

Subcultural Theory and the CCCS

The Chicago School's conceptualization of subculture as a means of understanding deviance in a socially situated context provided a key tenet for subculture's use as a theoretical framework by the CCCS. Prior to the publication of the CCCS' work, British youth research had retained a strong focus on issues of community and locality which, in many ways, mirrored the Chicago School's work in a British context. For example, Mays' (1954) study of juvenile delinquency in Liverpool argued that such delinquency was part of a local tradition as young males received and put into practice the deviant norms that were a part of everyday life in many underprivileged neighbourhoods of Liverpool. A similar view is presented in Patrick's (1973) research on Glasgow gangs during the 1960s. According to Patrick, the long-standing tradition of gang culture in certain parts of the city was underpinned by a historical cycle of socio-economic hardship. This emphasis on local community is carried on to some extent in early CCCS work: for example, Cohen's (1972) study 'Subcultural Conflict and Working Class Community' Drawing on research conducted with young people on new housing estates in East London, Cohen argued that the collective stylistic responses of the former were linked with what Cohen termed the 'magical recovery of community' – that is, the attempt to revive a sense of community following the break-up of

traditional working-class communities as a result of urban redevelopment during the 1950s, and the relocation of families to 'new towns and modern housing estates.

With the publication of *Resistance Through Rituals* in 1976, however, the emphasis shifted away from issues of locality and community towards a macro perspective on class in which youth subcultures were interrelated as spectacular indicators of the ongoing class struggle in British society. Using the original Chicago School premise that subcultures provide the key to an understanding of deviance as normal behaviour in the face of particular social circumstances, the CCCS reworked this model of subcultural deviance as a means of interpreting the stylistic responses of working-class youth in post-war Britain which, it was argued, represented a series of collective reactions to structural changes taking place in British post-war society.

is characterized by increasing economic affluence in Britain and the USA. In Britain especially, the temporary absence from the world market of major exporters such as Germany, France, Japan and Italy meant that the nation enjoyed an unprecedented rate of economic growth. Output rose by some 35 per cent between 1951 and 1961, while real average earnings increased by approximately 2.7 per cent a year (Leys, 1983, pp. 60–1). Consequently, consumerism, once a luxury reserved for the

wealthier classes, 'began to develop among all but the very poorest groups' (Bocock, 1993, p. 21).

. According to some commentators, notably Zweig (1961), the post-war consumer boom acted to erode traditional class distinctions as the affluent working class effectively bought into the lifestyle of the middle classes. Postwar youth style was also regarded as an aspect of this process, facilitating young people's assimilation into a unified teenage consumer culture (Abrams, 1959). The CCCS contested this interpretation of post-war youth. It was claimed by the Centre that the emergent style-based youth cultures, while indeed indicative of newly acquired spending habits, symbolized at a deeper level that class divisions were still very much a feature of post-war British society. The increased spending power of working-class youth, it was argued, may have raised their profile as consumers but did nothing to alter their life chances in real terms:

There is no 'subcultural solution to working-class youth unemployment, educational disadvantage, compulsory miseducation, dead-end jobs, the routinisation and specialisation of labour, low pay and the loss of skills. Subcultural strategies cannot match, meet or answer the structuring dimensions emerging in this period for the class as a whole. (Clarke et al., 1976, p. 47)