



Rethinking Street Culture: Enacting Youthful Defiance?

—Angela Dwyer

Ilan, Jonathan. *Understanding Street Culture: Poverty, Crime, Youth and Cool*. Palgrave MacMillan, 2015. 216 pp. \$50.00 pb. ISBN 9781137028587.

In *Understanding Street Culture*, Jonathan Ilan analyzes one of the key areas of future concern for young people: how they engage in street culture and the links between street cultural practices and disparate forms of marginality, criminalization, poverty, transgression, and consumerism. Chapter 1 begins with an inquiry into street culture as concept and mode of theorization. The author contends that it is not “a form of ‘resistance’, but rather a posture of defiance” (21). The precise differences between these terms is not very clear, given that the definitions themselves tend to imply one another (resistance meaning refusal to comply and defiance meaning open resistance and disobedience). In the conclusion, however, Ilan does hint at how thinking about street culture as defiance is a more suitable conceptualization than resistance, which ought to be “reserved for

phenomena more overtly political in nature,” suggesting that “street culture generally channels the defiance of exclusion as opposed to practical action towards altering configurations of power” (174). Ilan’s analysis does not, however, elucidate precisely *how* defiance may be less political. Importantly, street culture is reconceptualized “as a spectrum running from stronger to weaker variants that ultimately provides a similar scheme for understanding the world” (23).

Chapter 2 moves on to map research dedicated to unpacking street culture, from its very early origins in the youth subcultural theorizations of Albert Cohen, Howard Becker, and Paul Willis in the 1950s to 1970s, through to more contemporary cultural criminologies. This at times reads as a “who’s-who” of malestream (Bernard) street cultural theorizing, with surprisingly limited reference to

feminist theorizations of youth street cultural activities (Carrington and Pereira, Chesney-Lind and Irwin, Sharpe), meaning that particular understandings of street culture are privileged throughout the text, while young women's narratives about issues like street culture and violence are marginalized.

Subsequent chapters, beginning with chapter 3, look at the importance of a "spectrum-based" approach to street culture through an examination of the intersection between street cultural activities and class, gender, and ethnicity. Here, Ilan mentions the important work focused on the experiences of young women (Miller). Chapter 4 addresses issues of space, territory, and gangs, and argues for the importance of moving away from the loaded terminology around "gangs" and toward more nuanced ways of thinking about these youth group formations, i.e., in terms of "street cultural discourse" (61). As Ilan points out, this could potentially dissolve the loadedness of gang terminologies and replace it with terms such as "the fluid youth petty-offending group" or "the provisionally structured territorial and entrepreneurial drug-selling group," or perhaps "the criminally and politically active street cultural institution" (81). These options are all far more nuanced and captivating because they allow some overlap, and they avoid essentializing youth group formations as inherently problematic and necessarily criminal. Chapters 5 and 6 then examine the nexus between street culture, crime, and cool. Ilan demonstrates the links between "material

deprivation," "social marginalization," and criminal activities, but he does so without intimating the level of seriousness of these links for those who lack the material resources and cultural capital that enable class mobility. Ilan shows how these links between street culture and crime become a commodity in chapter 6, and how this is literally embodied by the young people involved, which includes "the embodiment of violent potential" (106). The focus on the body here is exciting. Very few academic texts explore how young bodies are worked with, and put to work, across a range of different street cultural contexts, be it in licit and/or illicit ways, and in ways that produce specific pathways. In chapter 7, Ilan links street culture and globalization, pointing out how street culture marginalizes and excludes by creating conditions through which young people "can obtain the material means for survival" (133). Chapter 8 unpacks the notions of resistance and defiance in street culture, with the core importance of a move away from politically motivated resistance and toward broad defiance. This shift singly references the experience of young male offenders, who are referenced again in chapter 9. This move appears to sidestep any consideration of how, or even if, the street cultural engagements of young women, and perhaps young genderqueer folk, might also fit with notions of defiance. How these practices feed the policing of young people engaged with street cultural defiance is a focus of chapter 9, and while noting this as a human rights issue, the author stops short of making clear the potentially

life-destroying outcomes of these systems. Moreover, the reader is at times left wanting for further elaboration about how a focus on defiance rather than resistance will help enable people to make these systems more socially just for young people now and in the future.

