Imagining the Real:

Theorizing Cultural Production and Social Difference in the Cape Breton Back-to-the-Land Community

by

Amish C. Morrell

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts
Department of Adult Education, Community Development and Counseling Psychology
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto

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Abstract

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Masters of Arts 1999, Amish Morrell
Department of Adult Education, Community Development and Counseling Psychology. Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto

In this thesis I review existing academic research on the back-to-the-land phenomenon and analyze texts produced by members of the Cape Breton back-to-the-land community. I consider the back-to-the-landers in light of existing social movement theory and argue that they were not a social movement, and that they had both progressive and conservative dimensions. Drawing from postmodern cultural theories I outline a theoretical approach to exploring how they both maintained and transformed social differences. I assert that the back-to-the-landers held particular ideals and engaged certain cultural practices that were informed by their class location and driven by a collective experience of alienation. In doing this, I attempt to shed some theoretical insight into our understanding of how social differences are shaped through textual representation and everyday cultural practices.
Acknowledgements

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Both Gary Knowles and Jack Quarter helped me in the early stages of this thesis. While my work took a somewhat different trajectory from how I conceptualized it while working first with Gary, and then with Jack, both had an enduring influence on my work.

While in the end I chose to focus this study on reviewing the literature and developing a theoretical framework to better guide future work, I greatly benefited from the time that many current and former members of the Cape Breton back-to-the-land community spent sharing their ideas and stories with me in the preliminary stages of my research.

I am also indebted to Pat Durish for our rich intellectual companionship throughout much of the development of this thesis. Many of the ideas in this thesis evolved from our conversations.
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Chapter 1
Introduction

Introduction

Beginning in the late 1960's, hundreds of thousands of people moved to rural areas intending to live simply, self-sufficiently, and close to nature. By the late 1970's, this phenomenon, known as the back-to-the-land movement, grew to include approximately a million people across North America (Brinkerhoff and Jacob, 1987). Amidst a generation that was “turning on and dropping out,” my parents moved to Cape Breton from the United States to go “back to the land.” Growing up in rural Cape Breton I spent much of my time as a child that was not at school helping with farm chores -- milking cows, caring for animals, or making hay. Without a television, I spent much of my leisure time being out in this wide and unpopulated landscape of fields, forests, mountains and brooks, or reading late into the night. With little exposure to the outside world, except through books, CBC Radio, and my father’s subscription to Time Magazine, this place acquired a permanence and a presence that seemed to make it inseparable from who I was.¹

In Cape Breton, I inhabit(ed) the ambiguous space between two different and sometimes opposing communities. My parents associated with a community of people from similar backgrounds who aspired to a similar life -- well educated middle-class American expatriates who had come to Cape Breton to go back-to-the-land all at about the same time. They also associated with another community of people who had lived in Cape Breton for

¹ I believe that the places of our childhood take on this sense of permanence for all of us. In many ways my intention is to use this sense of permanence as the starting point of my analysis -- to look at how a particular notions of truth and reality are constructed within our lives.
generations, who had come there over a century before escaping the poverty of industrial Europe and who had much more experience with farming. Through my interaction with other back-to-the-landers I got a sense of how they experienced the world that they left, and why they had moved to Cape Breton. Through others who had lived in Cape Breton for much longer than my parents I learned to appreciate their knowledge of farming, the landscape, and the history of the people. As a child I was part of a subculture that had its own ideological principles, social values, and cultural practices based on creating an alternative to the unsustainable, alienated relationships of industrial and postindustrial society. I was also part of a rural community that had its own cultural logic and social traditions that emphasized community and familial relationships and which had its own informal systems of reciprocity that helped people to make ends meet in a marginal rural economy. As a participant in both, I was able to see their points of convergence and conflict and how they both changed and influenced each other. I was also able to understand and participate in the meaningful practices through which each expressed their values and worldviews.

Since then, I have lived in other places. Spending my teenage years living just outside Philadelphia, I was able to learn to appreciate the meaning that other people felt as part of various cultural or subcultural identities. Amidst the suburban punk scene of the 1980's, I was temporarily part of a similar process of dissent against middle-class society as members of my parents' generation had been part of. Although I was an outsider, I was also able to observe the culture of African-American hip-hop through which many of my classmates expressed their politics. Later, I lived as a student in Toronto where, within the economically diverse and multicultural neighborhoods, I found a community of people who shared my interests in ideas, politics, culture, and social change. I also found myself part of a community of environmentalists -- an identity that I often hesitated to be part of -- and was able to
observe what seemed like enormous contradictions and problems with this self-identified movement. With all these groups I was struck by their sense of shared identity and the collective energy that surrounded their life practices, giving it meaning and vision. Further, I was intrigued by how people became, in different ways, politicized through their various identities.

At the same time I observed what seemed to me a tremendous depoliticization, even amongst those who assumed countercultural identities that were for some highly political. Almost half a century after it was written, I cannot help but remember the lines that begin Allen Ginsberg’s famous poem, *Howl*: “I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked...” (Ginsberg, 1986). Ginsberg articulates an emergent consciousness -- a desperate pursuit of meaning amidst the social machinery of 20th century America. He was describing many of the people around him: “... angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night...” (Ginsberg, 1986).

Ginsberg intended to create an “...emotional time bomb that would continue exploding in U.S. consciousness in case our military-industrial-nationalistic complex solidified into a repressive police bureaucracy (Ginsberg, 1986, p. xii).” I came to see *Howl* within my own context and experience. Moloch, the great military, industrial, national complex that Ginsberg raged against, now includes the forms of rebellion that Ginsberg tried to activate against it. I saw *Howl* in relation to the fact that we now have a tremendous knowledge of the problems that different people confront in this world -- the destruction of their land and cultural traditions, systemic racism, patriarchy, homophobia, war and poverty. Even though many of us have the power to help or to hinder struggles for social change, we are so deeply implicated in these systems of oppression that cynicism or denial is often the only way in which many people respond.
Through these experiences I came to believe that social change must be a process that captures our hearts and our minds and our spirits. That it must be rooted both in the material conditions of our lives and in our imaginations. Living in Cape Breton I was able to be part of an alternative social project which had its own logic and meaning that was constantly reflected to me when I milked the cow, when I ate food that had been grown on our farm, when I swam in the river, or when I heard about fossil fuel shortages or urban air pollution on the radio. Yet there was a palatable contradiction between the quality of my life and the lives of others that were reflected in the pages of Time Magazine or in my day-to-day interactions with other children at school -- whether they be people who lived in war torn countries or families in Cape Breton who barely eked out an existence between their farms and seasonal work. I further came to realize that social movement work must be a critical process and that it required a careful examination of our assumptions, the contexts that shape our lives, and our very identities.

This thesis is a very personal work in that I chose as the object of my analysis a social phenomenon that I was part of for much of my life. As such, it is both an attempt at critical self-location, and at trying to chart some direction for understanding transformative political action. This thesis is laid out as follows: First, I describe some of the existing academic and popular literature on and by the back-to-the-landers and outline some of the theoretical threads that will be central to the rest of the thesis. I then briefly trace the social origins of the back-to-the-landers and locate them within a tradition of middle-class dissent that can be traced from Bohemia of 19th century France to the rise of the 1960’s North
American counterculture and then to its subsequent decline.\(^2\) I then look at some of the literature on social movement theory to understand whether the back-to-the-landers can be considered as a movement within existing theories of social movements. Furthering my pursuit of a better understanding of how they were affected by, and affected, larger social processes, I look at post-modern cultural theories to specifically outline a critical approach to social movements. I argue that a critical cultural studies approach that explores the micro processes and politics of how meaning is generated is integral to broadening our understanding of the various dimensions of social change.

I assert that the back-to-the-land phenomena in North America emerged as a response to the social conditions of the 1960's and as an outgrowth of a profound sense of alienation by disenchanted members of the middle-class. By looking at books, magazine articles, interviews, and photographs produced by Cape Breton back-to-the-landers I illustrate how this particular group of people idealized and practiced their own social alternative as a response to these conditions and this sense of alienation. I specifically demonstrate how this alternative was premised on a particular notion of the “real” or of “authenticity” that they associated with the practices of self-sufficient living and the direct experience of nature. Using a cultural studies analysis, I argue that these notions were constructed within a particular social and historical context. For the back-to-the-landers, these concepts served to maintain the hegemony of middle-class values and ideology and contained implicit moral and normative assertions through which they distinguished themselves from both the society they rejected,

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\(^2\) I often hear the 1960's romanticized as a time of great social transformation. While I do not want to dismiss the significance of this period, I also want to ensure that our valorization of this period does not prevent social transformation in the present. By considering its relationship with other social movements and social and economic forces of the 1960's I wish to understand how these changes were unique to that period so that we may be able to forge processes of positive social change that are appropriate for our particular historical period.
and from non-back-to-the-landers who lived in rural Cape Breton. I argue that, while many of the Cape Breton back-to-the-landers may have at times been successful in achieving a particular ideal of meaningful and unalienated relations with nature and work, there were deeply embedded social, economic and cultural forces at work that would limit their success at creating a more inclusive social alternative.

It is important to state that this thesis is intended to raise critical questions pertaining to the role of cultural production in the maintenance and transformation of social differences as they relate to the Cape Breton back-to-the-land community. Rather than presenting conclusive answers, I intend to provide critical insight into the direction of further research on this community, and on other social movements and countercultural phenomena. Additionally, the critique I use in this study is limited almost entirely to issues of social class, and does not incorporate as thoroughly issues of gender, race, or sexuality, which also warrant careful attention.

Methods and Data

Because much research had already been done involving interviews and surveys exploring communities similar to the Cape Breton back-to-the-landers, I felt it was necessary to explore themes and assumptions that received little discussion in other people’s research.

3 I strongly believe that it is important to better understand how our subjective experiences of nature are differentially constituted. I also believe that as part of a politically transformative project we must encourage spaces in which meaning and power can be continually negotiated, where we can understand or at least respect each others subjective and often conflicting experiences. It is necessary to look at how social differences along the lines of race, class and gender determine our access to society. One of the tasks of theorists, I believe, is to help make make explicit the social-structural determinants of who participates in this sort of negotiation, and what amount of power they have.

4 The goals of the back-to-the-landers were rarely articulated as “sustainability.” Instead they used “self-sufficiency,” by which they meant essentially the same thing, though I would argue that it differs slightly in that the later term implies a more individualistic response to environmental problems rather than embodying a critique of the systemic nature of environmental issues that is implicit in the earlier term.
In my survey of the literature I found that issues of social difference received little attention and that how the back-to-the-landers were a social movement warrants further attention. Because Cape Breton back-to-the-landers were so prolific in representing themselves, their lives, and the landscapes they live in through magazine articles, photographs, interviews, books, and artwork, I have used this body of literature as the primary source of data. While I have devoted a portion of this thesis to mapping some of the social forces that shaped the back-to-the-land phenomenon, the bulk of my writing focuses on how we can position the back-to-the-landers within social movement theory and understand the role of representation in maintaining or transforming social differences along lines of class. This body of literature also shares similarities with other texts, such as those produced within the environmental movement, and can provide insight into an analysis of other textual representations and collective social phenomena.

My methodology is best described as textual analysis, although it also has a self-reflexive dimension. Textual analysis has been defined in large part by Dorothy Smith in her work on the role of texts in mediating social organization. “Our lives,” Smith says, “are to a more extensive degree than we care to think... infused with a process of inscription, producing printed or written traces or working from them” (Smith, 1984, p. 235). These texts, whether they be books, radio shows, passports, acts of legislation or police reports, connect us with discursive relations that lay outside ourselves. They function as part of discourse to create specific forms of social consciousness within which we situate ourselves. For example, passports (operating along with national newspapers, immigration exams, flags and federal holidays) locate us as citizens of a nation. Similarly, police reports function to situate us as either criminals or victims and maintain norms of what constitutes a criminal act. Books, or

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5 I am using discourse in a Foucauldian sense to refer not just to language, but to entire systems of communication, meaning and social practice which serve to regulate power.
radio shows serve a more subtle and complex function, locating us within systems of meaning specific to the content of the text. Smith states that

(d)iscourse develops the ideological currency of society, providing schemata and methods which transpose local actualities into standardized conceptual and categorical forms. Ideological practices bind the local to the discursive through interpretive circles whereby local instances index the "text" (Smith, 1984, p. 238).

Texts become important vehicles of social organization, and interact with other texts. Reading an article on making apple cider in Harrowsmith Magazine situates me within a community that has established social and economic practices around this activity. The apple trees and the process of making cider become part of a process of meaning construction mediated by Harrowsmith Magazine, through the meaning we place on apple trees and apple cider and by what making something by oneself signifies to us and to others. This is only one activity that locates us within the community called the "back-to-the-landers."

I consider the discursive function of some of the texts that have been produced by the back-to-the-landers as a way of critically explicating the issues that guide this thesis. It should be noted that this is primarily a theoretical, as opposed to a descriptive work. My intention is that the theoretical work presented in this thesis could better direct future studies of the ideological dimensions of everyday social practices and shape ways of facilitating social transformation through the enactment of our life practices and social relationships.

The Problem with Community

The problematic nature of defining the Cape Breton back-to-the-landers as a "community" cannot be understated. Firstly, it has certain descriptive limits -- people do not

* For example, we could be heterosexual men listening to Howard Stern or gardeners calling in to a gardening phone-in show to find out how to trim our shrubs in our English garden. These texts would validate our particular identity as males, or as members of the cultured middle-class.
all fit evenly into this category. In addition, in naming a community we also construct or reinforce a particular construction of a community. To do a critical analysis of this community, it is necessary to, as best possible, use the boundaries by which it has defined itself.

From my own experience I know that there exists in Cape Breton a group of people who call themselves “back-to-the-landers” and who are called “come-from-aways” by other people in Cape Breton. This is also documented in a study on American ethnicity in Cape Breton by Michael Taft, a folklorist (Taft, 1988, 1991). Further, this is mirrored across North America in popular and academic literature in which a broader back-to-the-land movement has been identified. In this thesis I situate texts produced by back-to-the-landers within the context of this North American “movement” in order to make sense of their ideological function. However, this community is made up of many different people who all respond to the world from their own life experiences. We need to be careful not to abstract it or make it into a totalizing concept and instead attenuate ourselves to the specific characteristics that unite these individuals and separate them from others. The task of this thesis is to demystify this identity, to understand how it came into existence, how it reproduced itself, and what are its political implications.

Often times, as is the case with the Cape Breton back-to-the-landers, communities are put together as a cumulative result of the individual circumstances of their members, rather than as a result of collective intention. Regardless, communities are defined through the exclusion of certain people and the inclusion of others. It is necessary to consider what are the bases on which these distinctions are formed. For example, are they defined by common interests, by social class, by gender, by race, by what people do for a living or by whether they grow their food in a garden or buy it in a store? Many seemingly superficial boundaries,
such as what one does for a living or what one does with their leisure time often coincide with more deeply embedded differences such as class. Feminist philosopher Iris Marion Young discusses some of the problematic aspects of the idea of community. She argues that through the discourse of community we invoke a "metaphysics of presence" that denies social differences. She says that

(t)he ideal of community presumes subjects can understand one another as they understand themselves. It thus denies the difference between subjects. The desire for community relies on the same desire for social wholeness and identification that underlies racism and ethnic chauvinism on the one hand and political sectarianism on the other… The ideal of community… totalizes and detemporalizes its conception of social life by setting up an opposition between authentic and inauthentic social relations. It also detemporalizes its understanding of social change by positing the desired society as the complete negation of existing society (Young, 1990, p. 302).

Young (1990) traces the ideal of community back through Western transcendental thought, noting that it has functioned to create hierarchies, oppositions, and systems of exclusion. We thus need to be cautious in using the term “back-to-the-lander,” because it is both a descriptive and a constructive concept. My intentions are to the contrary, to deconstruct this social identity and thereby understand how it excludes others in the creation of community.

For the purpose of contextualizing this study, there are some details that are necessary in order to render this community recognizable. The Cape Breton back-to-the-land community is only one specific manifestation of a broad phenomenon. In Canada, back-to-the-landers congregated in regional pockets, specific communities, or even as part of communal farms or households. Attracted by beautiful landscapes, low land prices, and farmable land, back-to-the-land communities formed in Eastern Ontario, the Annapolis Valley of Nova Scotia, the Slocum Valley in British Columbia, and in countless other locations. In Cape Breton, back-to-the-landers congregated on the western side of the island in Inverness.
and Victoria counties, a mountainous area 2514 miles square and 110 miles long where there was high quality farmland along the river valleys (Lotz, 1974). While there were several communes at various points in time, back-to-the-landers tended to be widely dispersed in individual households along the backroads in the many valleys, glens, and settlements of Cape Breton. Their neighbors tended not to be each other, but families that had lived in these areas for generations and who continued to practice the subsistence lifestyle that the back-to-the-landers idealized.

Conclusion

The drama of the Cape Breton landscape can be overwhelming. Farms precariously perched on mountainsides that plunge into the ocean, and fertile river valleys that wind their way slowly to sea. When I go back it sometimes seems unreal -- the feel of the cold dark water of the river, square dances with hundreds of people in old Parish Hall, and the view down the long crease of the valley from my family’s farm, like a projection across time and consciousness.

I understand why this landscape inspired so many people to represent it in their writing and artwork. I also understand why so many people found a sense of belonging and feel such an attachment to this land and the people that live here. I also understand why it seemed so “real” in a world where notions of reality and truth and community were being so profoundly disturbed. In looking at this sense of belonging and of the real, my purpose is to problematize these notions -- to critically explore the relationships between our senses and the concepts that organize our lives, and between our individual selves and the social systems that we are part of. When I talk about deconstructing these relationships, my intention is not to deny the pleasure and meaning they bring, but to enable us to better understand the contradictions they embody, and to find new ways in which pleasures and meaning can be
created. In a personal sense, I am attempting to prise open a space between my experience of the different communities of Cape Breton that I was part of, and between what I understood was happening in the rest of the world. This, I hope, will offer us the possibility of better understanding the linkages between texts, social identities and practices, and our ability to transform power through discourse.
Chapter II
Overview of Existing Literature

Introduction

In this chapter I survey several types of literature that pertain to the back-to-the-land phenomenon. First, I look at several academic studies on the back-to-the-landers within North America. These texts identify and establish the existence of a particular social phenomena called the “back-to-the-landers,” or the “back-to-the-land movement” that has been defined by at least several researchers as a meaningful object of inquiry within the context of the academy. Second, I look at texts that were produced by members of the Cape Breton back-to-the-land community, including magazine articles, one dissertation, photography, interviews and other literature about their lives and the lives of other people in rural communities. Cape Breton back-to-the-landers created a substantial body of literature and creative representation that linked them to other back-to-the-land communities, and with other people who shared a similar attraction to rural landscapes and a common interest in self-sufficient living. From both of these groups of literature I highlight several themes. These are the back-to-the-lander phenomena as a response to a sense of alienation. The back-to-the-landers as a social movement, and issues of social difference in existing research.

Academic Research on Back-to-the-Land Communities

There have been numerous studies focusing on back-to-the-landers in both Canada and

\[\text{I do not mean to suggest that academia is the only measure of the validity of the back-to-the-landers as recognizable social phenomenon. The popular texts that I draw upon have a role (that is in my opinion, precedes that of academic research) in indicating that the back-to-the-landers were/are a self-created and a self-acknowledged social identity.}\]
the United States. At the time that I write, there have been at least three Master's theses, one dissertation, a book, and several articles on this phenomenon. The most comprehensive study is by Jeffrey Jacob who wrote *New Pioneers: The Back-to-the-Land Movement and the Search for a Sustainable Future* (1997). Jacob also wrote several articles based on this study, many of which were in conjunction with Merlin Brinkerhoff (Brinkerhoff and Jacob 1984, 1986, 1987, and Jacob, 1996). In 1983, they conducted surveys with 554 homesteaders in the provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, British Columbia, and the states of Washington, Idaho, Montana, and North Dakota. They reached their research participants through subscription lists to a magazine published in Wisconsin called *Countryside* that had 40,000 subscribers at the time of their study and is well respected among homesteaders and small scale farmers (Jacob and Brinkerhoff, 1986, p. 45). In 1992 Jacob conducted another survey with *Countryside* readers, this time involving 565 respondents in California, Texas, Minnesota, Missouri, Maine and Georgia (Jacob, 1996, p. 242). While his research focuses primarily on the results of quantitative data acquired through his survey research, this is supplemented by exploratory interviews done in British Columbia during 1981 and in-depth case studies that he completed in 1996 (Jacob, 1997, p. xi).

Jacob focuses on the correlations between the values of back-to-the-landers and their lifestyle practices. He also looked at their involvement in community development and activist work. In his survey, Jacob attempted to measure the relative importance of several

Published papers by these authors include one article on the likelihood of new rural residents to become involved in activist and community development issues (Jacob, 1996), one article exploring the influence of religious world view on how back-to-the-landers measure quality of life (Brinkerhoff and Jacob, 1987), another looking at the relationship between values and use of alternative technology (Jacob and Brinkerhoff, 1986), and another on similar themes as this last one, but as an exploratory survey with British Columbian smallholders (Brinkerhoff and Jacob, 1984). Much of this research has been incorporated into his book (Jacob, 1997).

By the time of a later study conducted by Jacob (1992), the number of subscribers to *Countryside* had gone down to 30,000.

Jacob indicates in his book that he surveyed considerably more people than the numbers given in some of his articles. In his book he states that he interviewed over 800 people in the Pacific Northwest in 1983 and 1200 families across the United States in 1992 (Jacob, 1997, p. xi).
key values, such as providing habitat for other species, having a sense of community, growing one's own food, and having a sense of privacy. Privacy ranked as being very important among 98% of respondents whereas only 60% ranked having a sense of community as being very important. 89% said growing their own food was very important and 84% said that protecting habitat was very important. The relative importance of privacy to community indicates that for many people this was an individual as opposed to a social pursuit. Indeed, Jacob concludes that “...the typical back-to-the-lander is... a relatively apolitical person who seeks out refuge of privacy in the countryside, but who at the same time holds strong views on the importance of environmental preservation” (Jacob, 1996, p. 245). Among the people he surveyed he found that they held relatively conservative values. When asked to cite what political philosophy they identified with, 50% of his study participants cited capitalism while only 7% cited socialism. However, it should be noted that 34% expressed discomfort with any specifiable political categories and the remaining 9% indicated a wide variety of political philosophies from anarchism to Christian fundamentalism (Jacob, 1996, p. 244). While Jacob disrupts the conception that back-to-the-landers are left leaning community oriented people, and argues that they tend towards escapism and reclusiveness, he also notes that they “...possess a set of clearly defined values which have the potential to guide a fair and sustainable community development in the countryside” (Jacob, 1996, p. 248).

Another study that warrants careful attention is Rebecca Gould's (1997) dissertation, *At Home in Nature: The Religious and Cultural Work of Homesteading in Twentieth Century North America*. In this richly descriptive work she looks at both the lives of contemporary homesteaders and the lives of historical figures such as Helen and Scott Nearing and John Burroughs who influenced other homesteaders through their writings on
their lives during the earlier parts of the 20th century (and in the case of some of the Nearings' work, in the mid and late parts of this century). On the basis of her readings of these authors, and from her own interviews and notes, she argues that homesteading arose as a response to industrialism, scientific rationalism, and consumerism (Gould, 1997, p. 397).

Through her research she demonstrates that the homesteaders are a religious response that involved the enactment of particular rituals, through their lifestyle practice, that are based on the sacralization of nature. She says that

(h)omesteading needs to be understood broadly -- but with a breadth that allows for particularity -- as a cultural response to modernity as well as a consequence of it. Within this rather wide interpretive category, however, homesteading needs to be understood as a particularly religious response, as well as a response that emerges from a particular social location (Gould, 1997, p. 397).

Drawing from the work of sociologist Anthony Giddens, she argues that for 20th century homesteaders "nature functions in the ways that Giddens argues religion functioned in pre-modern times.... Nature becomes a point of reference by which human action is rendered both ethical and meaningful" (Gould, 1997, p. 402).

Gould also identifies their expression of a moral hierarchy and a sense of social complacency. Like Jacob she also notes an often apparent individualism. She states that "(i)f homesteading can enable one to be 'redeemed' or 'chosen' in the midst of the sinful world of modernity, it can become a practice which is more oriented towards the self than toward nature or the human community" (Gould, 1997, p. 411). Their ambivalence or complacency with regard to issues of social justice, she argues, was a product of their location as members of the social and cultural middle and upper class,
and that this limited their ability to take interest in or become involved in broader social concerns. These circumstances, she suggests, led to their proclivity towards what she refers to as "...fundamentalist readings of nature... the potential for the commodification of homesteading, and... the persistence of the very moral hegemony which homesteaders object to both in the Church and in the 'cult of progress'" (Gould, 1997, p. 412).

Another author who, like Gould, takes a primarily theoretical approach to the back-to-the-landers, is Angela Specht (1994). In her MA thesis, titled Retreat: A Philosophical Inquiry, she conducts a theoretical exploration of the theme of withdrawal from society and the creation of a social alternative through the practice of going back-to-the-land. Specht asserts that the back-to-the-landers were an attempt to retreat from the dominant culture and to create an "ecologically based social system" in response to the perceived environmental and cultural crisis.

