



University of
New Haven

University of New Haven
Digital Commons @ New Haven

Sociology Faculty Publications

Sociology

2013

Are the Kids Alright? A Critique and Agenda for Taking Youth Subcultures Seriously

Jeffrey S. Debies-Carl

University of New Haven, jdebies-carl@newhaven.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.newhaven.edu/sociology-facpubs>

 Part of the [Sociology Commons](#)

Publisher Citation

Debies-Carl, Jeffrey S. 2013. "Are the Kids Alright? A Critique and Agenda for Taking Youth Subcultures Seriously." *Social Science Information* 52(1), 110-33. doi: 10.1177/0539018412466636

Comments

This is the author's accepted manuscript of the published article.

The final version can be accessed at

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0539018412466636>

ARE THE KIDS ALRIGHT? A CRITIQUE AND AGENDA FOR TAKING YOUTH
CULTURES SERIOUSLY

ABSTRACT

Researchers have long been fascinated with youth subcultures. Decades of study have yielded several competing paradigms which attempt to interpret these subcultures in diverse ways, with each succeeding paradigm criticizing, and attempting to improve on, those that came before it. Rather than offering criticism of a specific youth studies paradigm, this paper provides a critique of this body of theory as a whole, by delineating several theoretical assumptions that have persisted *across* these perspectives. These include: 1) the tendency to group all youth phenomena under a monolithic conceptual umbrella, 2) a preoccupation on the part of researchers with style and the consumption of goods, and 3) the assumed lack of rational behavior found in subcultures and an accompanying inability on the part of subcultures to achieve real goals or effect social change. It is argued that such assumptions trivialize subcultures, have lead to a priori understandings of these without adequate empirical grounding, and must be addressed if subcultures are to be adequately understood and appreciated.

INTRODUCTION

For decades, researchers have attempted to make sense of the cultural practices of youths. The investigation into these practices has ranged across diverse practices—such as clubbing (Thornton 1995), tattooing (Atkinson 2003), and dressing up (McRobbie 1989)—and across diverse youth groupings, ranging from mods (Muggleton 2000), to heavy metallers (Arnett 1995), and ski-jumpers (Clarke 1982). Taken together, researchers working in this area of inquiry have achieved a number of interesting insights into many of the cultural phenomena of youths and have produced an impressive body of scholarly work for later researchers to draw on.

Of course, no area of inquiry is without its shortcomings, and each youth studies paradigm has received its share of criticism in the efforts to improve on our overall understanding of youth cultures. While each individual perspective can be subjected to a specific critique, it is argued here that several theoretical assumptions have persisted *across* these perspectives that are particularly problematic when such theories are employed for the interpretation of subcultures. These include: 1) the tendency to group all youth phenomena under a monolithic conceptual umbrella, 2) a preoccupation with style and the consumption of goods, and 3) the assumed lack of rational behavior found in subcultures and an accompanying inability on the part of subcultures to achieve real goals or effect social change. The maintenance of these assumptions has contributed to a scholarly environment where youth are not always taken seriously and where a priori expectations are sometimes upheld without investigating alternative explanations.

In the first section of this paper, four key paradigms in youth culture studies are described with an emphasis on those problematic characteristics of each which are discussed in the critique that follows. Particular attention is paid to the more recent of these paradigms—those that

maintain the most influence over current research. In the next section, I offer an appraisal of the overall, current state of the youth culture research, arguing that a number of problematic assumptions have been maintained across paradigms despite their differences. Along the way, I attempt to give examples of researchers who have attempted to address some of these assumptions. I conclude with a brief summary of the argument presented here and provide some concluding remarks regarding what these problematic assumptions have meant for youth studies and what the future might hold.

AN OVERVIEW OF YOUTH CULTURE PERSPECTIVES

The study of youth subcultures has developed over a number of decades and has undergone numerous revisions during this time. Understanding and appraising the current state of this body of literature, in turn, requires a brief survey of its history. To this end, four temporally overlapping but relatively distinct conceptual periods or traditions of youth subculture studies can be identified which will be discussed: 1) the Chicago School and Classical youth studies perspective, 2) Transaction and Labeling, 3) the Birmingham School/Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies perspective, and 4) Post-subculture studies. The first two conceptual traditions paved the way for later developments in the field and are essential to any discussion of youth subculture in order to contextualize these developments. However, the latter two perspectives are more salient to current research and debate and will, therefore, receive the bulk of consideration in what follows. Each perspective is addressed chronologically, receiving an overview and critique of its unique contributions to the field. Table 1 provides a concise overview of these perspectives, and their associated characteristics and criticisms.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

The Chicago School and Classical Youth Studies

Youth culture studies can be traced at least as far back as the Chicago School (Levine and Stumpf 1983). This body of work applied existing theories of crime, delinquency, and social deviance to youth lifestyles and behaviors. From this perspective individuals in general, and youth in particular, may resort to deviant behavior as a result of insufficient cohesiveness with society—as a result of alienation or anomie. The status of being young necessitates a confusing period of life in which the norms of childhood existence have not yet been fully subsumed by the norms of adulthood, resulting in role confusion and the inability to fully conform to normal standards. As such, youth culture was considered to be deviant culture and affiliation with such groups was believed to set one on a course for future criminality.

Underlying claims of this sort was the causal assumption that these deviant behaviors resulted from the inability or refusal on the part of youths to successfully conform to societal norms and practices which, in turn, were overwhelmingly considered to be those of the middle class. This assumption anticipated a later development in the field of cultural studies tracing the emergence of youth subcultures to the unique structural position of working-class society but which, as will be seen below, derived an entirely different set of conclusions regarding the significance of this context of emergence.

Youth studies in the Chicago School tradition were conducted as early as the 1920s. Despite this early inception, work of this sort continued for some decades and was considerably reinforced by Robert K. Merton's (1938) revision of structural functionalism. Merton attempted to illustrate how the apparent disruption of normality alleged to accompany deviant behavior could actually be interpreted as part of the normal operation of society. In his work, he suggests

that all individuals try to achieve normality, but sometimes conditions render the desired conformity difficult or impossible to attain. Failure may, in turn, result in the individual adapting to their situation in deviant ways, as a sort of continued effort to achieve normality, or shifting the emphasis on what sort of ends, and the means to get there, constitute the attainment of success (e.g. Cohen 1955, Cloward and Ohlin 1960). While youth studies thus remained fairly consistent in perspective and scope for many decades, other events occurring during this same time period, would ensure that innovations in the study of youth culture were imminent, even if they would not immediately displace the preexisting perspective.¹

Transaction and Labeling

Social and political events occurring during the 1960s brought the issue of power back into academic discourse and into youth culture studies in particular (Roberts 1976). Whereas the perspective of earlier subcultural studies implied that interaction occurred between equals, the emerging perspective recognized that equality in exchange was not always the case. This perspective, developed by a number of prominent researchers (e.g. Becker 1963; Goffman 1961, 1968; Erikson 1962), argued that youth occupy a relatively powerless social position and so interactions with adults are often characterized by a power imbalance, an unequal ability to define a given situation. Whatever practices youth adopt or develop are subject to the censure or approval of adults representing the established norms of society who, collectively, have the power to define and maintain those norms. Once a youth deviates from established norms, willingly or not, they may be labeled deviant as a means of social control. Fear of stigma may curb initial deviant acts but, once the label is assigned, it may become self-fulfilling in that the deviant identity is internalized by the youth who will go on to commit more deviant acts. Youths

may thus undergo deviant ‘careers’ in which they learn deviance and eventually adopt or even embrace a stigmatized identity. This identity may crystallize over time as others reinforce the deviant youths’ perception of themselves as deviant through further transaction.

Following from this explanatory scheme, youth culture studies continued to classify youth subcultures as deviants. However, the concept of a *relative* deviance was introduced. Dominant, powerful segments of society were able to define normality and labeled other segments, here youth subcultures, as deviant. This labeling amounted to a process of social control, stigmatizing and marginalizing different lifestyles. It also suggested a social etiology of youth subcultures: they develop not out of individual pathologies resulting, in turn, from alienation and isolation, but out of transaction. That is, out of social interactions where the power to define what is normal is not shared equally by all participants and which serve to maintain the status quo.

