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Youth Subcultural Theory: A Critical Engagement with the Concept, its Origins and Politics, from the Chicago School to Postmodernism

Shane Blackman

Initially, I will suggest that the postmodernist understanding of youth subculture relies on a determinist interpretation of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) position, which denies the immense diversity in the CCCS theorization that draws on Barthes, Gramsci, Althusser, Levi-Strauss and Lacan. I shall critically examine the development of postmodern subcultural theory, which is premised on the work of three key social theorists: Max Weber, Jean Baudrillard and Michel Maffesoli. Postmodernists have extracted ideas from these thinkers and combined them to argue against what is described as CCCS' 'theoretical orthodoxy' and also to construct new terms such as 'neo-tribe' and 'lifestyle' to replace the concept of subculture. I suggest that postmodernism's reluctance to focus on social structure promotes an individualistic understanding of the social. The work of the Chicago School and the CCCS gave priority to the collective, whereas postmodern subcultural writing is preoccupied with the individual resulting in a weak understanding of the group context of youth cultural practices. The postmodern interventions offer some useful critical insights, but their new theorization lacks substance and critical application to young people's social, economic and cultural realities. Furthermore, I will argue that under postmodern analysis, subculture returns to a conservative Mertonian interpretation of individual adaptation that corresponds to recent political neo-liberal economic and social policies. I will demonstrate that a contradiction is apparent between the postmodern dismissal of the CCCS' model of resistance and their own argument that youth are engaged in creative and emancipatory activities.

Correspondence to: Shane Blackman, Department of Media, Canterbury Christ Church University College, North Holmes Road, Canterbury, Kent CT11 1QU, UK. Email: sjb9@cant.ac.uk

Introduction

One of the aims of this paper is to examine the recently emerged postmodern theories of youth subculture: Redhead (1993), Melechi (1993), Rietveld (1998), Miles (1998), Malbon (1999), Muggleton (2000), Bennett (2000), Muggleton and Weinzierl (2003), Bennett and Kahn-Harris (2004) and Jackson (2004). The concept of subculture has been an attractive model for explanation in sociology for a diversity of theoretical positions from the Chicago School onwards. Each successive paradigm has sought to show its dominance and authority over previous understandings. Youth culture theory has always been a site of interdisciplinary theorization and ideological conflict (Blackman 2004). This is because youth subculture possesses immense semiotic power for communication. As an intellectual field, subculture promotes sameness of identity through consumption but also holds the potential to critically and politically impact on consciousness.

Subculture: The Concept, Origins and Politics

This paper will be concerned with the politics of youth subculture theory. Subculture is not macro theory; it is what Robert Merton (1957) described as 'intermediate theory', between grand narratives and 'grounded' everyday life. The concept of subculture at its base is concerned with agency and action belonging to a subset or social group that is distinct from but related to the dominant culture. The word distinct or different from is key to understanding the currency of the term subculture because it suggests something separate and unlike the majority of the population. For this reason the concept has been attractive as a model for explanation in sociology by a diversity of theoretical positions because it focuses on the existence of groups with different patterns of behaviour and alternative values from the mainstream who pursue and act out their own cultural solutions. The concept of subculture has been used by diverse sociological paradigms to promote their applicability and coherence. Its value as a model for explanation rests with its capacity to describe forms of solidarity that contrast with the dominant norms and values of society. However, each sociological approach has suggested that its theory is closer to the truth because it represents the true interpretation of the real-life experiences of the subculture. Theories of subculture have always asserted that theirs is the genuine explanation of behaviour. Unlike other sociological concepts subculture possesses an ability to change its hue according to the sociological paradigm, but it also retains elements of previous approaches, in particular a reliance on psychological or psychoanalytic explanations of the social (Cohen 1956, 1972).

In the development of subcultural theory it is useful to make the distinction between American and British theories of subculture. The formal academic study of youth began in America at the University of Chicago on the basis of undertaking empirical sociological research. From 1913 under the direction of Robert Park and later with Ernest Burgess, the Chicago school began to construct ethnographic maps of the social and cultural territories of the city with its diverse populations (Bulmer

1984). Ned Polsky (1967, p. 124) suggests that Park's training as a journalist and his interest in popular culture made him focus on experience in his attempt to understand cultural difference and the subjective meaning of action. Park was a student of Georg Simmel (1858–1918) at Berlin; for Simmel the purpose of sociology was to 'capture moments' in order to understand the interaction and formation of groups. Reflecting Simmel's concern to describe everyday 'configurations' of people's lives, Park concentrated on studying conflict and social change through an exploration of the city to discover the formation of urban social groups. This could be proposed as the beginning of subcultural studies, focusing on the 'youth's own story' (Burgess 1923; Shaw 1930). The Chicago school looked to understand young people from within an ethnographic context derived from normal conditions of urban social life (Downes & Rock 1982, p. 66). The Chicago sociologists identified social space, morality and social bonds that groups perform through hard times. Their aim was to explain the social and cultural context of deviance without reducing young people's actions to symptoms of psychological inadequacy.

A major figure in the development of American subcultural theory is Robert K. Merton. He was a research student of Talcott Parsons, whom he greatly admired, and his key project was the correction of Parsonian functionalism. He introduced his social theory of deviance first in 1938, and extended and revised it in 1957 [1]. Merton does not use the concept of subculture in his original paper [2], nor does he refer to the Chicago school work on deviance [3]. The sociological value of Merton's theory of deviance derives from his argument that deviance results from the interplay of culture and structure in society.

