Rethinking youth cultures in the age of global media: a perspective from British youth studies

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Abstract

This article provides a critical overview of the contribution of British Cultural Studies to research on contemporary youth cultures, and some indications of how it should develop in the future. While the early work in this tradition has sometimes been unfairly attacked by subsequent researchers, the approach is in need of some careful reappraisal in the light of recent cultural change. The article argues that the category of 'youth' itself has become increasingly fluid and flexible; that the relations between the global and the local dimensions of youth culture have become more complex and dynamic; and that media – not least digital media – have become increasingly central to youth cultural practices. The article refers to examples of research that address these three areas, and concludes by calling for a more reflexive approach to research methods in the field.

Keywords: Youth culture, British Cultural Studies, media, globalization, subculture

Zusammenfassung

Der Artikel analysiert in einem kritischen Überblick den Beitrag der englischen Cultural Studies für die aktuelle Jugendkulturforschung und zeigt Perspektiven für ihre Weiterentwicklung auf. Während die frühen Arbeiten in dieser Forschungstradition teilweise zu Unrecht kritisiert wurden, muss der Ansatz heute angesichts des jüngsten kulturellen Wandels einer sorgfältigen Überprüfung und Neujustierung unterzogen werden. Der Beitrag stellt dar, dass der Begriff „Jugend" heute zunehmend unscharf geworden ist, während gleichzeitig die Beziehungen zwischen globalen und lokalen Dimensionen von Jugendkultur komplexer und dynamischer geworden sind und insbesondere die digitalen Medien für jugendkulturelle Praktiken eine zentrale Rolle spielen. Diese Entwicklungen werden anhand ausgewählter Studien dargestellt, wobei der Beitrag abschließend einen stärker reflexiven Umgang mit Forschungsmethoden in der Jugendkulturforschung anmahnt.

Schlagworte: Jugendkultur, (British) Cultural Studies, Medien, Globalisierung, Subkultur

1 Introduction

The term 'youth culture' was first coined by the sociologist *Talcott Parsons* as long ago as 1942. While youth culture undoubtedly has an even longer history (see *Savage* 2007), youth cultures have massively proliferated and diversified since that time. The forms of cultural expression specifically associated with young people have become increasingly

significant, socially, economically and politically. In particular, the tradition of British youth studies associated with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham has been influential. As an approach for making sense of the experiences of young people, the CCCS blend of neo-Marxism and semiotics has been broadly adopted and adapted by other European youth researchers. Following the early studies of youth subcultures as expressive and 'spectacular' (see *Hall/Jefferson* 1976), critiques of CCCS abound, some from within CCCS itself (*Canaan* 1991; *McRobbie/Garber* 1975). Popular and academic commentators have argued that youth culture is dead – or at least that the concept of youth *sub*cultures is no longer a meaningful focus for social and cultural research. Youth culture, they argue, has now been so thoroughly invaded and co-opted by market forces that its innovative or subversive edge has long since been destroyed (see, for example, *Haddow* 2008).

In this article, we consider the need to rethink youth culture, and hence youth culture research from the perspective of youth studies traditions in the UK. How should researchers take account of the changing relationships between the global and the local, and the apparent 'mediatization' and 'commercialization' of youth cultures? Is youth itself still a meaningful concept, at a point when age categories and distinctions have become increasingly blurred? And how can youth culture researchers respond to the growing call for reflexivity in social research more broadly? These are among the broad questions we aim to address in this article. In doing so, it is not our intention to outline a new paradigm or programme for research. Rather we seek to present our reflections on a three-year series of seminars among UK youth culture researchers (see *Buckingham/Bragg/Kehily* 2014) that provided the space for a *conversation* between the rich history of youth research in the UK and contemporary work in the field. In this paper we present some of the key themes and issues that emerged in the context of this unfolding dialogue as it evolved across the seminars. As youth researchers we engaged in a self-conscious retrospective of the history of youth culture research in the UK, considering the legacy of this work alongside the impact of contemporary changes and recent studies. We argue for the need to rethink some of the fundamental concepts, but also for the importance of maintaining continuities with what remains a vibrant tradition of empirical research and an influential way of researching and making sense of young people's lives.

