

The Continued Significance of Subcultural Debates

At stake in the subcultural and post-subcultural debates is more than the substantive question of how best to approach contemporary youth culture. One of the reasons why the debate surrounding subculture is important is that it has provided a crucial space within which wider debates in social and cultural theory have been played out. Pre-CCCS, uses of subculture drew on contemporary symbolic interactionist and functionalist theory. The CCCS itself provided a sustained attempt at applying Gramscian Marxist analysis and, particularly in Hebdige's (1979) work, exemplified an important attempt to synthesize these approaches with structuralism and post-structuralism. Postsubcultural debates have, in their various ways, taken seriously contemporary critiques of 'essentialism and the concomitant emphasis on fragmented and contradictory practices and identities.

Standing over these various theoretical and methodological exertions is a question that will not go away: how to define the 'space within which youth cultural activity occurs. In other words, 'where does youth cultural activity take place? CCCS approaches and their antecedents stress the visibility of subculture as an identifiable space (identifiable externally and, in perhaps different ways, to their members) – a space that can be 'seen' and

analysed. Post-subcultural approaches are less sure about the identifiability of a specific site of youth cultural activity. Such is the fluidity and fragmentation of youth culture that there are only barely identifiable and transitory spaces to whose vagueness terms such as a lifestyle, neo-tribe and scene provide an appropriately opaque and ambiguously spatial response.

Perhaps one reason why subculture persists as a point of critique and of inspiration is that its identifiability and coherence provide an effective point of departure for contemporary research. It may be hard to identify quite where youth cultural activity is located and just what lifestyle and neo tribes connote, but in subculture there is at least an identifiable, knowable and researchable space that provides a point of departure in examining what contemporary cultural activity is not'. In approaching the questions set out at the beginning of this chapter, the various contributors to this book continue a tradition of engaging critically with crucial theoretical and empirical issues in contemporary youth culture research. In struggling with subculture, they also struggle with how to situate and identify the manifold sites of youth cultural activity.

The first two chapters in the book comprise a theoretical re-reading of subculture and contemporary culture more broadly defined. Such a re-reading is important, both in terms of

mapping the theoretical territory on which subcultural theory was established and considering why, in the light of more recent formulations of culture and identity, subculture is now seen to be a flawed conceptual model. In Chapter 1, Peter Martin suggests that a key problem with subcultural theory is its insistence on presenting subcultures as 'given' that is, as self-sustained social entities. Missing from this analysis, argues Martin, is any attempt to consider the role played by social actors themselves in the construction of "subcultural identities. Martin then goes on to consider how subculture, together with other forms of social categorization, might be more productively considered as a reflexively used form of representation. At Chapter 2, David Chaney considers how the increasing fragmentation of culture in contemporary society renders the concept of subculture problematic. According to Chaney, the central tenet of subcultural theory's project – the demonstration of subcultural groups' self-effected distance from dominant cultural ideologies – has become essentially redundant in social settings characterized increasingly by cultural pluralism.