Not only has the historical origin of the concept of subculture been inaccurate, its application has been used for political purposes within different sociological paradigms. During the dominant period of American functionalist sociology, theorists sought to reposition the contribution of the Chicago School to make it appear beholden to functionalism for revealing its inadequacies. Merton argues that A. K. Cohen's (1956) theory of subculture is 'in a direct line of continuity with the earlier studies by Shaw, McKay and particularly Thrasher' (Merton 1957, p. 179). Short states: 'Some may wonder why Shaw and McKay (1927) did not hit upon the notion of delinquent subculture since with Thrasher (1927) they were responsible for a large portion of the data upon which contemporary formulations rest ... it remained for Cohen (1956) to introduce the notion of delinquent subculture' (Short 1960, p. xli). The functionalist argument is that youth studies proper could not begin until functionalist social theory dominated sociology and introduced the concept of subculture.

A. K. Cohen's (1956) *Delinquent Boys: The Culture of the Gang* popularized the term 'subculture' and brought it into extensive use in youth studies. His theory of subculture as solving problems was influenced by Clellan Ford's (1942, p. 557) approach to culture, which Mike Brake (1980, p. 5) incorrectly identified as the earliest usage of the term 'subculture' (Gordon 1947). This error was continued by Sarah Thornton (1997, pp. 1–12) in *The Subcultures Reader*, where she argues the

term was first coined in the 1940s and was unfamiliar to the Chicago school under Park. The concept of subculture was known to members of the Chicago school; for example, Palmer, in her *Field Studies in Sociology: A Student's Manual*, details the importance of gaining 'maps of subcultural groups'. She notes that 'subcultural groups . . . display variations in the prevailing culture' (Palmer 1928, p. 73).

British Theories of Subculture

British subcultural theory has consistently relied on psychology and psychoanalysis to explain the social. Two psychologists who played a crucial part in the developmental phase of the British theory of subculture were Cyril Burt with *The Young Delinquent* (1925) and John Bowlby with *Forty Four Juvenile Thieves* (1946). Burt's (1925, p. 300) contribution to the concept of subculture is in terms of transferring elements of Lombroso's evolutionary theory of deviance into a series of cultural descriptions that refer to young people who enter deviant groups possessing defective morals showing pathological traits. Building on the work of Burt, the Wood Report on Mental Deficiency of 1929 [4], largely written by E. O. Lewis, asserted that a large proportion of the mentally subnormal were of a type termed 'subcultural'. It was argued that at school the 'educationally subnormal' form marginal groups possessed of low levels of intelligence and are found among the lower social classes in subcultures (Susser 1962). These case studies, Stephen Humphries argues, were directly misleading and used a 'faulty methodology for measuring intelligence and personality and failed to situate behaviour in the broader class context of poverty, inequality and exploitation' (Humphries 1981, p. 19).

While Burt produced biological theories of deviant youth drawn from social Darwinism in the first part of the twentieth century, Bowlby advanced more therapeutic theories of deviance for the 1950s. Bowlby's psychoanalytic theory of deviance served as a model for further research concentrating on the principle of 'inadequate socialization' as the reason for young people joining subcultures. In *Forty Four Juvenile Thieves* (Bowlby 1946) he developed his analysis of the psychopathology of the 'affectionless character'. The 'affectionless personality' refers to a deviant young person who is said to be suffering from the emotional effect of deprivation from maternal affection in the early years of life. Bowlby's idea was that maternal deprivation was the cause of youth delinquency; he argued against Burt's biological theory to advance that nurture was to blame for the 'affectionless personality'. The maternal-deprivation theory was fully developed in *Childcare and the Growth of Love*, where he says that 'separation of a child from his mother during the first five years of life stands foremost amongst the causes of delinquent character development' (Bowlby 1953, p. 38). Juliet Mitchell states: 'In the effort to rebuild the family the equation went delinquency = latch key kids = having been abandoned by its mother in infancy to crèche or evacuation. From now onwards appeals to maternal guilt vied with the political exploitation of the economic situation to keep women at home . . . we learnt that a person sucked his emotional stability literally with his

mother's milk' (Mitchell 1975, p. 228) Bowlby's work quickly became orthodoxy and Madeleine Klein (1965) argues that Bowlby's theory of the affectionless personality was applied within the majority of studies on working-class subcultures during the period.

The post-Second World War development of psychoanalytical approaches to juvenile delinquency under Kate Friedlander (1947) and Bowlby (1946, 1953) retained reverberations of the old positivist tradition of Lombroso. A series of studies emerged during the 1950s which argued that subcultural formation by working-class youth revealed their inability to integrate in society. Subcultural formation was identified as a form of deprivation where individuals lacked intelligence and emotional development. The major studies included Bagot (1941), Fergusson (1952), Spinley (1953), Jephcott (1954), Mays (1954), Morris (1957), Kerr (1958) and Trasler (1962). Throughout these studies young people who formed subcultures are described in terms of animal metaphors and in the language of health and disease. David Downes (1966, p. 111) critically accuses these British theorists for their use of subculture in combination with psychoanalytic deprivation theory 'to erect an "omnibus" theory of "inadequate socialization" as the origin of delinquent behaviour'. The psychoanalytic underpinning of the British theory of subculture is not too dissimilar from the American theory of subculture elaborated by A. K. Cohen, which uses Freud's theory of 'reaction formation' as the basis for the subcultural solution of collective deviance.