While the transaction perspective shifts ‘blame’ for youthful deviance away from youth themselves and their inability to conform successfully, it has been criticized on the grounds that it 1) denies agency to youth, suggesting that they merely receive and interpret sanctions from more powerful groups; and 2) that it downplays the role of social structure, of social context, on both sets of parties to the interaction (e.g. Akers 1967, Mankoff 1971).

The Birmingham School and the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies

Since the end of the Second World War, youth subcultures in Britain had become increasingly visible (Clarke et al. 1976). Researchers from the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham sought to better understand this emergent phenomenon. The starting point of their perspective borrows heavily from the American

interactionist perspective. While abandoning the idea of individual, social pathologies, the perspective maintained a transactional approach in which unequal cultural power underlies all interactions: “The definitions of the world... express the life situation of those groups which hold the monopoly of power in society” (Clarke et al. 1976). However, these researchers soon found that however insightful this approach might be, it was insufficient for explaining an obvious social structural aspect of British youth subcultures—specifically, the role of social class. A deviant youth status may result from processes of social labeling, but a pattern was noted in which working-class youths were far more likely to be so labeled than youths from any other class background. Chambliss (1973) provides a classic example of this phenomenon in his study of two High School social groups. The first, which he calls the “Saints,” came from respectable middle-class backgrounds while the second, the “Roughnecks,” came from lower-class backgrounds. While both were involved in similar deviant activities—drinking, skipping school, fighting, and vandalism—and, indeed, the Saints seemed even more heavily involved—only the lower-class Roughnecks were actually labeled as deviant by the community. The double-standards revealed in studies such as this revealed how a synthetic approach, combining both microsociological and macrosociological perspectives, was needed to account for the contributing factors to subcultural formation and participation. Both interactively and structurally then, youth culture could best be understood through its subordinate relationship to those segments of society endowed with superior cultural power.

According to the CCCS, each social class within a given society shares a separate understanding of how to live, that is, each class maintains a different culture (Clarke et al. 1976). Of these, the culture of the most powerful class is considered dominant. It has the greatest ability to set definitions and promote perspectives, and at the same time portrays itself as the *only*

culture of the society. The remaining class cultures, while subordinate to this dominant culture, are also at odds with it and attempt to assert their own collective definitions. Each class-based culture, dominant or subordinate, is not monolithic but contain variations, subcultures, within itself. The class-based cultures each serve as ‘parent’ cultures, providing sets of cultural assumptions and choices which can be selectively utilized or appropriated by the various subcultures which they contain. Willis (1977), for example, examined the working-class culture of teenage boys in their industrial jobs. The subculture they created is directly sampled from the working-class parent culture, placing emphasis on being tough, hard-working, macho, and street-wise. This system of values allows the youths to deal with their lot in life, their class position in society, and allows them to be contemptuous of other social classes, and their associated cultures, which are seen as pampered and naïve. However, this subculture also keeps them from ever aspiring towards attaining greater affluence, prestige, and cultural power.

Subcultures, then, can be studied in terms of both their relationship to their parent culture, as well as their relationship to the dominant culture. Each subculture is different. They may reaffirm and reinforce, or challenge and dispute the parent culture and/or the dominant culture. To the extent which they do so, they may be perceived as being “respectable, ‘rough’, delinquent [or] criminal” subcultures (Clarke et al. 1976: 13). In all cases, subcultures are predominantly concerned with the same issues of their parent cultures: their unique social and material position in society and the specific difficulties this entails. Subcultures differ from their parent cultures in terms of the solutions they develop to resolve these difficulties, even as they appropriate the cultural, raw materials for their resolutions from the parent culture.

The CCCS posited a kind of dual reality to the nature of the relationship between the cultures of youth and that of the greater society. Youth, on the one hand, are subject to market

influence, to being mere consumers of cultural goods. But youth are also engaged in resistance to the hegemony of dominant culture, and in pursuing class goals. Through semiological analysis these researchers located youth resistance to cultural hegemony in the appropriation and reinterpretation of these same goods from the parent or dominant culture in an attempt to subvert their meaning and either promote a counter-discourse or to simply disrupt taken-for-granted cultural assumptions—a process referred to as *bricolage* (Lévi-Strauss 1966). In these ways, subcultural style is intended to offend the mainstream, and to challenge the taken-for-granted meaning of objects along with the social relationships and organization they signify (Clarke et al. 1976). Thus, rather than focusing on mainstream interpretations of youth culture, as the British media and classical youth studies research had done previously, the Birmingham School attempted to adopt an emic perspective, examining youth subcultures through *their* view of the social world.

The importance of this perspective can be gleaned when considering the symbols youths implement and upon which great emphasis was placed by researchers. Such symbols may have entirely different meanings to the youth who adopt them and identifying these meanings is the researcher's most crucial task (Hebdige 1979). This is done primarily through homology (Brake 1985), through finding associations between the visible, material culture of a group (e.g. attire, hairstyles, body modification, etc.) and the non-material aspects of its lifestyle (e.g. values, beliefs, behaviors, etc.). Style meaningfully signifies or reifies the intangible elements underlying subcultural objects, rendering it a fit and insightful subject of analysis. This is complicated by the necessity of decoding these meanings from the perspective of subcultural insiders since, again, the meaning they invest in material objects and practices will inevitably

diverge from what other cultures within the same society would otherwise ascribe to those same objects.

The Teddy boys (AKA Teds), for example, were a working-class subculture very much concerned with their relatively low status and their desire to achieve membership in a higher class. To this end, they adopted the dress style, the Edwardian suit albeit with some modifications, of the upper-class as a way of displaying and symbolically achieving these goals (Jefferson 1976). While reflecting the interests of the working-class parent culture from which the Teds emerged (i.e. socioeconomic mobility), this style also served to resist the inferior status ascribed to the working-class. Indeed, the Teds were so concerned with status, and their own marginality, that they became well-known for 1) being extremely sensitive to anything that might be considered an insult to their status and 2) responding to this apprehension violently. These characteristics, then—sensitivity and pugnaciousness—can be interpreted as serving a similar purpose as Ted style: as a means of challenging their position in society.

Though this symbolic warfare may be defined as important by the subculture that is engaged in it, the CCCS researchers determined that it is ultimately ineffectual. The challenges to mainstream hegemony by subcultures are neutralized through a) commodification and b) ideological interpretation. Again, the relationship between the market and the dominant culture, on the one hand, and subcultures on the other, works in both directions. The symbols may be appropriated by subcultural opposition, but these may in turn be commodified by the dominant culture. They may be copied, manufactured, and sold as hot, new fashions, and thus deprived of their potency. Simultaneously, since subcultures, and their artifacts, present a danger to cultural hegemony through their apparent disruption of taken-for-granted meanings and norms, they can be neutralized by being interpreted in ways consistent with prevailing ideology. Members can be

portrayed as little more than pathological individuals, as youthful deviants, or as quirky, but otherwise normal members of society. In either case, no social change is achieved in the dominant culture and no new gains or different social positionings are achieved by the subculture. Thus, while the symbolic strategies of subcultures are intended to serve as solutions to their class problems, the CCCS perspective suggests they constitute only a symbolic or “magical” solution (Brake 1974, 1980; P. Cohen 1972)—meaningful, but not a “real” threat to established social organization and cultural hegemony. In the case of the Teds, of course, adopting the style of a more affluent class, although socially meaningful and potentially beneficial on a psychological level, did nothing to alter their real situation. If anything, spending hard-earned money on fashionable styles perpetuates a marginal social position.

Post-Subculture Studies

Post-subculture studies does not consist of a coherent, new paradigm, but rather contains a number of related observations and conceptualizations of subculture which are explicitly critical of the CCCS tradition. According to this perspective, the theories of the CCCS are either outdated and inapplicable to the current postmodern condition of social life, or inherently flawed and likely to be inapplicable even to the groups to which they were previously applied.

For the most part, it is argued that CCCS perspectives are too structural, static, and modernist whereas contemporary youth inhabit social worlds that are more complex, constantly shifting and flexible, and greatly proliferated in scope and scale. The CCCS is accused of deifying social class as the sole, or at least most important, determinant in the creation of subcultures and the forms they take, while neglecting other important elements of life such as age, gender, and ethnicity (Stahl 2003). This insistence on the primacy of structure likely

resulted from the imposition of neo-Marxian theoretical assumptions on the subject of study and, therefore, reflects only those assumptions and not the phenomenological realities of subcultural life (Muggleton 2000). Instead, it is argued that social “class is willfully obfuscated by subcultural distinctions” (Thornton 1995: 12), and consumption actually allows subculturalists to overcome structural impositions (Bennett 1999, 2005).

