

# Subcultures, Popular Music and Social Change



# Subcultures, Popular Music and Social Change

Edited by

The Subcultures Network

**CAMBRIDGE**  
**SCHOLARS**  

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**P U B L I S H I N G**

Subcultures, Popular Music and Social Change,  
Edited by The Subcultures Network

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# PREFACE

CAROLINE COON

When, in September 2011, Professor Malcolm Gillies, Vice Chancellor of London Metropolitan University, opened the inaugural symposium of the Subcultures Network, he drew attention to “the civil strife and riots” erupting into visibility all around us.

Immediately impinging on university life was the anger expressed by young people against rising tuition fees, increased competition and cuts in higher education. Farther afield was the Arab Spring. Over the symposium weekend the Occupy Wall Street protest started, and would soon go world-wide.

Extreme responses to economic desperation and political catastrophe define decades and generations, and mark high crisis moments on the wheel of revolution. We are witnessing another series of youth-led revolts that promise, like all revolts of the past, to shake established status quos and remedy the ills of the times.

As I sat among international delegates prepared to give papers at the symposium there was a tangible sense of many being aware that the social, economic and political history we could see being made before our eyes from London to Athens and Los Angeles to Guangdong would soon be subject to academic research and study.

A multiplicity of subcultures, scenes and tribes have always existed—even in autocracies and military dictatorships—defined according to their interaction with or rejection of prevailing zeitgeists. Usually it is the most popular subcultures—most popular because they carry the most potent political message against the status quo—that need and then create self-service structures necessary for their welfare, communication, and pleasure. These self-service sites, magnets for the most acutely dysfunctional and dispossessed, become the most obvious targets for attack and closure by military or police forces disinhibited by characterizations of subcultural youth as, at best, “dangerous”, “antisocial”, “mindless”, “feeble”, “amatuerish”, “disorganized”, “incoherent” and so on.

The steps young people take to defend themselves from the purposeful trivializations, misunderstandings and dismissals of dominant culture are a

function of their myriad subcultural groupings. In the protective collective of subculture young people can make play in, and out of, opportunity or the direst conditions, whether in liberal democracies or tyrannical dictatorships.

The universal pleasure of being stylish within a subcultural style, the entertainment of display, the enjoyment of rigid demarcation and fluid intermingling, the enduring poetics of subversion and reverence for “our own” heroes and heroines, all the current and successive subdivisions; every ordinary pleasure can be enjoyed in subculture for its own sake or taken to ecstatic spiritual levels by astounding creative skills in a perfusion of aesthetic forms, particularly popular music.

Today Internet social media are enabling international youth to connect, reason and spread information on their own terms as never before. But, as in the past, whenever active youth is allowed formal time in corporate media they most often find themselves silenced by experienced primetime presenters and outnumbered by “expert” defenders of the status quo.

When young spokespeople do emerge to give voice to their revolt the need for precise prose and exact meaning can fail them. Aiming to explain or make impressive arguments for change over the heads of politicians to the general public is very difficult. Sites of information exchange that always spring up in times of crisis at street level, like the Occupy movements’ “university” tents, testify to young people’s conscious need to hone language. Where words fail, then popular songs succeed. It is telling of meaning and intent to hear which popular songs of the past are adopted by new subcultures as they wait for contemporary songs to be written of and by their own.

The traverse between street and academia, the way subcultural concerns become refracted via universities into the mainstream, is acutely real to me. As news began filtering out of Tunisia that young people were setting themselves ablaze in protest against poverty—the vegetable seller Mohammed Bouazizi was not the only one—there was a shock of recognition. These desperate acts of martyrdom overlaid indelible images in my mind of Buddhist monks whose kerosene self-immolations against the US-backed South Vietnamese regime were a trigger for antiwar youth-protest movements of the 1960s.

Release, the hippy underground welfare service I co-founded in 1967—a self-service site—was an emergency subcultural defence against dominant culture’s moral panic and resistance to our political message and style.

We came under intense scrutiny as we tried to stay open and keep police and the criminal-justice system at bay. All aspects of social distress came through our door including addiction, trauma in the family, child neglect, prison conditions, homelessness and abortion. The joy in popular music kept up our spirits and morale.