From the late 1960s the British National Deviance Conference began to criticize American subcultural theory, and criminologists David Downes, Stan Cohen, Jock Young, Laurie Taylor and Paul Rock prepared the way for the development of a more indigenous and sophisticated form of British labelling theory that interpreted youth subcultures in terms of social class relations and social change. The psychological underpinning of the concept of subculture was questioned, and in an attempt to break the association of subculture with pathology Phil Cohen (1972, p. 30) argued that it is 'important to make a distinction between subculture and delinquency'. The twin ideas Cohen introduced to subculture were 'imaginary relations' and 'magical solutions', through an Althusserian reading of Jacques Lacan's concept of the 'imaginary' and Claude Levi-Strauss's concept of 'myth' (Cohen 1997, pp. 48–50). Using one of Louis Althusser's theories of ideology as a 'real' and unconscious force seducing people via hidden determinations, he rearticulated Levi-Strauss's (1962/1966) theory of myth into an explanation of how subcultures magically resolve social contradictions through multiple narratives of bricolage in the form of style, symbols and ritual. On this basis youth subcultures are interpreted as a language: the meaning of their style is imaginary—that is to say, it is 'real' in that it derives from their contradictory class position but young people are not fully aware of this repression; it is only fully 'realized' in their semiotic displays of subcultural style. Working-class youth through their subcultures attempt to resolve ideological contradictions that remain hidden or unresolved in the parent culture. Cohen's ideas became the basis for the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) theory of subculture. A major

contribution brought by the CCCS to youth studies, through *Resistance through Rituals*, was to systematize the topic as a field of academic discourse. The cultural-studies approach to subculture theory was innovative, although Stuart Hall (1980) [5] has argued that many sociologists at the time of the Centre's founding were hostile to 'cultural studies' (Blackman 2000). The approach used in *Resistance through Rituals* is to read youth cultural style as a text, to interpret each subculture through its creation of meaning as a collective force. The basic assumption is that youth subcultures belong to the working class, deriving from the experience of subordination. Subcultural activity is interpreted as a form of symbolic politics to particular class and cultural experiences. It is useful to note that a range of theoretical positions on subcultures exists within the text, and the leading theoretical paper itself is self-reflective and cautions readers about the limitations of an ideological understanding of subcultures. This diversity of theoretical importations from Marxism and structuralism used by the CCCS resulted in a highly intricate and rich analysis.

Subculture: An Emergent Critique

The ground-breaking work at the CCCS and by Dick Hebdige (1979) on young people, style and subculture transformed the field of youth studies, although ironically it led to a debate in the 1980s about the 'end of youth culture' (Frith 1984, Young 1985). This decline was attributed to the 'Thatcher Generation' of young people who were identified as no longer rebellious (Mintel 1988). The inaccurate forecast of youth subcultural decline was quickly turned on its head by the emergence of 'Acid House' in 1988 leading to the eventual development and diversification of dance-rave subculture. Youth were no longer the 'new conformists', but newly reborn as dangerous 'folk devils' who dance and consume drugs. From the 1990s onwards a series of theorists have sought to revise or replace the term subculture. The first serious challenge to the theory of subculture came from within the CCCS by Paul Willis [6]. He is critical of the concept of subculture, stating:

There has not been a vigorous analysis of the status of the culture a sub-culture is supposed to be 'sub' to. The notion implies a relative positioning which seems to give an altogether misleading sense of absoluteness and dominance of the main culture. (Willis 1972, pp. xlv–xlvi)

However, he does not elaborate upon the different uses of the concept of subculture. He suggests:

I have treated the notion of sub-cultures somewhat warily . . . and have tried . . . to refer to the groups as being in their respective cultures, rather than in their respective sub-cultures, in an attempt to avoid too mechanistic and received a notion of what the 'dominant' culture is reckoned to be like. (Willis 1972, p. xlvi)

Neither does Paul Willis (1977) apply the concept of subculture in *Learning to Labour*, but refers to counter culture with its obviously greater political connotations.

Building on Paul Willis' argument, my own study *Youth: Positions and Oppositions*, sought to develop an alternative concept to describe young people through the theory of youth cultural forms (Blackman 1995). The reason for not applying the concept of subculture did not rest on the variations between different competing definitions, but on the capacity of the concept to explain youth cultural groups in action: both in their internal and external social relations. The category of subculture not only homogenizes the practices of youth, but fails to allow for local variation. The theory of youth cultural forms is conceptualized in terms of specialized positions, social relations, specialized semiotic and signature that integrates the three aspects into a coherent picture. The driving force of the theory was that 'status positions' influence and generate forms of collective action that enables young people to either conform or take part in resistance towards authority. 'Status positions' revolve around intellectual capacity, class identity, display of subcultural style, expressions of feminism, degree of autonomy, advancement of sexual confidence and use of aggressive violence. In this theory social class remains an important variable but it is not the determinate one, it is a crucial factor among others. In different social contexts of interaction any one of these status positions may secure a primary position with gender relations playing a major role in all forms of communication.

