

The Rise of American Yuppie Culture in the 1980s

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Abstract

In the 1980s, historical and political changes took place in the United States. Under these circumstances, the radical Americans in the 1960s gave way to a new stereotype—yuppies, who were preoccupied with physical fitness, psychic harmony and successful career with high salaries. In summary, historical and political changes converged to contribute to the emergence of American yuppie culture in the 1980s.

Keywords: Rise of Yuppies, Conservatism, Historical and Political Changes.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The term “yuppie” was coined in the early 1980s as an ironic echo of the earlier “hippies” and “yippies”, who rejected the material-oriented values of the business community. It is the acronym for “young urban professionals” or “young upwardly professionals”. Americans usually contended that the term was coined by a syndicated newspaper Columnist by name of Bob Green. When he was writing about former radical Jerry Rubin, the former head of the yuppie-Youth International Party, he attempts to become the spoken man for the “young urban professionals”. In the aftermath of the publication of *The Yuppie Handbook*, the term quickly grabbed the headlines. According to the Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary (2004: 1455), a yuppie is a young college-educated adult who is employed in a well-paying profession and who lives and works in or near a large city. This definition clearly outlined the general features of a yuppie in terms of age, education and career, while the values of a yuppie were not specified. However, two more definitions gave us more explanations towards this special group of youth. Della Summers (1992: 1525) argued that “a yuppie is a young person in a professional job with a high income, esp. one who enjoys spending money and having fashionable way of life.”

In the United States, yuppies are thought as being young, sensitive, ambitious, and too interested in material goods. Michael Agnes (2002: 1663) held that “yuppies are any of those young professionals of the 1980s regarded as upscale, ambitious, materialistic, faddish, etc.” Both of the two definitions impressed us

their ambitious and materialistic values and their fashionable lifestyle. What’s more, Piesman and Hartley (1984:12) defined a yuppie as a person who: “(1) resides in or near a major city; (2) claims to be between the age of 25 and 45; (3) lives on aspirations of glory, prestige, reorganization, fame, social status, power, money, or any of the above; and (4) brunches on the weekend or works out after work.” Objectively put, this definition employed both demographic and lifestyle criteria so that it was more comprehensive than others. It comprehensively described a yuppie in terms of his age bracket, living place, personal values and aspirations.

2. The Historical Background

When the wheel of American history came into the 1970s, both the domestic and international milieu had significantly altered. In response to the changes, the 1980s ushered in another lifestyle for the baby boomers in American society, along with the social protest generation of the 1960s fading away in American mind and the “me generation” of the 1970s losing its self-actualized mode.

2.1 The End of the Vietnam War

The end of the Vietnam War abruptly extinguished the outrage and rebellious sentiments of the radical activists in the 1960s. In the 1960s, the escalation of the Vietnam War dramatically stimulated American youth to be in revolt of the government and the policy of conscription. After president Richard Nixon took office, he changed the policies office, he had to alter the policies both at home and abroad to help the United States out of the disastrous war. The election of President Nixon in

1968 displayed the presence of the “silent majority”—those overwhelmingly white working-class and middle class who were willing to regain the control of the anarchy, chaos and permissiveness of the society. Then, the pendulum of the national mood in America swung back.

During the campaign, Nixon claimed to bring “peace and honor” to Vietnam. In his inaugural address, he implicitly proclaimed his potential policy towards the Vietnam War that “we invite a peaceful competition—not in conquering territory or extending domination, but in enriching life of man.” (Wang 2000: 216) New policy was adopted by the Nixon administration to quell domestic unrest over the war. On the one hand, he initially established a draft lottery system that eliminated the inequality and further clarified the possibility of being drafted—only the nineteen-year-olds with low lottery numbers would have to go. In 1973, he created an all-volunteer military group and finally ceased the draft which dramatically mitigated the resentment and the anti-draft mood among youth. On the other hand, he gradually reduced the number of American troops in Vietnam to fulfill his proclamation in his inaugural address. From the peak of 540,000 troops in 1969, American troops began to gradually withdraw from the frontline of the battlefield. By 1973, only 50,000 American troops still remained in Vietnam. On March 29, the last American combat troops were withdrawn from the battlefield. Within a period of months, the war-fire in Vietnam was ceased. Albeit President Nixon was reluctant to make such modifications on the policy towards Vietnam War, owing to the grave situations both at home and abroad, he was considered to be “more successful in achieving the goal of reducing anti-war activity.” (Tindall & Shi 1996: 1460) The end of the Vietnam War led American youth to calm down. The former anti-war movement dramatically lost its motivation and source of protection. And then the feminist movement gradually came into a slump. To some extent, the primary target of radical Americans was achieved, therefore, they begin to think over of getting out of the radical activities and living good lives.