Like many volunteers in groups or organizations dealing with “the underside” of subculture I found that when I presented facts of ordinary people’s everyday lives to appropriate authorities I made little headway. Politicians and their civil-service administrators who confidently relied on established philosophical and social theory could easily reject points I made about malfunctioning and corrupt state institutions. Without a degree, in sociology at least, compared to a professor I had about as much agency as an ant.

After four years of active butting up against theories responsible for immense social and economic damage I went to Brunel University to read, of course, Psychology, Sociology and Economics. Not least was I interested in methodologies that researchers used when they came to Release for raw data.

Whenever I go back to university it feels poignant to be among scholars whose methods and theories I know will not obliquely but *directly* affect the lives of real people, especially the poor and the young who are most vulnerable to scrutiny and control. Whatever research universities choose to fund today and whatever labels scholars use to contest, frame or revise their theories will become those used in the doctrines of public policy and practice tomorrow.

Propelled by rebellious subcultures, the post-World War II struggle for enlightened change is succeeding as is dramatically apparent in the make-up of contributors to the Subcultures Network. Despite the financial crisis, the ambition is to be globally inclusive. At last, male-gendered grammar is considered archaic; critical masses of women are visible, present and inside the debate; and constructions of inequality and racism are being dismantled.

This stimulating collection of essays, the first from the Subcultures Network, offers us new thinking about human flourishing and celebrations of difference, new readings of “girl power” and popular manifestations of feminism, examinations of sites of recreation and ferocious political argument, with heroes and villains seen from positions of liberal hedonistic optimism to puritanical dystopian doom. It is a fine net cast wide across nations—Europe, America, Asia, Russia and Cuba—for insights into how people perpetually react to, adapt and make change.



## CONTRIBUTORS

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**Lee Brooks** is Programme Director of the Media Arts degree at St Mary’s University College in Twickenham. As a former graphic designer, Lee divides his teaching time between practical disciplines such as motion graphics, film and online production and theoretical specialisms in the cultural significance of popular music and the social impact of Disney

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**Timothy Scott Brown** is Associate Professor of History at Northeastern University. His research focuses on twentieth-century German and Transatlantic political and cultural history, radical mass movements, popular music and youth subcultures, the revolt of 1968, and alternative spirituality. His books include *The Global Sixties in Sound and Vision: Media, Counterculture, Revolt* (Palgrave, 2014), *West Germany in the Global Sixties: The Anti-Authoritarian Revolt, 1962–1978* (Cambridge, 2013), and *Between the Avantgarde and the Everyday: Subversive Politics in Europe, 1957 to the Present* (Berghahn, 2011).

**Caroline Coon**, artist and political activist, was at Central St Martin's School of Art and Design in the 1960s when she founded the anti-prohibition, drug-information and civil-rights organization, Release. She published *The Release Report: Drug Offenders and the Law* in 1969, and *1988: The Punk Rock Explosion* in 1977. When Coon went to the Sex Pistols' second gig in 1976, she found the answer to this question: with the 60s psychedelic revolution dead and buried and hippies derided as "boring old farts", what will youth do now? Johnny Rotten personified the nihilistic fury of a generation untouched by peace and love. At first, Coon's editor at *Melody Maker* didn't want to know. Determined anyway to write the story of the emerging "hate and war" counterculture, and thrilled by the music, Coon's seminal punk piece in *MM* on 28 July 1976, was the first to tackle the subject of the new "punk rock". Coon currently lives and works in London.

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# 1. SUBCULTURES, POPULAR MUSIC AND SOCIAL CHANGE: THEORIES, ISSUES AND DEBATES

BILL OSGERBY

## **Ripping Through the Atmosphere of Their Decade: The Social Significance of Subcultures**

*The Times* has never been renowned as an ardent patron of subcultural exploits. But in 2012 the august British newspaper's award for International People of the Year went to the Russian anarcho-feminist punk band, Pussy Riot. The group had made worldwide headlines earlier that year by performing an incendiary "Punk Prayer" in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Saviour as a protest against the Orthodox Church's support for President Vladimir Putin's election campaign. Subsequently, members of the group became a global cause célèbre when they were sentenced to two years' imprisonment for "hooliganism motivated by religious hatred". International celebrities and politicians rallied to the women's defence; *The Times* speaking for many when it denounced Pussy Riot's imprisonment as evidence of Putin's "determination to crush popular opposition" and hailed the band as "true and important figures of political protest" (*The Times*, 29 December 2012).

