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The Sociology of Youth Subcultures

Alan O'Connor

The main theme in the sociology of youth subcultures is the relation between social class and everyday experience. There are many ways of thinking about social class. In the work of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu the main factors involved are parents' occupation and level of education. These have significant effects on the life chances of their children. Social class is not a social group: the idea is not that working class kids or middle class kids only hang out together. There may be some of this in any school or town. Social class is a structure. It is shown to exist by sociological research and many people may only be partly aware of these structures or may lack the vocabulary to talk about them. It is often the case that people blame themselves—their bad school grades or dead-end job—for what are, at least in part, the effects of a system of social class that has had significant effects on their lives. The main point of Bourdieu's research is to show that many kids never had a fair chance from the beginning.

In spite of talk about “globalization” there are significant differences between different societies. Social class works differently in France, Mexico and the U.S. For example, the education system is different in each country. In studying issues of youth culture, it is important to take these differences into account. The system of social class in each country is always experienced in complex ways. These include differences between living in the city, a provincial town or the country. In many societies—including the United States—social class is lived out as differences in ethnicity. In most societies there are also significant gender differences. We will expect to find the effects of these differences in youth subcultures.

In American sociology in the 1950s—a very conservative time in academic research—research on youth gangs and deviance indirectly showed the effects of class. It was argued that youth who cannot achieve according to social norms, who cannot do well in school or find good jobs, create subcultures. These in turn have their own roles and norms which these youth can fulfill. The idea was that youth who do badly at school create their own little societies in which they can achieve status by smoking, being tough or engaging in petty crime. This actually extends beyond youth. Black men who were in effect excluded from good jobs in straight society could perhaps achieve success in their own terms through a “deviant” career as a jazz musician.

British research on subcultures in the 1970s had as its goal to argue against

the idea that youth subcultures are simply generational conflict. It is not only a matter of youth briefly rebelling against their parents before settling down in a steady job. Research in cultural studies reintroduced the theme of social class. Subcultures are ways in which kids live out and understand a complex social structure. But this research method attempts to link each subculture to a social class. Skinheads in the 1970s represent a “magical” recovery of traditional working class culture. At the same time, hippies are living out a rebellious middle class culture. There is some evidence for this, but this attempt to find a homology between subculture and its parent social class is too simple. The practice is often more complex.

It is often said that punk subculture in England in the mid-1970s was a working class subculture. It was “dole queuc rock” performed by unemployed youth. It represented the culture of high-rise working class ghettos. Certainly this is the way that many punk musicians represented themselves and it is still the general image of punk in England: that it was working class. Some simple calculations by Dave Laing in one of the best books on 1970s punk (*One Chord Wonders*) show that the reality was more complex. He compares the biographies of beat musicians (1963–1967) with the new generation of punk bands (1976–1978) according to whether they are working class (52 percent and 57 percent, respectively) or middle class (48 percent and 43 percent), and also what percentage are ex-students (22 percent and 29 percent). What the numbers show is that there is only a slight difference of social class between the sample of 1960s musicians and the punk bands of the 1970s. The figures also show that there were many students involved in punk. Many of these were in art school, which in England at the time was a possibility for youth who were not able to enter university. There has been quite an amount of commentary on the influence of art school on punk in England in the 1970s. It explains some of the self-conscious behavior that was intended to shock, the emphasis on individual self-expression and the extravagant dressing up. Some of this was quite brilliant.

The central concept of Bourdieu’s sociology of culture is the idea of an artistic field. He imagines this as a relatively autonomous space in society where artists compete for recognition of their work. Think of it from the point of view of a person who wants to publish a novel, sell his or her artwork or be in a band. Starting from your family background, you have a certain education (let’s imagine you finished high school) and then have to make certain choices. Do you go to art school? Take guitar lessons? These are individual choices—we have all agonized over such decisions—but it is still you coming from a certain background, taking the decision with those resources, with that social support or lack of it. Bourdieu has a complex term for this: he calls it the “habitus.” It is a certain structure of experience, of ways of relating to the world. Some people will believe that university is impossible. Others will try for technical college. Others will risk everything—perhaps against their parents’ wishes—on joining a band.

People with different kinds of cultural capital enter into an artistic field. They bring resources from their habitus. They make all kinds of decisions. Should I buy a really good drum kit? Give up my day job and risk everything on the

band? Get married and have a kid? And the habitus is different according to social class. Of course individual effort and risk-taking matters. But this is done against the background of a habitus of which the most important factors are parents' occupation and education, and lived out in complex ways in race, ethnicity, gender, city/country, region, etc. It makes a difference if you can calculate that your parents will cover a month's rent in an emergency. It makes a difference if your parents will loan you U.S.\$2,000 to start a record label, perhaps even encourage this. So people with different kinds of "cultural capital" compete in a field as musicians, or novelists, or even as sociologists. They have some collective interest in the field—musicians should care about the conditions for all musicians—but they are also competing against each other. Most musicians downplay this and there can be genuine solidarity (you can borrow my bass guitar). But the objective relation is that bands compete against each other, just as do novelists and university professors. But they compete with different resources.

