THE
SUBCULTURES
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THE SOCIAL LOGIC OF
SUBCULTURAL CAPITAL [1995]

'Club culture' is the colloquial expression given to the British youth cultures for whom dance clubs and their offshoot, raves, are the symbolic axis and working social hub. Club culture is not a unitary culture but a cluster of subcultures which share this territorial affiliation, but maintain their own dress codes, dance styles, music genres and catalogue of authorized and illicit rituals. Club cultures are taste cultures. The crowds generally congregate on the basis of their shared taste in music, their consumption of common media and, most importantly, their preference for people with similar tastes to themselves. Taking part in club cultures, in turn, builds further affinities, socializing participants into a knowledge of (and frequently a belief in) the likes and dislikes, meanings and values of the culture. Clubs and raves, therefore, house ad hoc communities with fluid boundaries which may come together and dissolve in a single summer or endure for several years.

Club nights continually modify their style, change their name and move their location. Club cultures are faddish, fragmented and heavily dependent on people 'being in the know' - on being 'hip', 'cool', or 'happening'. In fact, if one had to settle on one term to describe the cultural organization or social logic by which most clubs operate, it would have to be 'hipness'. But what is this willfully arcane attitude? This cultural value? How it is embodied? How is it displayed? Why is it most important to young people and something older people readily or reluctantly give up? What are its social uses, its demographics, its biases and discriminations?

Although this study is indebted to the subcultural studies associated with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham,
it is nevertheless distinctly 'post-Birmingham' in several ways. First, it doesn’t position youthful consumer choices as proto-artistic and/or proto-political acts, ultimately explaining the logic of their cultural consumption in terms of its 'opposition' to vague social bodies variously called the parent culture, the wider culture or the term I find most revealing (and will discuss at length below), the 'mainstream'.

Vague opposition is certainly how many members of youth subcultures characterize their own activities. However, we can’t take youthful discourses literally; they are not a transparent window on the world. Many cultural studies have made the mistake of doing this. They have been insufficiently critical of subcultural ideologies, first, because they were diverted by the task of puncturing and contesting dominant ideologies and, second, because their biases have tended to agree with the anti-mass society discourses of the youth cultures they study. While youth have celebrated 'underground', the academics have venerated 'subcultures'; where young people have denounced the 'commercial', scholars have criticized 'hegemony'; where one has lamented 'selling out', the other has theorized 'incorporation'. In this way, the Birmingham tradition has both over-politicized youthful leisure and at the same time ignored the subtle relations of power at play within it.

Subcultural ideologies are a means by which youth imagine their own and other social groups, assert their distinctive character and affirm that they are not anonymous members of an undifferentiated mass. They are not innocuous accounts of the way things really are, but ideologies which fulfill the specific cultural agendas of their beholders. In this way, I am not simply researching the beliefs of a cluster of communities, but investigating the way they make 'meaning in the service of power' - however modest these powers may be (Thompson 1989: 7). Distinctions are never just assertions of equal difference; they usually entail some claim to authority and presume the inferiority of others.

In pursuit of this theme, I found it productive to return to the work of Chicago School subculturalists, particularly Howard Becker and Ned Polsky. Becker offers a compelling analysis of 'distinction' under another name in his study of a 'deviant' culture of musicians in the 1940s (see Chapter 7). The aspirant jazz musicians of his study saw themselves as possessing a mysterious attitude called 'hip' and disdained other people, particularly their own audience, as ignorant 'squares'. Similarly, in 1960, Ned Polsky researched the social world of Greenwich Village Beatniks, finding that the Beats distinguished not only between being 'hip' and 'square', but added a third category of the 'hipster' who shared the Beatnik's fondness for drugs and jazz, but was said to be a 'mannered show off regarding his hipness' (Polsky 1967: 149).

