadily and without fanfare and as invincibly as all living things blosson ripen, and mature, more people were living longer. And as they did so, they were creating a possibili not even the most far-sighted futurists had anticipated.

Return to the beginning of the 20th century. In 1900 most people in the western world could loo back upon a family history where one out of every three babies died within a year, where it w commonplace for women to expire in childbirth, where few grandparents lived into their sixtie where most elderly citizens had little more than the county home or the workhouse to look forward once they could no longer earn their own way. However amazing people then might find th technological wonders of our day to be, there are things far more incredible: a world where the wome of Japan and France are leading the way to a life expectancy beyond 85 years — with their husban not that far behind them. A world where money needed to pay for the elderly ill could begin to outstr money spent on the tools of war. A world where, like a target in a gun sight, the genetic locus o senescence could be coming ever more steadily into sharp focus.

Now that it is so clearly upon us, senior dominance is viewed with horrified amazement by ma politicians and economists. Because it is the very opposite of what they anticipated, they see ma longevity as a fiscal calamity, a prospect wholly at odds with all they hold dear. The country is filli up with the wrong people — *old* people, people who by definition take little interest in innovatio who care more about secure investments, savings accounts and prescription costs than the next h thing on the market and who will be claiming more and more of our resources, influencing ever mo of our political policies. Hardly a week goes by but the evening news or the op-ed page takes up th drum-beat: “Be warned! Old people are coming! Old people are coming!” Gerontocracy, in th judgment of many pundits, threatens bankruptcy, backwardness, and stagnation. They ask: “How ca we afford all these people?” And, less audibly, they ask: “How are we going to sell them i-Phone HDTV, flashy clothes, new movies, the next American icon?”

Their Finest Hour

That bleak outlook is exactly what *The Making of an Elder Culture* rejects. It is not only wrong, it *exactly wrong* by 180 degrees. The elder culture that is being improvised all around us day by day ma not turn out to be an endless vista of fast-paced economic expansion and technological gadgetry, but promises to be the road toward a saner, more compassionate, more sustainable world — altogether, more important turning point than ever presented itself in the 1960s when boomers were coming age. This, at last, is what the dissenting idealism of the 1960s was, in its highest and brighte expression, all about: a transformation of values that may finally reveal the goal of industrializatio the life-enhancing destiny that has lain hidden in the wrenching violence and extravagant physical a spiritual costs. In raising that possibility, I cling to one hope. Boomers, who will usher us into seni dominance, are the best educated, most socially conscientious, most politically savvy older generati the world has ever seen. They grew up entertaining (if not always endorsing) countercultural value reveling in their willingness to search beyond the limits of convention. Given sufficient awareness a

inspiration, I believe that generation will want to do good things with the power that history h unexpectedly thrust upon it in its senior years. What boomers left undone in their youth, they w return to take up in their maturity, if for no other reason than because they will want to make old ag *interesting*. Just as the Dutch have won land back from the sea, we have won years back from deat That gives us the grand project of using those extra years to build a culture that is morally remarkabl

The elder culture we will be exploring in these pages is not the outgrowth of a well-defined soci philosophy, much less is it a blueprint for the future. Like the counter culture of the 1960s and 1970 on which it draws in spirit and for ideas, it is a surprising proliferation of divergent values that emerg from a new demographic reality. Far from being a detailed agenda ordered up by a political moveme or an ideological faction, it is the way in which our lives are being reconfigured by the convergence numerous unplanned but inexorable developments in medical science, public health, economics, bra physiology, biotechnology, gender roles, generational relations, and social policy. Under th demographic pressure of an aging population, we are seeing radical changes in work and family lif career choices and retirement, man-woman relationships, health care, and city planning.

As people in greater numbers live long enough to suffer late-onset diseases, those san demographic pressures are redirecting medical research toward new genetic therapies that ma contribute to an astonishing extension of life expectancy. We are discovering that the best way to tre many diseases of old age is to nip them in the bud by forms of prenatal intervention that will brin benefits throughout a lifetime. That in turn is forcing new budgetary priorities upon us that will mak some traditional expenditures and investments — such as military adventures, space exploratio corporate welfare — less urgent and more difficult to afford. And that will force us to revise publ policy. At the same time, as research on the aging brain becomes more widespread, we will fin ourselves revising our understanding of the mind, its limits and its unexplored potential — a proje that has enormous philosophical implications. This, in time, will open new avenues in education th may lead to the reevaluation of expertise and experience. And as new living patterns arise among growing population of elders, our relations with the natural environment are likely to change as the come to reflect new, more discriminating patterns of consumption, transportation, housing, nutritio recreation, lifestyle. A grand panorama of change, but behind it a common theme: more people ar living longer.

