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### Something for everyone? Changes and choices in the ethno-party scene in urban nightlife

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# Chapter 1 Subculture and post-subcultural research

The history of youth culture as an object of sociological study is long and complex. Just as youth culture itself is constantly changing aesthetically and stylistically, so the analytical tools and theoretical frameworks that researchers have employed to interpret its meaning and significance have also varied over time. In this chapter I will explore the content and perspective of the existing literature that is relevant to nightlife in urban contexts. The purpose of this is to enable me to develop a conceptual and analytical framework as a basis for both the fieldwork I have carried out and the analysis thereof. I start with an exploration of the concept of subculture, which was developed in the 1970s by the Centre for Contemporary and Cultural Studies (CCCS) in Birmingham. This theory addresses the relationship between young people and their lifestyles. I will then focus on a more recent body of work, known as post-subcultural studies, which has become the dominant approach to the study of young people and their cultural lives when at leisure. During my exploration of both of these concepts, I will specifically draw attention to their usefulness (or lack of) when the nightlife activities of ethnic minority young people are the subject of the research.

## 1.1 The Birmingham school

In anthropology, sociology, criminology, cultural studies and education, the concept of a 'subculture' has been an important notion, which has been developed into an analytical model with which to interpret young people's social lives (Nayak 2003). The foundations of the study of youth culture were laid during the 1920s and 30s by a group of US sociologists based at the University of Chicago (Bennett 2000). By emphasizing the context of the working-class neighbourhoods, ghettos and slums, the 'Chicago School', as this group came to be known, wanted to construct a new paradigm for the study of deviant behaviour from where it arose. They argued that when studied in its cultural context, juvenile delinquency could be seen as a normal response 'determined by

cultural norms and not a symptom of psychological deficiency' (Bennett 2000: 14). Whyte's *Street Corner Society* (1981 [1943]) is a good example of such studies. From an insider's perspective, he describes the organized and hierarchical gang-life of young people. Whyte used ethnography as the basis for his research in an Italian-American slum, which he referred to as 'Cornerville'. He believed that the ethnographic method could provide an alternative to the dominant view of the slum as a social problem, enabling it to be instead seen as a world within a world, where particular rules apply and must be observed in order to survive (Bennett 2000).

From the 1920s onwards, researchers have attempted to explain why and how young people become involved in a subculture, its meaning and functions, and, in particular, its contribution to enabling young people to cope with transitions in their lives. As early as the 1920s, the notion of a 'subculture' was being recognized analytically in youth research. However, it was through the work in the 1970s of the British, Birmingham-based Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) that the term subculture really became associated with the study of young people. The CCCS's studies used ethnographic methods and Marxist analysis to describe and analyze youth culture in general, and specific subcultures in particular, in the post-war period (Besley 2003). The researchers linked the proliferation of subcultures to the struggle that young people had with class relations and associated structural changes. The notion of subculture as a response to structural changes was the centrepiece of the CCCS's work, *Resistance through Rituals* (1993). First published in 1975 as a series of working papers in the *Cultural Studies* journal, *Resistance through Rituals* embodied a first attempt to provide a systematic social theory of music and style-driven youth cultures, and it quickly became a key text both in youth research and in the teaching of youth culture as an academic subject. The names of some of these subcultures - teddy boys, mods, punks, skinheads etc. - are notable for the way in which they focus on style of dress, manners and type of music, all of which provide some of the cohesiveness for the group and evoke images of particular (rebellious) behaviour. The analyses of this specific approach to subcultures during the 1970s referred to young white, heterosexual, working class men in particular as oppressed, marginalized and resistant to the social and

economic conditions in which they found themselves within an exploitative capitalist system (Griffin 2001). It was claimed by the CCCS 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' (Bennett 2004: 5).

### *Critiques of subcultural studies*

The CCCS approach, and its use of subcultures as a concept, has been criticized on a number of grounds. McRobbie and Garber (1976) highlighted the failure to provide accounts of the involvement of girls in subcultures. Indeed, almost all of the research in this tradition addressed working class young men as the active constructors of subcultures, while young women, if mentioned at all, were viewed as passive followers. In her work, McRobbie demonstrates that young women were actively involved in their own subcultures, which predominantly took place in their homes and bedrooms. She labelled this: 'bedroom culture'.

