

## Chapter 42

# Rebelling Against Conformity

*How did some Americans rebel against conformity in the 1950s?*

### 42.1 Introduction

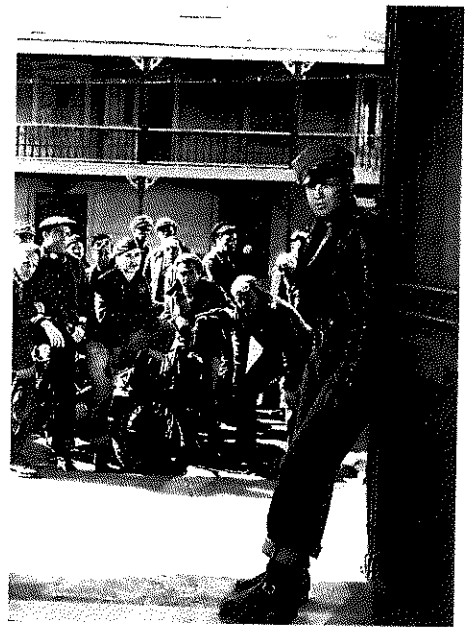
Historian Doris Kearns Goodwin grew up in Rockville Center, a suburb of New York City. On weekdays, her father put on a three-piece suit and left for work. “From the window I watched him greet the other men on our block as they walked to the corner to catch the bus for the short ride to the train station.” On summer weekends, “he and almost all the fathers could be found outside in their shirtsleeves mowing the small patches of grass, rooting out the occasional weed, planting flowers along the margins of the driveways.”

Like most women in Rockville Center, Goodwin’s mother was a full-time homemaker. “She never wore shorts or even slacks,” Goodwin later recalled. “In the grip of the worst heat waves, she wore a girdle, a full slip, and a cotton or linen dress with a bib apron perpetually fixed to her shoulders. Such modesty was the norm in our neighborhood.”

Goodwin’s childhood was carefree. When she and her friends were not in school, they rode their bicycles or roller skates around the block, played hopscotch, and set up lemonade stands in front of their homes. They considered their little street “our playground, our park, our community.”

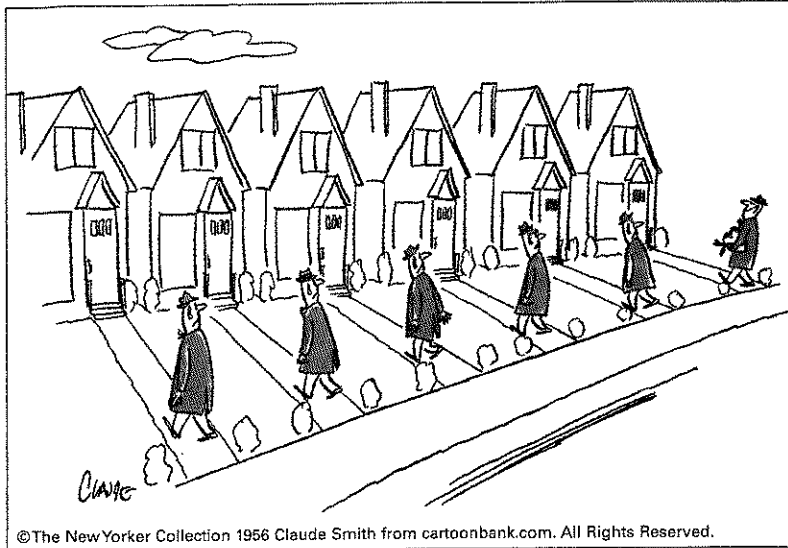
Life in Rockville Center seemed idyllic until Goodwin became a teenager. Then, like other teens in the 1950s, she began listening to the radio to a new kind of loud, fast music called **rock ‘n’ roll**. She read novels about romantic misfits. She went to movies that featured rebellious youth. She discovered that beyond her suburb lay a universe rather different from the safe and predictable world she had grown up in. Goodwin began to question the expectation in her social world that she should think and behave like everyone else.