Two other studies can help us understand back-to-the-land communities within specifically Canadian contexts. The Impact of Alternative Ideology on Landscape: The Back-to-The-Land Movement in the Slocum Valley (British Columbia), an MA thesis by John Gower (1990), explores the long lasting effects of back-to-the-landers on the social and physical landscape of the Slocum Valley. Heather Holm (1998) in her MA thesis, Unintentional Community: Alternative Community in the Annapolis Valley, looks at how the back-to-the-landers came together to create a shared identity and a community and by circumstance rather than by collective intention. The community that Gower studies has its roots firmly in the counterculture of the late 1960's, and endured a long history of experimentation with communal living. The Annapolis Valley back-to-the-land community -- while it originated in the 1960's -- has gone through periods of decline and regrowth, and many of its members have undergone various changes in their lifestyle practices. In her
survey of 86 people who have identified at one point as back-to-the-landers, only 28 said that they were still “back-to-the-landers.” However this community (at least more recently) has become characterized as much by member’s participation in new-age spiritualities and alternative therapies as by self-sufficient farming. This process of collective identity formation is illustrated by Michael Taft (1988, 1991).

As part of a research fellowship titled “Ethnic Americans and American Ethnicity on Cape Breton Island” Michael Taft interviewed over 80 American immigrants in Cape Breton in 1987 and 1988, a large number of whom were back-to-the-landers (Taft, 1988). Starting from the premise that Americans constitute an “ethnic group” in the same way that people of other cultures, nationalities and regional origins are considered as belonging to distinct ethnic groups, he attempted to find evidence of American ethnicity in Cape Breton (Taft, 1991, p. 35). Because American immigrants to Cape Breton did not identify themselves as American, and were not necessarily identified by others as such, he found them difficult to define as an ethnic group. What he did find, and eventually reported on, was the community called the back-to-the-landers. In describing a reunion of Cape Breton back-to-the-landers that he attended in the fall of 1987, he suggests that being “come-from-aways,” was the basis of their common identity.

Rather than defining this group as a bunch of ethnic Americans, it would be more accurate to define them as a bunch of middle-class, fairly well educated, cosmopolitans who had special interests in organic gardening, log buildings, crafts and politics (Taft, 1991, p. 40-41).

While the back-to-the-landers were defined by their own common interest, they were also defined by their relation to the surrounding rural community. As come-from-aways they shared an identity as outsiders. As Taft states “(a)lmost all Americans I have spoken with mention the fact that they are forever strangers. On an island where introductions begin with
the question, 'Who’s your father?,' Americans can never claim local citizenship” (Taft, 1990, p. 40).”

While in the work of Jacob and Gower the back-to-the-landers are dealt with as a cohesive social identity, this identity was not prefigured. Holm (1998), who uses the more inclusive term, “alternative community,” says that there were various people who aspired to similar practices as the “back-to-the-landers,” but did not always identify themselves in this way. The thesis of her research is that the back-to-the-landers did not go back to the land collectively, but that each person or couple migrated into rural communities and found others who had done the same thing. As outsiders, or come-from-aways in tightly knit rural communities, they formed a common identity and created what Heather Holm calls an “unintentional community.”

Texts by Cape Breton Back-to-the-Landers

There is no shortage of images, texts, literary reflections, and works of art documenting the lives of back-to-the-landers and portraying the landscapes and communities they lived in. Best known among these is Harrowsmith, a bimonthly magazine started in Eastern Ontario in 1976 to serve as a guide to the art and skills of self-sufficient living. More specific to Cape Breton is the work of Lynn Zimmerman and her husband, George Thomas, as well as writings by Lorna Green and interviews by Ron Caplan. Zimmerman was a regular contributor to Harrowsmith magazine. Thomas’s photographs often illustrated Harrowsmith, and appear in his own book and in collections by the National Film Board of Canada and the Canadian National Archives. Lorna Green, a former academic, wrote theoretical texts that are

This is a common preface to conversation in Cape Breton when the person being addressed is not known. While it serves to locate the subject within a patriarchal social order, it serves a more obvious function to indicate who one’s father is (who the person asking is likely to know) which will then reveal the subjects location in the community, physically (where one lives), culturally (as either Acadian, Irish, English, Scottish, or as an outsider) and one’s social status (which is largely defined by one’s parents).
useful for understanding some of the philosophical undercurrents that motivated her experience, and help us to connect her experience with those of other people who subscribed to similar ideologies. Ron Caplan gathered oral histories for *Cape Breton's Magazine* and his reflections on this work that he has included in his edited compilations provide us with insight into his interaction with long term residents of Cape Breton. However, we need to remember that “back-to-the-lander” is an ambiguous notion. Many made their living as writers, editors, photographers or teachers. For some of the people cited in this section, the fact that they had the time and energy to produce creative or literary representations of their lifestyle likely meant that they were less involved in the productive tasks of self-sufficient living, such as gardening, cutting firewood, or building that were central to this lifestyle." For the purposes of this thesis, I am only considering a few texts which exist in the public domain to serve as a launching point for a consideration of how this group of back-to-the-landers constructed a culture of nature, and how they imagined their own lives and practices, and the landscapes and communities that they lived within. Further, I am focusing primarily on small biographical and autobiographical passages, which exist sparsely among numerous books and articles.

George Thomas is known for his black and white images of bucolic idyll; farmers with horse and plow, blacksmiths, boys proudly displaying rabbits they have snared, or sleepy communities nestled in the mist at daybreak (Thomas, 1980, Tasker, 1974). In the preface of his book, *Margaree: Photographs of Cape Breton* (1980), which he describes as a “...visual tribute in praise of a once prevalent way of life,” Thomas tells us of what drew him to this place. It might be relevant to also consider representations and texts by people who came to Cape Breton as summer residents, since many of these people were artists and writers and shared similar perspectives on the landscape and the communities as the back-to-the-landers. From my own knowledge of the community I know that some of the Cape Breton back-to-the-landers initially encountered Cape Breton as vacationers, and that many modified their lifestyle by pursuing careers elsewhere and only returning to Cape Breton for holidays. I would argue that to seriously pursue their creative vocation they had to find external sources of income, which entailed serious modifications to the ideals of self-sufficiency.
In 1971 I moved from Boston to Margaree where I eagerly listened to my neighbours' nostalgic, mirthful tales of blacksmiths, clever moonshiners and mounties, of dauntless schooner captains, mail-sleigh drivers and farmers who once drove ox teams. Observing the modest, rural communities along the valley, I realized that the last vestiges of a passing lifestyle were vanishing. That earlier way of life appealed very much to me. It spoke of a less complex world, a conserving society, and a way of life which emphasized hard work, intimacy with the earth and nature, and attitudes of pride, independence and self-sufficiency (Thomas, 1980).

This longing for a past characterized by simplicity, and working close to the land is echoed by Lynn Zimmerman in an article she wrote for Harrowsmith called “People of the Margaree: Portrait of a Good Place” (1978). Zimmerman describes how Margaree Harbour, now a tiny cluster of houses with a handful of houses and one general store was once a bustling seaport with seven bars, a hotel, a lobster canning factory, a bank and five general stores. She attributes the collapse of this vibrant local economy to the invention of the automobile, the consequent demise of schooner shipping which made the local resource economy so successful, and the beginning of the commercial availability of staples that people previously had either made or grown themselves. Both Zimmerman and Thomas witnessed the last generations who remembered and practiced vestiges of this way of life. As Zimmerman laments, “...the accelerating changes taking place in the world are quickly and irreversibly altering the patterns of rural life...” To Zimmerman, and other back-to-the-landers, how people responded to changes happening in the world and in rural communities, stood in opposition to what the back-to-the-landers were attempting to do, and at times seemed to them ill-guided. As Zimmerman relates, “many local residents have taken to snowmobiles in winter and few of us will forget the sight of the priest, garbed in a snowmobile suit, standing outside the church blessing the local snowmobiles” (Zimmerman, 1978b, p. 79). Yet she
reminds us:

Still, eagles soar proudly above the river and those of us who live here will tell you that the Margaree Valley is a good place to live. If only we could have seen it eighty years ago, and experienced the hustle, however, fleeting, of a booming seacoast town” (Zimmerman, 1978b, p. 82).

Zimmerman, like her husband, echoes a certain nostalgia that other people living in Cape Breton did not always seem to share at the time. At the same time she shows a deep appreciation for the landscape.

Another author who has written extensively about issues facing rural Cape Bretoners is Lori Cox, who has lived in Bay St. Lawrence on the Northern tip of Cape Breton since 1971. Cox has been involved with Atlantic Women’s Fishnet, an organization that works for the inclusion of women’s voices in research and policy making in the fisheries, and for finding ways to sustain coastal communities (Cox, 1995). She has also written numerous popular articles on issues facing coastal communities and a thesis on the relocation of Black Point, a small fishing and farming community by the provincial government in the 1960’s (Cox, 1997, 1996a, and 1996b). She has actively challenged the stereotyping of the people who live in remote Northern Cape Breton communities as uneducated and backwards that have been used to rationalize their marginalization (Cox, 1997 and 1991). In her dissertation (1997), Cox writes extensively about the complex cultural traditions, community support mechanisms, and economic practices that were an integral part of survival in an extremely marginal economy with few outside supports.

For Lorna Green, who spent her life searching for truth first through the sciences, then through philosophy, next through religion, and more recently through nature (She has a PhD in cell biology and did an MA and worked towards a PhD in philosophy, and later studied spiritual traditions) the theoretical basis are much more apparent (Green, 1994). Her book,
The Verification of Metaphysical Theories: Ethics as the Basis of Metaphysics (1985) appears on the surface to have little to do with the back-to-the-land experience, and her later book, Earth Age: A New Vision of God, The Human & The Earth (1994), has much more to do with environmentalism and spirituality. However, they provide us with some insight into how she connected her experience with a larger existential project. In Earth Age she writes:

For the better part of the past fourteen years I have lived a wilderness life in the hills of Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. My home is a two-story log house which I have shared with Don (her husband) and Puss (her cat), with no indoor plumbing, no electricity and no telephone, along with a forest track, one mile from the nearest plowed road... I took up this life at the age of forty-one, after many years of studying science, philosophy and the spiritual traditions. I wanted a simple life of practical tasks, writing and prayer, to live completely with God. After the abstractions of academic life I have come to love words which are close to the earth -- wood, stone, cup, spruce (Green, 1994, p. 87).

Coming from the traditions of Western science and philosophy, she asserts that there is an essential truth within our selves, and in nature (Green, 1985, p. 113). She urges us to not wait for theory, but to seek truth through direct experience. “We can have this confidence in ourselves, not waiting upon world views, because there is something non-arbitrary about our essential self. Our ethics does not wait upon a theory of being” (Green, 1985, p. 114).

Neither social nor cultural determination has a place in her world view. As such, nature is asocial, transcending politics, economics, and representations:

Let all who think the human is only a fabrication, entirely self made, let all who think we are merely minds in bodies, come and sojourn with the Earth awhile. In the cities, we are fabrications in a fabricated world, our minds filled with detail, voices, words. Come, let the winds of Heaven wrap you round on a dark, mysterious night, star-laden, and let whispering trees and flowing waters fill your soul, cleaning it from the dross of civilization. Centre down in a field of rustling grass, let the Earth restore you to who you really are, your deepest self, as old as the Earth, a self even older, going back beyond the beginnings of life, a self without beginnings, rooted in eternal things of which the Earth is our nearest incarnation (Green, 1994, p. 124).
Lorna Green, and her husband Don Knight, put their ideals into practice through a home-school that emphasized the foundations of Western thought and an “Earth Lore and Crafts Camp” that focused on Native American spirituality and wilderness skills. The brochure for the camp reads:

Children are born free but everywhere are in school. The ancient Greek word for ‘school’ is scholé. It means “leisure,” what one does for pleasure or when not at work. We call what we do in Cape Breton scholé. Aristotle, the Greek philosopher, noted that human beings by nature desire to know. If this is so, learning should be a pleasurable experience, it satisfies a basic desire. Scholé is our attempt to make learning pleasant (“Home Education Programme,” 1994).

The camp brochure describes the wilderness setting, without television or electricity. It states that “(c)ooking is done over the campfire and swimming is the natural way of taking a bath” (Summer Adventures for Young People, 1994). Of aboriginal culture, it says “(m)asters of survival, Native Americans are well known for their construction of hunting weapons. As a survival skill we shall make our own bow and arrows, throwing sticks and traps... We shall learn about the customs and traditions of Native Americans through stories, games, traditional peace pipe and sweet grass ceremonies, customs, dancing, beading and drumming.” (Summer Adventures for Young People, 1994).

Both Green’s writings, and the promotional literature on the school and summer camp that she and Knight operated, engaged particular ways of seeing nature, aboriginal cultures, and European American culture. While they advocate us shedding ourselves of our materialism and Western cultural rituals and replacing them with those of Native cultures, they maintain the philosophical traditions of Western thought as the basis of their logic. They abstract aboriginal culture from its contemporary and historical context, ignoring a history of cultural genocide that has been enacted on aboriginal peoples in the name of Western religion, scientific reason and economic progress. They further ignore the vast contributions of other
cultural and philosophical traditions that have been subordinated by Western hegemony. Rather than being transformative, they uncritically embrace the philosophical traditions that have underpinned the historical trajectory of Western civilization and its oppressive social institutions of slavery, patriarchy, and cultural genocide."

Disenchanted with his marginal existence as a book designer in Pennsylvania, Ron Caplan came to Cape Breton with his family in 1971 (How, 1990, p. 63). Struck by the rich traditions of story telling he began recording the lives and stories of the people around him and started Cape Breton’s Magazine. In the magazine, Caplan backgrounds himself to the point of almost vanishing. However, we can discern something about his life through a few articles that have been written about him and from his own introductions to edited compilations of his interviews that contain vignettes of his own experience. Caplan writes eloquently of his love for Cape Breton and of his time spent with the people whose stories appear in Cape Breton’s Magazine. He admits that he gained an enormous respect for the lives of the people around him when they helped him get through his first winter in Cape Breton. Caplan, who describes himself as a romantic, writes about how he was set straight by one woman he interviewed:

I remember an early interview... I came close to arguing with Annie Margaret Morrison... she was trying to tell me about the difficulties of farm/fishing lives on the North Shore of Cape Breton fifty years ago. And I was saying, ‘But you were independent’ (probably ‘self-sufficient’ was the word I was using then), ‘you had your own land, you had your own potatoes,’ and so on. ‘I suppose so,’ she said softly, knowing and thus unconvinced (Caplan, 1980, p. vii - viii).

15 The founding of Scholé on ancient Greek concepts of learning is extremely troubling in light of the recent history of the school. Greek public space was an exclusively male domain (women were delegated to the private sphere, away from education and politics) and education (only available to males) included sexual relationships between teachers and their young male students. In 1994 the school’s founder escaped Canada amid allegations of sexual abuse and was recently arrested and returned to Nova Scotia where he awaits trial (Halifax Chronicle Herald, Oct 27, 1994, Globe and Mail [Atlantic edition], March 22, 1999, p. A5).
It was later, he writes, in another interview with another woman that the differences between how each of them saw subsistence living become perfectly clear to him: “Mrs. MacAskill rammed it home. She told a young woman who was collecting information for a local archives: ‘I’ll tell you about the old way. The only difference between us and the cattle was that come tomorrow morning we knew which field we’d be in (Caplan, 1980, p. vii - viii).” Caplan, who has earned enormous respect amongst come-from-aways and older generations of Cape Bretoners alike, writes of the common meaning that Cape Breton has for him, and for others. He writes that it was a place to belong, yet there is a touch of melancholy in his words as he writes about a place that gave him such meaning and support. He writes that he feels that it is losing its ability to accomplish this for others. He writes that the subsistence practices of farming, fishing, and working in the woods once functioned as a space where one could learn, belong, and make a contribution to their community. However, he points out that with modernization “(t)here seems to me to be fewer and fewer of these arenas that can absorb people when their only alternative is to run away, marry, or hang themselves...” (Caplan, 1996, p. viii). Of the Cape Bretoners who return, the one’s who left for work in Upper Canada or New England, Caplan describes as in search for a part of themselves that they find here. In his own words:

They are looking for something they might, if pressed, call ‘the authentic.’ They are happy to find even remnant of a bit more manageable world, evidences of a time when life was more simple and direct. And on occasion they meet someone who is more than a remnant, who is, you might say, the real thing (Caplan, 1980 viii).

While there are many interviews with members of the Scottish, Irish, English and Acadian communities, there are only a few with the members of the back-to-the-land community.16

16 It should also be noted that Ron Caplan also did interviews with members of the Mi K’maq, African-Canadian, and Jewish communities of Cape Breton. Stories were often published in the languages in which they were told (either French, Gaelic, or Mi K’maq) and in English.
One of these interviews is with Otis Thomas, who continues to live in Cape Breton and builds musical instruments using locally grown wood. Another is with my mother, a fiber artist who maintained a self-sufficient farm in Cape Breton from the early 1970’s up until the early 1990’s.

Otis Thomas’s interview provides insight into what it was like for youth in the 1960’s, and why he came to Cape Breton. Of the 1960’s, Thomas says that “a lot of us were sort of rejecting that type of society that just sort of provides you with everything. That was part of my challenge to that, to see that I could be myself and have nothing, and still have strength that I could survive” (Otis Thomas: Making Instruments and Tunes, p. 42). Thomas traveled around North America, working, playing music, and briefly being part of different communal living arrangements. He says that

(t)o me, I was into... at one point... sort of a Jack Kerouac sort of a phase, I guess.... (I)t was part of my idea of just figuring out what I was and what I was doing. It was almost like this kind of voluntary poverty.... I would travel - - I’d have nothing. I’d take off with 50 (cents) and I might go across the country or something.... (Otis Thomas: Making Instruments and Tunes, p. 42)

Thomas eventually came to Cape Breton where he and his family lived in a tipi, surviving on minimal financial resources. In talking about a song that he wrote when they were just starting out in Cape Breton, a waltz called “The New Land,” he describes what it was like then.

I wrote it... (on a) September day or something. We were in the teepee (sic) again, we were just kind of getting settled there. I can remember the afternoon, a nice kind of sunny, fall sort of a day, just playing the fiddle. Just the whole idea of the new land.... (W)e were in a new country, a new land. And we had our own land, our little piece of property we were starting at. It was just kind of a sense of, leaving behind, all the things leaving behind, and all the things that were opening up at the same time. Just that whole -- that kind of sense, I think, is sort of what’s in that tune (Otis Thomas: Making Instruments and Tunes, p. 43).

7 Note that interviews are published in Cape Breton’s magazines with few editorial revisions and appear virtually as they are spoken.
Thomas articulates several themes germane to this study. One, which will be discussed at length in the next chapter, is the link between the back-to-the-landers and the 1960's counterculture. Another theme is that of producing and reproducing meaning through a specific cultural practice. Through his instruments and songs Thomas communicates a particular set of values and experiences -- including independence and nature as a source of aesthetic pleasure.

My mother provides a slightly different set of reasons from Otis Thomas for why she and my father came to Cape Breton. However, the links between the the specific values and practices associated with self-sufficiency and cultural production are similar. On why she came to Cape Breton she says that

I wanted to have my own farm. I was working for a guy in the States, and it was a great job. I got a regular salary, but I wasn't getting anywhere. I just felt like, if I had my own place and I was doing it, then at least I would have something in the end. [Garry] has just finished graduate school, just gotten a Master's degree in Fine Arts. And he wanted to get away from the craziness of the States and have a place to be able to do what he wanted. Which was playing with machines, and doing just a little bit of art, and farming. It was the "self-sufficient homestead" days (Caplan, 1996, p. 136).

My parents, who were for many the role model of self sufficiency, emphasized using low-impact technologies and relying on traditional organic agricultural practices (Caplan, 1996, p. 146). For them, it was a practical challenge. Her interview centres around another text that is relevant to the analysis of this thesis, a quilt that she produced in 1982 documenting the events of her life that year. This helps us understand, in a different way, what this life meant to her. Each panel depicts a different activity, organized by season: In the spring -- birthing calves, spreading manure on the fields, tilling the garden. In the summer -- making hay, milking cows, weeding the garden. In the fall --- picking apples, stacking firewood, canning vegetables. And in the winter -- cooking, cross-country skiing, cleaning the barn... and the list
goes on. This quilt, which vividly depicts the landscape and my mother's everyday activities within it, is not just about depicting a life, but it is also about inscribing a life in a particular place and representing it to others.

Another collection of texts that are indicative of many of the ideas and values that were part of the back-to-the-land phenomenon are practical books and articles, such as works by Jo Ann Gardner (1997, 1992, 1989), who writes about heirloom plants and herbs, a cookbook by Susan Restino (1996), and Lynn Zimmerman's many articles in Harrowsmith magazine on topics including raising sheep and companion planting. These books and articles, which provide practical information for self-sufficient living, and which are richly illustrated with stories of the lives of the authors, embody many of the implicit goals of self-sufficiency, simplicity, and living close to nature that were held by back-to-the-landers. As such, they have an important discursive role in producing and maintaining a distinctive and meaningful experience, and shaping many of the practices that are shared by back-to-the-landers.

These interviews, writings, and works of art exist as what Smith would call forms of "inscription," in that they are the production of a document or text that serves a particular social function. It is sewing a series of events together -- organizing productive relations -- so that they make sense within a particular social system (Smith, 1986, p. 235). They organize and regulate our lives, placing us in a particular social order. By writing letters to Harrowsmith protesting truck advertisements, some back-to-the-landers (as happened in response to ads in several issues printed in the late 1970's) struggled to maintain a moral order in which they do not participate in actions that are incongruous with back-to-the-land

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16 For other articles by Zimmerman see Harrowsmith Volumes 6, 8, 10, 12, 15 & 26.
values (in this case, the ideals of simplicity and sustainability).” In articles about communities such as Margaree, particular activities, relationships, and values are made meaningful and valued above other activities, relationships, and values. This distinction is made between schooners and snowmobiles in Zimmerman’s article. Caplan’s interviews of elderly Cape Bretoners inscribe a notion of an authentic past that we dream of returning to (which his interviewees sometimes disrupt). Artistic renderings, such as my mother’s quilt, not only depict a particular reality, but situate us within a constructed social and natural order. The power of representation to both maintain and transform existing forms of social organization is something that I will take up later in this thesis. However, it is necessary to look at some of the themes in the literature reviewed in these past two sections.

**Alienation as a Theme in Academic and Popular Literature**

The existing literature is unified in its description of the reasons why people went back-to-the-land and in how they describe the ideals that they set for themselves. This is best articulated by Gower, who describes his participants as having been repelled by the “rat race,” the pollution of the cities, and the violent politics of the 1960’s (Gower, 1990). While virtually all authors cite an explicit disdain for urban industrial society among back-to-the-landers, there is little evidence that a critique of capitalism is also central to back-to-the-land ideology. Indeed, the figures from Jacob (1996, p. 44) that I reference earlier in this chapter suggest that the largest portion, 50%, identify capitalism as their social-political philosophy. However, what is also significant is that 34% of Jacob’s respondents declined to align themselves with any identifiable philosophy. This can be explained by one of Jacob’s

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10 The irony of this is that most back-to-the-landers owned trucks, which were a necessary part of rural living. The editors of Harrowsmith were quite aware of this contradiction and instead operated from a set of guidelines that excluded ads for other products such as cigarettes or pesticides, but not cars or trucks. See Harrowsmith Index One (1980) (issues one to twenty-five), p. 38.
findings. He discovered that many back-to-the-landers saw two different strategies for achieving social justice and “the good society” that were being advocated by opposing camps. One was that capitalism would bring about the technological innovation necessary to build a better society. The invoked an argument for state socialism. Jacob found that many of the back-to-the-landers disagreed with both of these analyses and instead advocated a third alternative:

In reaction to the capitalist-socialist polar positions, there began to crystallize in the early 1970’s a counterstream perspective that resurrected long-standing discontents with the eclipse of an agrarian way of life by rising urban-industrial culture. This third force on issues of social equity did not ignore capitalism’s responsibility in the creation and perpetuation of poverty, but it did raise serious questions whether socialism, or any social-political configuration, could transcend what it saw as the inherently alienating character of industrial technology, with the near inevitable stratification of the social order into expert planners and a relatively uninformed citizenry. Consequently, the good life was to be found in a more democratic “small is beautiful” society, whose everyday life would be closely connected with the sustaining power of the land (Jacob, 1997, p. x).

They believed that the solution to social crisis was to retreat from mainstream society and that through subsistence agriculture, crafts production, and that by practicing ideals of non-violence and equality they could escape the alienation of modern industrialism, the institutionalism of urban society, militarism, and the gross social inequality that had reached a crisis point in the United States. Going “back-to-the-land,” they thought, would allow them to be independent of institutional politics and larger economic forces and live a satisfying existence in the countryside among a community of like-minded people.

The critique back-to-the-landers made of urban-industrial society was often conspiratorial and condemned others for their participation in mainstream society. One woman, who refused to participate in Jacob’s study, instead wrote back and said

(w)e are living in a capitalist society. A capitalist society will survive only as
long as the masses work for wages, pay taxes, consume enormous quantities of material goods, and produce a great number of little consumers to keep the ball rolling. The only class that actually profits from this is the top echelon -- government, corporations, and educational facilities. We, the self-sufficiency advocates, are the flies in the ointment. What would happen if half the population decided to 'live lightly on the land'? Wow!...

We are barely tolerated by the big boys [sic]. I will use myself as an example. I have (1) never made more than $1000 a year, (2) never paid income tax, (3) always tried to provide my own needs, bought second hand where possible, and used a minimum of outside services, (4) not produced children (Jacob, 1997, p. 189-190).

