Structure, Agency, Subculture: The CCCS, *Resistance through Rituals*, and 'Post-Subcultural' Studies

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Abstract

Post-subcultural studies has emerged as a critical response to perceived difficulties with the previously dominant approach to subcultures associated with the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS). Alternative terms such as scene and tribe have been suggested in light of the supposedly more amorphous nature of contemporary formations. Others have defended the CCCS approach, or argued for a revised understanding of subculture which attends to difficulties with the CCCS framework whilst implying greater stability than other more recent terms. The following outlines these debates before focusing specifically on Hall and Jefferson's (2006) own response. Whilst agreeing with the argument that subcultural studies needs to be properly contextualised, it suggests that post-subcultural studies reminds us also of the need properly to attend to subcultures in practice. It then interrogates the claim that the CCCS did both, noting not just the lack of ethnography in *Resistance through Rituals*, but the bias against ethnography implicit in the Centre's Marxist-realist approach, and the unresolved tension between their culturalist and structuralist leanings, to which semiotic analysis came to the rescue by allowing agency to be read-off from subcultural assemblages rather than explored in practice. It also addresses some of the problems with this. It concludes by suggesting how the concept might be reformulated to address lacunae in the CCCS project and shifts in the nature of contemporary 'subcultures', whilst retaining a sense of their importance and not reducing them to the status of either youth-culture in general or any-other-lifestyle.

Introduction

1.1 The last ten to fifteen years have seen the emergence and partial consolidation of what has been widely labelled 'post-subcultural' studies; a body of writing and research intended to re-assess our understanding of subcultural-type practices and formations in light of both perceived difficulties with the previously dominant framework *per se*, and apparent changes in the nature and composition of such groupings since the 1980s. Work associated with the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) has come under sustained criticism for its symptomatic reading of subcultures as class-based responses to structural contradictions - and its consequent neglect of subculturalists' own experiences and views - and the idea that such difficulties have been amplified by the more amorphous and heterogeneous nature of subcultural-type formations since the publication of the CCCS's ground-breaking work on subcultures, *Resistance through Rituals* (*RTR1*), in 1976. Terms like 'scene' and 'tribe' have been put forward to address both perceived inadequacies in the CCCS framework *per se*, and related ideas suggesting that 'subcultures' have become increasingly diffuse, unstable and individualised (Bennett 2011; Bennett & Kahn-Harris 2004; Hesmondhalgh 2005, 2007; Muggleton & Weinzierl 2003).

1.2 That is not to say such criticisms have been uniformly accepted. While some have defended both their overall approach and the continuing applicability of the CCCS's central term (or at least have claimed to do so, see below) (Blackman 2005; Griffin 2011; Martin 2009; Shildrick & MacDonald 2006), others have argued for a modified understanding of 'subculture', which does away with most of its previous connotations, whilst still implying greater stability and commitment than alternative concepts are said to allow (Hodkinson 2002). In their own contribution to these debates, in their recent introduction to the second edition of *Resistance through Rituals* (2006, *RTR2*), Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson, meanwhile,

argue that recent ethnographic work in post-subcultural studies - Hodkinson included - suffers from a form of hollow empiricism, or failure to locate its analyses in relation to the wider structural context, but that their own framework intended to do exactly this, whilst *also* attending to the lived specificities of subcultural practice as their simultaneous emphasis on agency required.

1.3 The following outlines the broader debate around post-subcultural studies before focusing specifically on Hall and Jefferson's contribution and, in particular, their claim successfully to have combined interpretive and structural analysis. Whilst agreeing with Hall and Jefferson's (2006) argument that subcultural studies needs to be properly contextualised, it suggests that one of post-subcultural studies' key contributions is to remind us of the need also properly to attend to the specificities of subcultural practice. It then goes on to interrogate the claim that the CCCS framework did both, noting not just the (oft-remarked) lack of ethnography in *RTR1*, but the largely unacknowledged bias *against* ethnography implicit in their Marxist-realist approach, and the unresolved tension between their culturalist and structuralist leanings, to which semiotic analysis came to the rescue by allowing agency to be read-off from subcultural assemblages rather than explored in practice. It also addresses some of the problems with this. It concludes by suggesting how the concept might be reformulated to address lacunae in the *RTR* project and apparent shifts in the nature of contemporary 'subcultures', whilst retaining a sense of their importance and not reducing them to the status of either youth-culture in general, or any-other-lifestyle.[1]

1.4 The CCCS's neglect of ethnographic research has been widely remarked. This has also been attributed to their structuralist leanings (Bennett 2002: 453; Blackman 1998: 210-211, 2005: 5-6; Muggleton 2000: 12, 24). Where this paper takes things forward is in properly interrogating Hall and Jefferson's (2006) claim that the subcultures project in fact combined interpretive and structural levels of analysis, demonstrating, on the basis of a close reading of the original text, not simply how the Centre's structuralist leanings took precedence over and rendered untenable their claims seriously to attend to subcultures in practice, but locating this in the context of the marked tension between the different strands of their research. It also shows how, in this context, semiotic analysis acted not simply an innocent methodological alternative to more hands-on forms of research, but a means of papering over the cracks: a methodological sleight of hand allowing for an apparent emphasis on agency without the need actually to engage with subculturalists themselves. Finally, as has already been noted, the paper also proposes a way forward in the 'post-subcultures' debate, through a reconceptualisation of the central term which addresses difficulties with the CCCS approach and changes in the 'subcultural' landscape, whilst retaining a sense of subcultures' distinctiveness and importance and continuing to allow subcultural analyses to be located in respect of wider issues and debates.