The 1950s are widely viewed as an age of **conformity**—a time when everyone behaved and thought in socially expected ways. But for Doris Kearns Goodwin and many other young people coming of age in these years, it was also a time of rebellion against those same expectations.



In the 1950s, rebellious teens were looking for a new kind of movie hero. They found one in Marlon Brando. Brando’s role in *The Wild One*, a controversial 1953 film about motorcycle gangs, established him as a symbol of youthful rebellion against authority.

• A teenage “sock hop” in the 1950s



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This cartoon pokes gentle fun at conformity in suburbia. The identical husbands going home to their identical houses look upset by the man carrying a gift. Perhaps they are wondering if they should be bringing home gifts as well, if only to be keeping up with their neighbors.

## 42.2 The Culture and Critics of Suburbia

During the 1950s, novelist and poet John Updike gained fame writing about life in **suburbia**—a term used to describe the nation’s suburbs and the people who lived there. In one poem, he wrote,

I drive my car to supermarket  
The way I take is superhigh,  
A superlot is where I park it,  
And Super Suds are what I buy.

Supersalesmen sell me tonic—  
Super-Tone-O for Relief.  
The planes I ride are supersonic.  
In trains, I like the Super Chief.

—*Superman*, 1954

Updike’s mocking of the “super” suburbs did not discourage families from moving there. During the 1950s, suburbs grew twice as fast as the nation as a whole. By 1960, a third of all Americans were living in suburbia.

**Critics Condemn Life in the Suburbs** Not everyone viewed this enormous population shift with enthusiasm. Critics saw suburbia as a wasteland of conformity and **materialism**, or preoccupation with the pursuit of wealth. In their eyes, little good could be said about the suburbs or the people who lived in them.

When social critic Lewis Mumford looked at a suburb, he saw only bland people in bland housing leading bland lives. He described the first Levittown built on Long Island, New York, as

a multitude of uniform, unidentifiable houses lined up inflexibly, at uniform distances, on uniform roads, in a treeless communal waste, inhabited by people of the same class, the same income, the same age group, witnessing the same television performances, eating the same tasteless prefabricated foods, from the same freezers, conforming in every outward and inward respect to a common mold.

—*The City in History*, 1961

In an influential book called *The Organization Man*, sociologist William Whyte offered a different view of suburbs. He saw them as “packaged villages that have become the dormitory of a new generation of organization men.” These “organization men” were employees of large corporations or government bureaucracies. Whyte wrote of them,

They are not the workers . . . in the usual . . . sense of the word. These people not only work for the Organization. The ones I am talking about belong to it as well. They are the ones of our middle class who have left home, spiritually as well as physically, to take the vows of organization life.

—*The Organization Man*, 1956

Whyte argued that these workers had given up their individual personalities and desires to conform to the demands of the organizations they worked for.

Sociologist David Riesman attacked suburbs for creating a culture of conformity. In his book *The Lonely Crowd*, he wrote that a middle-class suburban child “learns to conform to the group almost as soon as he learns anything.” Such children grow up valuing “fitting in” with their peers far above thinking for themselves or striving for individual achievement.

Few aspects of middle-class life drew more criticism than television. In the early 1950s, television brought **high culture**—works of art, such as plays and concerts, that are held in high esteem—into U.S. homes. By 1960, however, most shows were popular entertainment. Critics were dismayed by much of what they saw on the “idiot box.” They also worried about its isolating effects. Poet T. S. Eliot dismissed television as a “medium of entertainment which permits millions of people to listen to the same joke at the same time, and yet remain lonesome.”

**In Defense of Suburbia** To many Americans, these attacks on suburban life seemed unfair. Where critics saw only conformity, people who actually lived in suburbs were often struck by their diversity. Although most suburbs excluded African Americans, they often had a broad mixture of religious and ethnic groups. A resident of Levittown, Pennsylvania, recalled, “From the beginning there has been this unusual mix of liberal and conservative, Bronx-born Jew and Nanticoke coal cracker.”