Clearly, Pussy Riot's protest was an episode of political import. The event pointed to a groundswell of concern about a Russian regime sliding into autocracy. But the *mode* of the group's dissent was also significant. Pussy Riot's raucous performance art was inspired by Bikini Kill, Bratmobile and other bands associated with the American 1990s feminist/punk riot-grrrl movement; together with "lumpen punk" bands from Britain's Oi! scene of the early 1980s. "All those folks", a member of Pussy Riot explained, "had incredible musical and social energy, their sound ripped through the atmosphere of their decade, stirred trouble around itself" (cited in Langston 2012). This passion for punk rebellion testifies to the way distinctive styles, fashions and music pulsate with political and cultural energy. Myriad recent examples also affirm the potency of sub-

cultures as bearers of meanings, values and identities. Burma's ruling junta, for instance, has faced defiance from the leather-jacketed followers of local punk bands like No U Turn and Rebel Riot. Indonesia's punk scene is also alive and kicking despite facing a conservative crackdown in 2011 that saw some sixty-five punks arrested and detained for a process of "re-education". In Botswana, meanwhile, bands like Metal Orizon and Overthrust lead a passionate heavy-metal scene whose black-clad followers draw curious looks in the Kalahari heat. And, amid Mexico's vicious drug wars, the city of Monterrey is home to the Colombianos—an urban youth scene that combines a love of Colombia's mellow *cumbia* and *vallenato* music with a distinctive "look" of baggy pants, plaid shirts and religious prints, complemented by fringes that are plastered resolutely down and spectacular sideburns that stretch to the chin.

It was the rich historical and cultural significance of phenomena such as these that prompted the launch of the Subcultures Network: The Interdisciplinary Network for the Study of Subcultures, Popular Music and Social Change—a cross-disciplinary research association for scholars and students interested in subcultures and their relation to processes of social, cultural and political change.<sup>1</sup> Bringing together theoretical analyses, empirical studies and methodological discussions, the network explores subcultures' relation with their historical contexts, and their various meanings for participants, confederates and opponents. The network considers experiences across a variety of global sites and locales, examining these in relation to such issues as class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, creativity, commerce, identity, resistance and deviance.

This book grows out of the network's inaugural symposium (held at London Metropolitan University in September 2011), which brought together a wide variety of contributions to this vibrant, interdisciplinary field. The volume comprises new empirical studies and critical discussions that demonstrate how the ideas and paradigms that have hitherto characterized the area can be applied, developed and moved beyond. While it is impossible to provide an exhaustive survey of such a rich and diverse field, this introduction offers an overview of the chief perspectives and main contours of debate that form the context of the chapters that follow.

### **The Roots of Subcultural Analysis: Deviance, Youth and Social Change**

Scholarly research on what have come to be known as "subcultures" traces its roots to the early twentieth century and American sociologists' attempts to understand juvenile crime. In the forefront were ethnographic studies

undertaken by researchers associated with the University of Chicago (later known as the Chicago School). Frederic Thrasher's (1927) research, for instance, explained the rise of Chicago's juvenile gangs as a product of the conflicts and weakening of social controls that characterized neighbourhoods undergoing processes of transition. Thrasher's arguments were reinforced by William Foote Whyte's (1943) participant observation of Italian-American gangs in Boston, which depicted gang membership as a source of support and prestige for those whose circumstances offered uncertain (or negligible) social and economic prospects. In these terms, then, the delinquent gang was seen as a collective response by the economically or ethnically marginalized to the conditions of their disadvantage.

Subsequent American researchers also placed emphasis on the meanings gangs held for their young, working-class members. Albert Cohen (1955), for example, argued that the underprivileged social position of working-class youths excluded them from the mainstream culture and its avenues to status and success. As a consequence, Cohen argued, youngsters gravitated to the gang *subculture* as a source of prestige that replaced the core values of the "straight" world—sobriety, ambition, conformity—with an alternative value system that celebrated defiance of authority and illicit thrills. Howard Becker (1963) also saw deviant subcultures as a product of wider social forces and relationships. For Becker, "deviance" was not a quality inherent to particular behaviour, but was a socially constructed category, a pejorative label applied to the actions of certain individuals who then come to identify with the negative categorization. In this way, Becker argued, the application of a "deviant" label becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, as people thus designated come to see themselves in terms of the way they have been classified and stereotyped.

