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**Taking Pleasure Seriously: The political significance of subcultural practice**

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## Introduction

This paper addresses a hotly debated issue in the study of youth: whether or what politics might be located within subcultural practice. The famous subcultural theories of the Birmingham School that conceptualised subcultural young people as 'magically resisting' their class position have arguably fallen out of favour, become contested and to some extent have been replaced by a range of perspectives that might be collected under the heading of 'post-subculturalism'. As a result contemporary debates on subcultures and their politics have been based on an apparent 'rivalry'. The Birmingham School has been accused of reading too much politics into youth subcultures, whereas the post-subcultural perspective might be found equally guilty 'of under-politicizing them' (Muggleton & Weinzierl, 2003: 14). The question of subcultural politics remains thus unresolved. We argue that a combination of elements from both approaches provides an analytical framework that is suited to identifying and understanding a number of different forms of everyday politics within subcultural practices.

In doing this, we demonstrate that the notion of 'subculture' retains analytical purchase as a means of understanding contemporary youth leisure practices and their political significance. We argue furthermore, that the 'post-subcultural' movement that is associated with critiquing and even perhaps rejecting the classic notion of subculture and hence the politics associated with the concept, can instead be interpreted as significantly updating it. We argue that notions of political significance must be sought beyond conscious and organised 'resistance'. Instead, we demonstrate that the post-subcultural emphasis on *affects* and *everyday life*, aspects of social existence less overtly discussed by classic subcultural theory, provides a promising means of understanding the proto-political nature of what might otherwise be simply conceptualised as hedonism. Whilst post-subcultural modes of analysis have tended to remain restricted to exploring collective experiences as leisure we demonstrate how they might be extended to understand political meanings, however under-articulated and inchoate. Put simply, we contend that subcultural practice provides a host of alternative experiences that challenge dominant late-capitalist ideals and hold out a lived sense of existing differently, however much it may be fleeting, impermanent and co-opted (see Martin, 1999). We argue that taking pleasure seriously provides a means of responding to those who view the practices of contemporary young people as 'post-political' or apolitical (see e.g. Muggleton, 2000; Lash, 2007; Hall et al, 2015).

In this paper we demonstrate that where macro-structural issues (class in particular) tended to frame Birmingham School analyses of subculture, post-subcultural theorists instead emphasised everyday, micro-affective, consumerist and instrumental concerns (see Blackman, 2005). Furthermore, the types of practices or activities that might properly be viewed as either subcultural or in some manner deviant have become somewhat more complicated to identify, given the plurality of lifestyles now deemed acceptable (see Hayward and Ilan, 2011). Nevertheless, we contend that it is possible to find practices that merit the application of the term and argue for the use of 'subculture' to describe groups of people who engage in sociability connected to the performance or enjoyment of particular leisure practices that a significant section of establishment society view as frivolous at best and threatening at worst. Drawing on the notion of 'subterranean values' (Matza and Sykes, 1961) we argue that subcultures do not operate on an entirely different set of values to

the 'main culture' but that they often place significance on intrinsic elements of the 'main culture' that tend not to be openly and directly celebrated.

To be clear from the outset, the arguments we make here are not intended to apply to more overtly political social movements. Instead we seek to highlight what is arguably a deeply-buried proto-politics within more general youth leisure practices and lifestyles. We first explore subcultural and postsubcultural theories' conceptualisation of political potential in youth leisure. We move on to excavate the theoretical concerns that animate both perspectives, setting out how the Gramscian conceptualisations of resistance that underpinned the Birmingham School approach, chime with notions of everyday experience, whilst demonstrating how post-modernist notions of individualism, 'loss' and 'pleasure' explore the existence of politics within seemingly hedonistic behaviour. By integrating the work of Bataille and more recent examinations of embodied affect, we argue that micro-personal experiences say something back to structured power (classed, gendered, sexualised and ethnic disadvantage). From this basis we are in a position to drive subcultural and post-subcultural theory further and to reassess the political significance of subcultural behaviour in contemporary western society. We provide four examples of the kind of politics that can be understood thus to exist within a range of notable youth leisure practices: a politics of identity and becoming; a politics of defiance; a politics of affective solidarity and a politics of different experience. Ultimately, we contend that categorising such phenomena as political is both possible and accurate, however much these phenomena are removed from organised, articulated, transformative politics.

### **Politics in Subculture and Post-subcultures**

It is not our intention to rehearse the subculture/post-subculture debate in its entirety here, as there are works which do so eloquently (see e.g. Blackman 2005; 2014). Our intention is instead to present how the various positions in these debates view politics in subcultural practice (if at all). Essentially subcultures operate around the 'politics of everyday life' (Williams, 2011:183), where power and resistance, consent and coercion can be found at every level of human social interaction (Heywood, 2013): from the influence that one individual has over another, to relations associated with the social structure and institutions such as religion, police, work, leisure, media and education (Ekers & Loftus, 2008). The politics of everyday life are used to explore manifestations of power and resistance at multiple levels of social relations: at the individual and the collective, private and public, formal and informal, personal and global (Ekers & Loftus, 2008; Gramsci, 1971). As Scott (1985) argues the politics of everyday life usually go unnoticed. Everyday life practices, experiences and choices do, however, show a proto-political potential that reflects and speaks back to structures of power, creating reefs of autonomy and freedom no matter how temporary or durable, impactful, or feeble these may be.

