

After Subculture: Critical Studies in Contemporary Youth Culture

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Introduction

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The concept of subculture has dominated the study of youth, style, music and leisure in the related fields of sociology and cultural studies since the mid-1970s, when the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) published its seminal account of post-Second World War British working-class youth, *Resistance Through Rituals* (Hall and Jefferson, 1976). Drawing on the cultural Marxism of Gramsci (1971) and Althusser (1971), the CCCS interpreted post-war youth subcultures, such as the Teddy boys, mods and skinheads, as pockets of working-class resistance to the dominant hegemonic institutions of British society. Representing as it did the first attempt to provide a systematic social theory of music and style-driven youth cultures, *Resistance Through Ritual* quickly became a key text both in youth research and in the teaching of youth culture as an academic subject. The study, together with the post-Centre work of theorists such as Paul Willis (1978), Dick Hebdige (1979) and Angela McRobbie (1980), remains highly

influential in contemporary academic research and teaching on the subject of youth culture.

The present book represents an attempt to reassess critically the value of sub. cultural theory as an analytical model in the study of youth. Some may question the need for a text which takes as its central focus the critique of subculture, such critiques being by now relatively commonplace in sociology and cultural studies (see, for example, McRobbie, 1980; Clarke, 1981; Brake, 1985; Cohen, 1987, Redhead, 1990; Harris, 1992). Moreover, such is the rarity of positive uses of the CCCS conception of subculture in research since the 1970s and early 1980s, it might be thought that there is little need to provide yet another critique of the concept at all. But it is precisely the continuing ubiquity of critical approaches to the CCCS' conception of subculture that is problematic, not to say curious.

One possible reason for this continued ubiquity of the concept of subculture is that it remains a centrally defining concept in post-CCCS work on youth, style and music, but a concept used in an increasingly arbitrary fashion. As Bennett (1999a) observes, subculture 'has arguably become little more than a convenient 'catch-all' term for any aspect of social life in which young people, style and music intersect' (p. 599). However, despite subculture's widespread use, and despite its existence as a

theorized concept long before the CCCS, criticisms of subculture centre almost exclusively around the work of the CCCS. The 'debate' over subculture has therefore remained locked within the parameters of a rather narrow critical discourse. Thus there is a need to go beyond a critical evaluation of the CCCS's work, and present a sustained evaluation of the concept of 'subculture' itself.