

BEATS AND PUNKS: CONFORMITY AND COUNTERCULTURE IN COLD WAR AMERICA

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Introduction

As the Cold War developed out of the aftermath of World War II, some organizations within the United States government deemed it necessary to project specific cultural ideals both domestically, and to the world at large. This resulted in some rather interesting bedfellows as the CIA became a de facto ministry of culture in the late 1940s and early 1950s.¹ The CIA and the U.S. State Department supported film projects, art exhibits and concerts designed both to project a favorable image of America abroad and to depict capitalism in a positive light.² With the encouragement of politicians and intellectuals like Nelson Rockefeller and Arthur Schlesinger, the government provided support to certain types of art that one might not associate with the conservative elements prominent in the federal government at that time, such as Abstract-Expressionism and modern jazz.

Closer to home, political and business factions promoted a lifestyle based on consumerism, patriotism and capitalism.³ The dissemination of these ideals in advertising, movies, and political pronouncements resulted in a perceived cultural conformity against which groups whom we now identify as “the counterculture” rebelled.⁴ Countercultural factions such as the Beats in the late 1940s and on into 1960s, gave voice to and acted out, a repudiation of what they saw as a bankrupt system of values. They rejected the requisite middle-class, nuclear-family suburban lifestyle, which was in turn supported and was supported by the increasingly consumer- based economy.⁵

Columnist Herb Caen jokingly named this group of countercultural advocates the Beatniks as a play on Russian terminology akin to “Sputnik.”⁶ The Beatniks grew out of the immediate post-war urban

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1. Kammen, Michael. “Culture and the State in America,” *The Journal of American History* 83, no. 3 (December 1996): 798.
 2. Saunders, Francis Stonor. *Who Paid the Piper: The CIA and the Cultural Cold War*. London: Granta Books. 1999, 1.
 3. Fried, Richard M. *The Russians are Coming, the Russians are Coming!: Pageantry and Patriotism in Cold War America*. New York: Oxford University Press. 1998, 20-22.
 4. Jamison, Andrew and Ron Eyerman. *Seeds of the Sixties*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994,
 5. Johnston, Allan. “Consumption, Addiction, Vision, Energy: Political Economies and Utopian Visions in the Writings of the Beat Generation.” *College Literature* Vol. 32 No. 2 (Spring, 2005): 107.
 6. John Arthur Maynard, *Venice West: The Beat Generation in Southern California* (New Brunswick:

landscape and formed enclaves in places such as Greenwich Village, Venice Beach, and San Francisco. They produced literature that on one hand hearkened back to the Romantic poets of the nineteenth-century like Walt Whitman, and on the other reflected the rhythms and sensibilities of modern jazz: bop and bebop.⁷ The Beats included socialists, drug users, practitioners of alternative religions and homosexuals. Almost all were in some way on the fringes of the societal mainstream and thus popular media often ridiculed or marginalized the movement. One example is in the television show *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis* which aired from 1959-1963. Bob Denver (aka Gilligan) portrayed Beatnik character Maynard G. Krebs as a lovable, ineffectual, unthreatening “rebel” with the requisite Beat goatee. This depiction effectively neutralized any potentially ominous aspect of such a character and helped to relegate the Beats’ social criticisms to the realm of satire and comedy.⁸

Much as the Beats reacted to the political and social environment of the 1950s, the punk rock scene developed from the mid-1970s to the early 1980s in part as a response to the post-Fordist economic challenges of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The United States was shifting from a labor intensive, manufacturing-based economy, into a white collar, service oriented economy. This ultimately resulted in a loss of relatively well paid union jobs, and an increase in lower paid, pension-less and often temporary service jobs. A phenomenon known as “stagflation” – a combination of high unemployment, high inflation and sluggish growth – became the byword for the economic troubles of the decade.⁹

While the origins of musical developments are notoriously difficult to pin down, some cultural and social historians consider punk rock to have begun in New York City circa 1975.¹⁰ The Punks symbolized a reaction against the perceived failure of the cultural, political, and economic ideals of American society. The social and economic gains that workers and their families realized throughout the 1950s and 1960s were collapsing, as was the nuclear family. Frustration with this state of affairs (in the U.S. and in Britain) and with both the mainstream ideals of society at large and the mainstream artistic–primarily musical–cultural situation at the time were all major factors in the development of the punk movement.¹¹

Both Punks and Beats saw themselves as torch bearers of an artistic integrity that countered the growing commercialization of an increasingly consumer-driven popular culture. Some believe these views represent unsupportable and unrealistic generalizations about the motivations of the participants, and to an even greater extent, the realities of the relationship between counterculture and consumer

Rutgers University Press, 1991), 100.

7. Maynard, 48.

8. Maynard, 2-3.

9. Bailey, Beth L and Dave Farber, Ed. *America in the Seventies*. University Press of Kansas, 2004, 59.

10. Moore, Ryan. *Sells Like Teen Spirit: Music, Youth Culture, and Social Crisis*. New York: New York University Press, 2010, 1.

11. Moore, Ryan. *Sells Like Teen Spirit: Music, Youth Culture, and Social Crisis*. New York: New York University Press, 2010, 6-9.

culture. Others, however, believe they don't go far enough in crediting the Beats and Punks for their roles at the beginning and end of a cultural movement that effectively questioned the very concept of mainstream culture.

