

FROM BEATNIKS TO HIPPIES TO US: A BEATIFIC STUDY OF POPULAR CULTURE

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Abstract: *Of the things we notice in popular culture nowadays, few have had such a lasting impact as the archetype of the misunderstood genius, the pursuit of happiness, peace and love, and everyday poetry. We see that in much of the civilized world ideals of individuality, spirituality and anti-establishment find a strong following, and we may feel inclined to ask ourselves what group is responsible for this rippling effect. This inquiry inevitably leads us to two major stages in the cultural and social development of the aforementioned demographic, namely the Beat Generation and the hippies. The present paper not only explores the particularities of the beatniks and the hippies and their respective backgrounds, but also analyses the transition from the Lost Generation to beatniks, hippies and, finally, contemporary society. The study falls under the category of Cultural Anthropology and utilises both approaches of Ethnohistory and Ethnology, as well as literature analysis, in hopes of augmenting our understanding of several crucial pillars of popular culture and the unique ways they continue to shape communities. Several conclusions are drawn, covering the relevance of the two movements as anti-war and anti-establishment vectors and the transition of their values into social and environmental policies.*

Keywords: *The Beat Generation, hippie, popular culture, Kerouac, Ginsberg*

1. Introduction

Surging from the political and social turmoil of the 1950's, a group of close friends spearheaded a movement of lifestyle and art the likes the world had never seen before. Both their close-knit community and the cultural manifesto that they documented and inspired took the name of the Beat Generation.

The term of "Beat Generation" was coined by Jack Kerouac, in 1948, to label an open-minded, anti-conformist youth movement in New York. At first said to depict a state of skepticism and weariness, this notion was quickly refuted by Kerouac, who explained the origin of the name was inspired by concepts such as "upbeat", "beatific", and if one was part of that movement it implied he was "on the beat".

The Beat Generation's riveting features were found in its disposition towards alternative forms of sexuality, extensive consumption of recreational drugs, hostility towards materialism, profound interest in Eastern spirituality and the continuous pursuit of joyful, unbound means of expression and being.

When thinking of prominent examples of Beat literature, Allan Ginsberg's *Howl* (1956), William S. Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* (1959) and Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) are the first ones that come to mind. As a result of *Howl* and *Naked Lunch* being put on obscenity trials, the vanguard of the Beat Generation became known as a gathering of artists that took on the role of bohemian hedonists, indulging in non-conformity and unconventional creativity. These trials did, however, lead to a liberalization of publishing in the United States (Charters, 2003: 19).

The original Beat Generation nucleus emerged in New York, only to end up reunited, in the 1950's, in San Francisco. There, they became acquainted with and befriended figures associated with the San Francisco Renaissance.

By the 1960's, the movement underwent certain changes and features of the expanding Beat Generation message were incorporated in the hippie counterculture.

By offering a depiction and chronological events of this transition, the current paper's purpose is to explore not only the defining characteristics of the Beat Generation and the hippie movement, but also to bring to attention the main points of transition and to pinpoint the features that dominated both cultures. Particular attention will also be given to their differences, as well as their impact on today's society and popular culture. This analysis will perhaps aid the reader in understanding not only the "beatific" effect of the writings of mavericks the likes of Allen Ginsberg and William S. Burroughs or Jack Kerouac on hippies, but on modern American society as a whole.

2. Methodology

The present study employs qualitative research methods, as quantitative data is not particularly relevant to the topic at hand, nor is it likely to be collected in any form compatible with the scope of the research. Although the sample size can be considered of gargantuan dimension, of roughly three generations, we believe qualitative data, collected with the aid of Cultural Anthropology research tools such as Ethnohistory and Ethnology, is best for the study of a group whose true creed was rooted in individualism.

We began the search for an answer to a question as old as time ("Where did it all go?") by tackling the burden of contemplating a few generations who have transitioned into a different identity. The beatniks and hippies may be de-facto gone in a cultural sense, but their elder, transformed selves in many cases still exist. Just as a historian may ask himself where exactly history ends and the present begins, so did we attempt to pinpoint the bridge between the Lost Generation and the Beat Generation and, finally, the hippie movement and contemporary society. This pursuit was facilitated by employing the ethnohistorical approach, looking up official records, recounts and literature, both by and about the beatniks and hippies. By using their own accounts and external observers, we hope that we have managed to portray a reality as close to their truth as possible.