In trying to make sense of the values and hierarchies of club cultures, I’ve also drawn extensively but critically from the work of the French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, particularly his book Distinction (1984) and related essays on the links between taste and the social structure. Bourdieu
explores what he calls *cultural capital* or knowledge that is accumulated through upbringing and education which confers social status. It is the linchpin of a system of distinction in which cultural hierarchies correspond to social ones and people’s tastes are first and foremost a marker of class. For instance, in Britain accent has long been a key indicator of cultural capital and university degrees have long been cultural capital in institutionalized form. Cultural capital is different from *economic capital*. High levels of income and property often correlate with high levels of cultural capital, but the two can also conflict. Comments about the *‘nouveau riche’* disclose the possible frictions between those rich in cultural capital but relatively poor in economic capital (like academics) and those rich in economic capital but less affluent in cultural capital (like professional football players).

One of the many advantages of Bourdieu’s schema is that it moves away from rigidly vertical models of the social structure. Bourdieu locates social groups in a highly complex multi-dimensional space rather than on a linear scale or ladder. His theoretical framework even includes discussion of a third category – *social capital* – which stems not from what you own or know, but from who you know (and who knows you). Connections in the form of friends, relations, associates and acquaintances can all bestow status. The aristocracy has always privileged social over other forms of capital, as have many private members’ clubs and ‘old boy’s networks’.

In addition to these three major types of capital – cultural, economic and social – Bourdieu elaborates many subcategories of capital which operate within particular fields such as ‘linguistic’, ‘academic’, ‘intellectual’, ‘information’ and ‘artistic’ capital. One characteristic that unifies these capitals is that they are all at play within Bourdieu’s own field, within his social world of players with high volumes of institutionalized cultural capital. However, it is possible to observe sub-species of capital operating within other less privileged domains. In thinking through Bourdieu’s theories in relation to the terrain of my empirical research, I’ve come to conceive of ‘hipness’ as a form of *subcultural capital*.

Although subcultural capital is a term that I’ve coined in relation to my own research, it is one that jibes reasonably well with Bourdieu’s system of thought. In his essay, ‘Did You Say Popular?’, he contends that ‘the deep-seated “intention” of slang vocabulary is above all the assertion of an aristocratic distinction’ (Bourdieu 1991: 94). Nevertheless, Bourdieu does not talk about these popular ‘distinctions’ as ‘capitals’. Perhaps he sees them as too paradoxical in their effects to warrant the term? In response, I would argue that clubs are refuges for the young where their rules hold sway and that, inside and even outside these spaces, subcultural distinctions have significant consequences.

Subcultural capital confers status on its owner in the eyes of the relevant beholder. It affects the standing of the young in many ways like its adult equivalent. Subcultural capital can be *objectified* or *embodied*. Just as books and paintings display cultural capital in the family home, so subcultural capital is
objectified in the form of fashionable haircuts and carefully assembled record collections (full of well-chosen, limited edition ‘white label’ twelve-inches and the like). Just as cultural capital is personified in ‘good’ manners and urbane conversation, so subcultural capital is embodied in the form of being ‘in the know’, using (but not over-using) current slang and looking as if you were born to perform the latest dance styles. Both cultural and subcultural capital put a premium on the ‘second nature’ of their knowledges. Nothing devalues capital more than the sight of someone trying too hard. For example, fledgling clubbers of 15 and 16 years old wishing to get into what they perceive as a sophisticated dance club will often reveal their inexperience by over-dressing or confusing ‘coolness’ with an exaggerated cold blank stare.

A critical difference between subcultural capital (as I explore it) and cultural capital (as Bourdieu develops it) is that the media are a primary factor governing the circulation of the former. Several writers have remarked upon the absence of television and radio from Bourdieu’s theories of cultural hierarchy (Frow 1987; Garnham 1993). Another scholar has argued that they are absent from his schema because ‘the cultural distinctions of particular taste publics collapse in the common cultural domain of broadcasting’ (Scannell 1989: 155). I would argue that it is impossible to understand the distinctions of youth subcultures without some systematic investigation of their media consumption. For within the economy of subcultural capital the media is not simply another symbolic good or marker of distinction (which is the way Bourdieu describes films and newspapers vis-à-vis cultural capital), but a network crucial to the definition and distribution of cultural knowledge. In other words, the difference between being in or out of fashion, high or low in subcultural capital, correlates in complex ways with degrees of media coverage, creation and exposure.

