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**The trouble with class: Researching youth, class and culture beyond the 'Birmingham School'.**

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# **The trouble with class: Researching youth, class and culture beyond the 'Birmingham School'.**

## **Abstract**

This paper revisits the work on youth cultures and sub-cultures that emerged from Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (hereafter CCCS: 1) during the 1970s. I engage with a number of recent critiques of the 'youth sub/cultures project' (2), including Thornton's influential work on rave and club cultures and its troubled engagement with class. I argue that the focus of the youth sub/cultures project on mediated cultural practices through which young people constitute themselves and their (gendered, classed and racialised) positions remains of value, especially the emphasis on a 'symptomatic reading' that locates these processes in a 'conjunctural analysis'. I end by exploring the legacy of this project for understanding youth, class and culture in contemporary late modern society.

119 words

## **Introduction**

In the second half of the 1970s, CCCS produced a series of highly influential texts on the relationship between (predominantly white, male, working class, heterosexual British) youth and popular culture. Books and papers by Hall and Jefferson (1975), Hebdige (1979), Willis (1977), Corrigan (1979), McRobbie (1978) and McRobbie and Garber (1975) were to prove formative for what became the new field of youth sub-cultural studies (3). Work linked to 'the Birmingham School' attempted to represent youth sub/cultures from the 'inside', drawing on ethnographic methods as well as versions of New Left Marxist and feminist theorizing. This work took young people's cultural practices seriously, in opposition to an academic and popular orthodoxy that viewed working class youth in overwhelmingly negative terms.

As someone who worked at CCCS in the early 1980s, I have always been surprised by the rapidity with which this diverse and profoundly oppositional body of work came to be constituted as a uniform approach and even as an orthodoxy (4). The 'CCCS approach' was never a unified set of ideas or a common framework: it was forged in and through contestation, although only some of these debates came to be reflected in published texts (eg. Frith, 1983; McRobbie, 1980; McRobbie and Garber, 1975; Powell and Clarke, 1975). These disputes could be unpleasant, but they also reflected a passionate engagement with theory, research and politics at a time when those connections mattered – and could happen - in British universities. Despite their differences, many of those involved in the early youth sub/cultures project were grappling with a common set of politically-informed theoretical debates, which contributed to a sense of coherence, as did the collective working practices from which much of this work emerged (5).

## **Youth sub-cultures, cultures and class: The youth sub/cultures project and post-WW2 Britain**

The youth sub/cultures project was formed at a particular historical, cultural and political conjuncture, as referenced in the sub-title of *'Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-war Britain'* (Hall and Jefferson, 1975; hereafter 'RTR'). This period was characterised by the emergence of 'teenagers' as an increasingly visible social and economic group with more disposable income, a market geared to youth consumption and an expanding culture industry targeted at and engaged in producing a distinctive 'youth' market (Griffin, 1993, 1997). Its wider context was the loss of Empire amid the post-WW2 era of apparent affluence, embourgeoisement and consensus. The youth sub/cultures project treated (primarily white, male, heterosexual) working class youth cultural practices as imbued with meaning and political significance, as worthy of study in their own terms, and as potentially creative rather than inherently destructive and of minimal cultural value. The work also aimed to understand the significance of working class youth sub/cultures via a mediated view of the latter that explored the cultural and political significance of youth styles, music and popular culture. Youth sub/cultural theory politicised (working class) youth style.

A major impetus for the youth sub/cultures project involved charting what John Clarke and colleagues termed "the *stubborn refusal of class to disappear* as a major dimension and dynamic of the social structure" in post-WW2 Britain (Clarke et al. 1975, p.25, original emphasis). The Introduction to 'RTR' challenged the then pervasive representation of 'youth culture' in media commentaries and academic research as a relatively uniform entity that was taken as evidence of a new classlessness (eg. Clarke et al., 1975). Clarke and colleagues aimed to put class, rather than age and generation, at the centre in theorising the lives of young people. The youth sub/cultures project viewed working class youth cultures through a lens of power,

following Thompson (1960), Williams (1963), and of course, Marx. 'RTR' drew on a particular concept of culture as a collective practice that produces lives and meanings, forging an articulation of and between structural locations and abstract individuals. Marx was quoted at length as delineating the Cultural Studies approach to culture:

“as individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production, both with *what* they produce and with *how* they produce” (Marx, 1970, p.42).

