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# **Subculture Theory: an historical and contemporary assessment of the concept for understanding deviance.**

Shane Blackman

## **Introduction**

This article examines how the concept of subculture entered the discipline of sociology and how it has been applied to interpret deviant behaviour. For Becker (1963) and Clinard (1974) subcultures possess distinctive shared values and cultural practices which are different from the mainstream. How to assess departures from normality is a central question for the sociology of deviance. Subcultural theory in sociology has a complex origin and development, which has been shaped by both academic and popular usage. In Blackman (2004: 104) I argued that subculture was a chameleon theory “which possess an ability to change its hue according to the sociological paradigm.” Within criminology and sociology the concept of subculture has defined deviants as ‘subnormal,’ ‘dysfunctional,’ ‘delinquent,’ ‘resistant’ and ‘consumerist.’ Each successive criminological paradigm tends to act as a corrective to the previous tradition and has increased the methodological and epistemological diversity in the study of deviance. For nearly a hundred years, subculture as a concept has been shaped by sociology, anthropology, criminology, psychology and psychoanalysis. This makes it an exciting area of social theory, because it emerged at a time when sociology was making its disciplinary claim to knowledge through Durkheim (1895) and the Chicago School (Park and Burgess 1921). As Albert Bell (2010: 153) notes, subculture is an analytical tool that remains “hotly contested.”

## **Origins: errors, misunderstanding and the first usage of subculture**

A common error in the literature of sociology and criminology, subsequently compounded on the web through numerous online sites dedicated to subculture is the argument that the concept of subculture was first used at the *Chicago School of Sociology* (Newburn 2007, Agnew and Kaufman 2010). No evidence for this assertion can be found. This misunderstanding in the discipline has been advanced by key figures, Jenks (2005: 68) and Gelder (2007: 29) argue that under Robert Park, the Chicago School’s focus on micro urban research, derived from Georg Simmel, marks the beginning of the term being used in the discipline. Jenks and Gelder detail classic Chicago School deviancy studies including Anderson (1923) Thrasher (1927) and Cressey (1932). But at no point do Jenks and Gelder offer a quotation, or page reference that specifies which Chicago sociologist applied the term subculture. Patrick Williams (2011: 17) states for these sociologists: “the concept had not yet entered sociological use.” This error was uncritically taken from Brake (1980: 5) who argued that McLung Lee (1945) and Gordon (1947) are the “earliest use of subculture in sociology.” This error was then repeated in the *Subculture Reader* by Thornton (1997: 1), then again by Jenks (2005: 7) and Gelder (2007: 40) and affirmed by Bell (2010: 159) who states that subculture “was first used in the 1940s” and is attributed to Milton M. Gordon”

In order to correct this error and misunderstanding, I will demonstrate through evidence that indeed, the concept of subculture was first applied at the Chicago School and its use and understanding was influenced by anthropology and the work of Emile Durkheim. At Chicago, it was not until 1929 that anthropology, broke away from sociology to form a separate department, Ned Polsky (1997: 277) argues that ‘graduate students in one department were encouraged in all sorts of informal ways to take courses in the other department.’ Howard Becker (2012), Herbert Bulmer (1997) and Martin Bulmer (1984: 39) argue that anthropologists at Chicago including, Edward Sapir and Robert Redfield played an important role in this “cross-fertilising influence.” For the first application of the term subculture within Chicago we find that in California around 1907-08 Sapir worked with and later had extended correspondence with Alfred Kroeber. In 1925 (fig73) Kroeber used the concept of subculture, to divide the state of California into “subculture areas.” Sapir (1932: 151) wrote: “every individual is in a real sense representative of at least one subculture which may be abstracted from the generalised culture.” The idea of subcultural groups was certainly taught at the Chicago School as Vivien Palmer (1928) demonstrates in her *Field Studies in Sociology: a student’s manual*. Vivien Palmer (1928: 73) calls for ‘maps of subcultural groups.’ She goes on to state that “Subcultural groups which display variations in the prevailing culture of the land are much more difficult to discover. Investigations seem to disclose, however, that there are certain basic differences in people’s mode of life which leads to clear-cut variations in their customs, attitudes and behaviour patterns.” Funded by the *Local Community Research Committee* of the University of Chicago, the manual would have been a key teaching device for undergraduate and graduate students to systematise the idea of the city as a “laboratory for research in sociology” (Burgess 1928: vii). Thus, there is evidence that the concept of subculture was first applied within the Chicago School.