A further problem identified with the CCCS's work on youth is its unqualified equation of post-war patterns of youth consumerism with ideas of working class resistance. As Muggleton (2000) notes, such a premise rests on the essentialist notion that members of subcultures were indeed predominantly, or even exclusively, working-class; other youth groups were never part of this subcultural research. Another criticism is that the CCCS primarily focused on working class young men, while other structural characteristics, such as gender and ethnicity, were neglected. However, at the same time, the findings were generalized to the broader category of British youth. Furthermore, the notion that young people may be playing their 'subcultural' roles for 'fun' was never really considered by the CCCS. Instead, they analyzed subcultures as being the result of the marginalized and oppressed circumstances of young, white, working class men.

A final point of concern is that the subcultural theory developed by the CCCS is essentially a British concept, formulated with a view to studying a specific section of British youth - white working class males - at a particular point in post-Second World War British history. As such, it is very difficult both to transpose the

group's subcultural theory to other national contexts (Bennett 2004: 8) and use its structural framework for other periods of time. The specificity of the CCCS's subcultural theory to a British context is further evidenced by youth culture research in the USA, which has remained far more sensitive to issues of race, culture and locality as factors that cut across, or at least problematize, structuralist explanations of youth (see, for example, Rose 1994, and his work on hip-hop).

## **1.2 Post-subcultural theory**

Much of the recent work which has reacted against the CCCS outlook has been characterized 'post-subcultural' (Muggleton 2005). Introduced by Redhead (1993), and developed further by Muggleton (1997: 2000), this approach argues that the structurally grounded concept of subculture has become increasingly redundant in relation to contemporary youth culture. Underlying the move towards post-subcultural analysis is an argument that as the relationship between style, musical taste and identity has become progressively weaker and articulated with more fluidity, subcultural divisions have broken down. This alleged breakdown was first noted by Redhead in his study of the early British rave scene. According to this author, rave was 'notorious for mixing all kinds of styles on the same dance floor and attracting a range of previously opposed subcultures' (1993: 3-4). He argued that the combined effects of post-industrialization, and the increasing amount of free time available to young people, gave rise to a new 'clubbing culture', which supposedly dissolved previous structural divisions, such as class, race and gender, because the dance crowds became mixed in these respects. Instead, Redhead drew attention to the influence of the market and media, as well as the increasing buying power of young people in the construction of their lifestyles. Reviews of the literature on youth culture or lifestyle research conventionally recognize this shift as a movement from a more structural approach towards one which emphasizes both the agency of young people and the influence of the marketplace as a site for socialization (Bennett 1999; 2000; Besley 2003; Chatterton and Hollands 2002; Griffin 2001; Maira and Soep 2004; MacRae 2004; Miles 2000). This post-subcultural outlook views young people as social agents who are free to engage in consumer practices. Muggleton (1997: 173), for example, argued that subcultural style is

constituted solely through consumption, and is 'no longer articulated around the structural relations of class, gender, ethnicity or even the span of youth'. In post-subcultural studies there is, it is argued, less attention paid to social divisions or stratified youth cultures (Hollands 2002). Indeed, in direct contrast to the class-based youth cultures identified by the CCCS, contemporary youth cultures are said to be more fleeting and organized around individual lifestyle and consumption choices.

### *Globalization*

In order to capture these elements of choice and self-determination, researchers have tried to come up with new concepts, like 'neo-tribes' (Bennett 2000), 'post-subculturalist' (Muggleton 2000), lifestyle (Miles 2000), taste culture (Thornton 1995) and club culture (Redhead 1997). For instance, in his analytical framework, Bennett (1999) draws upon Maffesoli's (1996) concept of *tribus*. In contrast to the term subculture, the phrase neo-tribes provides, according to Bennett, 'a better understanding of the series of temporal gatherings characterized by fluid boundaries and floating membership of young people' (1999: 600). He argues that the framework of neo-tribes is related to the concept of lifestyle, which he defines as: 'the sensibilities employed by the individual in choosing certain commodities and patterns of consumption and in articulating these cultural resources as modes of cultural expression' (Bennett 1999: 607). What these researchers did, however, agree upon is that the study of subcultures, as conducted at the CCCS, no longer applies to the current globalized and commercialized times. In this postmodern, global era, youngsters are regarded as consumers with specific interests, desires and buying power. Now more than ever, children and young people find their identities and values in the market place, rather than in traditional sources such as the family, church and school.

In reaction to these changes, youth culture research began to engage with theories of globalization (Maira and Soep 2004; Miles 2000; Nayak 2003) and, at the turn of the century, with the notion of global youth culture (Griffin 2001). It is the hedonistic vibe celebrated in the clubbing scene that appears to have been taken over by the researchers; clubbing is all about forgetting the problems

of the week and, instead of social structures, cultural features (dress code, dance, pose) are centralized as the dividing and hierarchy creating elements. In this approach, young people are viewed as free-floating consumers who can easily move in and out of styles according to the ‘tastes of the day’.