The greatest challenge of mass longevity is the fact that so few have seen it coming except tho who would deny it and defeat it — in large measure by condemning boomers as a failed generatio That is an unusual, perhaps a unique, political tactic. Is there any other generation in history that h faced such adversarial hostility — which is perhaps a clear measure of its power? Conservative especially the neoconservatives who came to power during the Reagan presidency, see the cost of a aging society as the prime obstacle to their project of building a corporate-dominated, market-base highly militarized global economy. They have accurately seen the entitlements and the life expectanc now available to the many as the antithesis of a Social-Darwinist ethic that serves the few. Since th 1970s, far-right ideologues have been doing all they can to make the United States incapable dealing with the demographic facts of life in the 21st century. Nothing clashes more with their hope for an American imperial order than a society whose future lies in the hands of 75 million agin boomers. Conservatives cannot turn back the clock on longevity; but they can make it so fearful an painful an experience that we will be ever more reluctant to pay the price that good health and lon life demand.

More nefariously, neoconservatives can make the old feel guilty for becoming such a supposed ~~great burden to their long-suffering children — even though these children will themselves soon b~~ moving into their fifties and sixties. Like the stereotypic welfare queen Ronald Reagan liked to bas the greedy geezer is a figment of political propaganda, an image of other people's detestable paren somewhere out there in Florida or Arizona or aboard *The Love Boat*, living it up at *your* expense. Ev so, conservative guilt-tripping has been remarkably successful among boomers themselves, some whom, in an astonishing display of social masochism, are willing to bear the blame for being numerous and living so long. That is what one finds in editorials and commentaries — most of the written by boomers — lamenting how the "rise of the wrinklies" will drain the national treasury. In brutally satirical novel about his avaricious generation titled *Boomsday*, Christopher Buckley rush to defend his children from the boomers' legacy: "mountainous debt, a deflating economy, and 7 million people retiring." The heroine of his tale proposes a solution, a morbid sort of annuity. P boomers in advance to commit suicide at 75. But what do parents like Buckley need to apologize fo That *their* parents produced so many of them? That they kept fit and lived longer? That they follow doctor's orders and lived longer still? That they lived long enough to need a payback on the help th once gave kids who were in many cases dependent on them for 20 years or more? What such *m culpa* gestures fail to grasp is that the power that boomers inherit is their chance to create a bett world for their children and all who follow them.

There is a terrible irony to the anti-elder campaign that conservatives are waging. Why are they n celebrating mass longevity as capitalism's greatest achievement? For is this not the economic syste that has delivered the productivity that makes life longer and richer for all of us? But, then, perha that has never been the objective of the corporate elite for whom the gap between have and have-n serves as the first line of defense for social privilege. So, by way of upper-class tax cuts and proflig military spending, they have been rushing to cripple our economy so that there will be no way to me the needs of an aging population gracefully. They have done a supremely clever job of burning mone that might have been set aside for compassionate purposes. In the name of free trade, they have r trade deficits that make the nation far too dependent on foreign support for the cost of basic soc programs. They have reinforced the economic dogma that only corporate earnings, the Dow Jon index, and the Gross Domestic Product shall be used to measure the wealth of the nation. They ha shipped manufacturing jobs and indeed whole industries offshore, leaving the working and midd classes unprepared for unemployment or retirement and less and less able to afford decent health ca Meanwhile, they have devoted themselves assiduously to building what Robert Frank has call "Richistan," land of the $10,000 diamond-studded martini and the million-dollar time share, where t inequality gap between have-lots and have-less has reached proportions as dire as any in the poore parts of the world. The boomers' first job as they assume direction of the elder culture will be repair the fiscal damage that has been done by 30 years of conservative budgetary sabotage a wrong-headed economic priorities.

