

Angela McRobbie

SETTLING ACCOUNTS WITH SUBCULTURES

A Feminist Critique

1980

○ ▲ ○ ▲ ○ ▲ ○

Although "youth culture and the "sociology of youth"—and particularly critical and Marxist perspectives on them—have been central strands in the development of Cultural Studies over the past fifteen years, the emphasis from the earliest work of the National Deviancy Conference onward has remained consistently on *male* youth cultural forms. There have been studies of the relation of male youth to class and class culture, to the machinery of the state, and to the school, community, and workplace. Football has been analyzed as a male sport, drinking as a male form of leisure, the law and the police as patriarchal structures concerned with young male (potential) offenders. I don't know of a study that considers, never mind prioritizes, youth and the family; women and the whole question of sexual division have been marginalized. This failure by subcultural theorists to dislodge the male connotations of "youth" inevitably poses problems for feminists teaching about these questions. As they cannot use the existing text straight, what other options do they have?

One is to dismiss the existing literature as irrevocably male-biased and to shift attention toward the alternative terrain of girls' culture, to the construction of ideologies about girlhood as articulated in and through various institutions and cultural forms—in schools, in the family, in law, and in the popular media. The danger of this course is that the opportunity may be missed of grappling with questions which, examined from a feminist perspective, can increase our understanding of masculinity, male culture,

and sexuality, and their place within class culture. This then is the other option: to combine a clear commitment to the analysis of girls' culture with a direct engagement with youth culture as it is constructed in sociological and cultural studies. Rather than simply being dismissed, the subcultural "classics" should be reread critically so that questions hitherto ignored or waved aside in embarrassment become central. An examination of their weaknesses and shortcomings can raise questions of immediate political relevance for feminists. What, for example, is the nature of women's and girls' leisure? What role do hedonism, fantasy escapes, and imaginary solutions play in their lives? What access to these spheres and symbols do women have anyway?

In this article I am going to explore some questions about youth culture and subcultures by attempting this sort of feminist rereading of two recent books, Paul Willis's *Learning to Labour* and Dick Hebdige's *Subculture*.¹ The point, therefore, is not to condemn them—they represent the most sophisticated accounts to date of youth culture and style—but to read "across" them to see what they say (or fail to say) about working-class male sexuality, bravado, and the sexual ambiguity of style. Willis investigates the relation for a group of "lads" between working-class youth cultural "gestures" and the places to which they are allocated in production. The expressions of resistance and opposition which characterize this relation are fraught with contradiction. Willis suggests that the vocabulary articulating their distance from structures of authority in school and workplace simultaneously binds the lads to the basically rigid positions they occupy in these spheres; their rowdy shouts of disaffiliation quickly become cries of frustration and incorporation. A particular mode of class culture is thus seen in a complex way to serve two masters: capital *and* labor. The emphasis of Hebdige's *Subculture* is quite different. He focuses elliptically on subcultural style as *signifier* rather than as a series of distinct cultural expressions. Style, he claims, takes place several steps away from the material conditions of its followers' existence and continually resists precise historical analysis. One of its objectives, then, is to be forever out of joint with mainstream dominant culture: it evaporates just as it crystallizes.

Willis and Hebdige both show how male adolescents take already coded materials from their everyday landscapes (and, though this is not spelled out, from their fantasies) and mold them into desirable shapes, into social practices and stylish postures. Both accounts draw on the notion that control and creativity are exercised from within subordinate class positions and that, as a result of this subordination, cultural gestures often appear in partial, contradictory, and even amputated forms. These insights can be taken further by focusing on the language of adolescent male sexuality embedded in these texts. Questions around sexism and working-class youth and around sexual violence make it possible to see how class and patriarchal relations

work together, sometimes with an astonishing brutality and at other times in the teeth-gritting harmony of romance, love, and marriage. One of Willis's lads says of his girlfriend:

"She loves doing fucking housework. Trousers I brought up yesterday, I took 'em up last night and her turned 'em up for me. She's as good as gold and I wanna get married as soon as I can."²

Until we come to grips with such expressions as they appear across the subcultural field, our portrayal of girls' culture will remain one-sided and youth culture will continue to "mean" in uncritically masculine terms. Questions about girls, sexual relations, and femininity in youth will continue to be defused or marginalized in the ghetto of Women's Studies.