While this critique identifies capitalism as a primary cause of oppression, it shows little appreciation of the circumstances in people's lives that enforce their participation in oppressive and alienating social institutions. To understand the conservative implications of the back-to-the-land phenomena we need to explicate some of its ideological contradictions.20

It is important to remember that while the people who chose to go back-to-the-land were almost universally middle and upper class, they often self-consciously allied themselves with a political struggle, as Jacob's correspondent does. Whether they constitute a social movement is another question. From the existing research, mostly notably Holm's (1998)

study, we can see that it was not a collective initiative. Rather it emerged as a cumulative

20 There are many overlaps between values of right-wing extremists and back-to-the-landers. Most authors, however, treat the two separately. Jacob states that "...since the survivalist and Aryan Nation movements are preoccupied with issues of conspiracy at the highest levels of government and claims of racial superiority, rather than the pleasures of a simple life in the country, they cannot justifiably be considered part of the back-to-the-land movement" (Jacob, 1997, p. xiii). I believe that the distinction between these two groups is not quite this simple, and I will argue this in more detail in later chapters. The fact that people could go "back-to-the-land" was made possible by their social privilege (manifest in education, skills, money, and the freedom of youth had in the 1960's). Because their own privilege was being threatened as a result of many of the social and economic changes that were occurring during the mid-and late 20th century -- they were in danger of being downclassed -- they retreated from society in order to create their own social structures, and through various ways sought to maintain their social status. While right-wing survivalists aggressively and often violently struggle to define their own alternative society based on the exclusion of certain groups of people, the back-to-the-landers enacted their values (which are by and large those of White middle-class society) through their everyday social practices which they cloak in a liberal discourse and through which they subtly asserted their own claims to superiority. This is, of course, not to dismiss the efforts of back-to-the-landers. We are all implicated in complex systems of social organization and differentiation. Acts of inclusion and exclusion are embedded in everyday actions, language, and in the range of choices that are made available to us.
effect of the decisions made by many people experiencing the same sense of alienation and disenchantment that have been defined by Gould (1997), Jacob (1997), and Gower (1990). However, the term "movement" seems to get attached to the back-to-the-land identity without a clear explanation, and with many obvious contradictions.  

The Back-to-the-Landers as a Social Movement

While none of these researchers comprehensively address the question of whether the back-to-the-landers were a social movement, they all implicitly refer to this phenomena as "the back-to-the-land movement." The only discussion given to the question of whether they are a movement is by Jacob (1997), who devotes a few brief sentences to suggesting that they do not share many of the ordinary characteristics of other social movements of the same time period, such as an identifiable ideology, an organizational structure, and recognizable public figures. While he suggests that they could be just as easily described as a demographic shift, he is perseverent in describing them as a "movement" and implies that the problem of their non-conformity to the ordinary characteristics of movements lays with the existing categories of social movements (Jacob, 1997, p. 5). He does discuss at length the differences between the political strategies of the back-to-the-landers and those of other social movements. Jacob indicates that their practice was motivated more out of an interest in a particular lifestyle than in public politics:

In contrast to the well-defined organizations, groups, and coalitions that constitute the civil rights and feminist moments, for example, the back-to-the-land movement's institutions appear anemic. There are no high-profile demonstrations demanding the implementation of back-to-the-country ideals, nor are their Washington back-to-the-land organizations that retain lobbyists to petition congress on behalf of

Note that Gould (1997) further describes the response of the back-to-the-landers as being defined by a discourse of liberal Protestantism shared by members of middle-class society.
aggrieved small holders. While there exists no shortage of public advocates for the back-to-the-land way of life, neo-homesteaders are motivated as much by defenders of ecologically sensible living like Aldo Leopold, Rachel Carson, and E.F. Schumacher as they are by those writers who focus exclusively on the importance of a simple life in the country (Jacob, 1997, p. 5).  

Jacob suggest that the back-to-the-landers chose to ‘live by example’ rather than get involved in organizations working for social change. However, Taft’s research suggests that the back-to-the-landers created many of their own social institutions which serve more to help them to implement their goals of self-sufficiency within their own lives rather than to advocate for their adoption by the rest of society. Michael Taft states that

....many of the Americans I met are social activists in one way or another. Not that they are involved in provincial politics and mainstream political parties -- most of them care little for this kind of activity -- but many of them are involved in local organizations and have been founding members of -- for example -- craft guilds, cooperatives, a market gardening association, a cattle breeders’ association, a sheep farmers’ association, local publications, heritage and preservation associations, day-care services, and ecological protest groups (Taft, 1990, p. 42).

Jacob corroborates Taft’s observation of involvement by back-to-the-landers in the environmental movement. From his research, Jacob shows that the proportion of homesteaders who were involved in environmental organizations was much greater than that of the broader population.  

In his survey, he found that almost half of the back-to-the-landers he surveyed (47%) provided financial support to activist groups, and that 15% held

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leadership positions in many of the same organizations. Among the general population, however, only 8% are involved in activist groups (Jacobs, 1997: 179). Through his case study research, which he also presents in his book (1997), he found that many of the people he studied became involved in environmental issues when lands that were important to them came under threat. The involvement of back-to-the-landers in environmental issues is not to be overlooked within the Cape Breton back-to-the-land community. In the late 1970’s and early 1980’s many Cape Breton back-to-the-landers became involved in a long court battle against a multinational resource company that threatened to spray a deadly combination of herbicides on forests close to where they lived in order to kill an infestation of spruce budworm. From this a book was written, *Budworm Battles* (1982), by Elizabeth May, who came to Cape Breton from Connecticut (On the Trail of Elizabeth May, p. 21-57). Gower (1990) and Holm (1998) also note that many of the people they studied were heavily involved in environmental issues that were affecting their communities. Writings by people living in Cape Breton, including both Green (1994) and May (1982) indicate involvement in the environmental movement specifically by members of the Cape Breton back-to-the-land community. It is apparent from the literature that there is a strong relationship between the back-to-the-landers and the environmental movement. While environmentalism may be a significant thread in the value system, and political practices, of back-to-the-landers, researchers also locate them in relation to other social forces that existed at various time periods during the 20th century.

Gower, Holm and Jacob situate the communities they studied as originating from the

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24 In addition, 93% of back-to-the-landers that Jacob surveyed sympathize with environmental activist groups (Jacob, 1997, p. 179). Note that Jacob does not provide comparable figures for how strongly the general population sympathizes with environmental issues.

25 May went on to become senior policy advisor to the Canadian Minister of the Environment, and now works as Executive Director of the Sierra Club of Canada (On the Trail of Elizabeth May, p. 21-57).

26 Sprecht (1994) suggests that back-to-the-landers were motivated by environmental concerns, and that back-to-the-landers, and many environmentalists subscribe to an ideology of retreat.
1960's counterculture. Gould, however, also looks at homesteaders in the early 1900’s. In looking at the lives of John Burroughs and Helen and Scott Nearing, she points out that homesteading also occurred during the 19th and 20th century in American society.

While current homesteaders owe certain cultural debts to the sixties, they also have gone on to make innovations and adjustments that move well beyond sixties assumptions about the Good Life. Similarly, while Burroughs and Nearing were children of the nineteenth century, they evolved homesteading styles that simultaneously harked back to nineteenth century ways of living, responded to the particular religious and cultural pressures of their day, and also seemed to anticipate late-twentieth century interest in self-development, ecological concern, and community building. In short, homesteading is too complex, diverse, and longstanding to be seen overall as a 'movement' -- though when 'peaking' in certain decades it sometimes resembles one -- and it certainly enjoys a long history prior to the emergence of the counterculture (Gould, 1997, p. 422).

Gould in the only researcher who does not make the tacit assumption that the back-to-the-landers were a social movement. According to her, as a movement it could be considered a response to 20th century social conditions in America through the evocation of 19th century American values. My argument, which is supported by Gould’s work, is that the back-to-the-landers have both conservative and radical dimensions and that it is necessary to look further at the social origins of the back-to-the-landers, and their political agenda. In addition, it is also necessary to look at the back-to-the-landers in relation to the equally complex and fluctuating array of social movement theories.27

Issues of Social Difference in Existing Research

Gould devotes the most attention of all the authors I have cited to issues of social class within the back-to-the-land community. However, it does not comprise a main theme of her argument. She draws our attention to the fact that it was largely a middle and upper class

27 Chapter four is devoted exclusively to this task.
movement and that this afforded people the opportunity to make such radical changes in their lives. She further argues that their social location affords them the ability to express "fundamentalist" ideas of nature, allows them to easily make homesteading a "commodity," and facilitates their creation of a moral hegemony not dissimilar to the one of capitalist progress and institutionalized religion that many of them claimed to subvert (Gould, 1997: 412). Both Holm and Jacob also included questions about class identity in their questionnaires, though it received little attention in their writing. One thesis that I have not yet discussed because of its specificity warrants mention at this point.  

Lesbian Intentional Communities in Rural Southwestern Oregon: Discussions on Separatism, Environmentalism, and Community Conflict (1997), by Katherine Matthaei Sprecher, looks at some of the intersecting dynamics of class, race, and ability among members of lesbian intentional communities. Sprecher did ethnographies of four lesbian intentional communities in rural Oregon. Her research specifically focuses on community structures, conflict resolution processes, and the values of community members. Sprecher found that class difference came up as a frequent source of conflict between community members. She found that many working class and lower class women felt excluded from intentional communities. One woman she interviewed says that

There was a heavily enforced but unstated status quo -- most people in Southern Oregon’s women’s community are women of privilege. They own land, and usually follow the same ethical and spiritual path; the speak the same language about how one ought to be a lesbian. That image prevailed, and it was very evident if you were not conforming. It alienated a lot of women. You were supposed to be middle-class, verbally adroit, goddess-worshippers, creative, and political within a narrow framework of what the “gurus” had decided. (Quoted in Sprecher, 1997, p. 116).

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28 It should be noted that the communities Sprecher studied seemed to have a much wider range of women from different socioeconomic backgrounds than are represented in the broader back-to-the-land phenomena.
In addition, many working class women felt that the issues they faced, such as financial restrictions, were trivialized and treated as personal problems, and that middle-class women were more concerned with philosophical problems rather than getting work done (Sprecher, 1997, p. 115). However, she notes that working class women tended to stay within the community, as they had few options available to them, such as being able to own their own land (Sprecher, 1997, p. 114). Of all the groups discussed by different researchers, Sprecher’s sample indicates the strongest presence of people from other than middle-class backgrounds.

While her study focuses on class conflict within lesbian intentional communities, rather than between community members and outsiders, she reveals how class operates in restricting or enabling women’s participation on intentional communities.

With regards to gender differences, the back-to-the-landers depended heavily on the existence of an extremely rigid gender divisions, and on the reproduction of the nuclear family. This is documented extensively in a dissertation titled *Homesteading as Social Protest: Gender and Continuity in the Back-to-the-Land Movement in the United States, 1890 - 1980*, by Vivian Ellen Rose (1997), and is discussed in the work of Heather Holm (1998). Rose shows that the separation of men’s and women’s labour, and the of the role of the heterosexual family was strongly advocated by people such as Scott Nearing who had a profound influence on more recent back-to-the-landers (Rose, 1997: p. 299). She suggests that the experience of back-to-the-land women was similar to that of suburban housewives who were confined to domestic roles in their homes.

While none of the studies I looked at address issues of race within the back-to-the-land community in a comprehensive way, Sprecher’s research gives us some indication into

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Although Sprecher does not discuss this, it would be interesting to see if class differences in lesbian intentional communities ever translates into a division of labour. This did happen in one particular sense, in that some of the women she studied had to work off the community while others received money from parents, savings, or trust-funds.
why the communities she studied were so racially homogeneous. The communities she studied articulated anti-racist values as part of their vision. They specifically were formed with the intention of making land available to women and children who had no other means of access to land or wilderness. However, Sprecher says that "(b)ecause of their geographical location, however, within the mostly (W)hite and often racist population of Southern Oregon, OWL Farm (one of the communities she studied), and other women’s communities are quite inaccessible to women of color" (Sprecher, 1997, p. 119).

In addition, Sprecher found that women living with disabilities felt excluded by able-bodied members of intentional communities. Sprecher quotes the writing of one woman, Maria, from a column she writes for Maize, a magazine for rural lesbians. Maria attributes this to the value system that is central to the back-to-the-land culture:

"Self-sufficiency has come to mean doing all those tasks necessary to country living that requires physical strength and skill such as splitting wood, pushing a wheel barrow uphill, carpentry, plumbing, changing a tire, using a chain saw. The better you do these things, the more important it seems you are. I have internalized and contributed to these values (1995/1996: 25)." (Sprecher, 1997, p. 121.)

Maria lives with physical disability and says that she is made to feel that is a burden to her community (Sprecher, 1997, p. 121). Sprecher’s research shows the existence of specific norms in terms of ability, social class, and race within the communities she studied. She reveals how these are deeply embedded in the values systems of community members and how they have served to exclude particular groups of people. While it was obvious that differences along the lines of class were being actively and continually negotiated because the communities she studied had a certain amount of class diversity, this was often not case in other back-to-the-land communities where people were more uniformly upper/middle-class. One thing that we can infer from Sprecht discussion of issues of race and ability is why these
issues are so absent from studies of the back-to-the-land phenomena. The racism that people of color risked being exposed to in rural communities, and the racial and cultural homogeneity of the back-to-the-landers strongly deterred people from being interested in coming to these communities in the first place. With regards to ability, back-to-the-land ideals placed greater value on those who could perform physical tasks, to the exclusion of many differently abled people.

Conclusion

The back-to-the-land literature identifies a set of experiences, feelings, or conditions that motivated them to go back-to-the-land. Described as an escape from the "rat-race," the drudgery of nine-to-five work, the impersonalism of urban living, or the violence and political corruption of the 1960's, back-to-the-landers sought an unalienated experience of nature. While the literature successfully describes these conditions, there are numerous absences in the existing research on the back-to-the-land phenomena, as well as themes in the popular literature that need to be looked at in a more careful and critical way. While issues of social class receive attention in Gould's (1997) dissertation, and in Sprecher's (1997) thesis, I believe that this theme warrants further exploration. Due to the specificity of Sprecher's study, her results have limited applicability to other back-to-the-land communities. However, through all the research I have discussed, it is apparent that the back-to-the-landers were almost universally White, heterosexual, and middle class. This aspect of the back-to-the-land phenomena, its homogeneity, begs further inquiry.\(^{30}\)

Why do they tend to be only white middle-class folks? And what does this mean

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\(^{30}\) Again, note that I do not purport to rigorously pursue issues of sexuality, race, ability or gender. This thesis is intended primarily to develop a theoretical approach to issues of social class within the back-to-the-land community. This is not to diminish the importance of these other issues, but to recognize the limited scope of this thesis.
when so many of them come out of a period of such pronounced social struggle for racial
justice and human equality? The assumption that they are a social movement is also a
contentious and complex matter. To better understand these issues, it is necessary to look at
what was happening in North America in the 1960’s. In the next chapter I will explore the
literature of Bohemia since the early 1800’s and the counterculture of the 1960’s in order to
help us to better understand the ideological origins of the back-to-the-landers.
Chapter III

Social, Cultural and Political Forces that Underlay the Back-to-the-Land Phenomenon

Introduction

The back-to-the-land phenomena came about as a result of many different social, economic and political conditions that became especially pronounced during the late 1960's. It was only one of many different manifestations of a counterculture that branched out into different forms of cultural expression. In this chapter I first describe the history of Bohemia and its influence on 19th and 20th century art, culture, and ideas. Then I review some of the events in the United States in the mid and late 20th century that gave rise to the 1960's political counterculture and the lifestyle politic of hippiedom. Finally, I consider how these countercultures gave rise to the back-to-the-land movement. While these different countercultural phenomena occurred amidst complex and divergent social and economic forces, they retain a common historical and contextual thread -- that they were a middle class response to the alienation and violence of capitalism and modernity that found cultural expression through bohemianism, the avant-garde, the 60's counterculture, and more recently, the back-to-the-land movement.

The Origins of Bohemia

Bohemia originated in 19th century Paris among disaffected artists and intellectuals as a cultural response to modernity and as an attack against the bourgeoisie. Writing in 1913, Orlo Williams described bohemians as "gypsies" or "vagabonds," or as people who did not
work in any traditional sense. For Williams, the revolution of 1830 was the flowering of the what would become a widespread movement of bohemian romanticism that would be both political and artistic (Williams, 1913, p. 62). In being primarily aesthetic, Bohemia was different from the communities formed by utopian socialists Charles Fourier or Henri St. Simon in opposition to capitalism. Bohemia concerned itself with the realm of culture and ideas, not the practicalities of building a different society.

... the aesthete’s war was bound to be a war of the imagination -- a member of Gautier’s circle wrote that while St. Simonians and Fourierists attacked the bourgeoisie at the political and economic level, the artistic faction had as its weapons only ‘the brush, they lyre, and the chisel.’ And perhaps for that reason, it was waged with a degree of psychological aggression that reached near-cultish proportions (Graña, 1990, p. 6).

The bohemians of 19th century Paris sought to enact cultural terrorism against the bourgeoisie. One artist walked a pet jackal around the streets of Paris and a student group required its members undergo an all night ritual that involved taking an oath of vengeance against the bourgeoisie (Graña, 1964, p. 8). Early bohemians sought to render all life, and even death, into aesthetic ritual. Taken to its greatest extremes, in “suicide clubs,” Parisian Bohemians took enormous pride in maintaining aesthetic composure until the very last moment of their lives, choosing for example, in the case of one member, to kill himself at an opera by drug overdose (Graña, 1964, p. 9).

The Bohemian counterculture was also fertile ground for the formation of various artistic movements including impressionism, situationism, dadaism, and the avant-garde.

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31 Bohemia was popularized by several stories written by Henri Murger in the 1840’s, one of which was made into a play and later into an opera called La Boheme. These established Bohemia as a place and as a way of life, drawing countless voyeurs and young converts (George & Starr, 1985, p.189)

32 Graña writes that this was the only reported instance where a member actually took their life.

33 Camile Pissaro of the impressionists believed strongly that artists should be able to work freely and independent of capital. The impressionists began as a cooperative modeled after those used by French bakers in 1874 that was called “Societe anoyme des artistes, peintres, sculpteurs, graveurs, etc...” (Werner, 1962, p.103)

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Through these movements, artists sought to constantly and often excessively challenge the moral codes of society rather than try to seek more gradual social reforms (Werner, 1962, p. 103). Some of the 20th century’s most gifted artists expressed profound social alienation and personal conflict and were often driven to self-destruction. The American painters Arshile Gorky and Jackson Pollock lived very fervent and dissatisfied lives, Gorky eventually hanging himself and Pollock dying recklessly in a drunken car ride (Werner, 1962, p. 107).

The same excessive experimentation was also characteristic of the American literary avant-garde. Bohemia became best known in North America through the “beat generation” in the 1940’s and 1950’s, which was well represented by (almost entirely male) writers such as Henry Miller, William Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg, and Jack Kerouac who continued to have enormous influence throughout the counterculture of the 1960’s. These writers wrote extensively of their lifestyles of wild adventure, sexual experimentation, and heavy drug use. Their writing techniques were also highly experimental. William Burroughs was known for his style of cut-up writing, a method which writer Barry Farrell describes as “...dissecting words from news items, which, Burroughs believes, reveals truths beyond the range of conscious thought (Farrell, 1967, p. 613).” Kerouac wrote On the Road in fewer than twenty days as a stream of consciousness, fueled by alcohol and amphetamines. Like the painters of the avant-garde, the beat-generation writers attempted to liberate consciousness from the shackles of social repression -- whether it be through sex, drugs, or literary technique.

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39 Burroughs was a heroin user throughout most of his lengthy life. Kerouac died at an early age of alcoholism and, along with Henry Miller, valorized the heterosexual escapades of his characters. Most of these writers wrote extensively about their homosexuality at a time when it was hardly acceptable. Paul George and Jerold Starr write that Burroughs, Ginsberg and Kerouac all met when they were students at Columbia University and their literary careers were very much influenced by each other (George and Starr, 1985, p. 191). They also note that women were very much excluded from this close circle of friends, some of who were also lovers to each other (George & Starr, 1985, p. 194). Among their most noted books are; for Burroughs (1992), Naked Lunch; Ginsberg (1986), Howl; Kerouac (1958), On the Road; and Miller (1961), Tropic of Capricorn. All were met with censure in the United States, which further increased the demand for them, and were eventually allowed to be sold to the enormous success of the authors.
The Bohemian counterculture was not completely made up of mad-genius personalities bent on a path of self-destruction for the sole sake of defying social norms. However cautious or wildly experimental, the sentiment was the same -- that there was something profoundly wrong with modern society, and that there was some deeper understanding that could be liberated through aesthetic experimentation. In Taos New Mexico, Mabel Dodge Luhan attempted to create a creative cultural community that would help chart future directions for society.

Luhan brought many others to the Southwest, where she planned to make her home in Taos the center of a "new world plan" that would regenerate Anglo civilization from its urban-industrial bias, its individualist and materialist credo, and its Eurocentric vision of culture. Through her marriage to Antonio Luhan, a Pueblo Indian, she hoped to serve as "a bridge between cultures." Together, they would attract the nation's great writers, artists, and activists to discover the social and cultural benefits to be gained from native communities whose religious, aesthetic, and work values were organically integrated with their physical environment (Rudnick, 1996, p. 7).

The people who came to the Luhan house did have great influence on American culture and ideas. Carl Jung, D. H. Lawrence, Georgia O'Keefe, Ansel Adams, Paul Strand, John Collier, among countless others stayed there (Rudnick, 1996, p. 7-8). They saw this area and its cultures as rife with symbolic resources that they needed to articulate a cultural vision that facilitated ecological sustainability, the preservation of native cultures, and social change. They also shared a belief in art for art's sake and considered art as less ideological than other social functions. This, they believed, made it somehow less likely to exploit others (Rudnick, 1886, p. 8).

Bohemia was not guided solely by circumstance and spontaneity. It had a guiding vision -- Mabel Dodge Luhan gives us evidence to this fact. Malcolm Cowley in his 1934 book, *Exile's Return*, he defines Bohemia as a hip way of life with an informal doctrine that
he summarizes in eight points (Cowley, 1934, p. 69):

- **Salvation by the child** -- everyone has an unique intrinsic worth that is destroyed by having to conform to social norms.

- **Self-expression** -- this is our primary purpose in life.

- **Paganism** -- the body is pure and clean and needs to be celebrated through rituals of love.

- **Living for the moment** -- seize the moment, even at the cost of future sacrifice.

- **Liberty** -- anything that prevents self-expression should be destroyed.

- **Female equality** -- women should have access to the same economic and social opportunities as men.

- **Psychological adjustment** -- we can change our lives as a result of the understanding brought about through the removal of repressions.

- **Changing place** -- by living in different places one can live creatively, freely, and without restrictive attachments.

Cowley’s concern was that Bohemia fed the expansion of growing American capitalism that was in need of new markets (Cowley, 1934, p. 72). People could express themselves, or live for the moment through consumption. By encouraging women’s social and economic freedom, consumption could be further increased. Travel also increased demand for American products abroad. Cowley asserts that Bohemian principles were ripe for exploitation by business. Indeed, It was this convergence of Bohemia and capitalism that later led to the downfall of the counterculture during the 1960’s. What is also present in these principles is an emphasis on the purity of human feeling, expression and physical form. It advocates a return to a “lost innocence” that is repressed by society. This is corroborated by other authors, who also note that both the Bohemians and the beats had an intense fascination with the primitive and the
exotic, and that they saw intense experiences, exposure to the beauty of nature, adventure and creativity as necessary for the unrestricted development of human potential (George and Starr, 1985, p. 190). Indeed, business would later capitalize on these pursuits to further the expansion of Western imperialism.

While Bohemia describes a cultural identity held by a particular segment of the population, as well as a social process and a tradition, it has been popularly used to refer particular places. Urban social enclaves such as New York’s East Village, San Francisco’s Haight-Ashbury District, or rural artist colonies such as one that existed along the Pacific Coast in Carmel California in the early 1900’s, have all been areas where writers and artists have congregated (Snyderman and Joseph, 1939, p. 87, and Austin, 1927, p. 497). Low living costs afforded them a place where they could pursue their work and lifestyle. Art, and the aesthetic pursuit of lifestyle became a common bond, along with the desire to push beyond the bounds of socially sanctioned experience.

However, this group was also united by their shared membership in the educated middle class. This was, paradoxically, the very bourgeoisie society that they rebelled against. For many, particularly artists, their lifestyles were supported by invested family income or the patronage of the rich. Their dissent was made possible by capitalism. The increase of wealth in North America, along with the further expansion of capitalism would later facilitate the explosion and transformation of this counterculture.

Communal Utopias

In the late 1960’s and early 1970’s there was an enormous proliferation of communes,
estimated as many as 10,000 in the United States alone by Donald Pitzer, a scholar of social utopias (Pitzer, 1997, p. 12). However, these follow on countless efforts to create intentional communities based on religious identity, social reform, or lifestyle practices not just throughout the 20th century, but during the 19th century and as far back as the times of early Christians (Pitzer, 1997, p. 3). The proliferation of industrialism during the 18th and 19th centuries inspired various attempts to create socialist utopias. In addition, numerous groups, including Mormons, Shakers and Dutch Mennonites all aspired to communal autonomy at various points in North American history (Pitzer, 1997).

The most cited theorists of socialist utopias include Charles Fourier, Henri Compte St. Simon and Robert Owen who all lived in the 18th century. They proposed schemes to reorganize society and redistribute wealth through co-operative industries and communal living. Fourier believed that the workers themselves should enjoy the benefits of their labour and proposed communist colonies to alleviate poverty in Ireland and contested marriage, private property and the church as being obstacles to the achievement of his communist vision (Cohen, 1964, p. 14). Henri Compte de St-Simon called for expelling the aristocracy and elevating the importance of intellectualism and art in a society ruled by common interest, not national allegiance. Charles Fourier constructed elaborate plans for a utopian society made up of communities of several hundred families, each bringing different abilities and everyone sharing common property (Cohen, 1964, p. 31-32).