The youth sub/cultures project was also forged in opposition to the Marxist line of the time, which located political resistance in traditional forms of union activism in the arena of labour and production, and absolutely not in the field of popular culture (Hall and Jefferson, 2006). The project aimed to understand how young working class people reproduce, negotiate and transform their material conditions through signifying cultural practices, but (to paraphrase Marx) not in circumstances of their own making (Clarke, 2009). The Introduction to 'RTR' offered a materialist definition of culture as “that level at which social groups develop distinct patterns of life, and give *expressive form* to their social and material life-experience” (Clarke et al., 1975, p.10, original emphasis). Working class youth subcultures were seen as “social formations constructed as a collective response to the material and situated experience of their class” (Clarke et al., 1975, p.47).

Working class youth subcultures were therefore viewed both as *responses* to the “material and situated experience” of (primarily white, male and heterosexual) working class youth, and as *attempted solutions* to those problems. In the absence of any clear 'subcultural solution' to the material conditions in which working class young people found themselves in 1970s Britain, subcultures could offer only 'magical' resolutions, to use Phil Cohen's phrase (Cohen, 1972). RTR did not dismiss the 'magical resolution' offered by youth subcultures as a form of 'false

consciousness' (unlike traditional Marxists), or 'juvenile delinquency' (unlike those working in the sociology of deviance), but attempted to take these sub/cultural forms seriously and on their own terms. One of the difficulties with the CCCS approach, which became the focus of subsequent critique, was the tendency to view (white, male) working class youth sub/cultures as potentially resistant in political terms (Hodkinson and Diecke, 2007).

The youth sub/cultures project focussed on working class (primarily white, male and heterosexual) youth subcultures partly as a consequence of this emphasis on delineating the connections between "the material and situated experience" of subordinated classes in post-WW2 Britain, and specific ideological, cultural and political formations. This produced a distinctly blinkered approach to the intersecting forces of gender, 'race' and sexuality, according class a primacy that eclipsed the potential impact of other important sets of social relations. It proved extremely difficult to disentangle potentially 'resistant' facets of white male working class cultures from their sexist, racist and/or heterosexist elements, and this was the focus of sustained critique from the start (Amos and Parmar, 1981; Jones, 1988; McRobbie and Garber, 1975; Race and Politics Group, 1982).

Until the mid-1980s, research involving young people was characterised by a well-established and relatively uncritical focus on young men as the unmarked norm (Griffin, 1987). It was commonplace for major research projects and theoretical frameworks to involve male-only samples or to revolve primarily around the experiences and perspectives of young men. Young women therefore appeared as marginal and/or deviant, and simply by focussing on the lives of girls and young women, female researchers were viewed as engaged in a political endeavour in a way that male researchers exploring the lives of young men were not (Griffin, 1987). Some of the most heated debates at CCCS during the early 1980s concerned the ways in which a theoretical framework with its roots in Marx might be rethought to address the

complex inter-relationships between gender, race, sexuality and class (Women's Studies Group, 1978; Race and Politics Group, 1982; Gilroy, 1987).

These debates predated the concept of intersectionality and subsequent theoretical discussions within feminist and postcolonialist theory (Ahmed et al., 2000; Spivak, 1999). The youth sub/cultures project has tended to be judged (and found wanting) according to the values of subsequent political moments, especially where the intersections of race, gender and sexuality are concerned. The harshness of more recent critiques can obscure the battles of feminist and other youth cultural researchers involved in the youth sub/cultures project at the time in their attempts to move beyond the boys' own blinkers that characterised the CCCS approach – and most other youth research of the period.

### **“Some kind of collective obsession”: Debate, disagreement, critique, backlash**

As early as the mid-1980s, theorists in the British sociology of youth were referring to the work of 'the Birmingham School' in derogatory terms as an 'orthodoxy' that needed to be countered (Griffin, 1993). The youth sub/cultures project was later the focus of sustained critique in the wake of postmodernism, especially with respect to the work of Baudrillard (1983), and later Maffesoli (1986) (Blackman, 2005). These theorists challenged the notion that people's political, social and psychological perspectives can be read from their structural locations in any straightforward way, and subsequent work criticised the overly simplistic, even romanticised perspective of the 'CCCS approach' in this respect (Hodkinson and Diecke, 2007). A continuing theme in these critiques addressed the reluctance of CCCS researchers to recognise that many sub-cultural forms involve young people from a range of class locations and trajectories, incorporating considerable internal diversity and contradiction (Clarke, 1981).



