Subcultural Theory

Traditions and Concepts

J. Patrick Williams

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Preface

This book, while theoretically relevant to the study of most cultures marked as different from the so-called "mainstream" – whether by social status, ethnicity, language, taste, politics, or otherwise – focuses most on bringing together decades' worth of studies on oppositional youth subcultures, which became so prevalent during the twentieth century. The reasoning behind this is twofold. First, while the concept "subculture" has been used in various ways to describe the culture of many types of social groupings, its application to youth has been profound, and some of the best descriptions of young people's alternative methods of doing things have occurred within this tradition. Second, the idea of oppositional youth subcultures is close to my own heart. It is through my participation in the punk, straight-edge, and extreme metal subcultures over more than two decades that I am the person I am today. Setting aside what I am supposed to know about primary and secondary socialization, I feel that my inter-actions with(in) these cultures during adolescence and through my adult life have been incredibly profound, leading me toward sincere critical thinking, a certain disregard for social standards or "right-ness," and a belief in the positive possibilities for social change.

Over the course of writing the text, however, I began to realize that explicitly signifying "youth subcultures" throughout the text would be counterproductive, mainly because of the diversity of types of people who participate in such cultures today. Go to a subcultural venue in almost any city and you'll probably see more teenagers than anyone else, but there *are* other people to be seen as well. Subcultural affiliation is most likely to begin during adolescence, but its sig-nificance can last a lifetime. The concept of "youth subcultures," so commonly used in social-science writing, rhetorically denies the

continuing significance of subcultural participation to those of us who have accidentally grown up and grown older over the years. Thus, while the impetus behind the book (and its dedication) lies with all the kids who make subcultures real, its writing is intended to represent the larger landscape of social life.

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Subcultural Theory

As I sat thinking about how to begin this book, a phone call reminded me that there had been another school shooting recently – November 2007 – this time at Jokela High School in Tuusula, Finland. Eighteen-year-old Pekka-Eric Auvinen killed eight people, injured several others, and then killed himself. A month earlier, fourteen-year-old Dillon Cossey had been arrested for planning an attack on Plymouth Whitemarsh High School in Pennsylvania. The day after the Finnish shooting, a Pennsylvanian reporter called me because of my research on the convergence of youth subcultures and digital culture. She explained that Auvinen and Cossey had communicated about twenty-five times on an internet forum and through instant messaging, and she wanted me to tell her more about "this tiny – but frightening – subculture [that] is thriving" online (Ruderman 2007). I spent the next half-hour in what I later considered a somewhat bizarre conversation about video games, internet forums, and youth subcultures. Why bizarre? Because I found myself going out of my way to dissuade the reporter from talking about these events as sub-cultural. As the quote from her subsequent news story (cited above) indicates, she decided to do so anyway.

I was not surprised, actually. What she described were two boys who were disturbed enough by their social interactions at school – which seem to have involved ridicule, hazing, and ostracization – that they decided violence was the most viable solution to their problems. But did that make them members of a "frightening subculture"? I thought not. What I feared was that the word "subculture" would be used, as it often is, in an uncritical fashion, that is, as a journalistic tool that took two deplorable acts of violence (one in the mind, the other acted out) and linked them to something that I have valued

over the last twenty-something years. What I wanted was for this journalist to leave subculture out of the conversation, to not drag it through the mud. What I didn't want was for the term to be reduced (as it often is anyway) to an attention-grabber in the Sunday paper.