A concern with the inadequacies of the semiotic methodology of the CCCS also permeates the post-subcultures literature. It is argued that “[t]he discourse of style overemphasizes a symbolic response to exclusion, situating semiotic play with appropriated texts above that of the imaginative and concrete contexts in which cultural activity is enacted” (Stahl 2003: 28-9). Styles, and the meanings behind them, are constantly shifting and diffusing in a globalized world, such that no stable meaning can be decoded by the semiotician (Baudrillard 1983, Craik 1994). Without the ability to read the meaning of subcultural styles, the concerns of subcultures cannot be interpreted through semiotics, rendering CCCS approaches void of interpretive value.

Post-subcultural approaches also take issue with the essentialist characterization of youth subcultures promoted by the CCCS. Instead, they suggest that a) coherent, consistent, and homogenous subcultures with stable sets of shared beliefs, practices, and identities do not exist, and that b) the loose categorizations that do exist cannot be readily differentiated from each other or from other entities.

First, post-subculturalists tend to take issue with the CCCS’ assertion of a “homological unity of class-based practices” (Weinzierl and Muggleton 2003: 7), that is, with the agreement or meaningful correspondence between various material and non-material aspects of the subculture. This is especially true in regards to the alleged correspondence between style and music.

Whereas the CCCS semioticians generally argued that the meanings which could be read in each of these would reflect and support one-another, post-subcultural approaches find no such correlation. Instead, they argue that modern subcultural activity is more eclectic and diverse. Participants sample from (i.e. consume) a number of available styles and musical forms which do not generally reflect each other in any real way (Bennett 1999, 2000; Redhead 1990). Moreover, moving beyond issues of homology, post-subculturalists argue that there is no such thing as a coherent, recognizable subculture, and therefore no such thing as “real” or “fake” (i.e. *poseur*) members or participants. For example, Muggleton, agreeing with and quoting one of his informants, states that “There is no such thing as punk” (2000:2). Thus, to even use the term ‘subculture’ is problematic since it is a term with no referent (Bennett 1999). While norms, rules, and shared understandings still exist and still matter, they are contingent, temporary, and fluid (Grossberg 1984) and cannot be used to delineate a stable configuration that can be labeled ‘subculture.’

Next, post-subculturalists, in perhaps the most telling departure from CCCS theory, disavow that paradigm’s assertion “that both ‘subculture’ and the parent culture against which it is defined are coherent and homogenous formations that can be clearly demarcated” (Wienzierl and Muggleton 2003:7). Just as we cannot locate a clearly identifiable subculture, neither can we distinguish between subcultures or between subculture and external entities that are clearly *not* of the subculture. Global flows of people, ideas, style, and so forth, constantly diffuse and overlap, making nothing distinct, leaving no unit of analysis discrete, and rendering null any attempt to distinguish any subculture from the ‘other.’ For example, the CCCS theorists established an inimical relationship between youth subcultures, on the one hand, and mainstream media, on the other. Youth were portrayed as interested in maintaining freedom from media

representation which would either demonize them (e.g. S. Cohen 1972) or coopt their image for sale and, therefore, remove its threat (Hebdige 1979). These clear divisions are not evident in post-subcultural studies. Thornton's (1995) work with 'club cultures' exemplifies this blurriness. She locates subculture formation not as distinct from the media, but dependent on media representation to establish anything resembling coherence out of a mish-mash of individual styles and tastes. Likewise, McRobbie has argued that subcultures are "born into the media" (1989: 39). Thus, there is no distinction between a moment of subcultural authenticity preceding representation in the media. Grossberg (1984, 1997) has similarly problematized the distinction between subcultures and the mainstream or popular 'other.' What we might otherwise attempt to understand as two separate and opposed social entities, are actually interrelated and share numerous elements. Each incorporates "practices, codes, and effects" (1997: 220) of the 'other,' resulting in an inability to clearly differentiate between them. In short, no cultural phenomenon is self-contained and localized. Instead, all are overlapping, locally experienced variations in a global stream.

Having established a powerful critique of the CCCS tradition and the concomitant concept of 'subculture,' some post-subculturalist researchers have endeavored to establish new concepts which they feel more adequately capture and describe the phenomena of contemporary youth culture. The most prominent of these include 'neo-tribes' (Bennett 1999, 2005), 'club cultures' (Thornton 1995), and 'post-subcultures' (Muggleton 1997, 2000). These can be categorized as 'lifestyles': individual-level sensibilities deployed in the selection of commodities through which to engage in self-expression (Bocock 1992, Chaney 1996, Miles 2000). That is, youth phenomena are reduced to a series of individual quests for expression in the "Supermarket of Style" (Polhemus 1994). Members are not goal-oriented in any 'rational' way but, through

shifting patterns of taste and consumption, seek only to assert their individuality. Subcultures, by whatever name, are not homogenous, coherent ways of life where the members share collective goals and sensibilities. Instead, youth phenomena are characterized by fluid, fragmented identities, shifting and overlapping boundaries, relatively low levels of commitment, and little concept of authenticity. At the same time, the “individual” becomes difficult to pin down, precisely because of the multiplicity of meanings—expressed through different styles, places of subcultural activity frequented, and behaviors engaged in—which are all inherently unstable and diverse (Shields 1992).

Post-subcultural approaches are not without their own criticisms. For example, just as the CCCS was accused of obscuring social reality through a procrustean imposition of a priori theory (Muggleton 2000, Redhead 1990, Stahl 2003), the same can also be said regarding post-subcultural research. While the theory imposed this time may not be grand or general theory, the expectations of the perspective are still found to only partly hold in research designed to test the relative merits of the competing interpretations of youth culture (e.g. Greener and Hollands 2006). Just as it is possible to ‘read’ too strongly the effects of social structure at the expense of human agency, so too is it possible to selectively note instances of agency at the expense of the importance of ‘real,’ material conditions. Thus, in a related critique, some researchers have argued that contemporary youth cultures have not been freed from structural constraints. Issues of class, gender, race, and so on, are not readily done away with or easily “negotiable by self-creating subjects” (Hesmondhalgh 2005: 25). Rather, structural forces still influence youth subcultural participation and its consequences (Hollands 2002, Nayak 2003). From this perspective, while some modern youths may partake in a vast variety of styles and activities, it is most likely those of an upper- or middle-class background that are able to most fully take part in

these consumption activities and freely define their identities through them (Shildrick and MacDonald 2006). At the very least, the background of individuals, comprising a *habitus* (Bourdieu 1990), will influence the type and degree of subculture participation they “choose” to engage in (O’Connor 2004a). The post-subculturalist insistence on absolute agency, moreover, typically leads post-subculture theorists “to down-play the collective nature of subcultural practice... because their postmodern critique of the CCCS wants to give priority to the individual” (Blackman 2005:12). Additionally, Blackman argues, whenever theories of subculture become too focused on the individual level of analysis—as is the case not only with post-subculture approaches, but also with the pre-CCCS Chicago School and Transaction/Labeling perspectives—they become “over-preoccupied with the particular, either in terms of ‘dysfunctionalism’ or celebratory hybrid pleasures... [and therefore] lack theoretical coherence and explanatory power at the level of the social” (2005: 16-7).

In summary, while post-subculture studies have been immensely important in reviving a dialogue regarding youth culture (Shildrick and MacDonald 2006), many problems remain and little theoretical consensus has been reached. This impasse has served to render youth subcultures something of a continuing mystery to academic interpretation, if not to the individuals that comprise them.

A CRITIQUE OF YOUTH CULTURE PERSPECTIVES

As illustrated above, existing perspectives regarding youth culture are considerably diverse. However, they do share certain fundamental tenets in common. While each perspective may be subjected to a unique set of criticisms, of particular interest to the current work are three, shared elements of these perspectives that seem particularly problematic for the overall

tradition—and future—of youth studies: 1) the tendency to group all youth phenomena under a monolithic, conceptual umbrella, 2) a preoccupation with style and the consumption of goods, and 3) the assumed lack of rational behavior or motivation found in subcultures and an accompanying inability or lack of desire on the part of subcultures to achieve any real goals or social change. In regards to these issues, even the recent post-subcultural approaches offer very little improvement over the CCCS or other earlier perspectives and, instead, seem to largely agree with the same conclusions, even if they arrive at them through a different logic.