In terms of the theoretical lineage of subculture and deviance, Bell (163) suggests that through the concept of ‘collective representations’ “we see Durkheim anticipating the meaning attributed to... subculture.” Durkheim (1901: xlix) states: “What the collective representations convey is the way in which the group conceives itself in its relation to objects which affect it.” This is a clear link to subcultural theory in the sense that the collective representations are products of real social groups that share symbols and common meaning and thus create forms of solidarity. Durkheim was included in Park and Burgess’ (1921) *The Science of Sociology*. One of Durkheim’s two contributions is on *collective representations*, and the following section is on the *Social Group*. Durkheim influenced the Chicago School through his preoccupation with establishing the disciplinary basis for sociology and influenced Park to pursue his zoned mapping of the city as an organic analogy of society. Reading *The Rules of Sociological Method*, we should not restrict Durkheim’s contribution to a moment in the construction of functionalism, as this would ignore the real advance in the development of the Chicago School approach that understands deviance on the basis of social factors. Waller (1932: 180) in reference to the work of Thrasher states “the gang makes an indispensable contribution to personality, and a contribution which adults sometimes overlook. One learns morality in the gang and one learns to take punishment.” It is not just that Durkheim wanted to project the idea that deviance “is normal”, theoretically he provides individuals with agency due to his commitment to creativity in the face of moral obligations. Thus, for Durkheim, social solidarity in the form of social cohesion for a group or subculture binds people together through

commonality to confront anomie. Durkheim (1895: 72) states deviance “must no longer be conceived as an evil.” The Chicago School explained deviance in its cultural and community context in opposition to seeing it as a pathological condition. Thus, a deviant subculture is created to counter anomie, where symbols, rituals and meaning promote social cohesion (Blackman 2010a: 202). Theoretically based on Edwin Sutherland’s (1924) theory of differential association, although not using the concept of subculture, Thrasher (1927), Shaw and McKay (1927) and Shaw (1930) were able to emphasize the normality of deviance. Thus the Chicago School through the methodological innovation of biographic research and the naturalistic account of the *Deviant’s Own story* contribute to understanding deviance as not based on sympathy but theoretically grounded on the social and economic contexts of everyday life within the locality.

### **Subcultures, sub-normals and dysfunctional deviants**

In both the American and British theories of subculture we can identify a close link with biology and psychology to define deviant behaviour. In Britain during the 1920s the term subculture emerged with a different understanding and application from that of the Chicago School. The British theory of subculture sought abnormality rather than normality as its theoretical base. In Britain, the Eugenics movement saw the term subculture as a means to describe young people defined through biology as ‘sub-normal’ (Watt 1998). In Britain the Mental Deficiency Committee (the Wood Committee) was appointed in 1924 and it reported in 1929. Macnicol (1989: 156) says that the committee contained “figures strongly sympathetic to eugenics, such as Cyril Burt.” The report identified ‘the social problem group’ as “social inefficients” (Woods 1929: 80) and “suggested three possible remedies: socialisation, segregation and sterilisation” to the “racial, social and economic problems that the subnormal group present to every civilised nation” (Macnicol 1987: 301). Heavily influenced by the hereditarian interpretation, Macnicol (1989: 168) notes the Labour Movement opposed the measures put forward by the Woods Committee “as fundamentally anti-working class.” Susser (1962: 145) argues that E.O. Lewis’ national survey from 1925-1927 on the prevalence of mental deficiency published in the Wood report “led him to conclude that a large proportion of the mentally subnormal were of a type he labelled ‘subcultural.’” Lewis (1933: 302) defines the subcultural group in terms of: “Their potential menace to social and racial welfare, the subcultural defectives form the crux of this problem.” Here we see that subculture is defined in biological terms as a ‘social evil’ according to a range of social issues including alcoholism, criminality and unemployment: thus deviant behaviour is theorised through medical concepts. Subcultural deviance is defined in Steadman Jones (1971) sense of being an unproductive ‘social outcast’ group. Burt’s (1925: 39-40) *The Young Delinquent* can be seen as an exemplar of this approach where he transfers elements of Cesare Lombrose’s evolutionary theory of delinquency through case studies on young people under hereditary and Eugenic measures. To describe young “deviants”, Burt uses language such as ‘defective’, ‘a typical street-arab’, ‘dull’, ‘mongols’, ‘cretins’, ‘shiftless’ and ‘subnormal.’ Burt predefines young people in a most degrading, unsympathetic and hostile way as “untrainable animals” (305). In the development of subcultural theory the difference could not be greater between Burt’s depersonalised image of a young delinquent: “fond of a ribbon, and fit for the rope” (351) and Shaw’s (1930) biographical approach of the ‘delinquent boy’s own story’ to

understand the normality of deviant behaviour through what Burgess (1930: 194-5) defined as “empathy, sympathy and imagination”.