The classic subcultural position on politics derives from a body of scholarship associated most famously with the Birmingham School of Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), characterised by the deployment of Gramscian-Marxism, and partially collected within *Resistance through Rituals* (Hall and Jefferson, 2006 - hereafter 'RTR'). RTR used a class conflict model that conceptualised subcultures as working-class youth phenomena that used music, style and 'rituals' to construct a 'collective response to the material and situated experience of their class' (Clarke et al., 1976: 47). Central to accounts in this book is the notion that youth subcultures do not actually change or solve

fundamental structural and material realities. Rather they offer 'magical solutions' to problems through stylistic innovation, celebrating leisure in specific constructions of self and collective identities. Subcultures are thus characterised as political: unconsciously resisting the subordination and ideological contradictions of specific cultural and class experiences (Blackman, 2005; Griffin, 2011). These were contrasted to counter-cultures that 'take a more overtly ideological and *political* form' (Clarke et al, 1976: 61 emphasis in original), which coalesced around overtly leftist movements.

Subcultural theory deals with the complex relationship that exists between organic identity making on the one hand and commerce and consumerism on the other, whereby the culture industries quickly capitalise on emerging styles, stripping them of their original potency and rendering them into commodities (see Hebdige, 1979). At the same time, however, subcultures are viewed as capable of subverting the meaning of consumer objects to serve alternative ends. The subcultural theories that emerged within the United States from the Chicago School onwards, were not as concerned with style but ultimately shared a concern about the ways in which the socio-economically marginalised made sense of their own position (see e.g. Cohen, 1955). In this context, *delinquent lifestyles* were viewed as a means of responding to the frustrations and restrictions of life at the margins (see Downes, 1966 in relation to the UK). A further significant strand of subcultural scholarship emphasised the power of the *external gaze* to classify particular kinds of youth leisure or indeed states of being as dangerous and deviant. This is best exemplified in Birmingham research by Hall et al.'s *Policing the Crisis* (1978), which focused on the role of the media and state in sustaining law enforcement campaigns against young black men.

Classic subcultural theory views youth lifestyles and leisure thus as a politics of everyday life, a means for young people to respond to their structured position and a means by which more powerful groups in society come to disapprove of and censure, in particular, the practices of disadvantaged young people. Subcultures were not, however, conceptualised as politically transformative. From the early 1980s the 'orthodoxy' of Birmingham subcultural theory began to attract critique (Griffin, 2011) at first internally and eventually from a collective body of work that is often grouped together under the banner of *post-subcultural* theory (see Muggleton & Weinzerl, 2003). This broad approach tends to privilege notions of heterogeneity, hybridity, classlessness, pleasure, fashion, fragmented identity and style, self-fulfilment through consumption, and apolitical sentiments (see e.g. Redhead, 1990; Thornton, 1995; Bennett, 1999; Muggleton, 2000; Bennett and Kahn-Harris, 2004). Their focus on local creativity and localised struggles in everyday life, outside the holistic and total narratives of Marxism has meant that post-subculturalism has often been associated with a rejection of macro-level structural analysis (see Blackman, 2005), and indeed in some cases with calls for the rejection of the use of 'subculture' as an academic analytic *in toto*.

Post-subcultural theories build on post-modern perspectives that note how previous loci of security and cohesion such as religion, place, class, and the nuclear family have declined in significance 'leaving individual biographies increasingly unpredictable and subject to changing tastes, circumstances and choices' (Hodkinson, 2007: 8). Beyond attempting to understand youth leisure under contemporary socio-economic conditions, post-subculturalism took aim at the theoretical and methodological assumptions of the CCCS, which were generally characterised as privileging Marxist semiotics over exploring the subjective dimensions of subcultural membership. Such concerns were framed as leading to a conceptualising of youth friendship groups as significantly

more coherent, stable, uniform and politically articulate than they were in reality. Whilst the editors of RTR seemed to accept this empirical corrective in the 2006 edition of their book, it should be noted that the CCCS viewed subcultures as taking various shapes with some being more clear, distinctive and tightly bounded, while others were more loosely-defined and diffused (see Clarke et al, 1976: 35). The CCCS and especially RTR tended to focus on the former, while post-subculture theory centres more on the latter (Williams, 2011).

In terms of politics, there has been an interpretation of post-subculturalism that sees it as conceptualising youth leisure as largely post-political: that where once 'heroic' working-class subcultures were viewed as engaging in 'semiotic guerrilla warfare' (Muggleton & Weinzierl, 2003: 4), such practices could now be better understood as 'just another form of depoliticized play in the post-modern pleasuredome' (Muggleton, 2000: 49). Such sentiments sit comfortably within an analysis that conceptualises contemporary society as post-ideological and post-hegemonic (see Beasley-Murray, 2003; Lash, 2007). Such perspectives tend to reflect on the problems of political mobilisation in an era of fluid and consumerist individualism and weak cultural-political ties. For Winlow et al. (2015: 8):

'If we discover "politics" in the most trivial and mundane of activities, then we erode our capacity to identify and address the movement of history and our ability to impose our collective will upon social reality. If graffiti is political, if cross-dressing is political, if pop songs are political, if buying fair-trade coffee is political, then what is the name of the field upon which we determine the structure of global political economy?'