Monolithic Conceptions of Youth Culture

Early discussion of youth in society made use of the idea of youth *culture*, as opposed to cultures or *subcultures*, suggesting that there was a shared state of social being at this stage of life. Talcott Parsons (1942), for example, posited the existence of such a monolithic, shared culture with which youth in modern societies were affiliated. While clearly inaccurate in describing the phenomenon of youth culture today, it is possible that such portrayals were once true. Indeed, some work suggests that until fairly recently the concepts of youth and associated youth subculture did not exist at all (e.g. Aries 1962, Mintz 2006). Instead, youth were drawn into the adult world, and therefore adult culture, as soon as possible.

Whatever the historical reality of youth life, regarding recent decades no serious observer would claim that all youth cultures are exactly the same. Yet, despite the admission of a multiplicity of contemporary subcultures, monolithic conceptions of youth culture remain popular. In other words, the attempt is often made to circumscribe a variety of cultural practices within a single, totalizing theorization. Bennet (1999) has convincingly argued that the term ‘subculture’ has come to encompass so wide a range of phenomena that the concept has been

stretched beyond the point of utility. Yet, to use a looser concept—such as tribe or post-subculture—does not necessarily solve this problem. Such concepts are, by the definitions of their creators, used to indicate a wide range of youth behaviors which cannot easily be classified and, thus, return us to the original problem of a concept that is too inclusive. Thus, while “[t]he CCCS subculturalists might have overestimated the boundedness and permanence of the group identities they were studying... simply to offer instability and temporariness as alternatives does not get us very far” (Hesmondhalgh 2005: 24).

The disagreement in findings over the years—the lack of consensus in what youth cultures are like—may be a result of the imposition of totalizing theories on divergent cases (Greener and Hollands 2006, Muggleton 2000, Redhead 1990, Stahl 2003). However, the reverse may also be true, that researchers over-generalize their findings—usually ethnographic case-studies of a single subculture rather than representative quantitative studies (Hesmondhalgh 2005)—to *all* subcultures. While it is understandable and even praiseworthy, given the nature of the subject matter and the need for an insider’s perspective, that researchers will utilize qualitative methodologies, the usual cautions for generalizing beyond the observations should still apply (see, for example, Berg 2004).

There are many possible solutions to this problem. One is to establish a typology of different youth cultures based on their distinguishing characteristics. The CCCS likely represents the first clear attempt to distinguish between different *types* of subcultures: conceptual groupings of subcultures that represent similar configurations and concerns. Specifically, they divided all subcultures into those with either working-class or middle-class backgrounds. As discussed above, the distinction was never fully supported and has been heavily criticized in the ensuing years. Another possible distinction is raised by Cagle (1995), who notes that the CCCS

failed to examine non-oppositional subcultures. This suggests that typing cases based on their stance toward “mainstream” society might also be a fruitful endeavor.

Regardless of which distinctions one uses to distinguish between different youth configurations, the practice will necessarily involve the use of ‘ideal types’ (Weber 1949): some characteristics of the subject matter will be emphasized at the expense of others. While such an approach will not perfectly represent the subculture under study, it will enable the recognition that not all youth cultures are the same and, therefore, cannot be treated by theorists as though they have identical antecedents, identical concerns, and identical consequences.

Fortunately, useful ideal types already exist that can be applied more fully. As already noted, there has been considerable disagreement over the extent to which current conceptions of subculture accurately reflect the phenomena in question. Empirical studies meant to compare competing interpretations of youth cultures find support for some aspects of both CCCS and post-subculture perspectives (e.g. Greener and Hollands 2006, Muggleton 2000). It is likely that neither perspective, on its own, can fully explain all youth subculture experiences and that, instead, each perspective represents an ideal at the end of a continuum upon which actual cases may be placed.

At least two major studies have previously argued for such a perspective, prioritizing neither a CCCS perspective of subculture nor a post-subcultures approach. Hodkinson argues that subculture is still a relevant concept, but researchers must “differentiate those groupings which are predominantly ephemeral from those which entail far greater levels of commitment, continuity, distinctiveness, or, to put it in general terms, substance” (Hodkinson 2002: 24). Using these criteria in his study of gothic subculture, Hodkinson finds that this group more closely approximates the CCCS ideal of a subculture than a post-subculture, but this should not

be assumed to be necessarily true of all other groups. Muggleton (2000) similarly suggests two ideal types: 1) 'liminal subcultures' and, 2) 'crossover countercultures.' The former are fairly coherent and consistent configurations, where members can mostly identify with a particular category but deny being a stereotypical exemplar of that category. This type clearly corresponds most closely with a CCCS ideal. The latter, however, are so eclectic, that they cannot be said to fit into a single category at all, nor do they identify with a single category but, instead, feel comfortable and accepted in multiple groups. This type has also been referred to as 'freak style' (Gottschalk 1993), and represents an ideal more consistent with a post-subcultures perspective.

Thus, not all cultures should be assumed to reflect a CCCS approach or a post-subculture approach, nor should any other characteristic be assumed to correspond with the totality of youth cultural experiences. The matter of characteristics becomes an empirical question which can be tested rather than assumed based on prior theory or overgeneralizations.

Style and Consumption

The preceding discussion of youth studies indicates that youth cultures are, typically, and monolithically, viewed as groups—or aggregations of diverse individuals—utterly preoccupied with consumption. For the CCCS, subcultures were primarily engaged in taking styles from the mainstream or parent cultures and reinterpreting them to signify subcultural concerns; that is, they were engaged in semiotic warfare through consumerism. The post-subcultural approaches argue that style is unique to each individual and does not necessarily signify anything at all, much less something that is *collectively* meaningful (Kaiser et al. 1991, Craik 1994). Yet, consumption practices still figure prominently in this perspective and are seen as occurring at the individual level where they are interpreted as emancipatory: they free individuals from structural

and social constraints by allowing them to express themselves via the “Supermarket of Style” (Polhemus 1994). Thus “priority is given to the individual to absorb and choose subcultural style, to explore personal emancipation and self-fulfillment...” (Blackman 2005: 15).

Both perspectives start out with an assumption that style and consumerism are central to all subcultures, then go on to establish the role of these without empirically testing the accuracy of the assumption. Thus while style and consumerism may have a role, and while this role may vary according to the particular group under study, the significance of that role may be exaggerated and no different from mainstream cultural consumption. This is particularly problematic if the researcher is an outsider to the group since spectacular appearances, and aspects of material culture more generally, will likely be the first and most obvious characteristic observable when encountering an unfamiliar group. Clark (2003) suggests that interpretations of subcultures as little more than fashion movements is likely the result of such an outsider perspective, and over the years insider perspectives are lost in the wake of hardier media and academic representations. However, even insiders are likely to work with these assumptions when they are also researchers. Muggleton, for example, “selected [informants] on the basis of what [he] regarded as their unconventional appearance” (2000: 171). We know nothing of the youth who did not place such emphasis on appearances since they were purposefully excluded from the sample. Moreover, of the 46 distinct questions listed in his interview schedule, at least 34 deal directly with the style of the informants: type of dress, reasons for dressing the way they do, and so on. While this is understandable in that the goal of his study was to interpret the “postmodern meaning of style,” the methodology serves to exemplify the assumptions in this field of study more generally.

While a discussion of alternatives to a superficial analysis of consumption and style cannot be addressed in full here, some mention of these possibilities is appropriate. In one of the principle documents of the CCCS canon (Clarke et al. 1976), Marx is invoked as guiding light of the perspective: “As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production, both with *what* they produce and *how* they produce” (Marx 1970: 42, emphasis in original). Despite this emphasis on production, however, the overwhelming tendency of most studies of youth subcultures insist that their subjects are only engaged in *consumption* or, at best, at reinterpreting the objects they consume which are provided by the parent culture. Indeed, they are silent on the matter of what new production might entail, what it might look like, and so rendered their claim invulnerable to falsifiability. Some recent work has begun to move away from the inertia of this tradition to forge new paths forward for research. Moore (2007), for example, highlights the need to move beyond consumption, finding that, at least for some subcultures, independent cultural *production* is a more salient source of meaning for both group members and researchers.