In the UK, the post Second World War period saw the development of psychoanalytical approaches to youth deviance under Friedlander (1947) and Bowlby (1944, 1951) who retained elements of the positivist tradition of the pre-war theories of Burt and Lewis. Bowlby (1944) in *Forty-Four Juvenile Thieves*, advanced the notion of an ‘affectionless personality’ belonging to the young deviant, which was subsequently developed into a theory of deviance in *Child Care and the Growth of Love* based on the flawed idea that maternal deprivation was the cause of subcultural delinquency (Mitchell 1975: 228). This psychoanalytical approach quickly became the norm and young people who formed a subculture were defined as suffering from psychological problems within a deprived culture. Major empirical work that emerged in the 1950s argued that subcultural formation by working class youth revealed their deviant inability to integrate in society. The key studies included: Bagot (1941), Fergusson (1951), Spinley (1953), Jephcott (1954), Mays (1954), Morris (1957), Kerr (1958) and Trasler (1962). Subcultural deviants were theorised through the language of pathology and insensitivity. Bagot (1941: 86) compared young delinquents to “tuberculosis” and Mays’ (1954: 88) argument contains echoes of Lombroso when he states “Children are all too often the undesired by products of a frequently indulged sexual appetite.” Here subcultural attachment is predefined as lack of intelligence and poor emotional development. Downes (1966: 111) is critical of the psychoanalytic underpinning of the British theory of subculture which sought to “erect an ‘omnibus’ theory of ‘inadequate socialisation’ as the origin of delinquent behaviour.”

The orthodox account of subcultural theory found in the *Subcultures Reader* credits A.K Cohen (1956) with the popular take-up of the concept of subculture. Importantly, two theorists who influenced Cohen’s thinking on deviant behaviour were Freud and Merton, who were the driving force behind Cohen’s theorisation that subcultures are ‘collective solutions to solve problems’ which is based on Clellan Ford’s (1942: 557) approach to culture. According to Keat and Urry (1975: 90-91), the powerhouse of functionalism: “Merton and Parsons used Durkheimian theses as the foundation for their own significant and influential writing.” The two major structural-functionalist theorists, Talcott Parsons and Robert Merton, both played a significant role in the development of subcultural theory and deviance. Parsons (1942: 92) in *Age and Sex in the Social Structure in the United States* defined youth culture as an agency for socialisation like the family. Traditionally the critics of functionalism have concentrated on his negative view of youth culture as more or less irresponsible and defined as “trouble.” But later, Parson (1951: 286) demonstrates how Freud influenced him, arguing that: the deviant “must of course make the substitution of the pattern of the deviant sub-culture for that of the main social system.” Although Parsons defined subculture in terms of stigma or delinquency, he still carries an echo of Durkheim by suggesting that the subculture fulfils the role of ‘belonging.’ The concept of subculture arrived at a time when there was a paradigm shift in sociology towards the general dominance of structural-functionalist thinking advocated by Parsons and Merton. Downes and Rock (1982: 75) argued that functionalism did offer a “sophisticated and subtle model of deviance.” Merton’s goal was to produce a sociological theory of deviance based on Durkheim’s theory of anomie. What drives Merton’s theory is his preoccupation with social structure as a causal explanation

whereby deviance results from the interplay between culture and structure. Merton (1938: 679) describes “class structure involving differential access to the approved opportunities for legitimate, prestige-bearing pursuit of the culture goals... (as resulting in) anti-social conduct.” His subsequent model of individual adaptation rests on an understanding whereby social hierarchy is identified as creating structural strain for the individual, and thus movement along the matrix from normal to deviance is a marker of anomie. Within the work of A.K. Cohen (1956) and Cloward and Ohlin (1960), via Merton’s theory of deviance, the concept of subculture gets taken up and placed at the centre of the new scientific approach of functionalism. We see the sociological concept fought over in terms of ownership of sociological knowledge. Merton (1957: 179) argues: “In examining the deviant subculture, Cohen is of course in a direct line of continuity with the earlier studies by Shaw, McKay and particularly Thrasher.” This assertion is reinforced by Short (1960: xli) who states: “Some may wonder why Shaw and McKay (1927) did not hit upon the notion of delinquent subculture since with Thrasher (1927) they were responsible for a large portion of the data upon which contemporary formulations rest . . . It remained for Cohen (1956) to introduce the notion of delinquent subculture.” Here we see the new paradigm seeking to control the new concept of subculture, while casting a critical shadow over the Chicago School (Kuhn 1962, Hart 2010).

The influence of Freud was also significant in A. K. Cohen’s development of ‘a general theory of subculture’ applied to deviant behaviour. Cohen adapted Merton’s theory of anomie whereby an individual’s adaptation to the model of appropriate cultural goals and institutional means became a collective adaptation borne out of ‘status frustration.’ Cohen’s analysis is based on the opposition between the corner boys and the college boys in Whyte’s (1943) *Street Corner Society*. Cohen (1956: 136-137) argues that the delinquent “can perfect his solution only by rejecting as status sources those who reject him. This too may require a certain measure of reaction-formation, going beyond indifference to active hostility and contempt for all those who do not share his subculture.”