After the Second World War American academia's interest in youth was boosted as the social profile of the young was thrown into starker relief by a combination of factors. In demographic terms, wartime increases in the birth rate and a postwar "baby boom" rocketed the US teen population, while an expansion of the education system further accentuated the profile of youth as a distinct generational group. But perhaps more important was the increase in young people's disposable income. A consumer boom brought a general rise in living standards, but young people's spending power was especially boosted. In response, the range of media and consumer products geared to the young proliferated as the music industry, film-makers, magazine publishers and an army of eager entrepreneurs scrambled to stake a claim in the teenage goldmine.<sup>2</sup> As a consequence, the perception of the young as inhabiting a gener-

ationally distinct culture of their own became a common feature of both popular discourse and academic analysis.

Notions of youth as a distinctive phase in life were not new. Modern concepts of “youth” as a discrete, transitional stage between childhood and adulthood took shape during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the work of psychologists such as G. Stanley Hall (1904), who popularized ideas of adolescence as a distinct (and inherently volatile) developmental phase that began with puberty and ended in mature adulthood.<sup>3</sup> Hall emphasized the biological and psychological transformations that characterized adolescence, but by the mid-twentieth century many theorists began to focus on the social and economic conditions that seemed to set youth apart as a discrete social group. During the 1940s, for example, Talcott Parsons (1942; 1943) coined the term “youth culture” to denote what he saw as a distinct set of values and behaviour shared by the young. Parsons stressed the positive role of youth culture as a formative stage between childhood and the responsibilities of adult life and other American researchers followed his lead. Erik Erikson (1950), for example, presented adolescence as a confusing (though not especially deviant) phase of identity formation, while S. N. Eisenstadt (1956) emphasized the way adolescent peer culture eased young people into their adult roles. James Coleman’s *The Adolescent Society* (1961) was also influential. Coleman portrayed American youth as increasingly divorced from the wider adult world in terms of its interests, attitudes and values; though he was optimistic in his conclusions, arguing that prudent adult intervention could guide the peer culture towards socially beneficial goals.

But more disconsolate accounts also surfaced. For some commentators, the rise of teenage consumption was the lamentable nadir of society’s more general slide into a shallow, debased world of “mass culture”. David Reisman, for example, condemned a pop-music industry that he saw as wielding the power “to mold popular taste and to eliminate free choice by consumers” (Reisman 1950, 361), while Dwight Macdonald saw the young generation as falling easy prey to the wiles of commerce. “These days”, Macdonald dolefully reflected, “merchants eye teenagers the way stockmen eye cattle” (Macdonald 1958, 70). Throughout the 1950s America was also gripped by the perception that juvenile delinquency was spiralling out of control, with a surge in the indices of youth crime. But James Gilbert has shown how this “juvenile crime wave” was, in fact, a statistical product of new strategies of law enforcement and changes in the collation of crime data. Rather than being a response to a genuine eruption of adolescent vice, Gilbert argued, the alarm surrounding juvenile

delinquency served as a symbolic focus for broader anxieties in a period of rapid and disorienting change—the concerns about youth crime articulating “a vaguely formulated but gnawing sense of social disintegration” (Gilbert 1986, 77).

Indeed, debates about youth often serve as a cipher for wider issues and questions. It is, perhaps, inevitable that conceptions of “youth” and “generation” feature in attempts to make sense of social change, but many authors point to the way this “symbolic” capacity is powerfully extended at moments of profound transformation—the “youth question” coming to encapsulate more general hopes and fears about trends in cultural life.<sup>4</sup> As Joe Austin and Michael Willard explain, “public debates surrounding “youth” are an important forum where new understandings about the past, present, and future of public life are encoded, articulated and contested”, so that “youth” functions as “a metaphor for perceived social change and its projected consequences” (Austin and Willard 1998, 1).