The post-subcultures debate

2.1 As already indicated, there are two main aspects to the post-subcultural critique of the CCCS approach. First, the idea that the framework was problematic from the outset, and did not accurately represent the subcultures to which it was applied, and second, that the nature of 'subcultural' practice has shifted, so that the framework is no longer applicable, even if it once was (see also Bennett 2011; Griffin 2011; Muggleton 2005). Amongst the key criticisms levelled at the framework *per se*, is the Centre's neglect of subculturalists' own experiences and views in favour of a predominantly structuralist account which regarded subcultures as symptomatic of wider difficulties and contradictions, although this is contradicted by some commentators[2] and disputed by Hall and Jefferson (2006) themselves, as will be discussed more fully below. As David Muggleton (2000) observed, and others have since reiterated, if we wish to understand subculturalists' motivations and experiences, what subculturalists actually do and what they get out of it, we need to do more than approach subcultures as texts, and instead engage directly with subculturalists themselves. In consequence of the post-subcultural critique, terms like 'scene' and 'tribe' have been suggested to address perceived inadequacies in the framework *per se*, and related ideas suggesting that 'subcultures' have become increasingly diffuse, unstable and individualised (Bennett 2011; Bennett & Kahn-Harris 2004; Blackman 2005; Hesmondhalgh 2005, 2007; Muggleton & Weinzierl 2003).

2.2 That is not to say that the subculture concept has been flatly rejected. Critiquing post-subcultural scholars for their supposedly uncritical celebration of consumer culture and lack of attention to the continuing importance of structural variables such as class, certain figures have argued for the continuing relevance of the CCCS framework as a whole, and their understanding of subculture as a symptomatic and class-based response to wider difficulties and contradictions (Blackman 2005; Griffin 2011; Martin 2009; Shildrick & MacDonald 2006; see also Bennett 2011). It should be noted, however, that in several cases such arguments are based on a conflation of youth and subcultural studies, such that evidence regarding the continuing importance of class in (mostly disadvantaged) *young people's* lives is presented as evidence that studies of *subculture* ought themselves necessarily to focus on class (Griffin 2011; Martin 2009; Shildrick & MacDonald 2006). In Shildrick and MacDonald's (2006) case, in addition, their apparent defence of 'subculture' actually reads, on closer inspection, as a denunciation of *subcultural* studies - the CCCS included - in favour of a broader concern with youth culture as a whole.

2.3 Adopting a position more sympathetically aligned to the broader post-subcultural critique, Paul Hodkinson (2002), meanwhile, on the basis of his empirical examination of the Goth scene, argues for the concept's retention, but reformulated specifically in relation to '(sub)cultural substance' (2002: 28; see also Sweetman 2009). Establishing his distance from the CCCS *and* discussions of scenes and tribes - which fail to allow for the 'translocal' aspects of subcultural formations and groups that display 'cultural substance' respectively - Hodkinson suggests a revised version of the concept, which dispenses with its wider theoretical connotations but differs from more recent formulations in that it not only allows for but is specifically conceptualised in terms of '(sub)cultural substance'. Or, as he later puts it, 'a *consistent*

distinctiveness in group values and tastes, a strong sense of *shared identity*, practical *commitment* among participants, and a significant degree of *autonomy* in the facilitation and operation of the group' (2009: 141-2, original emphasis). One can then distinguish between subcultures properly-so-called and 'more fluid elective collectivities' (2002: 33) to the extent that they satisfy these criteria in relative terms: the fact that Goth does so means not only that it can be firmly characterised as a subculture, but also that it is itself indicative of the continuing relevance of the term.

2.4 There are problems with Hodkinson's analysis. One can distinguish between more and less committed 'subcultural' groups - thereby addressing difficulties with attempts to apply an unmodified 'tribal' framework across the board - without necessarily retaining the term subculture in a denuded form (Sweetman 2004, 2009). Whilst sympathetic to Hodkinson's reluctance to read too much into his analysis, and to his argument that, although we should avoid relying uncritically on insiders' accounts, we should be equally 'wary of interpretations which ... take little account of them at all' (2002: 61), there may also be times when insiders' comments are not forthcoming, and it is legitimate to read more into things than is alluded to by one's participants. Just because insiders do not regard their actions as overtly political or transgressive, for example, does not mean they should not be interpreted as such, and while there are dangers in privileging theory over participants' own understandings and accounts, there are also dangers in privileging experience over interpretation (Frith & Savage 1997: 13), and assuming that a particular theoretical perspective cannot be employed simply because it does not tally with lay understandings of the phenomenon under investigation (see also Martin 2009: 127; Muggleton 2000: 11). It is where the privileging of one's theoretical perspective leads to not simply a critical distancing towards, but a disregard for or more or less explicit denial of the validity of one's participants' accounts *per se* that this arguably becomes a problem, as will be explored more fully below.