SILENCES

One of the central tenets of the women's movement has been that the personal is political. Similarly, feminists recognize the close links between personal experience and the areas we choose for study—our autobiographies invade and inform what we write. Even if the personal voice of the author is not apparent throughout the text, she will at least announce her interest in, and commitment to, her subject in an introduction or foreword. Although few radical (male) sociologists would deny the importance of the personal in precipitating social and political awareness, to admit how their own experience has influenced their choice of subject matter (the politics of selection) seems more or less taboo. This silence is particularly grating in the literature on the hippie and drug countercultures, where it seems to have been stage-managed only through a suspiciously exaggerated amount of "methodological" justification.

It is not my intention here to read between the lines of writing about subcultures and unravel the half-written references, the elliptical allusions, and the sixties rock lyrics. The point is that this absence of self (this is quite different from the authorial "I" or "we") and the invalidating of personal experience in the name of the more objective social sciences goes hand in hand with the silencing of other areas, which are for feminists of the greatest importance. It's no coincidence, for example, that while the sociologies of deviance and youth were blooming in the early seventies, the sociology of the family—still steeped in the structural-functionalism of Talcott Parsons—was everybody's least favorite option. If we look for the structured absences in this youth literature, it is the sphere of family and domestic life that is missing. No commentary on the hippies dealt with the countercultural sexual division of labor, let alone the hypocrisies of "free love"; few writers

seemed interested in what happened when a mod went home after a weekend on speed. Only what happened out there on the streets mattered.

Perhaps these absences should be understood historically. The sociology of crime/deviance/youth culture was one of the first areas from which the hegemony of Parsonianism was challenged. Many of the radical young sociologists in the vanguard of this attack were recruited from the New Left, from the student movement of the late sixties, and even from the hippie counterculture. At this time, before the emergence of the women's movement in the early seventies, the notions of escaping from the family, the bourgeois commitments of children, and the whole sphere of family consumption formed a distinct strand in left politics. Sheila Rowbotham has described how women were seen in some left circles as a temptation provided by capital to divert workers and militants alike from the real business of revolution, and she has also shown how hypocritical these antifamily, antiwomen platitudes were.³ Clearly things have changed since then but, although the work of feminists has enabled studies of the family to transcend functionalism, the literature on subcultures and youth culture has scarcely begun to deal with the contradictions that patterns of cultural resistance pose in relation to women. The writers, having defined themselves as against the family and the trap of romance as well as against the boredom of meaningless labor, seem to be drawn to look at other, largely working-class, groups who appear to be doing the same thing.

In documenting the temporary flights of the teds, mods, or rockers, however, they fail to show that it is monstrously more difficult for women to escape (even temporarily) and that these symbolic flights have often been at the expense of women (especially mothers) and girls. The lads may get by with—and get off on—each other alone on the streets, but they did not eat, sleep, or make love there. Their peer-group consciousness and pleasure frequently seem to hinge on a collective disregard for women and the sexual exploitation of girls. And in the literary sensibility of urban romanticism that resonates across most youth cultural discourses, girls are allowed little more than the back seat on a drafty motorbike.

Just wrap your legs around these velvet rims
And strap your hands across my engines
We'll run till we drop baby we'll never go back
I'm just a scared and lonely rider
But I gotta know how it feels.⁴

Writing about subcultures isn't the same thing as being in one. Nonetheless, it's easy to see how it would be possible in sharing some of the same symbols—the liberating release of rock music; the thrill of speed, of alcohol, or even of football—to be blinded to some of their more oppressive features.

I have oversimplified in this account, of course—there is a whole range

of complicating factors. In the first place, feminists also oppose the same oppressive structures as the radical sociologists and have visions of alternative modes of organizing domestic life—although ones which are *primarily* less oppressive of women, because historically women have always suffered the greatest exploitation, the greatest isolation in the home. Second, to make sense of the literature on subculture *purely* in terms of male left identification with male working-class youth groups would mean devaluing the real political commitment behind the work and ignoring its many theoretical achievements. The attempts to explain the ways in which class fears on the part of the dominant class have been inflected during the postwar period onto sectors of working-class youth—and dealt with at this level—remains of vital significance; also important has been the ascription of a sense of dignity and purpose, an integrity and a rationale, to that section of youth commonly labeled “animals” in the popular media. Third, there have been political and theoretical developments. The NDC (National Deviancy Conference) of the late sixties grew out of a libertarianism which rejected both reformist and old left politics in favor of grassroots politics (especially cultural and “alternative” politics) and which emphasized the importance of community work and action research. Many of these ideas have since been refined in an engagement with the work of Althusser and of Gramsci.