On the other side of the Atlantic youth attracted similar attention. In Europe the war’s greater economic destruction ensured that the development of modern consumer economies was slower, partial and more uneven than in the US—and, as a consequence, the rise of European “teenage” spending was more hesitant than in America. Nevertheless, by the late 1950s a commercial youth market was blossoming in many European countries. In Britain, for example, Mark Abrams’ widely reported market research proclaimed an explosion of adolescent consumerism that represented, he argued, “distinctive teenage spending for distinctive teenage ends in a distinctive teenage world” (Abrams 1959, 10). As in America, however, this “teenage world” drew mixed responses. Many films, magazines and newspapers of the period projected a positive imagery of youth as a shorthand signifier for flourishing modernity and a refreshing challenge to the dead hand of tradition. But some commentators were critical. Richard Hoggart, for example, echoed American “mass culture” critics when he singled out contemporary youth as a benchmark of what he saw as an increasingly pervasive cultural paucity. Denouncing modern youth as a “hedonistic but passive barbarian”, Hoggart poured scorn on “the juke box boys” with their “drape suits, picture ties and American slouch” who spent their evenings in “harshly lighted milk bars” putting “copper after copper into the mechanical record player”—a social world that, Hoggart argued, represented “a peculiarly thin and pallid form of dissipation” (1957, 248–50).

Britain, like America, also saw a wave of concern about juvenile crime. During the early 1950s these anxieties crystallized around the figure of the Teddy boy, whose style of long, “Edwardian” jackets and

drainpipe trousers was configured by the media as symbolic of a “new” form of vicious delinquency. By the early 1960s the Teddy boy’s drape-suits and brothel-creeper shoes had been displaced by the chic, Italian-inspired fashions associated with the mods; but mod style was also a focus for concern. Like the Teddy boys before them, the mods’ appearance was often presented by the media as a symbol of national decline—an approach that peaked in press responses to the “battles” between the mods and their leather-clad, motorcycle-riding rivals, the rockers, at British seaside resorts during 1964. At the same time, however, academic accounts were emerging that took issue with the media’s stereotypes.

During the 1960s a rising generation of British sociologists were shaped by the period’s political, social and cultural convulsions. The escalation of the Vietnam war, the rise of student protest and new countercultural movements, together with the emergence of a strident second-wave feminism, all raised sharp questions about the status quo. In response, a cohort of young academics allied themselves with radical political activism and the emerging counterculture, becoming fierce critics of the establishment. It was a critique that found focus in 1968 with the formation of the National Deviancy Symposium (or National Deviancy Conference (NDC)). The NDC was established by young sociologists who rejected traditional criminology, which they saw as pervaded by positivist assumptions that effectively bolstered existing mechanisms of social control. In place of this orthodoxy, the NDC looked towards the work of the American theorists Albert Cohen and Howard Becker (see above). Drawing on these ideas, the NDC members argued that “criminality” should be seen as a socially constructed and historically dynamic category whose nature and constitution was shaped by the responses of the law, politicians and the media. As a consequence, Jock Young (an NDC founding member) later explained, the object of study was effectively reversed:

The focus of the problematic shifted; where meaning was taken from the deviant, it was returned appreciated, and whereas the powerful had somehow magically been seen as existing outside the world of explanation, their activities and the impact—often self-fulfilling—of their activities became the centre of attention (Young 2009, 8).

Young’s (1971a) study of social reactions to drug use in London’s Notting Hill (then a hub of hippiedom) exemplified the approach. A wave of media concern about drug crime in the area, Young argued, had a reinforcing or “snowballing” effect. A “great panic over drug abuse”, he contended, had resulted in the setting up of specialized police squads to target drug crime



which, in turn, produced an increase in drug-related arrests (Young 1971b, 37). In these terms, the surge in statistical indices of drug crime did not point to a genuine leap in the scale of illicit drug use, but was an outcome of media concern and consequent shifts in policing strategies. Perceptions of a growing “drug problem”, therefore, were misplaced. Instead, there was a “mythical” quality to the “great panic”. It was a “fantasy crime wave” or “moral panic” generated through the interaction of the media, public opinion and the institutions of law enforcement.

