

THE BEAT GENERATION IN SOCIAL and CULTURAL CONTEXT

OZAN SELCİK¹

¹Department of Foreign Languages, Recep Tayyip Erdogan University
ozan.selcik@erdogan.edu.tr

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Abstract. *Post-war era significantly irreversibly changed the concept of the US nation and identity at all. The Great Depression in the 1930s had seriously affected the American Economy; however, the Second World War resuscitated the US economy. The USA became the world power; and in the postwar era, the Americans enjoyed an unprecedented personal prosperity and individual freedom. The widespread theories of Freudian psychology highlighted the individual's origin of mind and the seriousness of importance of the individual, which was also the social impact of World War Two. Secondly, gender issues were significant social matter of the American Society in the post-war America. Contributing much to changing concept of identity, the Beat Generation is one of the most significant results of the history of literature and literary movements during the post-war era. Thirdly, against the traditional methods of composition, together with the publication of Kerouac's *On the Road* in 1957, this period would be a newly bred movement in American Literature. The members of Beat Generation Literary Movement made an all-out effort to open up new possibilities of modern composition. The phrase 'to be on your own' is at the heart of our understanding of the aspect of the language that the Beat Generation Literary Movement had formed.*

Keywords: Post World War II; identity; Beat Generation;

1. Introduction.

'...and everything is going to the beat – It's the beat generation, it be-at, it's the beat of the heart, it's being heat and down in the world and like old-time lowdown and like in ancient civilizations the slave boatmen rowing galleys to a beat and servants spinning pottery to a beat... -Jack Kerouac

The Great Depression in the 1930s had seriously affected the American Economy; however, the Second World War resuscitated the economy. As a result, the United States of America became the world power; in the postwar era, the Americans enjoyed an unprecedented personal prosperity and individual freedom. After the Second World War, the face of the country had changed both socially and culturally. The increase in the number of those who had higher education, and the prevalence of TV let ordinary people access knowledge 'on their own' and in the end made them more sophisticated. Endless facilities and large and attractive suburban houses to consumerists let the middle class become more independent. The widespread theories of Freudian psychology highlighted the individual's origin of mind and the seriousness of importance of the individual. Birth control 'pill' liberated the women from the strict biological norms that they had always been the slaves of them. For the first time in the human history, many ordinary people got used to satisfactory life and could argue that there was an individual dignity hereafter.

2. Social and Cultural Repercussions of World War Two. Firstly, the revival of individuality was the social impact of World War Two. WWII and the Great depression had unprecedented effects on America. Lifestyles had been kept within bounds and this required an urgent need of social change. In the wartime, women were given the opportunity to do men's job. This opportunity proved that women could do

‘masculine’ jobs during the absence of men. However, the everlasting social conflict between men and women should carefully be discussed in the context of gender issues at time of warfare and post-warfare.

Gender issues were another significant social matter of the American Society during the 1950s. It was in this decade that men and women’s social roles had returned to its original, its stereotypical notions that once each sex had been required to do. During the WWII, unlike the lasting culture, the role of the women worker in the workplace had risen up whereas men were fighting in the war. After the war, when veterans came back their sweet homes, women faced setbacks in the business world. The two postwar years were very hard for women, as that two million women lost their jobs (Halberstam, 589). The women soon were forced to take over their traditional social roles as homemakers, notwithstanding with the fact that men began to take up on the workforce again. After being in the workforce during the war, women now were expected to be a good homemaker, a good mother and a wife. The thing that did not change was that many families supported themselves on one income. In traditional sense, it was unsurprising that most families again depended on one income, namely men’s, and there was no need for the women to work (Halberstam, 589).

When the war ended, the veterans of the war returned, America was ready ‘to enjoy life with Dwight David Eisenhower presiding over a nation both at peace and enjoying prosperity’ (Russell, 8). When veterans returned their homes, this situation resulted in a huge house crisis. It was because no new houses had been built in 20 years or so¹. This crisis, however, brought about two other results that were crucial for understanding the social issues of the 1950s. The house crisis began to push families to move to suburbia. This newly emerging community gradually appealed nearly all types of families catering to everyone through the lower middle-class to the upper class². By 1960, in fact, the number of homeowners reached over ten million³. Another result was the revival of the traditional roles of women just before the 1950s that women, for Halberstam, were isolated by this move and move away from their jobs and placing them amongst other women just like themselves. ‘In the home it was to a new, even an easier age, the good life without sweat’ (Halberstam, 496). The writer illustratively defined the basis of the consumerism. This new culture had all the options for women to stay as homemakers.

The postwar America happened to be defined as that ‘America had irrevocably changed’ (Russell, 8). As well as gender issues, economic situation of the society contributed much to the social change, and the new movement ‘Beat Generation’ in the end. Before discussing the new generation, I would like to focus our attention to the social changes contributed to the origin of the Beat Movement. “Never before had there so total and dramatic a transformation of a portion of the landscape, so sudden an evolution in habits, not such a flowering of popular architecture.’ J.B. Jackson⁴, ‘considered to be America’s greatest (...) writer on the forces that shaped the nation⁵’, obviously indicated in Landscape Magazine concerning the presentation of the automobile industry to the American Society that ‘Americans had the chance to experience the mobility for the first time thanks to vehicles’ (Bischoff, 39) This rapid pace of the technological advances of this period and its social, cultural and literary reflections would suddenly transform the landscape in question after the Great Depression, and the new community would be established in this landscape.