A Weberian influence can be found in the work of Sarah Thornton (1995, p. 8). She significantly advances and refines subcultural theory through the adaptation of Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital. She argues that the CCCS theory of subculture is 'empirically unworkable'. She further asserts the authentic capability of subcultures to engage in transgression but wants to impose constraints on subcultural autonomy by suggesting that youth subcultures are created by the media. Her inventive use of Bourdieu's theory provides value-added creativity to youth subcultures described as 'subcultural capital' who possess insider knowledge. Although she stresses that her approach is a corrective to the over-optimistic and elitist stance of the CCCS theory, her interpretation suffers from similar conditions of promoting elitism. Subcultural capital is used by Thornton to describe the distance between true subculturalists and the mainstream in a negative sense; those without subcultural capital are thus inferior and lack taste. She uses the concept of subcultural capital to confirm class, gender and status discriminations spoken by young people, which renders them passive by her judgements on them as possessing simplistic notions of subcultural authenticity (see Jackson 2004). She criticizes the CCCS for their lack of ethnographically informed theory but her own ethnographic data [7] seems remarkably transparent. She describes the operation of subcultural capital in Weberian terms, stating it is a 'means by which young people negotiate and accumulate status within their own social worlds' (Thornton 1995, p. 163). The influence of Max Weber is apparent in Blackman and Thornton's work, and to a larger extent it can be argued that the subsequent postmodern reworking of subculture theory has been heavily influenced by the ideas of Weber. The emergent critique of subculture from Willis and Blackman is also methodologically based in terms of the concepts inability to account for 'lived

experience' linked to ethnography. Thus, Weberian theory and methodology has formed the basis of the current revision to subcultural theory.

Postmodern Theories of Subculture

The recent development of postmodern subcultural theory is premised on arguments from three key social theorists: Max Weber, Jean Baudrillard and Michel Maffesoli. Ideas extracted from these thinkers have been used in combination to argue against what is described as CCCS 'theoretical orthodoxy' [8] and also to construct new terms to replace the concept of subculture such as 'neo-tribe' and 'lifestyle'. A key starting point for the postmodernist critique of the CCCS comes from Gary Clarke's (1982) paper 'Defending ski-jumpers'. He questions 'the value of decoding the stylistic appearances of particular tribes' [9] and from his own position at the CCCS he stressed there was a reluctance to consider the different degrees of commitment to a subculture 'since any discussion of life chances is regarded as a 'Weberian deviation' [10]. A major concern for postmodern subcultural theorists is an attempt to construct a new canon of discourse linked to one of the founding figures of sociology, Max Weber, via the French sociologist Michel Maffesoli. Rob Shields in his forward to Maffesoli's *The Time of the Tribes* states he offers a 'Weberian perspective focusing on the meaning of social interaction for participants' (Shields 1996, p. iv). Gary Clarke's use of the term 'tribe' to describe subcultures and the legitimacy he specifies for a Weberian approach have been considerably influential in the post-CCCS development of subculture theory.

A leading voice of the British postmodern approach to subcultures has been Steve Redhead (1995, p. 88). His criticism of subcultural theory has been accusatory and rhetorical; for him the novels of pulp fiction 'have told us more about the "feel" of contemporary youth culture than hundreds of pages of sociology of youth' (Redhead 1995, p. 88). He dismisses the CCCS theory of subculture as a fantasized academic creation, arguing 'it is seen to be no longer appropriate' (Redhead 1997, p. x). He states 'subcultures were produced by subcultural theorists, not the other way around' (Redhead 1990, p. 25). This critique has been explored by Antonio Melechi (1993), Hillegonda Rietveld (1998), Steven Miles [11], Ben Malbon [12], David Muggleton [13] and Andy Bennett [14], who have confirmed this assertion by Redhead either by specifying the exact quotation or commending his contribution. For postmodernists, subcultures react imaginatively through consumption and identity to construct creative meanings that can be liberating from subordination. Postmodern subcultural theory seeks to move away from models of social constraint and places greater emphasis on agency in the search for individual meaning in subcultural practice. The postmodern milieu of spatiality and cultural pessimism valorizes locality and the power of individuals in subcultures to imaginatively reappropriate global commodities for emancipation. This new 'postmodern' work on subculture has been criticized by MacDonald *et al.* (2000), Cieslik (2001), Hollands (2002) and Blackman (2004) as creating problems for sociology because of the apparent reluctance to integrate social

structures into the analysis and instead promote an individualistic understanding of the social.

‘Subcultural Disappearance’ and ‘Post-subcultures’

At Manchester Metropolitan University the aim of Steve Redhead (1997, p. 2) has been to champion what he calls ‘Popular Cultural Studies’ as a new discipline, to ‘borrow liberally from’ ideas of key postmodernist thinkers such as Jean Baudrillard to critique the sociology of youth as ‘a genre of writing . . . fast becoming a cliché’ [15]. Redhead’s (1995, p. 76) argument depends on ‘sampling’ Jean Baudrillard’s thesis of the ‘end of the social’ to reject the CCCS radical tradition, the concept of subculture and critique sociology in general. He argues that subcultures are part of the emancipatory project developed by modernist theorists belonging to the past and should be discredited. He relies on Baudrillard for his disciplinary critique of sociology and subculture. Barry Smart states ‘Baudrillard’s proclamation of the demise of sociology may be regarded as fundamentally flawed in so far as it is based on an impoverished conception of both the discipline and its subject matter’ (Smart 1990, p. 407). Redhead (1990, pp. 23–24) applies Baudrillard’s notion of an ‘end’ to explain that there will be a closure to youth subcultures because orthodox theory suggests they evolve ‘in a linear fashion’. Ironically having announced the end of subcultures, Redhead announces the new aim is that ‘postmodern youth culture can be excavated by way of some of Baudrillard’s signposts’ (Redhead 1993, p. 5)

