

On the Beat Generation*

Yonghong Zhang
 School of Marxism
 Research Center for Marxist Theory
 Southwest University
 Chongqing400715,China

Abstract

The American Beat Generation came into being in a special environment of the consumer society after World War II. The consumer society and the political pressure stimulated the Beat Generation's consciousness of anti-tradition and anti-modern civilization. It tells us: In a society with material prosperity, spiritual oppression could probably become the root of rebellion; Youth problems are generally macroeconomic, structural and social; the imbalanced development of youth participation awareness and participation opportunities could be an important reason for youth rebellion.

Keywords: Beat Generation, consumer society, rebellion, inspiration

1. Introduction

The Beat Generation was a group of loosely-bound young poets and writers in US in the 1950s. They challenged all the traditional values and became a most important force in questioning and denying traditional cultural values after World War II. The phrase "Beat Generation" was invented by Jack Kerouac in 1948. The phrase was introduced to the public in 1952 when Kerouac's friend John Clellon Holmes wrote an article "This is the Beat Generation" for the New York Times Magazine. The word "beat" refers in part to beatific and beautiful. Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, along with the writer William Burroughs, formed the center of the movement launched by this Generation. Since the emergence of the Beat Generation, researches centered on Beat writing or related to the Beat experience have been extensively made and related publications are too many to enumerate. What these publications tell us includes but is by no means limited to the conclusions and ideas such as "the Beat Generation broke the cycles of conformity and led an uprising of spiritual awareness", and "the Beat Generation opened the eyes of the world to the unconventional, and, by doing so, made its mark as one of the most significant literary movements of this century". Be that as it may, still some more questions need further research: How did the Beat Generation happen to come about in the 1950s? And how should we look upon the relationship between youth problems and the society? etc.

2. The social background of the Beat Generation

Culture is passed from generation to generation within society, once a culture is not suitable to solve problems of a particular group, the new culture will emerge. The Beat Generation in US was a product of the times. The emergence of the Beat Generation was closely related to the social environment of the United States in the 1950s.

2.1 Changes in American socio-economic environment

During World War II, the U.S. economy was not only unaffected by the war, but even more powerful than before the war. The unemployment during the Great Depression ended with the development of wartime economy, a large number of women began to go out and seek work, and payments for most Americans increased in the 1950s. In 1946, only 8.5 percent of blue-collar workers and 17.5% of white-collar employees were entitled to take paid leave, but in 1951, both proportions exceeded 40%.

*Sponsoring Information: This work is supported by the National Social Science Fund Project "The Way the Contemporary Western Developed Nations Guide Different Thoughts and Its Enlightenment"(13BKS064) and the Ministry of Education Humanities and Social Science Research Fund Project "The Way the Society Coped with the Youth Movement in USA in the 1960s"(09YJCZH102).

In 1956, the federal Highway Bill promoted the development of the suburbs, and gave birth to 41,000 miles of interstate highways, strengthening economic ties between the U.S states. America gradually entered the stage which economist John Kenneth Galbraith described as an "affluent society". The economic revitalization of the 1950s led to the emergence of mass production and mass consumption. Mass merchandise became a significant feature of the American society after the war. This new mass consumerism was manifested in many ways. For example, with the sudden increase of men coming home after the war started a serious housing shortage. In this case, a man named William Levitt bought thousands of acres of land outside of cities like New York and Philadelphia. Levitt then proceeded to plan out the construction of towns full of prefabricated houses. One of the first Levittown communities was started in Hempstead Town, Long Island, New York, and was developed between 1946 and 1951 by the firm of Levitt and Sons, Inc. It was an early example of a completely preplanned and mass-produced housing complex. Containing thousands of low-cost homes with accompanying shopping centers, playgrounds, swimming pools, community halls, and schools, its name became a national symbol for suburbia during the post-World War II building boom. The new U.S. consumer tendency also extended to the food service industry. McDonald's use of mass production in the food consumption area turned the kitchen into a production line, meeting the needs of the customers busy with work and requiring quick shopping.