In the introduction to his book, which approaches 600 densely written pages, Donald Pitzer suggests there simply is not enough room in his book to fairly address the communes of the 1960’s and 1970’s. He notes while there were a lot of communes being created during this time, many of them did not survive. He estimates that there now are only about 2,000 communes in North America, and only one fifth as many as had existed twenty-five years
earlier (Pitzer, 1997, p. 12). Why many of them failed is a source of much debate. Kenneth Westhues and Helen Constas, two sociologists from Guelph University, who wrote during the 1970’s have one explanation. They point out that for communes to survive beyond their early charismatic stages, they needed to develop ideological orthodoxy, strong leadership and a high level of organization, which had characterized efforts by the Fourierists and the Owenites (Constas and Westhues, 1972, p. 196-198). In many cases this style of organization and leadership conflicted with the decentralist and anti-authoritarian ideals of commune members. While countless communes failed as a result, many of these people continued to try to live a self-sufficient rural existence as smaller groups or as families.38 Others had no interest in communal living, or the money to buy their own land, and instead pursued self-sufficient rural lifestyles on their own.39

While the many of the back-to-the-land communities that have been studied went through a period of experimentation with communal living (Gower, 1990, Holm, 1998), and drew from the efforts of various earlier attempts at creating communal utopias, they are more clearly rooted in the historically enduring and less pragmatically oriented bohemian counterculture. While the utopian socialists were responding to the same conditions of industrialism, capitalist alienation, and new forms of class division as the bohemians, they more readily offered an economic programme. The Bohemians however, with their focus on lifestyle and aesthetic concerns were most successful at laying down the a social critique and a particular structure of feeling. While many people translated this into communal living, this was often short lived, as Westhues and Constas (1972) point out, and many continued to

38 As I bring this thesis to completion, a student in a class in which I was invited to speak about my research, said that she received an advertisement for members for a crafts commune in Cape Breton in the early 1970’s. She notes that the note she received emphasized an ideological vision, but offered no economic programme. Houriet (1971) found that many commune members he spoke to depended heavily on allowances from family, welfare cheques, or food stamps, which put their supposed practises of self-sufficiency into question.

pursue the back-to-the-land lifestyle as couples or as families.

**Hippies on the Scene**

When I was growing up in Cape Breton many of the back-to-the-landers were labeled as “hippies,” meaning that they likely had long hair, ran around in the nude, played music and smoked marijuana. Although I often heard people use it to describe themselves, it was more often used by others as a derogatory term. The origins of this term lead back to New York in the 1920’s. During the Harlem Renaissance many urban African-Americans were attempting to disown their stereotyped image as excitable and deferential servants and reinvent themselves as cool and independent hipsters.\(^4\) Disaffected Whites began hanging out with them and appropriating their lifestyle. Quoted in George and Starr, Malcolm X said that “(a) few of the (W)hite men around Harlem, younger one’s who we called ‘hippies,’ acted more Negro than Negroes” (George and Starr, 1985, p. 191). In the 1960’s, when the Bohemian countercultural lifestyle achieved mass appeal, the term hippie came into popular usage. However, there were a set of historically unique circumstances that enabled the dramatic growth of the North American counterculture during the second half of the 20th Century.

There was a sudden explosion of economic prosperity in the United States after WWII. Thousands of returning veterans went back to school under the GI Bill, a federal government initiative designed to ease the social effects of a sudden surplus population. Under this programme, employment opportunities were created for veterans, educational programmes were developed, and incentives were created to encourage veterans to take advantage of these new programmes (Mizruchi, 1990, p. 27). New arts schools and faculties were created, and many veterans regarded the arts as an easy way of getting a post-secondary

\(^{4}\) The term, hipster, according to George and Starr, referred to someone who smoked opium, or who carried a gun, bottle, or bankroll on their hip.
education. These factors coalesced to create an enormous middle-class that was well educated, had secure employment and a fairly comfortable existence.

This group of people gave birth to the largest generation in United States history, appropriately called the “baby boom” generation. By 1964 there were more 17 years olds than people of any other age in the United States, all of whom had been raised with enormous material advantage and amidst seemingly limitless economic progress (Lipsitz, 1982, p. 212). However, this meant little in light of a rising sense of the fragility of human existence. Their parent’s generation, amidst their rise to a level of affluence envied around the world, had also invented the atom bomb.

As a result of this, along with other factors, youth of the 1960’s had a deep sense of the meaninglessness of their economic security. They were the first generation to grow up with the possibility of total annihilation. They were what religious scholar Timothy Miller called “...the first generation in history that knows it may be the last.” One person he interviews stated that

(m)any people have come to an intense awareness of life’s inherent insecurity. We are mortal and alone. The vast responsibility of our lives and ‘salvation’ is in our own hands. One result of this has been a deep feeling of alienation, the personal realization that we are living a life (on a planet) that we don’t at all comprehend, that seems isolated, absurd, futile, that we have grown up on panaceas and lies and even our minds and hearts are strangers (quoted in Miller, 786).

War loomed, constant and threatening. A generation past World War II, the Cold War began to escalate, holding the potential to be far more destructive than any other war in history. The irrationality of U.S. governmental policy also became even more pronounced during the Vietnam War and the Watergate Scandal. Further, despite the affluence and freedom of American society in the 1950’s and 1960’s, Blacks and ethnic Whites still experienced enormous poverty and discrimination. Women also had little access to this wealth and
possibility.

The Old Left, however, which had included the Communist Party, Socialist Parties, and labour organizations suffered enormously from the effects of McCarthyism and the ensuing culture of fear and silence that permeated radicalism in the 1950's. Countless youth abandoned radical politics (Starr, 1985, p. 238). While the Old Left clearly suffered enormously from political repression, its emphasis on issues facing the industrial working class were not well suited to the aspirations of an emerging counterculture that was concerned about a new set of issues.

The Old Left, once out from under the shadow of McCarthyism by the 1960’s, was replaced with The New Left, which was largely run by students. The New Left critiqued late-capitalism for how it constructed instruments of cultural domination, facilitated social alienation, and constructed social hierarchies. The New Left, according to Jerold Starr, aimed to “....advocate liberty and end the repression of the state, and to organize community to combat alienation (Starr, 1985, p. 249).” Combining romanticism and radicalism, the New Left staged non-violent actions, successfully opposing nuclear testing and racial segregation (Starr, 1985, p. 249). While the New Left tried to create a unified movement, and was intensely allied with the civil rights movement in the early 1960’s, by the end of the decade this alliance was severed. Black leaders began to reject reformist goals of merely seeking access to White society and began advocating community control and racial pride (Starr, 1985, p. 251). With the emergence of this form of Black nationalism came a rejection of the paternalism of White liberalism (Echols, 1995, p. 154).
The civil rights movement was replaced by Black Power, which aimed to challenge institutionalized racism, and achieve equality by any means necessary (Starr, 1985, p. 250). During the same period the principal body of the New Left, Students for Democratic Society, collapsed from lack of organizational structure. Smaller organizations that had allied themselves with the New Left resorted to political extremism, resulting in a severe escalation of police violence and state repression (Starr, 1985, p. 278). Radical politics became further factionalized and violent, frightening many people away from public protest. Because so much more was on the line, people hesitated to ally themselves with other struggles.

Within this array of constantly shifting cultural and countercultural forces, the women’s movement found itself, and was largely responsible for the emergence of idea that “the personal is political,” which attempts to understand the ways in which broader political systems and social institutions impact on individuals (Echols, 1995, p. 118). From individual experiences, feminists attempted to articulate a common political identity that resisted their confinement by patriarchy within the private (read not political) sphere. The links between the personal and the political were also being made in struggles for racial equality. These different ideas and emergent forms of resistance coalesced into “identity politics,” meaning that people began to organize around their ethnicity, race, sexuality, or gender rather than supposedly inclusive struggles for equality. However, as Eric Hobsbawm points out, identities are formed in opposition to other identities (Hobsbawm, 1996). While this period is only the beginning of identity politics it came increasingly to define social movements.

Indeed, we see the end of a “unified movement” in the 1960’s that had been carried by the

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41 White radicals who allied themselves with the black power movement were rebuffed. There were few black hippies, as Black dissent was expressed more often through radical politics than the cultural practices of hippiedom. (Miller, 1991, p.16) In a 1968 edition of The Black Panther editors wrote: "Black brothers, stop vamping on the hippies. They are not your enemy. Your enemy, right now, is the white racist pigs who support this corrupt system... you enemy is not the hippies... WE HAVE NO QUARREL WITH THE HIPPIES. LEAVE THEM ALONE. Or the BLACK PANTHER PARTY will deal with you!" (Miller, 1991, p.16)
New Left, and the beginning of multiple movements.

Surrounding these various movements existed a countercultural lifestyle that helped draw people into the fray of politics and cultural radicalism. Within the counterculture a growing generation of youth found a way to express their critique of the banality of middle-class life and reject of the values of their parents. An ethic had long been evolving that emphasized equality, creativity, non-violence, the rejection of the protestant work ethic, and the unfettered pursuit of pleasure through adventure, the exotic, intense experiences, through nature, and sensual experience. However, it was easy to abstract the forms of radical culture from its political content, and the counterculture just as easily offered a non-political alternative. As Echols points out, the idea of the personal as being political was a fairly abstract notion for men, and for White people, for whom gender or racial oppression was not something they knew personally (Echols, 1995, p. 118). As the counterculture evolved, movements fragmented and much of it also became highly depoliticized.

Regardless of the how politicized people were, or how politicized they thought they were, the counterculture of the 1960’s made an enormous impression on the American social landscape. Millions of youth gathered together on university campuses, in neighborhoods such as New York City’s East Village and San Francisco’s Haight Ashbury, and in rural communes. Events such as the 1964 Summer of Freedom, the “trips festival,” as well as countless “human be-ins and “tribal gatherings,” drew tens of thousands of people together (“A Social History of the Hippies,” 1967, p. 17). The 1967 “Summer of Love” in San Francisco drew up to 100,000 (Starr, 1985, p. 278) and the Woodstock music festival in 1969 drew about half a million people (‘It was like balling for the first time,’ 1969, Sept 20). By this point, hippies were well recognized by The New York Times, by Time, Newsweek and Life Magazine as a countercultural community of youth centred around non-violence, drugs,
and rock n' roll (Starr, 1985, p. 248). For the purposes of this thesis, it is important to realize
the popularity of this countercultural phenomena, and the processes by which it was
politicized and depoliticized, how it came into existence, and then how it evolved into
something else. In many ways, the end of the 1960’s counterculture marks where the back-to-
the-land movement began.

The Disintegration of the Counterculture

There was never a fixed state in the counterculture of the 1960’s that we can hold as a
constant referent. As quickly as political ideologies and cultural practices came into being,
they were transformed or disappeared to be replaced by something else. The cultural and
political intensity of the 1960’s makes this period particularly memorable. We are apt to
remember civil rights marches, flowing skirts, long hair, student protests against the Vietnam
War, psychedelics drugs, free love, rock and roll, and eastern spirituality. Hundreds of
thousands of people created an expressive alternative to the banal uniformity of the suburbs
and factories and opposed the mantra of progress and the violence of patriotism. While these
practices were definitive of this period, the symbols and practices of the counterculture
quickly became stripped of their liberatory meaning and replaced by something much less
political.

The counterculture was quickly co-opted and undermined by its own popular
success. The media picked up on and sensationalized many aspects of hippiedom; the
fashions, the sex, drugs, disorder and dirt rather than its (by then, rapidly declining) political
intentions. It drew increased numbers of unsuspecting wayward youth that it could not
support, along with crowds of onlookers. It also quickly became an attraction for criminals
and unscrupulous drug dealers who in turn made the subculture an unsafe place for the people
who were increasing drawn to it (Farrell, 1967, p. 221). While the more lifestyle oriented aspect of the counterculture may not have been very political, at least it had an ethic of compassion and community. However, as it became adopted by the market and sold to mass audiences at rock concerts, even these values were jettisoned. By 1969 the counterculture had shown much evidence of decline. At a Rolling Stones concert that year in Altamont California, Hells Angels who were hired as security guards attacked hundreds of people in the crowd and stabbed a young Black man to death. After this tragic event, the Berkeley Barb bemoaned the apathetic decline of the “free-love” generation:

Someone was knifed to death. Lots of people were beaten. Love and peace were fucked by the Hell’s Angels in front of hundreds of thousands of people who did nothing. The brothers and sisters... could have cooed the Angels... but they just let hate happen (“A Murderous Thing,” 1969, December 12).

There also was an enormous backlash by the police against the hippies -- both those that were active in protests and those that were not -- and against the Black Power Movement. Violence began to escalate at a rapid rate. Between 1964 and 1969 there were over 300 riots by poor urban blacks in the United States, causing 250 deaths (Colburn and Pozzetta, 1994, p.128). In addition tens of thousands of people were arrested in riots after Martin Luther King’s assassination in 1968. The police persisted in raiding Haight-Ashbury and began to meet protests with escalating degrees of violence. The FBI and other federal agencies infiltrated activist organizations, often entrapping activists into taking violent action (Starr, 1985, p. 276-277).

In addition, many of the radical presses of the counterculture were shut down as a result of pressure from the federal government. Countercultural journalist Ray Mungo writes of his experience working with Marshall Bloom as editors of the Liberation New Service (LNS), an information hub which relayed information on politics, protest and countercultural
rebellion to the rest of the underground press. The LNS was forced out of business after being infiltrated by the FBI masquerading as another leftist group that tried to steal their press and actually set fire to the house where all the staff was sleeping (Mungo, 1990, p. 27).

An extensive study by journalist Angus MacKenzie during the late 1970's provided conclusive evidence that there had been a federal initiative to shut down the underground press. A CIA operation established for the purposes of investigating connections between domestic dissidents and foreign powers was stretched far beyond its mandate and was used to systemically infiltrate and undermine underground publications. MacKenzie suggests that this operation may have affected as many as 150 of the approximately 500 underground publications (MacKenzie, 1981, p. 57). Advertisers withdrew, papers were shut down on obscenity charges, and writers went on to less political publishing pursuits.

After the demise of LNS Ray Mungo moved to Vermont and joined a commune. For Mungo, there was no other choice than to get out (Mungo, 1970, p. 45). Mungo left confused and frustrated. At the time, no one knew, much less suspected, that the federal government

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62 The CIA claimed to be interested in finding out if these papers were being funded by foreign enemies (MacKenzie, 1981, p. 58). Strategies included sending anonymous letters to union leaders pointing out that a radical paper was printed by a non-unionized shop (requiring it be printed at a unionized shop would have been too expensive and shut the paper down), or sending letters to advertisers and the public suggesting that the papers were government fronts to infiltrate the counterculture. They also sent letters to advertisers highlighting criminal backgrounds, sent copies of controversial articles to law enforcement to invoke obscenity charges, or in the case of LNS, lit their house on fire.

63 US President Nixon pushed this agenda further, and by 1973 the CIA developed a list of 300,000 names of activists under the guise of this anti-terrorism.

64 Other writers have also documented federal government infiltration in the counterculture. Lois Rudnick writes that an undercover FBI agent was reported in Taos New Mexico where there were a large number of back-to-the-land communes. This agent revealed his identity to actor Dennis Hopper, who occupied the Mabel Dodge Luhan house, and using Hopper's networks to incite paranoia among members of the counterculture told him of fictitious plans of the local militia to seize control of the area and exterminate the hippies. Although there was little substantiation of this aside from reports from Hopper and writer John Nichols, this did not seem unreasonable to Rudnick. COINTELPRO had been used against the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement where agents fabricated evidence and spread false information (Rudnick, 1996, p. 257). Ewuare Osayande, a hip-hop music historian, notes that this initiative was also used to suppress black leaders, and he suggests that it was also used to disseminate weapons and hard drugs in inner city black communities during the 1980's (Osayande, 1996, p. 29).
had been infiltrating the counterculture. Writing just after the beginning of his new life away from radical politics he said that:

... the movement had become my enemy; the movement was not flowers and doves and spontaneity, but another vicious system, the seed of a heartless bureaucracy, a minority party vying for power rather than peace. It was then that we put away the schedule for the revolution, gathered together our dear ones and all of our resources, and set off to Vermont in search of the New Age (Mungo, 1970, p. 17).

The printing press continued to churn in the barn at the commune, putting out copies of The Journal of the New Age instead of The Liberation News Service (Mungo, 1990, p. 27). The transition was one of retreat into much more individualistic concerns. Mungo wrote frankly and positively about this change twenty years later:

...our new age had something to do with communal living, utopian societies, nudity, Eastern religion, striving for a higher and nobler life, and distance from, and independence of conventional lifestyles. The liberation we had tried to foist on the world became secondary to the liberation in our own lives (Mungo, 1990, p. 27).

While hippiedom dispersed, various elements of the counterculture took on new forms. People facing the growing police pressure in Haight Ashbury moved out to other parts of California, Oregon and Washington. Activists were frustrated by their seeming inability to affect meaningful social change. Robert Houriet, a journalist, traveled around the United States for a year visiting and living on dozens of communes and interviewing their members. One person he met, who had founded the West Coast War Resisters tells him why he joined a commune:

How many times are you going to run your head against the wall to learn that society isn’t going to change because of political demonstrations? You begin first by changing yourself, then your friends, and working outwards creating a new lifestyle that speaks more strongly than political slogans (Houriet, 1971, p. 63).

Marshall Bloom committed suicide the year the LNS staff was forced to shut down the paper and leave the city (Mungo, 1990, p. 28).
Houriet writes that one person, Lou Gottlieb, started a commune outside of San Francisco in 1967 on thirty acres for people who were already sensing the demise of the counterculture and beginning to leave Haight-Ashbury. Others attempted to create rural Bohemias, some of which succeeded, and most of which did not. The most elaborately planned was Earth People’s Park, in which a group including a record producer, a musician, a socialist radical and the founder of *The Whole Earth Review*, attempted to involve participants from the Woodstock Music Festival in creating a rural commune of 20,000 people on 100,000 acres (Houriet, 1971, p. 118). By this time there already existed numerous large rural enclaves, include Taos County New Mexico where there were over 3,000 people attempting to live off the land, including a third of whom were living on communes (Houriet, 1971, p. 178).

It is important to understand that the back-to-the-land phenomena spanned the North American continent. The extent of its occurrence in Europe and in other parts of the world is something that I have not been able to ascertain. For the same reasons that people were drawn to New Mexico, Northern California, or Vermont, people also migrated to Canada. While people didn’t necessarily settle into communes, the reasons for their move were to varying degrees, the same as the reasons that the hippies of Haight-Ashbury moved out of San Francisco, or the same reasons why people moved to Taos County New Mexico. The back-to-the-landers that John Gower studied in British Columbia found that Canada provided ideal conditions for people who were serious about getting away from the political and social chaos of the 1960’s. Canada appeared to have greater political tolerance, it seemed less polluted, and had a much stronger social welfare system than the United States. Immigration

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"After a year it was bulldozed by the Health Department (Houriet, 1971, p. xx).
"Earth People’s Park was eventually created in Northern Vermont on 600 acres (Houriet, 1971, p. 385).
"However, the countercultural politics of the 1960’s were also extremely pronounced in Britain, France, Germany and Italy (Marwick, 1998). I would suspect that the low availability of land in Europe would have been a major obstacle to potential back-to-the-landers."
at that time was a relatively easy process, and many Vietnam war resisters had already taken asylum in Canada (Gower, 1990, p. 32). In rural areas including Cape Breton, where my parents settled, many people were selling their farms at low prices (Zimmerman, 1978a).

However, this new turn from struggling in the city streets to working the land did not include many of the working class and African Americans that the social movements of the 1960’s claimed to support. While the back-to-the-landers arose as a very rational response to a dizzying array of social conditions, in light of many of the original principles of the counterculture their actions were in ways highly contradictory.

The Contradictions of Middle-Class Alienation and Dissent

Members of the counterculture held an ambiguous relationship to middle-class society. In his writings of the hippies as champions of American values, Timothy Miller locates them as staunch members of the middle class.

The hippies were mainly children of privilege, and their outlook reflected their heritage. They glorified poverty and sometimes lived in it; they championed the rights of racial minorities, and to some extent, women. But the movement came from a prosperous, white, male-defined segment of society. Perhaps it was inevitable that those who would reject middle class comforts had to come from comfortable backgrounds; the have-nots of society had no material luxuries to rebel against (Miller, 1991, p. 15).

While they are products of the middle class they also sought to reject middle-class society and all it stood for. Most of the popular literature on the counterculture tends to romanticize

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60 It should be noted that none of the writers in the previous chapter cite suggest that many of the back-to-the-landers were draft dodgers. While Gower (1990) mentions that people came to Canada because there were other Americans here escaping the draft, he does not make special mention of the presence of draft dodgers within the back-to-the-land community. I cannot think of anyone who was part of the Cape Breton back-to-the-land community who came here avoiding the draft. What is important is that Canada was perceived as a safe place for left-leaning people to come.

61 Farms, such as the one my parents bought were selling at less than $100 an acre in the early 1970’s and usually came with a house and a barn. Land in less accessible areas sold for much less. However, while land prices are still much lower than in the Europe or in other parts of the U.S. and Canada, they have increased considerably since then.
the political struggles of the 60's and the goals of the back-to-the-landers. However, there is a small body of academic literature, and an even smaller body of popular texts that critically addresses class contradiction within the counterculture.

The status quo view on the class politics of the 1960's and the back-to-the-landers suggests that they employed a politics of negation. Elizabeth Gornick, who wrote of her visits to communes in Taos New Mexico for The Village Voice describes hippies as refugees from middle class-life who sought to destroy the power of the middle class by aggressively refusing to participate in it, and instead creating a viable alternative (Gornick, 1969, p. 6). Their sense of alienation from middle class society was expressed through a shared sense of unmistakable doom. Gornick reports from her conversations with hippies in Taos New Mexico that they felt middle class life mined their energies and left them spiritually dead (Gornick, 1969, p. 58).

For there is about the hippie's presence the unmistakable feeling that something in the nation is terribly wrong, that a gut wrenching turbulence in the belly of the country is taking place, and that the hippie has stepped aside to utter prophecies of doom... (Gornick, 1969, p. 58).

Gornick's report is ultimately optimistic, suggesting that despite hardship they made it work. She notes that people seemed to take meaning in their work, that they have recreated their own forms of extended families, and that they had created their own religion. Gornick bestows them with legitimacy because they so closely mirror the institutions of mainstream society. Gornick points out that "(w)hat they want, in a word, is a real life. Not a novel life. Not an aboriginal, orgiastic fantasy of a life. Only a real life" (Gornick, 1969, p. 59). The question is, in our age of postindustrial capitalism, what is a "real" life? And if so, who's life is not "real?"

62 For Gornick, the children of the hippies are the true measure of its success. She says that they are much happier and healthier than the ones she has known from her mainstream culture and that this gives communal and back-to-the-land living ultimate validation (Gornick, 1969, p. 58-59).
Within weeks of the printing of Gornick’s article in the *The Village Voice*, Elizabeth Martinez wrote an article in the same magazine attacking Gornick for not considering how Spanish and Native people felt about the arrival of hippies in Taos New Mexico. Martinez points out that there was rape, violence, and murder as a result of the hippies’ presence. She also pointed out that the hippies’ choice to escape was a product of their privilege -- the Chicanos and Indians didn’t have any choice but to fight the forces of oppression.

Think about the fact that, much as you reject your middle-class Anglo society and its values, you are still Anglo. Think about the 120 year-old struggle by poor chicanos and the even older struggle by Indians to get back millions of acres of acres of land stolen by Anglo ranchers with their Anglo lawyer buddies. Think about what it means for a new influx of anglos -- no matter how well meaning -- to come in and buy up land that the local people feel to be theirs and cannot afford to buy back themselves (Martinez, 1969, p. 5).

Martinez points out that for the hippies, uncleanness, nudity, sexual promiscuity, and long hair were an expression of their rebellion. For the Spanish, however, their cleanliness, cultural pride, and self-respect was their only defense in an Anglo society (Martinez, 5). Unlike Gornick, for Martinez hippies were not “refugees.” They left middle-class society by their own choice -- or rather, they did not leave middle class culture at all. They continued to perpetuate middle-class values in their idealization of nature and they failed to practice their values of communitarianism and tolerance with their Chicano and Native American neighbours. As Martinez says to the readers of *The Village Voice*, “You see the scenery, we see a battleground (Martinez, 1969, p. 5).”

Similar themes emerge in Rudnick’s research on the Mabel Dodge Luhan House in Taos New Mexico. Rudnick suggests that the goals of Luhan and the actor Dennis Hopper were confused by ultimate narcissism.

Luhan and Hopper seemed to be saying “No” to the direction of American civilization by fleeing the city and retreating to a premodern, rural society. But
their utopianism reveals the kinds of contradictions that have often subverted
the ideal of community in American history. Both were determined to redeem
the world in their own image, and their narcissism confused their politics and
muddied their social vision. Luhan continually fought ‘progressive’ forces in
Taos who threatened to modernize ‘her’ community, which she believed
included Taos Pueblo. Hopper exploited Indians in film and abused women in
his own life in ways that violated his own radical intentions (Rudnick, 1996,
p. 13).