Initial critiques focussed on the marginal relevance of sub-cultural forms for most working class young people, who did not identify as part of any specific sub-cultural style or 'scene'. Richard Jenkins' 1983 text, *'Lads, Citizens and Ordinary Kids'*, for example, questioned the value of a focus on sub-cultures - and style - for understanding the position(s) and experience(s) of working class young people in Belfast as the 1980s unfolded (6). Another substantial focus of critique revolved around disagreements regarding the nature and status of the evidence presented in youth sub-cultural studies, and the areas of apparent mismatch between theoretical arguments and young people's lived experiences (S. Cohen, 1980, cited in Hall and Jefferson, 2006).

The arguments emerging from the youth sub/cultures project, and the way these arguments were presented, were particularly objectionable to 'mainstream' sociologists operating from a positivist perspective (Griffin, 1993). (Sub)cultural studies, even in its emergent form, was never a positivist project, and its research texts seldom followed traditional forms of 'scientific' argumentation, nor indeed rigorous ethnographic methods (7). Within CCCS there was also a considerable tension between a strand of work based on the development of relatively abstract theorisation, with its foundations in Althusserian Marxism, and a related, but different strand of more 'concrete' ethnographic research. The difficulties involved in reconciling these two approaches are reflected in the structure of Paul Willis's influential text *'Learning to Labour'*, with parts one and two focussing on 'Ethnography' and 'Analysis' respectively (Willis, 1977).

In the 1990s the youth sub/cultures project became the focus of more intense critique, and ironically this came primarily from researchers with an interest in youth and (sub) culture. As David Hesmondhalgh has argued, the concept of sub-culture associated with CCCS has

become almost “off limits” to many contemporary youth researchers. He characterised the various critiques of the youth sub/cultures project that peaked during the 1990s as “some kind of collective obsession...when a critical deluge came pouring out of youth cultural studies” (2007, p.37). In many respects, this was hardly surprising.

By the mid-1980s, the work of the ‘Birmingham school’ was being taught in sociology, media and cultural studies courses in the UK and elsewhere, presented to students as a key approach to understanding youth and popular culture. In the process it came to be constituted and ‘read’ in a particular way. Subsequent generations of researchers attempted to apply youth sub/cultural theory to the situation of young people in different countries, and at different historical and political conjunctures. They did so from a position in which the work of CCCS was increasingly likely to be constituted as a relatively uniform entity that was recognisable as an ‘orthodoxy’ to be countered. Being taught to subsequent generations of students as a key theory that is reflected in a set of ‘seminal texts’ is in itself usually sufficient to generate critique in the academic domain. However, it is the vehemence of much of the more recent critiques of the youth sub/cultures project, the fervent avoidance of too close an association with the reviled ‘CCCS approach’, and the urgency of the need to designate recent work on youth and culture as ‘post-subcultural’ (or even ‘anti-subcultural’) that intrigues me the most (Hodkinson and Deicke, 2007). I think other forces were at play here, in particular the difficult relationship of ‘post-Birmingham’ researchers with the theorisation of class during the 1990s. This was most clearly reflected in Sarah Thornton’s influential text ‘*Club Cultures*’ (Thornton, 1995: hereafter ‘CC’).

## **The trouble with class: Sarah Thornton, *'Club Cultures'* and "the will to classlessness"**

As the 1980s wore on, youth sub/cultures changed and dissolved as the rave and party scenes emerged and expanded into a global phenomenon (Blackman, 2005; Malbon, 1999). Aspects of feminist and gay/lesbian culture were incorporated into mainstream popular culture (McRobbie, 2009; Bell and Valentine, 1995), and urban youth became increasingly diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, nationality and culture (Sharma et al., 1996). The 1990s brought a shift towards more complex constellations of youth-based cultures that bore little resemblance to the more clearly demarcated, classed, gendered and racialised youth sub-cultural groups of the immediate post-war period. These were 'Thatcher's children', partying on the other side of what Hall and Jefferson termed "the fault line of the 1980s" (2006, p.xxix). Youth culture had also become increasingly commercialised, and the yellow smiley face trope of early acid house music became a ubiquitous symbol in mainstream popular culture, much to the horror of its early adherents (Thornton, 1995). The growth of electronic dance music culture (hereafter EDMC) and emerging technologies enabled faster and more complex relationships between popular youth cultural production and consumption (Wilson, 2006). The 'CCCS approach' began to be represented as increasingly out-moded – the ultimate sin in youth-related research as in many youth sub/cultures.

