Living for the weekend
Youth identities in northeast England

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A B S T R A C T

Consumption and consumerism are now accepted as key contexts for the construction of youth identities in de-industrialized Britain. This article uses empirical evidence from interviews with young people to suggest that claims of 'new community' are overstated, traditional forms of friendship are receding, and increasingly atomized and instrumental youth identities are now being culturally constituted and reproduced by the pressures and anxieties created by enforced adaptation to consumer capitalism. Analysis of the data opens up the possibility of a critical rather than a celebratory exploration of the wider theoretical implications of this process.

Whilst much has been written recently about changes in youth transitions (Coles, 1995; Furlong and Cartmel, 1997) and the influence of consumerism upon youth identities (Miles, 1996, 1998), the broader economic and social structures in which identity is constituted and reproduced have been somewhat neglected, or at least taken for granted as a rather passive backdrop to the cultural action unfolding before us. This article aims to challenge the rather fashionable notion that identity is potentially free to construct itself in a 'post-structural' or 'postmodern' world, and to do this we will focus on the question of how young people experience and perceive their lives in Britain's rapidly changing economy. As the formerly imposing edifice of industrially based social class begins to cast a far smaller shadow over identity (Marshall, 1997; Pakulski and Waters, 1996), and rigid modes of gender expression begin to loosen (Beynon, 2002; Connell, 1995), for some it seems reasonable to argue that young people are developing the wherewithal and 'discursive' tools to construct multi faceted and highly sociable identities in a fluid, changing world with a good deal of freedom and creativity (see, for example, Ball et al., 2000). However, our data suggest that although many young people have indeed honed their ability to dip in and out of consumer markets in order to construct a sense of self (Miles, 2000), which certainly gives the appearance of freedom and creativity, a sense of homogeneity and conformity is still quite overwhelming. At the same time it is strikingly apparent that huge gulfs of structural inequality remain.

The empirical data presented in this article come from a broad-ranging and ongoing ethnographic and qualitative project addressing the changing nature of youth identities in contemporary Britain. To date, 43 young people, aged between 18 and 25, have been interviewed in order to gain some insight into their attitudes towards marriage, relationships and kids, work, leisure, body image, fashion, consumerism,

friendship and life course. All of our respondents were white and from the northeast of England. We have changed their names and disguised specific locations in an effort to preserve anonymity. The interviews were unstructured, and in some cases respondents generously agreed to follow-up interviews in order to flesh out details and further explore issues drawn from the first batch of transcripts. Where possible we have also attempted to interview friendship cohorts, in order to gather data about their knowledge of and attitudes towards others within the group. The biggest single occupational grouping in our sample is call-centre workers, recruited with the help of key research contacts and then through snowball sampling. This work location fits neatly with the burgeoning literature (see, for example, Bain et al., 2002; Belt et al., 2002; Deery et al., 2002; Taylor et al., 2002, 2003) on an employment sector that is profoundly emblematic of Britain's service economy. Working in a sector that is overwhelmingly non- unionized, most of our call centre contacts were paid just over minimum wage, struggled with unsociable shift patterns, and suffered the indignities of incredibly intrusive micromanagement (see Winlow and Hall, 2006, for a more detailed account). The rest of our sample fared little better, working in other areas of the low paid leisure and service sector. Again, these contacts were largely recruited using 'snowball sampling'techniques. Around two-thirds of our respondents were male, because the main initial foci of our research project were narratives of victimization and perpetration of interpersonal violence in the night-time economy (Hall and Winlow, 2005).

Agency, structure and identity

Since the neoliberal 'restoration' of the 1980s (Badiou, 2007; Harvey, 2007) modernist norms have been severely weakened. Free agentic action and transgression of the restrictive norm appear to be more possible than ever before and many appear to believe that those individuals with the desire to do so can struggle free from the class system into a realm of unprecedented self-determining opportunities using skill, creativity, hard work and strength of character. 'Affirmative postmodernism' has been at the forefront of the more optimistic and celebratory movements in the social sciences. The emphasis this school of thought placed on the reconstructive and trans- formative possibilities that abound in the post-industrial world tends to marginalize perspectives that emphasize the tighter connection between agents and their new, shifting structural locations. Whilst the social action of the existentially free agent clearly makes up a significant part of the social world of our respondents, a palpable sense of structural pressure always loomed large in the background, despite the lack of perceptual and objective clarity in a structure that refuses to stand still long enough to get a reasonable take on it. In a fluid and unstable social world dominated by the values and practices of consumer fetishism (Stratton, 2001) and ornamentalism (Faludi, 1999), it's entirely understandable that sociologists operating in the field of youth studies have analysed young people's engagement with consumption as a means of constructing their identities (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; Roberts, 1995). Many interesting themes have emerged: for instance, the alleged expansion of choice rather than assimilation and adaptation as traditional structures of class, race and gender appear to fragment and recede; how

transitions to adulthood are affected by de-industrialization, rising divorce rates and the decline of the nuclear family (Burghes, 1994; Coles, 1995); and the impact of liberal social policy and the changing educational system on life chances (Coles, 1995). However, in the rush to bring contemporary culture to the foreground, the fundamental changes that have occurred within labour markets – as we move to a society in which both work and leisure biographies are characterized by instability, competition and risk (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997) – have been neglected.

