

### ***SUBCULTURE AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF SOCIAL IDENTITY***

**Dorin Chira, Assoc. Prof., PhD, Maria-Zoica Ghițan, Assist. Prof., PhD, "Babeș-Bolyai"  
University of Cluj-Napoca**

*Abstract : Culture and subculture represent two ways of reading and mapping society. Located within wider cultures they are equivalent to the particular positions and specific contradictions faced by certain social groups within wider social structures. In this paper we deal with the concept of subculture and the way in which social identity is reshaped as a result of subcultural insertions. In our view subcultures develop as a kind of special relationship between different levels of society. This is the case of the Beat Generation. The construction of social identity will be tackled by focusing on the Beat generation, especially on Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) and Allan Ginsberg's *Howl* (1956).*

**Keywords:** *culture, subculture, Beat generation, moral values, social identity.*

Subcultures are not isolated, not even independent of the main culture. They are rooted in the main/parent culture, very often originating from a state of opposition or objection to society which, in most cases, is fully rejected. Even though subcultures seem to oppose or resist the main/parent culture, they are deeply influenced by it. The codes used by members of these subcultural groups are directly derived from the experiences and ideologies existing in society. However, their primary structures, meanings and the hierarchy of values may be changed, overemphasized, dramatized or rejected. One of the aims of this short paper is to identify briefly some of the distinctive factors that create and define subculture. Undoubtedly, the boundary line between the main/parent culture and subculture is vague, fluid and difficult to understand. The society we live in, the effects of the media as well as those of globalization make it even more demanding to catalogue and detail cultures and subcultures. Where does culture end? Where does subculture begin? The answer is anything but simple. Culture expresses meanings and makes the world meaningful; it offers moral codes, sets of norms and values recognized by people. Subculture, on the other hand, reflects reluctance and a break with all these norms and values. Issues like everyday life, language, behaviour, change in moral standards and values, ways of expressing feelings, modes of perceiving reality with the help of an illusionary reality are factors that define one's belonging to a particular subculture. How do people solve their problems? Some double or re-double their efforts, some adopt a deviant behaviour. People choose various alternatives to their problems; they establish their own alternatives by creating a special kind of relationship with the society they belong to.

The construction of social identity will be tackled by focusing on the Beat Generation, especially on Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1955) and Allan Ginsberg's *Howl* (1956). Kerouac and Ginsberg are the most prominent representatives of Beat generation and their writing style reflects an unconventional work and a lifestyle. All members of the Beat Generation expressed objection and criticism against American materialism in a bitter and, often, abusive language (especially in the case of Ginsberg). They made a mockery of its

conformity, denounced its immorality and set out on the road in order to discover America's true spirit.

Jack Kerouac, father of the Beat Generation, perceives writing as the ongoing attempt to communicate the writer's vision and voice; through his characters he wants to be heard, understood and followed. Kerouac named the generation he belonged to 'a beat generation'; the phrase was used not to name the generation but more to 'un-name' it. The group included Jack Kerouac, Allan Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, Herbert Huncke, Neal Cassady, William S. Burroughs and many more. More than being just a literary movement or genre, the *Beat Generation* represented a social revolution with literary insertions too. Kerouac believed that writing was like a never-ending round between the writer's imagination and the reader's perception done with the help of language itself. He strongly believed that this world could be changed (*Essentials of Spontaneous Prose* (Allen 1965:74)<sup>1</sup>: 'The object is to set before the mind, either in reality, as in sketching (before a landscape or teacup or old face) or is set in the memory wherein it becomes the sketching from memory of a definite image-object [...] swimming in sea of English with no discipline other than rhythms of rhetorical exhalation and expostulated statement [...] - Blow as deep as you want - write as deeply, fish as far down as you want, satisfy yourself first, then reader cannot fail to receive telepathic shock and meaning-excitement by same laws operating in his own human mind.'