*'Club Cultures'* was an influential attempt to explore the cultural and political significance of EDMC, engaging with postmodern theory (ie. Baudrillard, 1983) via a critique of youth sub/cultural theory (see also Malbon, 1999). Thornton also drew on Bourdieu's work on distinction and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984) to develop the alternative concept of 'subcultural capital', in which subcultures were reconceptualised as 'taste cultures',

emphasising the importance of obtaining and displaying appropriate subcultural capital within youth (sub)cultures.

Thornton identified 'the Birmingham school' as of minimal value for her own work and for understanding club cultures, positioning her work as 'post-Birmingham' on several different grounds. Firstly, Thornton argued that used the concept of 'subcultures' differently, as referring to "those taste cultures which are labelled by media as subcultures" and the term subcultural "as a synonym for those practices that clubbers call 'underground'" (1995, p.8). Secondly, she stressed her indebtedness to the Chicago school rather than "Birmingham subcultural studies", as if the latter had not also been substantially influenced by the former. Thirdly, Thornton argued that "the classic Birmingham subcultural studies tended to banish media and commerce from their definitions of authentic culture...position[ing] the media as in opposition to and after the fact of subculture" (1995, p.9). Thornton presented her preferred approach as an "attempt to problematise the notion of authenticity and see various media and businesses as integral to the authentication of cultural practices" (p.9). Finally, Thornton represented her approach as focusing on cultural and social change (via archival research on British dance music culture since WW2 and ethnographic research between 1988 and 1992), in contrast with the 'CCCS approach'.

In 'CC' Thornton focused on three overlapping cultural hierarchies within the predominantly white and heterosexual sections of the British dance scene of the late 1980s and early 1990s. These are the distinctions between much-revered 'authenticity' and the 'fake'; between the 'hip' and the disparaged 'mainstream'; and between the 'underground' and 'the media' that formed the basis of 'subcultural capital' (Thornton, 1995). She concluded that many young people involved in these dance/club scenes operated according to "the politics of the youthful will to classlessness" (1995, p.167), which she referred to as "a strategy for transcending being

classed. ... a means of obfuscating the dominant structure in order to set up an alternative and, as such, is an ideological precondition for the effective operation of subcultural capital" (1995, p.167). As a consequence, Thornton argued that "subcultural capital is not as class-bound as cultural capital", since class "does not correlate in any one-to-one way with levels of youthful subcultural capital" (1995, p.12).

On closer inspection, Thornton's notion of 'classlessness' rests on her difficulties in determining the class background of clubbers and speculations about the attempts by upper-middle class youth to 'pass' as working class. Her occasional reference to upper middle class youth adopting working class accents is taken as evidence of how "class is wilfully obfuscated by subcultural capital" (p.12). Thornton represents this as an attempt by young people to escape from "the trappings of parental class" (p.12), a "pursuit of classlessness" in which young clubbers "are still interested in being a step ahead and a cloud above the rest" (p.91). Thornton interpreted these phenomena as evidence of the *lessening* relevance of class in the lives of clubbers, although she did acknowledge the inherent contradiction between the "will to classlessness" and the vestigial interest in staying "a step ahead and a cloud above the rest".

What Thornton did not recognise is that her participants' attempts to obscure their class backgrounds could be viewed as evidence of the *heightened* significance of class. Thornton and many other EDMC researchers missed the uneasy relationship between the much-vaunted core values of PLUR (peace, love, unity and respect) within EDMC and a parallel set of more coded elitist values or practices that were classed, gendered and racialised. Thornton noted her participants' disparaging talk about the influx of 'raving Sharons', 'techno Tracys' and 'acid Teds' dancing to the derided 'handbag house' that entered the scene during the 1990s. She did not interrogate the gendered associations with white working class culture in

these accounts in any depth – although she did note this contradiction elsewhere in the book (1995, p.114).