In the book *Nation of Rebels*, Joseph Heath and Andre Potter take issue with the distinction between the counterculture and the consumer society it purports to rebel against. They insist that countercultural ideals will always be absorbed into society and become part of the mainstream. In this way they not only emphasize that the counterculture cannot be considered distinct from consumer culture, but also that those who focus on such a distinction do more harm than good to progressive ideals like civil rights and socio-economic equality. By rejecting or discounting the political and social realities and processes by which such positive progressive change is made, these "rebels" do damage to these causes and by extension, to the underclass and working classes.¹² Additionally, such critiques of consumerism can often ring hollow to those in the working class who due to political/economic legislation and frankly, due to the benefits of capitalism, have gained easier access to consumer goods.¹³ Manuel Luis Martinez supports this assertion in *Countering the Counterculture*, and takes the argument a step further when he states that concurrent with McCarthyism, the Beat movement was in part a reaction to the civil rights movement and other progressive movements that were gaining ground in the 1950s. He views it as a predominantly white male isolationist association that showed little support for the needs of minorities, women and the working class.¹⁴

Greil Marcus, author of *Lipstick Traces*, affirms some of these charges as they relate specifically to the punk movement. Using the Sex Pistols as an example, Marcus identifies a sensibility that does, in fact, ignore the "language of protest" by which musicians and other artists had historically called for change.¹⁵ Instead, in songs such as "Anarchy in the U.K." and "God Save the Queen" the Sex Pistols observed the state of society in the aftermath of the 1960s protest era and called into question the very structure of the social order, the legitimacy of its "rulers" and thus the ultimate ineffectuality of traditional protest methods.¹⁶ Further, sociologist Ryan Moore notes that part of the genius of the punk movement lay in its deconstruction of the very ideals and icons of consumer society such as safety pins, Vaseline, pornography, the British and American flags, all recycled and re-presented to society in

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12. Heath, Joseph and Andrew Potter. *Nation of Rebels: Why Counterculture Became Consumer Culture*. New York: Harperbusiness. 2004, 8-9.
 13. Ibid, 32.
 14. Martinez, Manuel Luiz. *Countering the Counterculture: Rereading Postwar American Dissent from Jack Kerouac to Tomas Rivera*. Winconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press. 2003, 15-16.
 15. Marcus, Greil. *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth-Century*. Harvard University Press, 1991 13.
 16. Ibid, 12.
 17. Moore, Ryan. "Postmodernism and Punk Subculture: Cultures of Authenticity and Deconstruction," *The Communication Review* 7 (2004): 313.

undisguised mockery.¹⁷

This paper will analyze different views of the countercultural movements that bookended the Cold War. It will show that while some of the charges against the Beats may hold true, the primary impetus for the movement was artistic and not political. What politics were of concern were related to personal civil liberties especially those peculiar to artists. One can criticize them more for self-absorption than conscious reactionary tendencies (with the exception of Jack Kerouac). Likewise, in contrast to Heath and Potter's assertions, I will identify works by some in the beat and punk movement that while no longer universally shocking, have still not ingratiated into the mainstream, even today. I will also demonstrate that while Martinez and Heath and Potter have valid criticisms of certain countercultural elements, there were artists who managed to remain decidedly outside the mainstream and yet were eloquent activists for progressive change in society. Finally, this study will propose that it is far from axiomatic that the mainstream ultimately absorbs and negates all radical art. In fact, the legacy of both the Beat and Punk movements is a model of artistic freedom independent of conventional, commercial culture.

Chapter 1

During the early years of the Cold War the United States advanced its attempts at cultural propaganda even beyond the level it utilized during World War II. Through a clever use of local and national pageantry, and through new and old types of media, an American mythology was codified that promoted the ideals of democracy and freedom, indelibly linked with a capitalist, consumer-based economy. From national events such as the Freedom Train - a travelling museum of American historical documents - and holidays like I Am an American Day, to local staged events such as mock communist takeovers sponsored by the American Legion,¹⁸ a pointed comparison was made between the American and Soviet ways of life. Thus encouraged, authors like Mickey Spillane created best-selling novels involving duplicitous communists,¹⁹ ²⁰ and groups such as the Catechetical Guild Educational Society of St. Paul Minnesota published comic books like *This is Tomorrow: America Under Communism* which depicted the American congress and media under communist control with those who resisted either enslaved or dead.²¹ Using such broad strokes, all of the above demonstrate the fears extant about the encroachment of communism.

18. Fried, 16, 67, 75.

19. Barson, Michael. *Better Dead than Red: a nostalgic look at the golden years of Russiaphobia, red-baiting, and other commie madness*. New York: Hyperion, 1992, 79.

20. Zinn, Howard. *A People's History of the United States*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2003, 436.

21. Barson, 50.

Television was a different story. This new medium was used in more subtle ways that did not always directly confront communism or the U.S.S.R., but worked hand in hand with the promotion of the American consumer-based culture and economy. One example was the General Electric (GE) TV Theater show which ran from 1954 to 1962, hosted by Ronald Reagan. As hosts, Reagan and his wife Nancy provided a picture of an ideal middle-class lifestyle. This lifestyle embodied a confidence in technological progress (as in the all-electric kitchen) and the betterment of home life through the acquisition of the latest consumer goods.²² Thus the vision of America projected through these media was one of a freedom-loving, democratic, middle-class existence where one's basic needs were satisfied via the maintenance of an essentially conformist consumer culture.

This is ultimately, however, an incomplete view of American culture during the early Cold War era. While there were corporate and political interests that had as their goal the creation of a commercialized and multi-level consumer culture operating in education and the arts, as well as the general marketplace,²³ there were examples in literature, film, music and television of reactions to this tendency. Andrew Jamison and Ron Eyeran in *The Seeds of the Sixties*, and Lay May in *Recasting America*, note that the economic difficulties of the Great Depression of the 1930s led to a certain amount of political and artistic unity, and show that this in turn resulted in real progressive change. However, the relatively affluent fifties were often characterized by "fragmentation and anxiety"²⁴ epitomized by the popularity of books like *Catcher in the Rye*, plays like *Death of a Salesman*, the advent of film noir, rock and roll and the political and social ambiguities reflected in television shows such as *The Twilight Zone*. All point to the fact that the supposed consensus about America's actions, and where it was headed as a society was neither deep nor universal.²⁵

Likewise, at the level of the State Department and the CIA there were movements afoot that, while strongly maintaining an anti-communist stance, as well as an interest in domestic conformity, exhibited an occasional artistic progressiveness to the rest of the world in order to promote a view of America that embodied the virtues of freedom of thought and expression.²⁶ Conservative intellectual art critic Clement Greenberg, and allies of the Non-Communist Left (NCL) Joseph Schlesinger and Nicholas Nabokov were but a few of the supporters of such action.²⁷ There were others who had been associated with communism in the 1920s and 1930s but who became disillusioned with the same following Stalin's

22. Raphael, Tim. "The Body Electric: GE, TV, and the Reagan Brand," *TDR* (1988-) 53, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 127.

