**Subcultures, cultures and class**

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Our subject in this volume is Youth Cultures: our object, to explain them as a phenomenon, and their appearance in the post-war period. The subject has, of course, been massively treated, above all in the mass media. Yet, many of these surveys and analyses seem mainly to have multiplied the confusions and extended the mythologies surrounding the topic. By treating it in terms of its spectacular features only, these surveys have become part of the very phenomenon we want to explain. First, then, we must clear the ground, try to get behind the myths and explanations which cover up, rather than clarify, the problem. We have to construct the topic first – partly by demolishing certain concepts which, at present, are taken as adequately defining it. Necessarily, this exercise of penetrating beneath a popular construction must be done with care, lest we discard the ‘rational kernel’ along with its over-publicised husk.

The social and political meaning of Youth Cultures is not easy to assess: though their visibility has been consistently high. ‘Youth’ appeared as an emergent category in post-war Britain, one of the most striking and visible manifestations of social change in the period. ‘Youth’ provided the focus for official reports, pieces of legislation, official interventions. It was signified as a social problem by the moral guardians of the society – something we ‘ought to do something about’. Above all, Youth played an important role as a cornerstone in the construction of understandings, interpretations and quasi-explanations *about* the period. As the Rowntree study of the Popular Press and Social Change suggested:

Youth was, in both papers [the *Daily Express* and the *Daily Mirror*] and perhaps in the whole press of the period, a powerful but concealed *metaphor* for social change: the compressed image of a society which had crucially changed, in terms of basic life-styles and values – changed, in ways calculated to upset the

official political framework, but in ways *not yet calculable in traditional political terms . . .*(Smith et al., 1975)

It would be difficult to sustain the argument that a phenomenon as massively present and visible as ‘Youth Culture’, occupying a pivotal position in the history and consciousness of the period, was a pure construction of the media, a surface phenomenon only. However, Gramsci warned us that, ‘in studying a structure, it is necessary to distinguish organic movements (relatively permanent) from movements which may be termed “conjunctural”, and which appear as occasional, immediate, almost accidental’. The aim must be to ‘find the correct relation between what is organic and what is conjunctural’ (Gramsci, 1971: 177). The ‘phenomenal form’ – Youth Culture provides a point of departure, only, for such an analysis. We cannot afford to be blind to such a development (as some ‘sceptical materialists’ of the old left have been, with due respect to the recent debate in *Marxism Today*) any more than we can afford to be blinded *by* them (as some ‘visionary idealists’ of the new left have at times been).

**A. Some definitions**

We begin with some minimal definitions. The term, ‘Youth Culture’, directs us to the ‘cultural’ aspects of youth. We understand the word ‘culture’ to refer to that level at which social groups develop distinct patterns of life, and give *expressive form* to their social and material life-experience. Culture is the way, the forms, in which groups ‘handle’ the raw material of their social and material existence. ‘We must suppose the raw material of life experience to be at one pole, and all the infinitely complex human disciplines and systems, articulate and inarticulate, formalised in institutions or dispersed in the least formal ways, which “handle”, transmit or distort this raw material, to be at the other’ (Thompson, 1960). ‘Culture’ is the practice which realises *or objectivates* group-life in meaningful shape and form. ‘As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production, both with *what* they produce and with *how* they produce’ (Marx, 1970: 42). The ‘culture’ of a group or class is the peculiar and distinctive ‘way of life’ of the group or class, the meanings, values and ideas embodied in institutions, in social relations, in systems of beliefs, in *mores* and customs, in the uses of objects and material life. Culture is the distinctive shapes in which this material and social organisation of life expresses itself. A culture includes the ‘maps of meaning’which make things intelligible to its members. These ‘maps of meaning’ are not simply carried around in the head: they are objectivated in the patterns of social organisation and relationship through which the individual becomes a ‘social individual’. Culture is the way the social relations of a group are structured and shaped: but it is also the way those shapes are experienced, understood and interpreted.

A social individual, born into a particular set of institutions and relations, is at the same moment born into a peculiar configuration of meanings, which give her access to and locate her within ‘a culture’. The ‘law of society’ and the ‘law of culture’ (the symbolic ordering of social life) are one and the same. These structures – of social relationship and of meaning – shape the on-going collective

existence of groups. But they also limit, modify and *constrain* how groups live and reproduce their social existence. Men and women are, thus, formed, and form themselves through society, culture and history. So the existing cultural patterns form a sort of historical reservoir – a pre-constituted ‘field of the possibles’ – which groups take up, transform, develop. Each group makes something of its starting conditions – and through this ‘making’, through this practice, culture is reproduced and transmitted. But this practice only takes place within the given field of possibilities and constraints (see Sartre, 1963). ‘Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered given and transmitted from the past’ (Marx, 1951: 225). Culture, then, embodies the trajectory of group life through history: always under conditions and with ‘raw materials’ which cannot wholly be of its own making.