Thornton did not explore the political significance of this “will to classlessness” in the dying days of Thatcherism – which *does* set her approach apart from that of the ‘Birmingham school’. Clubbers’ attempts to “obfuscate” class and their class origins can be viewed alongside their fervent derision of the ‘inauthentic’ mainstream, the deluded and boring masses, and their desire to be part of the ‘hip’ and special secret world of dance culture. Thornton missed a golden opportunity to explore the reconfiguration of class that was playing out in 1990s club cultures. Along with most other EDMC researchers, she overlooked the extent to which class was everywhere and nowhere in clubbers’ discourse, lurking in and behind the facade of PLUR. Thornton argued that “subcultural capital is the linchpin of an alternative hierarchy in which the axes of age, gender, sexuality and race are all employed in order to keep the determinations of class, income and occupation at bay” (1995, p.105). What she did not explore is *why* subcultural capital might have taken this form at this particular conjuncture, and the wider political significance of this process both within and beyond the domain of EDMC.

Despite Thornton’s somewhat conflicted relationship with the ‘Birmingham school’, ‘CC’ did shift youth sub/cultural studies towards a fuller engagement with rave and dance culture and the various social and cultural changes of the late 1980s and ‘90s (Riley et al., 2010; Wilson, 2006). Thornton’s exploration of ‘subcultural capital’ emphasised the significance of diversity *within* youth (sub)cultures, in contrast to some earlier work in the CCCS mould. ‘CC’ also explored the implications of late modernity for youth and culture, especially the expanding role of the media culture industries and the increasing importance of consumption processes. Much subsequent work in the arena of ‘post-subcultural’ research as it came to be known

(Muggleton, 2000; Hodkinson, 2007), engaged in detailed debates about the most appropriate way of conceptualising youth's relationship to culture: via notions of (neo)tribe (following Maffesoli, 1986; see Bennett, 1999), scene (Redhead, 1993), lifestyle (Jenkins, 1983; Miles, 2000) - or "none of the above" (Hesmondhalgh, 2005). I have not engaged with these approaches in any detail here, partly because they have been discussed at length in a range of other texts (eg. Hodkinson and Deicke, 2007; Pilkington et al., in press).

Much of this 'post-subcultural' work missed, or in some cases actively avoided, was any active engagement with what Hall and Jefferson (2006) termed the shifting terrain of class in British society following the 'fault-line' of the 1980s (although see Brown, 2003, 2007 for one exception). To some degree the determinedly 'anti-CCCS' perspective of much post-subcultural work can be seen as another reflection of the troubled relationship with class that Thornton and others identified in some EDMC club, rave and dance cultures of the late 1980s and 1990s. In contrast, the youth sub/cultures project attempted to develop a 'symptomatic reading' within the frame of a 'conjunctural analysis' (Hall and Jefferson, 2006). By 'symptomatic reading', Hall and Jefferson (2006) refer to the sense in which the youth sub/cultures project would ask "what is the postmodernism in [contemporary youth] subcultures symptomatic of?" (p.xxi), rather than (as Thornton and others have done) theorising the shift from class-based youth sub-cultures to taste-based club culture as an indication of the redundancy of the CCCS approach. A conjunctural analysis would lead us to ask "why now?", attempting to understand youth sub/cultural phenomena in relation to the "political, economic and socio-cultural changes of their respective times" (p.xiv). In the remainder of this paper I address the contribution of the youth sub/cultures project to contemporary youth research.

## **The legacy of the youth sub/cultures project:**

### **(1) From sub-cultural styles to youth cultural practices**

One of the key difficulties with the youth sub/cultures project was the attempt – and desire – to understand the structural location of working class young people and the political and cultural significance of their collective sub/cultural practices (with their associated potential for political resistance) primarily through the lens of sub-cultures. One consequence of this was a tendency to over-interpret young working class people's sub/cultures as the emerging formations of political vanguards. The other was to overlook the cultural practices of the majority of 'ordinary' working class young people and their role in relation to major social institutions such as education, the labour market and the family (Jenkins, 1983; MacDonald, 1997). Two related texts emerged from CCCS during the 1970s and '80s shifted the focus from the study of spectacular youth sub-cultures towards debates on the 'transition from school to work', and took more nuanced approaches to the political significance of working class youth cultural practices.