23. Jamison, 12-13.

24. Jamison, 10-11.

25. May, Lary. Ed. *Recasting America: culture and politics in the age of cold war*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1989. 8..

26. Saunders, Francis Stonor. *Who Paid the Piper: The CIA and the Cultural Cold War*. London: Granta Books. 1999, 2.

27. Saunders, 63, 58.

purges and censures.²⁸ They supported the CIA-run covert campaign called the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF).²⁹ This was a program whose purpose was decidedly counter-communist, but at the same time maintained a relatively progressive cultural bent.³⁰ The CCF, which had a presence in thirty-five countries, published journals, held art exhibits, concerts and awarded prizes. In June of its inaugural year it adopted a declaration called the *Freedom Manifesto* which outlined its support of intellectual and artistic freedom, and its toleration of diverse opinion in opposition to totalitarian (communist) states.³¹

One of the CCF's methods in fighting the cultural Cold War was to showcase particular elements of the American avant-garde in order to counter the notion of the United States as a cultural follower, and show that a free society allowed an artistic liberty that the communist world and its push for Socialist Realism could not match.³² An example of the CIA/CCF's technique was the support of the New York Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), especially the exhibition of Abstract-Expressionists.³³ They accomplished this with the aid of Nelson Rockefeller, who was president of MoMA in the 1940s and 1950s³⁴ and who had long been a supporter of government funding for the arts.³⁵ The State department also made use of jazz music, especially that of black musicians whom they sent out on tour both to make an artistic statement and to counter the charges of racism that the Soviets made against the United States.³⁶

The situation in the United States at the beginning of the Cold War reflected an encroaching consumer culture supported by a growing middle-class, and bolstered by rapid technological development. In combination with an ideological enemy in the USSR and its communist allies, this state of affairs resulted in a certain amount of conformity both of purpose and of expression. However, an equally strong (if not equally perceived) reaction was a condition of anxiety that revealed itself in the art and media of the time. Some of this art the government deemed useful in waging the cultural Cold War and was supported domestically and exported abroad. Other art, such as that created by the Beats, both the government and the society at large viewed with suspicion, and as such it represented a decidedly countercultural trend.

28. Ibid, 1.

29. Ibid, 268, 270.

30. Ibid, 268

31. Ibid, 1, 83

32. Ibid, 254.

33. Saunders, 255-256

34. Ibid.

35. Howard, Brian David. "Between Avant-Garde and Kitsch: Pragmatic Liberalism, Public Arts Funding, and the Cold War in the United States." *Canadian Review of American Studies* 34. no. 3 (2004), 293.

36. Wagnleitner, Reinhold and Elaine Tyler May, ed. *Here, There and Everywhere: The Foreign Politics of American Popular Culture*. Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 2000, 7.

Chapter 2

The original Beat movement began in New York City. The Beat writers, influenced as much by modern jazz musicians like Charlie Parker as by current literary figures, created a style that often reflected improvisatory gestures as opposed more highly structured works. While the stereotype of the Beat poet reciting to bongos and a string bass was prevalent at this time, the improvisations of jazz musicians actually did inform the styles of many Beat poets. The freer improvisatory nature of bebop, as compared to swing and big band jazz, was inspirational to prominent Beat figures like Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, Larry Lipton and Stuart Perkoff.³⁷ The jazz of Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie, and later John Coltrane and Miles Davis, often involved long instrumental excursions that wrung and milked given themes and scales in an attempt to squeeze out their very essence. It was a far cry from the more structured and orchestrated swing style of the 1930s and 1940s. Poems such as Ginsberg's "Howl" and Michael McClure's "Ode to the Rose," with their spontaneous nature and the reiteration and development of their initial lyrical patterns, carried with them an improvisatory feel completely akin to the modern trends in jazz.

Often, but not always, the Beats' work carried with it radical political and sociological overtones implying dissatisfaction with the mores and structures of the current American government and society. An example is Michael McClure's "Mad Sonnet 13," written for Allen Ginsberg in 1964:

ON COLD SATURDAY I WALKED IN THE EMPTY VALLEY
OF WALL STREET

I dreamed with the hanging concrete eagles
And I spoke with the black-bronze foot of Washington.

I strode in the vibrations
of money-strength
in the narrow, cold, lovely CHASM.³⁸

McClure wrote this poem in the early days of the United States' involvement in the Vietnam War, and in it he links the politics of the federal government and the business interests of Wall Street.

Other poems like Ginsberg's *Howl* portray relatively explicit sexual themes and imagery in addition to radical political and sociological motifs.

Moloch! Solitude! Filth! Ugliness! Ashcans and unobtainable
Dollars! Children screaming under the stairways! Boys
Sobbing in armies! Old men weeping in the parks!

37. Douglas Malcom, "Jazz America: Jazz and African American Culture in Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*," *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (Spring, 1999): 85.

38. Michael McClure, *Huge Dreams: San Francisco and Beat Poems* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 75.

Moloch! Moloch! Robot apartments! invisible suburbs! skeleton
treasuries! blind capitals! demonic industries! spectral
nations! invincible madhouses! granite cocks! monstrous bombs!