Yet the question of sexual division still remains more or less unexplored. In *Learning to Labour*, Paul Willis convincingly argues that the culture which the lads bring to the school and workplace and its consequent relation to the position they occupy in the labor hierarchy provides the key to many of the more contradictory aspects of male working-class culture. But what do these expressions mean for girls and female working-class culture? One striking feature of Willis's study is how unambiguously degrading to women is the language of aggressive masculinity through which the lads kick against the oppressive structures they inhabit—the text is littered with references of the utmost brutality. One teacher's authority is undermined by her being labeled a “cunt.” Boredom in the classroom is alleviated by the mimed masturbating of a giant penis and by replacing the teacher's official language with a litany of sexual “obscurities.” The lads demonstrate their disgust for and fear of menstruation by substituting “jam rag” for towel at every opportunity. What Willis fails to confront, I think, is the violence underpinning such imagery and evident in one lad's description of sexual intercourse as having “a good maul on her.” He does not comment on the extreme cruelty of the lads' sexual double standard or tease out in sufficient detail how images of sexual power and domination are used as a kind of last defensive resort. It is in these terms that the book's closing lines can be understood. When Paul Willis gently probes Joey about his future, he replies, “I don't know, the only thing I'm interested in is fucking as many women as I can if you really want to know.”

Although Willis shows how male manual work has come to depend on the elaboration of certain values—the cultural reproduction of machismo from father to son, the male pride in physical labor and contempt for “pen pushing”—he does not integrate these observations on masculinity and patriarchal culture into the context of the working-class family. The family is the obverse face of hard, working-class culture, the softer sphere in which fathers, sons, and boyfriends expect to be, and are, emotionally serviced. It is this link between the lads' hard outer image and their private experiences—relations with parents, siblings, and girlfriends—that still needs to be explored. Willis's emphasis on the cohesion of the tight-knit groups tends to blind us to the ways that the lads' immersion in and expression of working-class culture also takes place outside the public sphere. It happens as much around the breakfast table and in the bedroom as in the school and the workplace.

Shopfloor culture may have developed a toughness and resilience to deal with the brutality of capitalist productive relations, but these same “values” can be used internally. They are evident, for example, in the cruel rituals to which the older manual workers subject school leavers newly entering production. They can also be used, and often are, against women and girls in the form of both wife and girlfriend battering. A full *sexed* notion of working-class culture would have to consider such features more centrally.

DISCOURSES OF DISRESPECT

Because it consistently avoids reduction to one essential meaning and because its theses are almost entirely decentered, it's not easy to contain Dick Hebdige's *Subculture* within the normal confines of a critical review. Ostensibly his argument is that it is on the concrete and symbolic meeting ground of black and white (implicitly male) youth that we have to understand the emergence and form of subcultural style, its syncopations and cadences. From an account of the “black experience,” he works outward to the ways in which this culture has been taken up and paid homage to by white male intellectuals and by sections of working-class youth. At the heart of this process he places rock music—black soul and reggae, white rock (especially the music and style of David Bowie), and, of course, the “mess” of punk. Acknowledging—and fleetingly pleading guilty to—the tendency to romanticism in such subcultural tributes, Hebdige stresses the danger that such hagiography can overlook the unmitigated ferocity of the oppression and exploitation which have created black culture as it is. He does not try to prove his case with a barrage of empirical facts, but presents his reading of style as one which the reader can take or leave. Yet the sheer partiality of extrapolating race as signifier *par excellence* makes that which he chooses *not* to deal with all the more shocking. Despite his emphasis on the neglect

of race and racism in youth and subcultural work, he seems oblivious to the equal neglect of sexuality and sexism.