2. 2. The End of American Self-sufficiency

The end of American self-sufficiency had consumed Americans’ attentions. Since World War Two, the United States had taken advantage of the turbulent international environment and the conflicts between the feudal nations to boom its economy, so that America came into “the affluent society”. With the close of the turmoil 1960s, the United States ushered in an era of economic depression in the 1970s. The Vietnam War and the constant federal deficits, of course, exerted tremendous impacts on the great economic recession, while the sharp rise of the energy costs, especially oil, aggravated the inflation which in turn led to the high unemployment rate in the United States. The result was “the worst of both possible worlds: a deepened recession

with unemployment at 7.5 percent in 1980, mortgage rates at 15 percent, and interest rates at 20 percent, and a runaway inflation averaging between 12 and 13 percent.” (Tindall & Shi 1996: 1486) Besides, the United States was also facing a future of almost fierce economic competition with some other industrial countries, including Japan, West Germany and the rapid developing China. Therefore, the stagflation in the 1970s subverted American liberals’ promise of unending prosperity and told the Americans that “their nation could no longer enjoy the degree of economic independence and self-sufficiency that it once had.” (Dollar 1984: 620) Under such serious circumstances, the radical activists had to sober up and return into the severe realities from their utopia counterculture. Many former activists gradually realized that the financial power and economic security were the goals to emulate not to decry.

3. The Ideological Foundation

3.1 The Waning of the Rebellious Trend

The withering away of the rebellious trend in the 1960s and the fast development of higher education had ushered in a conservative era, in which yuppies began to turn inward. In the 1960s, the New Left movement, the hippie movement, the civil rights movement and the anti-war movement, etc. had entwined together to counter the American mainstream culture and culminated the liberalism. The end of the Vietnam War, which was a dominating source of the social chaos, had gradually decreased the social movements in momentum. Though hippies as the typical models of the counterculture had their positive significance in perspective of protesting the oppression and the alienation of the mainstream culture, the means they had adopted, such as: abuse of drugs, indulgence in rock and roll and sexual promiscuity, dramatically broke their spirit and will, which inevitably made the hippie movement end up in failure. The failure told them that their challenges to the mainstream culture by radical and alternative means could not be feasible. About ten years’ radical counterculture later, most of them coming of the age of marriage had gradually become mature and rational. Psychological awaking from the illusion led them to face the severe social milieu and their personal future. Therefore, it should be mentioned that many of the members and leaders of the counterculture movements had mellowed in political styles and “they were less rejecting of alternative political views in their adult years than they had been during their youth.” (Braungart & Braungart 1990: 301) To some extent, the waning of hippies in the 1970s was foreshadowing the coming of yuppies in the 1980s.

In the wake of World War Two, American education came into a rapid growth period. Just as the term “yuppie” referred to, they were the young urban professionals. So, the majority of yuppies were well educated in college or university or trained with

professional skills. The number of college students had been constantly increasing since World War Two. (See Table 1) (Hacker 1983: 251)

Table 1: Educational Trends, 1940—1980: Percentage of Americans over Age 25 Having Completed High School or College

	High School Only	Four or More Years of College
1940	24.5	4.6
1950	34.3	6.2
1960	41.1	7.7
1970	55.2	11.0
1980	66.3	16.3

From the figures we could get that the college students had soared dramatically in the 1970s compared with the previous decades, and were still in an increasing trend. Until the 1980s, the figure of having four or more years of college education had increased to be 16.3 percent from 11.0 percent in the previous decade and more than twice of that in the 1960s. Expansion of national colleges and universities reflected the characteristic change of the era: professionalization and the rise of the middle class. More and more youth had acquired professional education and they improved their professional competency and competition in the job market. Given this, the decline of the rebellious trend in the 1960s and the rapid growth of education in the 1970s made great contribution to the emergence of the yuppie phenomenon.