Dreams! adorations! illuminations! religions the whole boatload
of sensitive bullshit!³⁹

As the subject of an obscenity charge lodged against San Francisco's City Lights bookstore owner Lawrence Furlinghetti, Ginsberg's *Howl* provided an important touchstone for American civil liberties. It premiered at the Six Gallery on October 7th, 1955. Furlinghetti, who published the work, was arrested shortly thereafter for disseminating obscene material.⁴⁰ The court ultimately acquitted him of all charges, as witnesses including poet and ostensible leader of the San Francisco Beats Kenneth Rexroth, testified to the artistic/literary nature of the work. Rexroth and others gave evidence to the fact that none of the supposed obscenity – and by extension the poem as a whole – had as its purpose arousal of sexual desires in those whom the work was likely to reach.⁴¹ This case became the precedent that courts have used ever since in defining obscenity from a legal standpoint. It was not enough merely to reflect offensive words or ideas, it had to be proven to appeal to and encourage the prurient natures of both the intended audience and those who were likely to access the work.⁴²

In addition to the group representing San Francisco's North Beach area, Southern California's Venice Beach was also home to a contingent of Beats who coalesced around poet/author Larry Lipton. Chicago-born Lipton and his wife, known professionally as Craig Rice, had success writing detective novels together, but Lipton wanted the literary world to take him seriously as a poet.⁴³ Venice Beach had the bohemian charm (as well as a bit of the seamy side) he wanted, and in 1948 he moved into a flat and began serious work on a book of poetry.⁴⁴ Many of the locals were already living what one could call a "counterculture" or "Beat-style" life: taking drugs and creating art, working when they needed to but not as a means to social mobility. With the exception of poet Charlie Foster, the Venice artists, unlike the San Francisco and Greenwich Village beats, had little if any association with universities or intellectuals in California or the East Coast.

However, through the publication of Lipton's book *The Holy Barbarians* (which included a photographic essay and a glossary of "Beat slang"), the Venice beats unwittingly provided the popular

39. J.W. Ehrlich, ed., *HOWL of the Censor: The Four Letter Word on Trial Containing the Poem of Controversy HOWL By Allen Ginsberg*. Nourse Publishing, 1956, 140-141.

40. Davidson, Michael. *The San Francisco Renaissance: Poetics and Community at Mid-Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989,27.

41. Ehrlich, 121.

42. Ibid.

43. Maynard, 24.

44. Ibid, 35.

model of Beat culture. Hollywood latched onto this, resulting in the portrayal of beats as benign characters like Maynard G. Krebs⁴⁵, and as more seedy characters like those portrayed in Paul Frees' 1959 movie *The Beatniks*. An additional occurrence that led to this stereotyping of the Venice Beats (and by association, all Beats) was the 1959 *Life* magazine article "Beatsville U.S.A. vs. Squareville U.S.A." Three teenage girls from Hutchinson, Kansas instigated the article. They wrote to Larry Lipton and asked him to come to their "square" town with some of his Beat friends. Lipton initially agreed, but the girls' parents made them rescind the invitation. However, word had gotten out and *Life* decided to run an article comparing the lives of the bohemian folk in Venice to those of "normal" families in Hutchinson, Kansas. Photographs depicted middle-class families at home in Hutchinson and bearded Beats in their "pad" discussing philosophy.⁴⁶ It was in all a rather even-handed article, but reinforced the black turtleneck-wearing, bearded stereotype that was gaining currency and downplayed the diversity that actually existed amongst the Venice and other Beat artists.⁴⁷

Poet and painter Stuart Perkoff was Lipton's most important protégé. Perkoff grew up in St. Louis and exhibited a rebellious artistic streak early in life.⁴⁸ He moved to New York City, and after an arrest for refusing to register for the draft at seventeen he moved to Santa Barbara in 1948 settling with his wife, Suzan and child in Venice, one of the few cities affordable in their rather dire financial circumstances.⁴⁹ Perkoff was one of the few members of the Venice Beach group (Lipton aside) to have his work published. Born into a liberal Jewish family, Perkoff dabbled in Marxism and developed an interest early on in the primitive and tribal natures of humanity.⁵⁰ He reflects this interest in works like the following excerpt from "Pithecanthropus Erectus," after a song by Charles Mingus for whom Perkoff wrote the poem:

the unpainted shamans
of magic eyes
present their visions
for the tribe

And in a poem to his wife Suzan, from whom he was often estranged:

inflated with the divine mother
reliving traumas of her births
 searching the wild beds and hatreds of the world
for her twin

45. Ibid, 4.

46. Ibid, 7.

47. Ibid, 8.

48. Ibid, 62.

49. Ibid, 64.

50. Ibid, 61-62.

her strength
 her unhad power
 david, david
 the tears that flowed
 that there cd be such tears⁵¹

These works reflect a different aesthetic than the Zen-influenced poetry of the San Francisco poets and are a microcosm for the Venice movement itself. Many of the artists involved with Lipton were less worldly than those in San Francisco. With the exception of New England-born Charlie Foster, who gave up an extremely well-paying job as an advertising executive⁵² to live the Bohemian life, the “fundamental raunchiness” of Venice Beach tended to draw people from poorer backgrounds with less traditional education.⁵³ As such, they were even further removed from the cultural mainstream than poets like Ginsberg and Kerouac, to say nothing of Abstract-Expressionist artists and others for whom the CIA and CCF had specific uses. The Beats were undeniably counter to the cultural inertia of the day. Whether one views their writings and lifestyle against the background of the mainstream culture or against some of the other progressive artistic movements such as Abstract-Expressionism, their work and respective lifestyles were assuredly something for which neither political nor business interests had any use. The Congress for Cultural Freedom never sent Allen Ginsberg abroad to read *Howl* as a symbol of American artistic freedom.

However, in *Countering the Counterculture*, Manuel Martinez asserts that the puritanical, capitalist society the Beats were supposedly rebelling against was only one aspect of American cultural development at the time. The Beats treated other important and more positive elements like the growing civil rights movement, women’s rights and Mexican immigration, with varying degrees of ambiguity and condescension. Furthermore, their worldview was sometimes more in line with the reactionary constituencies that gave rise to the likes of McCarthyism than they would ever admit.⁵⁴ Thus, while the freedoms espoused by countercultural groups such as the Beats were certainly radical, they were essentially the same *negative* freedoms that the CIA and CCF were interested in promoting.⁵⁵ That is, they were interested in civil liberties and the personal freedom to write, say and live as they wished, but had little to say about the concept of “positive liberty” by which all could share in the economic and political life of American society.⁵⁶ Additionally there were some elements in the Beats’ writings and experiences, particularly Kerouac’s, which seemed anything but progressive.