My desire to avoid invoking subculture is certainly tied to my own history of subcultural participation – in punk and straightedge as a teenager, then as an amateur musician in the death metal scene for nearly a decade. As a suburban American teenager listening to British bands such as Crass and Subhumans, I learned, among other things, to object to cultural industries' intentional appropriation of everyday culture for profit and to reflect on the relevance of class and gender in everyday life. American bands such as Seven Seconds and Minor Threat had taught me to put my thoughts into action and to live a life that I thought was positive and meaningful, regardless of what family and peers thought. I had learned to value directness, dissent, resistance, and in general an unwillingness to simply accept what I was offered by adults. Years later, after earning a Bachelor's degree in cultural anthropology, I discovered the relevance of my so-called subcultural mindset to sociology. It was partly from this standpoint – as someone who still happily embraces his subcultural past – that I discussed the irrelevance of "subculture" for that Pennsylvanian news report on school shootings. To be sure, many of the people I've known who participated in subcultures were similarly ostracized or hazed during adolescence, or even earlier in childhood. For them, subcultures seemed to offer a solution to the problems faced in their everyday lives – a solution that did not involve physical retaliation against the popular kids. Subcultures were to them, and are to me, a resource from which to develop a positive self-concept, a confidence in non-normative thinking (although subcultural thinking can became myopic), and a network of support in a world that often feels alienating and unfulfilling.

Today there are myriad collective forms of youthful behavior that serve such functions for young people who, for various reasons and to various degrees, find themselves "out of step" (Minor Threat 1981) with the world around them, including punk, hardcore, emo, goth, straightedge, veganism, indie, lowrider, skinhead, riot grrrl, extreme metal (e.g., black metal, death metal), mod, bike messaging, and hip-hop. I will discuss many of these and other subcultural phenomena as well throughout the book, although I do not mean to suggest that this list represents all the subcultures out there today, or that people subscribing to them would commit equally to the subcultural label. There are many forms of non-normative collective behavior that I

will largely avoid – religious sects, cults, immigrant populations, and people who are labeled as deviant because of their sexuality are but a few examples. I will also not journey into the realm of television, fantasy, or gaming fan cultures, except in chapter 9, and then only for a moment of comparison. These types of groups have been theorized differently by social science scholars and I will do no more than consider their relation to subculture. Certainly a case could be made that the Amish represent a subculture, or that nudists, motorcyclists, and players of rugby or violent video games do as well. So why *not* cover such groups? Because they shift the focus away from youthfulness and from the idea of groups with an intentionally antagonistic relationship with normal society.

Returning to my opening story, the journalist with whom I spoke regarding video games and school shootings was doing her best to make sense of abhorrent acts of violence, and in her mind the term "subculture" was useful in describing the kids involved. She is not alone in what I consider a sensational use of the subculture concept. For decades, subculture has come under intense scrutiny by social science scholars who claim that the term is too broad, too biased, or simply out of date. While saving my review of such work for later, I will now say that I disagree with the idea that subculture (as a sociological concept) should be put to pasture. The subculture concept still has relevance for social science and the social world. One of its most relevant uses is as an umbrella term that represents a collection of perspectives and studies that retrieve a "negativist approach" to sociology (Leventman 1982). By negativistic sociology, I do not mean to suggest something pessimistic, but rather something that responds to the thoroughly positivist bias in sociology. Here I am drawing from the tradition of Idealist philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831). Hegel argued that societies were grounded in tensions and contradictions, for example, between mind and matter, nature and culture, self and other, and that within these contradictions lay the basis of "absolute" knowledge. Hegel believed that any statement (thesis) had a dialectical and negative opposite (antithesis), the combination of which led to a new understanding (synthesis) and thus brought humans closer to truth. Setting aside Hegel's failure to ever arrive at what truth might actually be, what is useful here is his recognition of the importance of negation for understanding the social world. Subcultures function as the antithesis to mainstream/dominant culture[1] and therefore require study if we are to develop a synthetic understanding of the world we live in.

Auguste Comte (1798–1857) was a French philosopher credited with having developed positivism, as well as having coined the term "sociology" to describe his proposed science of society. Positivist philosophy rejected Hegelian negativism in favor of the search for a solution to society's problems. According to Comte, sociology would become an evolved form of religion. Scientific methods borrowed from biology, chemistry, and physics would be applied to the study of society and the resulting knowledge "would form the basis of consensus, and could also be applied to remove the causes of disorder, just as natural-scientific knowledge had been applied in the taming of nature" (Marshall 1994: 405). This was positivism in a nutshell: "the attempt to discover social laws analogous to the law-like regularities discovered by natural sciences; and an absolute insistence on the separation of facts and values" (ibid.).

