
Subcultures and Political Resistance

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In his influential work *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Dick Hebdige wrote,

Subcultures represent ‘noise’ (as opposed to sound): interference in the orderly sequence which leads from real events and phenomena to their representation in the media. We should therefore not underestimate the signifying power of the spectacular subculture not only as a metaphor for potential anarchy ‘out there’ but as an actual mechanism of semantic disorder: a kind of temporary blockage in the system of representation.

Much of the attraction of subcultures comes from the possibility they offer for reimagining the social landscape. Far distant from the prevailing norms of society, subcultural practices disrupt its smooth exploitative and demeaning workings. Punks, beats, mods, metalheads, ravers, hippies, and others have found on the margins a space of authentic transformation and sometimes autonomy, offering to the rest of the world a performative critique of its dull and hypocritical patterns.

Hebdige’s analysis of the “noise” produced by subcultures has deeply influenced the field of cultural studies; yet, it also runs the risk of overestimating the value of semantic as opposed to social innovation. The signifying behaviors embedded in subcultures have often been sufficiently transparent to make them readily available for appropriation; subcultures have served as fertile ground for trendspotters ready to bring the newest style to market. Stability is also a problem: disobedient individuals may abandon the difficult project of social transformation for mere signifying practices. And, they all too often glide smoothly back into the dominant culture once their years of butting heads with authority become tiresome.

This should come as no surprise. The 1970s counter-revolution effectively smashed the transformative and revolutionary hopes of the radical 1960s, ushering in the age of Reagan–Thatcher conservatism. In response, disenchanted youth found themselves limited primarily to apolitical or pre-political spaces. Whereas the 1960s heralded a Cultural Revolution on a global scale, the subcultures that emerged in its wake were forced to carve out individualized, local spaces (for example, Temporary Autonomous Zones or TAZs) in which their signifying practices of resistance would be encouraged and protected. Lines were sharply drawn between and even within competing subcultures, as demanded by survival and influenced by the broader hyper-individualism then rampant in society.

By the end of the 1990s, however, a new phenomenon began to emerge. With the rise of a global movement against neoliberalism, sparked in 1994 by the Zapatista rebellion in Chiapas, Mexico and culminating in the massive protests

between 1999 and 2001 in Seattle, Genoa, Athens, and elsewhere, subcultures stand poised to challenge the status quo and realize an alternative political vision of transformation. Sometimes called, if infelicitously, a “movement of movements,” the anti-globalization movement has produced a sea change in the interaction of subcultures. They have begun to drop historical feuds and rigid stylistic barriers to work, and learn, together. (Admittedly, this learning process is not without contradiction, as the spontaneity and energy of youth participants continues to be policed by advocates of “professional,” that is, bureaucratic, activism.) This sea change was made possible by the transformation of subcultures toward a culture and politics of fusion and heterogeneity. While stylistic blockages of social semantic resources are still an important part of resistance to the global corporate elite and their ideological stranglehold on mass media, subcultures are now a genuine political force.

The first, albeit short-lived, theoretical attempt to understand this phenomenon was through the idea of “post-subcultures.” Post-subcultural theory was a reaction against the dominant paradigm set by the Birmingham Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), and was instead influenced far more by the pioneering work of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and to some extent post-structuralism. As explained in *The Post-Subcultures Reader*, these new theorists rejected the CCCS dogma that posited the “unfolding and subsequent swift demise of a succession of discrete, clearly identifiable youth subcultures” and focused instead on the “sheer diversity and plurality of current (sub)cultural styles, forms and practices.”

The loss of the conceptual framework of “discrete” and “identifiable” subcultures does not mean that certain general categories aren’t still readily available, so long as we approach them with care. Punk remains the prototypical subculture, with an influential anti-capitalist, do-it-yourself (DIY) ethos that has enabled it to spread throughout the globe, influenced at every step by local cultures, music, and political needs. But the essays included in *The Post-Subcultures Reader* include: DIY protest cultures, techno tribes, Modern Primitives, Latino gangs, new-wave metallers, net.goths, and many more. Nonetheless, the significance of punk for thinking through the politics of subcultural resistance remains strong. This can, no doubt, be traced to some extent back not only to Hebdige’s continuing influence, but also to works such as Greil Marcus’s *Lipstick Traces*, which connects punk to the theory and practice of the surrealist-inspired Situationist International (remembered for their use of rocks to fend off police in Paris in May 1968, with the slogan, “under the paving stones, the beach!”), or George McKay’s *Senseless Acts of Beauty*, which looks closely at the punk band Crass and its impact on British politics.

Post-subcultural studies as a coherent discourse appears to have been a passing fad. Yet, its insights still remain strong. One of today’s tasks is to identify and analyze, in the fluid forms of youth culture and subculture, the basis for a global movement in support of economic, political, and intellectual freedom. After all, the underlying goals of today’s youth are not so different from what they were

at the dawn of the 1960s Cultural Revolution. As Herbert Marcuse, whose book *One-Dimensional Man*, influenced the counter-culture of the day, wrote in 1964,

Economic freedom would mean freedom *from* the economy—from being controlled by economic forces and relationships; freedom from the daily struggle for existence, from earning a living. Political freedom would mean liberation of the individuals *from* politics over which they have no effective control. Similarly, intellectual freedom would mean the restoration of individual thought now absorbed by mass communication and indoctrination, abolition of “public opinion” together with its makers.