Stanley Cohen (another NDC founding member) credits Young with the first published use of the term “moral panic” (Cohen 2002, xxxv), yet it is Cohen who most systematically enunciated and popularized the concept in *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, his classic analysis of the 1960s “battles” between mods and rockers. Originally published in 1972, Cohen’s study highlighted the way the media’s exaggerated and distorted portrayal of mods and rockers had generated a “moral panic”—an episode of heightened public alarm out of all proportion to the actual threat posed by real or imagined deviant groups, or what Cohen termed “folk devils”. For Cohen, the overdramatic press reports of “seaside invasions” by mods and rockers had not been a neutral “window” on events, but had actually been a crucial factor in their creation. The “mods and rockers” had initially been fairly ill-defined youth styles, but were given greater form and substance in the sensational news stories. And the two subcultures steadily polarized as youngsters throughout Britain began to identify themselves as members of either camp—the mods or the rockers. Media reports also influenced the agencies of social control. Sensitized by the press stories, police forces began cracking down on the slightest hint of “mods and rockers” trouble. As a consequence, arrest rates soared and magistrates (keen to show they were “getting tough” with the tearaways) imposed harsher penalties. Media attention and exaggerated press reports, therefore, fanned the sparks of an initially trivial incident, creating a self-perpetuating “amplification spiral” which steadily escalated the social significance of the events.

*Folk Devils and Moral Panics* dealt specifically with the 1960s mod/rocker episode, but its particular focus was, in many respects, unimportant. Indeed, even in the book’s first edition, Cohen asked “who on earth is still worried about the Mods and Rockers?”; while in an introduction to the second (1980) edition, he observed that the book had been “‘out of date’ even when it originally appeared in 1972”. More important than its account of the mod/rocker affair was the study’s wider implications. The book’s crucial contribution was the way it illustrated the processes a moral panic passes through as a threat takes shape, is disseminated and

caricatured by the media, is seized upon by moral crusaders and experts, and is eventually resolved through the adoption of special measures. Moreover, Cohen observed, youth culture had been recurrently central to these outbursts of disproportionate dread. Since 1945, he contended, youth groups had “occupied a constant position as folk devils”—Teddy boys, mods and rockers, skinheads and hippies all lining up in the “gallery of types that society erects to show its members which roles should be avoided and which should be emulated” (Cohen 2002, 1–2).<sup>5</sup>

Cohen’s analysis neatly highlighted the media’s role in creating social phenomena and escalating their impact. But it had less to say about the relation of these phenomena to their wider social and political context, or the meanings they held for those involved. Indeed, Cohen himself was aware of some of these omissions. In the introduction to his study he acknowledged that his focus was more on moral panics than on folk devils, and that “... the Mods and Rockers are hardly going to appear as ‘real, live people’ at all. They will be seen through the eyes of societal reaction and in this reaction they tend to appear as disembodied objects, Rorschach blots onto which reactions are projected” (Cohen 2002, xlvii). However, much closer attention to both the “Rorschach blots” and their historical context was to follow from authors associated with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) based at Birmingham University.

### **Subcultural Theory: Style, Resistance and the CCCS**

Originally founded in 1964 by Richard Hoggart, under the directorship of Stuart Hall (who succeeded Hoggart in 1968) the collective research of the CCCS contributed (along with that of the NDC) to Britain’s surge in radical intellectual output during the late 1960s and 1970s. The numerous authors associated with the CCCS were influenced by the work of Raymond Williams and his view of media and cultural texts as being not simply the creation of individual authors, but as being forged through a series of complex relationships between authorial intent, institutional process and aesthetic form. The CCCS authors were especially influenced by Williams’ critique of “mass culture” perspectives that valorized a meaningful and creative “high culture” against a “low” culture that was disparaged as vulgar and facile. Instead, adopting Williams’ (1958) view of culture as “a whole way of life”, the CCCS authors saw popular, mass-mediated texts and the ordinary practices of everyday life as being just as relevant and meaningful as the provinces of “high” culture or “great art”. These insights, moreover, were combined with ideas drawn from a battery

of American and European sociological, political, philosophical and semiotic theorists as the CCCS authors explored a formidable array of themes—including the form and meaning of media texts, the structures of working-class culture, power and gender relations, and the political dimensions of racism.