2.5 Whilst helpful in some respects, Hodkinson's approach also sidesteps whether it is appropriate to retain the concept whilst stripping it of its connotations. What is one left with? What does it mean if all that it implies is the fulfilment of a set of criteria indicative of '(sub)cultural substance'? How, in this respect, does Goth differ from a suburban golf-club or the Young Conservatives? And if the latter fulfil Hodkinson's criteria, does that mean they too should be regarded as subcultures? From the CCCS perspective they should not, the concept having been formulated in relation to an overall framework which regarded subcultures as both symptomatic and subversive (see also Griffin 2011). Hodkinson's wish to avoid CCCS-style over-theorising whilst retaining their central concept invites such questions, however, which themselves raise further questions about the purpose of subcultural studies. According to Hodkinson, his reformulation 'avoids key problems with traditional subcultural theory' (2002: 196), but what are we left with that is significant? And what is the point of looking at subcultural groups if any reasonably clearly demarcated lifestyle grouping might be so defined? One answer might be to do with issues such as gender, sexuality and transgression, but despite the possibilities his material appears to have afforded, his reluctance to read too much into his data means that this is not a set of issues which Hodkinson really explores (Sweetman 2009).

Hall and Jefferson's response

3.1 For the CCCS, subcultures constituted an active response by working-class youth to problems experienced by the parent class as a whole. Whilst doomed to failure, their attempts magically to resolve such contradictions were resistant in that they offered a challenge to cultural understandings and the post-war order. It is unsurprising, therefore, that in their introduction to *RTR2*, Hall and Jefferson (2006) ask similar questions about selected contributions to post-subcultural studies to those indicated above, noting that while Hodkinson (2002), Moore (1994) and Muggleton (1997) provide:

> fuller accounts of the lived experience of their subcultural 'bearers' than we did in *RTR* ... beyond that, what do we learn of the larger picture? How well are these ... subcultures 'grounded' in relation to the political, economic and socio-cultural changes of their ... times? The answer is 'not very well', if at all. (Hall & Jefferson 2006: xiv)

3.3 According to Hall and Jefferson, some recent studies are 'opposed to ... making connections between lived experience and structural realities' at all, but that was what they aspired to in *RTR1* and is '*why RTR* was not an ethnography' (2006: xiv, original emphasis). In contrast, much 'recent ethnographic ... work ... is not really addressing the *RTR* problematic' (2006: xv), and even if the nature of subcultures has changed, and class is no longer as significant, we still need to ask 'where these things come from' and to which broader 'processes they are related' (2006: xx). We still need to 'theorise the connection to, wider structures and historical developments' (2006: xxix), and to ask what the 'postmodernism' in contemporary subcultures is actually 'symptomatic of?' (2006: xxi).

3.4 There are difficulties with Hall and Jefferson's argument. Their coverage of recent work is remarkably partial and incomplete, and much of this work does attempt to locate its analyses in relation to wider issues and debates, even if some of the theoretical and political contexts within which these studies are framed are not - presumably - to Hall and Jefferson's taste (see eg. Bennett & Kahn-Harris 2004; Muggleton & Weinzierl 2003). Their argument that a wish to avoid under-theorised empiricism is '*why RTR* was not an ethnography' is also disingenuous, not least because of the possibilities for theoretically located and structurally contextualised ethnography they themselves attribute to certain colleagues' work in the following paragraph (2006: xiv), their claim that the *RTR* project looked at both sides of the coin, and the bias *against* ethnography which in fact characterised their framework as a whole. Nevertheless, I would agree with the need for empirical work to be properly framed, if only to provide a convincing rationale for looking specifically at subcultures at all.

3.5 Equally though, and as much recent work within post-subcultural studies reminds us, if we are to avoid constituting subcultures solely as theoretical abstractions, pay more than lip service to notions of

agency and creativity, and attend properly to subculturalists' motivations and experiences, we need also to engage with the people involved. Hodkinson (2002) may have been wrong to cling to the conceptual baby whilst dispensing with (most of) the theoretical bathwater - and ethnographic approaches are subject to their own difficulties and limitations, although it is not in the scope of the current paper to detail them here - but he and others are surely correct in their insistence on taking seriously the actions and interpretations of subculturalists themselves.

Structure, agency and creativity in the in the CCCS framework

4.1 As has already been indicated, Hall and Jefferson claim that the *RTR* project combined interpretive understanding of the specificities of subcultural practice with an attempt to locate such practices in their wider structural context: 'the project was concerned *both* to examine, concretely and in depth, one 'region' of contemporary culture *and* to understand how this could be connected in an explanatory ... way, to broader cultural and social structures' (2006: viii, original emphasis). Indeed, it is also claimed that interpretative understanding took priority in a methodological sense - 'The underlying ... assumption was that meanings had to be closely observed and related to practices, and ... cultural phenomena had to be understood concretely and in their full specificity *before* they could be 'double fitted with wider relations' (2006: x, original emphasis) - and that both agency and structure were to be respected - 'The task ... was both to understand how' subculturalists 'experienced and acted in this changing world and, at the same time, how they were socially positioned by and in it' (2006: xxii). 'Generally speaking,' Hall and Jefferson go on to point out, 'both the interpretive and the contextualising moments are unavoidable in cultural studies' (2006: xxii).