In the 1960s there was a concerted push among some scientific theorists to move beyond positivism. Thomas Kuhn (1962) argued that science progressed through revolutions against the predominate theories of the day, rather than through a linear improvement of those theories. Herbert Marcuse (1960: 345) argued that sociology's preoccupation with "order in science and order in society merged into an indivisible whole. The ultimate goal is to justify and fortify this social order." Meanwhile, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966) reframed the social world as a collective human construct rather than an obdurate reality that could be scientifically measured. It is their social constructionist approach that has influenced my own thinking about subculture the most. For me, subcultural theory emphasizes social worlds that are created by and affect young people directly and indirectly. Subcultural studies legitimate certain concepts that are antithetical to the social order (e.g., non-conformity, resistance, liminality) as much as they support a social constructionist view of them. In my mind, subcultural theory therefore represents both constructionist and negativistic sociology. As a field it is rather unconcerned with developing a consensus-based view of youth culture or the larger social world, highlighting instead an understanding of young people's problems within, and critiques of, the dominant social order, as well as the impact of larger social processes on young people's lives. Thus, rather than take either a functionalist or criminological approach, viewing subcultures as problems or dysfunctions, this book is intended in quite a different way, to "counterbalance the values of one's society . . . by viewing society as a 'problem' for the [subculturalist] rather than the other way round" (Polsky 2005: 70).

Defining subculture

Understanding what subcultures are, how they arose within the context of modernity, and what purpose they serve depends largely on what you read. According to Ken Gelder (2005: 1), the history of modern society is replete with narratives of people "that are in some way represented as non-normative or marginal through their particular interests and practices, through what they are, what they do and where they do it" and who thus stand outside the bounds of "normal" society. What stands out in Gelder's definition of subculture is the distinction between *non-normative* on the one hand, and *marginal* on the other. A similar distinction was made earlier by Louis Zurcher (1972: 357), who argued that social scientists studying subcultures tended to view them either as "collective, consensual and *perpetuating (or perpetuated) social patterning[s]*." Historically speaking, the emergence of subcultures as a social phenomenon took the form of perpetuated marginalization. Several scholars have pointed to Henry Mayhew as being responsible for bringing "a particular kind of social perspective, a 'sociological gaze,' which [began] to emerge in the 1830s and 1840s" (Tolson 1990: 114) to bear on the lived culture of London's working-class poor (see also Gelder 2005; Hebdige 1988: 19–22; Thompson and Yeo 1973). Mayhew was a newspaper journalist who published a series of character profiles on representatives of various working-class cultures in the London paper, *Morning Chronicle*, in 1849–50 (subsequently published in 1861–2 as *London Labour and the London Poor*). His work, based on interview-like conversations with people he came into contact with during his investigations, brought life to groups of citizens who were more or less treated as sub-human by England's landed classes. Andrew Tolson (1990: 114) argues that Mayhew's work, while liberal and reformist in nature, opened up "a range of approaches to the classification, supervision and policing of urban populations." While acknowledging the sociological importance of Mayhew's work, Ken Gelder (2007: ch. 1) also locates it within a larger historical tradition of literary voyeurism dating back to the mid-sixteenth century that focused on various undesirable "vagabond types who frequented the edges of early modern English society" (Gelder 2005: 2). From this perspective, subcultures have, for hundreds of years, been identified and labeled, cast in terms of dysfunction and need.

Yet, as we will see throughout this book, subcultures today are more often characterized by either perpetuating non-normativity or by temporariness and liminality than by perpetuated marginalization.

