

A NEW APPROACH to YOUTH SUBCULTURE THEORY

<http://www.sonlifeafrica.com/model/subcult3.htm>

This article explores a new approach to the understanding of youth culture and youth subculture formation that challenges the commonly held ideas that have been around since the fifties. It seeks to bring together a number of writings, mostly web-based, that challenge the ideas made popular through the Center for Cultural Studies in Birmingham, UK. Any comments or links to similar critiques should be emailed to me, Mark Tittley, at mark@sonlifeafrica.com.

1. [Subculture Formation and Cultural Studies](#)
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Introduction

Grant McCracken in [Plenitude: Culture by Commotion](#), identifies three features of our world today: (a) there is *difference* everywhere: "the world is hot and changeable, a house of many mansions, a place of robust diversity and difference"; (b) it is a *dynamic* world - "everything is in almost constant motion"; and (c) it is a *creative* world - "deep within this culture there is a relentless generative impulse." According to McCracken there was a time when we could categorise the world according to class, psychological types, generations, life-styles, etc. But increasingly the world seems to be resisting our classificatory schemes. When we look around we see diversity, variety and heterogeneity. McCracken calls this *plenitude*. He says that in the 1950s there was only two categories of teen: you were mainstream or James Dean. You had to choose to be either one or the other. Today there is great difference in varieties and difference in depth.

The following extract from the book shows something of the diversity that Grant McCracken discovered as he set out to research teens:

"As I began to talk to b-girls, goths, punks, and skaters I found myself listening to dramatically different values, outlooks, points of view. Differences of fashion, clothing - the differences of the surface - turned out to indicate differences below, differences of value and perspective.

The experts sometimes keep us from seeing the depth of these differences. Some say teens are driven by 'peer group acceptance.' What counts, they say, is the consuming insecurity of the life-stage. Hairstyles, clothing choices, speech patterns, leisure choices, music preferences - these are just so many fads and fashions - high school's sound and fury, as it were, signifying nothing, brute coinage every teen must pay to belong. *(Note: This paragraph reflects the view of youth culture as natural progression - Peer Pressure)*

A second camp has another way of concealing the depth of differences. It insists that the robust and vigorous diversity of the teen world comes down to one thing, the same thing. All these new styles of self-presentation, activity, and outlook are really the expression of age and class hostilities. Teens are

being transgressive. [Footnote: Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson, eds., *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain* (London: Hutchinson, 1976). For Dick Hebdige's characteristically brilliant account of skinheads, see 'Hiding in the Light: Youth Surveillance and Display,' in *Hiding in the Light: On Images and Things* (London: Routledge, 1988), 17-36. But notice this characteristic phrase: 'When disaffected adolescents from the inner city, more particularly when disaffected, inner city unemployed adolescents resort to symbolic and actual violence, they are playing with the only power at their disposal: the power to discomfit. The power, that is, to pose - to pose a threat' (18). See also Paul Willis, *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981). I am not saying there is no resistance in the world of teens or that there is something wrong with seeing it in this light. I am saying merely this should not be designated our unvarying point of departure and arrival. See Sue Widdicombe and Robin Wooffitt, *The Language of Youth Subcultures: Social Identity in Action* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1995), and John Davis, *Youth and the Condition of Britain: Images of Adolescent Conflict* (London: Athlone Press, 1990), 13-14, for other versions of this criticism.] (Note: This paragraph reflects the view of youth culture as resistance - **Protest**)

In both cases, we wish away what's going on. And what's going on is astonishing. The surface commotion of the teen world comes from a deeper, more systematic process of innovation that is throwing off a variety of types of teen, each with its own ideas, values, and ideologies. These types are well defined, easily read, consistently maintained, and policed with some vigour. Were peer pressure or protest the real cause of teen plenitude, none of this would be necessary, all of it would be gratuitous. (Note: This paragraph introduces the new view of youth culture - **Plenitude**)

Consider these ethnographic particulars. *Hippies* of the 90s, like those of the 60s, have a preference for the rural and the natural, for the spiritual and the uncontrived, for the spontaneous gesture and an egalitarian generosity. This is a well-defined, highly consistent set of values. *Rockers* refuse virtually all of this. At their worst, rockers are preoccupied with domination and a hostility for anything different, foreign, or unknown, and make the lads in *This Is Spinal Tap* look like men of taste and learning. This music is 'headbanging,' anthemic, and tribal where hippie music is spiritual, questing, and delicate. Here, too, 'look' is 'language,' a statement of a particular view of the world.