Many also objected to the view of suburbia as a wasteland of boring, look-alike boxes. As Doris Kearns Goodwin recalled,

For my parents . . . as for the other families on the block, the house on Southard Avenue was the realization of a dream . . . Here they would have a single-family home, a private world for themselves and their children, which they could make their own—furnish, repair, remodel—something which only a few years before had seemed the prerogative [privilege] of the impossibly affluent.

—*Wait Till Next Year: A Memoir*, 1997

“Postwar Americans were not more materialistic than earlier generations,” agrees historian James Patterson, “just incomparably richer. They were able to buy and enjoy things that their parents could only dream about.”



Malvina Reynolds sang a song called “Little Boxes” to describe America’s new suburbs. The song warned that identical houses created identical people. Many suburbs began with nearly identical homes. Over time, however, many people individualized their tract homes.



Beatniks placed a high value on self-expression. They frequently held events at coffeehouses in cities such as San Francisco and New York City. While spectators sipped European-style coffee and listened, beat writers read their latest works and jazz musicians added free-flowing riffs.



Beat novelist Jack Kerouac wrote in a style called stream of consciousness. He taped together 12-foot rolls of paper like this one, slid them into a typewriter, and wrote whatever came to mind, hardly ever stopping. It took him only 20 days to write *On the Road*, the most famous beat literary work.

### 42.3 Currents of Nonconformity

Beneath the surface of widespread conformity, there were many currents of **nonconformity**, or rebellion against conventional behavior, in the 1950s. No one knew this better than the writer Jack Kerouac. Kerouac embodied the era's nonconformist streak. Kerouac wrote that he lived in

a world full of rucksack wanderers . . . refusing to . . . work for the privilege of consuming, all that [stuff] they didn't really want anyway such as refrigerators, TV sets, cars, . . . thousands or even millions of young Americans wandering around with rucksacks, going up to mountains to pray, making children laugh and old men glad . . . [who] by being kind and also by strange unexpected acts keep giving visions of eternal freedom to everybody and to all living creatures.

—*The Dharma Bums*, 1958

**Beats Defy Convention in Poetry and Literature** Kerouac was part of a group of writers and poets who created the **beat movement**. The term “beat” had a double meaning. It could mean beaten down, but it was also short for “beatific,” or blissfully happy. The beat movement began in New York City's Greenwich Village and then spread from there to San Francisco. Herb Caen, a San Francisco newspaper columnist, called members of the movement **beatniks**, and the name stuck.

Beatniks rejected all forms of **convention**, or customary ways of living. They shunned traditional nine-to-five jobs and the materialism of American life. In contrast to clean-cut suburbanites, many beats wore beards, berets, and dark clothes. They turned away from conventional Western faiths to study Eastern religions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism. They grooved on African American music, especially a new form of jazz called bebop.

Beat writers made significant contributions to American literature. Their subject matter consisted primarily of their own feelings and adventures. They often used **stream of consciousness**, a writing technique in which thoughts are presented randomly, as if flowing directly from a character's mind. Their vivid, image-filled sentences could go on for pages without stopping. The first period in Allen Ginsberg's poem *Howl*, for instance, does not appear until line 221.

While many literary critics praised beat writings, more conventional readers were sometimes offended by it. In 1957, police raided a San Francisco bookstore on the grounds that *Howl* was **obscene**, or morally offensive. After reading the poem, the judge in the case ruled otherwise, saying,

The first part of “Howl” presents a picture of a nightmare world; the second part is an indictment of those elements of modern society destructive to the best qualities of human nature . . . materialism, conformity, and mechanization leading toward war . . . It ends in a plea for holy living.