This is partly the result of the post-subculture approach to youth cultures, partly the result of an erosion of the subculture concept in mainstream sociology, and partly the result of the growing use of the term "subculture" in popular vernacular. The theories and research that scholars at the University of Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) developed in the 1970s went a long way in reconceptualizing youth subcultures as a specifically post-World War II phenomenon rooted in consumerism. Yet CCCS research, like some American scholarship before it, also made evident that non-normative cultural responses are often the result of a process of marginalization. Since then, numerous scholars, many of whom I will discuss in the following chapters, have refined modernist and/or postmodernist conceptions of youth subcultures, which tend to view subcultures as cultures of choice more than cultures into which people are placed. Still, perhaps because of all this, a key question that subcultural scholars continue to ask – whether in sociology, cultural studies, or elsewhere – relates to the definition of "subculture." What is and what isn't subcultural? In other words, where are the boundaries of subcultures, and where do they start and end? How can we find the answers to such questions? The task is neither easy nor well supported. Just like the many authors of books on culture who begin with a sentence about how hard it is to define the concept of culture, many scholars today see the term "subculture" as similarly ubiquitous and vague. This has resulted in pessimism among some who believe that the concept poses more problems for sociological analysis than it is able to solve.

In order to judge how useful the subculture concept might still be, let us first look at how it evolved in sociology and cultural studies over the early years of its use. I will take one example from each of the following decades – 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s – to highlight some important developments that moved in the direction of subculture studies today. The earliest uses of subculture tended to be both arbitrary and analytic in nature. If any society could be subdivided in terms of demographic categories, then any culture could be similarly divided. Thus, Milton Gordon suggested that:

> a great deal could be gained by a more extensive use of the concept of the *sub-culture* – a concept used here to refer to a sub-division of a national culture, composed of a combination of factorable social situations such as class status, ethnic background, regional and rural or urban residence, and religious affiliation, but *forming in their combination a functioning unity which has an integrated impact on the participation individual.* (Gordon 1947: 40; emphasis in original)

In this early conceptualization, subculture would be useful for helping sociologists categorize people according to a number of social traits simultaneously. "We would, for instance, refer not so much to 'the Negro,' as to 'Southern, rural, lower-class Negroes,' or 'North, urban, middle-class Negroes,' etc." (ibid.: 41). The belief underlying this definition was that a person's culture was related directly to her or his membership in specific demographic categories. Such a definition left much to be desired because it assumed that all people who shared certain social characteristics also shared culture (i.e., values, beliefs, and practices).

Within a decade, however, the concept had already undergone some rather extensive revisions. In his landmark study entitled *Delinquent Boys* (1955), Albert Cohen started with a very different pair of assumptions, namely, that "all human action . . . is an ongoing series of efforts to solve problems," and "that all . . . factors and circumstances that . . . produce a problem come from . . . two sources, the actor's 'frame of reference' and the 'situation' he confronts" (p. 51). From this perspective, people spend all their time trying to solve mundane problems such as how to ensure shelter, sustenance, and companionship. For most people in a society, the dominant culture provides ways of solving these problems. For example, work provides income for food to eat and a roof over your head, while many formal and informal activities provide opportunities to develop meaningful bonds with others. Cohen also noted that problems are not equally distributed among a population. People do not have equal access to the means to solve problems. Everyone needs food and shelter, but some people struggle more than others to procure them. Second, a person's point of view is also important. Regardless of how difficult a problem may appear in a given situation, people will not always decide to act in the same way to solve it. What Cohen studied in particular was how groups of young working-class males chose to solve problems through abnormal, that is, deviant or delinquent, means. Here we find the key to Cohen's "problems" perspective on subcultures: "the crucial condition for the emergence of new cultural forms is the existence, *in effective interaction with one another, of a number of actors with similar problems*" (ibid.: 59). When groups that are somehow limited in their access to dominant cultural resources try to collectively solve their problems by alternative methods, a subculture is likely to emerge.