Paul Willis's *'Learning to Labour'* (hereafter 'LL') started from the perspective of the 'lads', a group of 12 white working class young men in an urban state secondary school in the English Midlands, who rejected the possibilities of academic advancement offered by education (Willis, 1977). The lads' mobilised a counter-school culture based around the importance of 'having a laff', pride in working class masculine practical abilities, and a celebration of an assertive masculinity that was also sexist, racist and heterosexist (although the latter would not have been a common term in the late 1970s). Willis presented the lads as complicit in their own class reproduction without patronising them or representing them as cultural dupes or mindless thugs. Through the related concepts of 'penetrations' and



'limitations', Willis side-stepped the difficulties associated with labelling specific working class youth cultural practices as either 'resistances' or 'collusions' (Griffin, 2004). However we still know relatively little about the other group who participated in the 'LL' project: the pro-school culture of the 'ear'oles'. Like Paul Willis himself, the 'ear'oles' were white working class young men who moved into 'mental' rather than manual jobs. Dismissed by the lads as 'cissies', they were likely to leave school with some academic qualifications and enter 'white collar' jobs in teaching or office work. We still know relatively little about whether such trajectories are still open to – or have been kept open by – young white working class men, and what such spaces might look like in the 'new global economic order' (see Roberts, 2010 for one recent exception).

'Typical Girls?' (hereafter 'TG'), a parallel text published ten years after 'LL', drew on similar methods to explore the social-psychological and cultural dimensions of the 'transition from school to work' for young, white working class women in the English Midlands (Griffin, 1985). This project focussed on young women's cultural practices in relation to the spheres of education, leisure, family life and the labour market as these shaped their negotiations of parallel pressures to 'get a job' and to 'get a boyfriend'. 'TG' drew on elements of the youth sub/cultures project in a fuller engagement with feminist theorisations of gender, class and sexuality. This focus on the lives of young working class women unsettled some of the foundational tenets of the sub/cultural approach, notably the basis of sub-cultural styles in gang- or group-based social formations, since for young women the predominant social form revolved around smaller intense friendship groups (cf. Hey, 1997). In addition, Willis's arguments about the continuity between the lads' counter-school culture and the masculine cultures of factory work did not have a clear equivalent for their female peers (Griffin, 1987). These texts explored the significance of working class youth cultures beyond the bedroom (eg. McRobbie and Garber, 1978) and the street corner (eg. Corrigan, 1979), but they did not

examine the representational force of class in British society in any depth – which was an important feature of the youth sub/cultures project.

### **The legacy of the youth sub/cultures project:**

#### **(2) Sub/cultures and the cultural signification of class – and gender**

Despite its predominant focus on the sub-cultural practices of young white working class heterosexual males, 'RTR' and allied texts had relatively little (and certainly little that was positive) to say about the major music-based youth sub-cultural form beloved of most white working class young men during that period – Heavy Metal (Hebdige, 1979; Frith, 1983).

Heavy Metal emerged in Britain during the late sixties, with the main areas of support in former industrial heartlands of the Midlands and the North of England (Brown, 2003). Heavy Metal has historically been associated with white, masculine, working class heterosexual youth cultures (Brown and Griffin, 2009), and is now a truly global phenomenon with a predominantly white working class male fan base. However, in common with many music-based youth (sub)cultures, Heavy Metal now involves young people from a variety of class locations and trajectories.

Metal scholar Deena Weinstein (2000) argues that this global spread is predicated on the cultural articulation of youth alienation, expressed through the blue-collar masculinist sensibility of Heavy Metal's music and imagery. That is, Heavy Metal can be viewed as blue collar/working class either by 'fact or sentimental attachment' (2000, p. 99), enabling it to recruit white collar/middle class youth from class fractions that may be only one generation away from manual work. A recent analysis of music reviews in the music weekly the '*New Musical Express*' (hereafter 'NME') between 1999 and 2007 explored the ways in which Metal bands, Metal music and Metal fans are marked by class and gender in contemporary British

rock journalism (Brown and Griffin, 2009: note 8). This work illustrates how Heavy Metal music and its fans are presented as cartoon like, comic and inauthentic to readers of the 'NME', such that white working class heterosexual masculinity is constituted as the 'constitutive limit' of racist and heterosexist excess (cf. Skeggs, 2004). In these texts, Heavy Metal is made to stand for a set of particularly negative characteristics that are attached to young white male working class bodies, even if the fan base of Metal music is more diverse.