For Cohen, working class young people in school face status problems due to their lack of middle class values and culture. Cohen’s theory is affirmed by Walter Miller’s (1958) analysis that deviance is generated by the transmission of delinquent values within a disadvantaged community. In contrast, Bordua (1961) is critical of Cohen (1956), Miller (1958) and Cloward and Ohlin’s (1960) insensitivity towards participants within subcultures who appeared defined by theory not data. The structural strain of their class position prevents working class youth from achieving success through the legitimate institutional means. Delinquent subcultural goals are pursued on the basis of a reversal of the values held by the dominant middle class culture. A. K. Cohen (1956: 121) states “the delinquent subculture, we suggest, is a way of dealing with the problems of adjustment” For Cohen, this internalisation of failure contains the kernel of the hidden causes of the delinquent’s transformation. As Freud (1913: 244-45) argues “there are motive forces in mental life which bring about replacement by the opposite in the form of what is known as reaction formation.” Thus, A. K. Cohen’s theory of subculture employs aspects of anomie theory derived from Durkheim and Merton, but what drives the theory is his application of Freud. Hence we have a subcultural theory of deviance, which has psychoanalysis at its centre.

## Centre of Contemporary Cultural Studies: subculture and resistance

In the 1960s symbolic interactionist studies on deviance by Becker and Matza were influential on the development of British deviancy theorists including Downes, Rock, Taylor and Cohen. By the late 1960s the British National Deviance Conference was a significant influence on the work of Phil Cohen (1972), the CCCS (1975) and Dick Hebdige (1979), which redefined the academic discourse of subcultural studies, youth and deviance. The new cultural studies perspective on deviant behaviour looked at subcultures in terms of their engagement in resistance and social struggle. Epistemologically, the CCCS theory of subculture fits within an interpretive sociological framework derived from the Chicago School, but their innovative approach was to understand deviance as informed by consciousness and agency. Understanding deviant behaviour through a cultural studies lens provoked criticism within mainstream sociology. Griffin (2011: 249) notes that the contribution of the CCCS work was described in derogatory terms as the “reviled CCCS approach.” Negativity was shown by Hargreaves and Hammersley’s (1982: 140) accusation that the work of the ‘Birmingham School’ was a ‘discharge of CCCS gas’ or “an intellectually disabling cloud of dogmatism.” In the myth of the heroic struggle, Albrow (1986: 337) reveals that sociology was under threat from cultural studies in losing its oppositional pathos. The hostility by sociology towards cultural studies is derived from *Working Papers in Cultural Studies 2* (CCCS: 1972: 3), where the introductory paper, entitled *Perspective* claims: “Mainstream sociology is dominated by the official or authoritarian perspectives at the service of the present organisation of interest and privilege.” Hall (1980: 21) states: “If cultural studies overstepped its proper limits and took on the study of contemporary society (not just its texts), without ‘proper’ scientific (that is quasi scientific) controls, it would provoke reprisals for illegitimately crossing the territorial boundaries.... this was no idle threat.” (See also Hall and Jefferson 2006: xv). Criticism of the CCCS approach was not just a matter of theoretical debate; it questioned the legitimacy of the cultural studies approach itself (Blackman 2000: 51).

The CCCS theory of subculture outlined in *Resistance Through Ritual* is an articulation of the ideas set forth in Cohen’s paper *Subcultural Conflict and Working Class Community*. Cohen’s (1972: 30) analysis has considerable resonance. He states that it is “important to make a distinction here between subcultures and delinquency... From my point of view I do not think the middle class produces subcultures for subcultures are produced by a dominated culture not by a dominant culture.” The break between subculture and delinquency freed subculture from the theoretical shackles of crime, so that subcultural practices could be interpreted in terms of agency. Cohen’s critical theory not only represented an ‘epistemological break,’ it replaced A. K. Cohen’s Freudian spring of ‘reaction formation’ with Louis Althusser’s reading of the ‘imaginary’ theorised by Jacques Lacan. Thus a key continuity between the American functionalist theory of subculture and the British CCCS theory is a dependency on psychoanalytic concepts to explain deviance in subculture.

Subculture in *Resistance Through Ritual* represents a dynamic melange of social and cultural theory, defined by Stuart Hall (1980: 25) as a “complex Marxism.” Through the employment of Lévi-Strauss’ structuralist theory of bricolage (style), the

semiological analysis of Roland Barthes, an Althusserian theory of ideology and Lévi-Strauss' theory of homology, youth subculture was wrapped in Gramsci's idea of hegemony and placed in the centre of the Marxist base and superstructure problematic (Hall 1980: 27-28). At the core of the CCCS theory of subculture is resistance and dissent. Applying Lévi-Strauss's theory of myth in terms of a 'magical solution' to the fragmentation of social class experience, coupled with Lacan's theory of the 'imaginary,' youth subcultures were no longer pathological but were articulated as trying to resolve social contradictions through performance of multiple narratives of bricolage, which celebrated their agency. Although social class is a key influence in the CCCS theory, the diverse theoretical strands of the CCCS theory enable style to have a multi-dimensional source of application and adaptation. The style, which belonged to the subculture, enabled young people to operate on many platforms, to create identity and express imagination through DIY practices (Barnes 1979). Subculture theory could explain the deviant behaviour of skinheads as trying to reclaim past forms of solidarity through fantasised notions of contemporary community in decline, while at the same time Hebdige's (1979) analysis saw punk as a deviant rupture picking at the sores of soft capitalism, demonstrating that power and corruption need to be exposed.