B-boys and girls are, in a sense, rockers reinvented in the style of the American ghetto and changed in the process. B-boys play out, embrace, the violence of the street. They cultivate the preemptive visual strike, the show of gang menace, the declaration of a toughness of which the rocker can only dream and the hippie only dread. More to the point, the b-boy/girl ideology is a response to the particular conditions of racism and poverty in the ghetto and therefore crafted in, and for, cultural circumstances unlike anything known to the rocker or the hippie. This is a rich and coherent worldview.

Goths are preoccupied with introspection and melancholia. They are inclined to speak poetically of 'beautiful deaths' and vampiric sympathies. Theatrical as they are, goths are not (or not only) play-acting and self-dramatizing. There is a coherent, defined, and engaging worldview, one that summons otherworldly forces and creatures that have no place at all in the cosmologies of the hippie, rocker, or b-boy. With dark cloaks, died black hair, and heavy eyeliner, this community of teens does not merely look different from other teens, it is giving voice to its own distinct cultural universe.

Punks are, by one reckoning, the Asian monks of our society. At their best, they have renounced the bourgeois world in order to instruct the rest of us in the deceptions of desire and the illusory nature of the material world. Punks will tell you they use homemade tattoos, stun the rocker and body piercings to jolt the rest of us out of the prisonhouse of our conformity. They break rules in order to reveal rules. There is nihilism here that would horrify the hippie, stun the rocker, puzzle the b-boy, and repel the goth. But it is well-formed nihilism and a world unto itself.

In each of these cases, we are looking at deep cultural completion and something much more than superficial differences. Each of these groups represents what I would call, for want of a better term, a 'little culture.' True, many of these groups engage in protest, but what is interesting is how different (and internally coherent) each protest is. To explain all these teen subcultures as the same act of protest is to generalize just when we need to be particularizing. It is to sacrifice the ethnographically illuminating for the glib larger truth.

Let me acknowledge that teens will often belong to more than one culture, that they will move from culture to culture in time and over time, and that they will even 'mix and match' these styles from time to time. But let us also note that this is not the postmodernist's *pastiche*. There are basic types of teen. They remain coherent and habitable, with characteristic values, practices, and styles. We do not (yet) live in a world in which each teen invents himself by inventing new cultural and aesthetic resources. When mixing and matching takes place, it is always the mixing and matching of preformed materials. (In another language, in the language of linguistics, morphemes come, as morphemes must, prefab.) 'Oh, man, those are goths,' is still a possible, frequent, and necessary act of recognition.

This is the most cursory of reviews, but it is perhaps enough to show two things. First, that the world of teens is simply exploding with difference. And, second, that the culture of commotion is doing something more than simply throwing off variety. It is generating deeper cultural types, each its own reckoning of the world, each an entire culture in little, carrying its own view of the world. If the surface difference is impressive, this deeper difference is simply breath-taking. Generally cultures do not do this. They are designed in fact to keep this from happening. Plenitude is a strange and powerful virus.

Could it be McCracken's admission that "teens will often belong to more than one culture, that they will move from culture to culture in time and over time, and that they will even 'mix and match' these styles from time to time" could contain a key for our understanding of the formation of youth subcultures in the nineties and beyond?

Later in the book he takes the *subculture theory* to task:

"There is a small band of social scientists who study 'subcultures.' This concept looks promising for our purposes, but in the event it proves a frustrating exercise in self-imposed limitation. This scholarly community is interested in only certain aspects of certain subcultures. As a result, the full character of plenitude goes neglected.