While some commentators have focused on the ways in which the decline of a rigid modernist social structure has enabled young people to construct identity and individuality by accessing consumer culture's kaleidoscope of images – to all effects and purposes freely choosing identity rather than being restrained by social class, gender or ethnicity – others have been quick to point out that the collapse of this social structure affects young people in ways that do not automatically facilitate progressive social change or a palpable rise in personal freedom, opportunities or well-being (see, for example, Currie, 2004). Put simply, the legacy of social class, the 'downsizing' of Western workforces according to the logical imperatives of the global commodity market, and the cultural revival of classical liberal forms of individualism, competition, mobility and opportunism have effectively marginalized and, in some extreme cases, fully excised many young people from the circuits of production, distribution and consumption, thus allowing them to secure only a very small proportion of the benefits associated with full participation (see, for example, MacDonald and Marsh, 2005; Webster et al., 2004). Even those who find menial, insecure and unfulfilling work might not be regarded, or regard themselves, as bona fide participants and beneficiaries.

Youth identities and consumerism

Young consumers play an active role in constructing the meanings they bring to their consumer choices (see Miles et al., 1998), but the broader social and economic pressures they feel to engage with forms of manufactured ornamental culture and adopt them as their principal means of mediation and valuation (Faludi, 1999; Hall and Winlow, 2003), to consume and to keep consuming, are clearly quite considerable. In the interface between consumerism, leisure cultures and identity, involvement in some cases appears both obligatory and laden with risk, anxiety and chronic dissatisfaction at the deepest psychological level. Relationships with iconic images of consumption and pleasure are fetishized (Stratton, 2001); anxiety-driven urges to buy and display fashionable consumer goods as a means of both conforming to localized social norms and establishing a distinct identity – urges that enter the realm of fetishism which, as Jacques Lacan reminded us, is the irresistible drive to circulate permanently around the objects of one's desire rather than possess and consume them in single, serial acts – hardly seem likely to produce a cultural landscape conducive to un trammelled freedom and creativity. As some of our respondents suggested, the pressure to be actively involved in 'going out' and participating in all these complex and demanding activities was considerable. Here Joanne, aged 23, describes night-time leisure as compulsory:

You have to go out on a Saturday night. You just have to really. It's the only time you get to see everyone, and you know you've got to get the money together to make it out ... If you miss a week, then everyone's talking about what happened last Saturday and you don't know what they're laughing about. If you miss too many weekends, people just stop phoning you.

Joanne accepts this rather stark assessment as the unavoidable reality of contemporary friendship negotiation in her cultural milieu. If she is to maintain her friendships, she cannot fail to be a regular participant in the weekly jaunt along the local drinking strip. If she does not or cannot keep up with appearances and comply with the double-bind demand to 'fit in and stick out' in an acceptable manner, she runs the risk of being jettisoned from her friendship network. Joanne's friend, Judith, offers a similar view:

I wouldn't want to miss a Saturday because that's where it all happens really. You look forward to it all week, thinking about what you'll wear, where you'll go and things like that ... If I've bought something new, you always want to go out to wear it ... If you don't go out you miss all the gossip. You miss being able to just go out and enjoy yourself really . . .

And the pressure to look a certain way, to embody and display the difficult skill of being an individual at the same time as being a conformist, is also palpable. Joanne suggests that:

You want to look fashionable I suppose, but you don't want to look like a fashion victim. It's sort of, looking good without trying to look good if you know what I mean.

Sarah, 21, clearly believes that she is an autonomous individual with 'creative control' over her own identity, and she appears to believe that her choices are in some way reflective of her core existential identity, yet at the same time she acknowledges the compulsion of fashion itself. Choosing between available styles in a way that does not approach creative 'subcultural' bricolage yet moves beyond mindless conformity, a sort of 'middle ground' that is ideal for the fashion industry in that it mixes predictability with constant movement and allows the industry and its manufactured, off- the-peg styles to sneak into the creative process as a dominant partner, seems to be the norm:

[I like] just pop music really, dance music, stuff like that ... I think I pick the clothes I like. I just go shopping and see things that I like and things I think will go well with other things I've got ... [I don't think I'm] influenced that much by magazines and that kind of thing. I mean, I might sometimes pick up ideas, but it's not like I rush out and buy things because I've seen them on TV or whatever. It's just up to the individual ... you just end up working out your own style for yourself ... You don't think about it much, it just sort of happens. I'd say I'm quite fashionable. I don't pay much attention to it but it just happens. Clothes are just about who you are really.

Donna, aged 24, however, feels a high degree of pressure and is aware of the potential humiliation:

I like to be a bit daring with the things I wear when I go out, but you've always got that doubt about what people are going to think. You don't want to look like you just crave the attention, you don't want to look like someone who's completely into themselves, but you want people to look, just so you stick out a little bit ... I've seen my friends try something new, and the others can just be unmerciful, you know, making fun and that.