The CCCS approach was aware of the theoretical limitation of youth subculture based on leisure, but for the CCCS, consumption was not defined by individual politics. Clarke, Hall, Jefferson and Roberts (1975: 47) saw that "there is no subcultural solution to working class youth unemployment." Furthermore, they (1975: 47) argued, "Though not ideological, subcultures have an ideological dimension." For Clarke, Hall, Jefferson and Roberts (1975: 45) there is a commitment to ethnography when they argue subcultures "are not simply ideological constructs. They, too, win spaces for the young: cultural spaces in neighbourhoods and institutions, real time for leisure and recreation, actual room on the streets or street corner." Here we see the *imaginary* working alongside the *actual*, where the CCCS theory seeks to build on ideas expressed by Becker and Matza derived from the naturalistic approach of the Chicago School of sociology. The subject of recreational intoxication by deviant subcultures is a useful example discussed by Hebdige (1975, 1979) and Willis (1972, 1978) where drug consumption within subcultures is pursued on the basis of leisure and pleasure interpreted as a counter-hegemonic practice. Subcultures both regulate conduct and promote experimentation within a framework of social order. Here the cultural descriptions in ethnographic studies on deviance by Becker (1963), Polsky (1967), Young (1971), Plant (1975) Bourgois (1995) and Anderson (1999) focus on the social context and construction of drug use; the subcultural support network and the collective experience affirm the value of the concept of subculture to interpret deviance. Gourley (2004: 70) suggests "subcultural theories of deviance are still relevant to understanding recreational drugs in contemporary society." Wilson (2006: 171) concludes that rave culture, because of its popular position, represents a "prototypical twenty-first century subculture." Two empirical studies on drugs and young people, by Lalander (2003) and Sandberg and Pedersen (2009), also apply subculture as a tool for analysis to explain deviance, and both see little relevance in the post-subcultural approach. Throughout their analysis of young people's drug consumption at night, Hunt, Moloney and Evans, K. (2010) acknowledge the notion of post-subculture but extensively use the concept of subculture.



Two key areas where the CCCS theory has been criticised are its weak focus on gender and black and Asian youth cultures (McRobbie 1991, Huq 2006). The CCCS Women's Studies Group in *Women Take Issue* (1978) point out that in subcultural studies there was a tendency for male academics to study male subcultures and where women were present to them through male eyes. Throughout the 1980s both Angela McRobbie and Christine Griffin sought to correct this blinkered approach. Young women's involvement in subculture was a major feature of Skelton and Valentine's (1998: 17) collection *Cool Places*, where chapters from Dwyer, Blackman, McNamee and Leonard "demonstrated... what young women do and what constitutes the distinctive elements of their culture." Feminist studies on young women's subculture have received little attention from the post-subcultural approach, which is primarily concerned with mapping individualisation, pleasure, fluidity and hybridity. Post-subculturalists Redhead, Bennett, Muggleton and Malbon point out that the CCCS approach is male defined but do not themselves address the feminist politics of young women's subcultural participation. Neither did gender receive attention from Albert Bell (2010) in his genealogical analysis of deviance and subculture. As with the growth of studies on young women we have seen the emergence of studies on black and Asian youth focused on both music and youth subculture including Gilroy (1987), Mac an Ghail (1988), Jones (1988), Back (1996) and Owusu (2000). The following work on black and Asian young people; including Sunaina Maira's (2002) focus on Indian and other South Asian American youth culture in New York and the contributors to Lee and Zhou's (2004) collection on Asian American youth, employ the concept of subculture theorised by the CCCS in terms of examining forms of resistance and deviance. Kathleen Hall (2002) describes young British Sikhs' involvement in subcultural styles and deviance, also Mahendru's (2010) work on the sexualities of young Indians in London, Gunter's (2010) ethnography on different black youth subcultures and Dedman's (2011) study on contemporary grime music and resistance, employ the concept of subculture to account for the actions of young women and ethnic groups. Also, Clark's (2012) study on youth culture in China, Steinberg, Parmar and Richard's (2005) international encyclopedia of contemporary youth culture and Horgby and Nilsson's (2010) collection on rock music and political change, all the use the CCCS concept of subculture. These empirical studies use the CCCS theory of subculture to examine the social, political, and cultural contradictions of subcultural practice to offer a wider lens on deviant behaviour. For Martin (2009: 137) these recent ethnographic accounts follow in the tradition of the classic criminological approach of the Chicago School, and apply a revised concept of subculture to explain localised class based solutions to material experiences.