This is arguably a rejection of the idea that politics might be embedded in the micro practices of everyday life. As will become clear below Gramsci (1971) and others argue otherwise. Indeed, within post-subculturalism there are perspectives that call for a politics of everyday life approach to understanding youth leisure practices in a manner that is compatible with classic subcultural theory.

For Blackman (2005), perspectives which deny any meaning to subcultural practice beyond consumerist hedonism often fail to account for the energy and exuberance that tend to be part of them. Indeed, there are strands of post-subcultural analysis that explore what might be described as the more affective-political elements of youth night-time leisure. For example in relation to rave culture, Melechi writes of 'the ecstasy of disappearance' (1993: 32): the pleasures of loss, abandon, liberation, escapism, selflessness and oblivion through dancing and intoxication (see also Rietveld, 1993). For Melechi, this disappearance is a form of 'resistance' – albeit temporary, ephemeral and individual. Any political potential here is fused with hedonism, sexuality, intoxication, dance, the body and music, where the only sign of overt resistance becomes associated with the 'right to party' (Rietveld, 1993: 69). Post-subculturalism has arguably been less concerned with producing structural-critical analyses of contemporary youth leisure (see Martin, 1999), but we would argue that it provides tools through which this might be achieved. Where it identifies 'resistance', post-subculturalism does not necessarily view it as 'driven by material forces' (Raby, 2005: 162). Power is interpreted in more Foucauldian terms, as a perpetual and multi-directional flow of forces within social relations (Ekers & Loftus, 2008). Hence, agency and resistance where noted are considered fragmented, fluid, contradictory and constructed within local and individual activities (Raby, 2005). Through this lens, it becomes necessary to locate political significance not just in articulated ideology

and political-economic analysis but also in affects and everyday lives, which are themselves impacted by structure.

In Maffessoli's (1996) important post-subcultural concept of the 'neo-tribe' youth sociability is linked to the formation of fluid, shifting and temporary 'communities of affect' where issues of feeling, embodiment, pleasure and desire come to the analytical fore. Maffessoli sees politics in neo-tribal affiliation which cannot be reduced to 'narcissistic individualism' (Blackman, 2005). He argued that neo-tribes are a way of re-appropriating one's existence, an 'explosion of life, even and especially if this life is exploited and dominated' (Maffessoli, 1996: 51). Post-subculturalism can thus be understood as offering a range of analytics ripe for application to understand issues of structure. Hall and Jefferson (2006: xii) indeed call for 'double sidedness': 'acknowledging the new without losing what may be serviceable in the old' in terms of interpreting subcultural practice and hence, understanding the politics of everyday life existing there.

Such politics varies in intensity and presence. Youth groups, scenes, tribes, subcultures or whichever term is preferred are hugely variegated phenomena, with different levels of everyday political significance. Some are explicitly concerned with ideologically articulated politics, for example particular punk scenes (see Clark, 2003). Many subcultures are fluid in membership, in dominant activity and in prime concerns. In common with the Birmingham School scholars we see structural forces driving this variation. The boundaries between 'mainstream', sanctioned consumerist leisure and the more deviant subcultural practice proper have become porous to the extent that they are often barely perceptible (see Ferrell et al. 2015). We argue, however, that this does not obviate the utility of identifying the subcultures that venerate those of the less trumpeted elements of the main culture and by doing so, say something important regarding positionality within the socio-economic structure. Such an approach draws furthermore on the theoretical antecedents to both subcultural and post-subcultural perspectives.

### **The Theoretical Roots of Power and Resistance in Subcultural and Post-Subcultural Perspectives**

Critiques of the Marxist orthodoxy of CCCS subcultural theory have arguably not paid sufficient attention to its *Gramscian-Marxist* nature. Implicit in much of postmodern literature on power and resistance, is an oversimplification of Gramsci's notion of hegemony (Johnson, 2007). As Foucault (cited in Buttigieg, 1991: xix) has argued, Gramsci is one of the most cited theorists, but at the same time, the least read. One of Gramsci's principle concerns was praxis (human action), or the conversion of political ideology into social action/reality (1971, 321-377). His argument was that ideas alone could not motivate 'the masses' into opposing an unjust socio-economic order. Such a trajectory could only stem from a lived sense that the world can be different and that this could only emerge from within the everyday lives of ordinary people: 'the only "philosophy" is history in action, that is life itself' (Gramsci, 1971: 357). For example, he was interested in how religion as an ideology had become an everyday life-mode of human experience and action. For Gramsci then notions of power and resistance stem 'from below', from individuals who would not associate themselves nor be associated with organized political groups (Smith, 2010). Rooted in this tradition, Birmingham School subcultural theory does not seem monolithically structural, recognising the importance of individualised meaning-making, micro-politics and the minutiae of everyday life.