4.2 Certainly an emphasis on agency was both *required by* and reflected the CCCS's partially Gramscian approach. Indeed, one way of reading the project is as an attempt, *via* Gramscian theory, to rescue working-class consumers from accusations of passivity, from both right and left critics, bemoaning either the pernicious effects of the culture industry or the displacement of genuine high-culture or 'authentic' working-class culture respectively. Gramscian theory sees hegemony as negotiated rather than absolute, and culture, therefore, as contested, providing both a framework through which subcultures can be analysed and a rationale for so doing. Hegemony 'is not universal and 'given' ... It has to be won, worked for ... sustained' (Clarke et al 1976: 40), and the 'terrain' on which this battle takes place 'is the terrain of the superstructures' (Clarke et al 1976: 38). Symbolic challenges, therefore, are significant. 'Working class culture has consistently 'won space' from the dominant culture' (Clarke et al 1976: 42), and the focus in *RTR1* is on those 'recently-current ... styles, where the stylistic core ... can be located in the expression of a partly negotiated *opposition* to the values of ... wider society' (Clarke 1976: 177, original emphasis).

4.3 The CCCS claimed, then, to emphasise agency. Indeed, comparing *RTR1* with another key study, *Policing the Crisis*, Hall and Jefferson argue that '*RTR* had emphasised agency; *PTC* history and structure' (2006: xxii). Culture is described in *RTR1* as not simply 'the way the social relations of a group are structured and shaped', but also 'the way those shapes are experienced ... and interpreted' (Clarke et al 1976: 11), and 'relations between a subordinate and a dominant culture' are said to be 'always ... active, always oppositional' (Clarke et al 1976: 44). 'The subordinate class brings to this 'theatre of struggle' a repertoire of strategies and responses' (Clarke et al 1976: 44), and the analyst's task is to understand how 'the class has been able to use its ... 'raw materials' to construct a ... range of responses', encompassing 'negotiation, conflict and subordination' (Clarke et al 1976: 45). In the case specifically of subcultures, 'What makes a style is the activity of stylisation – the active organisation of objects with activities and outlooks, which produce an organised group-identity in the form ... of a coherent and distinctive way of 'being-in-the-world'' (Clarke et al 1976: 54). And this takes place through a process of *bricolage*, the creative and agentic appropriation and recontextualisation of cultural objects and artefacts, such that new uses are imagined and new meanings assigned.

4.4 Despite this apparent emphasis, however, and John Clarke's claim that the CCCS gave 'privileged attention to the 'moment' of stylistic creation' (1976: 177), subcultural practice - *as such* - was not actually central to their concerns. First, Clarke et al are clear in their introduction that the 'phenomenal form', youth culture, 'provides a *point of departure, only,*' for their brand of analysis (1976: 10, emphasis added). Subcultural studies, as Graham Murdock and Robin McCron point out later in the volume, starts with a particular style, and *works back* to 'uncover' its 'class base' (1976: 205), showing how 'the forms of consciousness ... generated within these contexts are embedded in, and shaped by ... structural and ideological formations' (1976: 207). *Actual* subcultures, in other words, are little more than an expression of deeper realities, and the project's aim is to '*reconstruct* 'sub-cultures' in terms of their relation, first, to 'parent' cultures, and, through that, to the dominant culture' (Clarke et al 1976: 16, original emphasis). The volume tries to 'show how' subcultures 'are related to class relations, to the division of labour and to the productive relations of ... society' (Clarke et al 1976: 16), and the leisure sphere in which subculture operates is only really interesting insofar as it is here rather than at work that young people are afforded space in which to articulate a response (Murdock & McCron 1976: 204-5).

4.5 Second, the CCCS not only showed little interest in moments of stylistic creation but described these in essentially mechanistic terms, providing us with what is close to a functionalist explanation[3] (albeit from a broadly Marxist perspective) - in which oppositional meanings emerge as a *reflection of* 'the structural difference between the material position, outlook and everyday life-experience of the' classes (Clarke et al 1976: 43). From which perspective, the 'selection of ... objects through which' subcultural style 'is generated' is a 'matter of the *homologies* between the group's self-consciousness and' their 'possible meanings' (Clarke 1976: 179, original emphasis). Attention is given to how style *spreads*, with Clarke referring to the 'diffusion of the skinhead style' via the football terraces, and its 'selective 'appreciation'' by those 'who borrow and adapt it' (1976: 185). He also notes how media contribute to the 're-working' of styles 'by geographically-dispersed groups' (1976: 186). Although some acknowledgement is made of small-scale entrepreneurs in the initial *diffusion* of styles, however, prior to 'defusion' through

commodification, no examples are provided, and there is no discussion of how styles *originate* except in the sense that the group somehow *recognises itself* in the homological potential particular objects afford.

4.6 Despite their ostensible emphasis on agency, the overall explanation for subcultural formations is a structural-functionalist one, developed in the context of the Centre's predominantly Marxist-realist position as a whole. In this sense, culture, although apparently contested, is epiphenomenal, and, *in the final analysis*, subordinate to material structures and relations (see also Griffin 2011: 247). Noting that we can distinguish between three 'aspects' of analysis, 'structures, cultures and biographies' (1976: 57), Clarke at el argue that structures 'generate a set of common relations and experiences from which ... actions ... are constructed', and that cultures 'are the range of socially-organised ... *responses* to these *basic material and social conditions*' (1976: 57, emphasis added). Biographies then constitute the ''careers' of particular individuals through these structures and cultures', which, despite 'element[s] of individuation', 'only make sense in terms of the structures and cultures through which' they are constructed (1976: 57).