Redhead and others explore subculture through Baudrillard’s notion of simulation where there is ‘the generation of models of a real without origins or reality: a hyperreal’ (Baudrillard 1983, p. 2). For Baudrillard postmodern society is based on the hyperreal where the distinction between what is real and what is imaginary collapses leading to the notion that simulations can be experienced as more realistic than reality. Hence Redhead’s claim that pulp fiction is better than empirical work in youth studies. On this basis Redhead proceeds to argue that there is no ‘authentic subcultures’ and the ‘depth model’ is no longer appropriate ‘to analysis the surfaces of (post) modern culture, a culture characterized by depthlessness and “hyper-reality”’ (Redhead 1993, pp. 23–24). Using Baudrillard’s notions of postmodernity Redhead defines subcultures as ‘free-floating’ [16] signifiers that enhance differentiation of individual experience. The aim of Redhead is to avoid grand narratives as this would suggest determinism or imposition. Although he speaks profusely about ethnography there is no empirical data in his work; this makes his theory of subculture subject to the same criticisms he levels at the CCCS. By defining subcultural activities as wholly hedonistic and preoccupied with surface appearances, young people become identified as being shallow themselves. Twenty-first-century youth subculture is not merely an age of superficial plunder, but rather it has spawned a multiplicity of diverse and inter-connecting subcultures that mark festivals as one site of difference and unity, where subcultural practice is demonstrated through collective action. In this sense Redhead’s postmodernist theory of youth

subculture is individualistic, superficial and lacks critical reflection, because empirical reality supports the view that youth culture is more socially complex, group orientated, diversified and meaningful than Redhead allows. The new emphasis on the individual and pleasure fails to give young people rights, agency or critically recognize the structures and institutions that seek to impose marginal status on the young.

Antonio Melechi (1993) and Hillegonda Rietveld (1993, 1998) elaborate Redhead's discussion on subcultural hedonism in relation to drugs and develop Jean Baudrillard's notion of the 'real' being lost to an image. Speaking about the Acid House subculture Antonio Melechi argues that 'Those who sought to understand this subculture in terms of a politics of usage and identity completely missed the point' (Melechi 1993, pp. 37–38). For him this subculture is about 'escape', 'the self is lost' where the 'whole subculture attempts to vanish'. Melechi theorizes the act of apparent subcultural 'disappearance' as a strategy of resistance, which resides only at the level of the individual. Hillegonda Rietveld develops the idea of the 'spectacular disappearance' applied to subculture stating: 'The concept of the self has been untied, losing its socially constructed identity like some unnecessary luggage' (Rietveld 1998, p. 196). Here the postmodern theory of subculture puts pleasures first, arguing that individual sensation is found in empty kitsch, intoxication and hedonism as new forms of self-expression where drugs and different types of dance music allow young people to implode with the pure joy of individualistic consumerism. Rietveld (1998, p. 195) and Melechi's (1993, pp. 32–33) theory of subculture—as an act of disappearance—is achieved by exchanging Jean Baudrillard's ideas on the 'ecstasy of communication' with the ecstasy of drug consumption in subculture. Melechi and Rietveld's theory of subculture is also defined by the notion of the tourist gaze. It is through tourism that the 'self is lost', and this equates with the act of drug consumption in dance culture to signal individual abandonment and experience the 'act of disappearance'. Thus Melechi and Rietveld's theory of subculture is causally linked to the use of drugs to achieve intoxication to experience the trance-like condition, combined with Baudrillard's (1988) notion of the meaningless superficiality of post-tourism.

David Muggleton (1997, 2000) follows Steve Redhead's interpretation of Baudrillard to assert that post-subcultures are now concerned with 'surface' and self-authentication. Muggleton defines post-subculturalists as revelling in personal choice 'no longer articulated around . . . the structuring of class, gender or ethnicity' (Muggleton 2000, pp. 47–49). Thus subcultural identity is understood by him as individual 'free-floating signifiers' torn away from social structures. On this basis Muggleton (2000, p. 47) argues that 'there are no rules', following Redhead's assertion he proclaims there are no authentic subcultures. However, if you look at the case studies presented by Muggleton (2000), the mods and the punks, it is clear that they conform to precise subcultural regulations. It is not a case of no rules as Muggleton suggests, it is perhaps more that shifting boundaries may enable individuals to exhaust subcultural style and move on to a different one [17]. His interpretation

insists on an individualistic appreciation of subcultures, asserting that 'subcultures are just another form of depoliticized play in the post modern pleasuredom' (Muggleton 2000, p. 49). This emphasis on 'surface qualities' and diverse affiliation is suggested to give priority to subjective meaning allowing individuals agency. Following the postmodernist assumptions that there has been a growth in generalized culture and a blurring between elite and popular culture, it is then argued that social structures have become unstable where choice is everything. He argues 'post modern subcultural identities to be multiple and fluid. Constituted through consumption' (Muggleton 2000, p. 48). While claiming subcultural agency in terms of consumption and individual autonomy he strips youth of their creative edge by announcing the end of subcultures. He states 'subcultural styles have two options: they can feed off each other . . . destroying their own internal boundaries in the process; or indulge in the stylistic revivalism' (Muggleton 2000, p. 45). In other words, Muggleton suggests there can be no new subcultures, only forms of hybrid nostalgia.