Almost every book on the subject of aging has been written by a doctor, a gerontologist, a fitne trainer, or a financial planner, as if all that mattered in life beyond a certain age was fending o disease and being comfortably retired. I will pay a good deal of attention in these pages to health ca and retirement, but I will come at these matters within a very different context. *The Making of Elder Culture* is neither a demographic study nor a history, though it includes a bit of both. Rather, is an exercise in *practical nostalgia*. It mines the past to find solutions for the future. In that respect, stands somewhere between a critique and an appeal. My purpose is to explore the values, ideals, a

reforms that the first generation of senior dominance will bring into the later years of life. I seek
remind and to re-mind and, above all, to create a new paradigm for aging that will enable the bab
boom generation to live out its history with moral courage and high expectation. As boomers reach th
age of 60, they will, on average, have 20 to 25 years of life ahead of them. That is more time than the
spent being young and more than enough time to become a political and cultural force. My hope
that people who grew up on J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*, the poetry of Allen Ginsberg, the fo
music of Pete Seeger, the protest ballads of Country Joe, the anarchic insolence of the Beatles and th
Rolling Stones, the biting satire of Mort Sahl and Lenny Bruce, the acid rock of Bob Dylan, th
sociology of Paul Goodman and Herbert Marcuse, the Summer of Love and the Days of Rage, will n
be content to spend their retirement years on cruise ships or feeding their Social Security income in
slot machines at the nearest casino.

How might these elders put those extra years to better use? The chapters that follow suggest sever
possibilities both personal and political, all based on the assumption that the boomers' place in histor
has more to do with Act Two than with Act One. This is unknown intellectual territory, le
unexplored in large part because of the protracted reluctance which senescence-phobic boomers hav
thus far shown in facing up to their biological destiny. They have found it hard to recognize that th
best that they have to give lies before, not behind them. And needless to say, nothing is guaranteed i
human affairs — nothing good and nothing bad. That is why some of us write books, hoping
provide an influence that might not otherwise be there. Boomers, so uniquely obsessed wi
themselves — their tastes, their values, their choices — have been condemned as narcissists sin
they were in kindergarten. But with a bit of Socratic help, narcissism can be the beginning of sel
knowledge, even self-criticism. And a good, critical knowledge of the self — one's strengths an
vulnerabilities, one's irrationalities and shortcomings, one's false hopes and true needs — is the be
basis for moral action. By sheer weight of numbers, an elder culture we will have, but which will
be? The boomers' sad demise or their finest hour?

As boomers become the older generation, those in the media who chart their progress are eager
applaud them for nothing so much as not growing old. The literature of active aging has become
cheerleading genre in its own right. Journalists and advertisers compliment boomers for sticking
their careers, touring the world, keeping fit, winning prizes, staying sexy. *The AARP Magazi*
decorates its cover with senior celebrities, still virile, still nubile, still making it — in brief, extendi
their middle age by another 10 or 20 years. The subtext is clear enough.

Holding age at bay for as long as possible is the only good choice seniors have. Stay in the rac
keep the party going. Still others hope to see this most affluent of senior generations shop its life aw
by turning it into an unprecedented merchandising opportunity, as if becoming a market validat
people.

But my interest is in another possibility: that the final stage of life is uniquely suited to the creati
of new social forms and cultural possibilities, because, as naturally as the leaves drop from the trees
autumn, age offers us the opportunity to detach from the competitive, high-consumption priorities th
dominated us on the job and in the marketplace. At that point, life itself — the opportunity it offe
for growth, for intellectual adventure, for the simple joys of love and companionship, for working o
our salvation — comes to be seen as our highest value. What I offer here is an appeal for the buildi
of a new, humane social order based on that insight. That is what I have always assumed it means
be *countercultural*. It would be fruitless to make such an appeal if we were not experiencing

irresistible, long-term demographic shift toward societies dominated by seniors. There would then b nothing to work with but fond wishes and desperate rhetoric. But that shift is taking place. Boomers growing numbers are aging beyond the acquisitive values that created our industrial system. I mere suggest we make the most of that fact by taking on a task worth living for and fighting for.

Start with what you have. That was among the key ideas of countercultural protest. Start here — this neighborhood, this house, with these people. Don't waste time on blueprints and head trips. Sta with the means, the wit, and the resources at hand and build out from where you stand towa something better. Youthful boomers had a good deal to start with. They had the prosperity of th postwar era and the unusually permissive child-rearing ethos of the time, the willingness of parents be generous and indulgent. They had access to higher education on an unprecedented scale. That ga them freedom and a common ground, a gathering place that could be used to thrust their deman upon the public. They also, paradoxically enough, had conscription, a lever of power that allow them to resist the war in Vietnam by hitting the warlords where it hurt the most. Those advantag played a significant part in amplifying protest.