The “progressive” politics of the Sixties counterculture did not only ignore the continued
oppression of historically marginalized Chicanos and Native Americans in Taos New Mexico,
and seek retreat from the racial politics and violence of the period, but it also ignored
injustices faced by ethnic-Whites, such as Italian Americans and Eastern Europeans (Colburn
and Pozzetta, 1994, p. 132). Ultimately, according to David Farber, an American professor of
history, this would work against them. Working class Americans resented the youth of the
sixties counterculture because they tended to be the children of the affluent. While working
class people felt silenced, they saw that the middle-class youth of the counterculture
commanded what seemed like an unfair amount of public attention (Farber, 1994, p. 296).
U.S. President Nixon was able to use this resentment strategically, as an oppositional tactic
against the counterculture which had virtually ignored the struggles of ethnic whites and the
working class. Promoting the idea that that people should be grateful for their modest quality
of life, that hard work would be fairly rewarded, right-wing political organizations provided a
forum for these people to express their largely legitimate criticisms against the hippie
counterculture (Farber, 1994, p. 301).

Not only did the counterculture fail to address the interests of the working class and
other marginalized groups, but it was largely ineffective at achieving many of the goals it
articulated for itself. In many ways, the counterculture simply condoned and reproduced
many of the same oppressive social relations that it claimed to oppose. George Lipsitz points
out that the counterculture served the middle-class much better than the working class and people living in poverty:

Countercultural communities built on sharing surplus wealth provided important alternatives for young people stifled by the unnecessary materialism of middle-class life, but they did little to generate more material resources for desperately poor populations of inner cities and rural slums. The trusting openness and undercurrent of pacifism permeating counter cultural communities represented a significant alternative to the masculinist aggression of a society at war, but by itself the gentleness of a counterculture could not stop the systemic and unremitting use of violence in the sixties by America's police and military forces (Lipsitz, 1994, p. 223).

Members of the predominantly white and middle class counterculture failed to locate themselves in systems of oppression. As a result, social theorist Paul Breines suggests, their strategies were fundamentally flawed. They also appropriated the identities of others. For example, White radicals posed as Black hipsters, abstracting Black identities from the real life circumstances of Blacks living within institutionalized systems of racism. In doing this they also persisted in alienating themselves from their own culture and circumstance and failed to genuine locate themselves within a legitimate social critique (Breines, 1971, p. 289).

This issue of class privilege is not easily resolved. In the late 1960's theories arose suggesting that members of the counterculture were themselves victims of class oppression. Some academicians began to suggest that white collar workers had become a new working class (Oppenheimer, 1970, p. 27). Some theorists argued that as a result of automation and an increase in the knowledge industries, including teaching, social services, health care and defense, a class of people emerged who, despite their education and skill levels, were wage laborers and had little if any decision making power in the workplace. University educated youth who could have expected a high powered and well paying job in the past could only expect clerical or technical jobs in the 1960's (Aronowitz, 1971, p. 189). This loss of a sense
of control over the conditions of one's work further enhanced a sense of alienation among youth even though they still had access to the same cultural and economic resources. While they remained in the economic and cultural middle class, in terms of their relative social status they were being downclassed.

Conclusion

It was within the complex milieu of social forces that I have just described that the back-to-the-land movement began. The counterculture, with its anti-bourgeois Bohemian origins, gave a place for youth who experienced a profound sense of alienation within middle-class society, felt the meaninglessness of enormous economic progress in light of the emerging arms race, and observed the hypocrisy of U.S. government policy in the Vietnam War and the continued racism in American society. With the added threat of social downclassing and increased police violence against members of the counterculture, many of those who could, chose to opt out of society by going back-to-the-land. By living self-sufficiently, they attempted to create unalienated relationships with other people, with nature, and with work. Various socialist utopian experiments provided useful models for this project. They were able to imagine the possibility of something better than the society that they had left.

This returns us to the question of whether they were a social movement. Social movement theorist Alberto Melucci describes the role of social movements as being to script new narratives for society, much like the back-to-the-landers constructed their own alternative vision of ideal communities. Melucci says that

(h)uman beings want more than to eat, sleep, procreate and to stay alive. They are also motivated to transcend their given forms of

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65 What I mean by social downclassing is different from economic or cultural downclassing. Youth in the 1960's had greater economic and cultural possibilities available to them than people had in previous generations. However, so did an increasing number of people, meaning that their social status relative to others was in danger of diminishing.
existence. Awareness of this fact is growing in our times because metasocial principles, such as the Will of God or the Laws of History, are losing their grip on society. For the first time ever, society itself senses that it is contingent and in need of continuous reconstruction. Social movements feed upon this sense of contingency as well as reinforce it (Melucci, 1989, p. 232).

While the back-to-the-landers had emancipatory ideals, in many they were highly contradictory. Their existence came about only as a result of the capitalist structures they claimed to oppose, they only included members of the middle-class, and failed to embrace many of those who’s struggles they claimed to support. In light of the conditions in which the back-to-the-landers emerged, and the trajectory they took, were they a movement? Along with other elements of the 1960’s counterculture, they had a significant impact on society. The back-to-the-landers gave way to the environmental movement and spawned a range of mainstreamed lifestyle practices. In the next chapter I will review some of the major theories of social movement in order to shed some light on these problems.
Chapter IV
Social Movement Theories

Introduction

The answer to the question of whether the back-to-the-landers were a social movement has several different implications. One implication is to valorize a struggle that in many ways was about a segment of the population wanting to maintain its class position amidst rapid social and economic changes. Another implication is to risk ignoring the spaces through which social change can occur, as well as the cultural significance of the back-to-the-landers. In this chapter I look at several dominant trends in existing social movement theories, including theories of collective behavior, resource mobilization theory, and new social movement theory. I then consider their applicability to the theorization of the back-to-the-land phenomena. The greatest emphasis in this chapter is on New Social Movement theory as I believe it is the most useful framework for making sense of the back-to-the-land phenomenon. However, I indicate that this approach also has limits, and argue for a cultural studies analysis, which I describe in chapter five.

General Definitions of Social Movements

Social movement theorist Eduardo Canel defines social movements in ambiguous terms as a set of beliefs and attitudes amongst a population that suggest changing society in some way (Canel, 1992, p. 44). Alberto Melucci describes social movements as “submerged networks” that function as “laboratories of experience.” Within social movements “new problems and questions are posed. New answers are invented and tested, and reality is
perceived and named in different ways (Melucci, 1989, p. 208).” According to these theorists they set the conditions in place for concrete social change.

These definitions have specific parameters. Alain Touraine describes social movements as a conflict between a particular identity and a particular opponent to shift the cultural totality (Touraine, 1985, p. 760). Melucci breaks this process down into three detailed characteristics. First, it is based on a sense of collective solidarity. Second, it involves a conflict against an actor or group that wants access to the same resources, symbols, or values. Third, it breaks the limits of compatibility of a system in order to change its structure. It pushes its tolerance to a point that it is forced to accommodate the demands of the movement (Melucci, 1989, p. 29). While this describes how social movements work, Donatella Della Porta and Mario Diani describe their organizational form. For them, social movements are decentralized, segmented, policephalous (having multiple leaders with limited power), reticular (having multiple connections between segments), loosely structured networks for collective conflict (Donatella and Diani, 1999, p.140). Another way in which theorists distinguish “social movements” is from more concrete “social movement organizations (SMO’s).” Canel describes SMO’s as formal structures that attempt to achieve the goals of a social movement (Canel, 1992, p. 44). SMO’s involve defined participants, established goals, and technical mechanisms (Donatella and Diani, 1999, p. 140). However, how social movements have been understood has widely differed depending on the historical period, or the theoretical approach. Hence, it is necessary to better understand the various trends in social movement theory.

Since the turn of the century in both North America and Europe, social movement theory has gone through three major theoretical phases. Up until the 1960’s conservative theories of “collective behavior” prevailed. These theories looked at how forms of social

4 I will be discussing Touraine’s work in more detail later in this chapter.
organization break down and how people are brought back together into different social relations (Gusfield, 1994, p. 65). The emphasis in this approach is on the behavior of the individual and how they come to a new understanding of a situation (Gusfield, 1994, p. 61). Collective behaviorists included Herbert Blumer, Ernest Burgess, Robert Park, Ralph Turner and Lewis Killam. In the 1960’s Resource Mobilization Theory (RMT) entered sociological discourse, looking more closely at the organizational means by which social movements operate to affect change in society. Resource Mobilization theorists included Doug McAdam, John McCarthy and Mayer Zald who looked at the organizational dynamics of social movements and argued for their professionalization (Canel, 1992, p. 51). Anthony Oberschall, who looked at access to political resources and the formation of group solidarity within social movements, also influenced the development of RMT. Since the 1960’s, New Social Movement Theory (NSMT), defined by theorists including Touraine, Habermas and Melucci was developed to better account for the transition to post-scarcity economies in the Western world, and the rise of the cultural and information industries which have had a profound impact on how society is organized and how social movements can affect social change.

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67 Please note that there are many absences in this list of social movement theorists. I will be discussing other people’s work later in this chapter, particularly texts by new social Movement theorists. What I represent here is only part of an enormous and diverse body of research that I have hardly begun to describe.
Theoretical Trends Before the 1960’s

According to the European social movement theorists Donatella Della Porta and Mario Diani notions of collective behavior were developed early in the early 20th century to understand collective social phenomena. These approaches looked at technology, communication, and the decline of tradition and gauged their affect on society. Within this theoretical tradition, social movements were considered a collective response to transformations in the social, political, and economic spheres of society (Donatella and Diani, 1999, p. 5). As such, this approach was primarily interactionist and functionalist, lumping together unexpected dynamics of social change, such as mass panics, crowds, fashions, and organized political movements (Donatella and Diani, 1991, p. 7). They denied the agency of social actors, regarding them as only responding to social conditions. Such theories made forces of social disequilibrium the object of analysis while later theories of social movements made the movements themselves the object of analysis (Canel, 1992, p. 24). While it aimed at being descriptive, theorists of this approach tended to make normative judgments by describing social behavior as “deviant” responses to social conditions. In the 1970’s however, a new approach called Resource Mobilization Theory (RMT) replaced the more conservative theories of collective action that had framed previous studies of social movements.

Resource Mobilization Theory (RMT)

RMT moved to the forefront in the field of sociology, emphasizing a structural approach to social conflict based on systems analysis that more closely linked social struggle with changes in industrial society (Melucci, 1989, p. 21). Extremely functionalist, RMT attempts to explain how resources are mobilized for collective action (Donatella and Diani, 1999, p. 7). Unlike the work of previous theorists, Resource Mobilization theorists regarded
social actors as making rational choices and explored the utilitarian means through which they attempted to actualize their goals (Donatella and Diani, 1999, p. 9). Through RMT, the success of a movement is judged by its ability to attain political credibility and garner resources. Typically, social change occurs as a result of the actions of formal organizations (Cohen, 1985, p. 675). As such, RMT tends to focus more on social movement organizations, rather than on individual actors, and gauges success on instrumental criteria.

While it is still in broad usage, RMT is widely criticized. Alberto Melucci notes that it is predominantly an American phenomenon that has drawn largely from organizational theory to create an approach to social movements that is only marginally less conservative than its predecessor. Melucci describes it as an “ersatz radicalism” that is more illusory than real (Melucci, 1989, p. 196). Canel argues that RMT does not distinguish between social movements and more traditional groups of collective actors when in fact social movements actors are unique from other collectivities in that their members lack access to institutionalized political processes (Canel, 1992, p. 47-48). RMT and previous theories of collective action had been strongly based on rigid models of class structure. Influenced by traditional Marxism, such theorists constructed movements as very homogeneous and as holding a strong collective strategy (Donatella and Diani, 1999, p. 11). They continued to use the model of a unified working class struggling against capitalist owners when such a model was no longer entirely applicable. Canel further critiques RMT for its failure to address the symbolic dimensions of social movements. The processes of identity formation are ignored in an over-emphasis on strategy. However, these questions have begun to be addressed through New Social Movement Theory.

New Social Movement Theory (NSMT)

New Social Movement Theory emerged to account for broad social, political, and
economic changes that have emerged as part of the transition to post industrial society. With the transition to a post-industrial economy, class distinctions had become much more ambiguous and complex, and it became much harder to differentiate how people related to the means of production of society. Regardless of their income, most people in the Western world who are involved in social movements have access to many of the same goods and services (though not to the same quantity or ease of access) and a burgeoning middle class has allegiances to both the working class and the ruling class (though arguably more to the later). In North America, appeals by traditional Marxists for the working class to rise up and seize the means of production had long fallen on deaf ears with the supposed “working class.” Existing theory had not begun to reflect the changes in the context that it attempted to analyze.

New social movement theorists such as Alain Touraine argued that new social categories would replace the previous industrial classes in the struggle for control over and self-production of society and the shaping of historical trajectories (Donatella and Diani, 1999, p. 12). While many contemporary movements are “new social movements,” NSM is a theoretical approach that can be used to analyze many different forms of collective social phenomena. However, it is necessary to regard social movement theory as a collection of politically defined analytical approaches that organizes social phenomena into normative categories, rather than a set of empirical descriptors. While Melucci argues that NSMT should be used to analyze social movements that are not “new,” it appropriately describes many of the identity based social movements that have emerged as a result of the transition to postscarcity society dominated by transnational capital.8

8 Melucci notes that American theorists tend to define any kind of political action outside of existing institutional structures as being a social movement while European theorists are more cautious in defining social movements (Melucci, 1989, p. 24).
Material Needs and Control over Meaning

New Social Movement theorists emphasize that we have moved from a culture in which we are free from needs to a post-material culture in which we experience a “freedom of needs” where we face choice instead of necessity. Postmodern cultural theorists, including Michel Foucault, who have strongly influenced the work of NSM theorists, point out that contemporary society is organized by the unification of cultural codes and behavior (Melucci, 1989, p. 48). Similarly, the critical social theorist Jurgen Habermas argues that contemporary societies are incredibly complex and highly differentiated systems that depend strongly on the notion of individuality and require close integration of the individual and the social systems and institutions that surround them to control motives for human action. Within the market, the workplace, behavioral norms such as heterosexuality, or in performing our respective gender roles we participate in acts that are socially regulated (Donatella and Diani, 1999, p. 13). New social movements attempt to transform this process, often by opposing the intrusion of the state and the market or other institutions into social life, to reclaim individual identities, and to maintain people’s rights against manipulation by social systems.

What is most crucial about NSMT -- what differentiates it from previous theories -- is that it sees contestations of meaning as central to social conflicts, not struggles over material rights. It is critical to note that as far as many people are concerned we do not exist in a post-scarcity era. There are at least a half a dozen homeless people living with a block of the institute in which I write this thesis, and millions of people in both the First and the Third World are not able to meet their basic needs. While we do live in a “post-scarcity” area, we face the enormous problem that wealth is not distributed equitably.

As an example, the gay rights movement struggles against the institutionalization of heterosexuality through income tax regulations or same sex partner health benefits as a social norm and the consequent denial of rights to queers.

Other theorists, such as Antonio Gramsci who lived in the late 19th century and the first part of the 20th century, wrote about about struggles over meaning as being central to social conflict long before NSMT was developed. See Gramsci, A. (1971). Selections from the Prison Notebooks, trans. Q. Hoare and G.N. Smith. London: Lawrence and Wishart. Indeed, his concept of hegemony and how it embodies a dual process of coercion and consent has greatly influenced my own analysis. I would argue that NSMT crystallized much preexisting social and political theory into a specific theoretical focus on the ideological dimensions of social movements.
Melucci argues that

The cultural dimension of needs supersedes their material determination and opens up new unexplored territory: human needs are viewed as cultural creations, while recognition is given to desires which are not imposed by 'nature' and, hence, can be experienced as freely chosen and mutually accepted (Melucci, 1989, p. 177).

The right to meaning is replacing the right to material betterment as the object of analysis in social movement theory, according to many new social movement theorists. However, I think that it is important not to retreat into cultural relativism. While many social movements continue to be about access to material resources, actors are becoming increasingly concerned with gaining control over the production of symbols and meaning as part of the material improvement of their lives. New social movements are also concerned with defining their historicity, which Touraine defines as the ability of a society to reshape cultural models that determine our relationship with our surroundings. Access to, and control over systems of meaning allows social movement actors to convert ethical, cognitive and economic models into new forms of social organization (Touraine, 1985, p. 778).

New social movements aim to have an effect on the social totality by expressing themselves as symbols to the rest of society (Melucci, 1989, p. 5). How social movement actors construct their social and cultural identities is most important (this will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter). By finding and making spaces to deploy alternative symbols and representations they attempt to shift existing systems of meaning. While new social movement theory generally pertains to the cultural and ideological dimensions of collective action, it attempts to understand how temporary and informal public spaces such as institutes, task forces, committees or publications are created to organize around particular

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Cultural capital, such as education and other forms of knowledge can be readily translated into economic resources, and vice versa. However, this dialectic is much more complex. I will discuss this in greater detail in chapter five.
issues (Melucci, 1989, p. 8). Unlike previous theories of collective action which focused on universal plans and long term goals, NSMT emphasizes the temporary and de-centred nature of contemporary social struggles.

However, while NSMT takes up aspects of social movements that earlier theoretical approaches neglect, it does not embrace many of the critiques made by these other theories. Eduardo Canel criticizes NSMT for not adequately accounting for the conditions that give rise to social movements and their formalized organizational strategies (Canel, 1992, p. 35). He also critiques NSMT for over-relying on oppositions between the state, the market, and civil society and for not sufficiently explaining institutional political mechanisms as vehicles for change (Canel, 1992, p. 37). He also critiques NSM’s for ignoring existing institutionalized mechanisms for social change and failing to recognize any continuity between RMT and NSMT (Canel, 1992, p. 27). Henri Lustiger-Thaler also argues that NSM’s reproduce many of the problems that have become particularly pernicious in post industrial society. The emphasis on diverse and fragmented identities in NSMT, he argues, reproduces the same alienated subjects that NSM’s are supposed to counteract and impedes the development of a unified movement. “Identity issues, within the NSM theories,” according to Lustiger-Thaler, “mirror the vocabulary of the unmoored subject” (Lustiger-Thaler, 1992, p. 179). While I can appreciate arguments for more unified social movements, this often means more marginal groups subsuming themselves under the agenda of another more dominant group. Being able to articulate our different social, economic, and cultural experiences is a crucial part of negotiating for social equity. In being attentive to identity differences, I believe that NSMT more closely reflects the workings of contemporary social movements.

Each of these three approaches address different dimensions of social movements.
While this thesis is most heavily inspired by New Social Movement Theory, it is important to also consider the insights offered by other theoretical perspectives. The structural approaches to social movements that dominated studies of collective action up until the 1960’s help explain the role of social movements in the functioning of the rest of society. This approach, which includes forms of political exchange theory, also gauges the effectiveness of social movements within political systems. However, it centres the norms of dominant political structures and defines the success of movements by their ability to access these institutions. Summarized by Melucci, RMT helps us to understand the strategic functioning of social movements. In other words, RMT addresses the “how” of social movements. NSMT on the other hand, according to Melucci, in considering the cultural and ideological dimension of social movements, addresses the “why” of social movements (Melucci, 1989, p. 3).

Social Movements and the End of Revolutions

In recent decades, definitions of what constitutes a social movement have been modified considerably to acknowledge the entry of certain parts of the world into postmodernity and have been expanded to include newly recognized processes of social change. In talking about our entry into postmodernity, I am specifically referring to the development of economic and cultural systems based on consumption, rather than on production, and the expanded role of systems of representation in determining economic relations (inverting the Marxist dialectic of base and superstructure in which the productive forces of society shaped the more abstract realms of ideas and culture). The old model of industrial conflict that envisioned collective actors working in unity on the stage of history, while still used by many ardent adherents to classical theories of revolutionary class struggle,
has shown itself to be limited in its applicability to contemporary social movements (Melucci, 1989, p. 19). More recent social movement theories acknowledge that there exists an enormous diversity of overlapping and conflicting struggles, and that people participate in social change as individual actors operating within particular social contexts, not just as unified masses. The trend has been towards theorizing the existence of a multiplicity of social movements as opposed to one revolutionary social movement.

Theorists such as Alberto Melucci, express discomfort with the use of the term “social movement” for its association with universal plans and totalitarian regimes (Melucci, 1989, p. 189). Alain Touraine argues specifically against the idea of revolution because it often leads to the same exclusion that social movements are intended to oppose. Revolution, according to Touraine, is a modernist ideal, drawn from rationality and universalism and based on enlightenment philosophy, including Descarte’s idea of “tabula rasa,” which involves destroying one’s past and traditions. “Social revolution is a contradiction in terms,” Touraine writes, “for the essence of revolution is that it imposes total power so that no part of society can be defined outside of its relations of sociality, domination, specialization or negotiation” (Touraine, 1990, p. 125). In denying particularism, theories of social revolution centre universalist ideals of natural progress, the nation, and destroying the old order (Touraine, 1990, p. 121-122). Fortunately, Melucci, Touraine, and other New Social Movement theorists have developed analytical strategies that move us away from theorizing the kinds of universal strategies that have led to enormous human suffering under the good intentions of human emancipation. More recent definitions of social movements also allow for a greater acknowledgement of the subtleties of their operation, and the range of ways that they express themselves. We have seen a distinct shift in social movement theory from universalism to recognition of multiplicity. One solution may not be the solution for everyone
and it is necessary to have spaces in which we can negotiate these kinds of differences and ensure equitable representation and participation.

The Politics of Representation in Everyday Life

Previous theories of social change, as I have previously indicated, were based on fairly uniform class identities. In the industrial period, a small capitalist class that was thoroughly integrated through overlapping family and economic relations maintained control over communications and economic production. The working class, by being members of a collective labour force formed a distinct and separate entity (Donatella and Diani, 1999, p. 29). Because workers shared the same tasks, experienced little if any labour mobility, and because industries had limited access to external labour markets, they were able to form a unified identity as workers and act collectively and effectively through the creation of unions and organized protests (Donatella and Diani, p. 30). Since the decline of industrialism there has been a rise in low-paid positions in the productive sector, such as marketing, advertising, and other information related jobs. In addition, we have seen the emergence of what Donatella and Diani call the "new middle class," which they define as professional workers who work in health, education, and other public services but do not command the same incomes or prestige as doctors and lawyers, who in the past have been identified with the middle class (Donatella and Diani, 30). The traditional industrial working class of North America and Europe has in large part been fragmented and relocated, often to the Third World. Eliminating the industrial working class in the First World did not erase poverty, rather it displaced poverty onto the unemployed, women, communities of color, and the working poor.

Access to essentials such as food, clothing, shelter and freedom from violence and oppression is sharply curtailed by our access to the cultural and economic resources that
enable us to participate in the systems of meaning that in turn help ensure our material survival. For example, a post-secondary liberal arts education give us the cultural resources and the social prestige to be able to network to find a job and communicate our employability to our future employers. However, while someone without even a high school education may be able to meet the practical requirement for that job they may not have the connections or have access to the meaning systems that would help them to land the job, much less meet the screening requirements. Generally, being white, male, middle-class and heterosexual gives us full membership in society. However, if we are a person of color, differently abled, female, gay, lesbian, or transgendered our access to participation in society is severely curtailed by how we perceive ourselves and by how other people perceive us. These socially conditioned ways of seeing are among the ways through which wealth and power are regulated and society is organized so that people have differential access based on their race, class, ability, sexuality, or gender.

Hence, identity becomes integral to how society is organized, and how social conflict occurs. With postmodernity we have seen the formation of new collective identities. Those who have been marginalized have often tried to imbue the signifiers of their oppression -- skin color for example -- with alternative meanings to connotate more politically transformative qualities, as did Black men during the Harlem renaissance. Collective identities, which have come to play a greater role in transformative politics since the emergence of identity politics in the 1960's, have become much more multiple and complex. The emergent heterogeneity of postmodern society has required a radical alteration of theories of social movements and collective action.

The links between identity and action are best described by Melucci, who uses the term hesitantly. "Identity," he points out, implies a certain degree of permanence. What we
are interested in however, is the link between the individual and the larger social structure vis a vis individual and collective action. Melucci uses identity strictly as a analytical tool. According to Melucci, the concept of identity includes three assumptions; First, identity presupposes self-reflectivity and the recognition of symbolic meaning. Second, it presupposes that actors are able to understand the results of their action and determine how they should act. And third, identity presupposes that actors are able to relate present actions with past and future actions, achieve temporal consistency in their behavior, and strategize political effectiveness (Melucci, 1995, p. 46-47). However, to participate in collective action, individual identities must be linked to collective identities. Donatella and Diani account for this link:

A collective actor cannot exist without reference to experiences, symbols and myths which can form the basis of its individuality. At the same time, however, symbolic production cannot count solely on self-legitimacy. It is necessary for certain representations of self to find recognition in the image which other actors have of the subject. In other words, the definition which the group has produced of itself must be taken account of by other actors when they elaborate their own world view (Donatella and Diani, 1999, p. 93).

The shift from previous theories that emphasized the creation of institutional mechanisms for social change to an emphasis on individual subjectivity and negotiation between divergent collective identities has opened new spaces for social transformation. It has allowed for an acknowledgement of the possibility of pushing for social change through our everyday actions, behaviors, as well as through how we represent ourselves and respond to others. By understanding everyday life as the terrain of political negotiation, culture becomes a site of moral choice. Through naming things we bring them into existence (Melucci, 1995, p. 296). Lifestyle and identity becomes the ground on which new forms of culture battle for legitimacy, and the space in which rights are defended and traditions are maintained (Donatella and Diani, 1999, p. 41).
Growing differentiation in lifestyles represents another source of 'problematization' of social identities. In a world in which class allegiances seem fragmented and political and religious ideologies are in crisis, cultural consumption, use of one's free time, ways of organizing one's emotional life, eating habits, or styles of clothing can all represent a potent factor for diversification and, in the last analysis, of stratification, among social groups (Donatella and Diani, 1999, p. 41).