Ethnology has proved to be a secondary valuable tool in our approach, as the entire point of the paper is to find similarities, differences and popular culture influences of the Beat Generation and the hippie movement. By understanding the transition that the beatniks and hippies underwent, we can appreciate that many similar transformations happen in our day and age as well and it is important to reach a certain level of cultural traceability in order to understand how communities affect each other.

Finally, by scrutinizing the available literature, we can engage in a cross-cultural comparison, as the Beat Generation in particular had a strong literary identity and no tool is better to understand their (anti)social message than linguistic analysis.

3. Understanding the Beat

If one were to pinpoint the riveting stages of the Beat Generation, two frames could serve that purpose, two axes of Jack Kerouac's perception of the moment and

what it stood for. The first is a nefarious time in the history of the movement, namely the unfortunate events of the murder of David Kammerer, the incarceration of daredevils Gregory Corso, Lucien Carr and Neal Cassady, the collision with mental institutions that Allen Ginsberg and others like him underwent and the untimely death of Joan Burroughs (Stephenson, 1990: 3). These troubled waters may have shattered other movements, but beatniks were a resilient lot, and their misery is, as some believe, the very fuel of counterculture. If one needs to understand the spirit of that age, it is enough to take heed of Jack Kerouac's words, who stated that " (...) our battered suitcases were piled on the sidewalk again; we had longer ways to go. But no matter, the road is life." (Kerouac, 2011: part 3, ch.5) reverberating with the solitude of his wanderings. William Burroughs, notorious for his addiction to heavy drugs, declared, on a similar note, that pure desperation was bound to lead to change (Burroughs, 1987), signaling both the plight of the beatniks and the grandeur of what was to come.

Moving on, Kerouac's "beatific" vision materialized in the Beat Generation finally revealing itself to the wider audience, who was swift to internalize and live their message. Not unlike a Phoenix bird rising from its own ashes, the main figures behind the Beat turned their lives around and used their intellectual wanderings for creative purposes, massifying the Beat Generation's social message (Stephenson, 1990:4). A few years later, this vibration would bloom into the very ethos of the Flower Children, as they attempted to perfect a way of living and feeling direct opposite to the horrors of the brooding Vietnam War. As Gregory Corso emerged from the confines of the jailhouse, something in his own spirit was as well liberated, with him observing that "If you believe you're a poet, then you're saved." (Watson, 1995: 123) This would later become Hunter S. Thompson's "crest of a high and beautiful wave" (Thompson, 1990: 153), the alternative lifestyle that drew so many.

"By a generation," wrote F. Scott Fitzgerald, "I mean that reaction against the fathers which seems to occur about three times in a century. It is distinguished by a set of ideas, inherited in moderated form from the madmen and outlaws of the generation before; if it is a real generation it has its own leaders and spokesmen, and it draws into its orbit those born just before it and just after, whose ideas are less clear-cut and defiant." (Stephenson, 1990: 4) Taking F.Scott Fitzgerald's definition further, we can say that the beatniks were not only a movement and a generation, but the very broken heart of a generation. The First World War had ended not long prior to the inception of the movement, and its scars were still carried by those who had served and the ones who were left to suffer growing up through the recession that followed. The young men who had served in the war came back home broken and full of terrors, so much that the society which seemed to go on seamlessly caused them pain (Strauss and Howe, 1991: 247-260). If the U.S. Army mourned its Lost Battalion, the 554 men of the 77th Division who had been surrounded and cut down by German forces (McCullum, 1919: 49), then the U.S. had its Lost Generation – these men may not have died in a literal sense, but something inside of them had surely been slaughtered and had festered in the gloomy trenches of Europe. It is this Lost Generation that morphed into the Beat Generation, with Paul Bowles even describing some of its would-be members as being "the new lost generation". (Stephenson, 1990: 5)

What the Beat Generation took from the Lost Generation was the loss of conventional motivation and ideals, a by-product of the harsh realities of the war. Figures such as Eugene Jolas, Harry Crosby and Hart Crane greatly influenced beatnik

minds with their impactful discourses, and Henry Miller's hopelessness set, among others, the foundation of Beat intellectual aesthetics (if such a thing has ever existed). Struggling with the spiritual void of the soldier, they eventually made baby steps towards the refuge that new values offered, the perspectives of new forms of spirituality and an alternative culture or, better said, a counterculture. Seeing how much destruction the conventional values of their parents and governmental leaders could sow, the Beats drifted away from belligerent discourse specific to the Second World War and the Cold War and avoided tackling the popular, propagandistic values. Instead, their take was deeply personal and, in a sense, metaphysical. Their minds knew not of geographical borders and their social sensibilities went much further than political affiliation or class denominator. Whereas other movements were class-oriented, beatniks came from all walks of life – what united them was a disdain towards traditional culture and blending in with it, against sweeping under the rug cases of racial and gender-based discrimination, gratuitous violence and, finally, against materialism (Dempsey, 2010:211).