Now, in their elder years, they also have quite a bit more to start with. They have their voting pow — a resource those below the age of 21 did not have in the 1960s. Above all, they have a special clai upon the national treasury: Social Security and Medicare. As important as these programs are bread-and-butter terms for the senior population, they are something more. They are the model a linchpin of the ethical commitment we have become accustomed to calling *entitlements*. To accustomed — so that people overlook how much good can be done by a few good social progra even in this oversized, flabby, often Kafkaesque social order. In my own writing I have lashed o many times at the impersonality, the faceless, unfeeling, bureaucratic impaction of urban-industri society. This planet-straddling empire of industrial cities we have so blindly created is inhuman wrong in a thousand ways. And yet it has granted millions the empowering right to say "I'm *entitled* That is a good beginning. The fact that both Social Security and Medicare need to be reconfigured a expanded means there is unfinished business on our social agenda. And whose business can that be b that of elders themselves?

As the guardians of these entitlements, elders bear a special responsibility. By building upon thes programs, they can become the creators of a compassionate economy that will at last put our nation wealth to some better use than war-making, wasteful production, or corporate profiteering. Those we very largely the targets of protest in the 1960s when it seemed there was no way forward but rallie demonstrations, civil disobedience, and maybe a bit of bomb throwing. But now, at another stage life, a different possibility presents itself, the chance to make a society that will bring independenc health, and long life to everybody. Read that sentence again and appreciate what it mean independence, health, and long life *for everybody*. After centuries of privation and unjust privileg this is what history now offers us. It is really little more than many European societies and th Japanese have already undertaken to achieve, in every case recognizing that a growing population elders demands such a change.

In truth, the United States is a laggard in this movement toward a robust welfare state, and o resistance to that goal weighs heavily on other nations. The American corporate community has use its inordinate power to configure the global economy as an extension of its own mean-spirited soci ethic, a policy orientation that impoverishes people throughout the developing world, starting with i homeland where, in the period 1974 to 2004, it has, according to the a 2007 survey by the Pe

Charitable Trust’s Economic Mobility Project, for the first time in the nation’s history driven th
earnings of working people below those of their fathers. A century after the first labor laws wer
passed in the United States, American firms are once again setting up sweatshops, beating dow
unions and putting children to work where they can get away with it — mainly in Asia and Lat
America. The influence of our neoconservative corporate community is now an impediment
humane reform, environmental health, and social justice everywhere. It has imposed a free-mark
orthodoxy and a grinding Social-Darwinist ethic on the world at large. It has vastly widened the ga
between rich and poor and is ruthlessly exploiting the planetary ecology. Worst of all, the America
corporate community has by example, by competitive pressure, and by investment encouraged oth
societies as consequential as China and India to imitate its myopic standards.

What I propose here simply calls for extending the spirit that underlies the senior entitlements
our society as a whole — and above all the concept of *entitlement* as a rightful claim upon the weal
we have all created. That may not seem like much in the way of a utopian alternative, but given th
fierce and benighted ideological agenda of the corporate elite in our political life, it will be a fight
accomplish that much. If boomers can change the self-serving entrepreneurial and neoconservativ
values that now dominate our lives, they will have made a historic contribution not only to their ow
society but to the modern world at large. In their own interests, boomers have every good reason
take on the task of taming the world’s most dynamic, most market-oriented economy and to bring
under the guidance of an elder culture that sets a new criterion for wealth and progress. Do that, ar
we will have placed wisdom and nobility at the center of our lives.

CHAPTER 2

Boomers — Act Two

I lift my voice aloud,
make Mantra of American language now,
I here declare the end of the War!
Ancient days' Illusion!
and pronounce words beginning my own millennium.