It has been argued that what ultimately defines cultural capital as capital is its ‘convertibility’ into economic capital (Garnham and Williams 1986: 123). While subcultural capital may not convert into economic capital with the same ease or financial reward as cultural capital, a variety of occupations and incomes can be gained as a result of hipness. DJs, club organizers, clothes designers, music and style journalists and various record industry professionals all make a living from their subcultural capital. Moreover, within club cultures, people in these professions often enjoy a lot of respect not only because of their high volume of subcultural capital, but because of their role in defining and creating it. In knowing, owning and playing the music DJs, in particular, are sometimes positioned as the masters of the scene, although they can be overshadowed by club organizers whose job it is to know who’s who and gather the right crowd.

Although it converts into economic capital, subcultural capital is not as class-bound as cultural capital. This is not to say that class is irrelevant, simply that it does not correlate in any one-to-one way with levels of youthful subcultural capital. In fact, class is willfully obfuscated by subcultural distinctions. For instance, it is not uncommon for public school educated youth to adopt
working-class accents during their clubbing years. Subcultural capitals fuel rebellion against, or rather escape from, the trappings of parental class. The assertion of subcultural distinction relies, in part, on a fantasy of classlessness. This may be one reason why music is the cultural form privileged within youth’s subcultural worlds. Age is the most significant demographic when it comes to taste in music, to the extent that playing music in the family home is the most common source of generational conflict after arguments over the clothes sons and daughters choose to wear (Euromonitor 1989).

After age, the social difference along which subcultural capital is aligned most systematically is, in fact, gender. On average, girls invest more of their time and identity in doing well at school. Boys, by contrast, spend more time and money on leisure activities like going out, listening to records and reading music magazines (Mintel 1988; Euromonitor 1989). But this doesn’t mean that girls do not participate in the economy of subcultural capital. On the contrary, if girls opt out of the game of ‘hipness’, they will often defend their tastes (particularly their taste for pop music) with expressions like ‘It’s crap but I like it’. In so doing, they acknowledge the subcultural hierarchy and accept their lowly position within it. If, on the other hand, they refuse this defeatism, female clubbers and ravers are usually careful to distance themselves from the degraded pop culture of ‘Sharon and Tracy”; they emphatically reject and denigrate a feminized mainstream.

The ‘hip’ versus the ‘mainstream’

Hipness is not a single unified style, nor is it captured definitively by any one scene. Not all youth have it, but the majority are concerned about it. Within club worlds, there is much less consensus about what’s ‘hip’ than what’s not. Although most clubbers and ravers characterize their own crowd as mixed or impossible to classify, they are generally happy to identify a homogenous crowd to which they don’t belong. And while there are many ‘other’ scenes, most clubbers and ravers see themselves as outside and in opposition to the ‘mainstream’.

