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Subculture Theory and the Fetishism of Style

Benjamin Woo

If one accepts the axioms that (1) the collection of beliefs, texts, artefacts, and practices that we call "culture" have a real, dynamic presence in people's lives and that (2) culture is neither entirely determined and imposed upon them from above nor created by them *ex nihilo*, then "subculture" is an absolutely necessary theoretical and methodological concept. Subculture theory promised to provide a Marxian sociology of culture in complex societies; however, this promise has remained largely unfulfilled. More recently, a so-called "post-subcultures" perspective has decisively demonstrated the limitations of the "classical" model associated with the Birmingham School of cultural studies. However, in abandoning its class-based critique, they have tended to fall back upon a single-minded concern with the emancipatory potential of difference in the sphere of lifestyles. In neither case is the issue of style itself opened up as an arena of social and cultural reproduction: Subculture theory has fallen prey to a fetishism of style. In this paper, I will briefly outline post-subculture critiques of "classical" subculture theory and point towards the need for a de-fetishizing study of subcultures as an integral part of a critical cultural studies project.

Although the concept of subculture was first elaborated by American sociologists, the best-known articulation of subculture theory was produced by scholars working at the University of Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in the 1970s. While the procession of spectacular youth subcultures that emerged beginning with the Teddy boys in the 1950s seems to have provided the CCCS scholars with an experience of *thaumazein*—the sense of wonder that is the beginning of theoretical reflection—these subcultural groups also provided researchers a way to theorize political agency in the context of the post-war hegemony in British society. In *Policing the Crisis*, Hall et al. (1978) describe how, beginning in the late 1940s, an emergent fraction of the dominant class and the working class's official representatives converged at the political centre around the ideas of national interest, the mixed economy, and welfare-state liberalism. Traditional forms of working-class militancy thus seemed effectively contained and incorporated. For many of the intellectuals of the New Left, this political crisis was understood as a crisis of and for working-class consciousness and culture. Following from Phil Cohen's (2005) seminal paper, "Subcultural Conflict and Working-class Community," the CCCS researchers argued that changes in the material con-

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ditions of the working class after World War II produced deep contradictions in experience which were contained by the ideology of embourgeoisement and the "politics of affluence" (Hall et al., 1978, p. 230). Thus, the crisis of socialism was also understood as a crisis in working-class consciousness.

The cultural expressions of youth seemed to provide a way out of this crisis. Due to mediation by specific social institutions and what Pierre Bourdieu would call "the hysteresis of habitus" (1984, p. 142), working-class youth developed a distinctive generational orientation towards the contradictions in their parent-class's problematic. They expressed this unique orientation in the sphere of leisure—where, because of fewer obligations on their time and finances, they were less constrained than their parents—by forming new social groups, or subcultures. The class-based contradictions were thus resolved in a "magical" way (Cohen, 2005, p. 89) by the succession of spectacular subcultures that emerged beginning in the 1950s: the Teddy boys, the rockers, the mods, the skins, the punks, and so on. Each subculture's distinctive style and its component subsystems—that is, dress, music, argot, and ritual (2005, p. 90)—constituted a "socio-symbolic homology," a highly ordered symbolic system that expressed aspects of group life and experience. To members, this unity of style served to assert identity; to outsiders, it was a symbolic challenge. Subcultural style thus emerged as an inchoate, micro-political form of resistance at the same moment as traditional forms of macro-political resistance seemed to be disappearing. In sum, "classical" subculture theory suggested that culture was a sphere in which working-class subcultures symbolically contested their subordination and carried out "politics by other means."

However, as I have suggested, the Birmingham model of subculture theory has been largely displaced by a variety of "post-subculture" frameworks. These theorists conceive of themselves as "post" in two distinct ways.

First, the prefix signifies engagement with postmodern theory. David Muggleton (2000), one of the more prominent post-subculture theorists, argues that the CCCS approach to subcultures was distinctively modernist (p. 49). The generative conditions of these groups and styles were the structural constraints of modern society and, in particular, the class system. However, postmodernist scholars have argued, characteristically modern forms of culture, social organization, and identity have been displaced by more heterogeneous, fragmentary, and fluid forms of the same. David Chaney (2004) concludes from this that postmodernity is a post-subcultural environment because "the type of investment that the notion of subculture labelled is becoming more general" (p. 37); that is, the subculture concept is obsolete when everyone acts like a subculturalist. In its place, postmodernist writers have offered a panoply of terms in an attempt to capture the unstable play of

lifestyles in the marketplace, which are understood to be resources for the performance of individual identity. Post-subcultural "groups," an instance of the form of postmodern quasi-sociality that Sam Binkley (2008) has termed "liquid consumption," are considered less restricting on individual expression than the class cultures and modernist subcultures that they replaced.