The economic security and the emergence of new consumerism made people no longer surrounded by people, but by objects. In order to purchase new products, people had to work harder; In order to buy the goods which were said to be able to meet the needs of individuals, people were engaged in work without actual meaning. In many cases, people felt like cogs turning on the consumerism machine. Thus, the meaning of life changed. While people were met with growing material needs, they were also unwittingly giving up their own freedom of choice and independent will. The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit, by Sloan Wilson, is a 1955 novel about the social reality and the American search for purpose in a world dominated by business. In the novel, Wilson describes a middle-class family's social alienation. Although the family has a beautiful house and all the material things, it is unhappy: "It seems there is something hanging over our heads, something which makes us hard to be happy." The American people described by Wilson are derivatives of technology and machine, all of whom behave mechanically and completely lose self-awareness and self-selection. What he notes is that material success is doubtful because it is accompanied by tremendous personal sacrifices.

1.2 Changes in America's postwar political environment

Accompanying the Cold War Iron Curtain after World War II, there appeared a provocative political force called McCarthyism in U.S., whose purpose was to eradicate radical ideas of the American society and political dissents. From the late 1940s to the early 1960s, anti-Communist ideology infiltrated into the educational, cultural and political spheres at all levels, and the left-wing forces got a heavy knock and some left-wing trade unions and cultural organizations were excluded from the mainstream society. McCarthyism stifled free discussion in the American circle of thought, creating a modern politics of terror. Although the United States never formally restricted the freedom of expressing dissents, only those willing to study "non-controversial issues" could be possible to get copyrights and government research grants. They might get a generous subsidy to interview Cuban exiles, but could not get any support for the study on mass education and public health programs of the revolutionary government of Cuba. McCarthyism turned the democratic institutions in the United States into a "tyranny" which deprived without due process of individual rights and freedom.

Thus, the development of the American consumer society and the political constraints of McCarthyism made 1950s a depressing era, in which Americans were suffering from a collective nervous breakdown. At that time, people didn't have courage to maintain their individualities and dared not talk with their own voices. Everything in the American society, including its most privileged and educated children's "great expectations", seemed to be under control and unavoidable. Success in universities was just a meaningless prelude to future careers. Thus, the "silent generation" became the most vivid and revealing title of young people during this period. They were subject to every social depression and bondage, lost the passion and ideals of young people and became the "abnormal children" created by the affluent society of the 1950s. American campuses in the 1950s were oppressive. A survey shows that students were scared, and oath of allegiance and repression of radical liberalism on campus were common. There were two types of students in universities: managerial type and intellectual type. The former was keen on business, while the latter was keen on studies and hid in the ivory tower far away from politics.

What they had in common is that they separated values from the goals, evaded social responsibilities and didn't believe in social changes. But, the "silent generation" who benefited from the booming post-war economy was in another fashion, that is, the fanatical pursuit of material pleasures. In this environment, youth culture developed rapidly, which, with its own characteristics, habits, customs, language and idol worship, made continual impact on the traditional value system stressing thrift and self-discipline. So, the protestant ethic and puritan spirit, the American traditional values, tended to decline. However, the prevalence of hedonism didn't mean it had replaced the old value system. On the one hand, politicians, teachers, evangelists still continued to propagate the protestant ethic, while on the other, the mass media were trumpeting hedonism. The cultural rupture was already obvious and wide enough, but the new values hadn't yet been born. As for the youth, they were educated under the old value system in schools and universities, but encouraged by the society to consume and given such goods as rock and roll albums rejected by formal education. Thus, in the process of gradually deepening cultural anomie, the passionate Beat Generation went up on the historical stage. They reflected on the phenomenon of cultural anomie in the consumer society and tried to propose solutions to social problems, which, apparently, was quite different from what the "silent generation" had formerly performed.

2. Rebel of the Beat Generation

The Beat Generation was a group of American post-World War II writers who came to prominence in the 1950s, as well as the cultural phenomena that they both documented and inspired. Central elements of "Beat" culture included rejection of received standards, innovations in style, experimentation with drugs, alternative sexualities, an interest in Eastern religion, a rejection of materialism, and explicit portrayals of the human condition.