— Allen Ginsberg, "Wichita Vortex Sutra"

When I wrote *The Making of a Counter Culture* in 1969, I was as fascinated with the politic ebullience of college-aged, and even high-school-aged, youth as the rest of the world around me — th *young demographic*, as the marketing industry would soon refer to them. The rising influence of teen and twenty-somethings in the United States and Europe was the big story of that decade and the nex It was as if a war-weary parental generation was looking to its children to plant the ruined world wi flowers. Everything from hair styles to social ideology seemed to be falling under the sway of th exuberant young. But what middle-class parents saw happening among their progeny as they reache their high school and college years was not encouraging. It was not satisfaction, and it was n gratitude. The prevailing intellectual style of the time on campus and in the coffeehouses was a existential angst that asked whether life was worth living — or was it an exercise in absurdit pushing the rock up the hill only to see it roll back down? There was a good deal of such melanchol among the early Beats of the postwar period, a surly life-is-a-lousy-drag sullenness that seemed out keeping with their country's recent good fortune. Why were such gestures of disaffiliation catching o with the young? What place did morbid discontent have in prospering America? Was this not the lan of limitless discretionary income, where not a single bomb had dropped and where nobody was goin hungry? As mothers and fathers would soon learn: that was not going to be good enough. A dar disquiet was brewing in their pampered children.

The American version of Sartre and Camus might have been lightweight and skewed towar adolescence, but the inarticulate angst of Holden Caulfield, the rebellious young hero of J. D Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*, had a quality that formal philosophy rarely achieves. Embodied in th experience of a teenage runaway, Holden's clear-eyed contempt for the adult world could speak to larger and younger public. One of the most widely assigned high school texts of the 1950s, the nove both in its wistfulness and in its premature cynicism, overlapped with the impulsive need of the youn to make their own life. Norman Mailer, writing in 1959, shrewdly recognized that explosiv

connection early on in the period. For Mailer, the American existentialist was the *hipster*. The hipste were "white Negroes," as Mailer put it, "a new breed of adventurers, urban adventurers who drift out at night looking for action with a black man's code to fit their facts... an elite with the potenti ruthlessness of an elite, and a language most adolescents can understand instinctively, for the hipster intense view of existence matches their experience and their desire to rebel."[1]

A college instructor at the time, just beginning my teaching career, I recall how astonished I was see the change that came over my students through the early 1960s. It was as if someone had pushed button, and within a few short years the universities were turned upside down. The students I ha before me were nothing like the college population I remembered from my own undergradua experience. Just to set a time line: when I arrived on campus as a freshman, World War II vets on th GI Bill were finishing up on their post-docs and exploring the job market. Many were already marri and raising families; they were on their way into lucrative careers as doctors, lawyers, weapo engineers, marketing analysts, and junior executives. My postwar years at UCLA were lived out und the shadow of Senator Joseph McCarthy's reign of terror. In that period, as the pressures of the Co War set in, it took courage simply to sign a petition or attend a political rally. But now, as I entere my teaching career, seemingly overnight students were talking revolution and behaving as if they we willing to defy all official rules and parental conventions. Many of the brightest were vanishing fro the campus, walking out on their parents' expectations in search of some better alternative.

In the United States, the baby boom was the largest population bulge in the nation's history — to large a number to be fairly contained either then or now by any simple generalization. As one mig expect, this young demographic exhibited a spectrum of values and choices. Most of these babi would grow up to follow in their parents' footsteps. They would be as patriotic, as pious, as la abiding, and as complacent about the inherited ideals of their society as their parents and grandparen before them. But a sizeable number — nobody can say how many, but enough to make for good-siz rallies, marches, and rock concerts — would find reasons to voice significant discomfort with ju about everything in sight: education, family, foreign policy, national priorities, middle-clas conformity, corporate misconduct, race relations, gender identities, the work ethic, sexual more "Young people speakin' their mind/Gettin' so much resistance from behind." At times they seemed t be acting out Marlon Brando's line from the 1954 film *The Wild One*. Asked what he is rebelli against, Brando, playing a surly, leather-clad biker, answers, "What have you got?"

I realized at the time that the wild ones among my students were a minority of their generation. fact, the disaffiliated were a minority of a minority. The college-aged population might have bee larger than ever before, but it was still a minority of the nation — and of the world — as a whole. A even among those who showed up at the universities, only a minority participated in the prote politics of the time. But however small their numbers, they knew how to draw attention, and n simply by their boisterousness. The quality of the issues they were raising demanded a response. Th had drawn a bead on the phoniness and hypocrisy of their society, on its greed and injustice and mor numbness. *Generation* is the most unwieldy of social categories, little better than the people w happen to be lined up together at a bus stop. Yet, almost of necessity, we do isolate eras, movement and groups out of the steady and seamless flow of time and give them names, faces, identities. T parents of the boomers have been called *the greatest generation*, but not everybody went to war in t 1940s or suffered the worst trials of the Great Depression in the 1930s. We speak of the *flaming you* of the 1920s, but that term did not describe more than a small minority of boisterous college kids, th

an even smaller fraction of the total population. How many young women of that era would claim th were flappers, how many young men habituated speakeasies? The style of a generation is not a matt of statistics but of innovation. Historians, always on the lookout for the novel and flamboyant, a often guilty of overlooking the mainstream, the average, the ordinary — perhaps because nothi interesting is happening there. Changes in the cultural taste and moral awareness of society alwa begin in the lives of a minority, and that minority may become the soul of a generation.