The establishment of the new communities benefited another industry, as it is aforementioned: automobile business. As they began to live away from the city centers, jobs, schools, there had been an increasing need of cars. The need for this type of transportation gave a rise to need for cars. General Motors and other car companies produced roughly eight million new cars per year during the Fifties⁶. This situation surprised even the people working at General Motors: No one at GM, Halberstam states, could ever have dared forecast so much prosperity over such a long period of time (Halberstam, 487). The new motto of this prosperity is ‘success begat success’ (Halberstam, 487). To exemplify this success of GM, 49.3 million motor vehicles were registered when the decade began, 73.8 when it ended, and half of them sold by General Motors.

3. The Beat Generation. As mentioned already, the social transformation formed a new generation: the Beat. At the end of the spectrum, there were teenagers. Halberstam states in his book: the Fifties that thirteen million teenagers were in the country. These teenagers constituted the new generation as they broke away from their parents. This breaking led them to define themselves in new ways: music⁷. During the fifties, beginning with the revolutionary change of American Music, the society faced unprecedented radical transformation especially in aspects of race and music, the kind of music mainly between the African-American artists. The new decade (the 1950s), as scholars so call it, is 'a radical challenge to the rigid color line in American popular music and entertainment' and a cultural revolution as well. This revolutionary moment of the 1950s can be defined as a rise in Black artists and their music. Another important moment in this challenge is ideological intermixing of white artists, white audiences, black artists and black audiences⁸. An assistant professor of sociology, Paul Lopes' definition of the perspective and the content brought into mind the new music form: Rock and Roll (Lopes).

Rock and Roll was a new form of music including pop, jazz, rhythm and blues; namely 'a rigid color line' (Lopes). It appeals to all cultures and this 'beat' became 'hit' among teenagers immediately after its emergence. This form of music has been named after an old blues song, which sang, 'My baby rocks me with a steady roll'⁹. Unlike the old slow, sentimental melodies, which reflect the hard times of the war, rock and roll is energetic and 'get the music back to feet'¹⁰. Became the legends of Rock and Roll, Elvis Presley, Bill Haley and Chuck Berry changed the ongoing mood of the people not just in America but also around the world. Slightly different from other companions, Elvis Presley was known as 'the king of Rock and Roll.' As it has already been stated, Rock and Roll had a powerful effect on society, but especially on the young generation. It is because they had a desire for rebellion.

As Paul Lopes strikingly describes the precise scene of the 1950s that ideologically intermingling of the artists under the framework of this cultural movement what Norman Mailer calls it 'The White Negro'¹¹. As 'the White Negro,' (Mailer) Mailer defines his new character 'hipster' and his new doctrine 'Hipsterism.' Norman Mailer, however, particularly used the very concept of the hipster in his riveting essay 'White Negro' in 1957. He appreciably outlined the characteristics of the new rebellious man in detail. He has a rebellious instinct and his eyes are wide open. As David Kamp¹² defined in his essay on the White Negro Problem (New York Times, 2004), the word 'hip' derives from the Wolof term 'hepi' or 'hipi' meaning 'to see' or 'to open one's eyes.' Not to mention his awareness of what is revolving around, the hipster has his own cultural and social norms that he established on his own. This is what Mailer calls this phenomenon, the American Existentialist. The underlying principles of existentialism are that one creates moral and ethical values through his choices and actions. According to his newly established norms, there is no right and wrong until he makes his choice. In addition, to hearken Mailer, in order to be an existentialist, there are some prerequisites. He juxtaposed these conditions: one must be able to feel oneself; one must know one's desires; one must be aware of the character of one's frustration... To sum up, the common denominator for being existentialist is 'the individual' and 'the individual's own choices.'

In one-way or another, the hipsters were individualistic. They wanted to break away from conformity as it is already discussed. This young generation, unlike the previous generation, had not seen America in a depression or in the war. Economy was on the upheaval since the Great Depression. This new generation was surrounded by Rock and Roll that 'caused teenagers to question authority and their lives'¹³. One can directly come to this idea that the new generation would not think that the life was perfect as they were rebellious;

they question everything; and they did not plan out their future. This would give them the sense of questioning which in the end would drive the society nuts: "Offer them what they secretly want and they of course immediately become panic-stricken" (Kerouac, Part 3, Ch. 5). In conclusion, they became the new movement in the society and did not resemble the previous generation that is "what made the Fifties a turning point".