Second, "post-subculture" is also generally understood specifically to mean "post-Birmingham." Some scholars have retrospectively referred to the CCCS model of subculture theory as the "heroic" phase of subcultural research. They call into question the dogma that subcultures were inherently political, subversive, or oppositional. To question this tenet is to interrogate the romanticism implicit in the CCCS model.[1] The model was romantic in two ways:

One, its understanding of symbolic resistance was a decidedly romantic conception. Romanticism was a reactionary form of modernity, opposed to but nonetheless deeply shaped by Enlightenment rationalism, particularly as expressed in the nascent culture of the industrial revolution. The Romantics' critique of modern life remains a powerful one; indeed, the romantic doctrines of aesthetic experience and individual authenticity are the driving forces of modern consumerism (Campbell, 1987). However, as E.P. Thompson (1976) suggests in his biography of William Morris, a romantic hatred of the banality of bourgeois life is by no means the same as a revolutionary consciousness of the social system that has produced that banality. A romantic conception of resistance (that is, a purely aestheticized one) is a horizon that constrains politics to a simulacrum thereof.

Two, the CCCS research is marked by a romanticized orientation towards the objects of its study. This certainly contributed to its over sanguine reading of subcultural activity and its obsession with the "original" moment of subcultural resistance (cf. Clarke, 2006, p. 148). Post-subculture critics have noted the problems inherent in the distinctions between mainstream and subcultural, commercial and alternative, and authentic and inauthentic. Sarah Thornton (1996) argues that these dichotomies are, in fact, a powerful ideology internal to youth subcultures, which has, in her words, "inadvertently ensnared" subculture researchers who took these distinctions at their face value and neglected the social logic that determines them (p. 92).

Once the mystifying romanticism has been stripped away, it is apparent that the CCCS model is also highly essentialist. I mean this in three ways: one, it inscribes resistance in subcultures' basic nature, which is a functionalist error; two, it assumes that subcultures are homogenous and discrete and that their socio-symbolic homologies have stable meanings that are shared by all members; and, three, it renders white, male, working-class youth cultures

1. I use the term "romantic" to describe certain sensibilities commonly associated with Romanticism and related movements, not to suggest a direct influence by literary or artistic Romanticism sensu strictissimo.

with spectacular forms of style as paradigmatic of all subcultures. Such essentialism has only been possible through the bracketing of those elements that disrupt the theoretical model, such as the subcultural experiences of girls and women (McRobbie & Garber, 2006), on the one hand, and members of racial or ethnic minorities (Hebdige, 1979), on the other hand. In point of fact, the essentially working-class character of even the "classical" subcultures is questionable, though this matter is difficult to verify empirically (Muggleton, 2000, pp. 161ff.). In short, the "meaning of style" is determined from an abstract theoretical model and its logic.

In light of these critiques, then, what do post-subcultural perspectives offer in place of the deprecated Birmingham paradigm? Much of the post-subcultures research concentrates on questions relating to style. At the same time that the ambit of subculture research has been reduced, so has its ambition: Post-subculture theorists tend to make only modest theoretical claims, substituting "expression" for "resistance." In reducing subcultures from groups of people that may, under certain conditions, exercise political agency to styles and looks that can do no more than express the meanings given to them by semiologists, I fear that the potential usefulness of the subculture concept for the study of culture and society more generally has been largely abandoned by this development. Indeed, one might question whether the liberatory possibilities attributed to postmodern style are not a return of the ideologies of affluence, embourgeoisement, and classlessness that Birmingham subculture theory was formulated to debunk in the first place.

Having considered these debates on the nature of subcultural activity, how are we to consider subcultures? I propose that we ought to consider a subculture as one of three types or modes of homologously[2] structured cultural formations. My use of the term "cultural formation" is intended to denote a relatively discrete field of social action delimited along cultural bases. It thus has a great deal in common with Mike Brake's (1985) definition of subculture: Whereas the CCCS model depicts subcultures as authentic, if mediated, expressions of class problematics, Brake suggests that these cultures offer "symbolic elements which can be used to build an identity outside the restraints of class and education" (p. 189). At the same time, however, that such a definition allows for a great deal of variation in individual participation and interpretation, these "symbolic elements" are shaped and reshaped in a specific social context, that of the group—or, at least, its appearance as an "imagined community" (Anderson, 1983).[3]

In differentiating between three different modalities that cultural formations may occupy, I hope to retain the nuance to which Paul Hodkinson points (2002), allowing that different groups may at different times exhibit different levels of "subcultural substance" (pp. 28–33) and elicit differ-

2. In the more mundane sense of the word—i.e., following the same logic – rather than the specifically Birminghamian sense—i.e., relating to a socio-symbolic homology.