Gramscian notions of power (and subsequently resistance) are more post-modern than some might surmise. For Gramsci, power is not simply concentrated in coercive institutions but is diffused

throughout state and private institutions, including the realm of culture and the activities of ordinary people (Ransome, 1992). He saw hegemony as a perpetually moving phenomenon, constituted through a process of constant conflict with subaltern groups, which takes place throughout the civil society-state nexus (Ekers and Loftus, 2008). This notion of all pervasive power brings the Italian Marxist close to the arguments of one of the foremost post-modernists: Michel Foucault, who also saw everyday understandings and experiences as the fields in which power and its challengers most vigorously interact (Foucault, 1977). Subcultural perspectives were not rendered obsolete by the emergence of post-modernism but can be augmented by them.

In this vein, excavating the post-hegemonic theory that underpins significant positions within post-subculturalism, it is useful to note how it draws on Spinoza's (1985) thinking on the nature of power. Spinoza saw two modes of power operating within society: *potestas* (force from above which suppresses and limits the subject) and *potentia* (energy and potential, the inner force possessed by each individual human) (Viljanen, 2007). The embodied nature of *potentia* means that through a Spinozan perspective, questions of political philosophy are inherently tied to affects (Del Lucchesse, 2009): an impassioned mind must be located within an impassioned body. The body feels the affects of social structure (Deleuze, 1988) even if the mind is not analysing the political economy producing it. For Spinoza thus, politics are personal where negative affects (e.g. sadness) impede *potentia*, whereas positive affects (joy, love, etc.) increase it. Moreover, and crucial to our arguments, these positive and negative affects are generated through interactions with other bodies (Deleuze, 1988; Del Lucchesse, 2009). Clearly thus, even within a more post-political paradigm, social relationships such as those constituted within youth subcultures can be understood to have some manner of political capacity, however disconnected to an articulated ideology.

Inasmuch as Spinoza saw that cognitive and affective knowledge run in parallel, with cognitive knowledge evolving alongside the body's physical interactions, he understood that emancipation requires both an embodied sense of political analysis and surging *potentia* (Del Lucchesse, 2009). These ideas also resonate comfortably with Gramsci's analysis:

The intellectual's error consists in believing that one can know without understanding and even more without feeling and being impassioned... one cannot make politics-history without this passion, without this sentimental connection between intellectuals and people-nation (1971: 418).

Arguably thus, the theoretical antecedents to both subcultural and post-subcultural perspectives acknowledge that politics has ideological and affective dimensions. For transformational politics to occur, according to Gramsci, these must be united and efforts to address the social structure must be conscious. What is arguably described by both Birmingham School and post-subcultural notions of affective resistance is thus a proto-politics submerged within leisure practices: *passion* without a clearly defined or articulated ideology. If 'half' of what is required for political transformation is arguably present within youth leisure, questions remain as to why it has been classed as entirely apolitical.

### **Small 'p' Politics**

Elsewhere, one of us has argued that the notion of 'resistance' has created problems for subcultural theory in a manner that can be redressed through better considering what, if anything, is being



resisted and if so, how (Ilan, 2014). It is arguable that the political aspirations and doubts of critical, leftist academics have contributed to the controversy. On the one hand there is a tendency to celebrate and lionize youth leisure as a kind of proto-revolutionary activity (see Hayward and Schuilenburg, 2014), whereas on the other hand such activities have also been dismissed as meaningless and empty hedonism (Winlow and Hall, 2009). For Hall et al. (2008), constituencies that once supported broad, progressive politics have instead internalised neoliberal principles of intense individuality, competitiveness and consumerism. For its part consumer capitalism is constantly poised to co-opt and commodify activities, ideas, forms of leisure and expressive practices that might seem to run counter to the 'mainstream' (Bennett, 1999; Hall et al., 2015). The temptation is thus to pessimistically dismiss the potential for politics within youth leisure where tangible and explicitly articulated *resistance* cannot be easily located. As Hodkinson (2012) implies, however, the lived experience of research subjects can provide important correctives to 'black and white' academic thinking, where answers can be found through interrogating not just 'spectacular' transformative resistance but also through an adequate and consistent focus on the kinds of 'unspectacular', ephemeral politics that can be located within youth subculture.

As Hollander and Einwohner (2004) effectively argue, 'resistance' is in the eye of the beholder and sociologically speaking the term is used in a remarkably inconsistent manner to describe a range of practices: from those that challenge the existing order to those more concerned with carving out a more comfortable place within it, whether conscious or un/pre-conscious. The fact remains that there are expressions of discontent and efforts to secure succour beyond the clear kinds of ideological and expressive cleavages that some claim are necessary. As we argue later, sentiments concerned with an ability to experience the status quo differently, even pleasurably, remain 'political' even if the 'small p' beginning the word needs to be emphasised. With its deep connections to transformative (and frequently Marxist) politics, the word 'resistance' perhaps can thus be abandoned in favour of more nuanced and clear concepts such as 'defiance' (see Ilan, 2015).