2   Recovering tradition

The category of 'youth' has been a focus of attention for academic researchers since the psychologist *G. Stanley Hall's* ground-breaking work on adolescence at the beginning of the twentieth century (*Hall* 1906); and, as we have noted, *Talcott Parsons* (1942) was pointing to the cultural significance of age distinctions more than 70 years ago. Despite the many differences between them, both writers saw youth as a separate and distinctive phase of human development and as a potentially difficult period of adjustment to social norms and expectations. Succeeding generations of sociologists and psychologists have sought to define the unique characteristics of youth and youth culture, often in starkly divergent terms. In recent years, for example, psychological research has seen the development of the 'emerging adulthood' perspective (*Arnett* 2004); while sociological research in the UK has coalesced around the notion of 'youth transitions' (e.g. *MacDonald/Marsh* 2005).

However, at least in the English-speaking world, research on youth *culture* – or, as we would prefer, youth *cultures* in the plural – has been massively influenced by the pioneering work of the University of Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. Building to some extent on the 'Chicago School' of sociology that had preceded it, the CCCS established the study of youth culture as an important dimension of the emerging academic discipline of Cultural Studies (e.g. *Hall/Jefferson* 1976; *Hebdige* 1979). Through ethnographic research and semiotic textual analysis of key groups such as the teds, the mods and rockers, the skinheads and the punks, this work situated young people's cultural practices – including their consumption and use of media and popular culture – within a broader account of the social and historical context of post-War Britain. The Centre's analysis of youth culture was part of its wider political project, which was centrally informed by varieties of Marxist and post-Marxist theory: youth culture was implicitly seen, in the terms of the Italian Marxist *Antonio Gramsci*, as a site of struggle, in which the hegemony of the dominant classes might be challenged and contested.

The CCCS researchers analysed youth subcultures as expressions of resistance, in which young people made connections between their everyday experience and the wider social inequalities inscribed in class relations (*Hall/Jefferson* 1976). The CCCS analysis suggested that engaging in subcultural activity involved young people in acts of 'double articulation', firstly with the parental generation and secondly with political formations and agents of post-war social change. In the process, the CCCS provided an account of working-class youth culture that effectively challenged the pathological views of 'deviance' and 'delinquency' that dominated both public debate and a good deal of mainstream academic research. To view youth subcultures merely as manifestations of adolescent rebellion underestimates young people's collective investment in change through intergenerational conversations and creative forms of protest. By contrast, the CCCS approach sought to provide a generative way of interpreting youth subcultures as purposeful inventions, imbued with meaning.

The story of the Birmingham Centre has taken on almost mythological proportions, and in recent years its legacy has been widely questioned. Subsequent authors – not least exponents of 'post-subcultural' research (e.g. *Muggleton/Weinzierl* 2003) – have extensively challenged what they see as the limitations and absences of the CCCS approach. The 'Birmingham School' is now routinely dismissed for its narrow preoccupation with social class, and its neglect of gender, 'race' and sexuality. It is accused of 'over-politicising' youth culture, and merely celebrating youthful resistance to adult authority. And it is criticised for adopting a romantic notion of authenticity – as though youth culture arises 'from the streets', somehow expressing a pristine and spontaneous rebellion against the established social order (for examples of such criticisms, see *Bennett* 1999; *Muggleton* 2000; *Thornton* 1995).

The paradox is that many of these same criticisms were being made by members of the 'Birmingham School' at the time; and if we follow this tradition from its origins in the mid-1970s into the 1980s, we can find plenty of examples of research addressing precisely these absences and concerns. Indeed, if we look back to the 'canonical' texts of the CCCS, such as *Hall* and *Jefferson's Resistance Through Rituals* (1976) or *Willis's Learning to Labour* (1977), it is hard to see much evidence of the 'celebratory' approach to youth culture of which they are often accused: if anything, they seem rather gloomily preoccupied with the limited and self-defeating nature of much youthful 'resistance'.

