

Sub-cultures in Britain

The meaning of sub-culture is always in dispute, and style is the area in which the opposing definitions clash with most dramatic force. Culture can be said to be the peculiar and distinctive 'way of life' of the group or class, the meanings, values and ideas embodied in institutions, in social relations, in systems of beliefs, in customs, in the use of objects and material life. It is the distinctive shapes in which this material and social organisation of life expresses itself. A culture includes the 'map of meaning' which make things intelligible to its members. These 'maps of meaning' are not simply carried around in the head; they are objectivated in the patterns of social organisation and relationship through which the individual becomes a social individual. Culture is the way the social relatives of a group are structured and shaped; but it is also the way those shapes are experienced, understood and interpreted.

An individual born into a particular set of institutions and relations is at the moment born into a peculiar configuration of meanings, which give her access to and locate her within a 'culture'. 'The Law of Society' and the 'Law of Culture' are one and the same. These structures of social relationship and of meaning shape the on-going collective existence of groups, but they also limit, modify and constrain how groups live and reproduce their social existence. The existing cultural patterns therefore form a sort of historical reservoir which groups take up, transform and develop. Though this practice culture is reproduced and transmitted but it only takes place within the given field of possibilities and constraints. Culture, then, embodies the trajectory of group life through history; always under conditions and with raw materials which cannot wholly be of its own making. Perhaps now, we can safely say that sub-culture is a social ethnic or economic group with a particular character of its own within a culture or society. The dominant culture represents itself as the culture. It tries to define and contain all other cultures within its inclusive range. Its views of the world, unless challenged, will stand as the most natural all-embracing universal culture. Other cultural configurations will not only be sub-ordinate to this dominant order; they will enter into struggle with it, seek to modify, negotiate, resist or even overthrow its reign – its hegemony. The struggle between classes over material and social life thus always assumes the forms of continuous struggle over the distribution of 'cultural power'. Dominant and sub-ordinate classes will each have distinct cultures but when one culture gains ascendancy over the other, and when the sub-ordinate culture experiences itself in terms prescribed by the dominant culture, and then the dominant culture has also become the basis of a dominant ideology.

It is at the intersection between the located parent culture and the mediating institutions of the dominant culture that the youth sub-cultures arise. Many forms of adaptation, negotiation and resistance, elaborated by the 'parent' culture in its encounter with the dominant culture are borrowed and adapted by the young in their encounter with the mediating institutions of provision and control. In organising their response to these experiences, working class youth sub-cultures take some things principally from the located 'parent' culture; but they apply and transform them to the situations and experiences characteristic of their own distinctive group-life and generational experience. Even where youth sub-cultures have seemed most distinctive, different, stylistically marked out from adults and other peer-group members of their 'parent' culture, they develop certain distinctive outlooks which have been clearly structured by the parent culture. We might think here of the recurrent organisation around collective activities ('group mindedness'); or the stress on 'territoriality' (to be seen in both the Teddy Boys and Skinheads); or the particular conceptions of

masculinity and of male dominance (reproduced in all the post-war youth sub-cultures). The 'parent' culture helps to define these broad historically –located 'focal concerns'. Certain themes which are key to the 'parent culture' are reproduced at this level again and again in the sub-cultures even when they set out to be, or are seen as different.

The various youth sub-culture have been identified by their possessions and objects; the bootlace tie and velvet-collared drape jacket of the Ted, the close crop Parker coats and scooter of the mod, the stained jeans, swastikas and ornamented motor-cycles of the bike –boys, the Doc Martin boots and skinned head of the Skinhead, the Chicago suits or glitter customs of the Bowieites etc. Yet, despite their visibility, things simply appropriated and worn (or listened to) do not make a style. What makes a style is the activity of stylisation – the active organisation of objects with activities and outlooks, which produce an organised group – identity in the form and shape of a coherent and distinctive way of being in –the – world. Phil Cohen, has tried to shift the emphasis away from things to the modes of symbolic construction through which style is generated in the sub-cultures. He identified four modes for the generation of the sub-cultural style; dress, music, ritual and argot. Whilst not wanting to limit the symbolic systems to these particular four, and finding it difficult to accept the distinction (between less and more plastic) which he makes, this emphasis on group generation is far preferable to the instant stereo-typed association between commodity – objects and groups common in journalistic usage.

It will be appropriate to have a closer look at some of these sub-cultures in Britain and see what features of media use they identify themselves with. The first example, which I would like to give here, is Rastafarianism: Africa found an echo inside reggae in its distinctive percussion, and the Bible was also a central determining force in both reggae music and popular West Indian consciousness in general. The Europeans had used Christianity many years ago to introduce the Africans to European notions of culture repression, the soul etc. As time went on, it became clear that there was a distinction between slavery and the Christian ideology which had originally explained it. Contradictions followed, and this became very difficult to contain, but the black community began to look for its own reflection in the Biblical texts and the openness of the religious metaphors invited just a set of identifications.