As Grossberg (1983) noted at the dawn of the neoliberal era, understanding Rock 'n Roll (and for our purposes, youth subcultural practice more generally) requires locating it within its historical and cultural context, which is undeniably post-modern:

'... a world characterized by the steadily rising rate of change that did not allow any appeal to a stable and predictable teleology... The ramifications of this fact are only now becoming visible as we confront a generation that no longer believes that their lives will be better than those of their parents, even though the "rhetoric of progress" is still present. Suddenly, "we are obliged to remake from scratch the foundation of our taste, as of our politics and our very lives"... as history loses its sense, it can no longer be a source for the values by which one chooses and values one's actions' (1983: 106-107; featuring quotes from Schjeldjahl, 1981).

Critiquing subcultural practices that have arguably lost sense of the kinds of political and aesthetic difference and radicalism that may or may not have been possible in the past is arguably not a particularly promising means of understanding the present. Indeed, the notion that young people participated more fulsomely in transformative politics during the 'golden age' of leftist politics in the west is a historically questionable proposition. This is precisely the point made by the Birmingham School subculturalists: mods, skins and 'ordinary lads' did not do overt politics. As Grossberg's above

quote indicates eloquently for all their varying degrees retro-worship and futurism, youth subcultures remain grounded in the post-modern present, and post-subcultural theories grounded in this context have valuable insights.

Arguments that describe how the prevalence, growth and velocity of the consumer culture have made all forms of political leisure impossible, perhaps forget that from the earliest days Birmingham subcultural theorists noted this tension, but concluded that some type of politics are registered in this manner, even if not transformationally. Grossberg (1983) illustrates how although consumers, subculturalists remain able to consume in a manner that speaks to their experience of social structure. It is arguable that there can be a tendency to mourn the absence of ideological politics within subcultural practice, whilst forgetting that its cultivation of affective politics is important. Indeed, Grossberg identifies the prime force of Rock 'n Roll as located within this affective space.

This resonates importantly with ideas around affect and *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Ahmed, 2014) that have come to increasing academic prominence in recent years (see also Pedwell, 2014). These perspectives highlight the complex relationships and interdependencies that exist between the material and discursive, ideological and emotional, which render attempts to conduct analysis at only one of these levels overly simplistic. Instead, the way that people feel must be understood as connected to their position in the socio-economic order, as emotions are produced both within and upon bodies that exist at varying places within the structured world. As Sara Ahmed (2014) demonstrates, trying to understand contemporary political practice without identifying the roles of fear, hate, disgust, empathy, hope and love make little sense at all. We would add to this list the role of pleasure and enjoyment which we demonstrate below perform important functions within processes of youthful identification, defiance and the cultivation of an affective sense of the possible. Without the analysis of affective politics that this approach allows, there is a danger that significant elements of youth and subcultural leisure might remain misunderstood.

### **A Politics of Identity and Becoming**

In a post-modern world where bounded identities are not always easily located, subcultural practices continue to serve the inherently political role of situating and habituating individuals into their structured position. Youth leisure acts as a crucible within which structured identities mediated by class, gender, sexuality and ethnicity are given shape: where dispositions and tastes are taken up, within which individual bodies and collectivities become marked with the signs of structural positionality and responses to this identification are enacted. Youth subcultures continue to be a site of struggle where internal understandings of the self, meet external impressions of the Other. Importantly, such processes are not necessarily built on a platform of ideological resistance, but coalesce around pleasure-giving activities.

Hebdige (1979) famously considered how newly arrived and second generation West-Indian immigrants to the UK used their own forms of musical expression in an attempt to insulate themselves from the often harsh and racist 'welcome' they experienced in the UK. This practice persisted with the dancehall becoming one of the few spaces where young black people could feel at home and hear the issues that matter to them being discussed lyrically (Henry, 2006). In this case, subcultural leisure provides a space apart from heavy-handed policing and racist discrimination. As a form of the politics of identification such leisure practices thus create a safe space within everyday life and help to generate a sense of who adherents are and what this means in the context of the

social structure. The lyrical themes within such spaces directly address the ways in which such communities are perceived by outsiders and assert an alternative more positive interpretation. It is the sense of being together, collectively participating in fun activities that affectively charges the identification. An articulated ideological inflection is present in this example, but it is not necessary for a less-definite politics of affective identification to emerge.

Recent research by Sumi Hollingworth (2015) demonstrates how subcultural and leisure practices become the spaces in which class, ethnicity and gender based identities are formed within school. The experiences of young people in class and in the yard give rise to variously compliant or deviant practices (from football to smoking), in a sense creating different subcultures. Here school represents the apex of the state, its laws and policies, the middle-class teaching profession and students at various positions within the social structure. The interactions between these groups, the friendship groups that emerge and the patterns of leisure they practice have considerable implications for how young people grow into the world and how they and others see their place in it. As such, pleasurable practices help to shape structured identities and thus have a significant political impact. The absence of an articulated political ideology is not equivalent to the absence of politics. The insights of the CCCS, in other words, can still hold merit particularly where augmented by the insights of post-subculturalism as evidenced below.

### **A Politics of Affective Solidarity**

The above processes of identification are charged by the powerful feelings and affiliations that bind together those who enjoy themselves together. In research undertaken in Havana, Cuba by the first named author the members of separate subcultural groups, one politically astute and the other outwardly hedonistic, both vested great importance in being together, sharing friendship, having fun and becoming intoxicated (Dlmou, 2013). Whether or not a political narrative is openly espoused, youth leisure practices tend to create a sense of solidarity. The power of class, gender, ethnicity and sexuality based structures to mark the identity of particular groups, arguably produces an affective sense of commonality amongst those so labelled: a felt sense of 'who we are' and 'who are like us' which is often only as solid as the nature of the labelling itself.

