Far Out

Helen Andrews

Apollo in the Age of Aquarius
By Neil M. Maher
(Harvard University Press, 2017)

We Are as Gods: Back to the Land in the 1970s on the Quest for a New America
By Kate Daloz
(Public Affairs Books, 2016)

How spiritually bereft, how morally twisted, does a person have to be to boo the moon landing? It was fair enough for liberals to make the Apollo program a rhetorical foil for more welfare spending. Hubert Humphrey did that. So did Ed Koch, then in Congress, who explained, "I cannot justify approving moneys to find out whether or not there is some microbe on Mars when in fact I know there are rats in Harlem apartments." But at the sacred moment Neil Armstrong stepped onto the Sea of Tranquility, with the aspirations of mankind resting on his shoulders and the dying cries of Gus Grissom and the other casualties of the Apollo program ringing in his ears, what kind of monster would interrupt with a boo?

The audience at the Harlem Cultural Festival, apparently. The crowd of fifty thousand that had gathered in Marcus Garvey Park to hear Stevie Wonder and Gladys Knight jeered when the lunar touchdown was announced. They were not alone. In the fraught '60s, the space program irritated many radicals, including feminists, environmentalists, and peace campaigners, for reasons that went beyond its extravagant price tag, and involved its deeper, more symbolic meaning. This hostility is the subject of Neil M. Maher's *Apollo in the Age of Aquarius*.

Maher offers no unifying thesis, but the thread running through his book is the sheer irrationality of left-wing opposition to the space program. A better word might be *subrationality*. Regardless of their pretexts, those driven to fury by the rockets of Cape Canaveral were motivated by drives internal to their own psychology. There seems to be no other way to explain such absurdities as the Green movement's calling the lunar astronauts "litterbugs."

Radicals from Wendell Berry to Robert Crumb also expressed worries that America would "exploit" the moon. What did this mean? Were they using the word in the environmental sense of disrupting the delicate lunar ecosystem? Or perhaps in its Marxist sense of impoverishing the lunar proletariat? Throughout the history of the environmental movement, Greens have often provoked their critics to wonder whether they are motivated more by love of nature or hatred of humanity. When the environment they purport to care about is as blank and empty as outer space, there is not much room for doubt.

Tribalism is the most basic psychological drive of all. For many on the left, the space program was obnoxious simply because its personnel came from the America that voted for Nixon. "It's the triumph of the squares," proclaimed a NASA administrator as Apollo 8 splashed down. Norman Mailer wrote an entire book about Apollo in which he refers to himself in the third person as "Aquarius." In this guise, Mailer dismisses the crew-cut techs as "cogs in a machine" who were "subtly proud of their ability to serve interchangeably for one another."

The problem with activists whose motivation is primarily psychological is that they can never be appeased. But oh, how the politicians tried! On the eve of the Apollo 11 launch, a high-ranking NASA official was sent to address a rally of Ralph Abernathy's Poor People's Campaign. "I hope you will hitch your mule wagons to our rockets," he said with a left-brainer's flair for metaphor, "using the space program as a spur to the nation to tackle problems boldly in other areas." At that point the federal government was spending more *per year* on poverty than it would on the entire Apollo program.

NASA also tried hard to appeal to women. Maher cites a Harris poll from February 1969 showing that 46 percent of men but only 32 percent of women favored landing a man on the moon. He does his best to connect female indifference to real grievances, but the poll numbers probably represented nothing more than men's greater interest in rocket-powered toys. Gimmicks like a NASA recruitment video starring Nichelle Nichols, better known as *Star Trek*'s Lieutenant Uhura, certainly didn't close the gender gap.

The strongest evidence that opposition to the space program was a product of American neuroses, not rational argument, is the reaction of genuine Third Worlders. John F. Kennedy once asked the president of Tunisia, Habib Bourguiba, point blank whether America should try to put a man on the moon. "If I told you you'd get an extra billion dollars a year in foreign aid if I didn't do it, what would be your advice?" Bourguiba—who certainly could have used the money—thought for a moment and then answered, "I wish I could tell you to put it in foreign aid, but I cannot."