The publication of Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* in 1956 marks a turning point in the history of Beat literature. The long poem is intended to be read aloud, almost chanted, a sort of return to an oral tradition that had been neglected in literature for a long time. The content of the poem raised eyebrows, and sparked an obscenity trial which challenged the definition of pornography in America. With *Howl*, Ginsberg takes the reader/listener on a tour of the underside of America. There are drug-addicts, drifters, prostitutes, and swindlers. There is a visceral rage against the system that requires conformity and selling-out. Foul language and slang are common throughout the work, as well as drug use and criminality. All of these things were shocking to the 1950s establishment. But for Ginsberg, he was simply following the path of his inspiration. He cited Walt Whitman as one of his greatest influences, and one can certainly hear echoes of Whitman's primitivism throughout Ginsberg's corpus of work. This poem, though regarded as "disgraceful" by orthodox literature of the 1950s, reflects the feelings of anger and excitement of the young people, and is the Bible of the Beat Generation and a manifesto of a new youth culture.

Kerouac's *On the Road* is also one of the most influential writings of the Beat Generation. This book describes a group of people traveling both geographically and spiritually in the country. In a dreary conservatism and mass consumption era, Kerouac described a life which was rid of social pressure and shackles. He saw obedience as a big problem in the postwar American society. In this society, everyone was doing what they thought they should do. Kerouac believed that in this society, people earned money and desperately accumulated material wealth, just like insects. He believed that the American society made people pay the price, but people didn't really know what they lost in their lives; they didn't know why they continued to do so or where to go. In his opinion, life for most Americans was pointless. The characters of *On the Road* are always in action and convey their dissatisfaction with life and excitement to get rid of the middle class restrictions. As the focal point of the American society, the middle class most typically reflects the spirit of the American nation, beliefs and values. However, in most of the postwar middle-class youth's eyes, the traditional beliefs were becoming increasingly disintegrated and no trace of new faith was in view. In panicky embarrassment, the countercultural mentality of the middle-class youth was accumulating power.

Kerouac expressed his expectation for the change of values in *Dharma Bums*: "I see a vision of a great rucksack revolution thousands or even millions of young Americans wandering around with rucksacks, going up to mountains to pray, making children laugh and old men glad, making young girls happy and old girls happier, all of 'em Zen Lunatics who go about writing poems that happen to appear in their heads for no reason and also by being kind and also by strange unexpected acts keep giving visions of eternal freedom to everybody and to all living creatures." His idea was that people should go on monk-like roam through simple living conditions to recognize themselves and the world, so to establish an independent critical spirit and living rule against the traditional middle-class life.

This idea could also be perceived in *On the Road*, but the "revolution" there is almost instinctive impulses and anarchism; Only in *Dharma Bums*, it truly becomes a philosophy of life. In Kerouac's opinion, the American society was impacted by materialism and obedience, and even universities were no exception. He believed that universities were only meeting places of the middle-class. In his view, money is not the key to happiness or success. Pleasures of life are simple and the meaning of it can be found in nature, even in the absence of material wealth, one can enjoy the pleasures of life. Whether a person has money or not does not matter, "He doesn't need any money, all he needs is his rucksack with those little plastic bags of dried food and a good pair of shoes and off he goes and enjoys the privileges of a millionaire in surroundings like this." He pointed out that a person might have all the money he needed but was still unhappy, because he hadn't got rid of the values of consumerism of the American society.

In behavior, the Beat Generation often took anti-moral and even masochistic ways such as drug abuse and sex as means to dispel one's inner anger and rebellious emotion. Due to the youth's social, political, economic and cultural status, as well as high-pressure atmosphere of an alien society after World War II, young people couldn't struggle with the powerful social mechanism, and the means they expressed their emotions and thoughts were very restricted, so they took some extreme ways to highlight their alienation from the mainstream society. Therefore, "the meaning of these extravagances does not at all lie in the contents of such behavior, but rather in its form of 'being different', of standing out in a striking manner and thereby attracting attention." In order to awaken the public, the Beat Generation often aroused attention and made their voices heard using straightforward, and even impulsive and provocative language, which in their early works was particularly evident. For the Beat Generation, though they still remained in the United States, they had become inwardly diaspora. They were a special kind of diaspora: They didn't want to participate in the life governed by the "die-hards".