While Moore’s study considerably improves on the issues inherent in much youth culture research that prioritizes consumption, future research cannot address this issue by simply moving on to the study of the production of style either. Interestingly, despite his research model, Muggleton (2000) found that “contrary to what both sociology and our own assumptions might have led us to believe, some subculturalists did not hold style in high regard” (2000: 120) and that “We therefore need to explore the meaning of diversity in other areas” (2000: 69). The need to move beyond a focus on style, especially ‘spectacular’ style (Shildrick and MacDonald 2006), including the consumption of resources for the establishment thereof, has long been acknowledged (e.g. Clarke 1982). Chatterton and Hollands (2002; Hollands 1995, 2002) offer a

promising approach by expanding the analytic framework of youth activities to include an emphasis on youth relationships to both production and regulation, but moving also beyond style to focus on a more holistic set of cultural practices tied to different youth cultures in their respective socio-spatial settings. They note distinct patterns in their research: Some youth are engaged in relatively passive consumption in mainstream settings with individualistic emphases while others, for example, are more closely involved in producing and regulating their own cultural spaces. Such work is intriguing, and illustrates the possibility of moving beyond style while providing a meaningful alternative.

In summary, there is a need to determine the importance, if any, of subcultural style and the role of consumption rather than simply assuming a necessarily high level of such importance. Research cannot stop at the surface level of style and then presume an interior without substance if that interior is never explored. Indeed, if one were to limit an analysis to style only, the persistence of some subcultures over time may be lost entirely. Such, it is alleged, is the case with punk, which has been declared dead many times because it no longer has a clearly recognizable, and therefore easily marketable, style (Clark 2003). Moreover, consumption practices, no matter how important or unimportant, cannot be over-emphasized at the expense of neglecting issues of production, regulation, and distribution—important topics that can also tell much about the particularities and concerns of subcultures.

Goals, Rationality, and Outcomes

Each of the major theoretical perspectives on youth culture, either implicitly or explicitly, has argued that subcultures are engaged in irrational, ineffectual behavior. This is derived from a preoccupation with studying subcultural style and consumption, and an a priori assumption that

these are of primary if not sole importance to subcultures. In other words, the unsurprising conclusion is reached that clothing, piercings, hair-dye, and tattoos cannot change the world or social arrangements more generally.

This pattern is evident beginning with the earliest youth studies perspective, that of the Chicago School and related classical approaches. As discussed above, this early work emphasized that some youths are socially pathological. That is, that they have been poorly socialized, are isolated, or in some way experience insufficient solidarity with society and its norms. As a result, they form new social groupings—subcultures—as maladaptive, deviant responses to the strain otherwise induced by their incomplete integration. Such “strain” models were popular in this early era of sociological inquiry for explaining any number of social phenomena that did not conform to researchers’ ideas of “normality.” For example, social movement formation—another collective phenomenon like subculture—was also believed to result from the needs of socially pathological individuals (e.g. Kornhauser 1959, Smelser 1962, Turner and Killian 1957). Like subcultures, social movements were not believed therefore to be involved in any rational sort of behavior nor were they pursuing any rational goals (McAdam 1982). On a conceptual scale of perceived irrationality, subcultures were ranked, along with cults, somewhere between crowds and riots (at the most irrational end) and social movements (as the least irrational) (Eyerman 2002). Instead, subcultures and collective behavior more generally were conceived of as providing a therapeutic release for social deviants while doing nothing to alter the causes of their symptoms.

Strain theories have been heavily criticized and generally discredited in most topical areas of sociology, yet they still hold currency within the youth cultures literature. An exhaustive critique of strain theories is not necessary for the purposes of the current argument.² It is

sufficient to note the questionable logic upon which assumptions of irrationality and ineffectualness within youth subcultures are based. The assumption of irrational behavior on the part of participants of any collective mobilization was based on a functionalist assumption of stable and mutually beneficial social workings. Assuming the current system is functional, any efforts to work outside of that system must be, by de facto, *dys*functional and irrational, resulting from some pathological experience of strain on the part of the individual or resulting from social change. Also, later theorists indicated that strain, far from being experienced sporadically by a minority of the population at a given time, is a common experience whereas collective mobilization is not (see Jenkins 1983). Thus, the constant—strain—cannot be used to explain a variable—collective mobilization. In short, just as strain models offer inadequate explanations for social movements, so too should they be considered suspect in explaining other forms of collective behavior such as subcultures. At the very least, assumptions of pathology and rationality should be tested rather than taken as givens.

As noted earlier, in many ways the transaction and labeling perspective offers an improvement over the classical models of youth subculture (e.g. introducing the concepts of relative deviance and power into the model). However, this is still inherently a perspective that emphasizes deviant, discredited identities and passivity on the part of subculturalists. Here, any potential a subculture might have in pursuing rational goals is immediately defused by the label “deviant.” Thus, resistance to powerful cultural authorities (e.g. teachers, parents, the media, etc.) can readily be redefined by those same powers as youthful rebellion or a pointless fad (Raby 2005). Thus, no actual change can occur outside of the boundaries of deviantized subcultures to infect the rest of society.

The youth subculture perspective of the CCCS is considerably more sophisticated than these earlier perspectives and offers at least some degree of continued utility. However, despite the pervasive influence of neo-Marxianism in its formulation, the perspective still draws heavily on the strain theory of the prior generation and is subject to the same criticisms. As outlined above, the CCCS suggested that subcultures are indeed trying to change the real conditions of social life; it did not assume pathology or other irrational underpinnings of subcultural involvement. In fact, subcultures were direct responses to address structural grievances: economic duress, unemployment, and so on. However, while considered inherently political because of their subordinate structural location—itsself a proposition rightly criticized by post-subculture theorists—the nature of their opposition is indirect, located in style and symbolic resistance. As Marchart notes, “to restrict the analysis to matters of style rather than political mobilization will necessarily lead to a depoliticized account of subcultures—even... with the opposite intention of politicizing them” (2004: 420). Thus, it comes as no surprise that the *solutions* offered by subcultures are described by researchers in this tradition as “magical” and, again, as serving only psychologically therapeutic ends (Brake 1974, 1980; P. Cohen 1972). This conclusion is indistinguishable, in logic and terminology, from earlier strain theories in which: “The beliefs on which collective behavior is based... are thus akin to magical beliefs” (Smelser 1962: 8). By the time the CCCS became dominant in the study of youth culture, the Resource Mobilization (McCarthy and Zald 1977) and Political Process (Tilly 1978) perspectives had vindicated social movements, identifying them as rational, albeit unconventional, attempts to enact or oppose social change. Yet subcultures continued to be distinguished from social movements as “pseudo-political movements” that “exist at a mythical level” (Tillman 1980: 173) without any real agenda.³ While social movement activists were out

in the streets challenging the status quo, youths in subcultures were seen as simply “doing nothing” (Corrigan 1976: 103).

Post-subculture studies, while disagreeing that rational goals such as social change are even on the agendas of youth subcultures (to the extent that such groups can even be identified), tend to conclude that the end result is the same as those suggested by earlier perspectives: no tangible or collective outcomes emerge from subcultural activity. Indeed, in their apotheosis of agency most theorists in this perspective deny or ignore the ‘real,’ material, structural conditions (disparities) which collective interests might attempt to act against (Shildrick and MacDonald 2006). Instead, a series of temporary and overlapping aggregates are caught up in consumption and leisure pursuits, though which they hope to assert their individuality with little concern for social transformation or collective goals however defined. Far from pursuing rational interests—political or otherwise—the main occupation of youth is to express or lose one’s self in a hedonistic bender of consumption (Bennett 1999, 2005), drugs, and dance (Rietveld 1998). Any concept of “a rationalized ‘social’” is thoroughly superceded “by an emphatic ‘sociality’” (Maffesoli 1996: 11).

This sort of argument pervades the post-subcultures literature. For example, it has been argued that the politics of ravers are not “concerned with ‘changing the world’, but rather with... alternative experiences of the self” (Pini 1997: 118) and with accruing subcultural capital or “hipness” (Thornton 1995). The punks and Mods that Muggleton interviewed, similarly, offer “not a challenge to the system, but a liberal declaration of freedom of expression, including the right to dress in ways contrary to dominant social conventions” (2000: 161). It is the individual attainment of strictly expressive goals that are the focus of these groups; (post)subcultures are fully fixated with “consumer autonomy and creativity” (Bennett 1999: 599-600) within the

“Supermarket of Style” (Polhemus 1994). There are no external opponents, no causes or grievance that might inspire collective action. At best, “subculturalists are as much reproducing as resisting aspects of the dominant culture” (Muggleton 2000: 162). They are ‘taste cultures’ (Stahl 2003), market niches, and little more.