Groups which exist within the same society and share some of the same material and historical conditions no doubt also understand, and to a certain extent share each others’ ‘culture’. But just as different groups and classes are unequally ranked in relation to one another, in terms of their productive relations, wealth and power, so *cultures* are differently ranked, and stand in opposition to one another, in relations of domination and subordination, along the scale of ‘cultural power’. The definitions of the world, the ‘maps of meaning’ which express the life situation of those groups which hold the monopoly of power in society, command the greatest weight and influence, secrete the greatest legitimacy. The world tends to be classified out and ordered in terms and through structures which most directly express the power, the position, the *hegemony*, of the powerful interest in

that society. Thus,

The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control, at the same time, over the means of mental production, so that, thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it . . . Insofar as they rule as a class and determine the extent and compass of an epoch . . . they do this in its whole range, hence, among other things rule also as thinkers, as producers of ideas, and regulate the production and distribution of the ideas of their age: thus their ideas are the ruling ideas of the epoch. (Marx, 1970: 64)

This does not mean that there is only *one* set of ideas or cultural forms in a society. There will be more than one tendency at work within the dominant ideas of a society. Groups or classes which do not stand at the apex of power, nevertheless find ways of expressing and realising in their culture their subordinate position and experiences. In so far as there is more than one fundamental class in a society (and capitalism is essentially the bringing together, around production, of two fundamentally *different* classes – capital and labour) there will be more than one major cultural configuration in play at a particular historical moment. But the structures and meanings which most adequately reflect the position and interests of the most powerful class – however complex it is internally – will stand, in

relation to all the others, as a *dominant* social-cultural order. The dominant culture represents itself as *the* culture. It tries to define and contain all other cultures within its inclusive range. *Its* views of the world, unless challenged, will stand as the most natural, all-embracing, universal culture. Other cultural configurations will not only be subordinate to this dominant order: they will enter into struggle with it, seek to modify, negotiate, resist or even overthrow its reign – its *hegemony*. The struggle between classes over material and social life thus always assumes the forms of a continuous struggle over the distribution of ‘cultural power’. We might want, here, to make a distinction between ‘culture’ and ‘ideology’. Dominant and subordinate classes will each have distinct cultures. But when one culture gains ascendancy over the other, and when the subordinate culture *experiences* itself in terms prescribed by the dominant culture, then the dominant culture has also become the basis of a dominant ideology.

The dominant culture of a complex society is never a homogeneous structure. It is layered, reflecting different interests within the dominant class (e.g. an aristocratic versus a bourgeois outlook), containing different traces from the past (e.g. religious ideas within a largely secular culture), as well as emergent elements in the present. Subordinate cultures will not always be in open conflict with it. They may, for long periods, coexist with it, negotiate the spaces and gaps in it, make inroads into it, ‘warrenning it from within’ (Thompson, 1965). However, though the nature of this struggle over culture can never be reduced to a simple opposition, it is crucial to replace the notion of ‘culture’ with the more concrete, historical concept of ‘cultures’; a redefinition which brings out more clearly the fact that cultures always stand in relations of domination – and subordination – to one another, are always, in some sense, in struggle with one another. The singular term, ‘culture’, can only indicate, in the most general and abstract way, the large cultural configurations at play in a society at any historical moment. We must move at once to the determining relationships of domination and subordination in which these configurations stand; to the processes of incorporation and resistance which define the cultural dialectic between them; and to the institutions which transmit and reproduce ‘the culture’ (i.e. the dominant culture) in its dominant or ‘hegemonic’ form.

