

Judy Kutulas. *After Aquarius Dawned: How the Revolutions of the Sixties Became the Popular Culture of the Seventies.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017. 274 pp. \$90.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4696-3290-2.

Reviewed by Drew Maciag

Published on H-1960s (January, 2018)

Commissioned by Zachary J. Lechner (Centenary College of Louisiana)

The clever adage that “anyone who claims to remember the 1960s wasn’t really there” is amusing only because so many people associate the Age of Aquarius with a drug-induced haze. Nobody takes the statement literally, yet everyone gets the joke. It might be more culturally astute, however, to suggest that *everyone* remembers the 1960s—whether or not they were really there—because popular history in the United States has elevated the 60s to mythic stature. For a variety of reasons, American society has chosen to keep memories of those years alive and exciting. By contrast, Americans have generally chosen to forget the 1970s. Partly this resulted from the 60s being an impossible act to follow. But it did not help that plenty of psychic energy during the 70s was spent on digesting all that had happened in the previous decade, so it was difficult for the new decade to forge its own, free-standing identity. Andy Warhol famously dismissed the 1970s as “empty,” and unlike the 1960s, they seemed to lack any thematic coherence or heroic drama.

Consequently, books about the 1970s often betray a defensive tone; in effect, they make excuses for why the decade deserves more respect or a higher profile. One technique is to assert that the revolutions of the 1960s never completely ended; they just shifted gears, went underground, or

adopted new tactics. In this vein, Judy Kutulas—a professor of history and American studies at Saint Olaf College—has produced a very readable and enjoyable book in (what might be called) the “epilogue genre” of 1970s history. Simply put: Kutulas’s *After Aquarius Dawned: How the Revolutions of the Sixties Became the Popular Culture of the Seventies* argues that radical changes in consciousness during the 1960s, particularly regarding feminism, race, and gender identity, began to influence mainstream behavior during the 1970s, and that the process was aided by popular entertainment, especially music and television, and, to a lesser extent, by the commercial fashion industry.

Kutulas describes—and implicitly celebrates—routine subversions of the nation’s customary social hierarchies, which had privileged straight white men to the detriment of women, persons of color, and those of same-sex or transgender orientations. She observes that in the midst of a conservative political backlash, individual Americans, especially those belonging to previously suppressed groups, sought to incorporate the new social freedoms of the 1970s into their own lives rather than to participate further in organized reform movements. Although she does not directly say so, she also demonstrates that subversive

leadership passed from political to cultural agents: from activists and politicians to singer-songwriters, television writers and producers, and designers and marketers of clothing and shoes. It should be noted that this book speaks in a decidedly female voice, which is all to the good. Kutulas's strong woman's perspective lends authenticity and passion as well as a disarming personal touch: the book is dedicated to her three sisters, and a photo of her smiling with them graces the front matter; her personalized, gendered sensibility proves especially effective in the book's coverage of women singer-songwriters and of the *Mary Tyler Moore Show*.

After Aquarius Dawned is a serious inquiry into cultural values, yet it is written with a light touch—apparently in hopes of reaching a wider audience. Nevertheless, Kutulas briefly explains her theoretical approach up front. She also registers her main disagreement with a common stereotype of the 1970s that has been reinforced by popular and scholarly writers alike. While describing her narrative as “a classic from-the-margins-to-the-mainstream story,” she acknowledges the earlier work of the 1970s pollster Daniel Yankelovich, who pioneered the “measure[ment] of national psychology.” Both Yankelovich's polling data and Kutulas's historical sketches trace the “rapid diffusion of radical ideas into the mainstream,” and Kutulas states that Yankelovich's “understanding of the normalization process ... helps to frame my work” (p. 2). Kutulas clearly takes issue with the widespread belief that the 1970s were at heart a selfish “Me Decade,” asserting, “Sixties activism made Americans more cognizant of the need to reconcile values and lifestyle. It did not make them narcissistic.” Therefore Americans in the 1970s, especially baby boomers, exhibited both an expanded sense of personal freedom *and* a greater tolerance of others as they came to realize that “there was no one right way to live your life” (pp. 9-10).

The opening chapter on singer-songwriters contains hints of a personal memoir, since Kutulas, who was born in 1953, often seems to be conveying her own “coming of age” reactions to the “new women” sensibility encoded in certain popular music of the 70s. Although Kutulas mentions James Taylor as a reluctant example of the newly sensitive male and credits Paul Simon with spreading comfort to the insecure, it is three women—Carole King, Carly Simon, and Joni Mitchell—who take center stage. King personifies the clearest example of the transition from traditional marriage expectations to mature autonomy and sexual fulfillment (feeling the earth move and the sky a-tumbling down); Simon is even more free-spirited and uninhibited; Mitchell is the most world-weary and introspective. All three pop icons inspired a subjective connection between themselves and their individual listeners. This has been dubbed the “Carly Simon Principle,” and it “defined a bond forged by certain performers and their audiences,” which constructed a personal reality that “helped middle-class baby boomers ... reconcile their lived experiences with the sixties” (p. 23).[1] This also empowered women to place their own pursuit of happiness over the previously indoctrinated obligation to become contented wives and mothers.