His book twists and winds its way around a variety of themes. At some moments it goes off into flights of densely referenced semi-sociological stream of consciousness. At others it addresses itself with forceful clarity to mainstream theoretical debates on youth culture: two of his arguments here are worth dwelling on in that a feminist critique would demand they be pushed further than he is willing to do. From the start Hebdige acknowledges his debt to the theoretical overview in *Resistance Through Rituals*,⁵ in particular its application of Gramsci's concept of hegemony to the question of youth in postwar Britain, and places his own work broadly within the parameters defined by John Clarke's essay on style in that collection. The problem is that Hebdige's assumptions actually run counter to those of *Resistance Through Rituals*. Briefly, he posits that the youth subculture is the sum of those attempts to define it, explain it away, vilify it, romanticize it, and penalize it. The moral panic and smear campaign construct what the subculture "becomes" just as much as the kids on the street. Linked to this is his important recognition that there is no necessary relation between the peculiarities of subcultural style and the area of (presumably) working-class life from which it is drawn, that "one should not expect the subcultural response . . . to be even necessarily in touch, in any immediate sense, with its material position in the capitalist system." Working-class self-images are just as constricted by the limitations and historical specificities of available codes as youth cultures. Their "raw materials" may be material, but they are never completely "uncooked."

In one of the most perceptive and exciting parts of the book, Hebdige uses punk to illustrate this. It is here, in spelling out his argument that punk was a response to already articulated "noises" (especially in the popular press) of panic and crisis, that he contradicts the logic of the *Resistance Through Rituals* position, which argued for the *deconstruction* of the ideological debris and clutter about youth and for the reconstruction from these ruins of a more adequately theorized account. The important point is that, precisely because it used a phenomenal forms / real relations model, *Resistance Through Rituals* was unable to engage directly with the sort of concepts at play in Hebdige's account. The significance of "Outsider Mythology," for example, or of representations of youth in film, literature, or music, would have been consigned to the sphere of ideology or (worse) "idealism," given the same logical, if not political, status as the "moral panic" and therefore also in need of "deconstruction."

Hebdige, in contrast, argues that ultimately the radical/Marxist account is logically no more true than any other: it is valuable to the extent that it engages critically not only with the phenomenon in question but also with the inadequacies of the different existing accounts. Although its "politics"

cannot be read off—it may have little to say about youth politics in the activist sense—it nevertheless has a material political force in that it disrupts commonsense wisdoms about youth and their more respectable academic revisions. Whereas in *Resistance Through Rituals* it is class that provides the key to unlocking subcultural meanings (though not, the authors stress, in a reductionist way),⁶ in *Subculture* style and race are selected as the organizing principles for prying them open. Although neither book takes us very far in understanding youth and gender, Hebdige's account at least makes it possible to explore the theme *without* continual recourse to class and so may disrupt (in a positive sense) some of our own commonsense wisdoms about class and class culture. But although his method draws on the work of feminists like Kristeva and is one widely used by feminists working in Media Studies, Hebdige by and large reproduces yet another "silence." The pity is that he thereby misses the opportunity to come to grips with subculture's best-kept secret, its claiming of style as a male but never unambiguously masculine prerogative. This is not to say that women are denied style, rather that the style of a subculture is primarily that of its men. Linked to this are the collective celebrations of itself through its rituals of stylish public self-display and of its (at least temporary) sexual self-sufficiency. As a well-known ex-mod put it:

"You didn't need to get too heavily into sex or pulling chicks, or sorts as they were called . . . Women were just the people who were dancing over in the corner by the speakers."⁷

If only he had pushed his analysis of style further, Hebdige might well have unraveled the question of sexuality, masculinity, and the apparent redundancy of women in most subcultures.

What is clear, though, is that Hebdige revels in style. For him it is a desirable mode of narcissistic differentiation—"You're still doing things I gave up years ago," as Lou Reed put it. There's nothing inherently wrong with that; the problem is that as a signifier of desire, as the starting point for innumerable fantasies or simply as a way of sorting friends from enemies, Hebdige's usage of "style" structurally excludes women. This is ironic, for in "straight" terms it is accepted as primarily a female or feminine interest. What's more, women are so obviously inscribed (marginalized, abused) within subcultures as static objects (girlfriends, whores, or "faghags") that access to its thrills—to hard, fast rock music, to drugs, alcohol, and "style"—would hardly be compensation even for the most adventurous teenage girl. The signs and codes subverted and reassembled in the "semiotic guerilla warfare" conducted through style don't really speak to women at all. The attractions of a subculture—its fluidity, the shifts in the minutiae of its styles, the details of its combative *bricolage*—are offset by an unchanging and exploitative view of women.

HOMAGES TO MASCULINITY

Rather than just cataloguing the "absences" in *Subculture*, I want to deal with three questions raised by a feminist reading: the extent to which subcultural *bricoleurs* draw on patriarchal meanings, the implications of ambiguous sexuality for youth cultures, and the question of gender and the moral panic.