Professor Brake takes the characteristic position: 'Subcultures exist where there is some form of organized and recognized constellation of values, behaviour and actions which is responded to as differing from the prevailing

set of norms' [Footnote: Mike Brake, *Comparative Youth Culture: The Sociology of Youth Cultures and Youth Subcultures in America, Britain, and Canada*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985, Page 8. The key text here is Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, New York: Methuen, 1979]. Subcultures, these scholars tell us, develop in response to 'dominant meaning systems.' They are acts of resistance, protest, refusal which seek to differentiate themselves from the mainstream. Plainly some subcultures are devoted to and shaped by resistance, but to see them only in this way is a problem [Footnote: This is a distinction almost always elided by the Birmingham school.]. For the mainstream is losing its centrality. Increasingly we live in a world of coincident communities, a great swamp of possibilities. There is no main stream. There are many streams. The 'dominant meaning systems' are coming undone. It is less and less clear what 'rituals of resistance' might resist.

This is bad news for the subculture theorists. The rationale of the scholarly enterprise is disappearing. Subcultures can no longer be seen to be 'pushing off' against the rest of culture. Now they can be inspired by other motives, driven by other inclinations. If the inspiration for cultural difference is no longer political opposition, what then? The 'house' explanation loses its powers of illumination. The subculture theorists cannot explain line dancers, golf fanatics, bass fishermen, and other 'subcultures' they have so fastidiously ignored. In the world of plenitude, it is not even clear they can explain oppositional teens."

Grant McCracken suggests that we should treat lightly any attempt at categorising the diversities of culture with a new encompassing idea, such as Gail Sheehy's nine categories (including 'Turbulent Thirties' and 'Serene Sixties') or Michael Adams' twelve categories (including 'Thrill Seeking Materialists' and 'New Aquarians').

He makes a call for the embrace of contemporary culture, instead of resistance to it, where popular culture is constantly surveyed to spot, classify and illuminate new social species. Could we have a world in which "diversity becomes a thing of richness more than provocation, the occasion of curiosity more than antagonism"? This would be a world that celebrates plenitude.

Other writers are also referring to a new way of viewing youth culture and youth subcultures.

1. Youth Subculture Formation and Cultural Studies

Gordon Tait, in [Education Research and Youth Subculture Theory](#), critiques the subculture theory approach. Summary: It is common, even in Australia, to identify youth subcultures (one project identified Bogans, Nerds, Skeggs, Jocks and Gothics; and other writings identified Boddies and Widgies, Surfing Subcultures, Ockers and Disco-maniacs, Street Kids, Louts and Legends, etc.) based on their styles of dress, musical tastes, language and forms of behaviour. Subculture theory has dominated youth research from the mid-1970's onwards, when it was first popularised by writers from the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham (CCCS). This position, using a series of ethnographies, is based on the idea of counter-hegemonic struggle and the attempts by post-war youth to resolve the social problems and contradictions created by their material conditions. So the stylistic trappings of each subculture form part of a code by which the members communicate with the 'straight' world.

This work has been criticised because: (a) the only relevant variables in the subculture equation appear to be those of class and age, to the neglect of factors such as gender and race/ethnicity; (b) subculture theory has been guilty of romanticising groups by implying that

'ordinary kids' are too drab or passive to warrant investigation; and (c) the CCCS position is fundamentally deterministic, because members will behave in certain ways and hold certain values according to their economic class. Further criticism are suggested, ones that attack the foundations on which subcultural analysis is built. The use of subculture theory is criticised for it's (1) totalising, (2) normalising and (3) dichotomising tendencies.

A. Totalising - in the subculture theory model a diverse group of individuals are positioned as a discreet entity, with specific codes of behaviour and ways of relating to the outside world. But 'Youth' does not constitute a unitary object. It must be remembered that youth has been produced as a governmental object to solve legal, educational, medical and psychological problems. Probably the most useful way of approaching youth is to recognise that it has emerged as a by-product of the growth of a society characterised by what Michel Foucault refers to as *governmentality* - that is, youth is generated within interrelated strategies which manage the relations of time, bodies and forces and which sort, differentiate and categorise individuals. Contemporary society is characterised by techniques for taking charge of the time of individual existences - as in school or work. Any theory that does not treat seriously the function of society in influencing youth will be inadequate. Abnormal behaviour, antisocial conduct, neuroses, eccentricities, making friendships too easily or not at all, quarrelling or being withdrawn, grieving or fearing too much or too little - all these departures from the norm are linked together as maladjustments. It is then suggested that these deviances can almost always be avoided through the governmental practices and interventions designed as promoting the correct training of youth. Such a totalising tendency is a problem in subculture theory.