Perhaps I would have viewed the youthful disaffiliation of the time differently, and probably wi less hope of rapid social change, if I could have foreseen how many members of the young generation would eventually wind up as cultural conservatives or evangelical Christians, how ma would settle for lucrative business careers, how many would find the thrill of a lifetime at a NASCA rally. In all the generalizations and high hopes I offer here, I have tried to remember that George W Bush, Karl Rove, and Newt Gingrich qualify as boomers — as do many architects of the Iraq war. S were the piratical traders at Enron and World Com. Boomers have been the main market for SUV ga guzzlers and the most competitive parents in history when it comes to getting their children into th best schools. But that does not change my assessment of the dissent I saw around me through th 1960s and 1970s. That period will be remembered in the history books as a time of significa political unrest, as much so in the United States as the years of the Progressive movement at the tu of the 20th century or the New Deal of the 1930s. The protestors might have been young and at tim frivolously high-spirited, but the issues they addressed were weighty. More importantly for the yea to come, many of the ideas they championed are as bright and promising today as they were in th days of Woodstock.

The hopes I invested in the protest of that period had much to do with my own situation. I was that time developing serious reservations about the basic sanity and sustainability of urban-industri culture. I cannot say where these reservations came from, certainly not from my very conventiona working-class, Catholic background. Maybe dissent was in the air and I caught a good, strong case it, especially after I settled in the San Francisco Bay Area. After all, the world was living (as it sti does, though we assume with a bit less urgency) under the threat of thermonuclear annihilation. Wh clearer sign could there be that our technology was rapidly running away with us, setting mindle priorities that lacked all prudence? Under pressure of the anti-communist mania which had becon the total foreign policy of the United States, the scale of our institutions, both governmental ar private, was overwhelming any meaningful democratic control. The power of governing elites — th military-industrial complex — was growing, unchecked, by the year. The social reality that we we expected to adapt to — an unsavory mix of marketing lies, mysteries of state, and technocrat obsessions — was becoming ever more claustrophobic.

It was the surrealistic incongruity of it all, the sheer crazy-making inanity of business and politi as usual, that was most troubling. I had spent a good deal of undergraduate time imbibing existenti negativity, bemoaning the bad faith and moral treachery of humanity and expecting the worst fro those who controlled the bomb; perhaps that had deepened my sensitivity to the absurd. And now found it all around me. The era that brought us the theater of the absurd also brought us the society the absurd. All Mort Sahl had to do to produce mass hilarity was to stand in Sproul Plaza in Berkele and read the newspapers. Following a war that was fought against the ugliest of racist ideologie racism persisted. In the midst of the unprecedented affluence that followed the war, poverty persiste In the ethos of the Cold War, the very civil liberties that supposedly set us apart from fascist ar communist totalitarianism were being undermined by right-wing demagogues. With more knowled

at our fingertips than any society had ever enjoyed, we were drowning in duplicity and mystificatio ~~Though technology had given us more power over nature than humanity had ever enjoyed,~~ it w becoming frighteningly clear that we were doing the planet more harm than good. DDT was bei sprayed in the open air of public parks and residential neighborhoods across the country. Televisi bubbled over the delights of limitless consumption (this was, after all, the era that invented the cre card), but in our schools, children were learning to duck and cover when they saw the sky catch fire.

Has there ever been such a heady mixture of social contradiction and moral ambiguity? Had a previous generation ever faced a larger agenda of weighty issues? The very ideals for whi revolutionaries of the past had fought were being brought under critical scrutiny. Radical spirits h long embraced science as the heart and soul of enlightenment; they had seized upon technology as t secret of universal prosperity; they had turned *progress* into a secular religion. But here I w wondering what difference it made who owned or controlled the means of production if those ve means had become a Frankenstein monster over which leaders had less and less control.