Dick Hebdige claims that style breaks rules and that its "refusals" are complex amalgams taken from a range of existing signs and meanings. Their "menace" lies in the extent to which they threaten these meanings by demonstrating their frailty and the ease with which they can be thrown into disorder. But just as the agents who carry on this sartorial terrorism are inscribed as subjects within patriarchal as well as class structures, so too are the meanings to which they have recourse. These historical, cultural configurations cannot be free of features oppressive to women. Machismo suffuses the rebel archetypes in Jamaican culture which, Hebdige claims, young British blacks plunder for suitable images. The reds turned to the style of Edwardian "gents." The mods, locating themselves within the "modernism" of the new white-collar working class, looted its wardrobe as well as that of smart young blacks around town. The skins, similarly, turned simultaneously to both black style and that of their "fathers" and "grandfathers." More tangentially, punks appropriated the "illicit iconography of pornography," the male-defined discourse *par excellence*. Of course, it would be ludicrous to expect anything different. The point I'm stressing is how highly differentiated according to gender style (mainstream or subcultural) it is—it's punk girls who wear the suspenders, after all.

If, following Eco's dictum,⁸ we speak through our clothes, then we still do so in the accents of our sex. Although Hebdige does fleetingly mention sexual ambiguity in relation to style (and especially to the various personas of David Bowie), he doesn't consider it as a central feature right across the subcultural spectrum—for him subcultural style is Sta-prest trousers, Ben Sherman shirts, or pork pie hats. I'm not suggesting that all subcultures value transvestism—far from it—but that subcultural formations and the inflections of their various "movements" raise questions about sexual identity which Hebdige continuously avoids. Does subcultural elevation of style threaten the official masculinity of straight society, which regards such fussiness as sissy? Does the skinheads' pathological hatred of "queers" betray an uneasiness about their own fiercely defended male culture and style? Are subcultures providing relatively safe frameworks within which boys and young men can escape the pressures of heterosexuality?

For feminists the main political problem is to assess the significance of this for women. If subculture offers a (temporary?) escape from the demands of traditional sex roles, then the absence of predominantly girl subcultures—

their denial of access to such "solutions"—is evidence of their deeper oppression and of the monolithic heterosexual norms which surround them and find expression in the ideology of romantic love. Whereas men who "play around" with femininity are nowadays credited with some degree of power to choose, gender experimentation, sexual ambiguity, and homosexuality among girls are viewed differently. Nobody explains David Bowie's excursions into female personas (see the video accompanying his "gay" single "Boys Keep Swinging") in terms of his inability to attract women. But any indication of such ambiguity in girls is still a sure sign that they couldn't make it in a man's world. Failure replaces choice; escape from heterosexual norms is still synonymous with rejection. (Even the fashionable bisexuality among the women of the Andy Warhol set is less willingly dealt with in the popular press as hot gossip.) My point, then, is not to label subcultures as potentially gay, but to show that the possibility of escaping oppressive aspects of adolescent heterosexuality within a youth culture or a gang with a clearly signaled identity remains more or less unavailable to girls. For working-class girls especially, the road to "straight" sexuality still permits few deviations.

Finally I want to comment on the way in which Hebdige deals with the processes of reaction and incorporation accompanying the subcultural leap into the limelight of the popular press and media. He exposes with great clarity the inadequacies of the old "moral panic" argument and suggests that the Barthesian notion of trivialization/exoticization/domestication⁹ offers a better account of how youth cultures are "handled." But again, because his model is not gendered, he fails to recognize that these are gender-specific processes. Ultimately the shock of subcultures can be partially defused because they can be seen as, among other things, boys having fun. That is, reference can be made *back* to the idea that boys should "sow their wild oats"—a privilege rarely accorded to young women. This does not mean that the "menace" altogether disappears, but at least there are no surprises as far as gender is concerned. Even male sexual ambiguity can be dealt with to some extent in this way. But if the Sex Pistols had been an all-female band spitting and swearing their way into the limelight, the response would have been more heated, the condemnation less tempered by indulgence. Such an event would have been greeted in the popular press as evidence of a major moral breakdown and not just as a fairly common, if "shocking," occurrence.