### *Critiques of post-subcultural studies*

Post-subcultural studies pay little attention to the importance of social divisions and inequalities in contemporary youth culture (Shildrick and MacDonalds 2006: 125). Although subculture theorists are criticized for focusing on one social group of young people, most post-subcultural studies likewise concentrate on the nightlife activities of just a single group, namely the predominantly white middle class urban youth. Indeed, they largely ignore questions of accessibility or inequality and spatial separation among different groups of (ethnic) consumers (Hollands 2002). Shildrick and MacDonald (2006) correctly highlight the tendency of many post-subcultural researchers to ignore the cultural lives and identities of less advantaged young people, forgetting that for some, social divisions still shape their cultural identity. Most post-subcultural research focuses on nightlife and the capacity of young people to participate in different scenes by changing their style and musical preferences. However, the accessibility of this nightlife is not self-evident for all social groups of young people, as I have referred to in the Introduction to this book. Likewise, Carrington and Wilson (2004: 71) note the lack of attention paid by contemporary post-subcultural scholars to issues of ‘racial formation, ethnic identity construction and the articulation of racism in and between subcultures’.

### **1.3 An integrative approach**

In the previous two sections I have explored the different conceptual and analytical frameworks that have been developed to study the relationships between young people, music, style and identity. All of these frameworks can be placed within the sociological debate of agency and structure. In the concept of subculture, and in relation to subcultural participation, the social structure of class in the lives of young people is centralized.

In reaction to the dominance of the structural attention paid to how young people live, scholars

developed a new model to study this group and their cultural lives. This has become known as ‘post-subcultural studies’ (Muggleton 2004). In this approach, the agency and power of young people in terms of their choice of lifestyle are prioritized over existing social structures. Both approaches have been criticized and adapted, which has resulted in a so-called ‘current debate about subculture theory and post-subcultural studies’ (Shildrick and MacDonalds 2006).

These two outlooks, which can be placed at the opposite ends of the structure-agency spectrum, do not paint a coherent picture if the aim is to study different social groups; working class children in British society might have been weighed down by the structural forces arising out of the exploitive capitalist system in the 1970s, and it might be true that for contemporary middle class kids, social structures have become less important, making it possible to switch between different scenes as a result of their increasing buying power. Focusing solely on social structures, or on the agency and autonomy of individuals, does not however reflect reality for many young people. The opposition between these outlooks sustains an artificial separation, which Giddens (1984: 292) calls the ‘*phoney war*’ between micro and macro approaches in social science.

Some authors have attempted to reconcile both approaches. Focusing on the clubbing scene, MacRae (2004: 57), for example, states that it ‘is important to contextualize and conceptualize the young people’s experiences of clubbing and their lifestyle ‘choices’ in a way that recognizes that some young people are more able than others to engage in particular styles of life, and consumer and cultural activities’. Such a combined outlook assumes that culture or subculture is neither solely a matter of class relations, nor a matter of free choice. Hollands summarizes the need for an integrated approach by stating that ‘it is clear that hybrid symbolic and lifestyle aspects of consumption are crucial for an understanding of contemporary youth cultures, it is equally obvious that existing social divisions and transitions, locality and corporate ownership are also important and provide a context for understanding consumption ‘choices’’. (2002: 158).



Ultimately, the solution that the integrative approaches tries to offer, namely that to mediate between the structural processes imposed by society as a whole on the one hand, and the opportunities for active consumers to make choices on the other, is not particularly satisfying. None of these scholars shed any light on *how* this inter-relationship between structural processes and human agency actually takes place in the lives of young people. Most admit that both social structure and agency play a role in nightlife choices and experiences, but do not suggest how this interplay works. Bennett (1999) and MacRae (2004), for example, have attempted to explain social divisions *within* the clubbing scene. However, by focusing solely on that, they largely overlook matters of accessibility to nightlife and do not shed any light on the process of choice. Furthermore, none of the scholars who are working with an integrative approach study the lifestyle participation and nightlife experiences of young members of ethnic minority groups. Accordingly, I will argue that a new model, which does justice to the processes of agency and social structures in the nightlife choices of (ethnic) young people, is necessary. Moreover, since door policies and the musical programming of nightlife and parties are important features of a successful night out, it is important to include both the producers as well as the consumers of night-time activities in the research. Consequently, before setting out my analytical model of structured nightlife choices, in the next chapter I will first elaborate on the roles of both the producers and the consumers of night-time events.