Given the focus on youthful street cultural existences in this text, and the depth and dexterity with which Ilan elucidates this, the lack of discussion and analysis of empirical data from young people in this text is bewildering. This is especially true when one considers Ilan's core argument "that street culture is best understood through its meaning and significance within lived lives" (23), with a focus on "an appreciation of an individual's internal world of emotionality and reactivity" (31). Yet these potentialities are left unrequited. Although Ilan has done substantial and fascinating ethnographic work on issues such as police interactions with street-based young people and youth street social capital, these rich youth experiences have been omitted from this text. Excluding this material means the book perhaps takes a backward step in carving out a unique contribution to existing knowledges seeking to document and conceptualize the street cultural activities of young people. Incorporating these rich experiences may have further evidenced the subtleties of Ilan's argument by highlighting the precise qualitative differences between resistance and defiance. More importantly, by the end of the book there remains an absence of the voices of young people themselves, which privileges academic

voices over those about whom academic voices are speculating, and a move that excludes young people once again from emergent discourse around important issues affecting their lives.

Reading the text also produced a sense of disappointment knowing the skilful prising apart of young peoples' street cultural existences will be mostly inaccessible to those young people about whom Ilan writes. The core engagement of this text is academic, as Ilan is attempting to move academic and other knowledge workers away from more limited conceptualizations of street culture. In this way, the text is incredibly valuable. The complicated academic language employed, however, entails a sense of loss for those young people who, by virtue of the social, cultural, criminal, and economic systems in which they are engaged, do not have the capacity to read about their lives. This leaves the reader with a sense of once again being privy to details of the lives of street culturally involved young people and reading from a privileged stance about the more incendiary details, but through the exclusion of these young people. While the writing in the book ticks all the academic boxes for complexity and astuteness, this reader longs for a future in which these books offer up the capacity for young people to be part of the emergent conversations rather than continuing to silence their voices in authorized, legitimized, governmental contexts of decision making. This silencing only perpetuates the embedment of these young people in criminal justice

systems worldwide and further extends the inequities they experience.

A very important point in Ilan's analysis focuses on the use of the term "gang" in research on young people. I wholeheartedly agree with Ilan in this respect. Gang is an outmoded and limited term in what it can offer in terms of analyzing the practices of young people. Moving away from this terminology can only serve to further enrich the field the author discusses, but he appears to gloss over the potentially negative implications of its use, such as the ongoing demonization of young people hanging out in groups. While Ilan offers a range of other ways of knowing "gang culture" in the boundaries of this text by way of street culture, and while he skilfully elaborates the multifarious reasons why we need to think beyond the gang to understand complex youth street realities, the text seems to skirt the core issue: that "gang" is a term misused and abused in ways that perpetuate and deepen the criminalization of street-frequenting young people engaged in illicit activities. The term feeds into policing strategies and task forces that seek to uncover and "crack down" on young peoples' modes of survival in public spaces, especially in climates of economic privation. Terminologies of gang-ness are heavily invested in by government authorities engaged with criminal processing systems, such as the police, and the activities of these organizations continue to harass and criminalize young

people in ways that sustain their economic privation; to further entrench them at every level of harmful criminal legal systems; and to further perpetuate their social exclusion at all levels of sociality. While Ilan proposes an urgent need to find less judgmental ways of thinking about street cultural environments, it seems remiss not to emphasise the need to dismantle terms like gang that can so thoroughly impair young lives.

Besides these limitations, the excellence of this work is well evident. The book is well written and a pleasure to read. The spectrum understanding of street culture highlights the complicated nature of these power relations, and street culture offers us more in the way of productive conversations than terms such as "gangs" might have done. The acknowledgement of concerns around the global north and global south (Connell) is to the author's credit considering the ever-increasing focus on challenging criminal processing systems in these terms (Carrington et al.). *Understanding Street Culture* is an important text for academics, researchers, and criminal justice stakeholders interested in understanding how young peoples' street cultural existences are regulated and thrust into contact with the law. It emphasizes the urgency of disrupting the perpetual criminalization of street culture and how, moving forward, this requires "more than the 'business as usual' of standard criminal justice practice" (21).

Works Cited

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