A common feature found among soldiers and in general workers of extremely demanding jobs is desensitization, a psychological process by which a response is repeatedly elicited in situations where the action tendency that arises out of the emotion proves to be irrelevant (Raypole: <https://www.healthline.com/health/systematic-desensitization>). Both the Lost Generation and the following Beat Generation engaged in drug and alcohol consumption, frequent vices of those suffering from desensitization, in some cases the last tools capable of illiciting a response from one who is emotionally hardened and drained. These substances and the pursuit of increasingly extreme experiences were the point of contact between the two generations. Though excess remained a driving force behind the Beat movement, oftentimes with tragic consequences (such as the case of Lucien Carr), what eventually outlined the identity of the Beat Generation and separated them from the Lost Generation was their involvement with spirituality, a step one may see as the first in a long line of stages towards a complete healing. This road would be later walked on and taken to an entirely different level by the hippies.

Though the Lost Generation turned to drugs, alcohol, music and daredevil acts, it was the Beat Generation that, in its spiritual awakening process, truly flirted with bohemianism, drawing from the old romantics an inclination towards aesthetic values, an antimaterialistic ethic and a vehement refusal to go back to the regimentation still promoted by their peers. They, as the romantics, saw civilization turn into something wicked and sought release and evolution solely through the power of art, particularly writing and poetry. They proposed not a political upheaval or a carefully-orchestrated revamp of society, but, as Gregory Stephenson (1990, p.6) notes, "a revolt of the soul, a revolution of the spirit".

If one wonders where the hippies got the bulk of their aesthetic and philosophical drive, as well as their resistance to institutionalized discourse, one need look no further than the beatniks, who in turn took inspiration from the surrealists and dadaists, according to the same Gregory Stephenson (1990, p.6). Western values had failed both beatniks and hippies and their response was not to form a divergent political front, as politics were seen as part of the worldly psychosis, but to constitute a different intellectual, philosophical and cultural approach. What the beatniks stood for and the hippies later inherited was a distaste of consumerism, an urge to escape

the apathic confines of everyday life, a need to find a meaning beyond war, numbers and political ideas, and, finally, to escape the hamster wheel of conformity. They disregarded the whole for the self and shunned the tools that threatened to dissolve the individual into a product and blood-crazed society (Oldmeadow, 2004: 260).

When thinking of the Beat Generation, we can say that its uniqueness was born from the unique social, cultural and economic climate of a country ravaged by seemingly neverending warfare and internal conflict. The Lost Generation passed onto them their divergence from conventional values, bohemianism, surrealism and dadaism, and provided the much-needed escape. They, the Beat Generation, would filter these, overindulge in them and process them up to the point that they would become the pillars of a movement popular culture has yet to forget – the hippies.

4. From Beatniks to Hippies

Towards the beginning of the 1960's, many of the Beat Generation souls made the transition into a new type of counterculture, shifting from "beatific" to "hip", giving birth to the movement henceforth known as the hippies. The exact moment of the transition is blurry, as many of the beatniks remained beatniks and flirted only partially with the new movement, but if such a moment is to be named, it is in all probability the schism that occurred between Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, the latter blaming Ginsberg for using the 1960s politically radical movements as nothing but an outlet to be "spiteful" (Vidal, 1995: 256)

As the Beat movement transitioned into the hippie counterculture, some of its features took on a grand, oftentimes eerie turn. The hippie movement was born in campuses across the United States and made its way to other major English-speaking countries, such as Canada and Britain and is etymologically linked to two of the original Beats, Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, who were declared to be "hip" or, in other words, attuned to the changes and the spirit of the society they were living in, if not directly responsible for them (Dudley, 2000: 193-194). As the Beats of the 1950's became increasingly exposed to the brewing storm which would be the Vietnam War, their attitude, already anti-establishment, grew into a full-fledged dissent, thus outlining their transition into the hippie movement, chiefly associated with resistance and disapproval regarding U.S. operations in Vietnam (Oldmeadow, 2004: 264). It should be noted that the hippie movement was, for the most part, apolitical, unlike a demographic they are frequently confused with, the yippies. The yippies, with representatives such as Jerry Rubin and Abbie Hoffman, were political activists banded under the banner of the Youth International Party (Krassner, 1994:156).