In modern societies, the most fundamental groups are the social classes, and the major cultural configurations will be, in a fundamental though often mediated way, ‘class cultures’. Relative to these cultural-class configurations, *sub*-cultures are sub-sets – smaller, more localised and differentiated structures, within one or other of the larger cultural networks. We must, first, see subcultures in terms of their relation to the wider class-cultural networks of which they form a distinctive part. When we examine this relationship between a subculture and the ‘culture’ of

which it is a part, we call the latter the ‘parent’ culture. This must not be confused with the particular relationship between ‘youth’ and their ‘parents’, of which much will be said below. What we mean is that a subculture, though differing in important ways – in its ‘focal concerns’, its peculiar shapes and activities – from the culture from which it derives, will also share some things in common with that

‘parent’ culture. The bohemian subculture of the *avant-garde* which has arisen from time to time in the modern city, is both distinct from its ‘parent’ culture (the urban culture of the middle class intelligent-sia) and yet also a part of it (sharing with it a modernising outlook, standards of education, a privileged position vis-a-vis productive labour, and so on). In the same way, the ‘search for pleasure and excitement’ which some analysts have noted as a marked feature of the ‘delinquent subculture of the gang’ in the working class, also shares something basic and fundamental with it. Sub-cultures, then, must first be related to the ‘parent cultures’ of which they are a sub-set. But, subcultures must *also* be analysed in terms of their relation to the dominant culture – the overall disposition of cultural power in the society as a whole. Thus, we may distinguish respectable, ‘rough’, delinquent and the criminal subcultures *within* working class culture: but we may also say that, though they differ amongst themselves, they *all* derive in the first instance from a ‘working class parent culture’: hence, they are all subordinate subcultures, in relation to the dominant middle-class or bourgeois culture. (We believe this goes some way towards meeting Graham Murdock’s call for a more ‘symmetrical’ analysis of subcultures. See his article below.)

Sub-cultures must exhibit a distinctive enough shape and structure to make them identifiably different from their ‘parent’ culture. They must be focussed around certain activities, values, certain uses of material artefacts, territorial spaces etc. which significantly differentiate them from the wider culture. But, since they are sub-sets, there must also be significant things which bind and articulate them with the ‘parent’ culture. The famous Kray twins, for example, belonged both to a highly differentiated ‘criminal subculture’ in East London and to the ‘normal’ life and culture of the East End working class (of which indeed, the ‘criminal subculture’ has always been a clearly identifiable part). The behaviour of the Krays in terms of the criminal fraternity marks the differentiating axis of that subculture: the relation of the Krays to their mother, family, home and local pub is the binding, the articulating axis. (Pearson, 1973; Hebdige, 1974).

Sub-cultures, therefore, take shape around the distinctive activities and ‘focal concerns’ of groups. They can be loosely or tightly bounded. Some subcultures are merely loosely-defined strands or ‘milieux’ within the parent culture: they possess no distinctive ‘world’ of their own. Others develop a clear, coherent identity and structure. Generally, we deal in this volume *only* with ‘subcultures’ (whether drawn from a middle or working class ‘parent culture’) which have reasonably tight boundaries, distinctive shapes, which have cohered around particular activities, focal concerns and territorial spaces. When these tightlydefined groups are also distinguished by age and generation, we call them ‘youth subcultures’.

‘Youth subcultures’ form up on the terrain of social and cultural life. Some youth subcultures are regular and persistent features of the ‘parent’ class-culture: the ill-famed ‘culture of delinquency’ of the working-class adolescent male, for example. But some subcultures appear only at particular historical moments: they become visible, are identified and labelled (either by themselves or by others): they command the stage of public attention for a time: then they fade, disappear or are so widely diffused that they lose their distinctiveness. It is the *latter* kind of subcultural formation which primarily concerns us here. The peculiar dress, style, focal concerns, milieux, etc. of the Teddy Boy, the Mod, the Rocker or the Skin-head set them off, as distinctive groupings, both from the broad patterns of working-class culture as a whole, and also from the more diffused patterns exhibited by ‘ordinary’ working class boys (and, to a more limited extent, girls). Yet, despite these differences, it is important to stress that, as subcultures, they continue to exist within, and coexist with, the more inclusive culture of the class from which they spring. Members of a subculture may walk, talk, act, look

‘different’ from their parents and from some of their peers: but they belong to the same families, go to the same schools, work at much the same jobs, live down the same ‘mean streets’ as their peers and parents. In certain crucial respects, they share the same position (vis-a-vis the dominant culture), the same fundamental and determining life-experiences, as the ‘parent’ culture from which they derive. Through dress, activities, leisure pursuits and life-style, they may project a different cultural response or ‘solution’ to the problems posed for them by their material and social class position and experience. But the membership of a subculture cannot protect them from the determining matrix of experiences

and conditions which shape the life of their class as a whole. They experience and respond to the *same basic problematic* as other members of their class who are not so differentiated and distinctive in a ‘subcultural’ sense. Especially in relation to the *dominant* culture, their subculture remains like other elements in their class culture – subordinate and subordinated.