In his novel *On the Road* Kerouac uses the metaphor of travelling, the trip, whose main objective is to discover the undiscovered, to touch the untouchable and to perceive the unperceivable. Kerouac's trips are trips towards a special kind of universe, that of the Beat Generation. All the characters he creates, with a few exceptions, reflect the paradigm of the modern man, a man who lives with the continuous fear that something has to be changed, otherwise everything will be destroyed. That is why his characters are travelling to different places, to find out who they are, who they belong to, but always come back to New York and start looking again, planning again more and more trips, again and again. Their continuous travels are, in fact, travels to 'nowhere', because institutionalized patterns cannot be destroyed so easily. The characters are looking forward to finding a place in a society that rejects them because of their deviant behaviour, language and lifestyle. The characters Kerouac creates are against any type of conduct and behaviour; they are against cultural determinism, they strongly believe that the world is not free and they need to escape from its determinism in order to create their own world of values. Beat characters have the feeling that people around them are their enemies; a new world or a different way of living is the alternative. Does this new world have a well defined time and space? The answer is negative; beat characters travel and never get to an end. There is no way back home. The metaphor of travelling covers four main trips in Kerouac's novel. The narrator is the same, Sal Paradise, who is willing to travel all over the country to meet his friends. Dean Moriarty (Kerouac's real-life crazy friend Neal), the most fascinating character in the novel, is a model for Sal because of his lifestyle. Sal seems to ride on forever, from one place to another, meeting a group of friends here, a group of friends there, but always following Dean Moriarty. In the end, he comes back home alone. The end of his second trip is the same, he gets back home alone: 'At dawn I got my New York bus and said good-bye to Dean and Marylou. They wanted some of my sandwiches. I

<sup>1</sup> Allen, Donald, Creely, Robert (edd.) (1965), *New American Story*. New York. Grove Press.

told them no. It was a sullen moment. We were all thinking we'd never see each other again and we didn't care'(Kerouac 1955:137).<sup>2</sup> The third trip is about forgiveness; Sal and Dean start planning again an escape to 'nowhere' travelling by car. Soon, they are back in New York; the need of belonging to a place, even involuntarily, is stronger than their life misconceptions. The fourth trip is about factual awareness; Sal realizes that there might be other models in his life, not just Dean. Moriarty's destiny looks like a mixture of magnetic forces. During the first three trips he is the magnetic character; everybody needs him, he is a model for most characters. Finally, everybody gets sick of him at one point or another; life is not just pleasure, fun and joy, life has its dark side too. The four joy rides get less joyful as they progress. Why is that? Do characters realize that at one point they have to stop from riding on forever? Kerouac doesn't explicitly mention this. His novel is in fact an attempt to build up a new world, a place where members of the beat generation want to live. Kerouac's joy rides are not simple trips in a perfect world; they reflect a special universe. He creates a world in which people live according to some other principles; it is an unconventional world in which beatniks have their own symbols, desires and rules. Kerouac's characters equate the image of a man who is alone in front of fate. The main characters in the novel live in parallel worlds, in spaces created by them, in places that best suit them; in their world of chimeras everything is at random. This is a world without well-defined space and time; here, beatniks travel and never get to an end. However, the characters in this novel strongly trust in their own capacity of changing things. Members of the Beat Generation believed that America was a world in which evil dominated, a kind of Moloch god, who permanently asked for sacrifices: 'Moloch! Moloch! Robot apartments! Invisible suburbs! / skeleton treasuries! Blind capitals! Demonic industries! / Spectral nations! Invincible mad houses! / granite cocks!monstruos bombs! / They broke their backs lifting Moloch to Heaven! Pavements, / trees, radios, tons! Lifting the city to Heaven which exists and is everywhere about us! /Visions! Omens! Hallucinations! Miracles! Ecstasies! / gone down the American river! / Dreams! Adorations! Illuminations! Religions! The whole boatload of sensitive bullshit!' (Ginsberg, 1956:75)<sup>3</sup>. *On the Road* develops a special kind of universe in which uniqueness, illusion and reality form a consensus of meanings and unaccomplished desires. *On the Road* is a journal in which fancy and allegory are eliminated.

The voices of the underground are also reflected in Allan Ginsberg's poem *Howl*. The poem will be shortly discussed from two different points of view: first of all, the effects this poem has in an attempt to define subculture (the inner and outer context, the intertextual context, the historical context) and secondly, some of the most important discourse relations (the micro- and macro-conversational level). From a discourse point of view, we intend to focus on two specific discourse organization patterns, namely the problem-solution pattern and the matching relation pattern, which are relevant for a comprehensive understanding of Ginsberg's writing.

Although at first sight the poem seems to be a monologue, it is, in fact, a poem based on conversation patterns with at least two speakers interacting. The whole poem emphasizes the idea of a revolt against the conventional society, the tone used by the poet being extremely

<sup>2</sup> Kerouac, Jack (1955), *On the Road*, London, Routledge.