The Rastafarians started to believe that the accession of Haile Selassie to the throne of Ethiopia in 1930 represented the fulfilment of Biblical and secular prophecies concerning the imminent downfall of Babylon (white colonial powers) and the deliverance of black races. The profound subversion of the white man's religion which places God in Ethiopia and the black sufferer in Babylon has appealed to working class youth in both the ghettos of Kingston in Jamaica and the West Indian communities of Britain. Clothed in dreadlocks and 'righteous ire' the Rastafarian affects a spectacular resolution of the material contradictions which oppress and define the West Indian community. He makes out the meaning of 'sufferation' and blames colonialism, and economic exploitation, and promises deliverance through exodus to Africa. He is the living opponent of Babylon (contemporary capitalist society) refusing to deny his stolen history and turns poverty and exile into 'signs of grandeur', tokens of his own esteem, tickets which will take him home to Africa and Zion when Babylon is overthrown. He traces out his 'roots' in red, green and gold, dissolving the gulf of centuries which separates the West Indian community from its past, and from a positive evaluation of its blackness.

Under the Manley regime in Jamaica, they were granted a kind of recognition which signalled the beginnings of a 'cultural revolution'. Reggae can be said to be attributed to the Rasta influence, and it was through this music that the 'dreadlocks' and 'ethnicity' were communicated to members of the West Indian community in Great Britain. In the 1950's and 60's, immigrants from the West Indies came to Britain in search of employment, housing etc, but things did not work out as planned. Meanwhile black children born and educated in Britain were less inclined than their parents to accept the inferior status and narrow options offered to them. Reggae provided the focus around which another culture, another set of values and self-definitions could cluster. These changes were subtly registered in the style of black youth; in the gait, the manner, the voice which seemed almost overnight to become less anglicized. The bright coloured clothes of the early immigrants which had been disapproved of by the British public underwent a change. During the 1970's the 'youth' was developing their own different style : a refracted form of Rastafarian aesthetic borrowed from the slaves of imported reggae Albums and inflected to suit the needs of second generation immigrants. This was a Rastafarianism which stressed the importance of resistance and black identity, and which served to position the Blackman and his 'queen' outside the dominant white ideology. On most British high streets, there were army surplus shops which supplied the righteous with battle dress and combat jackets. Short hair was grown into an 'Afro' frizz or dreadlocks, and girls began to leave their hair unstraightened, short or plaited into intricacy parted arabesques, capillary tributes to an imagined Africa. For the unemployed black youth, 'heavy dub' and rockers provided an alternative sound track to the music which filled the new shopping centres, where he spent most of his time doing nothing but smoking 'ganja'.

Many blacks in Britain began to feel the unemployment problem, and a black youth was five times unlucky than his white counterpart in getting a job. Relations with the Police worsened and this caused a number of riots and trials, such as the Brixton riots and other disturbances in London's inner cities. It was during this period, especially at a time when conflict between black youths and the police were being openly acknowledged in the press, that imported reggae music began to deal directly with problems of race and class, and to resurrect the African heritage. The rebellion was given a much wider currency with dub and heavy reggae, it was generalized and theorised. Thus, the rude boy hero immortalised in Ska and Rock steady – the lone delinquent pitched hopelessly against an implacable authority – was supplanted as the central focus of identity by the Rastafarian, who broke the law in more profound and subtle ways.

The process of adjustment which simultaneously intensified conflicted and turned it inwards was reflected in the music and reproduced exactly in musical form. Reggae became darker and more African. War was put into the music and this displacement was more easily accomplished the further one moved from the original sources of reggae and Rastafarianism.

In Britain for instance, where immigrants had settled in sufficient numbers and at every local 'sound system', a righteous number of militant sufferers would gather to pledge their allegiance to the Ethiopian flag. The 'sound system' came to represent especially for the young, a precious inner sanctum uncontaminated by alien influences, a black heart beating back to Africa on a steady pulse of dub. Clubs like the Four Aces on Seven Sisters Road, drew an exclusively black audience, and the 'sound system' began to get associated with the heavier more 'rootsy' forms of reggae. The music itself was virtually exiled from commercial radio, but it was through the music that the communication with the past, with Jamaica and Africa, considered vital for the maintenance of black

identity was possible. The system turned on the sound which was bound up with the notion of 'culture', and if the system was attacked, then the community was threatened and so it therefore became hallowed ground territory to be defended against white groups. Even interference from the police was resented and their mere presence on certain occasions was enough to spark off trouble. The Notting Hill riots of 1976 and the Carib incident of 1974 could be interpreted in this way, as symbolic defences of communal space.