—Superior Court Judge Clayton Horn, 1957

**Rebellious Teens Create a Youth Culture** Teenagers growing up in the 1950s created another current of nonconformity: a new **youth culture**. Teens rebelled against the world of their parents in the music they listened to, the dances they

danced, the movies they watched, and the slang they used. Two factors supported the growth of this youth culture. One was the sheer number of baby boomers entering adolescence. By 1956, there were 13 million teenagers in the United States. The other was affluence. With cash earned from part-time jobs and allowances, teenagers had more money to spend than ever before.

The most enduring element of this new youth culture was a new style of music that drove many parents crazy. A Cleveland, Ohio, disc jockey named Alan Freed popularized this new sound. After hearing from a record storeowner that white teenagers were buying records by black rhythm and blues artists, Freed began to play black music on his popular radio show. Unlike traditional blues music, rhythm and blues uses amplified instruments, such as electric guitar. Before long, white musicians began blending rhythm and blues with country music and popular songs. The confluence of these musical styles resulted in a brash new sound called rock 'n' roll.

At one time, parents might have stopped their children from hearing this new sound by controlling the family radio and record collection. Technology, however, made that impossible. With the use of transistors in the 1950s, radios and record players became so cheap that teenagers could afford to buy their own. Despite, or perhaps in part because of, their parent's objections, young people embraced rock 'n' roll as the sound of their generation.

The most popular early rock 'n' roll performer was a young singer from Memphis, Tennessee, named Elvis Presley. White teenagers loved his distinctive sound and visual appearance. At a time when most teenage boys sported trim crew cuts, Presley wore his hair slicked back with long sideburns. He swivelled his hips in a sexually suggestive way, while his upper lip curled in a defiant sneer. Adults ridiculed him as "Elvis the Pelvis." But to teenagers, Presley represented a rebellion against the music and manners of their elders.

Teenagers often gathered at "sock hops" to dance to the latest hit records. Held in school gyms where street shoes were not allowed, sock hops were a place where teenagers could learn dances their parents had never heard of. Examples included the hand jive, the stroll, and the bop.

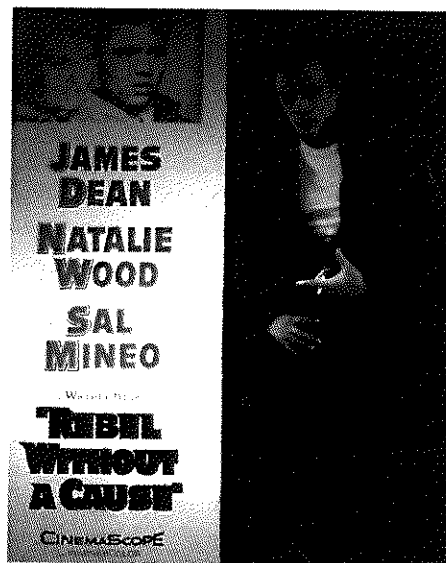
Hollywood catered to restless teenagers by creating movies featuring moody young people who were misunderstood by adults. In *Rebel Without a Cause*, James Dean played an intense, brooding young misfit. *The Wild One* featured Marlon Brando as a rebellious motorcycle gang leader. When a girl in the film asked what he was rebelling against, his answer was, "Whaddya got?"

Teenagers also developed their own language so that "big daddies" (older people) would not understand them. "Boss" meant great. "Threads" were clothes. A person who was "radioactive" was very popular. Phrases like "I'm on cloud nine," "cool it," and "don't have a cow" all started as 1950s' slang.