WALKING ON THE WILD SIDE—
IT'S DIFFERENT FOR GIRLS

Rather than dealing with more mainstream sociological criticisms of *Subculture* (its London-centeredness, for example) or making my rather over-

simplified comments on youth culture more specific (historically and in relation to such institutions as school, family, and workplace), I now want to look briefly at some of the meanings ensconced within some of the objects and practices constituting the subcultural artillery.

Rock music has been so much a part of postwar youth cultures that its presence has often just been noted by writers; the meanings signified by its various forms have not received the attention they deserve. Dick Hebdige does something to redress this, but again without developing a perspective sensitive to gender and sexual division. My points here are tentative and simple. Such a perspective would have to realize that rock does not signify alone, as pure sound. The music has to be placed within the discourses through which it is mediated to its audience and within which its meanings are articulated. Just as reviews construct the sense of a particular film in different ways, so an album or concert review lays down the terms and the myths by which we come to recognize the music. One myth energetically sustained by the press is the overwhelming maleness of the rock scene. Writers and editors seem unable to imagine that girls could make up a sizable section of their readership: although at a grassroots level virulent sexism has been undermined by punk, *Rock Against Racism*, and *Rock Against Sexism*, journalistic treatment remains much the same. As "the exception," women musicians are now treated with a modicum of respect in the *New Musical Express* or *Melody Maker*, but women are dealt with more comfortably in the gossip column on the back page, as the wives or girlfriends of the more flamboyant rock figures.

The range of drug scenes characterizing subcultures reveals a similar pattern. The inventory is familiar—alcohol for teds, rockers, and skins; speed and other pills for mods, punks, and rudies; hallucinogenics for hippies; cocaine and to a lesser extent heroin for other groups closer to the rock scene. So intransigently male are the mythologies and rituals attached to regular drug taking that few women feel the slightest interest in their literary, cinematic, or cultural expressions—from William Burroughs's catalogues of destructive self-abuse and Jack Kerouac's stream-of-consciousness drinking sprees to Paul Willis's lads and their alcoholic bravado. It would be foolish to imagine that women don't take drugs—isolated young housewives are among the heaviest drug users, and girls in their late teens are one of the largest groups among attempted suicides by drug overdose. Instead I'm suggesting that for a complex of reasons the imaginary solutions which drugs may offer boys do not have the same attraction for girls. One reason is probably commonsense wisdom deeply inscribed in most women's consciousnesses—that boys don't like girls who drink, take speed, and so on; that losing control spells sexual danger; and that drinking and taking drugs harm physical appearance. A more extreme example would be the way that the wasted male junkie can in popular mythology, in novels and films, retain a helpless sexual attraction which places women in the role

of potential nurse or social worker. Raddled, prematurely aged women on junk rarely prompt a reciprocal willingness.

The meanings that have sedimented around other objects, like motorbikes or electronic musical equipment, have made them equally unavailable to women and girls. And although girls are more visible (both in numbers and popular representation) in punk than earlier subcultures, I have yet to come across the sight of a girl "gobbing." Underpinning this continual marginalization is the central question of street visibility. It has always been on the street that most subcultural activity takes place (save perhaps for the more middle-class oriented hippies): it both proclaims the publicization of the group and at the same time ensures its male dominance. For the street remains in some ways taboo for women (think of the unambiguous connotations of the term "streetwalker"): "morally dubious" women are the natural partners of street heroes in movies like Walter Hill's *The Warriors* and in rock songs from the Rolling Stones to Thin Lizzy or Bruce Springsteen. Few working-class girls can afford flats and so for them going out means either a date—an escort and a place to go—or else a disco, dance hall, or pub. Younger girls tend to stay indoors or to congregate in youth clubs; those with literally nowhere else to go but the street frequently become pregnant within a year and disappear back into the home to be absorbed by childcare and domestic labor.

There are of course problems in such large-scale generalizations. Conceptually it is important to separate public images and stereotypes from lived experience, the range of ideological representations we come across daily from empirical observation and sociological data. But in practice the two sides feed off each other. Everyday life becomes at least partly comprehensible within the very terms and images offered by the media, popular culture, education, and the "arts," just as material life creates the preconditions for ideological and cultural representation. This complexity need not paralyze our critical faculties altogether, however. It is clear from my recent research, for example, that girls are reluctant to drink precisely because of the sexual dangers of drunkenness. This doesn't mean that girls don't occasionally "get pissed"; my data suggest that they will drink with more confidence and less tension only when they have a reliable steady boyfriend willing to protect them from more predatory, less scrupulous males. It's difficult to deal so schematically with drug usage, and particularly involvement in hard drug subcultures. Particularly interesting, however, are the warnings to girls against hard drugs in the West German media (the addiction rate there is much higher than in Britain). These are couched entirely in terms of the damage heroin can do to your looks, your body, and your sexuality. They reinforce and spell out just how "it's different for girls": a girl's self-evaluation is assumed to depend on the degree to which her body and sexuality are publicly assessed as valuable.