A major weakness in the theory of postmodern subcultures is that the rave subculture was not invisible, every subcultural participant at events during the 1990s could not help but be aware of the different political forces that opposed the subculture (Bidder 2001). Dance subculture faced three main forms of state intervention from the Prime Minister, John Major, and the conservative government's legislative programme that sought to repress and to regulate the subculture, the tabloid media that sensationally reported on the subculture to attract readership, and the police through the Pay Party Unit that sought to stop acid house parties. Simon Reynolds (1998) argues that throughout the 1990s popular youth culture has been in perpetual self-invention as a dynamic cultural force fragmenting but projecting a collective voice. Part of the radical element to contemporary dance subculture has been its integral connection to other forms of DiY protest, including Free Festivals, Legalize Cannabis, Anti-Nuclear Groups, Reclaim the Streets Movement and Anti-Road Groups, through specific dance collectives, such as Exodus and Spiral Tribe. These forms of disparate protest have been brought together via demonstration against 'Capitalism'. For Western governments and media such non-traditional alternative lifestyles were understood to represent values that were in opposition to the mainstream (Hutnyk 2000). The loose coalition between the various DiY cultures, forms of protest, travellers and the dance scene gives the impression of an identifiable international youth subculture (McKay 1998).

Subcultural 'Tribes'

The sociological theories of Michel Maffesoli have been central to the development subcultural theory that employs the concept of 'neo-tribe'. The work of David Muggleton (2000), Ben Malbon (1999), Andy Bennett (2000) and Kevin Hetherington (2000) advance Maffesoli's concept of tribe as a means to describe young people's groups under conditions of postmodernity. Michel Maffesoli argues that 'neo-tribalism is characterized by fluidity, occasional gatherings and dispersal'

(Maffesoli 1996, p. 76). Suggesting that this could be applied to 'punk or retro fashions' (i.e. subcultures), he states (Maffesoli 1996, 98) the tribe 'is without the rigidity of the forms of organization with which we are familiar; it refers more to a certain ambience, a state of mind, and is preferably to be expressed through lifestyles that favour appearance and "form"'. His ideas promote pluralization in opposition to the constraints of total theories, which he describes as a 'conceptual framework imposed by the 19th century' (Maffesoli's 1996, p. 157). He sees great value in relativism as a destabilizing force impacting on the 'pretensions of universality'. However, in parallel with the CCCS theory of subculture, he suggests that tribes are political forms that do not withdraw into narcissistic individualism, but can challenge 'the logic of domination ... belonging to the dominant classes' (Maffesoli 1996, p. 51). On reflection we can see here that postmodern subcultural writing seems to down-play the collective nature of subcultural practice identified by Maffesoli because their postmodern critique of the CCCS wants to give priority to the individual.

Postmodern subcultural theorists employ Maffesoli's concept of the tribe to suggest the existence of a 'postmodern age and postmodern sensibilities' [18]. Here the concept of tribe acts as a carrier for postmodern theory or ideology. The postmodern subcultural theory of neo-tribe is closely linked to theories of consumption and lifestyle that posit the centrality of choice and individualism as key factors in identity formation. The idea is that neo-tribes confirm our sense of identity and individuals take pleasure in the hybridity of consumerism. The centrality of choice in postmodern theories of subculture argues that social categories such as social class, sexuality and ethnicity are too reductive and universalistic. The reluctance to consider the way in which choice is also imposed on young people by capital, structures and institutions fails to give voice to different young people's experiences of marginality (Shildrick 2002). On this basis postmodern theories of subculture do not address or critique the relations of dominance and subordination exercised through social and cultural structures of society.

Bennett (2000), Muggleton (1997, 2000) and Malbon (1998, 1999) seek to argue that subcultures are 'fixed', in contrast to 'neo-tribes' that are 'fluid'. They put priority on local variation and the micro focus of 'everyday' contexts that shape subcultural affiliation. Malbon's work is closer to that of Melechi and Rietveld's due to the emphasis he places on drugs as a key feature of the subcultural experience but he also elaborates a more sophisticated theory of subcultural disappearance called 'oceanic experience' drawn from Toop's (1995) idea of an 'ocean of sound'. Malbon suggests that he wants to 'rethink resistance' but there is little critical discussion of resistance theory or cultural struggle. He suggests that resistance cannot be understood as 'a struggle with a dominant hegemonic culture'; for him, resistance is individually located 'in the most minute subtleties of clubbing' (Malbon 1998, p. 280). Drugs are an integral part of his theory of subculture but he fails to place drug consumption within the political context of state control. As a result Malbon also ignores the fact that club culture has consistently and incestuously celebrated drugs as a form of resistance to authority. The form that this resistance takes may be contradictory but it

is clear that the dance-rave subculture has a history of revolt even where there have been attempts to turn this pleasurable revolt into support for the dominant culture such as through mainstream tourism and leisure. Malbon is highly critical of the collective notion of subculture representing resistance, preferring to stay within localized cultural analysis focusing on the politics of subjectivity. There is a sense in which these postmodern theorists employ the assumptions of postmodern theorization as offering fluidity and individual difference, then transfer this description on to subculture as a means to demonstrate the existence of diffuse groupings called 'tribes'.

Lifestyle Theory and the Loss of the Group

Steven Miles (2000) and Andy Bennett (2000) show great disaffection with the concept of subculture and seek to elaborate the concept of 'lifestyle' in its place. They argue that consumerism allows young people to construct alternative lifestyles through local and global strategies where young people in local settings can use, appropriate and transform cultural commodities for their own authenticity. In essence, it is argued that lifestyle theory places new emphasis on local practices, and through local culture youth lifestyle strategies attach new and different meanings on global commodities. Miles and Bennett are seeking to highlight the emancipatory potential of 'critical' consumption for young people serving as a basis for 'stability in an otherwise unstable world' [19]. Underlying Bennett and Miles work is a hostility towards Marxism and its influence creating 'moribund conceptions of youth subculture' [20]. Neither theorist engages in a critical assessment of what type of Marxism informed the CCCS subculture theory. Miles' criminological accusations of the CCCS theory are inaccurate in the sense that Phil Cohen specified the purpose of an epistemological break between deviance and subculture. Bennett (2000, p. 25) uses Weber's critique of Marx to argue that people in status groups claim honour by pursuing patterns of consumption and lifestyle to critique the CCCS, but he does not consider Gramsci's theory of hegemony in the Marxist theory of subculture. However, on closer examination it is possible to argue that both Bennett and Miles depend on certain Marxist ideas for their assertion that subcultures hold the potential of emancipation.

