



Subcultural Theory: Traditions and Concepts

J. Patrick Williams

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A broad but nuanced survey of subcultural theory after the influence of late-modern sociology, Williams' commendable book represents a timely assessment of the field a decade after the notion of 'post-subculture' gained theoretical traction in work at the crossroads of youth culture and popular music. Key here is Williams' critique of the unyielding post-modern emphasis on the temporality of music, style and identity that emphasizes fluid cultural boundaries and fleeting social attachments, and has thus underpinned a turn away from the British 'subculture' model as a viable conceptual apparatus. Pointing to the ways in which subcultural phenomena ebb and flow as part of a larger whole, the author makes a good argument for the redundancy of an enthusiasm for divergent theoretical trajectories concerning the social iterations of subculture. Indeed, there is value in Williams' positioning of music within the dynamic "common universe of discourse" (Fine and Kleinman in Williams 2011: 42) that is the focus of an interactionist approach to subcultural theory, not least in the articulation of social processes that have tended to be reified through the use of spatial concepts in place of cultural ones.

Beginning with the contributions of the Chicago School, Williams maps competing frameworks across disciplines and methodologies, decades and continents. These multi-faceted discussions are extremely well-organised, the author locating conceptual innovations not only in the context of the evolution of subcultural theory but also within the broader intellectual environments within which important philosophical developments pressed against it. This analysis is pursued vis-à-vis selected empirical studies to have collectively comprised each at certain moments in the post-war popular mediascape, with this relationship too critiqued and contextualised for the benefit of the reader. Particularly poignant here is the emergence of club culture and intellectual interest in it during the late 1980s, alongside the revolutionary sociological innovations of the early 1990s.

Drawing heavily on the work of American sociologist Gary Alan Fine, Williams' analysis is underpinned by four major criticisms of concepts at the centre of the symbolic interactionist approach to subculture: that the concept of subculture has tended to be reified as something rather than treated simply as an abstracted concept; that few have been able to provide a suitable referent that clearly defines the boundaries of a subculture; that focusing on and analysing the 'core characteristics' of a subculture locks it into an ethnographic stasis that is unable to explain how

subcultures change over time; and, that these core characteristics have often been limited to the coded value-orientations of participants so that their subculture is theoretically constructed as closed off to influences from the non-participant population. In making these criticisms, Williams espouses instead a definition of subcultures as “bounded, but not closed, networks of people who come to share the meaning of specific ideas, material objects, and practices through interaction” (39).

He arrives at this position through the concept of ‘communication-interlocks’, also taken from Fine. There are, he argues, four main types of interaction that facilitate the dynamism of subculture: idio-cultures that comprise the overarching subculture; ‘weak ties’ that connect all the sub-cultures of everyday life; interaction between powerful members of subcultures and society that privileges particular interpretations of subcultural milieu; and the impact of discourses that are proliferated by the media and its products. With these epistemological parameters set, the next five chapters are devoted to some of the more central but also highly criticised objects of earlier subcultural scholarship. Chapter 3 looks at the continued relevance of structural factors such as race and gender in subcultural experience. Chapter 4 reviews discussions of ‘style’ in subcultural scholarship, where Williams draws on a number of engaging empirical studies to argue for the ongoing salience of the concept of homology in understanding the style of subculture. Chapter 5 reclaims the widely discarded concept of ‘resistance’ as a central tenant in many contemporary subcultures, while Chapter 6 looks specifically at the role of the media and the previous treatment of literatures surrounding the notion of the ‘moral panic’.

The final chapters are considerably less familiar terrain. Chapter 8 opens up a discussion of ‘scales’ – both sociological and spatial – that lays bare the epistemological arguments at stake in the various subcultural debates. Williams colours this with examples from his own research into straightedge. Chapter 9 speculates as to the relevance of critical discussions regarding subculture to similar scholarship on social movements and fan cultures and the final chapter offers a brief reflection on the value of thinking about theory and concepts, such as subculture, as a social scientific pursuit.

However, conspicuously absent here are the ways in which recent sociology has started to emphasise the corporeality of cultural practice – that is, that subculture might be more than a discursive or symbolic undertaking. Indeed, two of the major theoretical strands to proliferate in post-subculture literature draw on the work of Michel Maffesoli and Pierre Bourdieu, whose works each emphasise the body as the site of a corporeally transformative, or at least primarily affective, social experience. While I agree that subculture should not yet be unceremoniously ‘put to pasture’, it seems unlikely that the notion of ‘sub-culture’ would have held much appeal as a useful apparatus to writers taken by the complex embodied politics offered by the social philosophies of Bourdieu or Maffesoli. At the same time, there are clear inroads made by deploying interactionist ideas that dislodge subculture from the stasis of historically rooted meaning and representation.

This book, then, should be considered an important contribution to the field of popular music studies for the same reasons it is more broadly significant. Firstly, Williams’ critical evaluation of the major theoretical traditions and methodologically significant empirical studies (of predominantly music-oriented subcultures) to have driven the development of theory is one of the most lucid and well-organised discussions currently available on that topic. Secondly, the argument for symbolic interactionism in subcultural studies will prove invaluable as emerging scholars continue to resist understandings of subcultures as “homogenous and static systems” (39). By emphasising the interconnectedness of ‘sub-culture’ with broader aspects of social life, Williams is establishing an appropriate degree of conceptual fluidity without dispensing (as many post-subcultural writers have) with empirically salient boundaries all together. Finally, interwoven with autobiographical reflections and carefully chosen

anecdotes which locate the rich sociological relevance of 'subculture' within the broader fabric of late-modern popular culture, the book constitutes an accessible and thoroughly engaging introduction to subcultural scholarship that offers as much to new students of youth culture and popular music as it does the established scholar. For these reasons, *Subcultural Theory: Traditions and Concepts* will be required reading for anyone interested in the social iterations of popular music forms.