Where to look for a sane alternative? At the time, my own thoughts were reaching back to t origins of industrial society, to the great Romantic movement that had pitted the poets a philosophers of the later 18th century against the momentum of modern history. I believed that Bla and Shelley, Goethe and Wordsworth had more to teach us about life and the world than the experts the RAND Corporation. The young Romantics of that distant time were the first to rail against t gargantuan growth of cities, the concentration of power in ever fewer hands, the rape of nature th was then just beginning, and above all against the dominance of a narrow, desiccated form rationality that purported to be master of all that it observed — "Single Vision," as William Bla called it. So it was that I quoted Blake as the epigraph for *The Making of a Counter Culture*: "A Degraded, Imagination Denied, War Governed the Nations." Consciousness was at the core of t Romantic political style — as it was once again among the young protesters of the 1960s. As zany their politics might sometimes seem, it struck me that they had it right: The materialistic obsessio and blinkered consciousness that dominated both the capitalist west and the Marxist east we corrupting our souls. More than we needed new laws and new programs, more than we needed change in governance, we needed a new quality of experience, something we would have to learn fro artists and visionaries rather than politicians. We needed a culture that would *counter* the reali principle that ruled our souls.

The forces of youthful dissent achieved a good deal in just a few years' time between the mid-196 and mid-1970s. They succeeded in stopping a disastrous war in Vietnam and in bringing down crooked and deceitful president. They championed new initiatives for equality and justice: a women movement and a gay liberation movement to take their place alongside movements for racial justic They planted the ideal of multiculturalism squarely in the mainstream. They transformed the sexu morality of their society and deepened our awareness of the irrational forces that lurk in the depths the psyche. And, not least of all, they launched an environmental movement to address the future the planet. All to the good. Even so, by the mid-1970s, it became clear that much would rema undone. The magnitude of the countercultural changes some had sought was too great. That wou require more thought, more strategic planning, more maturity than a single generation still in its you could manage. Then, as the younger generation moved out into the world to seek careers and fo families, their dissenting energy faded. The youthful élan that had offered us these new beginnin was passing. Some called it *the big chill* And by the 1980s, a well-financed and well-general conservative backlash was on the scene, working to restore the "economic royalists" of corpora

America (as Franklin Roosevelt had called them as far back as the mid-1930s) to their place privilege and to build an even bigger warfare state. Intellect, once the monopoly of the left, began gravitate to new, right-wing think tanks. Competitive individualism and free-market orthodoxy, th discredited worldview of the 1890s, suddenly reappeared as hot new ideas. The future, it seemed, ha lost its utopian luster.

Life Beyond the Young Demographic

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, there was heated debate about the intellectual and ethic significance of youthful protest. The media fed avidly on the antics of the young, while many pundi dismissed all they saw as ephemeral, narcissistic posturing. Conservatives were particularly dismaye at what they saw unfolding. Eventually, in a grand judgmental summation entitled *The Closing of th American Mind*, Allan Bloom, a major neoconservative mentor, would look back in contempt on th entire, turbulent era, blasting it as a betrayal of absolute values. Multiculturalism, Bloom believe was a fatuous offense to the glories of western civilization; feminism was an absurd attack upon th natural order of the family and the biology of gender relations; the language and behavior of youn dissenters were uncivil and subintellectual; their lenient, liberal professors were guilty of a poisonou anything-goes permissiveness. Bloom could see nothing redeeming in the “histrionic morality” of th 1960s. A “period of dogmatic answers and trivial tracts,” it was “an exercise in egalitarian sel satisfaction.” For the universities, it was a period of “unmitigated disaster,” in which pusillanimou and guilt-ridden academics, instead of cracking down on bad taste and bad thinking, encouraged th muddled self-indulgence of students who were little more than a mindless “rabble.” Above all, it wa the vulgarity of the era that offended him, the lack of respect for excellence and the great creativ achievements of the western heritage. The result, he felt, was a corrosive cultural relativism th “succeeds in destroying the western world’s universal or intellectually imperialistic claims, leaving to be just another culture.” For Bloom, the concept of *lifestyle* sums up the sins of the era. “‘Lifestyl justifies any way of life, as does ‘value’ any opinion.... Lifestyle was first popularized here to describ and make acceptable the lives of people who do attractive things that are frowned upon by society. was identical to counter culture. . . . Counterculture, of course, enjoyed the dignity attaching culture, and was intended as a reproach to the bourgeois excuse for a culture we see around us. Wh actually goes on in a counter culture or a lifestyle — whether it is ennobling or debasing — makes n difference.... Whatever you are, whoever you are, is the good.”[2]