THE POLITICS OF STYLE— TWO STEPS BEYOND

I noted earlier that a "politics of youth" cannot simply be read off from Dick Hebdige's book. Although this hesitancy is preferable to the sloganizing with which much writing on youth culture ends, it still barely disguises the pessimism deeply rooted in all structuralisms, the idea that codes may change but the scaffolding remains the same, apparently immutable. Hebdige's conclusion seems to point to a convergence between gloomy existentialism and critical Marxism as the gap between the "mythologist" and the working class appears to expand. The sadness pervading the closing pages of *Subculture* hinges on this failure to communicate which, Hebdige claims, characterizes the relation between intellectuals and the class whose life they write about. But just because *Subculture* won't appear alongside the *Guinness Book of Records* on the bestseller lists or the shelves of Smith's is no real cause for such pessimism. Instead we should develop a clearer idea of the sectors of "youth" potentially responsive to Dick Hebdige's intervention (male ex-mods, hippies, skins, and punks at art colleges, apprentices on day-release courses in tech colleges, rock fans and young socialists . . . ?) and also a broader vision of our spheres of political competence.

Radical and feminist teachers could well, despite the usual resistance they encounter, popularize many of Hebdige's arguments (as well as some points of feminist critique). It's also conceivable that some young people may read the book unprompted by youth "professionals" (teachers or community workers). After all, the *New Musical Express*, which sells over 200,000 copies, recently reviewed it in glowing terms, and Hebdige's ideas have clearly influenced several of the paper's feature writers. So there's no doubt that, apart from being one of the most important books to date on the question of youth culture, it is also likely to reach, if often indirectly, an unprecedentedly wide audience. That's why its lack of attention to gender matters: it could have opened up questions of style and sexual politics. Also, had he addressed himself more directly to this potential audience, Hebdige might have made clearer the implications of the "escape" from the working class into the subcultural bohemia of an art college or rock band, or simply into the independence of a rented flat. As it is, *Subculture* should become a landmark within the politics of culture inside the notoriously traditional art colleges because of its emphasis on style and image as *collective* rather than *individual* expression and its investigation of the *social* meaning of style. The problem is just that Hebdige implies you have to choose either style or politics and that the two cannot really be reconciled.

My own guess is that to understand these questions about youth culture and politics more fully, it will be necessary to supplement the established

conceptual triad of class, sex, and race with three more concepts—*populism*, *leisure*, and *pleasure*. It's not possible to develop a full-blown theoretical justification for that project here, however. And as I opened this article by condemning the self-effacement of male writers, it would perhaps be appropriate to end on a personal note about the ambivalence of my own responses to subcultures (I too lace my texts with rock lyrics) and the possible links between youth subcultures and feminist culture.

For as long as I can remember, collective expressions of disaffiliation from authority and the hegemony of the dominant classes (by either sex) have sent shivers of excitement down my spine. Despite their often exaggerated romanticism and their bankrupt (frequently sexist) politics, the "spectacle" of these symbolic gestures has got a hold on my consciousness which I cannot completely exorcise. Sitting on a train in West Germany, surrounded by carefully coiffured businessmen and well-manicured businesswomen, the sight of two Felliniesque punks (male) in the next compartment cannot fail to make me smile, just as it cannot fail to make some convoluted political statement.

In a similar way, punk is central to an understanding of the resurgence of "youth politics" in Britain over recent years. It's not a *deus ex machina* which will banish the unpopularity of left politics but, as a set of loosely linked gestures and forms, it has proved a mobilizing and energizing force which has helped to consolidate developments like Rock Against Racism. There have also been overlaps between the nuances of punk style and feminist style which are more than just coincidental. Although the stiletto heels, miniskirts, and suspenders will, despite their debunking connotations, remain unpalatable to most feminists (with the exception of Nina Hagen), both punk girls and feminists want to overturn accepted ideas about what constitutes femininity. And they often end up using similar stylish devices to upset notions of "public propriety."