3.2 The Rise of the Conservatism

The conventional conservatism came in dominance of the society along with the liberalism losing its appeal. Since the New Deal of Franklin Roosevelt, the liberalism had been in dominance of the national affairs. There is no doubt that the turbulent sixties had climaxed the liberalism. Things turn into their opposites when they reach the extreme. As a backlash to the radical and turmoil years, a new trend of conservatism began to get the upper hand in American society, and therefore “the liberalism in all forms was anathema to the new administration.” (Luther 1992: 300) In contrast to the national disaffection with the liberal solutions to the social affairs in the 1960s, the conservatism had become respectable and gained countless adherents in the 1980s. In perspective of political conservatism, they concurred with Thomas Jefferson’s maxim “That government is best which governs least”. Hence, they began to restrain the size of the government, to reduce American tax burden and further loosen the regulations to encourage economic competition. So the restoration of the individual initiative and entrepreneurship, the essence of the national strength, was required in the circumstances. With regards to the cultural conservatism, it had tremendous appeals. It appeared that conservatism held claims on the merits of tradition while liberalism eschewed them. Hence, conservative Americans embraced the revival of the basic morals and social values, and strongly opposed to the widespread divorce,

casual sexuality and homosexuality. Therefore, restoring conventional morality was the focus of the cultural conservatism.

In the 1980s, religions revitalized and “the big three.....the Protestant, Jewish and Catholic faiths, are making a comeback.” (Blotnick & Srully 1986: 146) The conservatives were worrying about sexual permissiveness, devastating erosion of family life, and the alarming crime. The religious intensification had assumed different forms, and the most important symbol of the religious resurgence was the rapid development of evangelical Protestant demonstrations. Christian evangelicals then had owned their own television channel, radio station, and operated their own schools for the propaganda of evangelical doctrines. The evangelical Christians had turned to be more conservative than before. The leader of the Moral Majority once said that “our task is not to Christianize America, but to bring about a moral and conservative revolution”. What’s more, the president Reagan regularly addressed meetings of conservative fundamentalist and evangelical groups. So, we ought to admit the notion that “the election of Ronald Reagan represents the surprising victory of the religious fundamentalism of the American heartland that had been declining in influence and power for fifty years over the cosmopolitanism of the big metropolitan center.” (Luther 1992: 300)

4. The Declining Trust in Political Intervention

The declining trust in political intervention, mainly ascribed to the Vietnam War, the cold war and the Watergate Scandal, triggered American’s rebellion against all forms of governmental intervention. To some extent, the end of the Vietnam War decreased the rebellious mood of American youth; however, the negative impacts of the war towards Americans could not be ignored. The ghost of the war was still haunting in American minds. The longest war that America entangled in led to the big economic loss and great death toll of American soldiers, which signified a big mistake of American government. Along with the traumatic failure in the Vietnam War, America immediately turned into the weak side. After World War Two, America and the Soviet Union began to be involved in the cold war to vie for world leader both physically and ideologically.

Nothing terrified American government rather than the great achievements in military and nuclear weapons of the Soviet Union. Nothing gave thrilling impacts on American people rather than the rapid progress in nuclear development achieved in U.S. during vying with the Soviet Union.

So, Americans were confronting with the aggressive threatening of the Soviet Union and Americans came into another livelihood with a fearful and awful anxiety of nuclear war followed by the Vietnam War. Therefore, Americans gradually declined trust in government. What's more, the Watergate scandal intensified Americans' distrust in political intervention. The graceless departure from the White House of the president Richard Nixon made the Americans hold claims on the suspicion that they could trust in nobody except themselves. The declining trust in political intervention had made the Americans transform their focus to personal targets, individual success, and financial achievements. Furthermore, it's only natural that as people approach middle age, their main concern is going to be for themselves and their families. (Kinsley 1984: 4) Though the declining trust in political intervention affected everyone, it presumably affected the youth mostly because of their firstly getting exposure to politics. The route that was currently taking may very well lead the United States down to a haphazard path if they somehow didn't figure out a way to revitalize tradition then. Under these circumstances, the radical Americans in the 1960s gave way to a new stereotype—yuppies, who were preoccupied with physical fitness, psychic harmony and successful career with high salaries.

5. CONCLUSION

In the United States, the 1960s is a turbulent era, in which a group of radical Americans fought against and even want to deconstruct the mainstream culture. By contrast, the resurgence of conservatism in the ensuing two decades transferred the previous radical Americans to be yuppies in the 1980s. Compared with the radical Americans, yuppies prioritized personal luxurious life and financial success. In terms of demography, only a small portion of the baby boomers (born from 1946 to 1964) fit precisely to the common features of yuppies: being young in age, residing in urban areas and being professional in education. However, a large number of American youth were psychological yuppies as they adhered to the same attitudes and values with the verifiable yuppies. The former activists in the 1960s

abandoned their political values and commitments in adulthood and turned inward to relish their jobs in corporations, enjoy financial affluence and lead conventional, materialistic and political conservative lives. In summary, historical and political changes in America converged to contribute to the emergence of the yuppie culture in the 1980s.

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