In Defence of Sub-culture:

Young People, Leisure and Social Divisions

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Abstract

This paper represents a further contribution to recent debates in *Journal of Youth Studies* about subculture theory and 'post-subcultural studies' (Blackman 2005; Hesmondhalgh 2005; Bennett 2005). Specifically, we argue that the particularised focus of the latter on youth culture in relation to music, dance and style negates a fuller, more accurate exploration of the cultural identities and experiences of the majority of young people. Celebratory and broadly post-modern theories have been utilised as a means for understanding the 'scenes', 'neo-tribes' and 'lifestyles' that . 'post-subcultural studies' (Muggleton 2005) describe. Such studies tend to pay little attention to the importance, or otherwise, of social divisions and inequalities in contemporary youth culture. Almost unanimously, post-subcultural studies reject the previously pivotal significance of *class-based* subcultures, as theorised by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at Birmingham, in their attempts to explain new forms of youth cultural identity.

We argue that this critique of subculture is premised on a partial interpretation of the theoretical objectives of CCCS and that, in fact, some of the theoretical and methodological propositions of the latter remain relevant. This argument is supported by a brief review of some other, very recent youth research that demonstrates the continuing role of social divisions in the making and shaping of young people's leisure lives and youth cultural identities and practises. In conclusion, we suggest that the ambition of the CCCS to understand, not only the relationship between culture and social structure, but also the ways in which individual youth biographies evolve out of this relationship, remains a valuable one for the sociology of youth.

Introduction

Although popular in the late 1970s and early 1980s, rising rates of youth unemployment meant that interest in youth culture was quickly superseded by seemingly more pressing concerns with youth transitions into the labour market. Whilst the advent of the rave/dance scene in the late 1980s prompted a partial revival of interest, the study of youth transitions continues to dominate. Over the years there have been repeated calls for closer integration of youth cultural studies and those of youth transitions (Coles 1986; Jones 1988; Griffin 1993; MacDonald et al 1993; Gayle 1998; Hollands 2002). This division may have been overstated (for a fuller account of the 'two traditions' of youth research, see MacDonald *et* al 2001), but it is still the case that many studies of youth transitions have very little to say about youth culture, and vice versa. This paper is principally concerned with the study of youth culture, yet one of its central arguments is that a proper, holistic understanding of youth *requires* a closer appreciation of the ways in which young people's leisure and cultural lives intersect with wider aspects of their biographies [1].

Historically studies of youth culture were dominated by the CCCS subcultural approach (see Hall and Jefferson 1976), although more recently it is a body of work that have become known as 'post-subcultural studies' (Muggleton 2005) that provide the lynchpin around which most discussions of contemporary youth culture coalesce. For the most part, post-subcultural studies confine themselves to discussions of music and dance cultures and youth style and tend to be dominated by 'colourful, "cultural" accounts of young people's lives' (Nayak 2003:306) which celebrate the optimism of stylistic and musical possibility.

Blackman (2005) and Hesmondhalgh (2005) each offer fulsome, many-faceted critique of the turn to post-subcultural studies (and Bennett 2005 offers a defence). Although Blackman and Hesmondhalgh question the apparent inattention paid in post-subcultural theory to 'structurally embedded inequalities' (Bennett 2005: 256), neither pursue this issue at length or consider the potential methodological and

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[1] Elsewhere we attempt to show more directly how analysis of youth transitions might benefit from a fuller account of youth culture (MacDonald and Shildrick 2004).

theoretical causes and consequences of this. Our contribution to this debate is, thus, one that highlights this problem, contemplates how it might have come about and reflects on some of the repercussions of this for the sociology of youth and youth culture.

We begin by offering a critique of post-subcultural studies, arguing that, empirically, they tend to ignore the youth cultural lives and identities of less advantaged young people and that, theoretically, they tend to under-play the potential significance of class and other social inequalities in contemporary youth culture. Part of our purpose – in the subsequent section of the paper - is to bring to greater prominence some disparate examples of recent youth research which, although not directly or wholly concerned with youth culture, nevertheless do throw light on the ways in which young people's cultural identities continue to be 'closely intertwined with family histories, gender, place, class, region and locality' (Nayak 2003: 320). Once one accepts that, for some young people at least, social divisions still shape youth cultural identities, the post-modern tendency to celebrate the fragmented, fleeting and free-floating nature of contemporary youth culture becomes difficult to sustain. In the latter part of the paper we ask questions about the continuing potential theoretical value of the CCCS sub-cultural approach for the sociology of youth.