From the get-go, the hippie movement did not see themselves as part of the typical American middle-class, but rather a counter-culture that abhorred the concept of material possessions and holier-than-thou judgement. They were drifters, free spirits with a lifestyle that preferred its roots to be mostly spiritual. Their ideology was reflected in their aspect, where long hair and loose clothing, some of Oriental inspiration, were trademarks of the community. Men usually kept their faces unshaven and opted for clothes traditional American society viewed as effeminate – both hippie men and women chose bright or pastel colours and unisex accessories (Katz, 1988: 125). Here we can observe a major shift from beatnik aesthetics, who preferred a more simple, subdued look. Moving on, the hippie way of life was not limited to foregoing material possessions and choosing dreamy aesthetics – they also applied their original

views on living conditions and personal relationships, where they not only shared their beds and living spaces, but also their partners (Alexander: <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna19053382>). Those of the Beat movement planted the seeds of this pursuit of personal freedom, but the hippies took it to a whole different level. Their lifestyle was simple, and their desire to return to the origins took an almost druidic turn, with most of them relishing vegan diets and alternative medicine. This ethos was materialised in the form of *The Whole Earth Catalog*, a 1968 guidebook for the would-be hippie (Kirk, 2007:48). As it is to be expected, this lifestyle did not sit well with corporate America and workplace policies, therefore most members of the hippie community were jobless or doing odd jobs, not engaged in higher education and small-time peddlers. The few ones that were, to some extent, economically successful, were the ones who specialised in delivering products to other hippies.

The hippie movement was vehemently opposed to violence and a firm believer in open, free, unconditional love. Its stance against U.S. participation in the Vietnam War survives to this day in the popular catchphrase “Make love, not war” and the many pictures of young, beauteous women placing flowers in American soldiers’ rifles, a gesture fitting of the nickname the hippies carried – Flower Children. The hippies made it their mission to disarm not through overwhelming strength, but overwhelming love, complete acceptance and non-discrimination. It was due to their adoration of love and freedom that many Oriental religions and spiritual views entrenched themselves in American society, most notably beliefs such as Buddhism, Hinduism and Taoism. The hippies themselves mostly practiced these at a superficial and aesthetic level, frequently mixing them, but they did popularise them enough in order to peak the interest of the middle-class. Most often these spiritual practices were enhanced through the consumption of recreational and psychoactive drugs, mainly cannabis and LSD, trips which were meant to provide a means for “consciousness expansion” (Yablonsky, 1968: 298).

Other than their social and spiritual views, the trait that perhaps shaped the hippie culture the most was music. Artists such as Bob Dylan spoke of ways to fight the stark reality of the 60’s, while Joan Baez reflected on the pointlessness of chasing material possessions. Jefferson Airplane, frequently cited as a quintessential element of the hippie movement by Hunter S. Thompson, and Rolling Stones made the movement appealing to rebellious and lost youth, voicing in a sense the frustration and escape into art of an entire generation terrified by the horrors of the Vietnam War.

Perhaps what the hippie movement is best known for, other than peaceful resistance and the chasing the concept of absolute freedom, are its music festivals, oftentimes gargantuan gatherings of flower children, celebrating existence itself in a drug-induced frenzy of art and lovemaking. 1967 marked the first event of this kind, San Francisco taking the guise of the unofficial hippie capital. While beatniks were rarely found in large gatherings, hippies thronged in a 500,000 people event at Woodstock, where all the staple artists intermingled to perform a three-day music festival which would survive through the years as the chief expression of the movement itself (<https://www.woodstock.com/>). The hippies’ penchant for gathering in the name of peace and love subsequently led them to champion to the cause of the natural environment, certain groups going as far as to become academically involved in the matter. Universities and college campuses became regular sites for hippie speeches, where they found massive support from students and open-minded faculty

alike. This form of activism eventually led to the celebration of the first Earth Day in 1970

(Lewis:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20100328214819/http://www.epa.gov/history/topics/earthday/01.htm>).