In the second edition of *Resistance Through Ritual* (2006: xxii) the conceptual framework of conjunctural analysis is brought into a more dominant position of explanation. In the first edition (1975: 53), the term 'conjunctural' is used in relation to the sources of subcultural style and how the "historical conjuncture (the balance of forces between domination and subordination... will produce changes in the... matrix of problems, structures, opportunities and experiences which confront that particular class stratum at a particular historical moment." (44). Following on this, Dick Hebdige (1979: 84) defines 'conjuncture' as where "each subculture representing a distinctive moment" engages with a "particular set of circumstances." Looking back, Hall and Jefferson (2006: xxii) admit that within the study 'conjunctural analysis' was "not so well developed theoretically." For Griffin (2011: 245) the CCCS theory of subculture is valuable in that it allows young people's cultural practices and their

social positions of gender, class and race to be grasped through a ‘conjunctural analysis.’ The conjunctural analysis is related to ideas explored by Gramsci, Althusser and Poulantzas who focused on social contradictions within society to assess how social struggle occur within temporary moments (Jessop and Ngai-Ling 2012). The CCCS theory moves beyond deviance and style to address the symbolic politics of subculture. Thus ‘conjunctural analysis’ enables the CCCS to describe a complex field of power, deviance and consent, and look at different levels of expression - political, ideological, cultural and economic. In this way conjunctural analysis sees subcultural deviance through a critical combination of macro events within a temporary stability.

### **Post-subculturalist, postmodernism and neo-liberalism: the return of subculture**

This section will initially outline the new post-subcultural perspective, and then critically assess its position and relevance in understanding deviant behaviour. An emergent critique of the CCCS theory of subculture developed from within the CCCS, first through the empirical work of Willis (1972, 1978) and then from Clarke’s (1982) Weberian theoretical challenge. During the mid 1990s two ethnographic studies emerged proposing new terms. Blackman (1995) advanced the idea of ‘youth cultural forms’ and Thornton (1995) adapted Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital, to speak about ‘subcultural capital.’ By the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century new terms premised on post-modern ideas to replace subculture flourished, including post-subcultural, neo-tribe, scene, life-style, after and beyond subculture. Andy Bennett (2011: 493) described these new terms as representing “the post-subcultural turn.” Bell (2010: 154) in the *International Handbook of Criminology* notes this new terminology appears to take pleasure in “deriding the term subculture as problematic, anachronistic and redundant.” For example, Chaney (2004: 36) asserts that the concept of subculture has “been rendered superfluous.” During this time the new deviancy paradigm of *Cultural Criminology* emerged and also initially embraced postmodernism in terms of difference, discontinuity and diversity but retained elements from the Chicago School, labelling theory, New Criminology and the CCCS (Haywood and Young 2004: 266).

The post-subculturalists have sought to construct a new canon based on three key social theorists Max Weber, Jean Baudrillard and Michel Maffesoli as a foundation for their postmodern subcultural theory (Blackman 2005: 8). Postsubculturalist theorists construct a Neo-Weberian paradigm for subcultural theory. Shields in his forward to Maffesoli’s *The Time of the Tribes* states he offers a ‘Weberian perspective focusing on the meaning of social interaction for participants’ (Shields 1996: iv). A key unifying feature of the post-subcultural theorists is opposition to the CCCS theory of subculture defined as a rigid “modernist theory” within a “Marxist framework” (Muggleton 1997: 200) a theory which is too “class-centred” (Bennett 2000: 23) and restricted to “a pure working class subcultural membership” (Muggleton 1997: 200). The critique of the CCCS position has tended to be accusatory, through the use of labels such as Marxist or determinist rather than through critical engagement. Hodkinson (2012: 570) and Williams (2011: 31) key criticism of the CCCS subcultural theory was for an over reliance on theory and a lack of empirical data. Muggleton (2000: 24) states, “the CCCS failed to consider the lived reality of those under study.” However, it would be incorrect to accuse the CCCS of not undertaking

empirical work on deviant subcultures, because *Resistance Through Ritual* contains a range of qualitative empirical work. Although, it would be accurate to point out that the three cases studies on *teds, skins and mods* are based on ‘literary ethnography’ rather than direct observation which is alluded to by the general sub-heading *Ethnography* (Blackman 1995: 4).

In answer to the accusation that the CCCS theory was not based on empirical experience I want to highlight two brief biographical accounts concerning two leading CCCS theorists: Phil Cohen and Dick Hebdige. From 1968 to 1971 Cohen was a community activist known as Dr. John. He was leader of the *London Street Commune* (LSC) who occupied 144 Piccadilly, London and was part of the British Situationist International group, *King Mob* (Cohen 1997). LSC was a ‘hippy squat’, which received highly negative TV news coverage. Also, during this period Cohen made contact with a gang of deviant skinheads who formed a co-operative called *The Paint House*. Daniel and McGuire (1972: 16) state “When the London Street Commune... moved to Whitechapel, *The Paint House* decided to visit them.” The meeting was reciprocal, as Dr. John visited *The Paint House*. When at the CCCS Hebdige did ethnographic work on West London pubs and the professional criminal milieu in Fulham with a particular focus on actual and symbolic violence within and between subcultural cliques. During the same period he was involved in a sound system called the *Shoop* in Birmingham, which did mod-themed nights and became a feature of Birmingham’s underground music scene. He worked along side Mike Horseman who ran the *Shoop* throughout the punk period until the early 1980s (Hebdige 2012). These short biographical narratives on Cohen and Hebdige detail their involvement within deviant subcultural settings to study of style, creativity, identity and cultural transgressions. These examples provide evidence that the origins of the CCCS concept of subculture was informed by a real engagement with youth subcultures at a social and political level looking at deviant behaviour.