Here the implication is that young consumers such as Judith and Donna are forced to occupy a rather narrow cultural peninsula and face the constant prospect of a painful drop into social and cultural insignificance. Fashion choices, which so many of our respondents regarded as crucially important to their identities, status and sense of social belonging, are accompanied by a considerable quota of risk, the import of which is magnified in relation to the amount of value and meaning the individual places upon adroit engagement with the local leisure and consumer cultures. Although many of our interviewees tended to see their involvement in consumer fashions as a means of expressing their individuality, the pressure to be actively involved in the paradoxical dual imperative to cultivate an individualized yet culturally acceptable style was conspicuous. Despite these pressures, it was quite clear that many young consumers recognized that a fleeting and rather shallow form of satisfaction can accompany their involvement in consumerism, yet this pales into insignificance when judged against the vivid perception of reward that lies in store for those who get it right. What tends to remain rather understated in these quotes is that becoming involved in consumer signification and emotionally attached to it is a compulsory part of social life for anyone who wants to cultivate a sense of belonging.

As Miles et al. (1998) have noted, exposure to specific advertising campaigns may not be as influential upon consumption as we might have assumed. Many young people appear to have drawn from a diversity of influences that reflect their social and cultural environment. This could be read rather incautiously as a form of 'bricolage' (Hebdige, 1979) and redolent of some degree of creativity, but the claim that the individual exercises free choice over the items chosen rather than between sets of socially acceptable manufactured items seems to us to be something of a myth: in most cases, as far as the possibility of cultural politics is concerned, the whole is perhaps a little less than the sum of its parts. Our respondents tended to express the ideologically reproduced methodological individualist assumption that, despite the pressure that they all felt and freely expressed, involvement in spectacular consumerism is voluntary, and the image chosen and displayed directly reflects their independent and un adulterated stylistic sensibilities. The illusions of autonomous choice and symbolic subversion sustain and fuel consumerism by restricting agency to a choice between items rather than a choice to consume or not to consume.

The hard-edged economic logic that underlies this assumption escaped the majority of our respondents, despite their willingness to acknowledge the social risks involved if one fails to 'look different' but not 'too different'. Marketing pressure and the 'double-bind' command to be an individual at the same time as an accepted member of a loosely defined cultural group was simply felt and dealt with, but never

understood and criticized as part of an overall system. For example Peter, aged 22, maintains:

I don't think I'm that affected by advertising really. Maybe a little bit by adverts for trainers, but that's not really the advert, it's just telling you something new is out. I get my ideas, just little things I see on other people, like a style of jeans, and you think that would look good if I do that to them, or wear them with that ... but I try to change it around a bit so it's a little bit different.

Annette, aged 22, reinforced this with great clarity:

I buy my clothes from anywhere I see something ... You might get ideas from magazines, or seeing someone else wearing something. It's all mix and match now ... You want to look different, but, you know, not too different.

Here Annette appeared to hold on to the belief that the 'ideas' to which she refers are hers and hers alone, despite her recognition of external cultural influences and the structurally produced risk factors that accompanied her fashion choices. No thought is given to the design or production of the items, global trade relations or the exploitation of low-waged labour. In order for the consumer market to thrive, the megalithic culture industries of late modernity need to keep on subtly convincing individual consumers that satisfaction and indulgence lie in store for those who consume, discard, and then consume again *ad infinitum* (see Bauman, 2001), and that the choices made are an immediate expression of creativity and individuality (see Horkheimer and Adorno, 1973). The cold recognition that virtually every socially connected individual across the Western world is to some degree attempting to negotiate this same path – endlessly constructing, displaying and reconstructing identity by utilizing the symbolism of consumerism – does not seem to inhibit belief in autonomous individuality, enthusiastic participation or heavy spending. If the onward march of consumer capitalism is to be maintained, the systemic processes behind what is actually recognized and understood by the majority of consumers must remain permanently just out of intellectual or intuitive reach.

Ray is 25 and works short-term contracts in the building industry. His absorption into consumerism's symbolic order appears to be far more straightforward; he is heavily orientated towards the conspicuous display of branded consumer items, and, unburdened by doubt, assumes that owning such items bestows on him status and self-worth:

I mean ideally you want to be wearing all the best gear ... You'd have a Rolex watch, Stone Island, Jill Sander, the lot ... It's the quality isn't it? If you've got the money why would you want to be wearing just boring high street gear? ... It's just the flash isn't it? That's just the kind of stuff I'd want to be wearing ... I don't know why it is, it's just the stuff I'm into, the stuff I'd wear. If you can get the money together to get something top class, it's just a boost really, you feel better about yourself.