Building from Cohen's ideas of subcultures as behaviorally rather than demographically based, Howard Becker's theory of subculture in the 1960s further emphasized that collective deviant behavior

was most likely to become subcultural when members of a group consciously identified themselves in contrast to the broader mainstream society. Becker found that the jazz musicians he studied maintained a:

> system of beliefs about what musicians are and what audiences are [that] is summed up in a word used by musicians to refer to outsiders – "square." The term refers to the kind of person who is the opposite of all the musician is, or should be . . . The musician is conceived of as an artist who possesses a mysterious artistic gift setting him apart from all other people. [. . .] The square, on the other hand, lacks this special gift and any understanding of the music or the way of life of those who possess it. The square is thought of as an ignorant, intolerant person who is to be feared . . . The musician's difficulty lies in the fact that the square is in a position to get his way. (Becker 1963: 85, 89)

Now almost fifty years old, Becker's idea of contrast between insider and outsider is characteristic of subcultural theory today. When we combine Becker's (1963) insight with that of Cohen (1955), we come away with a conception of subcultures quite far removed from that of Gordon (1947). Subculture had come to represent groups of individuals who were connected to one another through interaction and shared interest rather than through arbitrary characteristics such as locality or skin color. Subcultural members' shared interests also led them to identify themselves as different from – usually in some form of antagonistic relationship with – normal, "square" society.

Problems theorizing subculture

In their study of how American sociology textbooks introduce university students to the concept of subculture, Jim and Laura Dowd (2003) noted three conceptual problems that deserve our attention. The first has to do with the relativity of the concept. As they ask, "how do we construct significant distinctions between the normal and the [subcultural]?" (p. 23). Put another way, how do we conceptualize the relationship between a subculture and the mainstream/ dominant culture? Whether viewing subcultures as a means of solving the practical problems of being marginalized or as an active form of symbolic resistance to the dominant culture, there is an assumed mainstream or dominant order against which the subculture exists. In his criticism of the British tradition of subculture studies, Gary Clarke (1997: 178) noted that many subculture researchers see

"the power of subcultures [in] their capacity to symbolize Otherness among an undifferentiated, untheorized, and contemptible 'general public' . . . As a result, [subcultural] theory rests upon the consideration of the rest of society as being straight, incorporated in a consensus, and willing to scream undividedly loud in any moral panic." More recently, an increasing number of scholars have come to see contemporary societies not so much in terms of a homogeneous mainstream with subcultural elements, but rather as a pluralistic collection of fragmented social groups that lessen or eliminate the need to talk about subcultures at all. The postmodern turn hasn't solved any problems related to subculture; quite the opposite. Now, instead of discussing the nature of the relationship between subcultures and mainstream culture, the very existence of such a relationship has been called into question, with little theoretical headway being made (Blackman 2005).

Other scholars have similarly criticized some subculture research for uncritically accepting the idea of a so-called mainstream. While sometimes difficult, it is both possible and necessary to identify the "mainstream" when studying subcultural groups. Subcultural youth often cast themselves in terms that emphasize their individuality vis-à-vis the mainstream and their similarity to others like themselves. Yet the mainstream culture they identify is typically amorphous and remains largely hidden from view. Perhaps the idea of a mainstream or dominant culture has become tenable only as a straw man that subculturalists use as a comparison by which to mark themselves as special. From this perspective, the boundary between subcultures and mainstream culture exists wherever and whenever people collectively agree it exists. What a group of concerned adults might call a "subculture" might not be one for the kids involved (remember my introductory story about video games and school shootings). And the opposite is true as well – a group of kids may consider themselves subcultural, with hardly any awareness of this by "outsiders." Most significant, from a subcultural perspective, is the idea that people construct both the mainstream and subculture through their everyday actions, implicitly demanding that we theorize them as dialectically related (see Copes and Williams 2007). This conception parallels theoretical developments in the study of youth cultures generally. Distinctions between subculture and mainstream "occur through the construction of a . . . mainstream Other as a symbolic marker against which to define one's own [identity] as authentic" (Weinzierl and Muggleton 2003: 10). The boundaries between the subculture and the mainstream are not concrete, but are negotiated

by individuals and groups through an ongoing process of (re)classify-
ing certain tastes and behaviors as legitimate or illegitimate, critical
or passive, "highbrow" or "lowbrow," decent or immoral, and so on.