Post-subcultural studies: empirical and theoretical absences

In the mid-1970s the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at Birmingham developed a particular conception of subculture which was to energise the sociology of youth culture for decades (Hall and Jefferson 1976), despite extensive, subsequent criticism. Problems tended to focus on the (apparently) poor construction and articulation of theory, the methodological paucity of the case studies or the empirical absences in their accounts of youth sub-culture (see, for example, Waters 1981; Roberts 1983; Coles 1986; Hollands 1990; MacDonald 1991; Pilkington 1994). Coupled with far-reaching social and economic changes in the intervening years, such criticisms have led to widespread abandonment of the CCCS subcultural approach. In their place has arisen a 'second wave' of British youth culture research (Roberts 2005): 'post-subcultural studies' (Muggleton and Weinzierl 2003).

Whilst post-subcultural studies should not be understood as a 'unified body of work' (Muggleton 2005: 214), a number of key themes can be discerned. Most are concerned with music cultures (e.g. Bennett 2000; Stahl 2003), dance scenes (e.g. St John 2003, Malbon 1999) and/or stylistic groups (e.g. Muggleton 2000). A central aim is to move away from CCCS subcultural theory and to uncover newer concepts and theories with which to explain contemporary youth cultural identities (Redhead 1993, 1997; Muggleton 2000; 2005; Miles 2000; Bennett 2000, 2004). In direct contrast to the class-based youth cultures identified by the CCCS, contemporary cultures of youth are said to be more fleeting and organised around individual lifestyle and consumption choices. Young people are more likely to move swiftly through a succession of styles, 'like tins of soup on a supermarket shelf' (Polhemus 1996:143). This has allowed for the use of concepts like 'neo-tribes' (Bennett 2000), 'post-subculturalist' (Muggleton 2000), 'scenes' (Stahl 2003) and 'lifestyles'(Miles 2000), to try to account for the ways in which youth cultural identities are (allegedly) no longer so affected by social divisions (such as class location).

Whilst (some of) the proponents of these concepts profess to take account of the influence of social structure, it is the fragmented and individualised ways in which young people construct their identities which is of key significance. This shift away from interest in social divisions and inequalities has facilitated the utilisation of what might broadly be described as 'post-modern' theoretical approaches. Thus, clubbers are said to be eager for a 'slice of the postmodern experience' (Redhead 1997: 95) and today's young people are claimed to favour a 'post-modern persona' with 'multiple identifications' (Shields 1992:16). Muggleton is clear that 'subculturalists are post-modern in that they demonstrate a fragmented, heterogeneous and individualistic stylistic identification' (2000:158) [2].

After the relative dormancy of youth culture research in the 1980s, post-subcultural studies have played an important role in rejuvenating the field. Yet it is also arguable that this work mirrors one of the most serious *empirical* flaws in the CCCS's earlier studies. A key point of Gary Clarke's (1982: 1) cogent critique of CCCS sub-culture theory was that it had become pre-occupied with 'the stylistic appearances of

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[2] See Blackman (2005) for a lengthier, detailed account of post-subcultural studies.

particular tribes' and focussed only on the 'stylistic art of a few'. Recently published readers by leading proponents of the post-subcultural perspective (Muggleton and Weinzerl 2003; Bennett and Khan-Harrison 2004) continue this partial fascination with music, dance and style [3]. We take youth culture to mean more than this[4] and a key contention of this paper is that the post-subcultural equation of youth culture with the stylistic exploits of minority music/ dance 'scenes' and 'neo-tribes' – at the expense of the cultural lives and leisure activities of the 'ordinary' majority (Jenkins 1983; Brown 1987; Shildrick 2003) – is in danger of producing a distorted and incomplete portrayal of contemporary youth culture. As a consequence, youth culture research lays itself open to accusations of pointlessness and its relevance to youth studies – and sociology more generally – comes into question (Roberts, 2005).