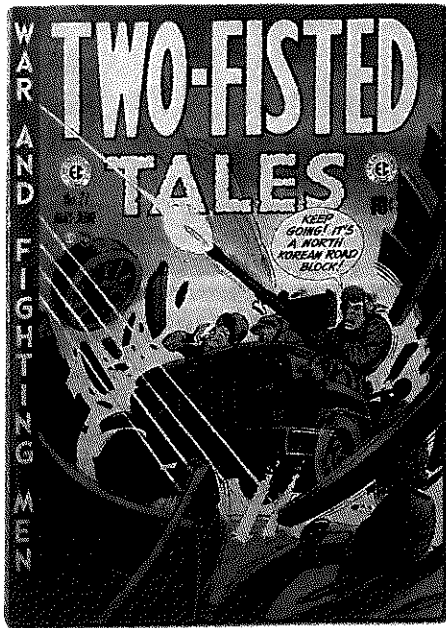
**Comic Books Deviate from "the American Way"** Comic book artists in the 1950s also broke with convention. Comic books had been around since the 1930s. Their heroes tended to be wholesome crime-fighters like Superman, who famously fought for "truth, justice, and the American way." But in the 1950s, some comics veered into darker subject matter. New series like *Crime Suspense Stories*, *Tales from the Crypt*, and *Frontline Combat* were notable for



Rock 'n' roll singer Elvis Presley was idolized by teens in the 1950s. He blended African American rhythm and blues with white country music and gospel to create a new sound. Although tame by today's standards, Presley's sexually suggestive dancing offended many adults.



To reach young audiences, Hollywood made films featuring angry young men misunderstood by adults. Actor James Dean embodied youthful rebellion. When he died in a car crash in 1955, many teenagers mourned his passing.



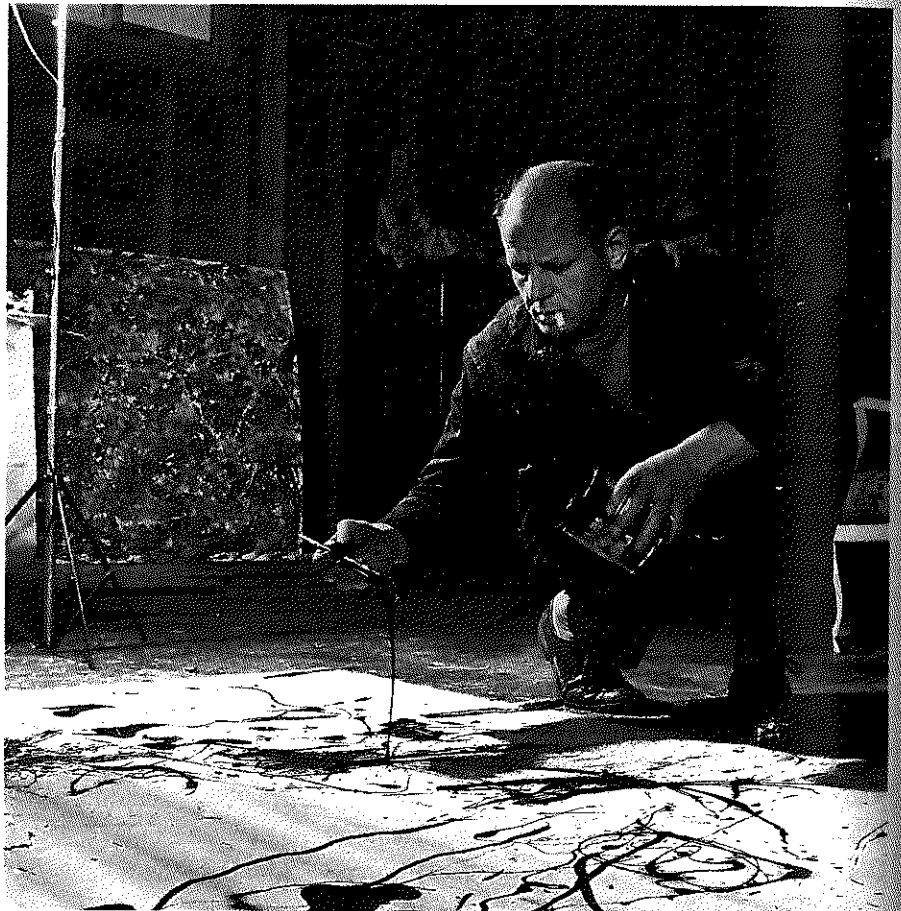
*Two-Fisted Tales* was one of a new breed of gory, graphic comic books that appeared in the early 1950s. Many adults feared the subject matter of these comics would corrupt the minds and morals of young readers.

their gruesome covers and violent storylines. A new comic called *Mad* poked fun at just about everything, from other comic books to popular television shows to foreign policy and espionage.