As stated above, the Beats were influenced in part by nineteenth-century Romantic poets such

51. Ibid, 73.

52. Ibid, 83.

53. Ibid, 1,14.

54. Martinez, 24-25.

55. Saunders, 81-83.

56. Martinez, 7.

as Walt Whitman. Much of Whitman's poetry was distinctly expansionist in tone and mirrored the American dream of Manifest Destiny. Kerouac's novels *On the Road* and *Dharma Bums* have this flavor. Visions of westward expansion along with condescending descriptions of "dusky...mysterious, sensuous gals" and "forlorn Indians" decorate the plotline of an individual seeking "space outside the social structure he fears,"⁵⁷ that is, away from the demands of a purportedly egalitarian civic society.⁵⁸

Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter make similar arguments in *Nation of Rebels*. Discussing countercultural movements at large, their first contention is that there is no real counterculture. Either mainstream society and the consumer culture co-opt the artifacts of subversive and rebellious movements and neutralize them as in the cases of "hippie" and "punk" fashion,⁵⁹ or those espousing revolution unwittingly display and popularize the artifacts of consumer culture as with the "rebel chic" associated with items such as Vans sneakers.⁶⁰ In this way cultures of America and Western Europe have been quite capable of tolerating and absorbing all manner of dissident art and political thought.⁶¹ Their second argument is that the attention given to these countercultural movements distracts from political action within the "system." It forestalls developments that could lead to real progress for those who may be in difficult socioeconomic straits—the working class minorities and the poor.⁶² This in turn reflects a larger problem for the counterculture, in that much of the working class actually has an interest in maintaining the general status quo, and that their needs are not such that actual revolution is required or even desired.⁶³

Martinez' main point is well taken, and certainly an important counter to the prevailing notion of the Beats as either dangerous harbingers of a declining civilization or heralds of a new generation free from conformity-driven society.⁶⁴ Martinez, along with Heath and Potter, makes a good argument about the efficacy of countercultural groups as agents of real change in society. However, as seen above, the real impetuses for these movements were artistic and personal and the Beats' main interest was in breaking away from political and economic strictures, not in creating new ones.⁶⁵ Their true legacy is creative/artistic change both within their respective genres and in society at large.

Chapter 3

The punk movement represents another aspect of the connection between the counterculture and the mainstream culture. In the late 1960s and early 1970s the economic boom of the post-war years in

57. Ibid, 87.

58. Ibid, 15-16.

59. Heath, 34.

60. Ibid, 3-5.

61. Ibid, 35.

62. Ibid, 31-32.

63. Ibid, 32-33.

64. Martinerz, 24.

65. Johnson, 103.

the United States and Great Britain ground to a halt. This was due to several factors, including the Arab oil embargo and the post-Fordist exportation of manufacturing where businesses endeavored to free themselves from the social democratic “compromises” they had made with labor since the New Deal.⁶⁶ The result was a decrease in well-paying, pensioned, skilled-labor jobs and an increase in lower paid, white-collar service work. Additionally, there was a coincident change in the nature of consumer society reflecting a shift from the acquisition of consumer goods, to the creation of personal identity from media lifestyles as seen in movies, television and magazines. Moore puts it this way, “...media spectacles, celebrity images and corporate brand names have advanced from the status of merely “reflecting” society to become the backbone of global political economy and constitutive of social relationships.”⁶⁷ Thus much commerce no longer involved the manufacturing of consumables (in the traditional sense) but created and sold “image” and hence had no use for skilled, unionized labor.

These developments greatly affected New York City. The loss of its manufacturing base was so devastating that it neared bankruptcy in 1975 and President Gerald Ford refused the city any federal aid.⁶⁸ The resulting ten-percent unemployment rate and decline in city social services meant that there were large numbers of youth seemingly without hope for a future as promised by the previous decades’ growth.⁶⁹ Many saw the more utopian visions of the 1960s as having failed and the music of the mid-1970s began to reflect this. While some of the more anarchic bands of the late 1960s and early 1970s such as MC5 gave voice to disaffected urban dwellers, none of them had the impact of the early punk movement.

The quintessential New York City punk band was The Ramones. Consisting of four musicians from Queens they provided often humorous commentary on the alienation of many youth from the political and social realities of the day as in the song “I’m Against It”

I don’t like politics
 I don’t like communists
 I don’t like games and fun
 I don’t like anyone...
 I don’t like sex and drugs
 I don’t like water bugs
 I don’t care about poverty
 All I care about is me

66. Moore, Ryan. “Postmodernism and Punk Subculture: Cultures of Authenticity and Deconstruction,” *The Communication Review* 7 (2004): 306.

67. Ibid.

68. Moore, Ryan. *Sells Like Teen Spirit: Music, Youth Culture, and Social Crisis*. New York: New York University Press, 2010,2-3.

69. Ibid, 3.

Well I'm against it!⁷⁰

In England, which was home to 1.5-million unemployed in 1975,⁷¹ the example set by the Ramones inspired bands like the Sex Pistols and the Clash who respectively reflected the extremes of post-modern irony and a burgeoning political conscience.

Don't ask us to attend
 'Cos we're not all there
 Oh don't pretend 'cos I don't care
 I don't believe illusions
 'Cos too much is real
 So stop your cheap comment
 'Cos we know what we feel

Oh we're so pretty
 Oh so pretty vacant
 And we don't care⁷²

An' if I close my eyes
 They will not go away
 You have to deal with it
 It is the currency

Hate...hate...hate...

The hate of a nation
 A million miles from home
 An' get war from the junkies
 Who don't like my form

I'm gonna stay in the city
 Even when the house fall down
 I don't dream of a holiday

70. The Ramones. *Loud, Fast Ramones: Their Toughest Hits*. Sire/Rhino: 2002

71. Moore, Ryan. "Postmodernism and Punk Subculture: Cultures of Authenticity and Deconstruction," *The Communication Review* 7 (2004): 310.