The “CCCS approach” was never a unified set of arguments or a common analytic perspective. But issues of class-based conflict and control were common to much of their work, which drew on a range of sophisticated Marxist theories. Particularly influential were the ideas of the French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser and his view of ideology as being not simply a mechanism that worked to inculcate an illusory “false consciousness” among the subordinate class, but a conceptual framework “through which men interpret, make sense of, experience and ‘live’ the material conditions in which they find themselves” (Hall 1980, 33). Another key influence were the ideas of the Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci and his view of capitalist societies as being characterized by an ongoing, class-based struggle for hegemony—or the moral, cultural, intellectual (and thereby political) leadership of society. While dominant groups were often able to secure their power through this struggle, Gramsci argued that subordinate groups were *also* active social agents, and were always able to challenge and resist the dominant hegemony.

The CCCS team explored these ideas in relation to a broad range of issues, but the analysis of youth culture and its relationship with broader social structures and political relationships was a prominent concern. The CCCS authors were influenced by Phil Cohen’s (1972) seminal attempt to relate shifts in the form of postwar British youth culture to more general transformations in the ecologies of working-class neighbourhoods. Focusing on developments in London’s East End, Cohen argued that postwar patterns of redevelopment, combined with the collapse of traditional labour markets and changing patterns of consumption, had disrupted the material basis of working-class life. For Cohen, the various youth styles of the 1950s and 1960s could be understood as collective symbolic responses to this dislocation. Stylistic subcultures, Cohen argued, were “magical” attempts by working-class youth to bridge the gap between traditional patterns of working-class life and the new cultural attitudes and practices emerging in postwar Britain. By fusing together key concerns of their working-class “parent” culture (for example, an emphasis on local identities and collective loyalties) with the new products of the developing media and culture industries (most obviously fashion and pop music), youth subcultural styles such as those of the mods and skinheads served to:

... express and resolve, albeit “magically”, the contradictions which remain hidden and unresolved in the parent culture ... [each subculture attempts] to retrieve some of the socially cohesive elements destroyed in their parent culture and to combine these with other class fractions symbolising one or other of the options confronting it (Cohen 1972, 23).

Instead of dismissing youth subcultures as trivial fads, then, Cohen presented the styles of groups such as Teddy boys and skinheads as important purveyors of social meaning, intrinsically linked to wider patterns of cultural change. In these terms, for instance, the 1960s mods represented an exploration of new, consumption-oriented working-class lifestyles; while the skinhead style of the later 1960s represented a symbolic re-assertion of more traditional working-class values.

Cohen’s approach was extended by the CCCS team. In *Resistance Through Rituals* (1976), the CCCS authors presented a range of different studies that, collectively, suggested subcultural style represented a symbolic, or “ritualistic” expression of working-class youth’s social experiences. Like Cohen, the CCCS team argued that working-class youth constructed a cultural, or *subcultural*, response pertinent to their life experiences by fusing together elements of their “parent” culture (for example, working-class argot, neighbourhood ties and particular notions of masculinity and femininity) with elements derived from other cultural sources—in particular, the products of the various media and consumer industries. Crucially, however, the CCCS introduced a neo-Marxist, “Gramscian” account of young people as locked into class-based struggles and conflicts. Whereas Cohen had seen subcultural style as an “ideological *solution*” to contradictions assailing the parent culture, the CCCS were more forthright—interpreting youth subcultures as symbolic (or “ritualistic”) strategies of *resistance* to ruling-class power structures. In what became known as “subcultural theory”, the CCCS authors argued that young people’s subcultural styles (those of Teddy boys, mods and skinheads, for example) were strategies of symbolic resistance to ruling-class power structures. Youth subcultures were interpreted as forms of cultural insubordination, expressions of defiant rebellion in which working-class youths appropriated the articles, artefacts and icons generated by the media and the commercial market, and symbolically reworked them to take on new, threatening and subversive meanings.