In what follows, we shall try to show why this *double articulation* of youth subcultures – first, to their ‘parent’ culture (e.g. working class culture), second, to the dominant culture – is a necessary way of staging the analysis. For our purposes, subcultures represent a necessary, ‘relatively autonomous’, but *intermediary* level of analysis. Any attempt to relate subcultures to the ‘socio-cultural formation as a whole’ must grasp its complex unity by way of these necessary differentiations.

‘Youth Culture’, in the singular and with capital letters, is a term we borrow from and refer to in our analysis, but which we cannot and do not *use* in any but a descriptive sense. It is, of course, precisely the term most common in popular and journalistic usage. It is how the ‘phenomenon of Youth’ in the post-war period has been most common-sensically appropriated. It appears to be a simple and common starting point, a simple concept. Actually, it presupposes already extremely complex relations. Indeed, what it disguises and represses – differences between different strata of youth, the class-basis of youth cultures, the relation of ‘Youth Culture’ to the parent culture and the dominant culture, etc. – is more significant than what it reveals. The term is premised on the view that what happened to ‘youth’ in this period is radically and qualitatively different from anything that had

happened before. It suggests that all the things which youth got into in this period were more significant than the different kinds of youth groups, or the differences in their social class composition. It sustains certain ideological interpretations – e.g. that age and generation mattered most, or that Youth Culture was ‘incipiently classless’ – even, that ‘youth’ had itself become a class. Thus it identified ‘Youth Culture’ exclusively with its most phenomenal aspect – its music, styles, leisure consumption. Of course, post-war youth did engage in distinctive cultural pursuits, and this was closely linked with the expansion of the leisure and fashion industries, directed at the ‘teenage market’. But the term ‘Youth Culture’ confuses and identifies the two aspects, whereas what is needed is a detailed picture of how youth groups fed off and appropriated things provided by the market, and, in turn, how the market tried to expropriate and incorporate things produced by the subcultures: in other words, the dialectic between youth and the youth market industry. The term ‘Youth Culture’ appropriates the situation of the young almost exclusively in terms of the commercial and publicity manipulation and exploitation *of* the young. As a concept, it has little or no explanatory power. We must try to get behind this market phenomenon, to its deeper social, economic and cultural roots. In short, our aim is to de-throne or *de-construct* the term, ‘Youth Culture’, in favour of a more complex set of categories. (Part of this demolition work is done in the article on Style, below.)

We shall try, first, to replace the concept of ‘Youth Culture’ with the more structural concept of ‘subculture’. We then want to *reconstruct* ‘subcultures’ in terms of their relation, first, to ‘parent’ cultures, and, through that, to the dominant culture, or better, to the struggle between dominant and subordinate cultures. By trying to set up these intermediary levels in place of the immediate catch-all

idea of ‘Youth Culture’, we try to show how youth subcultures are related to class relations, to the division of labour and to the productive relations of the society, without destroying what is specific to their content and position. It is essential to bear in mind that the topic treated here relates *only* to those

sections of working-class or middle-class youth where a response to their situation took a distinctive subcultural form. This must in no way be confused with an attempt to delineate the social and historical position of working-class youth as a whole in the period. The great majority of working-class youth never enters a tight or coherent subculture at all. Individuals may, in their personal lifecareers, move into and out of one, or indeed several, such subcultures. Their relation to the existing subcultures may be fleeting or permanent, marginal or central. The subcultures are important because there the response of youth takes a peculiarly tangible form. But, in the post-war history of the class, these may be less significant than what most young people do most of the time. The relation between the ‘everyday life’ and the ‘subcultural life’ of different sections of youth is an important question in its own right, and must *not* be subsumed under the more limited topic which we address here. As Howard

Parker reminds us, even the ‘persistent offenders’ of the delinquent subcultures are only occasionally preoccupied with illegal or delinquent behaviour (Parker, 1974). For the majority, school and work are more structurally significant – even at the level of consciousness – than style and music (see Graham Murdock’s article, below).

As Paul Corrigan eloquently testifies, most young working-class boys are principally concerned most of the time with the biggest occupation of all – how to pass the time: the ‘dialectics of doing nothing’ (see Corrigan’s ‘Doing Nothing’ piece, below).

**The rest of the chapter can be found in *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*. Ed. Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson. (2nd edition). London and New York: Routledge, 2006. 3-59.**