Many parents were horrified by the new comics. Their concerns were given voice by psychologist Fredric Wertham in a 1954 book called *Seduction of the Innocent*. Wertham complained that values such as “trust, loyalty, confidence, solidarity, sympathy, charity, [and] compassion are ridiculed” in comic books. He also argued that comics had become how-to books for future criminals. “If one were to set out to show children how to steal, rob, lie, cheat, assault, and break into houses, no better method could be devised,” he wrote.

In response to the fears raised by Wertham’s book, comic book publishers created the Comics Code Authority. This organization screened comics to make sure they complied with its Comic Code. The code prohibited depictions of gore, sexuality, and excessive violence. It also required that good must always win over evil. To escape the restrictions of the code, the creators of *Mad* converted their comic book into a magazine in 1955.

**Artists Rebel with Paint** In the art world, rebellion against convention took other forms. Like beat writers, some painters were creating art that was vivid, unstructured, and not bound by any rules. Although their individual styles were very different, these painters formed a school of art known as **abstract expressionism**. The art was abstract because it seldom depicted recognizable objects.



This photograph shows Jackson Pollock at work. He and other painters of the 1950s worked quickly and impulsively to create abstract art that said more about their emotions than their thoughts.

It was expressionistic because for both the artist and the viewer, an emotional response was more important than intellectual appreciation.

Abstract expressionists rebelled against highly realistic styles of painting. They drew much of their inspiration from psychology, believing that art could go beyond rational thought to reach deeper emotional truths. "The source of my painting is the unconscious," said Jackson Pollock, the most famous abstract expressionist. "I am not much aware of what is taking place; it is only after that I see what I have done."

Pollock developed a technique sometimes called "action painting." He placed a blank canvas on the floor and dripped paint onto it from above. Pollock said of this method, "I can walk around it, work from the four sides, and literally be in the painting."

Abstract expressionist works could perplex viewers. The paintings often had no coherent theme or central subject to focus on. Some paintings were so cluttered and detailed it was hard to make out what was in them. Others were so spare and simple that it seemed a child could have painted them. Nonetheless, abstract expressionism quickly gained acceptance from art lovers. Despite being dismissed as "Jack the Dripper," Pollock lived to see his paintings displayed in art museums. In 2004, a Pollock painting sold for a staggering \$11.6 million.

## Summary

**The 1950s were widely viewed as an age of conformity. Some social critics worried that the suburbs had become wastelands of cultural conformity and materialism. However, many currents of nonconformity also swirled through this decade.**

**Suburbia** Millions of Americans moved to suburbs during the 1950s. Critics like Lewis Mumford predicted that the sameness of suburban homes would lead to a social uniformity. But for many families, a move to the suburbs was the fulfillment of the American dream.

**The Organization Man** Sociologists William Whyte and David Riesman explored conformity in their widely read books. They argued that large corporations, suburbs, television, and peer pressure were robbing Americans of their individuality.

**Beat movement** A group of nonconformists called beats rejected all forms of convention. Beatniks rejected all forms of traditional society. Beat writers made major contributions to American literature.

**Youth culture** Teenagers created their own culture of nonconformity by embracing comic books, movies, music, and slang that annoyed or appalled their parents.

**Rock 'n' roll** This now-familiar form of music was born in the 1950s. It was rooted in African American rhythm and blues and featured simple melodies, basic chords, and a strong, danceable beat. Many parents hated rock 'n' roll, which made it even more attractive to teenagers.

**Abstract expressionism** Painters like Jackson Pollock broke with realism in art to create a new form known as abstract expressionism. Abstract expressionist paintings appealed to viewers' emotions rather than their rational thought.