The relation between the individual and the collectivity is a challenging one during a phase in history where identities have become increasingly fragmented and this fragmentation has been identified as a source of conflict and human alienation. Becoming individuals was one of the major cultural projects of modernity. Now, as one of the projects of postmodernity we face the realization that we are profoundly interconnected. We are both individuals and collectives, existing within complex social systems and networks (Melucci, 1995, p. 293). Relationships are decreasingly defined by biology, need, or historical forces (Melucci, 1995, p. 295). As citizens of the Western world at this particular time, many of us are confronted with enormous choice. Yet meaning is shaped by how we respond to choice and what we produce and share with others (Melucci, 1995, p. 294). Melucci links individual and collective identities in arguing that the "global planet" is the "internal planet." For Melucci, this involves an ecology of economics, politics and technology that embraces the technologies of everyday life -- language, form, gestures, and meaning (Melucci, 1995, p. 298).

Central to this discussion is how social movement theory has facilitated the creation of different collective identities and different ways of accessing cultural capital. The idea of people as being deviant or harmful that prevailed in earlier theories of collective action denies social actors rational agency. Studies of social movements must reveal the rational nature of human action, as it is experienced by its actors. One of the contributions of New Social Movement Theory has been its emphasis on the construction of collective identities and the

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"This certainly is not the case for all of us. However, it is what gives us the power to affect change."
role of symbolic representation in enabling actors to appropriate and construct meaning in order to act both as autonomous subjects and as collective agents (Donatella and Diani, 1999, p. 92). Through defining our own historicity we create our own myths, which are then internalized as social "truths." As social movement theorist Eric Hobsbawm writes, tradition is 'invented' and particular identities become defined as "natural" with authentic origins that have merely been rediscovered (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983 and Donatella and Diani, 1999, p. 93). This collective myth making process has had a profound affect on human action.

The influence of representation on action is considered through cognitive approaches to social movements which consider culture as including a range of skills, habits, and styles. According to Donatella and Diani

...culture provides the cognitive apparatus which people need to orient themselves in the world. This apparatus consists of a multiplicity of cultural and ideational elements which include beliefs, ceremonies, artistic forms and informal practices such as language, conversation, stories, daily rituals (Donatella and Diani, 1999, p. 68).

Donatella and Diani as well as Melucci emphasize the shifting of the symbolic codes that organize our lives as a crucial part of the functioning of new social movements. Melucci states that "(i)t is not possible to imagine a livable future without some kind of concise intervention and appropriation of social relationships, symbolic systems, the dissemination of information" (Melucci, 1995, p. 288-289). However, access to cultural capital is necessary to facilitate this kind of cultural intervention, whether it be through the strategic appropriation of images and cultural symbols or access to mediums of mass communication. A critical dimension of social movements is the context that shapes their emergence. At different points

An example of a strategic opportunity to appropriate cultural meaning by the gay and lesbian movements occurred in early February 1999 when Christian fundamentalist Jerry Falwell urged parents to not buy their children Teletubby toys because the main character, the cartoon character Tinky Winky displays gay characteristics (he carries a purse and is effeminate) and contradicts Christian family values. Since then, this figure has been used as a popular cultural icon to further the cause of gay rights ("Tinky Winky Gay: Falwell." Globe and Mail, Weds, Feb 19, 1999, p. A14).
in history there are varying kinds of conditions that facilitate social conflict and varying degrees of political opportunity. Effective social movements recognize and take advantage of these critical opportunities.

The Back-to-the-Landers and Social Movement Theory

The back-to-the-land phenomena cannot be isolated from the other political, culture and social movements and phenomena that surrounded it. It is necessary to locate it within the counterculture that preceded and surrounded it, including the political movements and cultural identities of the 1960’s. Also, it is necessary to consider the back-to-the-landers in relationship to the environmental movement and other practices that emerged from the same historical trajectory. Recent advances in social movement theory emerged largely to explain various aspects of these and other phenomena. While there has been a great deal of attention given to the womens’ and civil rights movements, the rise of identity politics, and the environmental movement, the back-to-the-landers are largely ignored in rigorous studies of social movements.

The strategies of activists in the 1960’s strongly shaped the ideas that underpinned the back-to-the-land movement. They drew largely from theorists including Herbert Marcuse and Eric Fromm who emphasized the cultural and aesthetic dimensions of social change. They advocated values that emphasized the realization of distinctly human qualities and forms of expression that they believed had been denied as a result of bureaucratization, mechanization, and rationalism that had become prevalent in modern society. Peter Dickens argues that they used aesthetics, culture and spirituality as means of recovery from alienation (Dickens, 1996, p. 155). However, they tended to take up these practices uncritically, not recognizing all those who were absent from their struggles. John Robert Howard points out that their vision of justice lacked an awareness of social difference and their own role in systems of
oppression.

The hippies assumed that voluntarism (every man [sic] doing his thing) was compatible with satisfying essential group and individual needs and with the maintenance of a social system in which there was an absence of power differentials and invidious distinctions based on, for example, wealth, sex, or race. That assumption is open to question. Voluntarism can work only where the participants in a social system have a sufficient understanding of the needs of the system to be willing to do things which they do not want to do in order for the system to persist (Howard, 1969, p. 249).

Without an understanding of the social system, reproducing many of the power structures that they had opposed became inevitable. The contradictions of the counterculture were manifest in both its ideology and its practices. Paul Breines suggests that activists largely misread theorists who did not see culture and aesthetics as expressly the vehicles for revolution, but as part of a pre-revolutionary movement that advanced a vision of enlightenment and freedom that was a necessary prerequisite for political struggle (Breines, 1971, p. 282). While there were specific movements that are identified with the 1960’s, including the civil rights movement, the women’s liberation movement (although this was more notable in the 1970’s), and the Black Power movement, the political counterculture that surrounded these different struggles is not in its totality a social movement. The activities that were identified with the counterculture -- encounter groups, folk music festivals, reading Mao, experimenting with drugs and creatively expressing disenchantment with the banality of the middle-class -- were an important part of what Hobsbawm calls a “pre-political movement” (Hobsbawm, 1959, p. 2). The 1960’s counterculture provided a space for groups and individuals to shape the ideas, values and cultural symbols and practices that underlay a political struggle. From this highly experimental era specific movements emerged and particular practices became adopted by mainstream society.

There are two factors which led to the disappearance of the radical politics of the
1960’s from the public consciousness. One is that the market proved itself successful at co-opting the expressive forms of the counterculture and the state found (often violent) ways of silencing the radical dimensions of the counterculture. Additionally, people’s desire for radical transformation could be easily thwarted by the strengthening of civil society and by providing for various needs through the market so that people did not have to establish alternative societies, or demand more radical forms of social change (Melucci, 1989, p. 210). By either accepting certain cultural aspects of the counterculture, or repressing actors who made more political demands, the state and the market forced people into either a relatively depoliticized lifestyle practice, such as back-to-the-land homesteading, into becoming active in other emergent political issues such as environmentalism, or becoming part of mainstream society.

The back-to-the-landers were an outgrowth of the 1960’s counterculture. However, were they a social movements in themselves? Within the most general definitions of social movements, which recognizes any collective phenomena that suggests changing society in some way, the back-to-the-landers are a social movement. However, we can dismiss this definition because it could embrace any form of social change, including efforts by manufacturers to dissolve trade barriers, or right-wing and fascists organizations that seek the exclusion of particular groups from participation in society. For a social movement to be emancipatory it must attempt to effect structural change to allow marginal groups equal participation in society. Within Melucci’s three descriptors of social movements -- a collective identity, a basis in conflict, and an intent to create structural change -- the back-to-the-landers are ambiguously situated. The back-to-the-landers had a strong collective identity based on shared values and meaning. The values and meaning they shared, while they included a common vision of an alternative society based on principles of self-sufficiency and human
equality, were largely those associated with their middle class status which is not a marginal identity. The conflict they engaged was not a direct one involving continual confrontation with opposing social actors, but an imaginary conflict against the urban industrial society they left. They also did not struggle against a dominant social and political institutions in order to change their structure, but instead attempted to create alternative models that they hoped others would adopt. While they expressed a principled stance against racism, police violence, the nine-to-five work mantra, the power of the nation state to commit genocide against another people, and the treatment of nature as a resource to be exploited and degraded, by retreating from society they did not involve themselves in an active struggle against these conditions. Both within classical marxian theories of revolutionary change, which have been challenged by theorists including Touraine and Melucci, and within neo-marxist theories of social change, the back-to-the-landers were not a social movement. They were not economically subordinated and going back-to-land was not a way of securing material rights that had been denied to them. Their politics was one of negation. If they had a model of how to affect social change, it was to change society by example.

The dominant theories of social movements have varying degrees of usefulness in application to the back-to-the-landers. Following the conservative tradition of collective behavior discussed earlier in this chapter, the back-to-the-landers could be understood as a result of a disequilibrium between the values of youth and the values of the dominant culture. Some theorists, including Herbert Blumer (of the collective behavior approach to social movements), would look at the organizational dimensions of the back-to-the-landers to understand them as a social movement. Blumer defines organizational evolution as beginning with a period of agitation or ‘social ferment,’ then a period of more focused effort or ‘popular excitement,’ followed by ‘formalization’ where identities and cultural practices are
established, and finally 'institutionalization' when a movement becomes part of the larger society and roles become professionalized (Donatella and Diani, 1998, p. 147). The back-to-the-landers easily fit along the different stages of this continuum. The involvement of actors in the social ferment of the 1960’s, and in various social experiments, such as communes, mirrors the first stage of social movement organization as described by Blumer. The second stage describes the process of independent couples and families becoming formalized as the primary units of the back-to-the-land phenomena, with a set of specific practices including self-sufficient farming, the use of health foods and alternative health care, and crafts production. With time this evolved into the third stage of professionalization, when many of these practices began to be taken up by the surrounding society and other practices, such as certain facets of alternative health care, became professionalized.

Using Resource Mobilization Theory, we could look at how they collectively organized to press for social reform, and created social institutions to meet their needs. In his report on his research in Cape Breton, Michael Taft writes about the organizations through which people who migrated to Cape Breton sought to further their goals of self-sufficiency, such as crafts guilds, farm marketing associations, publications and environmental groups (Taft, 1988, p. 42). Such organizations were crucial in mobilizing the collective resources that were necessary to sustain the back-to-the-land lifestyle and help people to put their values into actual practice. If we could call the back-to-the-landers a social movement, these would be social movement organizations according to Resource Mobilization Theory.

Within New Social Movement Theory, which focuses most closely on contestations of meaning and the creation of alternative symbolic systems to guide structural changes in society, the back-to-the-landers stand in opposition to the meaning systems that they had escaped. They actively sought a counter identity rooted in the practices of simple self-
sufficient living in a particular place. However, this did not actively conflict with the meaning systems they sought to oppose, except to the extent to which they were represented by other members of rural communities. While they eschewed certain values associated with middle class culture, such as economic progress, the nine-to-five workday, and consumption, they embraced other aspects of urban middle-class culture such as romantic visions of nature and physical labour, and the idea of social progress. While they sought changes in certain aspects of dominant systems of cultural meaning, they sought to maintain particular aspects of their middle-class privilege.

Whether we can consider the back-to-the-landers as a social movement or not, they did function like Melucci’s idea of submerged networks of experimentation, or Hobsbawm’s idea of pre-formative movements, in that they gave way to other movements such as environmentalism, the women’s movement, and the new-age movement. In elaborating on social movements as process, Melucci reminds us that they undergo periods of visibility and latency, alternating between periods of political negotiation and defining codes, shaping identities and building internal solidarity (Donatella and Diani, 1999, p. 161). While back-to-the-landers are part of the process of social movement formation, it would be imprudent to describe them as a social movement.

**Beyond Back-to-the-Land -- Subsequent Phenomena**

The back-to-the-land phenomena needs to be considered in light of other social

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*The women's movement was one of the most effective social movements to emerge from the 1960's counterculture. However, it was in large part a response to the patriarchal nature of the counterculture itself. Many women also responded to similar aspects of back-to-the-land ideology by becoming active in the women's movement. As another aside, it is in my opinion extremely debatable how politicized the environmental movement and the new age movement actually are. Subject to the same criteria to which I am subjecting the back-to-the-land movement, I believe that I would come up with similar conclusions as I do with the back-to-the-landers. I think that these phenomena also have some very conservative dimensions. However, this is not the subject of this thesis so I will not digress any further.
movements and phenomena that back-to-the-landers were active in and which emerged out of
the back-to-the-land experience. A central aspect of Jeffrey Jacob’s research is his findings
about people’s involvement in environmental issues. Arising from their need to protect the
landscapes and ecosystems they lived in, many became active in fighting against the spraying
of pesticides, or over-logging (Jacob, 1996, May, 1982). Concerned about issues broader than
their immediate environments, many people became intense advocates of sustainable energy
(Jacob and Brinkerhoff, 1986). Similarly, many people who had been back-to-the-landers
became involved in alternative health movements, or communities that embraced alternative
therapies or forms of spirituality (Holm, 1998). Following from the analyses of RMT and
NSMT, we can understand these different phenomena as mutually constituting, as part of a
complex network of symbolic meaning making processes, mobilization of resources and
concrete social actions. While the back-to-the-landers themselves were a “pre-formative”
movement, many of the same people worked towards social change through their involvement
in other social struggles, many of which may be considered as social movements.

Another aspect of the back-to-the-land phenomena that throws its current status as a
social movement into question is that it has become increasingly mainstreamed. This is
evident in popular magazines such as Harrowsmith. My mother stopped subscribing to
Harrowsmith by the mid 1980’s. It began to cater increasingly to an audience that was more
concerned with how to decorate their expensive country-homes than to those who were
interested in producing their own food. At about this time it changed names, becoming
Harrowsmith Country Life and was taken over by a large American corporation. While it lost
many of its earlier readers, their readership survey in 1990 can give us some indication of
what happened to some of them.

Most had been through enormous changes -- some had moved back to urban areas, a
sparse few continued much as they had been living twenty years ago, but most found some way of sustaining some aspects of their original lifestyle. Elizabeth and Charles reflect on their experience of living on the land and suggest that it wasn’t as easy as they had anticipated.

You know all about the sunsets and the hummingbirds, about drinking great draughts of sap in spring, moonlight skiing, open fires and the taste of food taken ripe from the vine. The reality of that is even sweeter than the dreaming of it, but there are worms in the apples, as well as prickly ash, poison ivy and the sheer perversity of nature. Some of us were beaten by the unexpected drudgery, others by the different aspirations of growing children, by the economics of self-sufficiency or by the Byzantine diplomacy of surviving in rural society.... It wasn’t quite the way we had dreamed it when we took off for life on the land (Long, 1990, p. 28).

For many people, such as the Longs, living on the land wasn’t quite what they expected. There were other factors that people had to adapt to. Women were thrust into very traditional gender roles, often housebound with children and in many instances animals to care for by themselves. Many couples didn’t have the skills for self-sufficient living, and as children grew older they brought increased financial demands as well as the need to be close to schools. Many also began to desire greater amenities and access to cultural resources (Holm, 1997 & Lawrence, 1990). For many, these realizations led to a significant modification of their lifestyles.

This trend towards the mainstreaming of the back-to-the-land phenomenon is corroborated by Jacob.\footnote{Another indication of mainstreaming is provided by Rebecca Gould. She says that Martha Stuart’s decision to buy a house in Connecticut was inspired by the Nearing’s and that Stuart has begun advocating self-reliance to her readers (Gould, 1997, p. 407).} He found that relatively few of the back-to-the-landers he interviewed were still pursuing their lifestyle on a full time basis in the mid-1980’s and mid-1990’s when he did his research. From his survey data he typologized them into several categories. 44% were “weekenders,” meaning that they were employed full time elsewhere,
but live in a rural area, and attend to property and lifestyle in free time. 18% were retired and living on pensions and 17% were what he called “country romantics” who were employed part-time or seasonally and spent the rest of their time devoted to work, leisure or recreation on their properties. Only 22% pursued their lifestyle on a vocational basis. Of these 15% were “country entrepreneurs” who made their living through small businesses, such as crafts or publications. 3% were what he called “purists,” meaning that they live a subsistence lifestyle, supplemented through bartering and a few cash crops. An additional 2% were micro farmers who produced high value crops for the market and 1% were apprentices who were learning skills for self-sufficient living on someone else's property. People who wrote to Harrowsmith Country Life saying what changes they had experienced in their lives indicated that many went back to school, began careers or sought other employment. By working part-time as substitute teachers, carpenters, planners, writers, nurses, or artisans or by running home businesses some were able to remain in rural communities and maintain their homesteads, gardens, and farms (Lawrence, 1990). However, a great many pursued careers that early back-to-the-landers would have shunned. The editors of Harrowsmith Country Life also note that eighty percent of their readers now hold managerial or professional positions (Lawrence, 1990, p. 11).

Over the more than twenty-five year history of the back-to-the-land phenomenon, participants began to take up more mainstream practices, such as careers and public schooling for their children, and the surrounding society began to embrace interests, such as country living and natural health, that were central to the back-to-the-land vision. Back-to-the-

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97 I think that many of these people who remain on their homesteads cited in the 1990 Harrowsmith Country Life anthology were used as best examples. The statistics on their readership that I have cited suggest that a great majority of their readers have careers apart from their (current or former) homesteading practice.

98 Some would say more than one-hundred year history, but in this thesis I am only looking at communities that have been around since the late 1960's and 1970's.
landers also helped facilitate the emergence of new movements, such as environmentalism. The back-to-the-landers were part of a transformative social dynamic that impacted the broader society and which lead to the emergence of new social forms and meaning. While there was a structural dynamic at work within and between the back-to-the-land phenomena and the rest of society that is well explained by social movement theory, the politics of the back-to-to-the-landers cannot be fully understood without also looking at the microprocesses and micropolitics of meaning formation within everyday cultural practice.

**From Social Movement Theory to Cultural Studies**

Social movement theory is most valuable in helping to understand the operational dynamics of a particular social phenomena, or rather, the means by which social change occurs. New Social Movement Theory, in particular, provides a macro-analysis of social conflict as occurring between systems of cultural meaning. In this chapter I have used this analysis to look at the macro politics of the back-to-the-landers as a form of collective action. However, I have not been able to explicate many of the vast contradictions of the back-to-the-landers as a social movement. While they had a liberatory social vision, they sought disengagement from society rather than actively involving themselves in trying to change the dominant power structures of society. While they had expressed outrage over civil and human rights issues, their social and cultural practices only helped sustain their own class hegemony in the rural communities they lived in. Further, the institutions they created and the practices they engaged were accessible almost exclusively to people of their own class and race. In the next chapter I bring cultural studies to bear on the specific micro-politics of the cultural meanings of the back-to-the-land lifestyle as a way of making sense of some of these contradictions that I have mentioned. However, I will first look at the idea of everyday social and cultural practices as a locus of social change that has emerged since the 1960’s. This has
been a thread in new social movement theory, and it provides a bridge between this and the next chapter.

Theorists that had inspired the 1960's counterculture, such as Marcuse, believed that radical change had to happen both in the fields of politics and of lifestyle for it to be effective (Berger, 1981, p. 201). This would protect it from co-optation, being crushed by the state, or from becoming dogmatic and authoritarian. In reading this, members of the counterculture believed that “... the troops of the revolution are not the toiling masses of the Marxian prophecy but naked children of nature dancing to the tune of primitive drums” (Berger, 1977, p. 37). However, the belief that free and spontaneous expression and direct engagement with “nature” is a direct route to human emancipation has been under-problematized.

These ideals, while they may be a reaction against capitalism and alienation, cannot be uplifted from our contemporary context. Peter Dickens, in his discussion on alienation and aesthetic experience suggests that “...humanity’s relation to the environment can itself easily become held up as a kind of omnipotent religion, a kind of court of appeal which obviates any need to turn to how societies actually work” (Dickens, 1996, p. 159). According to Melucci, social movement actors often deny the sociality of nature in trying to create a certain level of ideological orthodoxy necessary for collective mobilization:

In contemporary forms of collective mobilization, the appeal to nature, for example, is a species of symbolic mediation. At one and the same time it announces and denies this ‘form.’ In other words, it is saying that in order to resist pervasive social control we should revive a ‘pure’ nature, untouched by the human hand; but in a global system where nature is socialized this is no longer possible. Even the possibility of speaking about nature is culturally codified (Melucci, 1989, p. 48).

Back-to-the-landers evoke an essentialized nature that functions as a revolutionary and totalizing concept. However, it is necessary to deconstruct this particular cultural construct to reveal its social implications. It endangers being used as a guise under which to pursue the
exclusive interests of a particular social class. Revolution, which is based on totalizing concepts and the construction of universal ideals, is the opposite of social movement. It denies the existence of differentially constituted actors and subsumes their interests to totalitarian concepts that are viewed as transcending their interests and identities. Touraine reminds us that "(t)he revolutionary world is a world of essence, not of damage, a world of war, not of politics" (Touraine, 1990, p. 135). Touraine further states that capitalism is also a revolutionary concept, and trades in essentialism, just as back-to-the-landers were guided by an essential construct of nature.

The spirit of capitalism is not opposed to the revolutionary spirit; they belong to the same ensemble. What each is opposed to, as clearly in the one case as the other, are those reformist modes of modernization -- forms of political integration or religious fundamentalism -- which may arise within nationalist and populist regimes (Touraine, 1990, p. 127).

Marcuse argued that a cultural revolution requires original forms, not the ossified categories of dogmatic Marxism, and argued for aesthetics as central to a pre-revolutionary movement and to articulating an alternative vision of society. He suggested that we move from "Marx to Fourier... from realism to surrealism" (quoted in Breines, 1971, p. 295). It is necessary to excavate the politics of alternative culture visions. New social movements attempt to reappropriate cultural symbols and shift structures of meaning. However, how have these visions been constituted? This is what an exploration of the micro politics of the back-to-the-land culture must involve to further our understanding of its location and function within the social field.

Since the earlier theorizing of Habermas we have seen the emergence of multiple, decentred and fragmented "micro-public" spheres, many of which are created by the market (Kauffman, 1995, p. 155). The back-to-the-landers created their own countercultural "micro-sphere" as a response to the sameness of middle-class culture. However, the market has
begun to capitalize on this process of subcultural identity formation. Before this, in the 1950’s, fordist models of production emphasized sameness; prefab suburban homes, station wagons for every family, Levi jeans, wonderbread -- exactly what back-to-the-landers opposed (Kauffman, 1995, p. 155). With the emergence of postfordist models of production, corporations have begun to target specific groups, effectively going into the business of producing lifestyles. Multinationals began to market choices on the basis of identity. Kauffman cites as examples Black Ken and Barbie dolls, Ralph Lauren clothing, or Martha Stewart paint (Kauffman, 1995, p. 156-157). Lifestyle consumption based on a particular identity does not constitute a social movement, though it does help Western consumers situate increasingly dislocated identities in an unstable world. By looking the politics of representation within one particular micro-sphere, which we have determined embodies some characteristics of a social movement, but lacks other crucial ones, we can begin to understand the role of representation in the construction of countercultural identities, and its simultaneously socially transformative and culturally hegemonic implications.

What is important about social experiments such as the back-to-the-landers is that they create newness. Even if they are contradictory, and in the case of the back-to-the-landers, many people became what they set out to resist, they open up new possibilities that in turn evolve into new movements and more widely accepted cultural practices. One woman writes, in looking back at her experience, that

... we thought it possible to find a simple life. Now I figure that life is not simple anywhere, city or country. Those of us who went back to the land because we wanted to be in touch with earth are still here, if we still want to be. We’ve made adjustments with partners, incomes and expectations. The rest have moved on, properly so. Times change... The best thing we did, those who left and those who stayed, was to open up new possibilities for ourselves and for our souls and imaginations of those who didn’t come along physically (Avoiding the Rat Race, 1990, p. 18-19).
The back-to-the-landers were an attempt to integrate an alternative political practice into everyday social and cultural practices. However, this was shaped within a particular context, that included a repressive government (primarily against Blacks and countercultural youth). This context also shaped their social location and identities -- from which their ideals were formed and certain possibilities were made available to them. Now that that notion has been opened -- of the integration of radical politics into everyday cultural practices -- we can begin a to engage an analysis that looks at the links between broader social context and localized cultural practices.
Chapter V

Representation, Cultural Practice and the Transformation of Meaning

Introduction

In the previous chapter I suggested that a more specific micro-analysis of the cultural symbols and meanings that lay behind the back-to-the-landers is necessary to better understand some of the contradictions of this phenomena. In this chapter I draw upon the work of cultural theorists to better understand how social distinctions are deeply embedded in perceptions, ideas, everyday practices, and in how we represent ourselves and other people. From chapter two, we see that the Cape Breton back-to-the-landers created a rich body of texts, both visual and written. Not only do these records help us to understand the various practices that made up the back-to-the-land lifestyle, but they are also linked to larger social and historical processes through which particular social distinctions are enforced. Post-structural and postmodern social theory, which blossomed largely in the 1960's, can help us understand how cultural practice and representation are dynamically linked to ideology and social context. Through this I hope to make the fluidity of cultural meaning as it relates to the Cape Breton back-to-the-landers more apparent, and to make sense of some of the more conservative dimensions of this community. To be more explicit, my aim in this chapter is not to provide conclusive evidence on the relationship between culture and social difference within the Cape Breton back-to-the-land community. Rather, it is to describe a framework that would allow a better understanding of these relationships, and to raise some critical questions for further exploration. First, however, it is necessary to explain postmodernism and its relevance to the back-to-the-landers.