72. The Sex Pistols. "Pretty Vacant" *Nevermind the Bollocks, Here's the Sex Pistols*. Warner Bros. 1977.

When hate an' war come around⁷³

As much as the punk movement was a reaction to the aforementioned economic difficulties of the time, there were artistic and cultural forces to which they reacted just as strongly. The mainstream of rock music was represented by strains of progressive rock, the mellow “California sound,” and the vacuous pop music that every era has in abundance. Legs McNeil, co-founder of *Punk Magazine*, spoke about the early 1970s this way: “Everybody’s nice, everything just seemed so mediocre, tedious, it was just awful.”⁷⁴ Additionally, commercial culture had absorbed the formerly radical “hippie” culture and fed it back to society shed of its radical/political elements.⁷⁵ A large portion of society no longer considered long hair, Eastern religion or even sexual freedom taboo or strange. It was against these elements that the punk culture developed. Many of the youth saw a declining economy and a corresponding decline in the social services that governments instituted after World War II. Many aspects of 1960s counterculture no longer spoke to the problems extant at home and in the world at large. The promise of the peace movement died symbolically with the riot and murder at Altamont in 1969⁷⁶ and with it the “predominantly utopian opposition of Sixties counterculture.”⁷⁷ Neither was the music, with a few exceptions, speaking in a voice that represented the disaffection, anger and energy that many felt.⁷⁸

One can see the way the punk rock culture responded to these changes by analyzing two different facets of the movement which Ryan Moore calls the “culture of deconstruction” and the “culture of authenticity,” and which can be roughly identified with the punk groups in New York and London and those in California and Washington DC, respectively.⁷⁹ The Ramones and the Sex Pistols represent the culture of deconstruction, and as such they attempt to isolate themselves from commercial post-modern culture by assembling materials from the past and combining them in an ironic fashion.⁸⁰ The Ramones took cues from such disparate elements as 1960s pop like The Beach Boys and fifties do-wop, merged them with a facetious sensibility borrowed from the New York Dolls, and created songs such as “Sheena is a Punk Rocker,” “Beat on the Brat,” and “Now I Wanna Sniff Some Glue.”⁸¹ Cartoonish

73. The Clash. “Hate and War.” *The Clash*. CBS, 1977.

74. *End of the Century: The Story of the Ramones*. DVD. Directed by Michael Gramaglia and Jim Fields. Rhino Home Video. 2005.

75. Moore, Ryan. “Postmodernism and Punk Subculture: Cultures of Authenticity and Deconstruction,” *The Communication Review* 7 (2004): 307-313.

76. Marcus, 89.

77. Bailey, Beth L and Dave Farber, Ed. *America in the Seventies*. University Press of Kansas, 2004, 183.

78. Moore, Ryan. *Sells Like Teen Spirit: Music, Youth Culture, and Social Crisis*. New York: New York University Press, 2010, 6-8.

79. Moore, Ryan. “Postmodernism and Punk Subculture: Cultures of Authenticity and Deconstruction,” *The Communication Review* 7 (2004): 308

80. *Ibid*, 307.

81. *Ibid*, 313.

matching leather outfits and bowl haircuts exemplified their mocking seriousness.⁸² The Sex Pistols used the very structure of rock and roll and the band format to “destroy” it,⁸³ turning the quasi-religious aura of a rock concert into an arena for full expression of disaffected, ironic mockery. In both cases the response from society at large was overwhelmingly negative, to the point that city councils and even club owners themselves blacklisted both bands from many clubs in their respective cities.⁸⁴ One British city councilman stated on camera that the Sex Pistols were the “antithesis of humankind. . . sudden death would be best.”⁸⁵ Amazingly, the Sex Pistols had a number one hit with “God Save the Queen” in 1977, however the official report had the song blanked out of the number one spot.⁸⁶

The punk scenes in California and Washington DC emerged later and illustrate, in part, Moore’s “culture of authenticity.”⁸⁷ I make this caveat because the initial Los Angeles/ Hollywood scene represented by bands such as X, The Germs, The Plugz, The Weirdos and The Bags was equal to New York in its eclecticism and variety. By the end of the 1970s and into the early 1980s however, the impetus of the California punk scene had shifted to Orange County, and San Francisco⁸⁸ where bands such as Black Flag and the Vandals in Orange County and The Dead Kennedys in San Francisco became prominent. The punk rock sound shifted to “hardcore,” a style that emphasized the fast and aggressive aspects of the music. The bands did not all sound alike, or even similar, but the music had reached a point where it was more representative of itself and less a “deconstruction” of what had come before.⁸⁹

California had its own peculiar socio-economic difficulties at the time. Proposition 13, passed in 1978⁹⁰, rolling back property taxes and resulting in underfunded schools and other social programs.⁹¹ A latent homophobia manifested itself in the attempt to pass the “Briggs” amendment, which if passed would have resulted in the firing of gay teachers from public schools.⁹² These reflected a conservative constituency well represented in suburban Orange County, and the nationwide mobilization of this more reactionary electorate went hand in hand with the ascendancy of the Moral Majority and aided the

82. Ibid.

83. Marcus, 57.

84. *End of the Century: The Story of the Ramones* DVD. Directed by Michael Gramaglia and Jim Fields. Rhino, 2005.

85. *The Filth and the Fury: A Sex Pistols Film*. DVD Directed by Julien Temple. New Line Home Video. 2000.

86. Ibid.

87. Moore, Ryan. “Postmodernism and Punk Subculture: Cultures of Authenticity and Deconstruction,” *The Communication Review* 7 (2004): 308.

88. Ibid, 316.

89. Ibid, 308.

90. Collins, Robert M. *Transforming America: Politics and Culture during the Reagan Years*. New York: Columbia University, 2007, 61.

91. Moore, Ryan. “Postmodernism and Punk Subculture: Cultures of Authenticity and Deconstruction,” *The Communication Review* 7 (2004): 316.