If women pop singers touted new kinds of relationships that were often transitory, television sitcoms of the 1970s suggested new ideas about what constituted a family. Discarding the staid template of Ward and June Cleaver (of prerevolutionary *Leave it to Beaver* vintage), post-60s programs suggested that for all practical purposes a family need not comprise blood relatives living under the same roof. Instead, families could be creatively constructed to include friends and vocational colleges. This was certainly the case involving the featured show of Kutulas's third chapter, in which Mary Tyler Moore's character (Mary Richards) leaves behind her hometown life and a failed traditional relationship to seek an independent career and a freer lifestyle in a large city. Not

only is Mary not obsessed with hooking a new man, but she effectively establishes a supportive family of neighbors and coworkers. A subtext of her story is that in a society in which people had lost faith in governments and institutions, they could now rely on small clusters of self-selecting friends for protection and psychological security.

Indeed, the idea of choosing to construct one's own identity and social circle, and to accept the rights of others to choose their own alternative versions, became a core element of the new American sensibility during the 1970s. Kutulas's chapter on fashion confirms this pattern, as sartorial conventions shed the enforced conformity of the gray flannel suit for much more eclectic, colorful, informal, and diverse options. In terms of comfort and practicality, women (who gained the right to wear pants!) benefited more than men. While Kutulas covers the familiar examples, from jeans to disco attire to leisure suits, her treatment of the Earth Shoe phenomenon strikes me as distinctive. I am roughly Kutulas's age, and can remember buying a pair of Anne Kalsø Earth Shoes in 1974. Yes, I did feel I was making a countercultural statement (my hippie political science professor wore them), and yes, I believed that their negative-heel design was healthier because it was more natural. As Kutulas notes, no one was immune to clever marketing, and capitalism was very much complicit in the diffusion of alternative tastes.

This book also includes chapters on television and race, and on changing attitudes about sexual identity. Although these sections are useful, they lack the sense of authorial involvement and passion that make the women's sections so lively and special. All of the first five chapters plus the introduction and conclusion form a cohesive presentation of Kutulas's margins-to-mainstream cultural thesis. The sixth and last chapter is an interesting outlier that does not fit the same mold; in important respects it might contradict Kutulas's liberationist endorsement of the Aquarian spirit.

This final chapter deals with the 1978 Jonestown tragedy, in which over nine hundred American followers of the Rev. Jim Jones—plus a handful of outsiders, including a US congressman—died in Guyana, the victims of a massive murder-suicide. This chapter is a powerful and informative retelling of the event (I did not know, for instance, about the heated controversy over the repatriation of the victims' remains), and perhaps its impact stems from Kutulas's personal connection: two of her relatives and their adopted child were among the dead. But if most of her book evokes Woodstock, this part channels Altamont; if the joyful sensibilities of the 1970s derived from the counterculture, then the Jonestown nightmare reverted to Charles Manson. Akin to the horrible misadventures of the Manson "Family," the Jonestown disaster served as a warning that in the wake of traditional religions losing their authority, many people became susceptible to dangerous cults. And in an era when anyone was allowed to choose from an infinite variety of beliefs and lifestyles, not everyone was equipped with the psychological or intellectual capacity to choose wisely. In short, expanded freedom could bring misery instead of pleasure; at worst it could promote death instead of vitality.

Thankfully, the greater bulk of *After Aquarius* *Dawned* travels a more cheerful path. It will be a fine discussion book for college courses dealing with the cultural aspects of the long 1960s. Despite the many primary sources consulted (including songs and TV programs), Kutulas has produced a work of synthesis rather than deep research. Her emphasis is on articulate interpretation, not the discovery of new material. If any word of caution is needed—as distinct from outright criticism—it is that readers (or professors guiding discussions) must keep in mind how narrow a topic Kutulas has chosen to examine. There was much more to "popular culture in the seventies" than this book indicates. To take just one matter, popular music consisted of many different strands, some of which are difficult to reconcile—

in terms of their social-cultural messages—with the examples referred to above. And although Kutulas notes in passing that the early 1970s were much different in mood than the later years of the decade, her focus overwhelmingly favors the earlier period. Hence cultural reflections of some of the important darker experiences of the era—energy crises, stagflation, hostages in Tehran, and national “malaise”—are nowhere in evidence.[2]

Shortcomings are forgivable in a book as endearing and unpretentious as this one. Readers who were “really there” during the 1970s will have their memories jogged. Those who were not will learn much from this stimulating new appraisal.

Notes

[1]. Kutulas credits the “Carly Simon Principle” to Chuck Klosterman (p. 23).

[2]. The cultural/media reflection of widespread economic trauma can be found in Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York: New Press, 2010); an entertaining and ultra-illustrated book on 1970s culture that balances the optimism of Kutulas with the pessimism of Cowie is Thomas Hine, *The Great Funk: Falling Apart and Coming Together (On a Shag Rug)* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007); an excellent analysis that identifies the year 1973 as a moment of division between two separate cultural eras is Edward D. Berkowitz, *Something Happened: A Political and Cultural Overview of the Seventies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-1960s>

Citation: Drew Maciag. Review of Kutulas, Judy. *After Aquarius Dawned: How the Revolutions of the Sixties Became the Popular Culture of the Seventies*. H-1960s, H-Net Reviews. January, 2018.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=50744>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.