When I began research in 1988, hardcore clubbers of all kinds located the mainstream in the ‘chartpop disco’. ‘Chartpop’ did not refer to the many different genres that make it onto the top forty singles sales chart as much as to a particular kind of dance music which included bands like Erasure and the Pet Shop Boys but was identified most strongly with the music of Stock, Aitken and Waterman (the producers of Kylie Minogue, Jason Donovan, Bananarama and other dance-oriented acts). Although one was most likely to hear this playlist at a provincial gay club, the oft-repeated, almost universally accepted stereotype of the chartpop disco was that it was a place where ‘Sharon and Tracy dance around their handbags’. This crowd was considered unhip and unsophisticated. They were denigrated for having indiscriminate music tastes, lacking individuality and being amateurs in the art of clubbing.
Subcultural capitals fuel the burnings of parental class. The imagination is a fantasy of classlessness. The subcultural capital is aligned with the art, girls invest more of their subcultural capital with the inarticulate, listening to records and playing records (Goffman 1989). But this doesn’t happen in the same way as with subcultural capital. On the other hand, they often defend themselves with expressions like ‘It’s not the same’. The subcultural hierarchy is upper middle class, but on the other hand, they refuse to compete with them. They are usually careful to distance themselves from ‘Sharon and Tracy’; they maintain themselves as outside and in

Clubs and ravers might want to defend these attitudes by arguing that the music of Stock/Atken/Waterman, then acid house-come-techno respectively dominated the charts in 1987–88, and 1989–91. But there are a couple of problems with this reasoning. First, the singles sales chart is mostly a pastiche of niche sounds which reflect the buying patterns of many taste cultures, rather than a monolithic mainstream (Crane 1986). Moreover, buyers of the same records do not necessarily form a coherent social group. Their purchase of a given record may be contextualized within a very different range of consumer choices; they may never occupy the same social space; they may not even be clubgoers.

Second, whether these ‘mainstreams’ reflect empirical social groups or not, they exhibit the burlesque exaggerations of an imagined ‘other’. Teds and Tracys, like lower louts, soanes, preppies and yuppies, are more than euphemisms of social class and status; they demonstrate ‘how we create groups with words’ (Bourdieu 1990: 139). So the activities attributed to ‘Sharon and Tracy’ should by no means be confused with the actual dance culture of working-class girls. The distinction reveals more about the cultural values and social world of hardcore clubbers because, to quote Bourdieu again, ‘nothing classifies somebody more than the way he or she classifies’ (Bourdieu 1990: 132).

It is precisely because the social connotations of the mainstream are rarely examined that the term is so useful; clubbers can denigrate it without self-consciousness or guilt. However, even a cursory analysis reveals the relatively straightforward demographics of these personifications of the mainstream. First, the clichés have class connotations. Sharon and Tracy, rather than, say, Camilla and Imogen, are what sociologists have tended to call the ‘respectable
working class'. Still, they are not envisaged as beneath the class of clubbers as much as being closed, full stop. In other words, they are guilty of being trapped in their class. They do not enjoy the classless autonomy of hip youth. The obfuscation of class goes some way toward explaining why straight white youth so frequently borrow tastes and fashions from gay and black cultures (Becker 1963; Hebdi 1979; Lee 1988; Polsky 1967; Savage 1988).

Age, the dependence of childhood and the accountabilities of adulthood are also signalled by these visions of the mainstream. The recurrent trope of the handbag is something associated with mature womanhood or with pretending to be grown up. It is definitely not a sartorial sign of youth culture, nor a form of objectified subcultural capital, but rather a symbol of the social and financial shackles of the housewife. Young people, irrespective of class, often refuse the responsibilities and identities of the work world, choosing to invest their attention, time and money in leisure. In his classic article from the 1940s, 'Age and Sex in the Social Structure of the United States', Talcott Parsons argues that young people espouse a different 'order of prestige symbols' because they cannot compete with adults for occupational status (Parsons 1964: 94). They focus less on the rewards of work and derive their self-esteem from leisure – a sphere which is more conducive to the fantasies of classlessness which are central to club and rave culture. In Distinction, Bourdieu identifies an analogous pattern for French middle-class youth alone: 'bourgeois adolescents who are economically privileged and (temporarily) excluded from the reality of economic power, sometimes express their distance from the bourgeois world which they cannot really appropriate by a refusal of complicity whose most refined expression is a propensity towards aesthetics and aestheticism' (Bourdieu 1984: 55).