One intriguing look at the ever-shifting boundaries between
subculture and mainstream/dominant culture can be found in the
documentary film *Merchants of Cool* (Frontline 2001).[2] In Part 6,
"Teen Rebellion: Just Another Product," we see journalist Douglas
Rushkoff question three young white males waiting outside a venue
featuring the rage rock band Insane Clown Posse. Interested in what
he sees as an angry, aggressive posture among participants, Rushkoff
asks: "People seem to sense a lot of anger [in your culture] . . . Who
is the middle finger to?" His respondents confidently replied:

> Respondent 1: The middle finger is to everybody who doesn't
> understand what we're doing.
> Respondent 2: The mainstream.
> Respondent 1: It's to the world.
> Respondent 2: [repeats] The mainstream.
> Respondent 1: It's to these people who don't understand. The people
> like these people who drive by honking their horns, drive by laugh-
> ing at us. We don't care. That's who the middle fingers and the fuck
> you's are for.
> Respondent 3: I mean to Hell with society. I mean why worry about
> society and what they think? They control what goes on in our
> bedrooms, what we dress like, what our hair color is. Why let them
> control it here? This is where we have fun.

Young people's claims about the "mainstream," while deemed vague
and inarticulate by many adults (including social scientists), are real
for the participants themselves. And, as we will see in chapter 7, that
reality is powerfully linked to notions of selfhood and identity, as well
as to social behavior.

Whether by their non-normativity or their marginality, subcultures
do exist (sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly, and sometimes
both) in people's minds as an antidote to everyday life. The dis-
tinction between non-normativity and marginality is an important
one, for it clarifies two very different logics that underlie subcul-
tural research. These logics are not unlike the popular dichotomy
in sociological theory between structure and agency. Agency has to
do with the free will that human beings possess, though the extent
to which we exercise free will is, ironically, largely governed by the
mundane cultural structures that make certain choices more salient
to us. We are all raised in cultures that structure our lives in terms of

education, work, race or ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality, religion, and other social realities. These structures shape (either facilitating or constraining) certain lines of action throughout our lives. Yet those structures only *really* exist because we *choose* to make them real. For example, if 50 percent of the world's population were to wake up tomorrow believing that it was not worth going to work, the ramifications of those choices would be felt in almost every corner of the globe. So which is more important – structure or agency? The question seems paradoxical, though it is really quite simple. We choose to act in specific ways every day, and those choices, made over and over again daily, accrete into social structures that appear to constrain our choices.

Returning to the dichotomy between normal (or "mainstream" or "dominant") society and subcultures, we can see a similar process at work. Beginning with the structure side, most young people never participate in a youth subculture because normal culture provides them with an adequate sense of well-being and satisfaction in their everyday lives. For those young people who participate in youth subcultures, a process of marginalization may have begun when mainstream cultural members labeled them as problems, pushing them further away from mainstream structures of opportunity. This logic of marginality framed much of the early American subcultural scholarship by emphasizing how social structures simultaneously limited some people's abilities to succeed in mainstream society while providing them alternative, though "dysfunctional," means of success (e.g., Merton 1938). The logic of non-normativity, to the contrary, frames subcultures in terms of agency. From this perspective, subcultures are populated by individuals who want such a distinction to be made. Listening to many young subcultural members talk over many years, I have often heard an anti-establishment rhetoric, a sense of struggling against or being pinned down by "the system," a sense of wanting to make social changes, and so on.

A second problem with "subculture" identified by Dowd and Dowd (2003) has to do with theorizing related concepts, such as resistance and assimilation. Resistance and assimilation may involve either an unwillingness (non-normativity) or an inability (marginalization) on the part of some people to participate in mainstream culture in the first place. More problematic is the idea that neither resistance nor assimilation is ever completely achieved. People always resist and assimilate to some degree in their everyday lives (police officers may break the law by speeding on their way home; punk kids may spend a half-hour or more in front of a mirror