Yet if recent researchers have perhaps been unduly inclined to caricature the CCCS approach, and to proclaim that we are in the age of the 'post', a careful reappraisal of this tradition is certainly necessary. Critiques of the 'Birmingham School' have commonly focused on a small selection of early studies and tended to ignore its wider body of work. CCCS has been set up as the 'straw man' to be knocked down in order to make way for the post-subcultural new order. This compressed reading overlooks the diversity of interests and methods within the Centre. Collections such as *Policing the Crisis* (*Hall/Critcher/ Jefferson/Clarke/Roberts* 1978), *Off Centre* (*Franklin/Lury/Stacey* 1991) and *Border Patrols* (*Steinberg/Epstein/Johnson* 1997) bear testimony to the range of work exploring 'race', gender and sexuality respectively, while also offering insights into the politics and pedagogy of collaborative work (see *Kehily* 2010). CCCS can be seen as part of a broader project of knowledge production that was also radical in educational terms, blending new ways of looking with new ways of working together. The CCCS experience entailed working collectively towards shared goals, developing new ways of understanding the interplay between individual and society, for instance through autobiography, memory-work and narrative approaches. Distinctive features of work from the Centre such as the concern with the aesthetics of writing, historically informed accounts, and the early recognition of intersectionality remain under-acknowledged in subsequent critical accounts.

Meanwhile, the 'classic' Birmingham studies of the 1970s also need to be understood in their historical context, as a contingent response to a particular set of cultural and political circumstances. Read today, they speak of a society beginning to fragment, with the collapse of an industrial economy, the rise of global migration and the challenges of new forms of 'identity politics'. It would indeed be surprising if the insights and analytical concepts developed at this time were sufficient to encompass the vastly changed circumstances of the twenty-first century. Yet ultimately, the CCCS offered a theory and an analysis of youth *sub*cultures, and not of youth cultures more broadly: not least for political reasons, it was self-consciously concerned with an important but limited range of cultural practices. As authors such as *Gary Clarke* (1981) pointed out at the time, there was a bias in favour of the spectacular – a bias that inevitably led to a neglect of the complexity and diversity of most young people's experience. The cultural practices of the 'ordinary' young people of the 1970s – the teenyboppers, the glam rockers, the disco dancers – barely make an appearance in the CCCS texts of the time (although there are couple of notable exceptions to this: *McRobbie/Garber* 1975; *Taylor/Wall* 1976). One suspects that such apparently conformist, consumerist tastes would have proven hard to mobilise in the interests of the Centre's broader political project.

Recent authors have attempted to reconceptualise the concept of 'subculture' – or alternatively to replace it with different metaphors (see *Bennett* 1999; *Hesmondhalgh* 2005) – although such attempts have been less than conclusive. In a manner that directly echoes *Clarke's* argument from 1981, they have suggested that contemporary youth cultures are generally more diverse, more fluid and more provisional than the 'classic' subcultures of the CCCS research of the 1970s. Card-carrying members of subcultures are, they argue, few and far between; and contemporary youth cultural practices are more commercialised, and more politically ambivalent. While some groups – such as goths or 'emo kids' – can perhaps still be accounted for in terms of subcultural theory, the range of cultural practices that followed in the wake of the 'club cultures' of the late 1980s and 1990s are much harder to explain in terms of resistance and hegemony.

This post-subcultural moment has resulted in a stronger emphasis on the mercurial character of youth formations. Soaking up the impact of late modern 'choice biographies' and processes of globalisation, post-subcultural studies have drawn attention to plurality, fragmentation and the proliferation of multiple cultures of youth, with shifting 'scenes' and changeable alliances based on notions of style and taste (*Muggleton/Weinzierl* 2003; *Redhead/Wynne/O'Connor* 1997; *Thornton* 1995). The investments of these second and third generation youth researchers appear to cohere in the sphere of leisure. Going out, drinking, clubbing and group participation in city centre nightlife have become the focus of studies that portray youth as the hedonistic occupants of 'cool places' (*Skelton/Valentine* 1998). The interpretative shift from reading young people's practices as meaningful social commentary to an exploration of pleasure-seeking individualism can be seen as a reflection of changing times, as well as the changing political and emotional investments of researchers themselves.