92. Collins, 137.

election of Ronald Reagan in 1980.⁹³

As a result, many suburban youth expressed as much disaffection as their urban counterparts in Los Angeles, New York and London. They too recognized the end of the “American Dream” as portrayed by traditional media and its political and corporate counterparts. Not only were times difficult economically, but family life was disintegrating with increasing divorce rates and the advent of “latchkey” kids. As Keith, a punker from Winnipeg, says in the documentary *Another State of Mind*, “...people believe that punks are out to ruin the family structure, but that is wrong. Family structure is already gone.”⁹⁴ A worker at a halfway house for homeless punks in New York says that the American Dream “experience” for most of these kids is a broken home.⁹⁵

Penelope Spheeris’ movie *Suburbia*, about a group of homeless punk kids who become squatters in an abandoned housing tract in Orange County directly expresses these problems and sentiments. It is a fictional plot using unknown and inexperienced punk kids (including future Red Hot Chili Peppers’ bassist Flea) as actors and incorporates performances by Orange County bands such as The Vandals and TSOL. The story revolves around Evan, a teenage boy who leaves his broken home and meets up with a group of like-minded kids whose own stories reflect the social dysfunctions of the late 1970s and early 1980s: single parent homes, abandonment, abuse and a perception that the future holds nothing good for them. Self-proclaimed vigilantes harass them and the kids eventually turn to petty harassment of their own with ultimately disastrous results.⁹⁶

Punk bands like the aforementioned Vandals, and TSOL and Black Flag all represented, in varying degrees, as much of a concern with the moral breakdown of family and society as with the national economic difficulties of the time. Black Flag’s “T.V. Party” and “Annihilate This Week” are two examples, humorously skewering the commercial television culture and the mindless promiscuous party culture, respectively.

In the early 1980s the so-called “straight-edge” movement came to represent the extremes of these sentiments. Straight-edge bands such as Washington D.C.’s Minor Threat made a point of rejecting drugs, alcohol and promiscuous sex.⁹⁷ This further exemplifies Moore’s “culture of authenticity,” as these bands, and others that identified with the “hardcore” movement, established and more or less followed, certain stylistically pure characteristics that ultimately came to represent “punk” rock: short hair, fast tempos, aggressive singing and nihilistic/fatalistic lyrics, occasionally coming close to espousing racism

93. Collins, 175.

94. *Another State of Mind: Social Distortion, Youth Brigade and Minor Threat*. DVD. Directed by Adam Small and Peter Stuart. Time Bomb Recordings (dist.) 2004.

95. Ibid.

96. *Suburbia*. DVD. Directed by Penelope Spheeris. Shout Factory. 1983.

97. Moore, Ryan. “Postmodernism and Punk Subculture: Cultures of Authenticity and Deconstruction,” *The Communication Review* 7 (2004): 320

and/or homophobia (Minor Threat, Fear).⁹⁸ Tellingly, when Black Flag began to grow their hair long and concurrently incorporate slower songs they experienced criticism from hardcore fans.⁹⁹

This movement came to represent something rather different than the punk scenes that came out of New York, London and even Los Angeles. The stylistic diversity among bands such as The Ramones, Blondie, Television, Talking Heads, Sex Pistols, the Clash, The Weirdos, X, and The Gun Club altered as the hardcore movement (like the Beats) became a primarily white male club, with most references to R & B expunged from the music and the Chicano punk scene marginalized.¹⁰⁰ One can see additional parallels to Martinez' view of the Beat movement in that much of the hardcore punk movement was also a reaction to certain societal pressures, and they likewise saw themselves as representatives of an artistic and social alternative. However, at the same time they occasionally represented a reaction against the more pluralistic countercultural elements in society at the time.

There was another aspect to the "culture of authenticity" that Moore conveys which further represents the break with mainstream commercial culture. This was the DIY (do-it-yourself) aesthetic, which was a part of the punk movement from the very beginning, in literature as well as music. Homegrown punk fanzines like Britain's *Sniffing Glue* (1976-77)¹⁰¹ and Los Angeles' *Slash* (1978-80) (which also produced records until it was sold in 1986) published gigs, interviews and commentary on the respective burgeoning punk scenes.¹⁰² Black Flag's guitarist/leader Greg Ginn began SST records as an outgrowth of his electronic business. SST became home to bands like Husker Du, Meat Puppets, Sonic Youth and - especially relevant to this the DIY aesthetic - San Pedro's Minutemen.¹⁰³ The Minutemen represented the ultimate in DIY and even established their own brand of it: "we jam econo." Consisting of guitarist/vocalist D Boon (who died in 1985), bassist Mike Watt and drummer George Hurley, The Minutemen turned the traditional rock and roll "business model" on its head by viewing albums as promotion for their live shows, staying with friends and fans while on the road and other methods of cutting costs. They usually worked concurrent side jobs as well, all for the purpose of remaining independent of record company directives and the whims of the marketplace.¹⁰⁴

In this way they remained steadfastly outside of mainstream consumer culture while at the same time projecting a political conscience that goes against Heath and Potter's assertion that those who

98. Moore, Ryan. "Postmodernism and Punk Subculture: Cultures of Authenticity and Deconstruction," *The Communication Review* 7 (2004): 317.

99. Moore, Ryan. *Sells Like Teen Spirit: Music, Youth Culture, and Social Crisis*. New York: New York University Press, 2010, 96.

100. Moore, Ryan. "Postmodernism and Punk Subculture: Cultures of Authenticity and Deconstruction," *The Communication Review* 7 (2004): 322.

101. Triggs, Teal. "Scissors and Glue: Punk Fanzines and the Creation of a DIY Aesthetic." *Journal of Design History*. Vol. 19 No. 1 (2006): 70.

102. Moore, Ryan. *Sells Like Teen Spirit: Music, Youth Culture, and Social Crisis*. New York: New York University Press, 2010, 51.

103. *We Jam Econo: The Story of the Minutemen*. DVD. Directed by Tim Irwin. Plexifilm, 2006.