But a 'refusal of complicity' might be said to characterize the majority of British youth. Having loosened ties with family but not settled with a partner nor established themselves in an occupation, youth are not as anchored in their social place as those younger and older than themselves. By investing in leisure, youth can further reject being fixed socially. They can procrastinate what Bourdieu calls 'social aging' or that 'slow renunciation or disinvestment' which leads people to 'adjust their aspirations to their objective chances, to espouse their condition, become what they are and make do with what they have' (Bourdieu 1984: 110–111). This is one reason why youth culture is often attractive to people well beyond their youth. It acts as a buffer against social aging – not against the dread of getting older, but of resigning oneself to one's position in a highly stratified society.

The material conditions of youth's investment in subcultural capital (which is part of the aestheticized resistance to social aging) results from the fact that youth, from many class backgrounds, enjoy a momentary reprieve from necessity. According to Bourdieu, economic power is primarily the power to keep necessity at bay. This is why it 'universally asserts itself by the destruction of riches, conspicuous consumption, squandering and every form of gratuitous luxury' (Bourdieu 1984: 55). But 'conspicuous',

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Granted and ‘squandering’ might also describe the spending patterns of the young. Since the 1950s, the ‘teenage market’ has been characterized as displaying ‘economic discipline’. Without adult overheads like mortgages, pension plans and insurance policies, youth are free to spend on goods like clothes, music, drink and drugs which form ‘the nexus of adolescent gregariousness outside the home’ (Abrams 1959: 1).

Freedom from necessity, therefore, does not mean that youth have wealth so much as that they are exempt from adult commitments to the accumulation of economic capital. In this way, British youth can be seen as momentarily enjoying what Bourdieu argues is reserved for the bourgeoisie, that is the ‘taste of liberty’. British youth cultures exhibit that ‘stylization of life’ or ‘systemic commitment which orients and organizes the most diverse practices’ that develops as the objective distance from necessity grows (Bourdieu 1984: 55–56). This is a possibility for all but the poorest sections of the youth population, perhaps the top 75 per cent. While youth unemployment, homelessness and poverty are widespread, there is still considerable discretionary income amongst the bulk of 16–24 year olds. The ‘teenage market’, however, has long been dominated by the boys. In the 1950s, 55 per cent of teenagers were male because girls married earlier and 67 per cent of teenage spending was in male hands because girls earned less (Abrams 1959).

In the 1990s, the differential earnings of young men and women have not changed all that much – a fact which no doubt contributes to the masculine bias of subcultural capital (Euromonitor 1990; Mintel 1988).

Although clubbers and ravers loathe to admit it, the femininity of these representations of the mainstream is hard to deny. Girls and women are, in fact, more likely to identify their taste in music with pop. Moreover, they spend less time and money on music, the music press and going out, and more on clothes and cosmetics (Mintel 1988; Euromonitor 1989). One might assume, therefore, that they are less sectarian and specialist in relation to music because they literally and symbolically invest less in their taste in music and participation in music culture.

The objectification of young women, entailed in the ‘Sharon and Tracy’ image, is significantly different from the ‘sluts’ or ‘prudes’, ‘mother’ or ‘pretty waif’ frameworks typically identified by feminist sociologists (Cowie and Lees 1981; McRobbie 1991). It is not primarily a vilification or veneration of girls’ sexuality (although that does come into it), but a position statement made by youth of both genders about girls who are not culturally ‘one of the boys’. Subcultural capital would seem to be a currency which correlates with and legitimizes unequal statuses.

Conclusions

Subcultural capital is the linchpin of an alternative hierarchy in which the axes of age, gender, sexuality and race are all employed in order to keep
the determinations of class, income and occupation at bay. Interestingly, the social logic of subcultural capital reveals itself most clearly by what it dislikes and by what it emphatically isn’t. The vast majority of clubbers and ravers distinguish themselves against the mainstream which, to some degree, can be seen to stand in for the masses – the discursive distance from which is a measure of a clubber’s cultural worth. Interestingly, the problem for underground subcultures is a popularization by a gushing up to the mainstream rather than, say, the artworld’s dread of ‘trickle down’. These metaphors are not arbitrary; they betray a sense of social place. Subcultural ideology implicitly gives alternative interpretations and values to young people’s, particularly young men’s, subordinate status; it re-interprets the social world.