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The Postmodern Situation

Since I am using postmodern theory, I should clarify what I mean by the term, 'postmodern.' In this thesis I use this concept in two different ways. The first is descriptive and historical. As such, postmodernism describes an emergent historical phase. The second is as a mode of social critique. In his famous essay, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," Frederic Jameson (1984) argues that we have entered an era unlike any other. Jameson uses the term descriptively to make sense of the field within which cultural production must function. By the late 1960’s, he suggests cultural form had begun to express the rejection of modernist ideals. In art, literature, philosophy and architecture the idea of the great producer and the notion of an essential truth that underlays appearances began to wane (Jameson, 1984, p. 53). He argues that with this turn, the meaning of cultural artifacts had been “flattened” and denied of any affect -- that consumers had come to desire “...a world transformed into sheer images of itself and for pseudo-events and ‘spectacles’” (Jameson, 1984, p. 66). In this culture, he points out, “...exchange value has been generalized to the point at which the very memory of use-value is effaced....” (Jameson, 1984, p. 66). With the emergence of the postmodern, Jameson argues, the cultural has come to thoroughly infuse and determine our lives. He says that we have seen

...a prodigious expansion of culture throughout the social realm, to the point at which everything in our social life from economic value and state power to practices and to the very structures of the psyche itself can be said to have become ‘cultural’ in some original and yet untheorized sense. This perhaps startling proposition is however, substantively quite consistent with the previous diagnosis of a society of the simulacrum, and a transformation of the ‘real’ into so many pseudo-events (Jameson, 1984, p. 87).

Postmodernism describes much of contemporary Western culture. Contemporary capitalism is driven to a large extent through the exchange of appearances and spectacles. Indeed, it is
part of a Western hegemony:

...this whole global, yet American, postmodern culture is the internal and superstructural expression of a whole wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world: In this sense, as throughout class history, the underside of culture is blood, torture, death, and horror (Jameson, 1984, p. 57)

In this use of “postmodernism,” it is a particular way of describing a period in Western culture that the back-to-the-landers both reacted against and became part of. As I described in chapter three, the banal spectacle of middle-class consumer culture was abhorrent to 1960’s youth in juxtaposition to the war in Vietnam and police violence against protesters. While 60’s generation lived amidst what is now recognized as the emerging postmodern society, many theoreticians developed a critique in response to these emerging conditions.

Postmodernism emerged as a critical social theory, which I use in this thesis. The British historian, Arthur Marwick, who approaches postmodernism and poststructuralism with skepticism, writes of the emergence of some of these ideas in the 1960’s. He says “(t)here was an obsession with language, conceived, along with knowledge, as an instrument of bourgeois oppression” (Marwick, 1998, p. 19). While I agree with Marwick’s crediting this particular period with the crystallization of many of these ideas, I disagree with his off-handed dismissal of them. If used well, I believe they can help us to better understand the subtle operations of power through culture and representation.

As a theory, postmodernism helps us attenuate ourselves to how social experience is socially and historically contextualized while paying attention to the plurality of experience without falling into the trap of positivism. It provides a theory that acknowledges that feelings, relationships, and identities are contextually and historically constructed. Ben Agger points out that “(a)t some level, a universal social science is judged impossible because people’s and groups’ different subject positions cannot be measured against each other....
(Postmodern) (s)ocial science becomes an accounting of social experience from these multiple perspectives of discourse/practice, rather than a larger cumulative enterprise committed to the inference of general principles of social structure and organization" (Agger, 1991, p. 117). In this thesis, I am concerned with developing a way of understanding how the Cape Breton back-to-the-land culture is shaped by social context, cultural practices and texts, and how it transforms and reproduced particular ideological norms.

The Dialectics of Culture and Ideology

It is necessary to explore our understanding of two central concepts. First, I will look at culture as a historical construct. Secondly, I will consider ideology and its relation to cultural production. As a concept, “culture” has undergone various changes in its usage throughout history, and depending on who is using it as a heuristic tool. In this thesis I am using it in the broadest possible sense, and draw most heavily from the work of Raymond Williams, one of the founders of the field of cultural studies. I use it as defined within cultural studies as systems of symbols and processes of signification. At the same time I use it to refer to productive relations, institutional structures, values, and objects that make the world into a meaningful whole (Williams, 1976, p. 91). I use it to refer to both the abstract and concrete dimensions of what cultural theorist Dick Hebdige calls “a way of life” that has its own particular values and meaning that are produced through everyday social behavior, institutions, and practices including education and art (Hebdige, 1993, p. 358-359). The important thing about a concept of culture, as Stuart Hall points out, is that it is located within a particular group, and is concerned with the exchange of meaning between its members, or with other groups (Hall, 1997, p. 2). In the case of this research study, dimensions of the back-to-the-land culture include the ideals that underlay the back-to-the-
land vision (such as self-sufficiency and intimacy with nature) which are communicated through texts such as the magazine Harrowsmith, productive relations (such as small scale farming and crafts production), and institutions such as the nuclear family. Within this concept of culture there is a dialectical relationship between materiality and consciousness.

This relationship between materiality and consciousness has been discussed at length between Marxist and neo-Marxist thinkers. Marx is known for having inverted Hegel’s idea that our immaterial consciousness determines our material being in his model of base and superstructure. Rather, Marx suggested, the material conditions of ‘being’ shapes consciousness. Marx writes that “(t)he mode of production of material life (base) conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life (superstructure). It is not the consciousness of men (sic) that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness” (From Karl Marx (1859) A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, In Donald and Hall, 1986, p. 15). However, Louis Dupre suggests that Marx’s followers have over interpreted this and taken it to its greatest extreme to suggest that culture is merely a product of economic production (Dupre, 1983, p. 4). While many theorists have embraced, rejected, inverted, and re-righted Marx’s original model, we have seen the emergence of a dialectical understanding of culture, notably within the field of cultural studies. Textual analysis is a methodological tool that serves to prise a space between materiality and consciousness so that we can better understand how they help constitute each other. With the rise of information technologies, and post-industrial capitalism, the process by which humans are alienated from productive relations becomes more complex. Images and representations become even more critical in increasingly our relationships to the productive forces of society and other people. While the back-to-the-landers were a reaction against this form of alienation, it was from this alienated context that they obtained the ideals and cultural
models to undertake their lifestyle.

The second concept that warrants definition is that of ideology. Marx and Engels, Gramsci, Althusser, LeFebvre and Aronowitz have written on this concept at length. James and Hall, who summarize much of the work done by these theorists describe ideology as

.. the frameworks of thought which are used in society to explain, figure out, make sense of or give meaning to the social and political world.... They define a definite discursive space of meaning which provides us with perspectives on the world, with the particular orientations or frameworks within which we do our thinking. These frameworks both enable us to make sense of perplexing events and relationships -- and, inevitably, impose certain ‘ways of looking,’ particular angles of vision, on those events and relationships which we are struggling to make sense of (Donald and Hall, 1986, p. ix-x).

For Marx, ideas did not arise independent of society -- they were the ways in which material relationships expressed themselves. They did not exist as abstract truths (Donald and Hall, 1986, p. xiv). As such, ideology is not a set of abstract beliefs and ideas, but includes material and institutional manifestations. According to Stanley Aronowitz, ideology permeates and organizes all our lives through institutions of health care, family, schools, media until “...all spaces of the everyday have been filled” (Aronowitz, 1992, p. 81). While ideology infuses both the abstract and the material, it is what links the personal with the social and renders these relationships political.

But how do new forms of meaning enter popular knowledge, and how is power deployed through culture? Louis Althusser suggests that it is through the construction of the individual subject. According to Althusser. “...[A]ll ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects, by the functioning of the category of the subject” (Althusser, 1994, p. 47). “Interpellation,” according to Althusser, is the mechanism through which subjects are named and placed in a social order (Donald and Hall, 1986, p. xviii). As such, the social categories of different subjects are “symbolically constructed” (Donald and Hall, 1986,
p. xvii). As he points out, our subjectivities are constructed for us even before we are born; our gender and our location as a member of a family is predetermined and in time, we learn to respond to them as if they are unquestionable parts of our identity. We are interpellated into ready-made spaces whether they be the state, family, the church, the back-to-the-land counterculture, or our gender identities. Through the categories of the subject, individualities are made, or conversely, denied. In this thesis, the feelings and practical meaning associated with living simply and close to nature in rural communities are integrated into the making of the self -- the honest and knowledgeable farmer or the self-sufficient homesteader taking respite from the world of urban politics.

What are the processes by which "reality" is discursively constituted? For me, my memory of Cape Breton, my experience of walking down the street in Toronto, or my responses to the people I encounter on a daily basis are conditioned by a wide-range of factors. While Cape Breton, a street in Toronto, or another human being each has an objective existence, I have a subjective experience of that place or person. What is significant is how particular subjective interpretations of reality are normalized, or are made to seem "real," while others are not. Certainly other people verify certain subjective experiences for us, because they also share them. These experiences are woven together with other experiences and systems of representation to constitute "structures of feeling," a concept that Raymond Williams uses to explicate the aesthetic dimension of the dialectics of meaning. Structures of feeling, according to Williams, are "...concerned with meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt...." He further asserts that:

We are talking about characteristic elements of impulse, restraint, and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as feeling and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and inter-relating continuity. We are then defining these elements as a 'structure': as a set, with specific internal
relations, at once interlocking and in tension (Williams, 1977, p. 132).

Williams uses this concept to illustrate how our experiences of the city and the countryside has been ideologically constructed through literature and translated into a sense of lived meaning (I will discuss William’s work on the construction of the city and the countryside in more detail later). It is important to note that these structures of feeling can serve to deny the existence of whole groups of people and fail to account for the oppressive circumstances of their lives. Power operates through the construction of popular knowledge, and through the daily enactment of our lives.

The question is, who controls these processes? In The German Ideology Marx and Engels wrote that “(t)he class that has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it” (Donald and Hall, 1986, p. xv). Ideology shapes our subjective experiences of the world, infusing everyday actions with particular meanings. We are interpellated into or excluded from everyday social institutions and processes whether it be on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, ability, or gender. According to Donald and Hall, class struggle is carried out through these processes of articulation and “disarticulation” (Donald and Hall, 1986, p. xix). As Roland Barthes indicates, the bourgeoisie becomes a universalized subject as aspects of everyday life become imbued with dominant ideologies (Barthes, 1957). How the dominant classes imagine and construct the world becomes hegemonic, and the measure by which they and others measure themselves. In the Cape Breton back-to-the-land community the internalized ways of seeing nature and the countryside were of the dominant class (I will discuss this in greater detail soon). Those who control representation, and the cultural forms and practices we participate in, also regulate who has access to society, and under what
conditions.

What are the dynamics between different cultural systems and processes? Stuart Hall and Paul DuGay outline the processes of cultural transformation -- how different representations and practices come into use and how they are transformed. These authors imagine a dialectical web between representation(s), identity(ies), forces of production, processes of consumption, and forms of regulation in which each modify the other both directly and indirectly (Hall, 1997, p. 1). “Meaning is constantly being produced and exchanged in every personal and social interaction in which we take part” (Hall, 1997, p. 3). For Hall and DuGay, culture is fluid and unstable, simultaneously object, ground, and process. Similarly, language and knowledge are extremely fluid. Ben Agger offers a concise summary of Derrida’s ideas of Difference and Differance which can help us to understand how meaning is constructed through language:

...(I)t is in the nature of language to produce meaning only with reference to other meanings against which it takes its own significance. Thus, we can never establish stable meanings by attempting correspondence between language and the world addressed by language. Instead, meaning is a result of the differential significances that we attach to words.... Derrida plays on the French word Differance to show that one cannot hope to arrive at a fixed or transparent meaning as long as one uses a necessarily deferring as well as differing language: Every definition and clarification needs to be defined and clarified in turn; meaning always lays elusively in the future (Agger, 1991, p. 113).

Derrida’s concepts of difference and differance have both structural and poststructural origins. Meaning is thus defined both in opposition to other different meanings, and in relationship to other similar meanings. As Pierre Bourdieu argues, it is not possible to “...make the cultural order... a sort of autonomous, transcendent sphere capable of developing in accordance with its own laws.” Culture is a realm of subjective interpretations, not objective forms. Instead of concerning myself with whether there is any empirical basis to
culture, the purpose of my analysis is to understand how it functions within a particular social order. As Bourdieu argues, we can only look at the relationship between texts, and the relations within the network of social systems, or what he calls “system-of-systems” (Bourdieu, 1994, p. 54). In this case, I am looking at the relations between the everyday cultural practices of the back-to-the-landers, their own social experiences, their class identity, and the texts through which they represented their lives. Through the processes of class interpellation, ideology infuses the cultural acts of self-representation and the enactment of daily life.

Representation and the Discursive Function of Signs

Representation refers to the processes by which we give the ‘real’ world of objects particular meaning. Through representation we both construct and represent a particular reality that has both subjective and objective dimensions. Culture operates as a symbolic terrain within which symbols are shaped, which in turn shape our lives. Saussure, who had a profound influence on the field of structural linguistics, asserted that meaning is constructed through the relationships between signs (Saussure, 1959). Through representation, links are made between mental concepts and physical objects. To understand this process, it is necessary to break down linguistic exchange into the components described by Saussure. According to Saussure, the signifier is the word or sound image that we use to communicate a concept. The signified is the mental concept that is evoked when one either reads a particular word or hears a certain sound. The sign refers to the combination of the signified and the signifier. One of Saussure’s principle ideas was that the relationship between the signifier and the sign is arbitrary (Saussure, 1959, p. 67). However, these meanings are agreed upon

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*Saussure points out some exceptions, including some Onomatopoetic words including “tick-tock” and interjections (though he does not provide any example of the later) (Saussure, 1959, p. 69).*
within a linguistic community, meaning that any change in meaning must be collectively agreed upon (Saussure, 1959, p. 69). While they are arbitrary, they are not easily changed.

Meaning is generated in the move between signified and signifier, and through how signs are attached to an objective reality. For example: central to the back-to-the-land ideal is the concept of “land.” Canadian literary theorist, William New points out that this is a supposedly neutral metaphor (New, 1997, p. 6). New juxtaposes this with several other words that refer to the same material reality, such as territory, property, estate, home, or nation (New, 1997, p. 5). These other terms more explicitly imply ownership. In the case of territory, it also implies European (White) dominion (at least in Canada), or in the case of “home,” male ownership and female domestic servitude.70 “Land” as it used by the back-to-the-landers is a (W)hitewashed signifier. It detaches the act of ownership from the colonial and patriarchal history that would be evoked through another term such as “estate” or “territory.” Language is not divorced from its social context, although it is easily mystified when people begin think that relationships between signs and the world they represent are immutable. What is important here is that an object or practice can be lifted from its context and thought to hold only one meaning. As our experience becomes increasingly mediated by texts, it is easy to lose track of the material contexts and personal locations through which a particular experience is formed. In this case, it is the urban middle-class origins of the back-to-the-landers, which are profoundly different from the rural working-class origins of many of their neighbours in the countryside.

Following from this, how we speak, how we gesture, how we describe and interpret objects are what cultural theorist Stuart Hall calls signifying practices (Hall, 1997, p. 5).

70 Another example of this play in the relationship between signifier and signified is that I gave in Chapter Three when I described the use of the term “hipster” by urban African Americans as a way of reinventing themselves. The ideas is that this would change the way in which they were perceived by others and how they perceived themselves by assuming the meanings that were associated with this term.
Anything that functions as a sign is a language, according to Hall (Hall, 1997, p. 19). We give things meaning through how we interpret them; the frames we use, and how we represent them (Hall, 1997: p 3). In this thesis, my approach is semiotic and discursive, premised on a constructivist approach, which argues for a dialectical relationship between different systems of representation in the process of constructing meaning. I am concerned with how meaning is produced through various signifying practices and with how systems of representation serve as social regulation (Hall, 1997, p. 6).

It is important to remember that impact of symbolic interaction is not restrained to the abstract. Indeed, this would be a extremely dangerous assumption, equally dangerous as the idea that the fluidity of linguistic and symbolic meaning should allow us to construct the world in whichever way we want, without regard to context, history, or future implications. Foucault argued that semiotics reduced what were in fact violent social interactions into patterns of linguistic exchange. Instead of limiting his analysis to language, he expanded the existing concept of “discourse” to also encapsulate social processes and texts through which meaning is produced. In moving from regarding only texts that are spoken and written as only having meaning --and only abstract meaning at that -- to looking at all experience as being textually mediated we are able to understand the power and complexity of representation.

We create the world through representation; we produce and reproduce practices that affirm and support particular images and ideas that are felt as real. Bordieu points out that a particular event, phenomena, or field is always situated in relationship to other fields (Bourdieu, 1994, p. 50). Methodologically, this involves moving from specific events to context, and from individuals to structural relationships in order to critically locate ourselves

71 These differ from “reflective” or “intentional” approaches to language. The first presumes that meaning is inherent in the material world and exists as fixed truth(s). The second presumes that we impose meaning on the world through language that is unique to each person (Hall, 1997, p. 25)
within the fabric of history. Bourdieu argues that there is no need to look for an essential truth outside of discourse to understand what constitutes artistic or cultural meaning and legitimacy (Bourdieu, 1994, p. 53).

Pursuing a logic that is entirely characteristic of symbolic structuralism, but realizing that no cultural product exists by itself, i.e. outside the relations of interdependence which link it to other products, Michel Foucault gives the name ‘field of strategic possibilities’ to the regulated systems of differences and dispersions within which each individual work defines itself (Bourdieu, 1994, p. 53).

Bourdieu reminds us that meaning arises out of the interaction of complex forces, and not just from the social habits and interests of the producers (Bourdieu, 1994, p. 55). However, meaning achieves hegemonic status when it becomes part of the taken-for-granted subtext of communication. Concepts become abstracted from their material histories -- they become tropes which embody assumed relationships. Canadian literary critic W.H. New defines tropes as “...figurative ways of conveying attitudes and ideas” (New, 1997, p. 26). For example the invocation of the the narrative of ‘mother earth’ states an assumed equation between nature and fertility. The concept of “natural justice” privileges one particular form of social discipline that shares ideological links with evolutionary theory (New, 1997, p. 26). However these concepts do not critically address their histories. The idea of “mother earth” arises out of a particular social construction of femininity and from a long history of patriarchy. The idea of natural justice arises from evolutionary theory which arose concurrent with the development of the idea of the free market. Both these ideas, we know, have been used to justify or to deny enormous human suffering through practices such as beauty pageants, eugenics, intelligence tests and structural adjustment. Without knowing this context they become abstractions -- forms without actual content.

Where does this leave the pursuit of truth? What becomes of the truth that some of
the people who moved back to the land thought they could find in the simplicity of living close to "nature?" Truth is not inherent in objects, or to particular relations, but exists as an idea that mediates relationships. It exists in the productive interactions of different social fields and cultural texts. The back-to-the-landers embraced a transcendent ideal of nature that was its own "truth" constructed out of a particular social history and mediated by various texts. For them, nature as a site of authenticity, nourishment, and freedom. However, historically, this was only the case for a particular population of people who shaped the dominant representations of nature.

**Evicting the Poor from Nature**

The idea of a past in which people lived in harmony with each other and with the land underlays much the work of many literary authors, natural historians, and the ideals of many people involved in environmentalism or self-sufficient living. In his book, *The City and the Countryside* (1973), Raymond Williams examined English Literature from around the 12th century until the 20th century to map the historical evolution of the idea of the countryside. Williams points out that we move back in time, when we think of a quieter, happier time -- a "traditional" society, this place keeps moving backwards in time, so that we have reason to doubt that it ever actually existed (Williams, 1973, p. 35-37). What is significant to this thesis is not whether this idyllic past existed, or did not exist, but what function it serves. This myth serves precisely to mask the sociality of nature -- that a particular understanding of nature and landscape is premised on particular social inequalities and that resources cannot be exploited without people also being exploited.

Williams analyzes the poems of Wordsworth, Blake, and Shelley to understand this sense of the demise of the rural and the pastoral. The pastoral economies of the villages were
seen in the past as having been contented industrious places, but are now quiet and empty, and hold only the memory of their previous vitality (Williams, 1973, p. 78-79). Williams notes from the 14th century through the 19th century a largely obscured body of writing exists that describes starvation in the midst of wealth, slavery, and despair. However, these are not the works that are associated with English Literature. Through the dominant literary works he is able to trace the development of a particular structure of feeling which shaped many of the assumptions that underlay our experience of landscapes.

...with unusual precision, what we can later call a Romantic structure of feeling -- the assertion of nature against industry and of poetry against trade; the isolation of humanity and community into the idea of culture, against the real social pressures of the time -- is projected (Williams, 1973, p. 79).

As Williams points out, this constructed sense of the land and the countryside excludes the countless people who moved from place to place, and includes the landless people that made up the labour force of Britain's pastoral past (Williams, 1973, p. 84). This population is virtually erased from popular history. The very class structure that characterized capitalist relations had been long in place before industrialism. There was a rigid class structure that existed in rural English society in the 18th century prior to enclosure comprised of the gentry, the entrepreneurs, and the unpropertied poor. There was no egalitarian rural communal democracy where everyone lived in perfect harmony (Williams, 1979, p. 102). In the 18th century four hundred families out of a population of almost 8 million people owned almost a quarter of the cultivated land with much of the land occupied by wage-laborers and tenant farmers. There was not a peasantry, but instead a hierarchical form of agrarian capitalism (Williams, 1979, p. 60).

What enclosure did, Williams asserts, was make visible existing social relations, make more clearly evident who held power, and close the marginal spaces within which the poorest
of people survived (Williams, 1979, p. 107). Within history, the enclosures have been used to strategically locate the blame for massive human displacement on urbanization, rather than capitalism. For Williams, the enclosures were “a main source for that last protecting illusion in the crisis of our own time: that it is not capitalism which is injuring us, but the system of urban industrialism” (Williams, 1979, p. 98). The pastoral myth of an idyllic countryside that preceded the acts of enclosure serves to deny the experiences of the dispossessed; the laborers, the evicted, and all those who served the feudal landlords. The function of the town and country myth was “to promote superficial comparisons and to prevent real ones” (Williams, 1973, p. 54).

Another powerful aspect of mythified pastoralism is that of community. So often, the self-contained village of several hundred people is used as an idyllic democratic model. However, as Williams and others point out, rural England was far from democratic. Community, in the sense that it is currently conceptualized, only emerged in response to oppositional struggles against an identifiable set of oppressive social and material conditions. When the poor were forced into industrial urban centres and into workplaces where they labored at the same menial tasks alongside one another they were able to realize a collective identity. The landless became the industrial working class, which then had a basis for mobilization based on a common relationship to the means of production (Williams, 1979, p. 98). Williams argues that there is more community in contemporary towns than there ever was in rural villages. Community was only formed in political opposition to another class, as a result of struggle against landowners, and later against industrial forces (Williams, 1979, p. 104).

Enclosure refers to when the English evicted Scottish crofters who rented land from them in order to graze sheep to fuel the textile industry that burgeoned as a result of the industrial revolution. Many of these people came to Canada. Cape Breton has a large population of Scottish descendants, many of whom have retained or reclaimed various aspects of their cultural identity, including Gaelic language.
Through literary representations that established a way of seeing the countryside the social and political interests of the affluent were furthered. Through literature the countryside was given a sense of permanence and a sense that we are part of something that is absolute and irrefutably real. However, I think that we endanger making nature a totalizing concept that denies the existence of different subjective experiences.

**Imagining the Real**

Several years ago I took a walk up the mountain behind my family’s house in Cape Breton, reaching a place where I could walk along the ridge above the intervale and look down on our farm and the surrounding properties. From the ridge I could survey the long narrow valley up to where it vanished into the highland plateau and down to where it disappeared behind a mountain on its way to the Gulf of St. Lawrence. This landscape appeared unchanged for the almost twenty-five years that I had known it. It seemed to have a sense of permanence inseparable from the very structures of my mind. The long horizontal lines along the edge of the highland plateau were textured by the jagged tops of spruce trees and broken by streams that wound their way through this landscape. Throughout a period that included nuclear meltdowns, programmes of mass genocide, and continued violence against women, gays and lesbians, along with innumerable racial and ethnic groups, this landscape appeared unchanged. Indeed, it seemed that these global crises had no impact on this place.

This landscape, in the past, gave me an incredible sense of security and permanence. Whenever I returned, I had a sense of coming home. It felt that the fields, the hillsides, the moisture I could feel in my lungs on a cool morning, the sound of the waterfall on the mountain were an inseparable part of my very being. These were the sensations that I retreated into as a child, from the labour of daily life— from where I was picking stones from
the fields, milking the cow, shoveling manure, or the confusion of the complex human relationships that I was part of. This was my own subjective experience of nature. However, within the realm of abstract knowledge, and to a lesser extent within the realm of experiential knowledge, nature is thought of as being objective. The postmodern turn in social theory has enabled us to problematize this notion. It claims that experiences such as the one I describe are deeply subjective and are socially, historically, and contextually constructed.

Nature is used as a totalizing concept that masks its own constructedness. Nature is popularly thought of what is “real” and outside ourselves. While nature has an objective dimension -- for example, no-one would deny the existence of rain -- nature also has a subjective dimension. I have wonderful memories from high school of warm spring thunderstorms when my classmates and I would escape from our dormitories and run barefoot through the athletic fields, sliding down grassy embankments until we were drenched and muddy. I also have memories from university of trudging through the rain with cold wet feet, hunched over and anxious to get home. But this is a fairly simplistic separation of the objective and the subjective dimensions of nature. What is important is that our experience of nature, and how we represent nature, is subjective and that it is shaped within a complex field of social and cultural forces. The problem is this, that particular subjective interpretations become articulated as “truth.” In the case of the back-to-the-landers, a particular interpretation of nature became a totalizing concept.