Some of the sociology of Bourdieu has gained currency in the study of youth subcultures, but unfortunately in a way that completely distorts his central point. The notion of "subcultural capital" has been proposed and taken up by some researchers (many of whom, it appears, have never actually read Bourdieu's work). It is an attempt to describe struggles for status within a subculture. Certainly this exists in punk. People who have been in famous bands enjoy a reputation and get a lot of attention (not always welcome). People who have been in the scene for a long time and run a record label are generally well respected. In some scenes it matters to know about underground bands before they are generally popular and well known. There is a kind of status in exclusivity. The concept of subcultural capital attempts to describe this. The problem is that this completely trivializes Bourdieu's whole sociology of culture. First, it does not look at the relationship between habitus and subcultural capital. A kid who works on a family farm for pocket money is not going to be able to build a collection of rare punk records. Women are often excluded from high status in subcultures in subtle and unspoken ways. Bourdieu calls this "symbolic violence"—indeed, one important effect of "riot grrrls" in the 1990s was to point out the gender-based symbolic violence that exists in the punk scene. Any theory of subcultural capital that does not deal with symbolic violence has missed the central point. Second, the point about Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital is that it be an investment that has a reasonable chance of economic success. The main form of cultural capital in capitalist societies today is educational qualification. You get a university degree because the experience and the certification will (hopefully) result in an economic payoff. Most subcultures do not do this. There are very few jobs available to a successful punk. The cultural capital usually cannot be cashed in. Among the few possibilities are running a small record label or a record shop. Being a promoter of punk shows usually does not pay economically, though it might in other music scenes such as raves and hip-hop. The concept of "subcultural capital" is a mistake and trivializes Bourdieu's sociology of culture. It is very little different from 1950s American sociology of deviance: the idea that subcultures are alternative (non-legitimate) routes to social status.

There is another serious misunderstanding in the concept of "youth subculture." Most subcultures actually include adults with real resources who play key

roles. In English punk of the 1970s it is well known that Malcolm McLaren and Vivian Westwood had considerable influence in the shaping of the Sex Pistols and the punk scene in London. Other band managers also played important roles. The conservative Oi! movement was heavily promoted by Garry Bushell, in part to promote his own conservative political views. In the United States, the punk zine *Maximumrocknroll* was founded by a group of people among whom Tim Yohannan was absolutely key. Yohannan was considerably older than most punks and was interested in shaping punk in the United States in a progressive, loosely socialist, direction. Others at the time resisted this influence, and continue to resist today. All youth subcultures include at least two generations and the relations between older and younger participants is important.

The emphasis on “subculture” can be misleading in a different way. It tends to lead to attempts to describe the experience and activities as a whole. This is sometimes called describing the homology of the subculture: the ways in which the music, dress, choice of drugs, etc. add up to a coherent lifestyle. In earlier research there was an attempt (in some ways quite reasonable) to relate this homology to a particular social class. But in fact, if kids and adults from different social backgrounds (from a different habitus) participate in the subcultural scene, there are likely to be different social intentions. These often arise as “personality conflicts” or rivalries between bands, record labels or even different cities. But what is at stake are struggles about the scene, its meaning, its politics (or lack of politics) and its boundaries. Bourdieu points out that some of the fiercest struggles arise about the boundaries of the field: Where does punk end and heavy metal begin? Is a band on a major label—or even a large independent label—still punk? Is indie rock or even Emo still punk rock? These struggles go on endlessly in all subcultures.

This can be expressed in the diagram that Bourdieu typically uses to map social and artistic fields: a grid with four squares based on the now huge literature about the first generation of punk in the 1970s. The four squares can be designated “art punk,” “major label success,” “political and DiY Bands,” and “youth anthem bands.” Punk in England in the 1970s is best understood not as a “subculture” whose meaning can be described (punk is working class rock music, punk is chaos). The point is not that punk is divided into four categories; individual bands can be placed anywhere on the diagram, somewhere, say, between art punk and major label success. Bands even move around the field in the course of their careers as they change direction. We would expect—this is a matter of actual research and of course there are always individual exceptions—that kids with a certain kind of habitus will have a tendency towards one part of the diagram. Art punks are likely to come from middle and lower-middle class backgrounds. Perhaps rebellious in school, they lack the grades or funding for university in England. Many enroll in art school at that time; they meet people with similar ideas, start a band and then often drop out of art school.