Author of *Hell's Angels* (1967) and the better-known *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1971), Hunter S. Thompson, the father of gonzo journalism, is a priceless trove of knowledge when it comes to understanding both the euphoria of belonging to the hippie movement and the time of its loss of momentum, around the mid 1970s. In his acclaimed book, he ruminates that "History is hard to know, because of all the hired bullshit, but even without being sure of history it seems entirely reasonable to think that every now and then the energy of a whole generation comes to a head in a long fine flash, for reasons that nobody really understands at the time—and which never explain, in retrospect, what actually happened." (Thompson, 1990: 152) As Thompson aptly implies, the movement came to a halt by the 1970s, after the Vietnam War had ceased. It was not repression or catharsis that ended the hippies, but rather the realisation of many members, who had reached maturity, that the hippie way of life was unsustainable in the long term. Flower children cut their hair, strapped on their neckties and transitioned into the life of the yuppie (young urban professional), taking on a whole different kind of dream – a dream of a good career, stability and social success. These professionals did, however, carry on many of the hippie views, and were far more accepting when it came to sexuality and aware of the delicate state and needs of the environment. In a sense, one can say they took the best from both worlds and marked the beginning of true contemporary civilized society.

5. Conclusions

Who were the beatniks and the hippies? When was the exact moment the hippie movement was born? How much of the beatniks did the hippies take on and what did they pass forward? What did it all mean?

These are questions no one will be perhaps able to ever answer. Not in an accurate manner, anyway.

The Beat Generation was a bifocal point in the evolution of human values and beliefs in a war-torn dystopia and society, whose desperation to label and organize, coming from a life in crisis, had robbed its young inhabitants of the ideals so necessary for their coming-of-age. The bleakness of living in that world had urged them to initially abandon all hope and later to seek perspectives and visions compatible with basic human needs. The Lost Generation may have still been living in the trenches, but the beatniks sought a way out, as they soon discovered that pure hedonism was not enough to sustain a life of the mind and heart. They escaped into spirituality, culture and aestheticism, cementing the way for a new path, a path which would turn out to be a vital outlet for the youth traumatized and disgusted with the ever-looming threats of violence and regimentation.

After many of the beatniks had healed their spirit, they abandoned the dark sunglasses and bland clothes for brighter colours and hope for the future of humanity. They became the first hippies. Unlike the Beat Generation, the hippies did not shy away from openly protesting against the shortcomings of American society and government and, while they were in essence apolitical, their stand had a major impact on both U.S. politics and social reform, such as advances in the sectors of civil rights and anti-war

policies. One could say that the hippies, as a counterculture, provided the natural means to balance out the general zealotry that fuelled the Vietnam War and, more importantly, served as a safe haven for youth and adults alike, fleeing an oppressive mindset and discriminatory hatred.

From a literary point of view, the 1960's and 1970's, apart from the writers normally associated with the Beat Generation and the hippies, produced a series of writers heavily influenced by these two countercultures, most notably Amiri Baraka (formerly known as LeRoi Jones), Tom Robbins, Thomas Pynchon and Ken Kesey. The entire literary genre of cyberpunk is believed by some to have been inspired by William S. Burroughs, Larry McCaffery stating that "... it should hardly be surprising that to discover that the work of William S Burroughs had a profound impact on both punk music and cyberpunk science fiction." (McCaffery, 1991: 305). The hippies reached way beyond the literary field, having a major influence on all facets of popular culture, particularly music (several types of rock and heavy metal), personal style and clothing, mass-scale festivals and the New Age movement, not to mention environmentalism.

Popular culture and society today greatly benefit from the building blocks of quality of life that the beatniks and hippies set down on their modern foundations. As to exactly how, we may never find out, as the beatniks and hippies themselves did not know how and even if they would be of help. They took the human condition for what it was and tried to make the best (or the worst) of every moment of it. It is perhaps this human dimension that is their most valuable legacy and the focus today on equality, social justice, the environment and youth participation. These values are not only relevant for the United States, but also major points of the 2019-2024 European Commission priorities (European Commission: https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024_en).

Finally, we can say that the beatniks and hippies might have intended to teach us the most important lesson of all: "Happiness consists in realizing it is all a great strange dream" (Kerouac, 2007: 657)

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