<sup>3</sup> Ginsberg, Allan (1956), *Howl and Other Poems*. San Francisco: City Lights Books.

aggressive. Moreover, the responses reflect aggressiveness and threatening; the question-answer interaction is extremely subtle. However, we can detect it easily as a result of the use of different tenses. In the first part of the poem, the verbal groups have a special status, i.e. most of them are used in the past, whereas in the second part, there are present tenses, while some of the lines are verbless clauses, as a balance between past and present, between the desire to reject time and the need to express yourself freely, and past again in the last part of the poem, reflecting a completed action. The verb register is made up of verbs that belong to the same semantic register, e.g. to vanish, to wander, to lone, to howl, to blow, to cut, to give up, to run, to walk, etc., all of them being verbs that define a category of people who are in a continuous state of uncertainty, without knowing what to do or where to go. Another feature of the poem is repetition, i.e. every sentence is introduced by the relative pronoun 'who' used as an emblem for 'my generation'. The unique use of syntax and stream of consciousness phrases fit into the beat rejection of cultural norms. Shared knowledge principle could be used in order to fully comprehend the poem's discourse message. According to this principle, there should be a balance between the questions and the answers throughout any poem. In the case of this poem, the approach is just a little bit different: in the first part of the poem we have only answers ('angel headed hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly/connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery/of night'; 'who poverty and tatters and hollow-eyed and high sat up smoking in the supernatural darkness'; 'who passed through universities with radiant cool eyes/hallucinating Arkansas and Blake-light tragedy/ among the scholars of war'; 'yacketayakking screaming vomiting whispering facts/and memories and anecdotes and eyeball kicks/and shocks of hospitals and jails and wars', whereas in the case of the second part of the poem, we have one interrogative form which best suits all answers ('What sphinx of cement and aluminium bashed open/their skulls and ate up their brains and imagination?'). In the third part of the poem the declaratives used by the poet ('Carl Solomon! I'm with you in Rockland/where you are madder than I am/I'm with you in Rockland/where you must feel very strange') emphasize the personal pronouns 'I' and 'you', so the micro-conversation level and the macro-conversation level are fully completed. As far as the types of discourse relations are concerned, the poem begins with a statement ('I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by/madness, starving hysterical naked'), where the verb is used in the past, highlighting the idea that the action he refers to is already completed, but surprisingly incomplete, at least in time. The reason-result relations are also introduced by the relative pronoun 'who'; thus, the poet expresses the causes that were the basis of his sacrifice, as a member of his generation, and the results of the continuous struggle of his generation with the norms and rules of society. The last part of the poem is mainly based on contrast-comparison relations, the repetition 'I'm with you in Rockland' being used as a lexical connector. The poem in itself is a dialogical one involving an addressee as well.

The apocalypse of form, metaphorically speaking, is reflected in the case of both Kerouac and Ginsberg. The story, the framework, the characters, the language, the discourse relations are features that best describe the way in which social identity is reshaped as a result of disillusion with conventional society.

Undoubtedly, there is a strong relationship between cultures, subcultures and social structures. Culture reflects social identity, whereas subculture reflects the process of creating identity. Cultures are made up of socially organized and patterned responses to basic material

and social conditions, forming for each generation a set of norms and values collectively constructed, while subcultures reflect the achievement to 'win spaces' from the dominant cultures. And this was the case of the Beat Generation. There is a strong relationship between culture and subculture in the sense that in its encounter with the dominant culture, subculture borrows and adapts from the main/parent culture; however, at the same time, those who identify themselves as being a part of subculture apply and transform the things borrowed from the parent culture to the situations and experiences characteristic of their own distinctive group. Chaney stated that 'lifestyle relates to identity in two ways. First, they serve as a means of social placement, identifying elective communities in a world in which there are no longer stable structures of social identity or status. Secondly, they can act as a means of reference for individuals, a point of comparison that permits evaluation and emulation'<sup>4</sup> (Chaney 194:208).

### **Bibliography**

Allen, Donald and Creely, Robert (eds.) (1965), *New American Story*. New York: Grove Press.

Chaney, David (1994), *The Cultural Turn. Scene-Setting Essays on Contemporary Cultural History*. London & New York: Routledge.

Ginsberg, Allan (1956), *Howl and Other Poems*. San Francisco: City Lights Books.

Kerouac, Jack (1955), *On the Road*. London: Routledge.

---

<sup>4</sup> Chaney, David (1994), *The Cultural Turn. Scene-Setting Essays on Contemporary Cultural History*. London & New York. Routledge.