B. Normalisation - the subcultural approach to youth is also essentially normative. It is through the construction and demarcation of pathologies (such as the maladjustments mentioned above) that social, legal, psychological and medical norms can be reinforced. This process is especially evident when addressing the young. Unfortunately normality is not an observation but a valuation: so the focus on delinquent youth, and the categorisation of some of them into subcultures, is part of the process by which individuals are constantly measured and judged against a set of social norms. Within society, while youth are brought together and 'normalised', a process of differentiation also takes place.

C. Dichotomising - a final tendency of the subculture theory is the use of global oppositions, such as domination versus subordination, resistance versus conformity, regulation versus expression and young versus old. In the case of the CCCS, the explanation for subcultures is based upon the complex relationship which is thought to exist between dominant and subordinate social classes, between generations and between those who conform and those who do not. Here subcultural members are portrayed as constantly striving for mechanisms by which to pierce their ideological and generational oppression and thereby create spaces for themselves. Furthermore, this form of resistance through personal expression is frequently contrasted against the conformity of the 'Normals'. Not only are young people counterposed against adults, but the relationships that those young people have with adults are polarised between characters such as 'Gothics' and 'Skeggs', who respectively 'avoid and hate adults', and 'oppose them bitterly as they represent authority', and 'Normals' who have a 'good to excellent' relationship with adults and even 'consult adults with problems'. This also suggests a polarisation between those who resist and those who conform. This form of dichotomising pre-determines the conclusions of youth research, and tends to hide the complexity of any field of debate. He concludes: "it is important to state that much good work has been done in the area of youth and education. However, it is the contention of this paper that all too often research into 'youth' seems to involve the knee-jerk use of subculture theory. This is no longer adequate. The ideas and arguments which supported subcultural analysis have been largely abandoned within the wider arena of sociological debate. The work of writers such as Michel Foucault now provide a more fertile ground for understanding 'youth' than the repeated recourse to the romantic and redundant 'rituals of resistance' described by the CCCS.

2. Youth Subculture Formation and Global Change

Connie McNeely reviews *Societies in a Changing World* by Wendy Griswold, and states that: "the world is becoming increasingly interconnected, reflecting the process of globalisation. This globalisation is paradoxically exerting simultaneous pressures towards unity and fragmentation." Here may well lie one of the major factors in the diversification that is evidenced within the world of youth culture. In communities that are cut off from mass media and the kind of technology that can disseminate information and ideas widely, there appears to be much less diversity. The rate at which cultural objects and ideas are transmitted in large parts of the world today is a significant factor in the number of youth subculture groups that are identified.

Svetlana Kilmova, in [Youth, Socialisation and Social Change](#), suggests that the rate of change in society also impacts on the creation of subculture groups. In societies with slow pace of social change the transition to adulthood goes smoothly and youth are similar to their parents. There is a unity and a solidarity between the coming generation and the generation of parents. In societies undergoing rapid social change a smooth transition to adulthood is no longer possible and there is a strong dissimilarity with parent generations. Here an individual cannot rely on their parents identity patterns as they no longer fit into the social context. Because youth realise that they cannot learn from past experiences, they search for new identities that are relevant. Again this shows the positive role youth play in the creation of their culture.

3. Youth Subculture Formation and Productive Reception

The new approach is seen in a review of [Reconstructing Pop/Subculture](#) where the writer says: "A new book by Cultural Studies professor Van Cagle, *Reconstructing Pop/Subculture* proposes a theoretical framework that incorporates notions of productivity with reception and reexamines the critical relationships between style, youth culture, incorporation, hegemony, and resistance, focusing on the ways in which fans take up trends presented through mass media and adopt them through highly disingenuous practices. At the same time, this volume provides a historical account of the tensions that arose in Western culture during the 1960s and 1970s - both among and between various factions that were forced to engage in explicit confrontations." The emphasis here is on the way that youth people produce their culture as they receive images and ideas from the media, or mass culture (productivity with reception). Youth take up the concepts that are provided through the media and they adopt them through a process that is active, creative and which produces a new product. The new approach of youth culture is more optimistic than the older more pessimistic approaches, which seemed to imply that youth were simply pawns in the hands of the media and that their culture was a knee-jerk reaction (rebellion or resistance) that they were mostly powerless to control. The new approach sees young people mixing and matching as they take from the media those images and ideas that they want to use in constructing an identity which will serve them as they navigate their way from childhood to adulthood.