However, unbeknown to Ray, wearing even the most prestigious designer labels

does not immediately confer high status, and could in fact cause the young person to be the target of sly mocking if the individual's social status seems to make an ill match with the clothes. The inverted snobbery of Emma, aged 21, which seeks those like Ray as the principal victims of its symbolic violence (see Bourdieu, 1984), highlights how the tense relation between mythical individualism and conformity constitutes the subtle, constantly shifting and thus economically dynamic circular negative dialectics of style hierarchies:

I'd never wear something that was, like, obviously a designer label. I don't agree with buying things just because of what's written on them. It's a bit naff really, it's like saying 'look at me, I can afford D&G', or 'I'm really fashionable', but it just isn't I don't think. It's more like saying 'I can't think for myself'.

Our research clearly indicated that in this particular cultural setting all clothing choices are accompanied by this sort of risk, which, in the lives of many of our young respondents, was neither meaningless nor marginal in terms of a functional leisure identity. They feel compelled to imbue consumer items with significant import and utilize the symbolism of their fashion choices in order to display facets of identity that they hope will be appreciated by what they assume to be a critical and informed audience. Different settings require different styles, and different occasions require a greater amount of 'effort'. This process – which in each individual seems to oscillate rapidly between unconscious feelings and conscious judgements – slots neatly into the broader range of pressures and anxieties that make up consumer capitalism's life-world. What we are suggesting is that the active participation of most everyday young people in this high-pressure consumer practice is obligatory within the cultural setting of 'weekend leisure', and that the compulsory appreciation of the potential benefits and pleasures of consumerism is very much a part of the overall experience. Paula, 21, expands on this point, and goes so far as to suggest that the friendship group's active collusion in the process can be perceived as a battle to 'win' an informal style competition:

I suppose, if you didn't know, you'd say we all [friendship group] dressed about the same, but it's not like that at all, it's more complicated. You probably wouldn't notice the details, but we all do and I think we're still a little competitive about it.

Paula recognizes the competitiveness and sublimated hostility that exists between members of the group, but remains uncritical of it; it is just the way people are. Justin, 20, takes the competitive attitude towards the narcissistic extreme (see Hall et al., 2008). Despite owning a wardrobe of corporately manufactured items, he believes that he is a cut above. His nuanced personal taste reflects a distinctly innovative individuality, whereas others 'down the town' are unthinking drones, merely representing bland corporate style:

My clothes tend to reflect the kind of music I'm into and style and attitude, whereas I see some other people and you can tell they just buy whatever everyone's wearing down the town.

Despite the shallow pleasures of consumer indulgence, the ability of young people to pass a constant style test, where failure impacts heavily on the psychological security of a self that constructs its identity and achieves its status in consumption and forms of waged work within its circuits, is now a crucial part of everyday life. Proving to others that we are sufficiently attuned to recognize the sign value of Ralph Lauren or Dolce & Gabbana shares prime importance with the ability to differentiate the unique self from the ubiquitous 'others' attempting to navigate exactly the same path; economic momentum is generated by a situation akin to individuals being trapped on a treadmill and permanently inculcated with the desire to run away from each other yet stay connected. The market needs to be in constant motion to prevent stagnation, and so, in the magic moments between creation and absorption, the next wave of consumer styles at once appears to fragment popular culture whilst further reinforcing the vital importance of consumerism. The core value of 'individualism' pressurizes many young people to seek out specificity and differentiate themselves as 'cool individuals' from the 'mass' who appear to have been absorbed into the mainstream; in this way conformity, like ideology, can be perceived as something that the self has avoided and others have not (Eagleton, 1976).

Young people's attitudes towards work

The decline of traditional forms of employment has impacted upon young people's first experiences of paid labour at a number of levels. Of the 43 interviewed thus far, all but one work in the service and leisure sector, the vast majority work either part-time or shifts, and only eight work the traditional nine-to-five, five-day week. Only two interviewees were members of a union, and while some juggled employment with educational commitments, all acknowledged the fragility of their employment status. The vast majority expressed the belief – and in most cases the hope – that they wouldn't remain in their present employ for too long. Some vehemently disliked their work, while the attitudes of others tended to be more changeable, and the fact that roughly a third of all respondents were juggling full or part-time work with educational study exemplifies the diversification of pressures now bearing down on many young people.

The working-class cultures and communities that grew around forms of traditional labour have now all but disappeared, and in most cases our interviewees tended to see their employment as both transitory and isolating. The friendships, group identities, mutual experiences and political allegiances that constituted and reproduced working-class cultures (see Belcham, 1990; Charlesworth, 2000; Donaldson, 1991; Willis, 1977) were often grounded in traditional industrial working environments, either on factory floors (Roberts, 1993; Willis, 1979), production lines or coal faces (Dennis et al., 1956). As numerous studies have confirmed, a camaraderie often existed within traditional industrial settings, grounded in mutual interests, hopes and experiences and in part reflecting forms of collective resistance against the exploitative conditions in which they found themselves day after day (Roberts, 1993; Willis, 1979). However, our interviewees now experience and

appraise work in very different ways and in very different settings. Rather than camaraderie, many expressed feelings of isolation, and felt that they shared little in common with work colleagues. Very few invested work identities with any particular significance, regarding work as something to be done and forgotten, or in some cases blocked from the mind. For many, relationships forged at work were regarded as unavoidable but ephemeral and completely unimportant.