Post-political and post-subcultural perspectives have tended to view youth group sociability as more instrumental than solidaristic. This is a key point made by Winlow and Hall (2009) in their study of alcohol-driven night-time leisure in the north of England. They described principally young men who rely on temporary, opportunistic networks of acquaintances and more superficial friendships to facilitate night time leisure where intoxication, excitement and sensation are the true goals. Such a state of affairs would initially seem to contradict the notion of any kind of solidarity existing here, but instead a quest for individual stimulation that the most convenient and advantageous companions are sought to help secure.

Despite these views on the hollowness of contemporary youth relationships, Thurnell-Read (2011) in his ethnographic investigation of premarital stag tourism of British male groups to Eastern European cities, shows that relationships in the alcohol-driven night-time economy are not simply opportunistic, ephemeral and meaningless. Rather through shared moments of collective drunkenness and the pursuit of excitement, joy and fun young men forge 'collective masculine experience(s)' (Thurnell-Read, 2011:40), embodying the performative and affective aspects of hegemonic masculinities. While the stag weekend ritualistically celebrates the 'loss' of a man who

'symbolically' leaves 'the homosocial, fraternal, peer group' (ibid), these forms of affective solidarity mediated by gender, ethnicity, sexuality, class and age are constructed through predominantly sensory, emotive and embodied experiences. Hence, the coming together of individuals into friendship groups for the purposes of becoming intoxicated and having a good time, remains a process that generates more affective solidarity than it is given credit for (see Maffesoli, 1996).

For Shilling and Mellor (2011: 19) the social meanings of collective intoxication (frequently present in subcultural practice) can resonate with Durkheimian principles around the sublimation of individualism and the production of solidarity: 'if modern people are deprived of regular effervescent assemblies they may seek out other intoxicating means of provoking the transformations occasioned by group events'. Durkheim (1995) famously theorised that collective effervescence, the intense feelings generated within communal rituals where individuals are bodily marked and become intoxicated to become part of something greater than themselves, is a crucial component of the social. Indeed Martin (1999: 93) argues that in the rave 'one becomes all, or rather the distinction between one and all disappears'. The loss of the individualistic self within practices of dance, pleasure and intoxication is thus in a sense liberation from everyday instrumental subjectivities from which a communal solidarity and subjectivity emerges. In contemporary capitalism, however, Shilling and Mellor (2011) argue that intoxication is more widely retained only inasmuch as it refreshes individuals for economic productivity, and that absent of 'directionality' (the embedding of collective values), it can become 'abnormal': excessive and anomic. Whilst this can describe the scenes all too evident within contemporary night time leisure spaces frequented by young people, it does not preclude the emergence of affective solidarity.

Moore (2012) on Electronic Dance Music (EDM) scenes shows that intoxication-linked practices cannot always be assumed to be entirely anomic. Solidarity can be generated both in spectacular moments of clubbing and online in the unspectacular everyday emotional interactions facilitated by digital technologies, whereby 'digital affect' is generated (see Moore, 2012: 110-111). Such interactions, involve 'affective investment' both online and offline: a 'self-representation' to audiences that are imagined and understood to be close to clubbers' 'identities and collective allegiances (i.e. drug-taker/abstainer; clubber/non-clubber)' (ibid.). She considers reactions to the closure of the Gatecrasher One nightclub, in Sheffield, UK, where clubbers placed flowers at the building and posted memorials online. The process drew clear distinctions between members of the imagined community who felt loss and grief and those seen to be outside of it (non-clubbers or binge drinkers). Online the clubbers also directly confront stereotypes that label their subculture nihilistic, inauthentic and meaningless. Affective solidarity is generated by activities that run the gauntlet between the blatantly commercial (consuming branded goods), the criminalised (the consumption of illegal drugs) and the affectively ecstatic (intoxication and dance). It exists thus at various levels of intensity in both spectacular and unspectacular moments of subcultural participation and practice.

Arguably contemporary youth have been marooned to a certain extent by the march of history and the collapse of modern community institutions and infrastructures beyond the market. This has not obviated the desire to seek solidarity, but has left little other than the consumeristic sphere of leisure as the arena within which this might be achieved. The subcultural opportunities that exist arguably offer the space to form fleeting affective solidarities in moments of collective delight and intoxication (sometimes the night time leisure market might promise these things but fail to deliver

them – see further Winlow and Hall, 2009). There are, however, multiple types of party people and party spaces (from the alcohol dominated night-time economies to highly diverse dance settings; from the bustle of the street to online communities) that produce different affective experiences for participants (see Measham, 2004; Bhardwa, 2013). Circumscribed by class, ethnicity, gender, age and sexuality (see Bhardwa, 2013) different types of affective solidarity are produced, from the ephemeral and weak to the more long-lasting and strong. All can be understood as proto-political, as the under-articulated desire for solidarity is arguably such. What they tend to lack is an ideological politics that creates the mobilization within which more truly instrumental and transformational forms of solidarity can coalesce. The collective pleasure seeking that is characteristic of subcultural and youth leisure retains political significance but attention to the ephemeral, the affective and the heterogeneity of leisure spaces and party people, as advocated by post-subculturalism, may be necessary to locate it.