For the CCCS theorists, moreover, it was possible to differentiate fairly precisely between *subcultural* groups of working-class youth and the *countercultures* of their middle-class peers (Clarke et al. 1976, 60–1). For the CCCS team, subcultures (Teddy boys, mods, skinheads etc.) generally reproduced traditional working-class values and tended to be leisure-

oriented, fairly temporary, episodes in young people's lives. Countercultures (beats, hippies, etc.), in contrast, placed more emphasis on individual experience, while the stark polarity between work and leisure characteristic of working-class subcultures was much less pronounced in the bohemian and non-conformist world of the counterculture. More fundamentally, the CCCS authors argued that working-class subcultures represented a revolt against the status quo from "below", while the middle-class countercultures were a more politically conscious attack from "within" (Clarke et al. 1976, 62–3).<sup>6</sup>

The emphasis the CCCS model placed on the *symbolic* dimensions to these struggles effectively turned subcultural styles into "texts", and strategies of semiotic analysis were keenly deployed in attempts to "read" the subversive meanings seen as ingrained in the skinhead's boots and braces or the punk's bondage trousers and spiky hairstyle. Here, two concepts (both derived from the French anthropologist, Claude Lévi-Strauss) emerged as especially important—bricolage and homology. "Bricolage" referred to the way the meanings of particular objects and media texts were transformed as they were adopted and recontextualized by subcultural groups. According to Dick Hebdige, for example, the 1960s mods appropriated the motor scooter ("a formerly ultra-respectable means of transport") and transformed it into "a weapon and a symbol of solidarity" (Hebdige 1976, 93). "Homology" denoted the way disparate stylistic elements—music, clothes and leisure activities—coalesced to form a coherent symbolic expression of a subcultural group's identity. Using the example of biker culture, for instance, Paul Willis identified a "homological" relationship between the physical qualities of the motorcycle and the subcultural ethos of the biker gang. The "solidity, responsiveness, inevitableness [*sic*], the strength of the motorcycle", Willis argued, corresponded with "the concrete, secure nature of the bikeboys' world" (Willis 1978, 53). Developing this approach, Hebdige produced an especially deft analysis of late 1970s punk rock in *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979). Here, Hebdige presented punk style as akin to "semiotic guerrilla warfare" (1979, 105), an exercise in sartorial defiance that went "against the grain of a mainstream culture" and transformed the "naturalized" meanings of everyday cultural artefacts and media texts into something alien, spectacular and threatening (1979, 100–1).

## The Limits of Subcultural Theory

The CCCS authors always acknowledged the limits to subcultural “resistance”. Confined to specific realms of social life—most obviously leisure, style and media consumption—the subcultural challenge was always partial and tangential and, as Hebdige himself put it, “no amount of stylistic incantation can alter the oppressive mode in which the commodities used in subculture have been produced” (1979, 130). For some, however, the heavy attention given to symbolic meanings was problematic. According to Hebdige, style could be analysed as an autonomous text, with “resistance” taking place at a level independent of the consciousness of subcultural participants—and Hebdige conceded that it was “highly unlikely” that members of any subcultures would recognize themselves in his account (Hebdige 1979, 139). But this lack of attention to the actual intentions behind young people’s use of cultural artefacts provoked criticism. “It seems to me”, Stanley Cohen conjectured, “that somewhere along the line, symbolic language implies a knowing subject, a subject at least dimly aware of what the symbols are supposed to mean” (2002, lvii–lviii). In relying on an “aesthetics which may work for art, but not equally well for life”, Cohen warned, subcultural theory risked “getting lost in the forest of symbols” (Cohen 2002, lx).

Admittedly, a section of *Resistance Through Rituals* had been devoted to “Ethnography” but, even here, there were only limited attempts to understand and represent the meanings young people *themselves* gave to their subcultural styles and patterns of media consumption. In his (1977) study of working-class secondary school pupils, and his (1978) account of hippy and biker subcultures, Paul Willis *did* devote significant attention to ethnographic fieldwork. Yet, as Andy Bennett observes, even here there was an uneasy tension between Willis’s ethnographic observation of subcultural actors and the considerable space devoted to his own analysis of their style and its cultural meanings (Bennett 2002, 454).

The CCCS theorists’ focus on issues of social class also provoked criticism. The polarity constructed between working-class *subcultures* and middle-class *countercultures*, for example, could oversimplify groups whose composition has often been complex and multifaceted. According to Peter Clecak, for instance, the 1960s counterculture was composed of diverse movements and ideas that allowed people from a variety of social backgrounds “to find symbolic shapes for their social and spiritual discontents and hopes” (Cleckak 1983, 18). Gary Clarke, meanwhile, pointed to the contradictions between Hebdige’s emphasis on punk’s “working-class creativity” and the movement’s origins among the art-school avant-