Joanne, 23, comes from a stable working-class background and currently lives with her parents in a rather leafy and decidedly tranquil neighbourhood on the outskirts of one of the northeast's major cities. Both parents work, and seem to assume that their efforts have provided Joanne with the opportunity to continue the family's upward mobility and material prosperity (see Winlow and Hall, 2006). Joanne is the first of her family to attend university, and she currently has a job in a callcentre, ostensibly to earn enough money to fund the commitment to consumerism and the leisure lifestyles that must run alongside her education. She points out:

I don't want to stay there forever, but I need to have a job like that 'til I finish at Uni ... Some of the people there are all right, but I haven't really got to know many people that well. You go off on breaks and you see different people so it's difficult to get to know many people. At the end of the night, everyone just gets out of there as soon as possible ... I work nights and weekends mainly, but there's thousands of others who you never get to see cos they work different shifts. Plus, when it's busy, the calls are coming in all the time, it's just one after another, so you can't really talk to each other ... They have staff nights out but I wouldn't go ... I don't really want to, we just haven't got that much in common really. I'd rather go out with my own friends.

For young people such as Joanne, their working personas appear to be grounded in a kind of hard-edged instrumentalism, which appears to be at once indicative of the hyper-individualized nature of contemporary culture and the transitory and alienating nature of their work compared to that of the recent past. Both socio-economic and cultural relationships seem to impose the necessity of instrumentalism and discourage the recognition of mutual interests that some marginalized groups might continue to possess (see Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Most things appear to be appraised upon instrumental criteria as young workers attempt to steer a course through the choppy seas of consumerism's cultural capital. However, Joanne's continued involvement in formal education does not necessarily render her job or labour market position transitory. The promised land of extravagantly remunerated graduate employment is increasingly competitive, and this faux-meritocracy continues to subtly discriminate on the basis of cultural capital rather than transferable skills and abilities (see Brown and Hesketh, 2004; Winlow and Hall, 2006). There is, in other words, no guarantee that she will leave her current form of employment for something markedly better; she might well be forced to remain in the sort of job and with the sort of people that her culture has encouraged her to regard with disdain.

For young people such as Joanne, the privilege of continued education could very

well turn out to be an additional structural and financial pressure that will not necessarily advantage them in the long term. The vast majority of our interviewees were clearly alienated from their work, and all displayed calculative attitudes towards their involvement in these highly exploitative work settings. Judith, for example, another call centre worker, appears to see work in a purely instrumental fashion, devoid of any broader significance:

I don't care about it really [work]. It's just to get the money so I can buy stuff I want really ... The people there are just people, they're not really my friends. It's only the managers that care about it, with targets and monitoring calls and that. They're the only ones who care, who maybes see it as a career or something. The other people there, some are trying to get a bit of extra cash for the family or whatever, some are students getting a bit extra cash, some are older people. We talk and get on OK, but I just think everyone there just hates the place.

Here Judith seems to be indicating that, to her, life can be clearly compartmentalized and judged according to necessity, obligation and the anticipated pleasures that each compartment might offer. Work is seen as unimportant, aside from the fact that it funds other, more pleasurable, spheres of social engagement. Her work-identity is a product of the daily determination to get through each shift as an isolated individual with as little difficulty as possible, without forming close personal ties:

I'm polite to everyone, I smile at people, but underneath I'm just thinking about other things. What's on TV that I'm missing, anything apart from work. Some people are obviously more chatty than me and you can tell some of them are friends, but I think a lot of the people there just use work to get money, and couldn't care less about it. Now, people just talk to me if they need to or to pass the time.

Michael, 21, who works in a supermarket, expressed similar sentiments:

I feel sorry for some of the people there ... they're older and have to work in a supermarket. The money and everything, I don't know why they put up with it. I know I'm not going to be there for long, so really it's just a way to get some money. For me, it's just the money, it's not like it's my career. I just go in, do it, get it done and then that's it.

The manner in which many of the young people involved in this research situated employment within their lives seemed to indicate a desire to remove the negative feelings about their employment from their perceptions of self. As work biographies become unstable products of constant adaptation (Bauman, 1995; Beck, 1992), most interviewees were reluctant to attempt to improve work conditions at all. The preferred option is to move on to somewhere else, thus accepting the exploitative and alienating work that is the general condition of the lowest echelons of the service sector (see, for example, Newman, 1999; Toynbee, 2003).

If work is something to be simply endured and forgotten, its sole purpose is to fund forays into the consumer market, which for many seems to be saturated with the

communal symbolism that is absent from other dimensions of their lives. Leisure personas are consistently attributed with considerably more significance than those that exist in other dimensions. Who they really are, it seems, is who they are during the weekend, away from the pressures and mundanity of work, family and education. On weekends they can be with their 'real' friends rather than the acquaintances at work to whom they present a one-dimensional, instrumental and rather un sociable persona. Paul, 24, who works in a call centre in the northeast:

I hate work ... I get this feeling, before I go in, like feeling sick. I just hate everything about it. Most of the people there are just arseholes, petty, and pushing you about tiny things. They just want to wear you down. I've been there seven months and loads of people have left. The pressure they put on you for targets, they just can't take it . . .