### **A Politics of Different Experience**

Critiques of contemporary western night-time leisure rightly point to its existence as a fundamentally capitalist enterprise (see e.g. Smith, 2014; Winlow and Hall, 2009). Whilst this is the arena within which so much subcultural activity takes place, this need not necessarily mean that the entirety of its energy has been co-opted to service the neoliberal status quo. Instead, we argue that there is a dialectic operating here, where profoundly political tensions exist in the attempt to harness non-utilitarian pleasure for the purpose of utilitarian capital accumulation. Measham (2004:344) for example describes the move ‘from the criminalization of a cultural space (the unlicensed rave) to the commodification of criminal culture (within the licenced leisure space)’. Youth leisure practices and spaces are precisely where governments exhibit their power to set out what is ‘permissible’ pleasure (moderate, responsible, sensible alcohol consumption - a glass of wine or a cocktail in a calm terrace space or restaurant) and ‘impermissible’, ‘bestial’ pleasures (extreme drinking, illicit drug use, ‘unsafe’ sex in the night-time economy) (O’ Malley and Valverde, 2004:31). In governmental and academic discourses on intoxication, pleasure when and if mentioned, is interpreted through the classicist lens of ‘felicific calculus’ (ibid: 37). As such, rational, freely chosen ‘pleasure’ becomes understood as responsible enjoyment as a reward for labour, success, achievement and productivity whilst pleasure that does not fit this framework becomes labelled as savage, bestial, pathological, compulsive, abusive, risky and harmful. Policies are adopted to regulate, control, ‘cure’ or even criminalize such practices (ibid). The partial co-option of these ‘wrong’ types of pleasures into the capitalist realm cannot entirely resolve the political tensions that the censure of them produces.

Whilst certainly harvested for profit, youth practices of intoxication, dancing, eroticism and *jouissance*, often subcultural to a greater or lesser extent, contain within themselves the potential to be experienced by their practitioners as outside of economically productive activity: a sense of life lived outside of the dictates of labour, rationality and the markets (however much in ‘reality’ the night-time economy remains part of ordinary capitalist production). George Bataille (1991) famously argued that the heterogeneous realm (of loss, excess, eroticism, death and hedonism) cannot ever be fully integrated into the homogenous realm (of order, rationality, law and economic productivity). This heterogeneous realm is instead bound up in complex processes of ‘sacrifice’ by which certain states of being are made sacred and lifted out of mundane life (see Shilling and Mellor, 2013). Intoxication facilitates different ways of ‘being in the world’, as it reveals multiple new sensory,

performative and affective possibilities from the ones associated with the homogenous realm (Duff, 2008: 386). For example, in the case of the stag party (Thurnel-Read, 2011: 39) losing one's mundane self is facilitated by a range of sensory and affective 'stimuli': the drunken cheering and shouting of the stag group, the smell and taste of vodka or beer, the smell of vomit, the ever-penetrating sound of the nightclubs' bass speakers, excitement, fun, playfulness, laughter, disgust and embarrassment. As much as the leisure industries capitalise on such practices, they simultaneously offer a taste of life outside of the bounds of neoliberal instrumentality.

Subcultural experiences that place primacy on the non-utilitarian principles of enjoyment, fellowship and loss challenge the individuality, competitiveness and money-mindedness of contemporary culture. For sure, narcissism and competition do not become entirely displaced and continue to exist, but a different experience to these emotions can also be present. Dancing whilst high on drugs for example has been shown to leave participants 'transformed' through feeling, experiencing and connecting with their bodies, friends and strangers in profoundly new and meaningful ways (Duff, 2008:387). Here, losing the mundane self facilitates a new appreciation of emotions (empathy, love) that can be expressed in 'deeper and more intimate conversations' (ibid.). Rationality is made secondary to the embodied, sensory and affective with language, the cornerstone of reason, frequently failing to adequately articulate what individuals feel (Duff, 2008; Martin, 1999). This stands in stark contrast to the neoliberal imperative to account for and narrate the self in rational, disciplined, independent, consumeristic, emotion-free, self-interested and competitive ways. For fleeting moments, traditionally sacred states of being trump the self-regulation required by dictates of mundane neoliberal prerogatives. For Mellor and Shilling (2013: 321 emphasis in original) what is considered 'sacred' can help to make sense of:

'how societies *develop* cultural priorities, of how societies stimulate individuals to *become* certain types of social subjects, and of the risks and opportunities that arise in milieux characterized by shrinking or expanding prospects for creating sacred objects, values and identities'.

The notion of subculture speaks to a sense of connection to the lesser venerated aspects of our total culture, and subcultures can be understood as existing as one of the milieux identified by Mellor and Shilling. In this manner, the values and priorities of subcultural practice, whilst frequently exploited by the market, or harnessed by practitioners to advance their own careers (see Snyder, 2009) can also provide an awareness of the deficits in contemporary culture through venerating those aspects of human life that neoliberalism neglects or denies. In other words, subcultural practice can provide a sense (however momentary) of life lived according to different priorities. This we argue can constitute a visceral proto-politics, the kind of embodied understandings of what is possible that Gramsci and Spinoza noted are important to transformative politics.