Although post-subculture studies, then, portray youths as active agents and not passive objects of structural conditions, as the CCCS did, they fail to locate any rationality *or* resistance—even ineffectual resistance—within subcultures. As Blackman indicates, “emancipation is retained within postmodern subcultural analysis as a form of personal expression” (2005: 15). Yet, even researchers in this tradition have at times recognized the weaknesses of such a totalizing theorization for the contemporary study of youth cultures: “post-modernist and other post-subcultural positions have been... guilty of under-politicizing [post-subcultures],” a position that “has been significantly undermined by the political activism and media visibility of new post-subcultural protest formations” (Weinzierl and Muggleton: 2003: 14).

No existing perspective on youth cultures has yet emerged which allows for the possibility of rational, goal-oriented—including politically-oriented—behavior. However, some individual researchers have begun to take steps in this direction by suggesting that the literature on subcultures can be fruitfully merged with that of social movements (Martin 2002, Moore and Roberts 2009). While among such efforts no theoretical consensus exists in terms of how this should be conceptualized, many possibilities have been raised. This work suggests that, at the very least, 1) subcultures can serve as mobilizing structures from which more conventional movement activism can arise, and 2) subcultures can offer a direct, cultural challenge to taken-

for-granted social norms and practices. As such, some subcultures may be said to “straddl[e] the conceptual boundary between subculture and movement” (Haenfler 2006: 60).

Social movements are not shaped exclusively by objective factors such as available resources, but also by shared cognitions (Snow and Benford 1992). As Eyerman (2002) argues, subcultures, as contexts within which alternative ideas are exchanged and reinforced through shared experience, can be fertile breeding grounds for social movement activity. Similarly, Pfaff (1996) illustrates how the collective identity developed from mutual trust and solidarity in informal social groups can result in contentious movement activity—even with grim prospects for success. Just like traditional social movements (e.g. Kriesi 1996), the course which this activity takes is, in part, based on the greater socio-political context within which subcultural activity occurs: whether the subculture will serve as a recruiting ground, transform into an overt social movement, be institutionalized within the political arena, and so on. White power subcultures, for example, have been received quite differently in nations with varying opportunity structures. Eyerman notes that “Swedish neo-Nazi groups are larger and more aggressive, as an underground subculture, than those in Denmark, where the established political discourse has translated their ideas into more acceptable political forms and language” (2002: 457).

National factors, of course, do not necessarily trump factors internal to the subcultures themselves. St. John’s (2003, 2004) studies of rave dance cultures, for example, reveal how these groups—previously trivialized as simple taste cultures or hyperindividualist lifestyles—have often embraced political activity and emerged as an important component of a global protest movement. This subculture-based movement aims at achieving human rights, environmental protection, global justice, and the reclamation of public spaces for convivial—not

capital—purposes: “Not merely seeking difference, DIY tribes have mobilized to *make* a difference” (2004: 423, emphasis added). These ends are pursued not through an oblique, semiotic posturing, but through direct action. “Activists” storm the streets, denying vehicular traffic, sometimes destroying these same streets and planting trees, always creating a carnival-like, rave atmosphere and spreading the idea that public space should not be simply space for commerce. In cases such as these, subculturalists begin to resemble social movements more than “taste cultures.”

Social movement scholars have traditionally focused on social movements as “challengers” to established political systems (e.g. Gamson 1990), and subcultures can be studied as extensions of this practice as the preceding examples illustrate. However, it has been noted that strictly political challenges have been overemphasized (Giugni 1998) at the expense of other potential outcomes of movement action. In more recent years, the idea that social movements can be “a fundamental source of social change” as challengers to *cultural* hegemony has gained ground (Johnston and Klandermans 1995: 5). From this perspective, cultural change may be at least as important as political change (Gamson 1998). Haenfler’s (2006) characterization of the straightedge subculture as a social movement stands as a compelling case-study. Stemming from the discourse and collective identity of their subculture, many straightedgers find encouragement to participate in more overt social movement activity (e.g. taking part in the women’s rights movement, environmental movements, etc.) much like St. John’s ravers. However, the cultural challenge inherent in some subcultures, like straightedge, introduces new alternative ways of thinking and doing into dominant discourse. Subcultures, like formal social movements, “may also alter cultural understanding and the organization of everyday life” (Jenkins and Form 2005: 349). The effects of such a cultural counter-discourse

can be limited; for example, maintaining traditions of resistance within local subcultures that give birth to periodic bouts of activism (Van Dyke 1998). However, the effects can be more pervasive as well. A subculture's counter-discourse can serve as a ready-made collective action frame, launching a social movement into contentious action and, ultimately, becoming absorbed as part of a modified everyday culture (Tarrow 1992).

As is normally the case when attempting to measure cultural change (Gamson 1998), it is difficult to say how many youths have been inspired by subcultural movements to pursue social change. While specific political changes may not be readily observable, "the cultural outcomes of movement activity may generate longer-lasting and far-reaching consequences than political or legislative victories" (Haenfler 2006: 200). Presenting unconventional alternatives as *legitimate* alternatives, subcultures as social movements may lay bare the illusion of cultural consensus, permitting sweeping change in the ways people think, live, and dream. They can represent "oppositional subcultures within the 'global culture' [that] function as wellsprings from which oppositional thought and discourse flow" (Johnston and Klandermans 1995: 7).

Clearly, the capacity exists for subcultures to pursue instrumental or rational goals, whether or not those are explicitly political in nature. Yet, as Marchart warns, "not all roads lead to Rome, and not all paths lead to politics" (2004: 420). Similarly, the intention of the current paper is not to suggest that youth subcultures can readily be explained and reduced down by rational actor models nor that all subcultures necessarily resemble social movements. Indeed, many are likely engaged in expressive, non-instrumental behavior as well.⁴ However, it is the case that such groups have the potential to be at least as rationally-motivated as other manifestations of collective action. Conversely, they are equally subject to the limitations of rational reductionism. Nonetheless, the extent to which they *are* rational—the extent to which

subcultures are in pursuit of collective gains—relative to the extent to which they are not, cannot be determined unless one is willing to analyze the possibility.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

This paper summarized and provided a critical overview of the existing perspectives on youth subculture, the main points of which are summarized in Table 1. It is hoped that this discussion will help provide a theoretical grounding for future explorations of contemporary and historical subcultures, and provide a basis upon which to ask questions regarding these subcultures that do not rely on uncritically applying the a priori assumptions of much past research. From the critique established here, several suggestions can be made for such future work.

First, while being careful of overgeneralizations, the general character and content of a subculture must be established. While earlier perspectives, which tended to reduce youth cultures to deviant or pathological behavior, have largely fallen out of favor, considerable debate remains regarding the nature and character of the phenomena in question. CCCS perspectives tend to deny youth agency, exaggerate stability and boundedness, and provide an essentialist summation of subculture. Post-subculture studies prioritize agency while denying the effects of social structure. They suggest that no coherent, clearly-demarcated subcultures exist and that participation and affiliation are fluid and in permanent flux. Treating these competing perspectives as, at best, ideal types, rather than perfect representations of a given subculture, the characteristics of a subculture can be investigated and placed on a conceptual continuum. Additionally, researchers should of course be cognizant of the possibility that even a continuum

of this sort may itself not be appropriate for conceptualizing a particular subculture: one size need not fit all.

Second, issues of style and consumption should be investigated, but with critical attention regarding whether these issues are of particular importance to the subculture. Traditionally, youth studies have prioritized these issues, without prior empirical verification: interpreting style as an indirect and ineffectual form of resistance or as an individual means of self-expression without instrumental intent. Rather than assuming these are key preoccupations of a specific subculture or subculture in general, the extent to which style and the consumption thereof are important, and the role they serve, should be examined. Most importantly, alternatives to a fixation on style and consumption should be considered which may be more essential to cultural identity and praxis.

Finally, the extent to which a subculture can be reduced to an expressive or passive phenomenon, as opposed to a rational, goal-oriented one, should be addressed. For this, again, it is necessary to conduct critical, empirical investigation rather than rely on prior theorization based on assumptions or overgeneralizations from other case-studies. Having addressed these issues, it will be possible to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of current approaches to youth culture and suggest additional directions for future studies. At the same time, the same cautions apply that single case-studies, while instructive, cannot be presumed to speak for all subcultures.