Q: So why don't you pack it in?

I need the money. It's only just over six quid an hour but I couldn't do without it. If I could find another job with more money I'd do it. I'll try anything, I don't really care ... It's got to the stage where I just go in on autopilot, just blank out and take calls without really thinking about it. I need my wages for, just stuff really: fags, clothes, rent a video, whatever, and your weekend money ... the money to go out on a weekend ... I can spend around seventy quid on a Saturday ... It's the only reason I keep going to work ... I just love going out I suppose. After a week's work, it's good to go out and have some fun.

Malcolm, 24, another call centre worker:

You've just got to get used to the idea that it's work. If you want the money you've got to go and do it. Everyone I work with hates it, everyone ... The single most common thing we talk about, at work, is how shit it is. Everyone just goes on about all the bad stuff they have to deal with from callers, about how the team manager won't let you have holidays, how they keep putting targets up, how they shout and scream when you do something wrong . . . If I'm out, down the town, and I bump into someone I work with, the thing we end up talking about is how shit work is. It's like a competition to see who's got the worse thing to say about the place ... I've been on the work nights out. It's crap coz people just talk about work ... I wouldn't go out with people from work. It's not very nice, but to be honest, a lot of them, I just wouldn't want to be seen with them . . .

While work may not be particularly rewarding, the weekly big night out appears to offer a 'time out of time' (Presdee, 2000: 33), the functional respite of 'carnival' to sooth the pains of daylight frustration and prepare workers in these low paid consumer industries for what lies ahead the following week (see, for example, Hobbs et al., 2000, 2003; Winlow et al., 2003). Donna describes the weekly Saturday night experience:

We'll usually start at one of our houses. We have a drink to save a bit of money and then go into the town ... Paula's probably my best mate, she works at [shop name] in the town, Karen's a travel agent, Gemma's a student, but I think she's got a job now, and Angela, I'm not really sure; she's Gemma's mate rather than mine ... We talk about the usual really. Mostly we try not to talk about work cos it's boring isn't it? You want to have a laugh not hear about someone having a bad day at work. We talk about clothes, who's wearing what, where they bought it ... boyfriends, who fancies who ... stuff on TV maybe. When we get out we might talk about men in the bar, we might have a laugh at a few of the weird people out. Then it's clubbing, and by that time everyone's usually completely pissed so it doesn't matter.

Yet, as we have seen, in a way that casts doubt on Presdee's (2000) emphasis on the carnivalesque, the world of consumer leisure and lifestyles is replete with its own pressures and conflicts. This further permeation of pressure and conflict into everyday life, as we shall see has impacted significantly on the way that many young people now experience friendship.

Youth identities and friendship

As individualization increasingly dominates social life, the wider consequences of the breakdown of cultures grounded in social class and the emergent struggle to attain various forms of cultural capital required for socio-economic mobility are only now starting to be addressed (Bourdieu, 1984; Wacquant, 2002). As many commentators now acknowledge, the fragmentation of working-class labour and its attendant cultures has had a number of profound implications for the social sciences (Lea, 2002; Taylor, 1999). Whilst much of the literature addresses the problematic nature of the 'cultures of poverty' in so-called 'underclass' locales as they become disconnected from mainstream social and economic circuits (Byrne, 1999; Wilson, 1987, 1996), little has been said about those who appear to have adapted just that little bit more successfully to the sphere of service work and consumption, the 'new mainstream' that lies between the lumpen groups at the bottom and the successful new entrepreneurs, technocrats and knowledge economy workers somewhere above; in other words, to put it bluntly, we have missed out the bulk of the population. Whilst many of our interviewees would once have been categorized automatically as working class, in the current climate of transient employment and dispersed cultural capital their affiliation to a particular social class is now unclear. Most appeared to have a vague inkling of their lower-class status, but none at all could locate themselves in what Hutton (1995) and Westergaard (1995) described as capitalism's new 'deepening, widening and hardening' structures of social inequality.