4.7 Culture responds to changes in material conditions, and 'productive relations ... form the basis of the everyday life and culture of the class' (Clarke et al 1976: 36). Changes in 'the ecology of' the neighbourhood, for example, 'graphically reconstruct the *real* material and social conditions in which working people live' (1976: 37, original emphasis), and subcultures 'respond to the same basic problematic as other members of their class' (1976: 15). Although they encounter this via different 'institutions and experiences', and at a different stage of their 'biographical careers', subcultures 'too are concrete ... social formations constructed as a collective response to the material ... experience of their class' (1976: 47), the '*latent function*' of which is to 'express and resolve' tensions and contradictions which remain otherwise 'hidden or unresolved' (Cohen, in Clarke et al 1976: 32, emphasis added).

4.8 Despite difficulties understanding how this leads to the formation of *particular* subcultures (Clarke et al 1976: 33), subcultural styles are to be regarded as 'coded expressions of class consciousness' (Murdock & McCron 1976: 203), and despite Cohen's insistence on three levels of analysis - historical, structural, and phenomenological - the third is actually described in remarkably structural terms as the way in which the subculture is 'lived out' by its '*bearers and supports*' (Cohen, in Clarke et al 1976: 33, emphasis added). The structuralist nature of the Centre's predominantly Marxist-realist framework is also illustrated by and helps to explain why subcultures are ultimately regarded as futile. They offer no 'career prospects' as such (Clarke 1976: 191), and their failure to mount 'solutions on the real terrain where ... contradictions ... arise' (Clarke 1976: 189) means they can only offer symbolic resolutions to 'problems which at the concrete level remain unresolved' (Clarke et al 1976: 47-8).

4.9 In this context it is perhaps less surprising that, of the nine chapters that make up the 'Ethnography' section of *RTR1*, only two are actually ethnographic, and *neither* is about a subculture according to the CCCS understanding of the term. Paul Corrigan's (1976) 'Doing Nothing' is extracted from a longer study of kids' 'street-corner culture' in Sunderland, while Paul Willis (1976) focuses on Hippies, who according to the *RTR* framework actually constitute a middle-class counter-culture rather than a subculture as such (Clarke et al 1976: 60; Hall & Jefferson 2006: xviii; Hebdige 1976: 87).[4] Of the remainder, Geoffrey Pearson and John Twohig's discussion of interactionist approaches to drug use is also about Hippies, and despite employing related techniques is critical of interactionist ethnographies for their 'phoney radicalism' (1976: 125). Only Tony Jefferson (1976) and Dick Hebdige's (1976) chapters deal with specific subcultures, and *neither* is ethnographic, instead basing their accounts on semiotic readings of Ted and Mod respectively. Jefferson refers to 'reading' and decoding' the Teds' 'cultural responses' (1976: 81) - noting that, in the absence of a '*grammar*' for so doing, 'what follows is largely speculative' (1976: 86, emphasis added) - while Hebdige is apparently unaware of the irony in his claim to uncover 'the origins of the style in the experience of the mods themselves' through a penetrating *reading* of subcultural mythologies (1976: 88; see also Muggleton 2005).

4.10 Crucially, however, this lack of ethnography should be seen not as an oversight, but a result of the unacknowledged tension between the Centre's desired emphasis on agency, on the one hand, and their adherence to an overwhelmingly structuralist framework on the other (see also Griffin 2011: 248). Or, in other words, between the more culturalist and structuralist strands of analysis (Hall 1980). In this context, not only does the latter predominate (rendering the former not only unnecessary but untenable),[5] but semiotic analysis then comes to the rescue by glossing over the tension, allowing for an *apparent* emphasis on agency without the need for this to be explored in practice. Not only did the *RTR* project largely overlook real people, but their predominantly Marxist-realist framework effectively demanded this, while semiotic analysis did not simply fill the gap, but *allowed* them to do so, whilst claiming to emphasise agency and creativity as the more populist strands of their analysis demanded.

4.11 The wish to counter accusations of passivity is made clear in the chapter by Paul Corrigan and Simon Frith (1976). In spite of Steve Butters' part critique, part *how-to* guide to 'naturalistic field research' (1976: 258), and Brian Roberts' (1976) and Rachel Powell and John Clarke's (1976) calls for more ethnography, however, the *RTR* project is marked by an absence of fieldwork in favour of a structuralist account which views subcultures as a quasi functionalist response to wider contradictions, and ethnography not simply as unnecessary but *epistemologically suspect*. Not only is it unnecessary to engage with real people in order to arrive at a correct understanding of society, but it is better not to, given that they are likely not just to fail to understand the nature of their situation, but actually to *misunderstand* it (see also Bennett 2002: 543). People's responses need *decoding*, and from a Marxist-realist perspective, ethnographic approaches obscure rather than illuminate.