Youth culture studies have come a long way. No longer, for example, is it assumed that all youth are delinquents and potential criminals. While the relative dearth of research in this area in recent years (Shildrick and MacDonald 2006) seems to suggest that the work is done, there remains much ground yet to cover. Just as delinquency should not be assumed, neither should it

be assumed that all youth are hyperindividualist consumers or irrational pleasure-seekers. In one of its guiding statements, the CCCS argued that “We cannot afford to be blind *to* [youth subcultures] ... any more than we can afford to be blinded *by* them (Clarke et al. 1976: 10, emphasis in original). Unfortunately, this has not been the case with the majority of youth studies which, as illustrated here, have their starting point of analysis in assuming pathology, irrationality, or passivity on the part of youth without considering that there might be a point to all the apparent madness.

ENDNOTES

1. Indeed, on occasion some researchers still regress to an explanatory perspective reminiscent of classical youth studies perspectives. This tendency has been particularly pronounced in the analysis of heavy metal cultures, the existence of which are frequently attributed to inadequate socialization (e.g. Arnett 1995).
2. See McAdam (1982) for a more general critique of strain theories and for reference to further criticisms. See Useem (1998) for a competing viewpoint.
3. It is interesting to note that Tillman's (1980) argument that politics and culture, particularly subculture, are unrelated appears to be based exclusively on the single case of the Sex Pistols who often went on record saying they were not interested in politics.
4. This is especially true given the acknowledgement that no clear distinction between the pursuit of instrumental versus expressive ends by social movements can readily be demarcated (Gamson 1991). Indeed, even when such distinctions can tentatively be made, each serves to facilitate the other. The same observation applies to subcultures. As Haenfler notes regarding straightedge, "Personal actualization and social transformations are not mutually exclusive" (2006: 198)

REFERENCES

- Akers, R.L. 1967. "Problems in the Sociology of Deviance: Social Definitions and Behavior." *Social Forces* 46(4): 455-65.
- Ariés, P. 1962. *Centuries of Childhood*. New York: Vintage.
- Atkinson, Michael. 2003. "The Civilizing of Resistance: Straightedge Tattooing." *Deviant Behavior* 23:197-220.
- Baudrillard, Jean. 1983. *Simulations*. New York: Semiotext.
- Becker, Howard S. 1963. *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press.
- Bennett, Andy. 1999. "Subcultures or Neo-Tribes? Rethinking the Relationship Between Youth, Style and Musical Taste." *Sociology* 33(3): 599-617.
- . 2000. *Popular Music and Youth Culture: Music, Identity, and Place*. New York: Palgrave.
- Berg, Bruce L. 2004. *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*. New York: Pearson.
- Blackman, Shane. 2005. "Youth Subcultural Theory: A Critical Engagement with the Concept, its Origins and Politics, from the Chicago School to Postmodernism." *Journal of Youth Studies* 8(1): 1-20.
- Bocock, R. 1992. "Consumption and Lifestyles." Pp. 119 - 68 in R. Bocock and K. Thompson (eds.), *Social and Cultural Forms of Modernity*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1990. *The Logic of Practice*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Brake, M. 1974. "The Skinheads: An English Working-Class Subculture." *Youth & Society* 6: 179-200.
- . 1980. *The Sociology of Youth Culture and Youth Subcultures*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- . 1985. *Comparative Youth Culture: The Sociology of Youth Cultures and Youth Subcultures in America, Britain and Canada*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Cagle, V.M. 1995. *Reconstructing Pop/Subculture: Art, Rock, and Andy Warhol*. London: Sage.
- Chambliss, William J. 1973. "The Roughnecks and the Saints" *Society* 11: 24-31.
- Chaney, D. 1996. *Lifestyles*. London: Routledge.

- Chatterton, Paul and Robert Hollands. 2002. "Theorizing Urban Playscapes: Producing, Regulating and Consuming Youthful Nightlife City Spaces." *Urban Studies* 39(1): 95-116.
- Clark, Dylan. 2003. "The Death and Life of Punk, the Last Subculture." Pp.223-36 in David Muggleton and Rupert Weinzierl (eds.), *The Post-Subcultures Reader*. New York: Berg.
- Clarke, G. 1982. *Defending Ski-jumpers: A Critique of Theories of Youth Sub-cultures*. Paper 72, Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham.
- Clarke, John, Stuart Hall, Tony Jefferson, and Brian Roberts. 1976. "Subcultures, Cultures and Class: A Theoretical Overview." Pp.9-74 in Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (eds.), *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-war Britain*. New York: Routledge.
- Cloward, Richard A. and L.E. Ohlin. 1960. *Delinquency and Opportunity*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press.
- Cohen, A.K. 1955. *Delinquent Boys: The Subculture of the Gang*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press.
- Cohen, Phil. 1972. "Subcultural Conflict and Working-class Community." Pp. 78 –87 in *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-79*. Birmingham, UK: Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham.
- Cohen S. 1972. *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Corrigan, Paul. 1976. "Doing Nothing." Pp. 103 – 105 in Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (eds.), *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-war Britain*. New York: Routledge.
- Craik, J. 1994. *The Face of Fashion: Cultural Studies in Fashion*. London: Routledge.
- Erikson, K.T. 1962. "Notes on the Sociology of Deviance." *Social Problems* 9(4): 307-14.
- Eyerman, Ron. 2002. "Music in Movement: Cultural Politics and Old and New Social Movements." *Qualitative Sociology* 25(3): 443-58.
- Gamson William A. 1992. The social psychology of of collective action. In: Morris D and Mueller C (eds) *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 53-76.
- . 1990. *The Strategy of Social Protest*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- . 1998. "Social Movements and Cultural Change." Pp. 57-77 in Marco G. Giugni, Doug McAdam, and Charles Tilly (eds.), *From Contention to Democracy*. Lanham, MD: Rowan and Littlefield.
- Giugni, Marco. 1998. "Was It Worth the Effort? The Outcomes and Consequences of Social Movements." *Annual Review of Sociology* 24:371-93.

Goffman, Erving. 1961. *Asylums. : Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*. New York: Anchor.

----- . 1968. *Stigma*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Greener, Tracey and Robert Hollands. 2006. "Beyond Subculture and Post-subculture? The Case of Virtual Psytrance." *Journal of Youth Studies* 9(4): 393-418.

Grossberg, L. 1984. "Another Boring Day in Paradise: Rock and Roll and the Empowerment of Everyday Life." *Popular Music* 4:225-58.

----- . 1997. "Re-placing Popular Culture," Pp. 199 –248 in Steven Redhead, D. Wynne, and J. O'Connor (eds.), *The Clubcultures Reader: Readings in Popular Cultural Studies*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Haenfler, Ross. 2006. *Straight Edge: Hardcore Punk, Clean-Living Youth, and Social Change*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers.

Hebdige, Dick. 1979. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. New York: Routledge.

Hesmondhalgh, David. 2005. "Subcultures, Scenes or Tribes? None of the Above." *Journal of Youth Studies* 8(1): 21-40.

Hodkinson, Paul. 2002. *Goth: Identity, Style and Subculture*. Oxford: Berg.

Hollands, Robert. 1995. *Friday Night, Saturday Night: Youth Cultural Identification in the Post-Industrial City*. Newcastle, UK: Newcastle University.

----- . 2002. "Divisions in the Dark: Youth Cultures, Transitions and Segmented Consumption Spaces in the Night-time Economy." *Journal of Youth Studies* 5: 153-71.

Jefferson, Tony. 1976. "Cultural Responses of the Teds." Pp.81-86 in Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (eds.), *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-war Britain*. New York: Routledge.

Jenkins, J. Craig. 1983. "Resource Mobilization Theory and the Study of Social Movements." *Annual Review of Sociology* 9: 527-53.