These popular distinctions are a means by which young people jockey for social power; they are discriminations by which players are both assigned social statuses and strive for a sense of self-worth. This perspective envisages popular culture as a multi-dimensional social space rather than as a flat folk culture or as simply the bottom rung on some linear social ladder. Rather than characterizing cultural differences as ‘resistances’ to hierarchy or to the remote cultural dominations of some ruling body, it investigates the microstructures of power entailed in the cultural competition that goes on between more closely associated social groups.

Youthful interest in distinction is not new. One could easily re-interpret the history of post-war youth cultures in terms of subcultural capital. In a contemporary context, however, dynamics of distinction are perhaps more obvious for at least two reasons. First, unlike the liberalizing 1960s and 1970s, the 1980s were ‘radical’ in their conservatism. Change was experienced as a move to the right, while the left was effectively positioned as reactionary in its intent to preserve the past. Unlike Jock Young’s drug-taking hippies or Dick Hebdige’s stylish punks (portrayed in two classic texts which capture the spirit of British youth in their respective periods and which are excerpted in Chapters 9 and 15 of this Reader), the youth of my research were, to cite the cliché, ‘Thatcher’s children’. Well versed in the virtues of competition, their cultural heroes came in the form of radical young entrepreneurs who had started up clubs and record labels, rather than the poets and activists of yesteryear.

The second reason that the pursuit of distinction may be more noticeable today is because sociological debates have shifted our vision of difference. For example, despite their many disparate opinions, both Young and Hebdige see the assertion of cultural difference as an essentially progressive gesture, a step in the right direction away from conformity and submission. Difference was cast positively as deviance and disidence. If one believes that it is in the nature of power to homogenize – be it in the form of Young’s ‘consensus’ or Hebdige’s ‘hegemony’ – then difference can be seen as a good thing in itself. But if one considers the function of difference within an ever more finely graded social structure, its political tendencies become more
ambigious. In a post-industrial world where consumers are incited to individualize themselves and where the operations of power seem to favour classification and segregation, it is hard to regard difference as necessarily progressive. The flexibility of new modes of commodity production and the expansion of multiple media support micro-communities and fragmented niche cultures. Today, it is easier to see each cultural difference as a potential distinction, a suggestion of superiority, an assertion of hierarchy, a possible alibi for subordination.

These two senses of difference – deviance/dissidence and discrimination/distinction – clarify the politics of the youthful will to classlessness. At one level, youth do aspire to a more egalitarian and democratic world. On the other hand, classlessness is a strategy for transcending being classed. It is a means of obfuscating the dominant structure in order to set up an alternative and, as such, is an ideological precondition for the effective operations of subcultural capital. This is the paradoxical cultural response of youth to the problem of age and the social structure.

Note

1 An interest in distinction would seem to be the norm in all kinds of club cultures. Nevertheless, the subcultural capitals I investigate are those of predominantly straight and white club and rave cultures. Similar 'underground' discourses operate in gay and lesbian clubs but, as the alternative values involved in exploring sex and sexuality complicate the situation beyond easy generalization, I concentrate on their heterosexual manifestation. Moreover, 'campness' rather than 'hipness' may be a more appropriate way to characterize the prevailing cultural values of these communities (Sontag 1966; Savage 1988). And, although I did substantial research in Afro-Caribbean and mixed-race clubs, my account more thoroughly (but not exclusively) analyses the cultural worlds of the white majority. Despite the fact that black and white youth cultures share many of the same attitudes and some of the same musics, race is still a conspicuous divider.