It is perhaps worth noting that many recent studies have been conducted by those who have some familiarity with, or had some participation in, the youth cultures which they chose to study (Redhead 1993; Muggleton 1997, 2000; Bennett 2000). Indeed, for Muggleton, it was the apparent disjuncture between influential theoretical descriptions of punk (Hebdidge 1979) and his own experiences of it which fostered his research endeavours. On reading Hebdidge, he confesses, 'I could hardly understand a word of it. I fought my way through until the bitter end and was left feeling that it had absolutely nothing to say about my life as I had once experienced it' (2000: 2). Bennett also argues that his own subcultural experiences guided and assisted him in his research on music cultures: 'being a musician and playing in a local Newcastle band meant that I was constantly meeting or being introduced to musicians and music enthusiasts' (2000:6). These researchers tend to be positive about the significance of their 'insider knowledge' on the subsequent research process and there is little reflection on the possible negative consequences. Whilst Hodkinson is mindful of the potential problems of insider research (2005) he maintains that 'his position as a long-term genuine participant of the goth scene' was 'key to understanding the experiences and meanings of those involved' and especially

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[3] They contain as well some excellent chapters which successfully shift the post-subcultural gaze beyond its usual, limited horizons (e.g. Bosé 2003; Pilkington 2004).
[4] In a similar vein, Roberts (2005) asks why researchers have chosen to seek out youth culture in club-land rather than, for instance, in sports centres?

important 'in enhancing the process of doing research and the quality of my findings' (2002: 4 and 5).

Such 'insider' approaches may be partly responsible for the limited coverage provided by recent post-subcultural studies (and in youth culture research more generally). Understandably, the social identities and cultural biographies of researchers can influence the sort of research that is undertaken (the groups selected for study, the cultural or leisure activities examined, the theoretical questions asked and not asked). This problem was identified by McRobbie (1991) and other feminist writers (Marshall and Borrill 1984; Griffin, 1985a, 1985b), when they helped explain the 'invisibility' of girls and young women in youth culture research by reference to the male domination of youth research during the 1980s. Studies of British Black and Asian youth culture – and Black and Asian youth culture researchers themselves - are now more common than they were in the 1980s (for instance, see Back 1996; Alexander 2000, 2004; Gunter, 2005). Yet Carrington and Wilson (2004: 71) rightly bemoan 'the lack of attention' that contemporary post-subcultural studies pays to issues of 'racial formation, ethnic identity construction and articulation of racism in and between "subcultures"'.

For us, an at least equally significant theoretical (and empirical) absence in recent youth culture research relates to questions of social class. We are rarely told much about the wider economic lives of research participants (for instance, in terms of employment histories, work/ education related identities or income) and we hear very little in the way of a concerted discussion of their class positions. Those studies of dance culture that do specify the class basis of participants tend to acknowledge that their subjects were predominantly middle-class (e.g. Forsyth 1997; Measham et al 2001). (Albeit limited) evidence hints that those who adopt spectacular stylistic identities, for example goths, also tend to be disproportionately from the middle-class (Hodkinson 2003; Abbas and Shildrick 2002). The youth cultural identities and practices of working-class youth – especially the most marginalised and disadvantaged sections thereof - rarely feature in contemporary youth or leisure studies (for exceptions, see Ball et al 2000; Blackshaw 2003; MacDonald and Marsh, 2005) and are apparently wholly absent from post-subcultural studies. Paradoxically, far greater 'discussion' of aspects of working-class youth culture can be found in

popular media and policy diatribes against 'hoodies', street corner socialising and the alleged anti-social behaviour of the young and poor (Behr 2005; Lusher 2005; Page 2000).

More worrying, then, is the *theoretical* marginality of questions of class and other forms of structural inequality in the making and meaning of youth cultural identity and experience. As Bosé puts its (2003:176), social class has 'become a 'no-go-area' in many recent analyses of young people's expressions of (post)subcultural sociality'. Post-subcultural studies are largely predicated on the view that the increased significance of consumption (over production) has led to a situation where 'youths from different social backgrounds can hold similar values that find their expression in shared membership of a particular subculture' (Muggleton 2000:31). Consequently, it seems that in their efforts to dump subculture theory, most post-subculturalists have been all too ready to ignore *any* potential influence of class background on youth culture.