Punk represented a deliberately scrawled addendum to the 'text' of Glam Rock – an addendum designed to puncture Glam Rock's extravagantly ornate style. Punk's gutter snipe designed to undercut the intellectual posturing of the previous generation of rock musicians. This reaction in its turn directed the new wave towards reggae and the associated styles which the Glam Rock cult had originally excluded. Reggae attracted those Punks who wished to give tangible form to political bite, so obviously missing in most contemporary white music. This parallel white 'ethnicity' was defined through contradictions. On one hand, it centred on Britishness (the Queen and Union Jack etc) and yet on the other hand, it was predicated upon a denial of place. It issued out of nameless housing estates, anonymous dole queues, slums in the abstract. Rootless as it was, this Punk sub-culture was easily contrasted with the West Indian styles which had provided the basic models. Punk was forever condemned to act out alienation, to mime its imagined condition, to manufacture a whole series of subjective correlatives for the official archetypes of the 'crises of modern life': the unemployment figures, the depression, the Westway, television etc. Converted into icons (the safety pin, the rip, the mindless lean and hungry look) these paradigms of crisis could live a double life, at once fictional and real. They reflected in a heightened form of perceived condition – a condition of unmitigated exile, voluntarily assumed. Whereas exile had a specific meaning in the Rastafarianism and Negro history, when applied metaphorically to British white youth, it meant a hopeless condition. They deliberately used things that were considered sordid, such as toilet chains, dirty clothes, and bin liners. Things that were associated with immorality in society such as black leather, studded hand bands or belts and fishnet stockings, which were associated with sexual perversion.

The lady Punks wore bits of uniforms which were also connected with perversion and pornography. They set out implicitly a deliberate attack on those who did not accept them, and this they achieved through the wearing of grotty clothes, which did not mean what they really were (not a sign of poverty). Lots of Rasta styles were borrowed from the black British youth i.e. reggae was played in some Punk clubs; some Punks wore the national colours of the Rastafarian movement etc. Even Johnny Rotten of the Sex Pistols (a Punk group) claimed that the only music he danced to was reggae. However, here as elsewhere in punk, the mutation as said earlier was deliberate and constructed. Perhaps, given the differences between them, there can be no easy synthesis of the two languages of rock and reggae. The fundamental lack of fit between these two languages (dress, dance, speech, music, drugs, style, history) exposed in the emergence of black ethnicity in reggae, generated a peculiarly unstable dynamic within the punk sub-culture. This tension gave punk its curiously petrified quality, its paralysed look, its 'dumbness' faces of rubber and plastic, in the bondage and robotics which signified 'punk' to the world. For at the heart of the punk sub-culture, forever arrested, lied a frozen dialectic between black and white cultures – a dialectic which beyond a certain point (i.e. ethnicity) was incapable of renewal, trapped as it was, within its own history, imprisoned within its own irreducible antinomies. But Punk passed into high street – i.e. into ordinary fashion, and had a lasting development on Rock as well.

Sub-cultural theory rests on remarkably limited empirical research. The readings of youth styles in 'Resistance through rituals' for example are based not on direct observation, but on media sources – youth styles are analysed according to the ways they have already been labelled. This gives the description of style as conflict, a certain conviction – the media do set up sub-cultures as 'threats' to society, but it also raises doubts about the real extent of these threats. The 'resistance' displayed by sub-cultures in short may be exaggerated by sociologists on the most spectacular aspects of youth culture (aspects which interest the media).

Secondly, Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber in the 'Resistance through rituals' have noted that the sub-culture theory ignores girls. They have wondered why girls were absent from the accompanying analysis of Teds and Mods and Skinheads, and have asked further; were girls really absent from sub-cultures (and if so, why?) or were they there, but not noticed by sociologists (and if not, why?) What was apparent was that in ignoring girls, sub-cultures were ignoring boy's relationship with girls, were ignoring sub-cultural sexuality, the group's attitudes to marriage and the family. Boys masculinity was taken for granted; 'resistance' was defined solely in terms of class and race; subcultures political complicity with dominant sexual norms was not discussed.

Thirdly, the sub-cultural approach underestimates the individual joy of dressing up, inventing an image, striking poses. In 'sub-culture'; the meaning of 'style', Dick Hebdige suggests that styles are as much gestures of individual imagination as of class expression, relate to peoples fantasies as well as to their reality. Thus suburban sixth formers dress up in the imaginary of street gangs and play punk and reggae records; working class youth idolise Bowie, invent dress up as the 'new romantics'. Sociologists can't, despite the sub-cultural efforts judge a style by its cover. Leisure is an alternative to reality as well as a way of expressing it, involves magic for its own sake as well as a 'magical solutions to ideological problems'. Young people certainly do seek to inhabit worlds (the pub, the club, the disco floor) in which they are in control. But so do adults, who also indulge in leisure, use it as a source of fantasy, a place to act out 'subterranean values'. The distinctive nature of youth culture must be explained, then, not by reference to leisure itself, but to young people's position in work and family, to the 'reality' from which leisure is, on occasion, an escape.

Finally, sub-cultures were distinguished by their styles, like their music, dress, drugs etc, but all these seem to be going commercial. Take reggae for instance, which was restricted to the 'sound system' and exiled from the airwaves but is now being played on commercial radio and television and now accepted by society.

Many reggae groups like Aswad for instance cannot resist the temptation of going commercial. The same applies to the Punks, who now have their style incorporated into the high street fashion and into rock groups etc. The Kings Road is no longer a sub-cultural spot, despite the 'last of the punks' trying to revive it. It is now more or less a meeting spot for practically anyone.