4.12 Pearson and Twohig's (1976: 125) critique of interactionist ethnographies has been noted. Whilst implicit throughout most of the volume, however, this stance is most explicit in Murdock and McCron's contribution, which notes that the 'drawback' of ethnographic techniques - or 'interviews and

eavesdropping', as they are pejoratively described - is that they focus on 'verbalisations of consciousness' rather than 'the ways in which ... consciousness is objectified and expressed through other forms of ... action' (1976: 203). People don't necessarily understand their situation, however, and 'Since subcultural styles are coded expressions of consciousness, the primary act of analysis is an act of *decoding*' (1976: 203, emphasis added). Indeed, such is people's inability properly to understand the real nature of their situation that not only is decoding essential but 'We need in fact to restore the category of "false consciousness" to the centre of analysis' (1976: 201). In a somewhat more muted but nevertheless acerbic vein, Steve Butters' 'The logic of enquiry of participant observation' (1976) notes that the interactionist approach to deviancy studies imported to UK criminology via the National Deviancy Conference from the late-1960s, 'contains strong 'intuitive' elements, and does not lead ... to the production of a *theoretical* analysis' (Butters 1976: 256, emphasis added; see also Hall 1980: 69).

4.13 Despite their insistence on hegemony as negotiated rather than given, and culture, therefore, as relatively autonomous, the more materialist side of the CCCS's framework wins out, and contestation, such as it is, emerges as a more or less automatic reflection of the real, *material* conditions faced by the working-class. In which context semiotics emerges, again, not as an innocent methodological alternative - a convenient method for those with neither the time nor inclination actually to speak to real people, perhaps, or a reflection of the Centre's 'roots in literary studies' (Frith 2004: 175; see also Muggleton 2000: 3; Williams 2011: 78) - but a reflection of the *need* for cultural responses to be decoded, given people's inability to understand the reality of their situation themselves. It comes to the rescue by obscuring and ostensibly resolving the tension, seemingly satisfying a Gramscian emphasis on contestation without contradicting the more realist strands of analysis, and in fact reflecting the latter, reading agency *into* subcultural texts and regarding these as quasi-automatic responses to wider contradictions rather than moments of genuine creativity which ought (if only to satisfy the Centre's own claims) to have been explored at least partially in subculturalists' own terms.

4.14 Contemporaneous calls for additional ethnography and more recent claims to have combined interpretive and structural analysis thus read as somewhat disingenuous, and the Marxist-realist aspects of the Centre's framework, combined with their use of semiotics, deny agency except at an unconscious level, whatever their more Gramscian leanings may have demanded and claimed. Semiotics not only allows for but reflects a methodological *imperative* to overlook subcultures in practice, and this in turn *allows for* the reification of subcultures as theoretical abstractions and the drawing of overly tight distinctions between working-class subcultures and middle-class counter-cultures, which could not have been empirically sustained.[6] The synchronic rather than diachronic nature of structural analysis also leads to a neglect of process (contributing to the fetishisation of subcultures in their 'pure' and 'unadulterated' moments), and, along with their focus on spectacular subcultures (which implicitly condemns the remainder of working-class youth for an apparent *lack* of creativity), their understanding of subcultures as a symptomatic and collective response means that the Centre ultimately fail to rescue working-class youth from the accusations of passivity and vacuity with which they had previously been bedevilled. Intimations of 'false consciousness' also read as patronising - and, by definition, as implying a lack of understanding on the part of subculturalists themselves - while the materialist aspects of the framework cast subcultural interventions as ultimately futile *when understood in these terms*.

4.15 Finally, all of this means not only that subcultures are cast as futile, but that the CCCS overlook much else of significance, in political and broader terms. There is more to subcultures than signification, and much of this is centred on process, embodiment and affect, or the ways in which 'subcultural practices are articulated through or on the bodies of the actors concerned' (Sweetman 2001: 183). As Christopher Driver puts it: 'the focus on the *symbolic* aspects of cultural practice ... misses the significance of the affective impact of human experience so central to the production of both selves and scenes' (Driver 2011: 976, original emphasis). This includes both *immediate* experience, and the development of new disciplines and virtuosities, new bodies and selves; the development of highly accomplished skills and abilities to no formal purpose and outside of the realms of institutionalised education, employment or sport. Moving away from an exclusively semiotic focus allows us to acknowledge and explore such issues. It allows and encourages us to acknowledge the sheer *alive-ness* of subcultural practice, and reminds us that there is more going on than simply that which meets the eye.

Conclusion

5.1 None of this is to argue for a neglect of structure, or the continuing significance of class in young people's lives (Blackman 2005; Griffin 2011; Martin 2009; Shildrick & MacDonald 2006) (although as has already been indicated, the jump from there to an argument that studies of *subculture* ought necessarily to focus on class is a significant one). Subcultural studies, as I have indicated above, needs to be situated in relation to wider considerations and debates, and we also need to acknowledge limits to agency in the form of structural and other constraints. Nor is it to argue against forms of structural or semiotic analysis *per se*, although to focus exclusively on this level of analysis is to miss a great deal out and also to belie claims properly to have attended to agency, creativity and the specificities of subcultural practice. As indicated above, I am also alive to the difficulties and limitations that a focus on *spectacular* subcultures entails (see also Clarke 1990) and more than sympathetic to arguments that our understanding of *youth*-culture should move beyond a focus simply on the spectacular few, although any idea that this means one should abandon studies of subculture in what is implicitly conceived of as a zero-sum game are ill thought-out and misconceived.