For Roberts (2005:15), it 'beggars belief' that youth culture has now somehow become classless when the life-phases that precede and follow youth continue to be highly socially stratified. We are inclined to agree, but if a case *is* to be made for the declining importance of class, surely this can only be done on the basis of a proper, transparent estimation of the wider, structural influences on young people's lives? As Cieslik (2001) has pointed out, it is difficult to judge these post-modernist claims when the evidence necessary to make such judgements is not presented. Paying 'insufficient attention to material factors' - as Muggleton (2000:6) acknowledges he might be accused of in respect of his study - weakens the case for establishing youth cultural research as a serious, credible field of study.

After post-subcultural studies: bringing structure back in

Despite the ascendancy of the post-subcultural approach over the past decade, there exist some even newer, perhaps less well-known studies that have highlighted the complex relationship between young people's cultural identities and their broader lives. Whilst not *principally* cultural studies of youth (the examples that follow are drawn, for instance, from studies of youth transitions, policing and the night-time

economy), they recognise that not all young people share equally in a new, post-modern, global youth culture (e.g. MacDonald et al 2001; Chatterton and Hollands 2002; Hollands 1995, 2002; Nayak 2003, 2004; Pilkington 2004; Pilkington and Johnson 2003; Bosé 2003; Shildrick 2006). Unlike post-subcultural theorists, these writers purposefully *have* at least attempted to include economically disadvantaged young people in their research, empirically and/ or theoretically, and have found - consistently – that contemporary youth culture remains deeply divided.

Hollands has also broadened the field of youth culture research in that, as well as the consumption of city-centre 'night-life' by young adults, he is interested in its production (for instance, by large leisure corporations) and regulation (by local authorities, city councils and so on) (Hollands 1995, 2002; Chatterton and Hollands 2002). Whilst sensitive to the importance of new forms of social identity in these 'new urban playscapes', he argues that:

> Despite the existence of some minority patterns of post-modern tribal club cultures, there are clear social demarcations evident in nightlife that arise from both wider social divisions and lifestyle segmentations. These divisions have resonance with Hutton's (1995) concept of the 30/30/40 society, divided in to the disadvantaged, the insecure and the privileged (Hollands 2002:168).

Hollands' method (i.e. focussing *primarily* on those who *did* participate in the night-life of urban centres) meant that his study was able to say a little less about the contemporary leisure and youth culture of those who were largely excluded from it. Bosé (2003) reached similar conclusions to Hollands (this time in respect of Manchester, in the North West of England) and her *direct* focus on the experiences of 'excluded' young black people helps fill out Hollands' account. Many of her subjects described themselves as part of an 'underclass', pointing out the difficulties of living in 'deprived and disadvantaged communities' (ibid: 177). Economic exclusion disallowed access to parts of the city's nightlife and impacted on the sorts of youth cultural activities and identities that they forged; a process that was further exacerbated by the subjects' experiences of racism (see Mac an Ghaill and Haywood 2005, for similar findings in respect of young Bangladeshi people in Newcastle). Bosé concludes that:

the 'all-dressed-up-and-nowhere-to-go' experience of Saturday evening that Clarke *et al* (1976) named as symptomatic of the 'symbolically displaced resolutions' of subcultural styles, is a surprisingly contemporary experience for many black youths…//…A particular problem for young black and Asian men in Manchester is the experience of exclusion from popular cultural venues in the city…//…the persistence of selective policing and racial exclusion in the leisure spaces of the contemporary city has led local black youth in Manchester to devise various strategies of collective problem solving (2003: 174/5).

Once one starts to investigate the relationship between youth cultural experiences and 'race, class, social segregation and exclusion' (ibid.) it becomes clear that not all young people are able to – or want to - access leisure experiences or create cultural identities in the same way. If Bosé's respondents are to be understood as 'choosing' not to access Manchester's nightlife, such 'choices, can only be understood through a 'heightened sensitivity towards aspects of exclusion' (ibid:175) and the ways in which social structural inequalities interact with aspects of individual biographies. This echoes Roberts' argument (2000:6) that 'it is impossible to explain what is occurring elsewhere until the sub-structure of young people's lives (their school to work and family/housing transitions) have been analysed properly'. We agree that a successful sociology of youth culture *necessarily* invites in consideration of young people's transitions but would counter that, at least in some cases, the opposite also applies: proper appreciation of the twists and turns of individual's biographies (and their overall transitions) requires analysis of the cultural and leisure lives of young people (see MacDonald and Marsh, 2005 for a fuller argument).