United around the theme of *Subcultures and Political Resistance*, the essays in this special issue of *Peace Review* introduce readers to the depth and breadth of youth-oriented subcultures and the manner by which they seek political change. We do not attempt to address all subcultures, their styles, aims, and purposes. Such a project—running a spectrum from death-metal to happy-core—would require a much longer inquiry. Rather, we wish to point out several landmarks for future interest, while maintaining a diversity of voices. These voices reflect the very essence of subcultures themselves: that is, radically different from one another when viewed from afar but perhaps related in purpose when viewed up close. In this sense, the essays reveal unifying forces that have brought these subcultures together into the culture and politics of fusion.

More than just an introduction, then, this issue develops a lens through which scholars may view subcultures not just as symbolic actors engaged in signifying behaviors to remove themselves temporarily from the dominant culture, but also as agents of political change—political forces to be reckoned with, long after the ecstatic experiences of a particular scene have passed. Subcultures are a salient source of political socialization; for many young people, subcultures are the means by which they initially come to voice. With the ever-expanding neoliberal institutions and free-market processes dominant in today’s world, subcultures will continue to provide a vital political critique and alternative political vision not often heard in mainstream society.

In “The Sociology of Youth Cultures,” Alan O’Connor warns of the dangers of an unsophisticated analysis of subcultures, arguing that subcultures cannot be understood merely in terms of class objectives. Cultural differences impede the formation of a singular, or “homologous,” subcultural group across class, national, race, and ethnic boundaries. The next three essays expand on this base, examining the development of specific subcultural groups in the context of anti-capitalist struggle. In “New Protest Formations and Radical Democracy,” Oliver Marchart argues there is a difference between the antagonistic public face of the anti-globalization movement (periodically seen in massive street demonstrations) and the agonistic public sphere developed in activist social forums. While it is well known among activists that today’s widely diverse “movement of movements” has developed new modes of decision making (spokescouncils, for instance), these innovations are usually overshadowed by mass-media attention only to the antagonism between activists and state forces.

In Graham St. John’s “Counter-Tribes, Global Protest and Carnivals of Reclamation” as well as in George McKay’s “Subcultural and Social Innovations in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament,” the historic roots of today’s new protest formations are investigated. St. John shows how London’s Reclaim the

Streets (RTS) activists developed the practice of a carnival of protest, or what he calls a “protestival,” which enables direct action protesters to “rupture the present with figurative vision.” Combining civil disobedience with rave culture, RTS action opened up both the imaginative and political realms in resistance to market-driven society. McKay discusses tensions between the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament’s (CND’s) political aims (disarmament) and the social experiments born out of the festival culture it helped produce. From the 1958 Alderston March to the Glastonbury Festivals of the 1980s, subcultural formations were created that outlasted the disarmament movement and provided an object lesson in the “practical anarchy” that continues to permeate subcultural resistance today. Each of these essays gracefully weaves the practical with the theoretical and, taken together, they provide a strong foundation for a future (sub)cultural studies agenda.

The next two essays explore the role of gender within punk and as a separately emerging subculture, documenting the challenges and inroads women and “grrrls” have made. Helen Reddington’s “The Forgotten Revolution of Female Punk Musicians in the 1970s” looks at the reassertion of a masculinist status quo shortly after the emergence of strong female presences within British punk. Her concern—“where have all the women gone?”—is nicely counterpoised with Elke Zobl’s more optimistic “Revolution Grrrl and Lady Style, Now!” Zobl’s research into female “zines” (self-published and distributed “magazines”) and all-female “Ladyfests” shows that third-generation feminist radical activism may have shifted venues, but is hardly quiescent. Both of these essays reiterate the need for an ongoing critique of patriarchal and masculinist norms within subcultures as well as in mainstream society.

The last two essays address new forms of identity creation and sustainable community. Dylan Clark recounts experiences in the Black Cat Café in Seattle that contribute to what he calls “Waker Cells and Subcultural Resistance.” Waker cells are autonomous spaces in which subcultures are nourished and political actions developed. Though they seldom last especially long, the creation of autonomous community in relatively stable, non-commodified, pre-institutional spaces is essential to the next generation of anarchist and resistant sensibilities. In “A Commitment to Clubbing,” Karenza Moore counters common myths about electronic music and dance club cultures, typically represented in the media as merely hedonistic spaces rife with drug abuse. Instead, she describes the political uses of a culture of pleasure to counter the spirit of seriousness plaguing post-industrial culture. “Clubbing,” like the rave-influenced protestival, provides a space for liberatory, ecstatic imagination to flourish.

These last few essays show most clearly what is obviously true about the authors as a whole: these are not merely analysts and theoreticians, but participants in the cultures they write about. Practitioners of subcultural theory are activists, dancers, musicians, and artists. The subcultures they describe are rich archives of desire and possibility. Like the radical communities that have always driven it, subcultural studies will continue to grow and change, and we can only hope that the lessons garnered from these essays—about alienation, autonomy, commitment, pleasure, and freedom—are ones that influence the world to come.

RECOMMENDED READINGS

- Hebdige, Dick. 1987. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. London and New York: Routledge.
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