3. Cf. Bury (2003) for an application of Anderson's concept to subcultural "communities."

ent levels of commitment from their members. At the same time, I hope to emphasize the connections between these different kinds of culturally constituted groups. For this reason, then, I place them on a continuum from countercultures[4] (groups explicitly organized around political goals) to subcultures (substantive but "unorganized" groups characterized by sociality rather than goal-oriented action) to lifestyles (fluid, leisure-oriented taste cultures). I retain "subculture" as an umbrella term for simplicity's sake, because it provides a *via media* between the two extremes of the continuum, and in order to acknowledge the profound contributions of previous subcultures scholars to this model.

4. By this term, I do not mean the youth counterculture of the 1960s but any cultural formation that becomes a genuinely oppositional—rather than merely alternative—culture (cf. Williams, 2000). The term is more or less synonymous with those groups that have been, somewhat ponderously, labelled "New Social Movements."

The complexity of cultural formations is such that it is possible for an individual participant or observer to experience the formation in any of these modalities at a given time, although a consensus self-understanding of the formation may emerge (and may be actively promoted by particular interests). Moreover, actors within or without these formations may undertake action to transform or "convert" them along one or the other of two basic trajectories:

- The weaker trajectory leads from relatively fluid, apolitical, and heteronomous lifestyles through a process of substantiation and radicalization to relatively organized, political, and autonomous countercultures. Following Marchart (2004), one might define this trajectory as a process of articulation, whereby persons and emergent collectivities are linked together and enter into a set of struggles: "As long as subcultures remain on the level of 'symbolic resistance' or 'resistance through rituals' they remain within the sphere of micro-politics. Only when these rituals enter an antagonistic chain of equivalence do they become *politicized*" (p. 96).

- The process of commodification, which appears under the more innocent guise of mainstreaming, is by far the stronger trajectory under conditions of consumer capitalism. It may still be usefully described in the CCCS's language of incorporation, as "defusing" countercultures and "diffusing" subcultures (Clarke, 2006, pp. 155ff.).

In many cases, a closed loop is established, converting lifestyles and subcultures back and forth in order to produce novel and commodifiable cultural differences, the "calculated mutations" in the products of the culture industry to which Horkheimer and Adorno point (2001, p. 76). Thus, incorporation is not quite the dead end that CCCS theory suggests – subcultures have an "afterlife" as lifestyles, which may in turn generate new subcultures. Neither, however, is the lifestyle, as a cultural formation, as liberating and

empowering as some postmodernists would suggest, as it ultimately heteronomizes group life through processes of commodification.

Subculture theory's greatest strength is its insistence on connecting cultural expressions of personal and group identity to broader, social-structural determinants and to power relations. In the face of the post-subculture perspectives' more apolitical impulses, it is a strength that I would like to preserve in this model. However, such preservation requires a slight adjustment in the way that we think and talk about culture. It requires a more processual understanding of culture. That is to say, we must reconceptualize culture as a process of "structuration," a term I borrow from the work of Anthony Giddens in order to emphasize the recursive nature of social action. Structuration theory highlights the mutually constitutive interplay between agent and social structure:

> The constitution of agents and structures are not independently given sets of phenomena, a dualism, but represent a duality. According to the notion of duality of structure, the structural properties of social systems are both medium and outcome of the practices they recursively organize. (Giddens, 1984, p. 25)

On this view, structure and agency are each unthinkable without the other. Social structures derive from a continual process of reproduction. Human agents are ultimately responsible for this process, though no individual or group can either plan or effect it in its totality. The conclusion to be drawn is that society—and, by extension, culture—is not a *thing* but a *process.*

This processual understanding restores to culture its association with cultivation, growth, and development, a meaning that antedates the anthropological definition that has come to predominate in the human sciences. In the older sense, the word "culture" is often used as a verb; however, culture is not merely an activity but a form of labour. This labour is not the exclusive province of those we call "cultural producers"; consumers and audiences, too, perform symbolic labour that cultures their commodities. In *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign,* Jean Baudrillard (1981) develops a theory of consumption-power, or "consummativity." Whereas capitalist ideology suggests that the marketplace liberates the desires of individual consumers, Baudrillard argues that the market actually serves to organize consumption-power for the ends of capital:

> Indeed, just as concrete work is abstracted, little by little, into labor power in order to make it homogenous with the means of production … and thus to multiply the homogenous factors into a growing productivity—so desire is abstracted and atomized into needs, in order to make it homogenous with the means of satisfaction (products, images, sign-objects, etc.) and thus to multiply consummativity. (1981, p. 83)

This is not merely to say that capital attempts to stimulate consumer demand for the goods and services it produces. Rather, as Baudrillard's discussion of the homology between signifier and exchange-value makes clear, consummative labour is a source of surplus value—"Thus it should not be said that 'consumption is entirely a function of production': rather, *it is consummativity that is a structural mode of productivity*" (1981, p. 84, original emphasis).