Nayak's study (2003) is one of those few, recent ones that have tried to look both at issues of youth transition and of youth culture in a context of class and ethnic identities (also see Gunter 2004). Like Bosé and Hollands, he also concluded that the differentiation of local youth cultural forms could only be understood in relation local social divisions and the opportunity structures of the post-industrial North East of England. He uncovered three youth cultural groups: 'Real Geordies', 'White Wannabes' and 'Charvers'. The 'Real Geordies' were typically white working-class

young men, 'the salt of the earth natives' (2003: 311). The 'White Wannabes' were white young people who 'wanted to be black' (316) and who thus adopted many of the stylistic attributes associated with black (youth) culture. Finally, there were the 'Charvers' who, Nayak argues, inhabited 'a different "youth-scape" to that of other North East young people', one which involved 'making different transitions in the post-industrial economy that involved forging different pathways into "gang" and neighbourhood networks' (312) [5].

Other research with economically marginalised young people in the North East of England confirms Nayak's argument about the importance of broader class-based processes and experiences in shaping youth cultural identities and practices (Shildrick 2003, 2006; MacDonald and Shildrick 2004; MacDonald and Marsh 2005). These Teesside-based qualitative studies employed the concept of 'leisure career' to describe the reported changes in young people's free-time activities and shifting peer networks. Leisure careers were shaped by other important aspects of transition - such as 'school-to-work', family, housing, criminal and drug-using careers – along with locality itself. For most young people, the leaving of school, the gaining of some independent weekly income and new, wider friendship groups from jobs, schemes and college were allied with the move towards mainstream, commercialised leisure typical of working-class young adults in Britain (i.e. the sort enjoyed by most of Hollands' subjects). For others, however, their longer-term leisure careers remained tied firmly to neighbourhood-based peer groups in which street socialising was the norm. Unlike some of their counterparts from school, these young people had made little progress in the labour market and were more likely to be, or have been, involved in criminal and drug-using careers. 'Street corner society' has a long if neglected history as an important element of working class youth leisure. Notwithstanding Whyte's eponymous study in 1940s Chicago (1943), evidence suggests that as far back as the 1800s street corner socialising was not only widespread amongst working-class youth,

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[5] It is not our purpose to present a critical appraisal of the studies in this section. That said, we are uncomfortable with Nayak's decision to employ the label of 'Charver' for the most marginalised sub-section of his informants. Roughly equivalent to 'Chav', in the North East of England this is a populist and *universally* derogatory term for families – and particularly young people – regarded as socially, culturally and morally inferior to the 'respectable' working-class.

but also served a number of important socio-economic functions (Davies 1992). These 'corner lads' (and women) (ibid: 99), later labelled by Corrigan (1976: 103) as 'the largest and most complex youth subculture', are largely absent from post-subcultural studies. Yet, our own, more recent research suggests, that for some at least, 'street corner society' remains a central element of working class *sub-cultural* identity (of which more shortly).

The studies described above are illustrative of research which, although primarily about issues of youth transition, has had something to say about youth culture. Another impressive and elegant example of this can be found in the work of Steven Ball and colleagues (2000) on 'choices, pathways and transitions post-16'. This is an ethnography that simultaneously combines interest in young people's movement through new education, training and labour markets (in London) with a whole-hearted attempt to appreciate the cultural identities that shape, and are shaped in, these processes. And again, in relation to leisure, they found that, whilst there was some evidence of cross-class leisure interests, the actual 'capacity to participate and consume was different for different social classes' (69). We are reminded that 'geographies and other possibilities for identity are not the same for all' (150) and moreover, that identities are 'contingent on sets of structural and material factors' and 'embedded in the social fabric' of 'real social worlds' (2000:57).

The final two example we present in this section had quite different focal concerns and were conducted in quite different geographical contexts. Both, though, confirm the conclusion quoted from Ball et al (op. cit.).