Optimistic readings of the current situation might suggest that the building block of extra-familial bonding is *friendship*, which has surely survived and even prospered in the cultures of 'new capitalism', even in the disembodied circuits of cyber-space. If indeed instrumentalism has become a common value and practice in 'new capitalist' culture (Hall et al., 2008; Lasch, 1991; Sennett, 2006), has friendship escaped

intact? During the industrial capitalist era most working-class individuals were bonded together in the cultural forms and shared *habitus* that established and reproduced their identities in mutual experiences such as exploitative employment, schooling, poverty and family life (Dennis et al., 1956; Winlow, 2001). This anchored a whole range of personal relationships (Whyte, 1993; Young and Willmott, 1961) in communities characterized by a significant degree of solidarity and continuity. During this period, friendships appear to have been far more durable. In terms of social being, lives lived within a grounded working-class community tended to flow along relatively predictable channels of biographical development. Put simply, those who were born in the same age group in the same neighbourhood, attended the same school and were subject to similar family lives, and who left school at the same time to perform the same alienating and exploitative work in industry, tended to experience the same demands and pressures. Friends who grew up together in this manner might also have experienced a range of other life events, which further bonded them together: marriage, child- rearing, periods of unemployment, family bereavements, aging, retirement and so on. Without denying the fact that in the absence of a political project to consolidate class identity some of these communities could degenerate into insular, defensive and hostile in-groups, what our research shows is that the increasingly complex nature of youth transitions now presents a practical impediment to the maintenance of these close and enduring personal attachments and that, as the culture of advanced capitalism increasingly forces instrumentalism to the very core of self-identity, truly empathetic, altruistic and durable forms of togetherness are becoming increasingly rare amongst those deeply and actively incorporated into consumer culture.

Although we accept that close personal relationships continue to exist amongst some young people, and that indeed friendships can be struck up in any situation, our data suggest that now many friendships are characterized by a different, highly selective, competitive and fragile form of 'closeness', which, because bonds are not rooted in anything more profound than the display of style and cultural competence in the circuits of consumer signification, in the medium-term might have a corrosive effect on the deeper and more enduring friendships upon which the communal, social and political solidarities of the past were built. Indeed, for many respondents, friendships are now providing an essential functional platform for making a personal 'impact' and achieving a sense of significance and distinction in night-time leisure cultures. We are not suggesting that this type of relationship is new, only that it is diffusing throughout youth culture and becoming the norm from which traditional close friendships are a deviation. As 'going out' is the most important activity in the lives of most respondents, friends were often seen primarily as a means of facilitating the 'right' type of cultural engagement.

Andy, 25, who works for a high street retailer, recalls:

We'd go all over the place [clubbing], and I can remember I'd always offer to drive, or book trains or whatever, because I really wanted to go and you're trying to get all your friends to go ... We sort of stayed together because we all wanted to go clubbing together. If they didn't go I couldn't go ... if I bumped into some of them now

I think it would be a bit awkward, it was just so different with them ... just weird I suppose because we didn't talk about much apart from drugs and house music ... Slowly but surely we started to drift apart.

Peter, 23, describes how his male friendships are negotiated:

There's all sorts really [in our friendship group]. There's lads who do all sorts, just everything ... Well, there's a couple of contractors, some do stuff with telecommunications or something, some do just building work I think, I'm not sure exactly. Pete works in a shop down the town, John works in a call centre up in Northville. They just do all sorts ... Most of the lads still live with parents and that, I think there's maybe one or two who've moved out ... it's just because we just don't have that type of crack really, all work and families and stuff. I think I know them well but when you get to thinking there's a lot I don't know ... There's maybe ten of us who go out regularly, but really, there's only really Paul who I'd call a good mate, because the others, I mean they're still mates, still good lads. But, apart from going out I don't really see them. I don't even think most of them know what I do. See, it's not really talked about. You go out to have a laugh, and that's it.

For Peter and others like him, the actual experience of night-time leisure has a huge bearing upon conventions about the nature and parameters of male friendships. He goes on:

My mates are really just there for you to go out and just enjoy yourself really. You've got your family, you've got the people at work, and then you've got the lads, and, really, we just have a laugh, so that's what we all think about it ... if you want to go out, you ring around and see if anyone's up for it and you know most likely you're going to have a good night because we're all the same really, we all like to have a laugh and just enjoy ourselves really . . . you know you can rely on them, just to cheer you up I suppose ... when we turn out [meaning go on a night out] that's what we're bothered about.

In many cases the actual knowledge of practical and emotional aspects of friends' lives seems to have undergone a shift in emphasis. The informal rules governing the social and communicative behaviour of the 'going out persona' seem to be quite restrictive. Peter continues:

I think we make a conscious effort not to talk about certain stuff. If one of the lads comes out and starts talking about work, complaining about this or that, he's just going to get the piss taken out of him and everybody knows that. We get enough of that ourselves, during the day. We don't want to hear about depressing stuff cos it's going to spoil the night.

The expression of knowledge of friends 'going out' selves was encouraged and positively sanctioned. Joe, 24, takes up the story:

I know who's going to get pissed first, I know who's going to be on the score all the

time, I know which ones are going to sneak off to meet their girlfriends, I know who's going to get chucked out of nightclubs ... The sense of humour you have to know because you need to know how far you can push certain people, like Eric, he'll stand for a bit of piss-taking but not too much or he'll go mad, whereas someone like Andy just takes the piss all the time ... Eric, guaranteed, is going to have the worse clothes ever, Ian likes trainers, and he keeps getting dodgy hair cuts ... and Tony, he's probably the best looking and most likely to score.