Postsubculturalist theory with its new focus on spatiality, locality and fluid individual identity wants us to view subcultures more creatively, liberating identity from the subordination of oppression. The aim is to move away from models of social constraint and place increased emphasis on agency. Muggleton (2000: 9-10), Bennett (2000: 25) and Miles (2000) call upon Max Weber's ideas to support post modern thinking which understands social action in terms of its meaning for individual people. The post-subcultural approach uses Weber to argue that young people are not the bearers of the social structure; the social world is made up of different sets of values. Hence the post-subcultural position argues that style is expressed through individual consumption and lifestyle rather than its relations to production and struggle. The post-subculturalist preoccupation with lifestyle and consumerism negates the question of the ethics of production and according to both Young (2008: 21) and Martin (2000: 133) cultural criminology has adopted and drawn upon post-subcultural theory. However, Keith Hayward (2013) states that “the post-subcultural position remains too ambiguous, and I don’t think that Cultural Criminology has bought into the post-subcultural argument because what it has produced is not viable or has no worth to explain material social and cultural conditions.” Thus it would appear that Cultural Criminology is stepping back from post-subcultural theory alongside its movement away from postmodernism towards subcultural analysis in late capitalism.

The emphasis of the post-subcultural argument based on individual consumer creativity enables individuals to forge their own identity. But postsubculturalist theorists downplay the collective nature of subcultural practice identified by Maffesoli (1996: 51). Postsubculturalist theorists employ Maffesoli's concept of the tribe to claim individuals take pleasure in the hybridity of consumerism, to posit the centrality of choice and individualism. The post-modern argument is focused on particularity and individualism where post-subculturalists assert that subcultural formation and practice are no longer articulated by the modernist structuring relations of class, gender and race. Here subcultures appear to be cut adrift from the social structure, social divisions and the collectivity of young people's identity. This postsubculturalist approach results in an alignment with classical neo-liberal ideology where individuals pursue entrepreneurial freedom of choice in the style supermarket. This assertion fits with Redhead's position that (1993: 23-24) there are no 'authentic subcultures' and the 'depth model' is no longer appropriate "to analyse the surfaces of (post) modern culture, a culture characterised by depthlessness, flatness and 'hyper-reality". This idea is repeated by Muggleton (2000: 47) who argues that the "depth model" of analysis is no longer relevant because with post-subcultures "there are no rules, there is no authenticity, no ideological commitment, merely a stylistic game to be played." Hodkinson (2002: 29), Greener and Hollands (2006: 413) and Dedman (2010: 517) critically oppose the notion that subcultures lack depth. Their qualitative empirical studies demonstrate that subcultures are engaged in productive practices with a common set of values, which highlight subcultural commitment, degrees of resistance and transgressive acts. Blackman (2010b: 365), MacDonald et al (2005) and Nayak and Kehily (2008: 13) argue that the post-subcultural approach tends to marginalise questions of social class and structural inequalities and appears to have little interest in examining social divisions. The importance of social divisions in youth leisure is demonstrated in studies by Roberts (2005), Gunter (2010: 119) Hollands (2002: 168) Nayak (2003: 311) and Griffin (2011: 250) who specify that youth cultural identities based on consumption are structured by both material and social conditions of inequality. Hence, Shildrick and MacDonald (2006: 129) conclude that the most worrying aspect of the post-subcultural analysis is the "theoretical marginality of questions of class."

Moving away from models of social constraint the post-subcultural position disengages from collective understandings of deviance with a new focus on individual style choice. The preoccupation with liberating notions of consumer capitalism as the causal explanation of subcultural activities leaves little room to assess subcultural deviance or transgression. Through valorising individual consumption, the postsubculturalists do not address the generation or articulation of deviance as a social experience. Muggleton (2000: 49) argues "post-subcultural ideology will, in other words, value the individual over the collective, elevate difference and heterogeneity over collectivism and conformity." Both Muggleton (2000: 48) and Bennett (2012: 495) link post-subcultural theory with "postmodern sensibilities of style in which individualism has surpassed an emphasis on collectivity." Muggleton (2000: 48) and Bennett and Kahn Harris 2004: 12) assert that there has been increased 'fluidity' between contemporary youth subcultures resulting in cross-cultural influence and weakened subcultural borders. There is a tendency to equate this apparent instability and movement of subcultural affiliation to wider postmodernist thinking defined in terms of social fragmentation by Baudrillard and Lyotard. This is closely linked to the take-up of the idea from Ted Polhemus (1995) that subcultural style is defined as