104. Ibid.

choose to remain “counter” do so at the expense of real political action. Their lyrics, especially Boon’s, projected an informed and literate progressive reaction to the wave of conservatism sweeping the country in the 1980s such as in the song “The Big Stick” which criticizes American military involvement in Central America.¹⁰⁵ One reviewer noted that Boon “howled” his lyrics “... as if trying to overpower the Republican tidal wave of the 1980s with sheer volume...”¹⁰⁶ They were not the only band to do so. The Clash tackled political topics and Joe Strummer in particular supported left-wing causes¹⁰⁷ as did Jello Biafra of the Dead Kennedys. Biafra went so far as to run for mayor of San Francisco, and for the Green Party presidential nomination (finishing second to Ralph Nader).¹⁰⁸ An additional and more unusual case is the Ramones. On one side singer Joey Ramone (Jeffrey Hyman), a noted liberal supported progressive causes and campaigned for Jerry Brown in the 1992 primaries. On the other, guitarist Johnny Ramone (John Cummings) was a conservative Republican who famously said, “God bless America and God bless President Bush” at the Ramones’ induction to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and was vocally a supporter of the Iraq war.¹⁰⁹

It might seem that given the Ramones’ (and Sex Pistols) inclusion in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, they no longer represented the counterculture. Likewise the Clash achieved a great deal of commercial success prior to breaking up. Some believe this undermines their credibility as “revolutionaries.” One can safely say that neither the Dead Kennedy’s nor the Minutemen will be inducted into the Hall of Fame. And neither came close to the platinum success of the Clash. I submit that this is representative of the ultimate inadequacy of the counterculture/ consumer-culture dichotomy in the post-modern, post-punk era. From its inception the punk movement was an attempt to deal not only with the sixties counterculture that had gone mainstream and completely ingratiated itself into the consumer culture, but a mainstream culture that had, as Heath and Potter state, become so adept at assimilating the rebellious that the very idea of counterculture was effectively meaningless.¹¹⁰ Each subset of punk rock, “deconstruction” and “authenticity,” effectively neutralized the very idea of mainstream by first disassembling the very icons of consumer culture and sending them back out reconstructed in various ways, like the Sex Pistols with their safety pins. And then by creating a DIY tradition that in many cases allowed artists to remain “off the grid,” while at the same time having great influence and nurturing a viable social conscience like the Minutemen.

Admittedly, punk rock fashion (and even many of the elements of the music) is well established

105. Minutemen. *3-Way Tie (For Last)*. SST, 1985.

106. Buckley, Jonathan and Mark Ellingham, eds. *Rock: The Rough Guide*. London: The Rough Guides, 1996, 573.

107. Salewicz, Chris. *Redemption Song: The Ballad of Joe Strummer*. New York: Faber and Faber, Inc., 2006, 290-291.

108. Molen, Jodi Vander. “Jello Biafra Interview” *The Progressive*. February, 2002. http://www.progressive.org/mag_intvbiafra (accessed 12/05/10)

109. *End of the Century: The Story of the Ramones* DVD. Directed by Michael Gramaglia and Jim Fields. Rhino, 2005.

110. Heath, 34-35.

in what passes for the mainstream now (does one give a Mohawk a second glance anymore?). It is now more difficult to shock. It is not impossible as the Mapplethorpe exhibits in the 1990s proved, although that controversy had as much to do with the use of public funding as with the art itself.¹¹¹ More recently Lady Gaga resorted to wearing a “meat dress” in order to create a stir but the shock was short lived and quickly forgotten. Nothing has caused a mass cultural reaction comparable to *Howl* or *God Save the Queen*. And it is not that the sensibilities reflected in these two works have been fully absorbed or otherwise compromised; it is that the relationship between the mainstream commercial culture and the counterculture has changed. Johnny Rotten implied as much when he stated that the Sex Pistols’ purpose was to destroy rock and roll, and with it, its place in the mainstream.¹¹² With his next band Public Image, LTD (not a band, but a “corporation”¹¹³) he proceeded to pick up the pieces and build something new that no longer had the concept of counter vs. mainstream culture as a backdrop, but was a self-contained, self-referential entity.

Conclusion

A cultural war enveloped American society after World War II. Artistic and social movements, some of which the CIA and State Department promoted and used, countered a few trends of conformity in order to project an image of the United States that in turn countered claims that America was culturally weak and stagnant. Domestically, however, matters were different. Much of the general culture was geared towards encouraging consumption, and with it a middle-class lifestyle that tied into the promotion of capitalism as a further counter to Soviet hegemony. Thus the government had no interest in either promoting or in any way supporting strains of art that made it a point to criticize or reject these mainstream cultural values.

The Beats rebelled against those aspects of society and art that they saw as requiring allegiance to this given set of values. In both their lifestyles and their works they distanced themselves from contemporary social mores. In so doing they expressed a new relationship to mainstream consumer culture, one that did not always directly engage the social order in support of progressive causes such as civil rights, but definitely had an effect on civil liberties with events like the *Howl* trial. Additionally, they furthered the process of freeing art from dependence on the strictures of conventional culture.

In a similar way the Punks rebelled against the culture of the mid-1970s, a culture that in some respects represented the ultimate failure of the 1950s ideal. The economy that allowed for the growth of consumerism in the 1950s and 1960s had collapsed, and along with it the idealism of both the mainstream and those on the outside. They criticized this as a failure both of conventional society, and the counterculture of the 1960s. Their response was to try to create some form of authenticity within

111. Collins, 188.

112. Marcus, 57-59.

113. *John Lydon on the Tom Snyder Show-1980*. [Video] Retrieved 12/11/2010. From <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BZ2UoBZzEI>

the movement itself and to deconstruct and resubmit the artifacts of consumer culture as a way of rendering it impotent. This has made the process of identifying counterculture vis-à-vis the mainstream increasingly difficult. The Punks also developed a strong do-it-yourself aesthetic that freed them from the necessity of conforming to conventional artistic sensibilities. Both the Beats and the Punks successfully countered the traditional artistic paths that government and society encouraged and in so doing exercised an impressive level of independence and influence. As Minutemen bassist Mike Watt said, “We are kept in place (only) by our mind...the point is to get away with whatever you can. You don’t have to be part of any machine.”¹¹⁴

114. *We Jam Econo: The Story of the Minutemen*. DVD. Directed by Tim Irwin. Plexifilm, 2006.