Bataille (1991) discussed how the heterogeneous realm tends to be concentrated within temporally-bounded festivals, so that its energy tends to be contained and released in a controlled manner without threatening the political status quo. This is an insight that was carried forward into understanding contemporary culture by Mike Presdee (2000) who noted that although the carnivalesque is scattered through everyday life by the consumer culture, it is temporary release as opposed to transformational politics that is produced. Nevertheless, the fleeting feelings of freedom and fellowship that can be produced in the more intense pleasurable moments of subcultural

leisure/practice will constitute for many, a rare opportunity to experience the social world differently. This is potentially political; whatever is required for an articulated politics to emerge from it.

### **A Politics of Defiance**

The modes of politics set out above have an emergent and unrealised nature. Ultimately, critics of the idea that politics exists within subcultural practice could point to this for vindication. The argument we make, however, is that in the absence of conscious forms of ideology that can galvanize and advance these proto-politics, they remain not as transformational movements, but as self-defeating modes of defiance. Defiance burns bright with a body-felt-sense of power but ultimately fizzles out. It differs from 'resistance' in that it is often not directed against a particular set of socio-economic principles, but is ultimately concerned with the momentary thwarting of a particular institution to generate a sense of power that is otherwise difficult to achieve (Ilan, 2014; 2015). Defiant gestures by targeting surface, rather than root forms of perceived oppression ultimately do not threaten the status quo, and often simply reinforce or exacerbate the defiant individual's position within it. Consider the case of Willis' (1977) lads who feel a power over the teachers they laugh at, only to find themselves years later performing similarly at the expense of their bosses as they take up semi/low skilled work. The notion of *magical resistance* which ultimately insured that working-class kids got working class jobs, clearly identifies subcultural politics as a means of supporting rather than transforming the status quo. It is a politics of futile defiance as opposed to a form of emancipation and this has been the case since before the dominance of neoliberalism and postmodernism. This does not mean, however, that a combination of subcultural and postmodern perspectives cannot help to make sense of more contemporary manifestations of this phenomenon.

The heterogeneous is wrapped into processes by which youth subcultures seemingly engage in what some might call 'negativistic' activities: e.g. vandalism, excessive intoxication, placing immediate pleasure and autonomy over career progression or utilitarian concerns. The temptations to critique such actions for failing to produce change risk neglecting the realisation that power is experienced in the immediate moment of the challenge. There is an affective politics of defiance here, an expression of discontent, of frustration and of a willingness to assert autonomy and experience momentary freedom, however potentially limiting the consequences of these practices might be. What is absent is an analysis of political-economy and the role of an individual's conscious actions and attitudes in challenging it. It remains worth paying attention to the subtle defiance that can be observed where individuals seek to defy the restrictions of their gendered, classed and racialized position in the socio-economic hierarchy, without challenging the nature of the hierarchy itself. It is ultimately important to recognise how individuals experience their own practices, and to understand that their actions may speak back to how they perceive the social structure, and that this is political, even if not necessarily overtly ideologically or transformatively so.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper we have argued that it remains useful to use the idea of 'subculture' to understand the political significance of youth leisure. This is a practice that dates back to the work of the CCCS and in their own terms involves investigating both easily identifiable, coherent and choate groups as well as looser collections of individuals who gather to enjoy practices that are associated with the less

venerated aspects of contemporary culture. We argue that a view of youth leisure as exclusively hedonistic and apolitical risks overlooking the more subtle forms of proto-politics that arguably exist within them. We have argued that post-subcultural theory can be interpreted in such a way as to add to the conceptual tool-box of a subcultural perspective and allow for an analysis of affective and ephemeral proto-politics, which is different to the 'resistance' that might be associated with adherence to a conscious, transformative political ideology. We have demonstrated that the theoretical antecedents to both subcultural and post-subcultural perspectives support such an interpretation. By combining the two perspectives we have shown the kinds of politics that might be said to exist within contemporary subcultural practice and youth leisure.

It is useful to recognise the political potential within the lives of those young people so greatly disadvantaged by the status quo. Gramsci, after all made the argument that the need for and means to change must be bodily felt not just intellectually understood. In the absence of a contemporary ideology that provides the ideas and analysis that can harness and reflect the feelings that young people experience in their everyday lives to the extent that they are moved by it, simply dismissing their behaviour as apolitical and exclusively hedonistic risks over-simplifying what is occurring. It remains necessary for an ideology to emerge that can do this, and thus far neither academic intellectuals nor youth subcultures seem to have been successful in supplying this. Where identities are assigned through the operation of the social structure, it is inherently political for youth groups to lay claim to or reject this identity, to celebrate or to challenge it. It is inherently political to focus on loss, fellowship and enjoyment where society preaches instrumentalism, competition and utilitarianism. It is inherently political to seek out allies and the likeminded. It is inherently political to lash out against the institutions of perceived oppression, even if this changes little and simply places the actor in a more disadvantaged position.

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