Jenkins, J. Craig and William Form. 2005. "Social Movements and Social Change." Pp.331-49 in Thomas Janoski, Robert R. Alford, Alexander M. Hicks, and Mildred A. Schwartz (eds.) *The Handbook of Political Sociology*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Johnston, Hank and Bert Klandermans. 1995. "The Cultural Analysis of Social Movements." pp. 3-24 in Johnston, Hank and Bert Klanderman, eds. *Social Movements and Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

- Kaiser, S.B., R.H. Nagasawa, and S.S. Hutton. 1991. "Fashion, Postmodernity, and Personal Appearance: A Symbolic Interactionist Formulation." *Symbolic Interaction* 14(2): 165-85.
- Kornhauser, William. 1959. *The Politics of Mass Society*. New York: Free Press.
- Kriesi, Hanspeter. 1996. "The Organizational Structure of New Social Movements in a Political Context." In Doug McAdam, John McCarthy and Mayer Zald (eds.) *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements*. Pp. 152-84. NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 1966. *The Savage Mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago.
- Levine, Harold G. and Steven H. Stumpf. 1983. "Statements of Fear through Cultural Symbols: Punk Rock as a Reflexive Subculture." *Youth & Society* 14(4): 417-35.
- Maffesoli, M (1996). *The Time of the Tribes: The Decline of Individualism in Mass Society*. London: Sage.
- Mankoff, Milton. 1971. "Societal Reaction and Career Deviance: A Critical Analysis." *Sociological Inquiry* 12(2): 204-18.
- Marchart, Oliver. 2004. "New Protest Formations and Radical Democracy." *Peace Review* 16(4): 415-20.
- Martin, Greg. 2002. "Conceptualizing Cultural Politics in Subcultural and Social Movement Studies." *Social Movement Studies* 1(1): 73-88.
- Marx, Karl. 1970 . *The German Ideology*. New York : International
- Merton, Robert K. 1938. "Social Structure and Anomie." *American Sociological Review* 3: 672-82.
- McAdam, Doug. 1982. *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930 - 1970*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- McCarthy, John and Mayer N. Zald. 1977. "Resource Mobilization and Social Movements: A Partial Theory." *American Journal of Sociology* 82:1212-41.
- McRobbie, A. 1989. "Second-hand Dresses and the Role of the Rag Market." in A. McRobbie (ed.), *Zoot-Suits and Second Hand Dresses: An Anthology of Fashion and Music*. London: Macmillan.
- McRobbie, A. and M. Nava. 1984. *Gender and Generation*. London: Macmillan.
- Miles, S. 2000. *Youth Lifestyles in a Changing World*. Buckingham, UK: Open University.

- Mintz, Steven. 2006. *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap.
- Moore, Ryan. 2007. "Friends Don't Let Friends Listen to Corporate Rock: Punk as a Field of Cultural Production." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 36(4): 438-74.
- Moore, Ryan and Michael Roberts. 2009. "Do-It-Yourself Mobilization: Punk and Social Movements." *Mobilization* 14(3):273-91.
- Muggleton, David. 1997. "The Post-Subculturalist." Pp. 167 – 85 in Steven Redhead, D. Wynne, and J. O'Connor (eds.), *The Clubcultures Reader: Readings in Popular Cultural Studies*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- , 2000. *Inside Subculture: The Postmodern Meaning of Style*. New York: Berg.
- Nayak, A. 2003. "Ivory Lives": Economic Restructuring and the Making of Whiteness in a Post-Industrial Community." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 6(3): 305-25.
- O'Connor, Alan. 2004. "The Sociology of Youth Cultures." *Peace Review* 16(4): 409-14.
- Parsons, Talcott. 1942. *Essays in Sociological Theory, Pure and Applied*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press.
- Pfaff, Steven. 1996. "Collective Identity and Informal Groups in Revolutionary Mobilization: East Germany in 1989." *Social Forces* 75(1): 91-118.
- Pini, M. 1997. "Cyborg, Nomads and Raving Feminine." Pp. 111 – 29 in H. Thomas (ed.), *Dance in the City*. London: Macmillan.
- Polhemus, T. 1994. *Streetstyle*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- Raby, Rebecca. 2005. "What is Resistance?" *Journal of Youth Studies* 8(2): 151-71.
- Redhead, Steve. 1990. *The End-of-the-Century-Party: Youth and Pop Towards 2000*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press.
- Rietveld, Hillegonda. 1998. 'Living the Dream.' in Steve Redhead (ed.), *Rave Off: Politics and Deviance in Contemporary Youth Culture*. Aldershot: Avebury.
- Roberts, Brian. 1976. "Naturalistic Research into Subculture and Deviance: An Account of a Sociological Tendency." Pp.243-52 in Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (eds), *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-war Britain*. New York: Routledge.
- Willis, Paul. 1977. *Learning to Labor*. Farnborough, UK: Saxon.
- Shields, R. 1992. "Spaces for the Subject of Consumption." Pp. 1- 20 in R. Shields (ed.), *Lifestyle Shopping*. London: Routledge.

- Shildrick, Tracy and Robert MacDonald. 2006. "In Defence of Subculture: Young People, Leisure and Social Divisions." *Journal of Youth Studies* 9(2): 125-40.
- Smelser, Neil J. 1962. *Theory of Collective Behavior*. New York: Free Press.
- Snow, David A. and Robert D. Benford. 1992. "Master Frames and Cycles of Protest." In Aldon D. Morris. and Carol McClurg Mueller, eds. *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory*. Pp.133-55. New Haven: Yale University Press
- St. John. 2003. "Post-Rave Technotribalism and the Carnival of Protest." Pp. 65 – 82 in David Muggleton and Rupert Weinzierl (eds.), *The Post-Subcultures Reader*. New York: Berg.
- , 2004. "Counter-Tribes, Global Protest and Carnivals of Reclamation." *Peace Review* 16(4): 421-28.
- Stahl, Geoff. 2003. "Tastefully Renovating Subcultural Theory: Making Space for a New Model." Pp.27-40 in David Muggleton and Rupert Weinzierl (eds.), *The Post-Subcultures Reader*. New York: Berg.
- Tarrow, Sidney. 1992. "Mentalities, Political Cultures, and Collective Action Frames: Constructing Meaning Through Action." In Aldon D. Morris. and Carol McClurg Mueller, eds. *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory*. Pp.174-202. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Thornton, Sarah. 1995. *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.
- Tillman, Robert H. 1980. "Punk Rock and the Construction of "Pseudo-Political" Movements." 7(3): 165-75.
- Tilly, Charles. 1978. *From Mobilization to Revolution*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Turner, Ralph H. and Lewis Killian. 1957. *Collective Behavior*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Useem, Bert. 1998. "Breakdown Theories of Collective Action." *Annual Review of Sociology* 24:215-38.
- Van Dyke, Nella. 1998. "Hotbeds of Activism: Locations of Student Protest." *Social Problems* 45(2) 205-219.
- Weber, Max. 1949. *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*. New York: Free Press.
- Weinzierl, Rupert and David Muggleton. 2003. "What is 'Post-Subcultural Studies' Anyway?" Pp.3-23 in David Muggleton and Rupert Weinzierl (eds.), *The Post-Subcultures Reader*. New York: Berg.

<i>Perspective</i>	<i>Source of Youth Culture</i>	<i>Locus of Action</i>	<i>Prospects for Social Change</i>	<i>Major Criticisms</i>
Chicago School/ Classical	Lack of cohesion between individual and society along with poor socialization precipitate deviant behavior	Deviant behavior	None	Assumes members of youth cultures are pathological or maladaptive relative to social normality
Transaction/ Labeling	Dominant sectors of society define normality and label youths as deviant who do not conform to set expectations	Deviant behavior, especially as a self-fulfilling component of a deviant label	None. Labeling serves to perpetuate <i>status quo</i>	Youth viewed as passive objects in interactions. Neglects the role of social structure
Birmingham School/ CCCS	Youths react to material and social conditions of their social class and attempt to address the specific difficulties these entail	Collective appropriation/reinterpretation of mainstream, cultural goods to signify indirect resistance and alternative meanings	May temporarily introduce confusion into a social system, but ultimately coopted and used to perpetuate established ways of life. Action is largely therapeutic	Youth viewed as passive objects of structural location. Overemphasizes degree of coherence, constancy, and durability of youth formations, focusing on collective experience at the expense of individual agency
Post-Subcultural	Youth are engaged in expressive behavior to individualize themselves and assert personal identity	Consumption of cultural goods--based on taste and preference--to establish identity and express individuality	Consumption frees individual from structural constraints and externally-imposed meanings. No social change beyond the individual level	Overemphasizes agency, youth can overcome structural limitations through leisure and consumption. Youth cultural activity is reduced to depthless hyperindividualism

Table 1 Overview of Theoretical Perspectives on Youth Subcultures