5.2 What it is to argue for, where *subcultural* studies is concerned, is an at least partial focus on subculturalists themselves, moving beyond a focus simply on *symbolic* creativity, to consider the *non-* creative aspects of subcultural practice and experience (or at least those which are not *tangibly* so), as well as its extra-symbolic motivations, consequences and effects, including the development of new skills and virtuosities, new bodies and selves. Subcultural practice is not just about re-arranging

commodities, it is also about the exuberant vitality of the here and now, and, through the performative re-enactment of subcultural competencies, the development of new forms of physical capital, bodies and subjectivities. It doesn't necessarily achieve *anything* beyond a fleeting enlivening of the present, and if it does, this is as much about the re-working of the body through ludic forms of self-discipline as it is about creative resolutions of a symbolic kind (even if such carnal re-workings also challenge existing understandings of the body, and lead, too, to the contestation of embodied subjectivities). The gratuitous expenditure of energy and effort to no formal end, other than the development and display of subcultural competencies and virtuosities, and the *collective reproduction of the here and now*.

5.3 This is not to say that the experiences afforded by subcultures are unique or extraordinary (although they may be) - as Hodkinson (2012) argues that recent studies which focus on embodiment and affect imply - but that they are key to people's motivations and enjoyment and can contribute to the development of skills and virtuosities, bodies and subjectivities, which stand apart from officially sanctioned forms. None of which may alter wider conditions, but which are important, political, and may also allow subcultures to be conceptualised as art. Problems with the concept go beyond those associated with the CCCS, and the following, offered by way of conclusion, can be no more than sketched out here. But it may be that one way to avoid CCCS-style over-theoreticism without reducing subcultures to the status of youth-culture in general or any-other-lifestyle would be to reformulate the concept in precisely these terms; as relatively committed lifestyle groupings characterised by the gratuitous expenditure of energy on non-instrumental pleasures and 'extra-curricular' virtuosities, leading not only to the temporary appropriation of time and space, but the development of alternative knowledges, capitals, bodies and subjectivities which may themselves stand apart from, or challenge, institutionalised or hegemonic forms.

5.4 Far from depoliticising, in allowing for an exploration of the embodied and performative aspects of issues such as gender, race, sexuality *and* class, such an approach would also allow for subcultural studies to be properly contextualised in relation to wider considerations and debates, as Hall and Jefferson (2006) and other defenders of the CCCS framework rightly demand; despite the implications of certain recent contributions to these debates, the choice is *not* between the sort of class-based analysis associated with the CCCS and a politically naive celebration of the possibilities afforded by consumer culture. Two studies which have gone a considerable way towards what is being suggested here (and *neither* of which is mentioned by Hall and Jefferson (2006) in their survey of recent ethnographic work) are Iain Borden's (2001) *Skateboarding, Space and the City*, and Nancy Macdonald's (2001) *The Graffiti Subculture*, each of which highlights the 'doing' of subculture rather than its symbolic effects, even if this also leads to the reproduction of masculinities of a nominally subversive but in some ways very traditional kind (see also Driver 2011).

5.5 Difficulties with the central concept remain. Even if it makes less sense in the absence of a clearly demarcated 'mainstream', however, and subcultural-type practice is increasingly ubiquitous (Chaney 2004), reformulating it along the lines suggested would at least allow us to address some of the difficulties with earlier understandings without dissolving it in its entirety or diluting it beyond helpful recognition. Macdonald cautions against a 'one-size-fits-all' approach (2001: 150). Whatever form a subculture takes, however, it will always be possible to focus on process, embodiment and affect, and on the development of 'extra-curricular' knowledges and virtuosities which may themselves lead to the development of bodies, pleasures and subjectivities which are subversive or transgressive in particular ways.

Acknowledgements

Notes

[1] In referring to the '*RTR* project' or the 'core CCCS approach', I am not trying to suggest that the writers associated with the Centre adopted an entirely uniform approach. As numerous commentators have made clear (e.g. Bennett 2011: 496; Blackman 2005: 6; Carrington & Wilson 2004: 76; Griffin 2011: 245), and as is amply illustrated by the critical voices *within* the original *RTR* text, their approach was never homogeneous. At the same time, however - and as is also noted in the book's original introduction (Hall & Jefferson 1976: 5) - a dominant theoretical and methodological position *can* be clearly identified, as closely specified in the two core 'Theory' chapters - Clarke et al's (1976) 'Subcultures, Cultures and Class' (which opens the collection as a whole), and Clarke's (1976) subsequent essay on 'Style' (which opens the second 'Theory' section); a position which itself develops Phil Cohen's earlier work on 'Sub-Cultural Conflict and Working Class Community' (Clarke et al 1976: 30-34), and upon or from which the remaining contributions either elaborate or diverge. It is this framework which represents the core CCCS position on subcultures as generally understood, and it is notable that many of those who draw attention to the Centre writers' heterogeneity also refer to '*the*' *RTR* project or some variant of such, as, indeed, do Hall and Jefferson (2006) in their new introduction to *RTR2*. It should also be noted that, just as youth-culture and subculture have been conflated in recent attempts to defend the CCCS framework (Griffin 2011; Martin 2009; Shildrick & MacDonald 2006), so too have certain claims regarding the heterogeneity of the Centre's output conflated different aspects of their work. Paul Willis is frequently cited as an illustration of their use of ethnography and the variety of approaches and perspectives employed (e.g. Hesmondhalgh 2007: 44), but not only might Willis's work on subcultures be seen as an 'exception that proves the rule' - and is itself subject to the tension between it's more structuralist and interpretivist stands which characterises