Based on a long-standing research interest in Russian youth, Pilkington examines how aspects of globalisation articulate with local conditions to help generate 'youth cultural strategies' that are 'carved out of the social cleavages of Soviet modernity' (2004: 126). Her contribution to After Subculture (Bennett and Khan-Harris 2004) provides a more panoramic mapping of youth cultural forms than do most of the chapters in that volume. In doing so, she describes a division between two broad-based, deep-rooted and self-defined youth cultural categories: the 'progressives' (more 'global', West-looking, stylistic, youth subculturalists) and the 'normals' (more 'local', 'ordinary', 'mainstream'). Not only does Pilkington's research offer a

sophisticated theoretical approach, it provides a nice corrective to youth studies - and shows the possible limits of theories - that are only based on British (or Western European) research. Whilst not written in a determinedly comparative style, her account of the Russian youth cultural scene was intriguingly similar, in many respects, to that found in Britain. The (self)description of the 'normals' – who displayed indifference and sometimes hostility to their more sub-culturally involved counterparts, who stressed their ordinariness, who favoured instead the security and stability of very locally-rooted, neighbourhood-based friendship groups – echoed exactly divisions that have long been apparent amongst British youth (a point noted by Frith, 2004). Moreover, Pilkington's findings are extraordinarily similar to Shildrick's depiction of the ways in which the young people in her research in the North East of England (2003, 2006) culturally differentiated themselves.

Within a primarily criminological discussion of youth, governance and policing, Loader (1996) – like the studies mentioned above – examines the cultural possibilities and practices that emerge for young people in the context of a particular place and particular sets of socio-economic constraints. As with the Teesside studies, he details the ways in which young people make use of public space in their local neighbourhoods for leisure activities and 'just hanging around'. He argues that those who are most economically disadvantaged, such as recurrently or long-term unemployed young adults, are 'in a state of 'suspended animation', extending their status as dependent 'adolescents' (1996:111). They are materially – and hence geographically – excluded from the sorts of leisure activities open to their more successful peers. Loader shows how the amusements of youthful consumer culture are not available equally to all and that this has much to do with the material bases, and consequences of, transitions.

The overriding conclusion of these studies of less flamboyant, less stylistically spectacular youth is that the sorts of free cultural *choice* described by more post-modern, post-subcultural perspectives tends to be reserved for the more privileged sections of dominant cultural groups. There is enough evidence in the studies noted in this section, we think, to demonstrate how social and economic constraint reverberates through the youth cultural and leisure experiences of less advantaged young people.

A return to subculture?

Whilst the work of the CCCS may well be the 'crown jewels of British youth research' (Roberts 2000:10)**,** several writers would agree that subculture theory has now 'run its course' (Jenks 2005: 145), become 'superfluous' and 'no longer relevant' (Chaney 2004: 36) and fails to provide 'a useful description of young people's social world or their experiences' (Karvonen et al 2001:393). Post-subcultural studies – explicitly defined as 'post CCCS studies' by Muggleton (2005: 214) – has been to the fore in the attack on the CCCS's approach as being polemical and devoid of theoretical, empirical or practical value (Redhead 1992, 1997; Bennett 1999, 2000; Miles 1998, 2000; Muggleton 1997, 2000).

We think that this overstates the case. Within recent accounts of young people's cultural identities and leisure practices voices more sympathetic to long-standing ideas of subculture – and at least some aspects of the CCCS's theorisation of it - can be heard. These studies hint at the continued salience of the concept of subculture and, as such, question the broader relevance and applicability of 'post-modern' theories of youth culture.

Bosé is one of the most explicit about this: there are a 'number of indications that the characteristics of the early work on subculture – power relations linked to 'race', class, social segregations and exclusion – are still central to our understanding of the (life)styles and cultural choices of young people' (2003:). Although Hodkinson is concerned to avoid 'some of the term's previous implications' and is worried about discounting newer concepts and theories, his research on goths suggests that there is enough stability and 'cultural substance' in their understanding of what it is to be a goth, and the affiliations and practices that come with that identity, to argue for a 'reworked and updated notion of subculture' (2002:9). Outside of what might normally be taken to be youth culture research, Williamson (1997: 79) alerts us to the potential value of theories of subcultural formation in understanding the situations of young people 'not in education, employment or training'. With a similar focus on 'socially excluded' young people, MacDonald and colleagues (2001:11) also note that 'some of the potential of older criminological and sociological theories of subculture -

with their emphasis upon the ways that youth cultures emerge as localised class-based "solutions" to material inequalities - may have been too quickly forgotten'.