Bennett argues that lifestyle theory places new emphasis on 'understanding how collective cultural meanings are inscribed in commodities', which enable young people 'to construct their own forms of meaning and authenticity' (Bennett 2000, p. 27). This idea is derived from Walter Benjamin's understanding of modernity through his 'micrological approach' and 'redemptive critique' (Sontag 1979). Benjamin's style was to focus on small pleasures to understand the pulse, portability and power of a commodity. Somewhat like an ethnographer looking at subjects through a cultural microscope. Benjamin's 'redemptive critique' examines small commodities to find potential freedom and emancipation embedded or inscribed in the cultural object. Benjamin identifies commodity fetishism as achieving a mass effect transforming culture and society into a totality on the basis of a dialectic

possessing division and emancipation simultaneously. Whereas Bennett prefers to remain at the individual level of 'local scenarios', suggesting that young people can 'inscribe' their own localized meanings on global culture. However, Bennett's lifestyle theory remains built around wider social categories such as age, sex, status, ethnicity, and so on, and these categories are directly linked to purchasing power and disposable income closely associated with social class, and thus social structure plays a significant role in shaping consumption through limits and constraints. Bennett's preoccupation with the power of the local culture to reinterpret meaning is valuable but cannot be not be seen as equivalent to the discursive power of global media institutions based on the accumulation of capital (Morley 1995, p. 313). Consumption is not available to all and thus is a marker of inequality. Young people can be resistant and attempt to challenge dominant values, but young people's encounters with social exclusion and zero tolerance policies show that consumption is a chimera of choice in constructing subcultural identities (Blackman 1997; Williamson 1997). Young people desire subcultural expressions and commodities that are themselves defined by the power of the market. Bennett's priority on individual consumption at the expense of production misrecognizes youth marginality under postmodernism. Youth consumers may have developed into a specialized subcultural market niche but capital actively denies youth economic stability that prevents them from participating in cultural consumption.

The work of Steven Miles is comparable with Bennett to the extent that he proposes a theory of lifestyle based on a critique of the CCCS theory of subculture and identifies consumer culture as offering individuality for young people. Miles interpretation is more structural; he argues that 'lifestyles are not individualized in nature but are constructed through affiliation and negotiation . . . Lifestyles are, in effect, lived cultures in which individuals actively express their identities, but in direct relation to their position as regards the dominant culture' (Miles 2000, p. 16). This argument is a reconfiguration of the CCCS theory of subculture with its implicit use of Gramsci (1971), albeit undertaken through lifestyle especially when he asserts the desire to speak about the dominant culture in terms of institutions such as school and the labour market and 'power structures' [21]. For him youth identities are constructed through 'through consumer goods which allows them to feel unique' [22]. It is clear that Miles wishes to promote an individualistic understanding of youth subcultural identity as stable that offers agency but he sees adherence to particular forms of collective solidarity as more ephemeral due to conditions of postmodernity. Miles and Bennett's attention is on individualistic identity and individual performance in subculture where 'young people do identities rather than have identities'. They no longer see the term group as possessing permanent qualities Bennett (1999, p. 605; Miles 2000, p. 18). They ignore the collective response by young people over the past 10 years at festivals, raves and at anti-capitalist demonstrations where diverse and unified forms of subcultural identities and affiliations have performed rituals of resistance.

Postmodern Subcultural Emancipation?

Postmodern subcultural theory has raised significant theoretical and methodological issues and brought more sensitivity towards an understanding of subcultures. It wants to argue that youth are engaged in creative and oppositional activities and claim emancipation is obtainable, but in what sense? A weakness of the new theoretical developments of subculture derives from its place within an ideology of postmodernism. In its refusal to address a collective subject, postmodern subcultural theory has been a source of political rhetoric and a supply of ammunition for the political right to oppress expressions of diversity and difference [23]. Postmodern subcultural theorists in their preference for plurality, difference and otherness seem unaware that postmodernism according to Aijaz Ahmad 'is imperialist at its very base' (Ahmad 1995, p. 45) These cultural preferences have been incorporated into the cultural logic of marketing contemporary subcultures, strengthening the capitalist mode of production. In its imitation of the commodity form, postmodernism deludes us with play while imposing the 'crippling austerity of the market place' [24]. Postmodern subcultural theory reduces 'real' subculture to surface signifiers without authenticity where identity is determined by choice. In their analysis spatiality and locality are given special attention but this becomes disconnected from local structural processes, leaving young people with exaggerated individual autonomy that decentres their political understanding of globalized material divisions. A result of the personal and private being seen as valuable is that postmodern subcultural theory presents an individualistic understanding of subcultures that fails to see how social space and locality is structured by capital as a universalistic form of exploitation. Subcultures are lived and experienced through hierarchical structures where struggle is played out against social categories such as class, gender and ethnicity that interpolate the social identities of individuals in subcultures. Postmodern subculturalists have been seduced by the micropolitics of bodily performance and intoxication, and appear unable to access the broader social processes that subcultures inhabit. The approach lacks critical self-reflection, it claims to be against universals, because these constrain and deny individuality, but it constantly asserts universal moral prescriptions such as plurality instead of singularity, fluidity to fixity, hybridity to sameness, and so on [25].