the RTR project as a whole (Griffin 2011: 248; Muggleton 2000: 24) - but much of Willis's work - just like much of the CCCS's output more broadly - is not actually about *subcultures* at all (Griffin 2011: 252, Muggleton 2005: 211-12). Finally, and in fairness to other recent commentators, none of this confusion is helped by either the inclusion of broader research on youth-culture in *RTR1* (see section four, above), or the book's original cover, featuring two resolutely *non*-subcultural looking 1970s teenagers harassing a younger boy in school uniform.

[2]Although widely presented as one of the key difficulties with the CCCS approach, including by at least partial defenders of their perspective as a whole (Blackman 1998: 210-211; Shildrick & MacDonald 2006: 137), the Centre's neglect of empirical research is contradicted by certain commentators, with Valentine, Skelton and Chambers (1998), for example, claiming that: 'Within *Resistance Through Rituals* ... researchers combined empirical studies of sub-cultures such as Teds, Mods, Rockers, Skinheads and Punks with Gramsci's (1971) theory of hegemony as a way of explaining the forms of rebellion expressed by certain youth groups. *The participant observation technique of ethnography was a principal methodological tool used in such studies*' (1998: 12-13, emphasis added; see also Griffin 2011: 245; Martin 2009: 134). Leaving aside the issue that Punk is not mentioned in the book (and did not actually emerge in the UK until a year after *Resistance through Rituals*' initial in house publication), part of the difficulty here presumably results from the Centre writers' own claims successfully to have attended to both structural and interpretive levels of analysis (see also Martin 2009: 127, 134), and the erroneously titled section on 'Ethnography' in *RTR*, both of which are discussed more fully in section four, above. As with claims surrounding the heterogeneity of the Centre's output (and as repeated in recent defences of the CCCS framework), however, this can also be attributed to the conflation of different aspects of the Centre's work (e.g. Martin 2009: 127), and specifically that of Paul Willis as discussed in note 1, above.

[3]I am using the term functionalist in a deliberately broad sense here to refer not so much to the idea that subcultures emerge in response to a broader societal requirement, but rather that they are perceived as a symptomatic response to broader structural conditions, in which context individual agency is ultimately unimportant; the key distinction from the CCCS perspective being that subcultures are seen as counter-hegemonic rather than supportive of the status quo. (Although a more strictly functionalist could presumably also be made along these lines, following the example of standard functionalist accounts of crime and deviance.) In a sense all Marxist-realist accounts share something with functionalism to the extent that culture is perceived as epiphenomenal and a reflection of deeper structural realities, and the argument presented here is that this is ultimately true of the CCCS account of subcultures, despite the claimed degree of cultural autonomy which the Gramscian strands of their analysis are intended to introduce. A more direct parallel can, of course, be made in the sociology of education, where there is in fact little to separate Durkheim (1956) from Bowles and Gintis (1976), save that the former regards education as a potentially positive allocative mechanism so long as it functions meritocratically, while the latter see it as an unmeritocratic way of reproducing existing class inequalities.

[4]Clarke et all distinguish clearly between 'working-class sub-cultures' and 'middle-class counter-cultures' (1976: 6) in their theoretical introduction to *RTR1*, while Hebdige notes Mod's use as an 'umbrella term' which encompassed art students who had developed a taste for 'outrageous' clothes, but argues that 'for our purposes, we must limit the definition ... to working class teenagers ... in London and ... the South' (1976: 87). The distinction is maintained by Hall and Jefferson in their new introduction to *RTR2*, where they excuse their neglect of 'the growing literature on 'riot grrrls'' on the basis that, 'being middle class and overtly political, they constitute ... a counter culture and not a subculture' (2006: xviii).

[5]As Hall himself notes, albeit in the context of a more general discussion of culturalism and structuralism (and without referring to the clear tension between the two in the Centre's own work on subcultures): 'Whereas, in 'culturalism', experience was the ground - the terrain of the 'lived' - where consciousness and conditions intersected, structuralism insisted that 'experience' could not, by definition, be the ground of anything, since one could only 'live' and experience one's conditions *in and through* the categories, classifications and framework of the culture' (Hall 1980: 66, original emphasis).

[6]In distinguishing between middle-class counter-cultures and working-class subcultures, Clarke et al point to the 'host of variant strands, connections and divergencies' which characterise the counter-cultural 'milieu', in contrast to the 'sequence' of 'tightly-defined' post-war subcultures (Clarke et al 1976: 61-2). Subcultures such as Punk and Mod also demonstrated wider connections of this sort, however (see Frith & Horne 1987), as Hebdige himself acknowledges but then decides to ignore in respect of the latter (1976: 87; see note 4, above), and it is only the lack of ethnographic work which characterises the *RTR* project, combined with the wilfully myopic nature of aspects of their analysis, which allows for such empirically inaccurate distinctions to be confidently maintained.

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