There is quite an amount of anecdotal evidence to support this kind of sociology. Michael Azerrad, in *Our Band Could Be Your Life* (2001), deals with American “indie rock” (not distributed by a major label). In the U.S. these are bands that are mainly played on independent college radio stations. There is some overlap with historical punk bands (Black Flag, Minor Threat) and certainly many punks have heard some of these indie bands (the Minutemen, Big

Black, Fugazi). Some of the bands actually went on to sign with a major label. The usefulness of this book is that the author usually gives the family background of each musician. The pattern is very clear. Most of these successful “college” bands have members who come from a college background. The exceptions are the Minutemen (who have working class backgrounds) and perhaps Hüsker Dü. Almost all the musicians in these bands are male. Quite a few actually did go to college but many didn’t finish. So it would seem that being in a successful indie band is a career option mainly for middle class kids (who tend to be college dropouts). Certainly this is strong evidence for Bourdieu’s argument about habitus and social field.

Much writing on subcultures deals not with central figures such as members of successful bands but with ordinary kids. Among the best books of this sort are Paul Willis’s *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs* (1977) and Donna Gaines’s *Teenage Wasteland: Suburbia’s Dead End Kids* (1991). There is not enough space here to summarize these books, one written in England and the other in America. They are books on the sociology of youth and their subtitles give a sense of their seriousness. It is a far cry from the air of celebration that surrounds much writing on “subcultures.” Kids struggle with school, just as later they will struggle with surviving and paying the rent. It would be worth also looking at Pierre Bourdieu’s *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society* (1999).

In spite of much talk about “cultural globalization,” it is becoming clear to serious researchers that there are significant differences among subcultures in different countries. Punk scenes in different parts of the world all have record stores (or the equivalent), places for bands to play (and practice) and involve social life of some kind or another. However, this varies enormously between countries, with differences in each social structure, culture and education system. Punk has also developed at a different pace in each country. For example, in Toronto for a period there was a volunteer-run punk record store (Who’s Emma). In Mexico, tapes (there are very few punk records and CDs) are bought and sold in the weekly open-air rock market (El Chopo). In Barcelona there are many small indie rock stores that stock punk and also an important bookstore/community center that is also a record label (El Lokal). The conditions for bands to practice and the social organization of punk shows are quite different in each country.

Of course punk style travels around the globe. Fans and collectors buy records through the mail. Some bands are able to tour and play outside their own country. Fanzines and websites spread information and styles. But this is also socially organized. Punks from poor countries (Mexico, Bolivia) usually cannot afford to buy records through the mail. It may be very difficult for them to put up a website about their band. Even access to a computer to answer their Hotmail account may be an expensive luxury. Differences in economic resources explain much of the differences between the punk scenes in Mexico and in the United States. And of course, in global exchanges, there are problems of language. The English language dominates in punk subculture, just as it dominates in the world of business and academic life. A band in Sweden must decide whether to record in their own language or in English (or possibly in

both). Many theories of “global culture” are based on very little actual research in different parts of the world.

Punk is both local and global. This complicates how we think about it as a cultural field. For Bourdieu the most important matter is the autonomy of artistic fields. They should be protected both from direct state influence (some well-known punk bands have been affected by state censorship and forced to defend themselves in expensive lawsuits) and from direct economic pressures. Ideally, artistic fields should be spaces where success is judged by one’s peers. Many fields do not have very well-defined boundaries or institutions. Bourdieu worries that this weakens the field as a whole because some people will be tempted to achieve quick economic success in ways that damage the field as a whole. Many of the people who work in the culture industries are what Bourdieu calls the “new petty bourgeois.” They tend to be individualistic and on the whole politically conservative. Bourdieu believes that it is important to strengthen the autonomy of cultural fields such as filmmaking, music and journalism. People should be rewarded for being innovative and taking risks, not by the state acting directly or by market forces alone.

The question must be asked for each subculture and each field: How autonomous is punk today? Is the scene able to enforce real sanctions against bands or record labels (or anybody else) whose actions weaken the autonomy of the field? Punk bands that sell out are often abandoned by their original fans. A record label that is sold to a major corporation will lose much of its credibility. Within the punk and hardcore scenes today, the norms are vague and the sanctions are weak. A band will usually appeal to their status as artists. An individual will appeal to his/her right to make individual choices. (“Who are you to tell me what to do?”) It is easy to point to the contradiction of a punk “rule book.” The fairly large number of record labels and the continual influx of new kids mean that bands have a good chance of getting away with actions that weaken the autonomy of the field.

RECOMMENDED READINGS

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