Strong words from a learned man. Bloom could wield the authority of great minds with self-assure dexterity — Plato, Locke, Rousseau, Nietzsche, Hegel. He brought these to bear with impressive effe in his biting critique of youthful dissent. And it must be granted that the angry irreverence of the tim as expressed in slogans, posters, graffiti, and street theater, does not stand up well against th measured words of intellectual giants. But what conclusion would Bloom have reached if he ha leveled the same erudite criticism at those on the commanding heights of society — the Pentago warlords, the RAND Corporation strategists, the “best and the brightest” in the West Wing, th corporate beneficiaries of the military-industrial complex, all those whose decisions enforced th chauvinism, the racism, and social injustice at which the dissent of the 1960s was aimed? Would h also have awarded them a failing grade for their violations of reason and decency — or would he hav

given them a gentleman’s C?

Bloom, a committed conservative, was not alone in finding the 1960s an elusive critical targe Though the counter culture was rebellious enough to offend the political right, it was not ideological rigorous enough to please the left. Many old-line lefties were as harshly dismissive as Reagan righ wingers. Even those who were in the thick of things still had a hard time making up their minds. In 2006 interview, Country Joe McDonald, whose “Fixin’ to Die Rag” was the anti-war anthem of th period sung to crowds that numbered thousands, confessed that he had no idea what all th demonstrations accomplished — if anything. “There was a lot of bull thrown around about revolutio and a lot of drug taking and sex happening,” he observed. But he wondered if it made “much of difference.” Other veterans of the period found the radical politics of the time so misconceived th they made an about-face and turned staunchly conservative. Peter Collier, an editor of *Ramparts* in th 1960s, and David Horowitz, once a fiery New Leftist, made that transition. The title of their 198 book, *Destructive Generation: Second Thoughts About The Sixties*, captures their change of heart. Th counter culture, so Collier and Horowitz concluded, was little more than “an Oedipal revolt,” a outburst by adolescents “who never grew up politically.”

Now, looking back, I think a lot of what has been said pro and con about the 1960s — a calend decade that has assumed a personality of it own — was foolishly overwrought. The scene was chaoti a lot of people doing a lot of things — some of it smart, some of it witless, some of it astute, some it delusionary — but none of it officially initiated or under central control. And that as much a anything else was worrisome to people in high places. The mandarins of corporate America we being mocked by the children of prosperity and the values of the sacred marketplace rejected — b not in the name of any familiar ideological tradition. The attack was a disconcertingly playf confabulation with anarchist social theory, voluntary primitivism, Zen-Taoist mysticism, occult lor Tolkienesque fairy tales, with all of it fueled by a randy, adolescent prankishness. Conservative especially were troubled by the brashness and disorder of the time. Many of those who would lat flock to the Reagan backlash — horrified evangelicals, Young Americans for Freedom with their hig respect for God and country, neoconservatives nursing visions of a worldwide Pax Americana – probably still carry troubling memories of the sexual openness and disrespectful rhetoric they sa around them, and perhaps regret they missed out on the fun and games when they had the chance. one cares to lint-pick, there was plenty to denigrate. There was certainly no lack of ideologic extremists, loud-mouthed bullies, radical poseurs, and devious opportunists moving through the ran of the protest movement. Bloom, for example, drew a great deal of his spleen from a few obnoxio activists he had to deal with and some distasteful incidents he lived through on his campus. He w especially offended by the uppitiness of black power leaders and even more so by the insolence militant feminists, who, he felt, failed to appreciate the chivalric side of machismo and seemed have no idea why God had endowed them with a womb.

Yet self-righteous vituperation and strident anger were hardly the only ingredients in the bubblin political stew of the times. The Port Huron Statement of the Students for a Democratic Society is fine a manifesto as any ever written, and the authors on whom young dissenters drew — C. Wrig Mills, Paul Goodman, Noam Chomsky, Jacques Ellul, E. F. Schumacher, Herbert Marcuse — wer hardly lightweights. Admittedly, there were new modes of expression, especially the rock music of th period, that were troublingly unfamiliar to the cultural mainstream, but, given the chance, they cou be persuasively incisive. Works such as Stanley Kubrick’s *Dr. Strangelove* (especially Ter Southern’s mordant screenplay) and Allen Ginsberg’s “Wichita Vortex Sutra” brilliantly capture th

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