Bennett is right in arguing that one of the problems of using 'subculture' is that it has sometimes been applied inexactly, becoming 'little more than a convenient "catch-all" term for any aspect of social life in which young people, style and music intersect' (1999: 599). In our view, part of the problem here stems from the way that later youth studies have interpreted the theoretical and empirical intentions of the CCCS. It was their attention to the *well-known*, *tightly-defined* and *stylistically spectacular* sub-cultures of the 1960s and '70s that has received most critical discussion (e.g. Clarke, G., 1982). Bennett (2005: 257) is correct again in saying that the concept of 'subculture has always been used to demarcate homogenous and relatively static groupings'. In most of the work post-CCCS – and perhaps too in their own application of the concept in the 'ethnographic' chapters of <u>Resistance through Rituals</u> (Hall and Jefferson, 1976) - this might well be the case [6].

Yet – when we came to re-read the theoretical introduction to this classic text (Clarke, J., et al, 1976: 14) - we were reminded that this was not all that they were about. Seeking to theorise the significance of working-class young people's forms of social network, leisure career and cultural identity (as part of a wider analysis of economically marginal youth transitions), we returned to this book. We were struck by the similarity between their depiction of the more *generalised*, *'loosely-bounded'* and *un-labelled* forms of masculine, working-class, 'delinquent' sub-culture and our account of contemporary 'street corner society'. In another CCCS volume, Clarke, J. (1979: 251) provides a theoretical description of one form of working-class, youth cultural experience that seems to mirror exactly what we found in our study (and that Loader found his):

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[6] Ethnographic is placed in inverted commas because the CCCS work *can* be criticised for the relative paucity of their empirical work on subcultures.

Locality continues to act as a focus for some working class cultural identifications, often amongst those who are in some sense marginal to production and to the collective solidarities generated there. Locality continues to act as a base for collective activity among working class adolescents, both in the sense of providing cultural identities (…//…for many otherwise unnamed youth groupings) and constituting their 'social space' – 'the street', alleyways etc. which are public and less tightly regulated than other areas.

We agree with Carrington and Wilson (2004:76) that 'the CCCS's work was never as unified or as coherent as some have claimed it to be' (see also Blackman 2005). Rather - like the CCCS – we see it as a 'tentative scheme' (Clarke et al 1976) that *still* helps to explain the relationships between locality, class culture, transition and identity (for some – if not all – working-class young people [7]). We were also rather struck by the following, lengthy passage from *Resistance through Rituals*. This broad statement encapsulates much of the theoretical and empirical scope of their approach and implies ambitions, we suggest, that remain valuable for studying youth in the contemporary period and in light of recent theoretical development (discussed further in conclusion):

We can distinguish broadly between three aspects: structures, cultures and biographies …By *structures* we mean the set of socially organised positions and experiences of class in relation to the major institutions and structures. These positions generate a set of common relations and experiences from which meaningful actions – individual and collective – are constructed. *Cultures* are the range of socially organised and patterned responses to the social and material conditions. Though cultures form, for each group, a set of traditions – lines of action inherited from the past – they must be collectively constructed anew in each generation. Finally, *biographies* are the 'careers' of particular individuals through these structures and cultures – the means by which individual identities and life-histories are constructed out of collective experiences. Biographies recognise the element of individuation in the paths which individual lives take through collective structures and cultures, but they

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[7] And, of course, CCCS sub-cultural theory never intended to explain all working-class youth cultural experience, nor suggested that all working-class young people would respond in the same way to similar socio-economic situations.

must not be conceived as either wholly individual or free-floating. Biographies cut paths in and through the determined spaces of structures and cultures in which individuals are located (Clarke et al 1976: 57).

In short, we agree with Carrington and Wilson's (2004: 65) view that 'some theorists have dismissed CCCS approaches without considering adequately what aspects of social life the earlier works continue to explain'. Ironically - after scathing and sustained critique of the approach – Muggleton, one of the leading post-subculturalists, is now beginning to wonder whether, after all, that the 'future of the subcultural concept is rather more secure than has often been suggested' (2005:217).