The classed and gendered work that Heavy Metal is made to do in particular media sites is relatively autonomous from – but not independent of – the cultural practices and the class and gender positions and trajectories of Heavy Metal fans, bands and Heavy Metal culture(s). The fragmentation and diversity of Metal culture, Metal fans and Metal bands since the 1990s has not undermined the continued force of 'Heavy Metal' as a powerful signifier of the (white, male, heterosexual) working class in some sections of critical rock journalism and the liberal broadsheet press, at least in the UK. Drawing on Bourdieu's view of classification as a form of symbolic violence that constitutes both the classifier and the classified (Bourdieu, 1984), it is possible to argue that this enables dominant middle class modes of cultural authority to be inscribed within matters of musical taste and distinction (Savage, 2000; Skeggs, 2004). The legacy of the youth sub/cultures project is evident here in the emphasis on the (continuing) representational significance of Heavy Metal in particular British media, constituting white working class masculinity as politically reactionary, repulsive and excessive – though paradoxically exciting (Brown and Griffin, 2009). This is also a conjunctural analysis, examining the significance of such derisive texts in the light of recent theorisations of neo-liberalism (Rose, 1989) and late modernity (Giddens, 1991).

## **The legacy of the youth sub/cultures project:**

### **(3) Reconfiguring class and culture in the neo-liberal social order**

The youth sub/cultures project aimed to look beyond young people's collective sub/cultural practices, to locate their significance in wider political, cultural and historical conjunctures.

The project set out to 'read across' social domains, to understand the connection between youth sub/cultural phenomena and broader cultural configurations in order "to make sense of (as opposed simply to describe, celebrate or denigrate) what some of young people are making of what is being made of them" (Hall and Jefferson, 2006, p.xxxi-xxxii). In this respect the project was asking different questions compared with many subsequent studies of youth and sub/culture. It was concerned with the political significance of cultural practices; whether generational disaffection was a sign of broader social contradictions, and with the "nexus between culture and power" (Hall and Jefferson, 2006, p. ix).

Many critics of the youth sub/cultural project have taken Thornton's text and the shift from relatively distinctive class-based youth subcultures to more diffused club cultures of the 1980s and '90s as evidence of the demise of the RTR project (see Hodkinson and Deicke, 2007 for review). However, for Hall and Jefferson (2006), this shift did not reflect the fundamental inaccuracy of the youth sub/cultural project so much as an important cultural and political move in British society – and indeed in global capitalism as a whole. Hall and Jefferson understand this youth cultural shift as both a response to and an attempt at 'magical resolution' of recent major changes in late capitalism. The latter include globalisation, the commercialisation of culture, the development of mass consumption, the de-industrialisation of the Anglo-American world and the emergence of the new Right, all of which characterise the neo-liberal social order. Hall and Jefferson (2006) advocate an interrogation of the current state of youth sub/cultural practices in order to explore the significance of this turn to

postmodernism, fragmentation, liquidity, compulsory individualism and sovereign consumption in the wider social and political sphere.

It is now commonplace in social scientific circles to refer to a series of profound shifts in the structures and institutions of advanced industrial societies over the past 50 years that have resulted in an erosion of traditional anchors for social and personal identities (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991). In particular, theorists point to the decline in large-scale manufacturing industries in recent years, changes to traditional family forms, and the growth of consumption as a basis for the construction of identities. There is a body of academic and popular opinion that interprets these changes as evidence that contemporary Britain is a classless society, or at least one in which the significance of class is much reduced following the widespread decline in manufacturing industries and the growth of the service sector during the 1980s (Hodkinson, 2007). However, this has been fiercely contested by a number of youth researchers (eg. Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; Shildrick and MacDonald, 2006). There is little evidence that the macro-economic structurations of class have changed substantially since the 1960s and '70s, with a dramatic increase in social and economic inequalities around health, employment and education in British society since the early 1980s (MacDonald, 1997; Walkerdine et al., 2001). The emphasis on 'consuming oneself into being' within the neo-liberal social order therefore places a particular burden on working class young people without access to the necessary financial resources to buy 'the right stuff', with implications for social exclusion (Croghan et al., 2006).

Theorists such as Beck and Giddens offer a relatively optimistic interpretation of these changes, but theorists of neoliberalism present a more pessimistic picture, arguing that the increasing importance of the 'biographical project of the self' carries with it powerful new forms of governance (Rose, 1989). That is, contemporary discourses of individual freedom,

self-expression and authenticity demand that we live our lives *as if* this was part of a biographical project of self-realisation in a society in which we all have 'free' choice to consume whatever we want and to become whoever we want to be. This authentic and fully-realised self should be subject to continual (self-)surveillance, transformation and improvement, in a process that has long formed a central element of normative femininity, but is now being intensified and extended to affect masculinity as well (Walkerdine, 2003).