The academic research that I surveyed in chapter two contains a heavy emphasis how back-to-the-landers found a particular “truth” in their experience living close to the land. Heather Holm found that the people she interviewed often said that living on the land enabled them to tap into something “real” that they weren’t able to experience in their previous lives. Back-to-the-landers she surveyed also used terms such as “intrinsic potential” suggesting that
living close to nature gave them freedom to experience a kind of spiritual unity and authentic existence. Jacobs also found that 81% of back-to-the-landers reported experiencing “a sense of peace of mind” and that 75% felt “a feeling of union with nature.” 61% similarly reported “a feeling of wholeness” and 51% reported feeling “a sense of being in the universe” (Jacob, 1997, p. 85).

The real is also a persistent theme in popular texts. Ron Caplan’s interviews, Lynn Zimmerman’s articles, George Thomas’s photographs, and Lorna Green’s writings inscribe the landscape and people of Cape Breton with a sense of authenticity that they sometime juxtapose with a perceived “inauthenticity” of the rest of the world. Lorna Green summarizes this most directly with her statement that “(i)n the cities, we are fabrications in a fabricated world... (Green, 1994, p.124).” Both Zimmerman and Thomas lament the modernization of rural communities. Caplan suggests that his readers, often people who have left Cape Breton, find a sense of the “authentic” in the stories of the lives of other Cape Bretoners who remain.

The idea of something as being “real” or “authentic” infers empirical truth, which in turn lent validity to the ideals and practices of the back-to-the-landers. The invocation of these concepts was a moral assertion by which the back-to-the-landers distinguished themselves from others. Gould found that back-to-the-landers asserted their values through a spiritual practice that “...constitutes a sacralization of nature and a ritualization of everyday life with reference to nature as a source of meaning and authority” (Gould, 1997, p. i). The back-to-the-landers presumed the authoritative naturalness of their world view and routinized it through a particular lifestyle. While the back-to-the-landers may not claim to “discover” a natural idyll, they certainly aspire to such ideals. In doing so, they establish an authoritative identity. This is readily translated into a regulative order within the community. Linda Tatelbaum illustrates the workings of this process in describing what happened when she and
her partner got running water, solar electricity and running water, and a television after almost 20 years of living in a log cabin without electricity and producing almost all their food. She writes that her friends

...are shocked. They are homesteaders, too, who have long since put in power, washing machines, freezers, taken jobs in town, and they regret to see us change. We are the last “pure” homesteaders around. They want us to die for their sins. But we want to live, and not just subsist (Avoiding the Rat Race, 1990, p. 27).

What is significant in this quotation is that there was a moral order based on a particular construction of nature. This concept of nature, as I will argue, emerges from a particular social history, yet it paradoxically denies its sociality.

Nature is both a subjective experience and an objective reality, and it is apprehended differently depending on one’s social location. It is possible to trace how a particular construct of “nature” has evolved and become dominant, much like the idea of the countryside, through different social and political influences. With the rise of scientific rationalism and the field of natural history, nature became separable from the human realm, and could be described empirically. This comprised a new kind of writing that denied nature of its sociality (Williams, 1979, p. 118-119). The geographer Jonathan Smith suggests that even though our experience is defined for us by texts, these textually mediated experience of landscape are thought to be absolute:

Because they are able to endure, which is a function of their tangibility, landscapes are believed to possess a reality surpassing that of the process by which they were created. Yet we relate to landscape as text, consisting of symbols that “allow a dislocation of event and meaning. Representations construct an illusion by which we relate to landscape that... make the simulacrum more compelling than the landscape itself (Smith, 1993, p. 81).

In that we project values and ideals on landscape, and we live our lives within landscape without acknowledging the subjective nature of this process, we deny that landscape is
ideologically constructed. Once we recognize that any way of looking at nature arises out of a particular set of social, economic and political and circumstances as they are experienced in peoples lives, we need to ask who’s experience has come to define how we think about nature.

In the Western world, or at least in England, the concept of landscape itself arises out of the experiences of people who could afford to own land and have others work it for them.

In a sense, the English landlord invented natural beauty, charity, politeness, land improvement, and “discovered” other cultures and countries. While this was derived from observation, what is important is the socioeconomic context with these distinctions were made -- the social history of those that made these distinctions and those that were described -- not the nature of the ideas themselves. They served a particular function and purpose by those who engaged them (Williams, 1979, p. 121).

The idea of landscape itself was based on domination and exploitation. The detached observer could afford to reproduce this image of landscape through commissioned artwork and the landscaping of their properties. Nature became increasingly a site of respite or leisure, a place one owned, or from which resources could be extracted. While this conception arose concurrent with scientific rationalism, and as a result of exploitative capitalist relations, nature began to be constructed to resist capitalist alienation, as it was experienced by the classes that benefited from it. Williams notes that into the 20th century writers began to valorize the countryside in yet new ways.

A working country, that is to say, was becoming, yet again but in a new way, a place of physical and spiritual regeneration. It was now the teeming life of an isolated nature, or the seasonal rhythm of the fundamental life processes. Neither of these feelings was new in itself. What was new was their fusion into a structure of feeling in which the earth and its creatures -- animals and peasant almost alike -- were an affirmation of vitality and of the possibility of rest in conscious contrast with the mechanical order, the artificial routines, of the cities. At its strongest this was a socially adapted pantheism. At its strangest it was a displacement of sexual feeling, in the awkward course of the
Victorian liberation: a transitional imagery, in which sex was ploughing, a bed of bluebells was a breast: neither activity quite stated, neither feature quite seen; the intensity part of their confused secret. Yet if you turned to doubt, there was the cold sick nerve of money and the city; property and repression and ugliness; the frustration of worldly conventions and routines (Williams, 1979, p. 252).

Writers such as D. H. Lawrence reworked social forces in the themes of life and death in his novels, equating the modern city and industrialism with death and native cultures with life, natural processes, relationships and physical exploration (Williams, 1979, p. 266). What writers did was combine myth, partial histories, and objective recording to create a way of seeing the past that left out pieces and reinvented it under the guise of tradition.

Nature was constructed throughout English literature to further the interests of particular social classes, and has almost completely obscured the experiences the majority of the English population. Williams argues that the “real history” would be so that much more powerful and alive (Williams, 1979, p. 261). Indeed, ideas, ideology and texts have been used to limit, deny and oppress, as well as to shape new pleasures. They serve to regulate human experience along various lines of social difference, and to maintain particular hegemonic relationships.

The back-to-the-landers were a quest for ‘the real’ in response to alienation. Through their life practices and their aesthetic pursuits, they expressed a desire for authenticity, that had previously found expression in bohemian art, literature and lifestyles. Similarly, the practices of the counterculture were informed by the tyranny of the real -- the quest for authenticity that arises as a response to capitalist alienation. This concept of nature, constructed by many back-to-the-landers had its own internal logic that was shared by others, including other farmers, and which was routinized through subsistence farming. However, the research of Holm, Gould, Gower and Jacob all document in various ways how
people's life practices and values changed between when they initially went “back-to-the-land” and the time of their research which was conducted several decades later. Many people began to seek employment, or made careers for themselves so that they could access many of the cultural and social opportunities that they missed. In many instances, people disapproved of the values embodied by other members of their rural communities or expressed doubt about the quality of education available for their children. Many of these people moved to places where they believed schools were better and their children would have peers with whom they had more in common. For others, their farms became a weekend or an after work activity, or for those who moved away, they used their properties as summer vacation retreats.

The back-to-the-landers embody a particular paradox in that they attempted to reject the middle-class yet they were bound to the middle-class by virtue of the symbols and meanings that they accessed and reproduced. By invoking and practicing a set of ways of looking at nature, landscape, and community they affirmed their own cultural hegemony and masked the conditions of oppression that affected others who had different relationships with nature. The back-to-the-landers did not attempt to disrupt their own established ways of seeing nature and instead translated it into a moral order. Their own life experiences were profoundly different from others who were excluded from their way of seeing nature. These differences do not simply exist in the realm of ideas and the imagination, but they are deeply embedded in our collective social histories.

**The Sign(ificance) of Landscape**

In this thesis we are dealing with several different kinds of texts. These include articles, books, interviews and artwork produced by back-to-the-landers. However, lifestyle,
or economic and cultural practices such as self-sufficient farming or log home building, as they are subjectively represented and apprehended, also function as texts. In addition, the landscape itself can operate as a text. Experience is mediated by the interplay of these different texts, which can only be understood within their own contexts and histories. This is why it was necessary to look at the back-to-the-landers in light of social changes and countercultural events in the mid-late 20th century, as well as in light of the history of Bohemia and dominant constructs of the countryside. The discursive influences of literature and landscape is particularly poignant as illustrated by Raymond Williams. New, in his work on the makings of the Canadian landscape through literature describes the arbitrary relation between representations and landscapes. He writes that land "slides" -- that language, and the meaning of land changes with social context (New, 1997, p. 17). I am describing many different textual spaces here -- spoken words, pages, and landscapes.

These various textual forms provide us with the meaning that is necessary for the making of the self. Norman Denzin, in his work on phenomenological forms of inquiry, makes the point that we talk ourselves into being through language (Denzin, 1989, p. 72). However, we also make ourselves into being through our self-conscious relations within landscape. Landscape, like language, operates as a symbolic referent within broader patterns of meaning. Within the back-to-the-land counterculture, gardens signified self-reliance, health, and nourishment. The forest, if it was where the firewood was cut, represented security and permanence and the practices of fishing or farming signified simplicity and intimacy with nature. However, these signs are not universally accepted. Many non-back-to-the-landers I knew growing up in rural Cape Breton saw these same practices as signs of their poverty, or the forests as something that could be converted into economic capital through which they could improve their lives. As text, the meaning of landscape is unstable and depends on many
factors, including the social and cultural meanings we bring to our reading of landscape through exposure to other cultural texts, such as television, books, and language. Further, our interpretation of landscapes is shaped by the material conditions of our lives. As Denzin points out, there is no essential meaning that exists within the text and in the world (Denzin, 1989, p. 45). Instead it is produced through interpretation, and in the relation between interpretations. The meaning of landscape is produced and transformed in the interplay of texts, one of which is the landscape itself.

Culture and Class Hegemony

Social class powerfully determines the material conditions of our lives, our degree of political agency, and the particular set of cultural practices through which we distinguish ourselves from others. So far, in this chapter, I have illustrated the fluidity of concepts including culture and nature, and explored their role in the maintenance of an existing social order. Up until this point, I have given little attention to significant changes that have occurred in the concept of class during the second half of the 20th century. This is important for understanding the back-to-the-landers because while many did not have economic wealth, they had access to forms of social and cultural capital that determined their social status relative to others.

Many Western nations experienced enormous technological and economic growth after World-War II. Large segments of the population in countries including Italy, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States were suddenly able to drastically improve the conditions of their lives. In some cases this meant getting a post-secondary education, owning a car, or having access to many of the luxuries that were being marketed to them. For others, this meant simply being able to have running water and heat (Marwick, 1998, p. 359). With
the rise of consumption as a force that shaped our relation to the economy and society, there were significant changes in the meaning of class.

Marx believed that class was defined by the relationship between groups of people and the means of production. The conditions of factories in industrial Europe put people in close proximity to each other and enabled them realize a collective identity based on a common relationship to the means of production. Marx believed that history was entirely defined by people's agency through control and ownership of production (Aronowitz, 1990, p. 104). Since then, class has come to be defined by consumption as well as production, and has been much complicated by a much less uniform social and economic field. The invention of post-fordist models of production and the rise of the information economy and service industries has further complicated class analysis. Stanley Aronowitz defines class in a way that bridges Marxian economistic interpretations of class with more identity oriented processes of class formation:

Classes come into being when groups of people (a) occupy a common structural space within the mode of production, (b) have a common discursive (cultural) position in the specific social formation in question which, however, is not presupposed by structural unity, and (c) are, therefore, capable of forming political organizations exemplified by parties, trade unions, and other class-based associations which also function discursively (Aronowitz, 1992, p. 127).

Social theorists such as Aronowitz have much problematized Marxian notions of class. In recent decades, many north American sociologists have come to define class on the basis of social status, delineating for example, between professionals and lay people, manual laborers versus intellectual workers or skilled workers versus unskilled workers (Aronowitz, 1992, p. 25). Whether specific social classes actually exist is not the question. What is important is how they exist as symbolic categories that shape our values and behavior. There are specific
practices and behaviors that make up what we identify as being characteristic of a particular class, and which we emulate, seek to acquire, or avoid. Class does not occur in any pure sense (Aronowitz, 1992, p. 72). It typically exists as something that we wish to achieve (the middle-class), or to shun (the lower class). The back-to-the-landers are clearly predominantly of the middle-class by virtue of the context from which they came, though in many instances they do not have the economic wealth associated with the middle-class. However, they are of the cultural middle-class. Their access to the symbols and meanings of the middle-class allowed them to distinguish themselves from others in such a way that they could uphold their class status.

I only give cursory attention to the specific practices and processes of distinction engaged by the back-to-the-landers. However, an example of such a study, but with a different population is given by Pierre Bourdieu, in his book, Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste (1984). Bourdieu undertook a massive study of the cultural preferences of people living in France between the 1960’s and 1980’s and correlated their taste in art, food, furniture (and many other things), with their class position. What he found was that class differences were embodied in specific cultural practices. In his analysis he argued that internalized behaviors and specific tastes serve as a form of “symbolic” property by which people distinguished themselves from others and attempt to elevate their class status.

As the objective distance from necessity grows, life-style increasingly becomes the product of what Weber calls a ‘stylization of life,’ a systematic commitment which orients and organizes the most diverse practices -- the choice of a vintage or a cheese or the decoration of a holiday home in the country. This affirmation of power over a dominated necessity always implies a claim to a legitimate superiority.... This claim to aristocracy is less likely to be contested than any other, because the relation of the ‘pure’, ‘disinterested’ disposition to the conditions which make it possible, i.e., the material conditions of existence which are rarest because most freed from economic necessity, has every chance of passing unnoticed. The most ‘classifying’
privilege thus has the privilege of being the most natural one” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 56).

The back-to-the-landers created a particular cultural practice through which they distinguished themselves from others. Culture, in the broad sense that I have conceptualized it — in that it is a life practice, high aesthetics, and a set of distinctions — becomes naturalized as an inseparable part of the lived meaning of people’s lives. Bourdieu points out that “(t)he ideology of natural taste owes its plausibility and its efficacy to the fact that, like all the ideological strategies generated in the everyday class struggle, it naturalizes real differences, converting differences in the mode of acquisition of culture into differences of nature...” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 68). He calls this the “mystery of immaculate conception,” that culture exists without any reference to its sociality (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 68).”

Bourdieu argues that there are different forms of capital, and that it is used in various ways to maintain class position. An example he gives is of saving money to send one’s children to university as a strategy often used by the bourgeois to help their heirs maintain their class position (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 137). Similarly educational capital can be converted into economic capital (which in part explains why I am writing this thesis). Also, cultural capital can be converted into economic capital. In the Cape Breton back-to-the-land community, some people sold photographs or quilts to art collectors, and others sold articles to magazines. Of central importance to the line of argument in this thesis, is the idea that culture can give us further access to social power in operating as a signifier of class.

Counterhegemonic Interventions

I do not intend to seem entirely dismissive of the back-to-the-landers, nor to act as the sociologist who Bourdieu describes as “... the lame devil who takes off the roofs and reveals
the secrets of domestic life to his (sic) fascinated readers (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 126).” However, it is important is that the back-to-the-landers be placed within an accurate social and historical context, as I believe I have done in this thesis. It is important that the back-to-the-landers, despite my lengthy discussions of their conservatism, undeniably intended their practice as an act of dissent against maintain society. However, their actions were limited by the context in which they lived and the meaning systems that were available to them.

Along with Bohemia and the 1960’s counterculture, the back-to-the-landers transformed existing structures of feeling (to varying degrees) as experienced within their community and created a new countercultural identity. This is congruous with one of the functions of subcultures, as described by cultural theorist Dick Hebdige. Hebdige, according to his editor Simon During, argues that subcultures “...take up the objects, spaces, and signs available to them within the larger system of late industrial culture in order to turn such objects and signs against the system” (Editors Introduction. Hebdige, 1993, p. 357). However, because the signs and symbols being used are those of the dominant system there are limits to the alterity of their meaning, and limits to our ability to apprehend them critically. Hebdige says that

(s)ocial relations and processes are then appropriated by individuals only through the forms in which they are represented to those individuals. These forms are, as we have seen, by no means transparent. They are in a ‘common sense’ which simultaneously validates and mystifies them (Hebdige, 1993, p. 364).

Hebdige describes the inescapability of context. The meaning that we access and reproduce in our everyday lives is strongly shaped by dominant ideological systems. The existing research on the back-to-the-landers, suggests that they did not seek collective liberation so much as individual retreat and personal salvation (Jacob, 1997 and Gould, 1997). Further, the ways in which back-to-the-landers described their lives, and the historical origins of many of their
ideals (such as how they imagined the countryside and nature), are from exclusively middle-upper class Western ideology. As a result, the meaning systems they created as part of this project were exclusive. The construction of totalizing concept of nature and authenticity around their own ideals prevented the active negotiation of contradictions and differences that could have contributed to building a more inclusive movement.

Conclusion

Since the explosion of the back-to-the-land phenomenon in the early 1970's there have been significant advances in cultural theory. While there have been numerous studies on back-to-the-land communities in the past decade, none have attempted to apply these theoretical developments in a substantive way to this phenomenon. Additionally, issues of social difference within rural communities receive little more than the occasional passing reference in these studies. While the middle-class has played an enormous role in many social movements, their identity and their alliance with the oppressed has rarely been problematized. The back-to-the-landers provide us with a unique opportunity to understand how class struggle is carried out through how we represent ourselves and others and to understand how we translate ideology into cultural practice and meaningful experience. They also provide us with an opportunity to understand some of the contradictions of middle-class dissent and to articulate new forms of cultural intervention that pose a front to the complex and often hidden forces of oppression.
Chapter VI

Conclusion

Summary

This thesis was intended to accomplish several things. First, to review the existing literature on the back-to-the-land phenomenon and to look at texts produced by Cape Breton back-to-the-landers. Second, to place the back-to-the-land phenomenon in a historical and social context. Third, to review social movement theory in order to understand whether they were a social movement or not. And fourth, to explore the relevance of postmodern social theory to finding a way of understanding the relationship between culture and social difference within the back-to-the-land community. In my review of the literature on and by back-to-the-landers I found several notable themes. One theme was the persistent emphasis on a experience of alienation within middle-class society by back-to-the-landers. Another was the assumption that the back-to-the-landers were a social movement. In addition, I found a lack of critical attention to issues of social difference within current research on the back-to-the-land phenomenon, and in texts by members of the back-to-the-land community.

By looking at the back-to-the-landers within the context of the 1960’s counterculture I was able to illustrate that they were a response to a historically unique set of circumstances that existed in the 1960’s. By locating them within the history of Bohemia, I was able to show how they were part of a long tradition of middle-class dissent. Given the social forces at play, and the cultural influences available to them, such as Bohemian art, literature, lifestyle, and social utopianism, their decision to withdraw from society was a logical and seemingly transformative act. For middle class youth in the 1960’s, the only alternative was
to become another cog in the military industrial complex and embrace a life that they did not want to be part of, or to face a violent military police force in the streets, against whom they could only lose.

In looking at social movement theory in relationship to the back-to-the-landers it is difficult to situate them as a social movement. While they embodied many characteristics described by social movement theory, they were not a marginalized group seeking their rightful access to political processes or demanding structural changes in society. For these reasons, I do not consider them to be a social movement. While they were adversely affected by some of the social conditions of the 1960's, such as violence against protesters, they did not experience the material deprivation that was part of the lives of many of those whom they allied themselves with. In retreating from society they did little to further these struggles and reenacted the conditions of their own social privilege. New social movement theory, in acknowledging that contemporary social movements are increasingly concerned about challenging existing systems of meaning, is the most useful social movement theory for understanding the back-to-the-land phenomenon. Indeed, the back-to-the-landers were highly influential in shaping a set of values that underlay the emergence of the environmental movement and the more widespread use of natural foods, alternative forms of health care, and sustainable food production. The back-to-the-landers could, however, be described as a pre-formative movement, in the sense that Eric Hobsbawm (1959) writes about, in that they created the conditions for the creation of other movements.

In order to better understand questions that had been raised in new social movement theory regarding the role of cultural production and the mechanisms of ideological transformation, I looked at postmodern cultural theory. In postmodern culture, which has been described by Jameson (1984), social reality is increasingly shaped and regulated by
representation. Texts, whether they be “how-to” articles, artistic photographs, fiction, legislative acts or quilts, work together to shape a social order with particular norms of perception and structures of feeling. These are then linked to economic relationships. For example, in the back-to-the-land community in Cape Breton, texts such as George Thomas’s photographs of Margaree Valley and Lynn Zimmerman’s articles of how to live in rural communities inscribe the practices of self-sufficient farming with particular meaning. Because we endow the landscape with meaning from our own lives, it reflects particular values and structures of feeling. Language is not just words, and texts are not just books. As Dorothy Smith suggests, texts function as a way or organizing us within larger productive relationships (Smith, 1984, 1999).

However, in a world where we address the interplay of meaning on the surface of texts, suffering and injustice easily succumbs to relativism or dismissal. Postmodern culture is a condition that facilitates new forms of social exclusion, as has occurred with identity politics. For those who have access to cultural capital it enables them to more easily manipulate structures of meaning (whether it be through literature, advertising, or education) and translate it into economic or social capital. While the conditions of contemporary Western society have facilitated new mechanisms of social control through discourse, they have also opened up new possibilities for social change. By combining social movement theory and cultural studies it is possible to engage an analysis that enables social movements to involve themselves in shifting power through representation and to open new spaces for the active negotiation of meaning.

Structures and Openings

What is crucial to remember about the back-the-landers, is their social location. They
are situated within particular social relations -- as White people, as women or as men, or as members of middle-class culture. These signifiers are embodied, existing as largely unnoticed aspects of everyday life (when they serve to our advantage) that locate us within a particular social order. In Western nations since the 1960's, social status has become increasingly shaped by access to cultural capital and symbolic meaning (typically expressed through consumption).

As is evidenced by the back-to-the-landers, class divisions are reproduced through cultural divisions. The back-to-the-landers reified aspects of their culture (how they saw nature and rural communities) in order to produce an exclusive identity and maintain their own class location. In trying to escape their sense of alienation, their ideal of nature and community became a totalizing concept and an integral part of a hegemonic discourse. Yet, at the same time they approached creating a viable social alternative based on the idea of living self-sufficiently and close to the land as an act of dissent against mainstream culture. While they reproduced certain problematic social norms, they produced an identifiable and unique social experience.

Shortly before I completed this thesis I was in Cape Breton and went by myself to the beach at Margaree Harbour, where Lynn Zimmerman wrote of there having been a busy seaport many years ago, before roads were built to service the coast. The beach was virtually unchanged from how I had known it throughout the past twenty-five years, and had likely changed little from a century before. Standing at the edge of the surf, I could see across the mouth of the river to where the land slowly drew back from the water and retreated into the low mountains that wound their way up the coast and beyond the horizon. This was probably the first time I had come here alone, and likely the first time when I did not recognize anyone on the beach. Despite its familiarity, it seemed profoundly new. That I
could experience the same place in such different ways reminded me of the problems of reducing a landscape to the events and experiences that occur within it. Indeed, I had feared that with all my efforts to deconstruct and analyze my own experience (and, as best as I could, the collective experiences of others as represented through texts) of something that I took so much pleasure in, I would render it meaninglessness. Instead I found it liberating. This, it became evident to me, was the power of language and other interpretive processes, to bring new meaning to bear on different experiences, and to continually make the world anew.

Paradoxes and Questions

How do we orient ourselves within the complex webs of meaning that connect us to the world? In this thesis I have attempted to show how specific texts and practices are linked to processes of social organization (for example, the link between nature as a site of recreation and middle/upper class wealth). By beginning to map how power is expressed through the enactment of daily life it is possible to identity spaces for transforming the conditions of society. As Homi Bhabha reminds us, in the postmodern era there is recognition of the arbitrariness of signification (Bhabha, 1994, p. 220). I believe that by allowing for the articulation of different discourses, and by ensuring accountability to context, it is possible to create new meanings.

The invocation of the “real” by the back-to-the-landers was an attempt to counteract social alienation. However, we need to define and contextualize this concept within the experiences of those who articulate it. For me, there is something authentic about the sound of waves crashing on a rocky shoreline, or the face to face interaction I have with someone in my neighborhood. While these encounters may not be directly mediated by written words, by a recorded or transmitted image, or through another person’s story, they are mediated and
constructed through my own memory, history and context. These experiences have both subjective and objective dimensions. For the back-to-the-landers the idea of an essential and authentic experience served to exclude the perspectives of others and assert their social status. Yet, at the same time, they rejected the middle-class Anglo-American culture whose meanings they reproduced.

There are no straight-forward answers. In this thesis I have done a brief review of existing research on the back-to-the-landers, and used popular texts in conjunction with contextual and historical information to explain the processes by which the back-to-the-land phenomena emerged. I have concluded that they were not a social movement in any traditional sense, but they were intensely involved in an ongoing process of social change that was oriented towards a shared set of ideals. Because of their many contradictions, which I have illustrated, they allow us unique insight into the often politically opaque realm of everyday experience.


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