Summary and conclusion

This paper has attempted to delineate what we see as some of the key problems with post-subcultural studies. We regard an analysis of young people's cultural identities, practices and affiliations as a crucial part of any attempt to provide a more holistic, explanatory study of youth. We argue that the current ascendancy of post-subcultural studies *limits* the relevance of such research to broader youth questions and does little to advance the case that youth studies could be – should be - more sociologically important.

Our criticisms are simple ones. Empirically, there has been an overemphasis on 'spectacular' music, dance and style cultures as definitive of contemporary youth culture (a 'mistake' that repeats that made by the CCCS in their primary, but not exclusive, focus on the 'spectacular few'). As in the 1970s, it is still the case that the majority of young people in Britain don't come near the sort of subcultures/ post-subcultures that are described in most, prominent youth culture research[8] . The turn to *post*-subcultural studies has restricted which young people, and which aspects of young people's lives, have been deemed worthy of investigation.

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[8] Although it is difficult to substantiate empirically such a claim, one recent survey of musical tastes and sub-cultural affiliations (The Observer 17th July 2005) found that the majority of respondents did not report current/ previous 'membership' of *any* sub-culture, with the highest rating going to 'dance culture', with 12 per cent being (or having been) participants.

Theoretically, these studies have aligned themselves with post-modern thinking and tended to downplay – and sometimes ignore - the significance of social divisions and inequalities of power in young people's cultural lives. Blackman (2005) suggests that even in their consideration of dance/ rave culture, for instance, the post-subculturalists forget the, at times, political, resistant, sub-cultural character of their subject. Our point is different and more methodological. By focussing in on the most obviously stylistic forms of contemporary youth culture (whose adherents might be argued to be predominantly drawn from more advantaged social positions) these studies are less likely *to be able* to uncover evidence of how class, and other social divisions, delimit youth cultural possibilities.

Where researchers have utilised a broader understanding of what constitutes youth culture and included more 'ordinary' and less advantaged young people as research participants (as with the studies reviewed in the mid-part of this article), they have unanimously, to our knowledge, concluded that youth cultural identities, leisure lives and consumption practices remain imbued with the facts of material and social circumstances. Bennett (2005: 256), in responding to Blackman's and Hesmondhalgh's critique of post-subculturalism, rather misses the point when he argues that some popular cultural practices do not 'demand particularly high levels of disposal income' (and that, therefore, the effect of material inequalities on youth culture may be overplayed by his critics). Although various studies *have* demonstrated the material exclusion of young people from aspects of mainstream and alternative forms of popular culture (Loader 1996; MacDonald and Marsh 2005) and their resultant 'leisure poverty' (Banks et al 1992), the significance of social division and class culture is more subtle than this. In this sense he is correct when he says that class does not act as a 'dead-weight', determining all. For instance, there is much differentiation *within* the leisure lives of the young working-class (Ball et al 2000; Blackshaw 2003; MacDonald and Marsh 2005; Shildrick 2006). Such patterns of intra-class cultural differentiation tend, however, to reflect - not the liberation of individuals from traditional, long-standing structural constraints in a post-modern world of consumer choice - but the complicated story of how these shape up and are met and responded to by classed, 'raced' and gendered young people in particular

places at particular times (Reay 1996). The various studies quoted in this paper – by Hollands and Chatterton, Bosé, Nayak, Loader, Pilkington, MacDonald and Marsh, and Shildrick – demonstrate this.

This leads us to our main conclusion. Whilst in need of theoretical refinement and empirical renewal, we think some of the broader goals of the CCCS sub-cultural approach remain valid ones. Their emphasis upon the relationship between social structure and culture in youth cultural formation and, particularly, the ways in which individual biographies intertwine with, and between, the two seems curiously timely. This perspective allows in more general, recent social theoretical interest in, for example, the individualisation thesis, risk society, biography, the unequal distribution of forms of capital and so on. In relation to youth research, the emphasis in this broad conceptual framework on socially differentiated 'careers' and 'biographies' has clear resonance with specific discussions of 'bounded agency' (Evans 2002) and 'structured individualisation' (Roberts 1997) in young people's lives as well as signalling an obvious parallel with the more general, core concern of youth transitions research. Perhaps, ironically, the rejuvenation of this aspect of CCCS sub-culture theory might not only help to broaden and increase the relevance of contemporary youth culture research but might also aid in uniting it, with transitions research, in a more holistic, lively and telling sociology of youth.

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