There is growing evidence that the distinctive pressures of neoliberalism appear to be taking a considerable toll on the mental health of young people in many parts of the affluent 'First world' (Forbrig, 2005). This operates through a perceived imperative on individual subjects to construct and display themselves as distinctive, authentic and discerning selves through consumption, and as ethical, responsible moral subjects. If young people behave or appear in ways that are taken to be excessive, unhealthy, irresponsible or undisciplined, then this is constituted as a *moral* failure of the self (Croghan et al., 2006; Griffin et al., 2009). Given that there is not a 'level playing field' (Skeggs 2005, p.974), some simply do not have access to the 'right' cultural resources and techniques to construct and display themselves in appropriate ways, with the result that many working class young people can only display a 'lack' of possession of culturally valued resources.

According to some theorists, the emergence of the neo-liberal order has signalled a profound reconfiguration of class at the centre of a cultural project revolving around symbolic violence (Skeggs, 2004). The signification of the working class as a viable and unitary culture that was understood (and understood itself) in its own terms all but disappeared in the UK during the 1980s. This has left the middle class as what Savage has termed the 'particular-universal' class, or the central reference point in British culture (Savage, 2000). According to this view, the virtual hegemony of a neo-liberal individualism against which representatives of the

working class are viewed as 'excessive' and 'inadequate', is made possible because of the economic and social decline of the working class. What might the implications of this thesis be for the cultural forms and practices of British youth in a globalised economic order? What cultural resources might the children and grandchildren of the mods, skins, punks and teds represented in the early youth sub/cultures project be able to draw on to negotiate the complex arenas of the education system, the welfare state, the labour market, family life and leisure within neo-liberalism?

These are questions for another paper, and for other projects. In this paper I have tried to illustrate some continuing benefits associated with the legacy of the youth sub/cultures project. The first is the attempt to develop symptomatic readings and conjunctural analyses of young people's lives; the second is the exploration of young people's cultural practices in relation to their attempts to survive, (re)produce and transform wider structures of education, family life, sexuality and the labour market; and the third involves analyses of the representational significance of 'youth' in relation to the social, economic and political conditions in which young people live. Finally, it is important to interrogate the continuing significance of class in the neo-liberal social order – both within and outside of the UK – as it intersects with social relations around gender, race and sexuality, drawing on theorisations from outside of youth research if necessary. Youth research can then enable us to understand, witness and document how different groups of young people live with and survive their multiple subordination, and to interrogate the continuing representational force of that desired and feared category – youth – as a means of understanding broader social formations around class, race, sexuality and gender.

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## Notes

1. CCCS (or what it became – the Department of Cultural Studies and Sociology) was summarily closed by the University of Birmingham during the summer of 2003 despite an international campaign objecting to this decision.
2. I have used the term ‘youth sub/cultures project’ throughout this text, following the terminology adopted in the Introduction to the second edition of *RTR* (Hall and Jefferson, 2006).
3. A number of other texts have proved equally influential, though not all are generally located within the CCCS youth sub/cultural ‘canon’ (eg. Hall et al., 1978; Race and Politics Group, 1982; Women’s Studies Group, 1978; Jones, 1988; McRobbie and McCabe, 1981).
4. The author was a researcher at CCCS from 1979 to 1982, working on a Social Science Research Council funded project on ‘Young Women and Work’, later published as ‘XXXX?’ (XXX). [**Anonymised**]
5. The pressures of the Research Assessment Exercise, growing marketisation and the extensive audit culture in British (and international) higher education has fundamentally undermined the opportunities for engaging in collective forms of academic work as practised at CCCS.
6. Jenkins drew on the concept of ‘youth lifestyles’ rather than culture or cultural practices, differentiating his approach from the Marxist perspective of the youth sub/cultures project (cf. Miles, 2000).
7. Two of the more interesting though frequently overlooked chapters in ‘*RTR*’ by Steve Butters and Brian Roberts, engaged with the nature of ‘method’, theory and research evidence in some depth (Butters, 1975; Roberts, 1975).
8. As an exemplar of ‘critical rock journalism’, the ‘NME’ retains a wide circulation and a self-proclaimed role as the leading guide to the ‘cutting-edge’ in youth music and style ([www.NME.com](http://www.NME.com)).



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