What this indicates is a mysterious symbiosis between aspects of subcultural life and style in postwar Britain and aspects of a "new" left and even feminist culture. However precious or trivial the question of style may seem in contrast to concrete forms of oppression and exploitation (unemployment, for example, or the strengthening of the state apparatus), it cannot be hived off into the realm of personal hedonism. The sort of style Dick Hebdige describes is central to the contradictory nature of working-class male culture, and it plays a visible role in the resistance by youth in Britain today. The style of West Indian boys and girls is as much an assault on authority as outright confrontation. In our daily lives, feminists wage a similar semiotic warfare. Knitting in pubs, breastfeeding in Harrods, the refusal to respond to expressions of street sexism, the way we wear our clothes—all the signs and meanings embodied in the way we handle our public visibility play a part in the culture which, like the various youth

cultures, bears the imprint of our collective, historical creativity. They are living evidence that although inscribed within structures, we are not wholly prescribed by them. For many of us too, escaping from the family and its pressures to act like a real girl remains the first political experience. For us the objective is to make this flight possible for all girls, and on a long-term basis.

I'm not arguing that if girls were doing the same as some boys (and subcultures are always minorities) all would be well. The "freedom" to consume alcohol and chemicals, to sniff glue and hang about the street staking out only symbolic territories is scarcely less oppressive than the pressures keeping girls in the home. Yet the classic subculture does provide its members with a sense of oppositional sociality, an unambiguous pleasure in style, a disruptive public identity, and a set of collective fantasies. As a prefigurative form and set of social relations, I can't help but think it could have a positive meaning for girls who are pushed from early adolescence into achieving their feminine status through acquiring a "steady." The working-class girl is encouraged to dress with stylish conventionality (see the fashion pages of *Jackie*); she is taught to consider boyfriends more important than girlfriends and to abandon the youth club or disco for the honor of spending her evenings watching television in her boyfriend's house, so saving money for an engagement ring. Most significantly, she is forced to relinquish youth for the premature middle age induced by child-birth and housework. It's not so much that girls do too much too young; rather, they have the opportunity of doing too little too late. To the extent that all-girl subcultures, where the commitment to the gang comes first, might forestall these processes and provide their members with a collective confidence which could transcend the need for "boys," they could well signal an important progression in the politics of youth culture.

NOTES

¹ Paul Willis, *Learning to Labour* (London: Saxon House, 1977); Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen, 1979).

² Willis, *Labour*.

³ Sheila Rowbotham, *Women's Consciousness, Man's World* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p. 19.

⁴ "Born to Run," © Bruce Springsteen 1975.

⁵ Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (eds.), *Resistance through Rituals* (London: Hutchinson, 1976).

⁶ For a different interpretation, see Ros Coward's angry attack in "'Culture' and the Social Formation," *Screen* 18, No. 1 (Spring 1977).

⁷ From an interview with the now deceased Pete Meaden in *New Musical Express* 17 (November 1979).

⁸ See Umberto Eco, "Social Life as a Sign System," in D. Robey, ed., *Structuralism* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1973).

⁹ From Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, quoted in Hebdige, *Subculture*, pp. 97-99.

Gary Clarke

DEFENDING SKI-JUMPERS

*A Critique of Theories of Youth Subcultures**

1981

○ ▲ ○ ▲ ○ ▲ ○

THE SEARCH FOR RESISTANCE

Since its publication, the "new subcultural theory" contained in the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies' collection *Resistance Through Rituals*¹ has become the new orthodoxy on youth; the collection and its spinoffs are firmly established on course reading lists at a time when youth has become a major focal concern of the state and parties across the political spectrum. To a large extent, the acceptance of the literature and its acclaim are justified: the authors realistically outlined the lived experience of postwar working-class youth subcultures in a sympathetic manner which was hitherto unknown. However, the approach has not been without its critics.

The major emphasis of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies has been to explain the emergence of particular youth styles in terms of their capacity for problem solving. Phil Cohen's "Sub-cultural Conflict and the Working Class Community"² set the pace, and most of the Centre's analyses are based on an amplification of the ideas, and consequently the problems, in Cohen's paper.

* Ski-jumpers are cheap, imported, acrylic sweaters depicting a row of three skiers as a band across the chest. The origin of the style or the cult is impossible to trace, yet they are worn by a large majority of working-class youth, regardless of race or gender.