One of the most significant arguments in the history of literature and literary movements of the 1950s is the Beat Generation. It is arguably difficult to ignore this idea that 'the cores of this literary and social phenomenon were three men -Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and William S. Burroughs' (Russell, 7). These leading characters were 'the core of a rebellion to the American post-second world war society,' namely known as the 'Beat Generation.' In addition to first definition of 'beat,' Allen Ginsberg defines in an issue of the journal *Friction* in 1982, was originated from 'a remark by Jack Kerouac, un-naming of his generation.' Ginsberg compared his generation with the lost generation writers (Ernest Hemingway, Francis Scott Fitzgerald) that his generation was 'nothing but a beat generation' (Ginsberg, 50-52).

The Beat Generation became the central issue for the 1950s, since the Beat Phenomenon 'transformed American society.' Allen Ginsberg was one of these 'beats'. For him, beat means emptied out, exhausted or else, finished. For Kerouac, 'beat' was 'connected to words like beatitude and beatific.' Beat, moreover, musically means the depressive beats like in jazz, beatitude or being blessed, on the other, it refers to 'beat up' echoing being exhausted or beaten up. The word 'beat' is also said to have derived from the word 'beatitude.' The people constitute this group called 'Beat Generation.' It refers to a group of friends (as Ginsberg, Carr, Kerouac and Burroughs are friends) who had worked together on poetry, prose from the mid-forties to late fifties.' Moreover, Ginsberg 'refers to the broader influence of literary and artistic activities of poets, filmmakers, painters, writers, and novelists ' who "refreshed the long-lived bohemian cultural tradition in America" (Ginsberg, 50-52). For Ginsberg, there are essential parts of beat generation such as spiritual liberation, sexual revolution; liberation from censorship, decriminalization of drugs (this partly refers to aforementioned birth control pills), evolution of R&B, the spread of an ecological consciousness (respect for everybody regardless of his race, color), opposition to the military-industrial machine civilization. Beats inspired from jazz, eastern religions or from a bum life. Beat poetry was the most heterodox literary form in the United States of America; but the senses of patriotism remains. Ginsberg revolutionized the traditional poetry in his poem 'Howl' (1956):

*I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical
naked, dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry
fix, angel headed hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry
dynamo in the machinery of night.
Allen Ginsberg, Howl, For Solomon, Part I*

In a certain way, as the new generation did, the desire for the autonomous work of art shaped the new generation. The desire for the autonomous work of art faded in the desire to replicate life. Published in 1957, Jack Kerouac's riveting novel, *On the Road*, tells us of these things. Kerouac, documenting his journey around America, written in three weeks rich of different experiences, calls his work "an improvisational Beat prose." Professor Amy Hungerford, a professor from Yale University, discusses in her class that replication of desires, in fact, meant the replication of the experience the writer himself had had.

Literarily, the publication of Kerouac's *On the Road* in 1957 "signaled the emergence of a new movement in American Literature" (Hopkins, 279). To continue with Hopkins's ideas, along with Allen Ginsberg's 'Howl' in 1956, Kerouac's *On the Road* brought about a counter-culture bubbling in such a conservative frame of the 1950s. Against the traditional methods of composition, the members of Beat Generation Literary Movement made an all-out effort to open up new possibilities of modern composition. Kerouac's *On the Road* and Ginsberg's *Howl* are two of those works of art of Beat Generation in the Fifties. To further this newly emerged culture; needless to say, they needed a new language to express themselves in this culture, which in the end came to be called 'hip language' (Ginsberg, 50-52). To exemplify this unique language: "'Man, I'm beat,' meaning being without money and without a place to stay; 'would you like to go to the Bronx Zoo?' 'Nah, man, I'm too 'beat.' I was up all night,' meaning to be exhausted, sleepless, wide-eyed perceptive,

rejected by the society he was used to live in and to be on your own (one of the basis of this movement). The phrase 'to be on your own' is at the heart of our understanding of the aspect of the language that the Beat Generation Literary Movement had formed. What the language of the Beats intended to write was 'to make the language totally autonomous, to separate from the world' (Hungerford, Lecture on Jack Kerouac at Yale University). However, the notion of creating an autonomous work of art enabled us to deeply get in the Beats. Hungerford's phrase of autonomous work of art can be characterized through the term Ginsberg had already made. With his companions, Ginsberg desired for 'liberation of words from censorship' (Ginsberg, 50-52). Their desire for being free was obviously reflected through their works of art.

3. Conclusion. In this respect, in conclusion, we can state that Kerouac's relentless seeking sense is at the heart of our understanding Kerouac's work (Hungerford). What is interesting in this writing is that Kerouac together with Ginsberg and his other 'hip' friends became the name of the transformation in the 1950s. Despite the negative results of the Great Depression and WWII, sudden evolution in habits, flowering of new social communities could also be defined as that for the first time in American society, people saw a rapid change of technological advances in the Fifties and its social, cultural and literary reflections transformed this landscape forever. 'Cozy' 1950s, safe, secure notions of the Fifties affected American society to feel that the decade the 1950s were the happiest time in America, cherished by all people leaving behind good memories. In addition to the affluence of the fifties, they were the Beats who became the voice of the younger generation of the Fifties who did not appreciate their parents' 'fake optimism' anymore.

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