Under postmodern analysis subculture returns to a Mertonian interpretation of individual adaptation showing elements of functionalism where developments in social theory correspond to government neo-liberal economic and social policies. Priority is given to the individual to absorb and choose subcultural style, to explore personal emancipation and self-fulfilment. This individualistic appreciation of subcultures appears to ignore the collective basis to subcultural practice and performance. Emancipation is retained within postmodern subcultural analysis as a form of personal expression where individuals can engage with global commodities to redefine meaning to support their individualized subcultural practice. Postmodern subcultural theorists failure to understand that these local variations have national

and international connections that have supported subcultures from the 1950s [26] to the twenty-first century [27]. Subcultures may celebrate locality but they also possess an international context that is both local and global towards forces of domination. In its celebration of localism postmodern subcultural theory fails to see the commonalities of collective positions among local subcultural groups within a nation and across states. Speaking about the subculture of hip hop George Lipsitz (1994, p. 31) maintains that local variations of hip hop across different nations can affirm wider international solidarity. Subcultures work within contradictions, producing tensions and hostilities as a result of incorporation into global capitalism. Postmodern subculturalists remain silent on the material marginality of youth, while romancing the cultural marginality through postmodern and postcolonial theory. Postmodern subcultural theory releases the power of the local and personal wanting to argue that emancipation is individual but young people in subcultures experience constraint as their stylistic appearance, drug use and bodily representations become normalized as mass commercialized products. Postmodern subcultural theory wishes to retain the notion of emancipation, but through denouncing universals as oppressive it ignores the power of capital, thus without a means of understanding collective forms of oppression postmodern emancipation remains a 'speculative exercise' [28].

Conclusion

I have argued that the concept of subculture has a long legacy in sociological theory and its longevity relates to its power of explanation and its attraction relates to its apparent immediacy and relevance to the social world. On this basis the concept has had popular appeal with different and opposing sociological paradigms. For the Chicago School the early collective use of the concept subculture reflected their rich ethnographic concern to map diverse social relations within urban communities. The American school of structural-functionalism saw subculture as a individualistic means to explore criminality and prescriptively categorizes subcultures as deviant. The initial British theory of subculture emerged from positivism and biological theories of adolescence, but was soon dominated by a psychoanalytical interpretation where it was used to explain an individual's apparent social inadequacy. The cultural studies approach to subculture saw it as a means to critique society and address issues of conflict and social change. In Marxist and structuralist theory subcultures became part of a collective critical vanguard, to challenge bourgeois order and celebrate creative resistance to authority. Postmodern theory of subculture has taken on a Weberian appearance where status and spatiality are seen as providing individuals with opportunities for increased freedom in consumerism and fluid identities (Blackman 2004). The postmodern theory presents an individualized understanding of the subculture as simulacrum, where no authenticity exists and individuals free floatingly signify any identity. Each time subcultural theory moves towards a more individualistic understanding of young people, it becomes over-preoccupied with the

particular, either in terms of 'dysfunctionalism' or celebratory hybrid pleasures. I have argued that the postmodern interpretation of subculture can offer new ways of reading young people's creative practices, but the new conceptual developments of 'post-subcultures', tribe and 'lifestyle' lack theoretical coherence and explanatory power at the level of the social.

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Notes

- [1] 'Social structure and anomie' (1938) and 'Social continuities in the theory of social structure and anomie' (1957) in *Social Theory and Social Structure*; both papers are in this text.
- [2] Merton used the concept of subculture in a substantial revision of the paper for *Social Theory and Social Structure* (1957).
- [3] The 1938 paper has passing reference to Nels Anderson's study on *The Hobo* (1923).
- [4] Wood Report, Parliamentary document.
- [5] Hall (1980).
- [6] He contributed a chapter to *Resistance Through Ritual* but did not write the section containing the CCCS theory of subculture.
- [7] Thornton (1995, p. 107) states her 'method was more one of ethnographic survey rather than the more common ethnographic case study'. This could account for the criticism that her data while useful seems to lack depth
- [8] Muggleton (2000, p. 73).
- [9] Clarke (1982, p. a).
- [10] Clarke (1982, p. 8).
- [11] Miles (1995, p. 36).
- [12] Malbon (1998, p. 279).
- [13] Muggleton (1997, p. 210).
- [14] Bennett (2000, p. 24).
- [15] Redhead (1995, pp. 11–12).
- [16] Redhead (1993, p. 17).
- [17] Blackman (1995, pp. 25–26, see theory of cultural ransacker).
- [18] Bennett (1999, p. 607).
- [19] Miles (2000, p. 10).
- [20] Miles (2000, p. 5).
- [21] Miles (2000, p. 9).
- [22] Miles (1995, p. 42).
- [23] Scruton (1998).
- [24] Eagleton (1995, p. 68).
- [25] Eagleton (2000, p. 82).

- [26] Fyvel (1961, pp. 18–21) talks about the Teddy Boy subculture as an international phenomena.
- [27] See *The Face* (1990s), on rave as an international subculture, linked to drug tourism, new age culture and hedonism.
- [28] Eagleton (1995, p. 66).

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