While some Americans were voyaging to the moon, others were going back to the land. In *We Are as Gods*, Kate Daloz provides a new history of the commune movement. Although it's indelibly associated with the hippies, experiments in communal living are part of an American tradition that stretches back to the Transcendentalists—or maybe even to the Pilgrims. It's enough to make the reader think that communes, too, are a recurring symptom of a chronic American neurosis.

Daloz grew up in a geodesic dome in the backwoods of Vermont, and her book focuses mainly on her neighbors in that region. New England communes had a different ethos from their California counterparts. They were less artsy, more rustic; less about abolishing property, more about achieving self-sufficiency. "How can you take care—*really* take care—of your family's daily needs?" one of Daloz's subjects asked himself in 1969. "Every answer of the kind that had offered his parents so much security—a good education,

a steady office job, a mortgage—seemed terrifyingly dependent on the good word of authorities who were these days proving themselves over and over to be liars."

For another neighbor, it was the square world's moral complicity in a corrupt system that bothered him. For him, too, going back to the land was an act of principle, not just a vague "dropping out" in the Timothy Leary sense. Compared to the rest of the hippie movement, the people who joined agricultural communes were rational and sensible. And New England's communes were the most sensible of all.

The East Coasters also denigrated West Coast hippiedom as commercialized. Less than ten pages into the book, Daloz points out that "The Summer of Love" was a phrase invented by the Haight-Ashbury business council over the strong objections of the activists on the ground, the Diggers, who groused in their newsletter about "the cats who have sold our loverly [*sic*] little psychedelic community to the mass media." Not only were the merchants turning an authentic popular movement into an excuse for profit, but the resulting wave of migrants that washed up onto the Bay Area brought "hunger, hip brutality, rape, gangbangs, gonorrhea, syphilis, theft, hunger, [and] filth" in quantities that left the Diggers overwhelmed. New England communes were happy to keep a lower profile.

One feature that communes on both coasts shared was an inability to attract racial minorities. When Nina Simone visited the pioneering commune Morningstar Ranch, she said to her escort, "Lou, there aren't any black people here." "I want them to come," he replied abashedly, "but we don't invite people. They just show up." Hispanics in the Southwest showed as little interest in joining desert communes. This prompted considerable soul-searching among theorists of commune life. What were they doing wrong that their members should be "almost all white, well-educated, and from middle-class or wealthy backgrounds"? To be fair, the demographics of the back-to-the-land movement were no more lopsided than hiking's or camping's today.

Ironically, considering their opposition to the commercialization of hippiedom, it was the business that wrecked the Vermont commune scene—specifically, the marijuana business. A new strain, *indica* rather than *sativa*, was introduced to Vermont in 1978. This hardier and more potent variety meant big money for those who stayed on the land. The lure of easy profits proved to be a strain on the communes' original idealism, especially when the feds started cracking down on the big growers in 1984. Daloz's neighbors at Myrtle Hill Farm nearly lost their land when one of their number was busted on a cultivation charge and the court confiscated his property, which legally speaking belonged to the entire collective under an arrangement they had reached in happier times.

In one sense, most communes were a failure while the space program was a success. Considered from another angle, however, the commune movement may have exercised a stronger influence on American culture. NASA stopped sending people into space in 2011. Yet you can buy organic yogurt at every supermarket. In her final chapter, Daloz interviews a Vermont selectman who reports that after four decades of rural life "you could no longer tell the difference between the locals and the newcomers—the locals might have long hair and the hippies no longer dressed quite so eccentrically." Apollo 8 may have been the "triumph of the squares," but most of the rounds have gone to the other side.

Helen Andrews *is a 2017 Robert Novak Journalism Fellow.*