The CCCS theory of subcultural participants as *bricoleurs* appropriating commodities into their subcultural style is amenable to the concept of consummative labour; however, the emphasis falls somewhat differently. For example, according to Paul Willis (1978), "the importance, value and meaning of a cultural item is given socially, but within objective limitations imposed by its own internal structure: by its 'objective possibilities'" (p. 200). But the apparent fit between the elements of a socio-symbolic homology is susceptible to the critique of induction: They seem to fit only because we have observed them together in the past. The expressive relationship between the "objective possibilities" of a "cultural item" and features of group life is by no means necessary. It is a reification of the consummative labour that went into producing the subcultural style. Subculture researchers, therefore, ought to focus on a de-fetishizing critique of the processes by which style is constructed and transformed, rather than taking its meaning as given by the group's class problematic or falling into a posture of uncritical celebration of cultural difference, as "classical" and "post-" subculture theorists, respectively, have tended to do.

What, then, are the possibilities for a subcultural politics? CCCS subculture theory tended to assume that any emergent culture was necessarily an oppositional one, but, as Raymond Williams notes, "[i]n certain societies it is possible to find areas of social life in which quite real alternatives are at least left alone" (2000, p. 159). Any easy conflation of subcultures with political agency is fallacious, but subcultures may take genuinely oppositional political stances under the right conditions. Subcultures are structured groups of people organized by communicative networks and with certain interests in common. In this sense, they are always potentially political in the traditional sense. However, their more typical micro-political activity primarily resists symbolic oppression and symbolic power. This is by no means insignificant, but cultural struggles are not necessarily translated into victories or change at other levels of struggle. Rather, the primary field of political action for the subcultural participant is the struggle to define the subculture and control its relative autonomy within its given field. This constitutes a politics of classification, a struggle over the definition and meaning of the subculture itself:

> The capacity to make entities exist in the explicit state, to publish, make public (i.e., render objectified, visible, and even official) what had not previously attained objective and collective existence and had therefore remained in the state of individual

> or serial existence—people's malaise, anxiety, disquiet, expectations—represents a formidable social power, the power to make groups by making *common sense*, the explicit consensus, of the whole group. (Bourdieu, 1985, p. 729, original emphasis)

Closely related is the struggle to control the relative autonomy or heteronomy of the subculture. The boundaries between the subculture and the "mainstream" are at stake in this game, which pits subcultural participants against outside actors and one another. Some participants will act to maintain their specific capital by strictly policing the subculture's autonomy, charging more heteronomous members with "selling out." Others will find it in their individual best interests to heteronomize the subculture, both expanding the market for subcultural commodities and entrenching their position as the sanctioned spokespeople of the group.

All of this is to re-evaluate the question of incorporation raised by classical subculture theory as a more fluid, ambivalent process that, if not constituting a form of resistance per se, is one of the subculture's primary forms of negotiation with dominant cultures. If subcultural actors can maintain a certain degree of control over the meanings that out-group members take from its existence, then the values of the subculture may survive the process of diffusion without necessarily being defused. Rather than pronouncing whether this is "good" or "bad" in the abstract, research should focus on the factors that determine and condition the relative autonomy and heteronomy of actually existing subcultural groups and the real implications of these changes for group life. This nuanced view of subcultural activity and its political potential is only possible if subculture research decisively transcends the debilitating focus on the fetish of subcultural style. If we can do so, it will become apparent that style is not some mystical thing "abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties" (Marx, 1978, p. 319) but rather that style only gains its vitality by means of the symbolic labour of group members and that it is the latter—real people embedded in social relationships—that must be the focus of subculture research's attention.

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I am a doctoral candidate in the School of Communication, Simon Fraser University. My major research interests are subculture theory, the cultural bases of social and political organization, Marxian approaches to consumer studies, and comic books and graphic novels. In my dissertation research, I am examining subculture participation through a media ethnography of nerds, geeks, and dorks—a subculture not particularly known for its stylishness.

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