supermarket selection. The emphasis of the post-subcultural argument based on 'individual consumer creativity' (Bennett and Harris 2004:13), enables young people to make their identity. The result of the post-subculturalists analysis is a celebration of isolation. Unlike the CCCS theory of subculture the post-subculturalist approach is unable to critically analyse the current neo-liberal social order (Griffin 2011). Williams (2011: 42) concludes, that the post-subcultural accounts "are little more than new empirical examples of something already theorised in terms of generic social processes."

Two theorists who have sought to revise the theory of subculture within sociology and criminology are Paul Hodkinson in the UK and Patrick Williams in the US. Hodkinson (2002) offers a detailed revision to the CCCS theory of subculture through the elaboration of four distinctive criteria: identity, commitment, consistent distinctiveness and autonomy. In a similar way Williams (2011) places communication and culture at the centre of his symbolic interactionist theory of subculture. Both these revisions of the CCCS theory of subculture build on the cultural studies approach to deviance, which also focuses on questions of resistance and transgression within capitalism. Both Hodkinson and Lincoln (2008: 30), and Williams (2011: 40-42) see the new forms of subcultural communication through social media as offering increased knowledge, flexibility, participation and collectivity transmitted through a subcultural network. They do not see increased digital and online communications as evidence to support the post-subcultural position. Furthermore, there has been movement from within the post-subcultural position. Bennett (2012: 503) states: "in post-subcultural discourse, it is largely taken for granted that young people's tastes, interests and cultural affiliations are fluid, and inter-changeable. However, beyond the small handful of published studies... there is very little in the way of reliable data to assert such claims." Meanwhile, Muggleton (2005: 205) has argued that "while reports of the death of subculture are greatly exaggerated, the continued use of this concept in future research is perhaps likely to emphasise certain CCCS connotations of group coherence, consistency and commitment." It would now appear that Muggleton and Bennett are seeking to bring about consensus within the subcultural debate and no longer want removal of the concept of subculture. Therefore, they propose an academic truce whereby subculture and post-subcultural theory will work in collaboration. Evidence from empirical work cited in this paper shows that there are limitations to the applicability and rigour of the term post-subcultural due its dependency on a postmodern neo-liberal ideology. In contrast, in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century the increased levels of social disturbance by young people and young adults, from micro anti-social behaviour to mass rioting, have shown that subcultural identities are shaped through material and social conditions.

## **Conclusion**

One of the attractions of the concept of subculture is its power to define and describe deviant behaviour in society. The concept has complex social origins and has been subject to struggle within the sociology of knowledge. I have demonstrated that subcultural theory has been applied and developed within different sociological paradigms. Furthermore, subculture is linked to fashions in social speculation due to

its intimate connection with young people. This makes the concept of subculture a barometer of cultural contemporariness and societal measurement.

It would be wrong to argue that there is a dominant explanation of subculture. Different theoretical concepts of subculture are in vogue in different settings and across societies. There remains a trace of the British biological theory of subculture where subcultural commitment is not merely defined as pathological but understood as a social and moral danger to civil society. The real attraction of A. K. Cohen's general theory of subculture within mainstream politics and institutional media is because it provides an answer for deviant behaviour. The powerful common sense explanation derived from Freud that subcultural members look for inverted status from within their deviant subculture has its own politically enticing permanent cultural logic. The CCCS theory enabled subcultural actions to be interpreted as non-pathological through the separation of subculture from deviance. From here subcultures were theorised and interpreted as collective social formations within wider social, political and historical moments, responding to their material experiences and understood as representing a creative challenge to bourgeois order through forms of resistance. The analysis and evidence presented here suggest that CCCS theory has explanatory potential to account for young peoples subcultural activities across different countries at different historical and political conjunctures. Post-subcultural theory put an emphasis on individual meaning in subcultural practice, in terms of individualistic identity, pleasure and individual performance defined as offering fluidity, locality and hybridity. At the same time post-subcultural theory has avoided critical engagement with issues of class, feminism and ethnicity due to its postmodernist positioning and belief in the 'hyperreal.' The post-subcultural emphasis on consumer choice to buy into subcultures reduced subcultural identity to a neo-liberal cash nexus where freedom to choose was confused with authenticity and the DIY basis of subcultural agency and dissent was lost. This paper has argued that post-subcultural theory is unable to provide depth and relevance at a structural and cultural level of analysis but it retains value when assessing cultural engagement though consumerist identity focused on individualisation. In conclusion, the major impact of the post-subcultural turn has been a constructive critical re-evaluation of the epistemological and methodological basis to the theory of subculture in sociology and criminology.

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