4. Youth Subculture Formation and Iterative Discourse

The positive view of youth subculture formation is reflected by Steve Mizrach, in [Iterative Discourse and the Formation of New Subcultures](#), where he says: "New subcultural jargons don't just appear out of the unconscious without prompting - they're "mixed" together out of borrowings from earlier youth cultures, global pop culture and the mass media, and other sources. To these appropriations, there is appended a constant process of innovation, in which people are adding terms out of a need to describe within their subculture sentiments, quirky behaviors, intergroup dissensions and rivalries, fluctuating identities, etc. which they couldn't express any other way. The subcultural jargons don't exist merely to alienate the outsider - they are to explore and probe new possibilities and options for the larger 'mainstream' culture as a whole. The youth subcultures of the 90s have created oppositional discursive systems - but these don't constitute only a rejection of the larger culture, rather a challenge for it to adapt and change. Subcultural jargon is a "linguistic laboratory" because inevitably subcultural terms "filter" out to the culture at large."

5. Youth Subculture Formation and Creative Expressions

An example of the way in which the Culture Industry or mass culture is used by youth to create an identity is expressed by Shirlene Noordin, in [The Mat Rokers](#). In Singapore, male Malay youth from the working class, with little or no educational qualifications or hope for the future, used the heavy metal and rock cultures to create an identity apart from the dominant Malay culture. Metal and rock music, and their associated styles, became emblems of this subculture which was a youthful response to problems faced by working-class Malays - a generationally specific articulation of an alternative value system. These youth were marginalised in society, so they designed an alternative value system in which they defined success and failure in their own terms. They were not a counter-culture as they kept some of the traits of the dominant Malay culture. The subculture is dying because the need for this response from youth has passed due to a burgeoning middle-class and more and more youth are entering university and professional vocations. There is also better local networking at changing the problems encountered by working-class youth in the eighties. As youth grew older, and the social context changed, most left behind the subculture which was a generational working-class response to the problems of the day. The heading with the article summarises this view of subculture: *Subcultures are often the creative expression of cultural difference by marginal groups.*

Steve Mizrach, in [Technology and the Transformation of Identity](#), says that the cyber age is helping to create new identities for people, ie. the cyborg, slacker, virtual, mutant and mediant. He ends the article by saying: "These five kinds of selves are not mutually exclusive, and we can expect that post-industrial citizens will display some or all features of these identities all at once. Thus, in the future, we can expect personal identity to become more associative and "field-oriented," more hybrid and technologized, more oriented toward electronic expression, less oriented toward work, and less somatically grounded. Many of today's **subcultures** (cyberpunks, ravers, modern primitives, zippies) are experimenting with these new kinds of identities already, as a sort of rehearsal or practice for when they will be more common. As always, these subcultures are showing in microcosm where large sectors of society will be heading in the future."

Subcultures help to evolve the dominant culture. Far from being the response of people with their backs against the wall, struggling to survive through rituals of resistance, many subcultures seem to be on the cutting edge - leading the whole society in new areas of growth.

6. Youth Subculture Formation and New Categories

Geoff Bradshaw, in [Majoring the Margins, Minorning the norm: Rethinking the Culture Concept with the Grateful Dead](#), says: "The traditional terminology for a group such as fans of the Grateful Dead, however, is to label them a "subculture." Yet to adopt the label of subculture is to implicitly concede a marginal relationship to an undefined "norm" of (in this case) American culture. Yet on what basis should we accept this hierarchical relationship?" He shows that American culture is far from a homogeneous cultural unity. His article which highlights the problem with traditional categories such as culture/subculture; majority/minority; norm/margin; does not provide any help as to what new way will be found to describe groups within society and their interaction to each other. But it does, however, show the sharp contrast to the dominant culture/subculture distinction of the seventies and eighties based on an understanding of the diversity within society that necessitates a new way of addressing the cultural pluralism or multiculturalism that does not employ hierarchical terms but which stresses equality, tolerance and the traditional anthropological contribution of cultural relativism.