However, the Beat Generation didn't fight against the die-hards. They didn't come up with their own ideas and action programs to compete with these die-hards. The importance of their rebellion is that it shows something was wrong with the bourgeois world. Although they did not cause too much damage to the American society, they in their own unique ways deconstructed the mainstream society and culture, and inspired the US rebellious generation in the 1960s. In the youth counterculture movement in the 1960s, many members of the radical groups such as Mark Rudd and Mario Savio with Weatherman and Huey Newton with Black Panther all grew up in the 1950s, when radical emotions continued to grow and rebellious atmosphere spread in the American society. As they got mellowed, they launched a movement to pursue freedom and democracy.

3. Conclusion and discussion

Although the Beat Generation in US in the 1950s has long gone, the emergence and rebelliousness of it tell us something which we should always bear in mind.

3.1 Spiritual oppression could be the root of the rebellious consciousness in a society with material prosperity

The rebellious consciousness and behavior of the American Beat Generation lie primarily in spiritual oppression, not material causes. This shows that economic growth and material abundance don't directly lead to social harmony. People in the environment of economic security are more likely to pursue post-materialist lifestyle and values. When the social reality is in stark contrast to people's aspirations, the rebellious consciousness will accumulate, and even develop into larger social conflicts.

3.2 Youth problems are generally macroeconomic, structural and social

The emergence of the American Beat Generation not only illustrates that young people of the 1950s came to the crossroad, but that the society came to the crossroad too, and that the traditional social system and mode needed to be changed. Therefore, in view of youth issues, it's necessary to analyze whether something is wrong with the social environment in which the youth live; in exploring the root causes of youth social problems, it should be noted that to find out the social forces and social relations behind social phenomena is also necessary. This, surely, is instructive for us to understand and respond to today's youth problems.

3.3 The imbalanced development of youth participation awareness and their participation opportunities is an important reason for youth rebellion

Young people are energetic, quick-witted, and tend to be skeptical of things, which allows them to suck up new ideas and new awareness while accepting a variety of cultures and values. They become increasingly aware of their differences from other social groups and are eager to go beyond previous achievements and constraints. However, due to practical conditions and limitations of youth themselves, the means and opportunities for youth to get involved in the society are relatively insufficient, which restricts the youth's desire to achieve historic mission and creates various forms of collisions and conflicts between the youth and the mainstream society. The emergence of the American Beat Generation in the 1950s is a reflection of the reality in which the youth's wishes to change social life and realize their ideals couldn't be well met. Therefore, to correctly respond to youth issues and continuously eliminate antagonism and conflicts between the youth and the society should be a major concern of the whole society in the process of modernization.

References

- A Brief History of the Growth of Suburbs. [Online] Available:<http://13d.cs.colorado.edu/systems/agentsheets/newvista/automobile/suburbia.html>.
- Altbach, Philip G. (1997). *Student Politics in America: a Historical Analysis*. New Brunswick, NJ, USA: Transaction Publishers.
- Cavallo, Dominick (1999). *A Fiction of the Past*. New York: Palgrave.
- Flacks, Richard (1971). *Youth and Social Change*. Chicago: Markham Publishing Company.
- Halberstam, David (1993). *The Fifties*. New York: Fawcett Columbine.
- Kerouac, Jack (1976). *On the Road*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Kerouac, Jack (1986). *The Dharma Bums*. New York: Penguin.
- Rahn, Josh (2011). *The Beat Generation*. [Online] Available: <http://www.online-literature.com/periods/beat.php>.
- Steven M. Tipton (1982). *Getting Saved from the Sixties*. California: University of California Press.
- The Beat Generation*. [Online] Available:<http://www.online-literature.com/periods/beat.php>.
- Wilson, Sloane (1955). *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Wolff, K.H. (ed. & trans.) (1950). *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*. New York: Free Press.