These types of assessments of friends, grounded in mutual knowledge of night-time leisure culture, can often contrast starkly with the broader and deeper knowledge shared by traditional close friends about each other, discussions of which, as we have seen, were discouraged and negatively sanctioned. Joe's knowledge of key aspects of the personal histories of his friends doesn't trip off the tongue in the same way his stories of their nights out together:

Eric works in a factory somewhere in Northville ... I'm not sure what he does really, something to do with car parts ... He still lives with his Mam . . . I'm not really sure what happened to his Dad. He grew up in Yorkshire somewhere so I'm not sure where he went to school ... I think he likes his job, the money's not bad, but he doesn't talk about it much ... Tony is a car salesman, he did OK at school I think, but we didn't go to the same school so I'm not 100%. He's got a girlfriend and he's just got a flat in town. He used to live with his Mam and Dad. His girlfriend is called Karen, and that's about it really.

Others appear to have a profoundly practical approach to friendship. Karen, a 24-year-old travel agent, believes:

[Apart from Diane, my best friend] The others, to be honest, I just see when we go out. They're nice and that, don't get me wrong, but, I don't know, I don't like to get drawn into all that kind of stuff, where, you know, you see each other all the time ... We usually get on all right, but I know, if anything happened, or if I stopped going out, I just probably wouldn't see any of them . . . There's a time and place for friends, and I suppose we all like to meet up now and then, and we text each other and stuff, but really apart from Diane, I'm not that close to any of them.

For some young people social competition and the barely concealed antagonisms that inevitably accompany it seem to lurk just below the surface of what appear to be close and supportive friendships. However, this need not impede one's ability to utilize the pretence of friendship to access the heady pleasures of the night-time drinking circuit. Karen continues:

Now, I'll go out with them and everything on the surface can be quite friendly but you know some of them can be quite bitchy and there's all this, you know, like breaking off into different groups, and things like that. Now I just think they can get on with it, it doesn't bother me ... Sometimes we'll go out together and you'll be talking and getting on OK, but underneath it all you're not that close at all ... it doesn't stop me

going out, it's not so bad you've got to stop going out together because people are always having rows and there's nothing you can do. You just make the best of it.

Instrumental solos

Previous analyses of working-class youth often uncovered a profound sense of kinship, belonging, mutual knowledge, hopes and ambitions (see, for example, Parker, 1974; Patrick, 1973). Now the same types of youth group often reveal growing divisions, fragmentation, alienation and isolation. As the battle for prosperity and distinction enters its consumer phase, it seems prudent and fashionable to act unencumbered by enduring affective and social bonds. Attachments, and the obligations and restrictions that in evitably accompany them, are unwanted complications as individuals streamline their lives to fit in with the competitive cut and thrust of ornamental consumer society. While reciprocity remains important in intimate human relations, the need to maximize benefit for the self seems inescapable (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). Some of our respondents talked about maintaining friendships, with phone calls, text messages, and the occasional solicitation for information about 'how they're doing', but ultimately their motivations seemed to revolve around the benefits rather than the virtue of reciprocity. What these young people put into friendships is driven by what they might get out of them in terms of a culturally and economically functional identity. Andy, a 24-year-old student, suggests:

It's hard to keep in touch and keep friendships going if you're working and you've got a life of your own. My friends and me used to be really close when we were younger because you spent more time together. Now, everyone's got jobs,... [and] stuff going on. I keep in touch with maybe a couple, like talk to them on a weekly basis, and I know I can call them if I fancy going out or something. The others, really, haven't got anything to do with me anymore. It's like they're strangers, even though we might go out for a pint and have a laugh together. It sounds harsh, because I still like them and I still enjoy seeing them ... I think as I get older, I'm more and more happy just to spend time in my own company . . .

The night-time economy is now not only the primary arena for consumption and 'identity-work', but also the primary arena for the construction and maintenance of friendships. It must be emphasized that some respondents talked in impassioned and idealistic terms about closeness and mutual support, of standing by friends during the hard times of rapid cultural and economic change. However, this conflicted powerfully with their descriptions of relations as outlined above, and the general shift in emphasis that lies underneath these comments is not without wider theoretical significance as large numbers of young people begin to lead their lives as instrumental solos.

We contend that growing numbers of today's young people exhibit forms of identity and behaviour indicative of instrumental adaptation rather than creative resistance to underlying social, economic and cultural change. Looking at the data gathered so far

here and in our wider ethnographic project (Hall et al., 2005, 2008; Winlow and Hall, 2006), it is entirely reasonable to suggest that the ability of Western societies to maintain a minimum degree of social cohesion will become a matter of growing significance in the coming years. 'Youth identity' numbers amongst a broad range of social phenomena that register the breakdown of the modernist industrial order without necessarily indicating what stable forms might be replacing it or waiting in the wings. Will the next phase of capitalist social history be a utopia of burgeoning personal freedom, trickle-down economics and universal prosperity or a bleaker dystopian world of atomization and deepening divisions driven into hitherto unknown territory by the remorseless economic logic of global consumer capitalism?

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