The post-subculturalists in their turn have been rightly criticised for their neglect of the continuing relevance of class (*Blackman* 2005; *Shildrick/MacDonald* 2006). The latter argument has to some extent been reinforced by the recent emergence of a new 'folk devil' in the figure of what in Britain is called the 'chav' – a derogatory term for the white working class figure that, as *Owen Jones* (2011) suggests, has become the vehicle of a contemporary form of class disgust. In practice, the work of the 'post-subculturalists' also appears oddly preoccupied with spectacular manifestations of youth cultural style: there are many cultural practices that are engaged in by 'ordinary' young people that continue to fall well outside the remit of such research. Academic researchers still appear strangely reluctant to look at the relatively mundane, conservative things that the majority of young people do in their leisure time – and indeed to consider the possibility that in such respects, young people may actually be rather more like adults than we might be prepared to admit.

The rethinking that is taking place here is thus a necessary, ongoing process: it reflects changes in academic fashions as well as youthful ones, and it relates to much broader social, cultural and political changes. Yet in re-assessing academic traditions, it is important to avoid a kind of 'presentism' – a tendency to re-read the past in light of the very different circumstances of the present. Like youth culture itself, academic research in this field needs to be understood historically, in terms of the imperatives of its time.

3   Rethinking youth

A further reason for rethinking relates to the category of 'youth' itself. Like 'childhood', youth can of course be seen as a social construct. The ways in which societies divide up the life course vary significantly across different time periods and cultural contexts. Historical studies of youth (e.g. *Gillis* 1981; *Mitterauer* 1992) and 'classic' anthropological accounts (e.g. *van Gennep* 1909; *Mead* 1928) illustrate something of the diversity here; and these differences have also been increasingly apparent in recent studies of youth culture (see, among many others, *Austin/Willard* 1998; *Nayak/Kehily* 2013; *Nilan/Feixa* 2006). Yet even within contemporary Western societies, many of the meanings that are associated with youth are undoubtedly changing; and the period that is encompassed by the term 'youth' itself seems to have become ever more elastic.

Thus, on the one hand, it can be argued that childhood seems to be blurring into youth – or at least that public perceptions and anxieties about such a prospect appear to be growing. The recent debate in the UK (and in many other English-speaking countries) about the 'sexualisation' of childhood provides an especially controversial case in point here (see *Bragg/Buckingham* 2013). Campaigners in this area are crucially preoccupied with policing the boundary between childhood and youth, in relation not only to sexual experience but also to sexual *knowledge*; yet in a period when sexual representations have become much more widely available through digital media, such attempts at regulation appear increasingly impossible to sustain. This example of course reflects a wider anxiety about the 'disappearance' of childhood, in which the media and popular culture are frequently seen as the destroyers of children's innocence. While this argument has been around for many years, it appears to have taken on a renewed force in recent years, not least in response to children's growing access to consumer culture (see *Buckingham* 2011).

Yet on the other hand, we are also witnessing an extension of youth, or a blurring of the boundary between youth and adulthood. If youth is, as *Erikson* (1968) argued, a kind of 'moratorium' – a liminal, in-between state – then it is arguably one that appears to be lasting much longer and ending much later than it used to do. Young people are leaving the family home at an older age, and 'settling down' in terms of stable jobs and relationships at a later point. Indeed, the lack of stable jobs or affordable independent housing means that 'settling down' is hardly a prospect for many young people. Some psychologists argue that this period of 'emerging adulthood' is now continuing well into the thirties (e.g. *Arnett* 2004); while in a different way, sociologists confirm that the 'transition to adulthood' has become a significantly more unstable, precarious process (e.g. *Blatterer* 2007). Indeed, one might well ask what kind of state young people are transitioning towards: what is the stable condition of adult maturity which young people are apparently taking longer to achieve? It could be argued that, for all sorts of reasons, the values of achieved 'adulthood' are less easily obtainable than they used to be, but also, for many, less desirable in the first place.

Media and marketing undoubtedly play a key role in this process, but it is a difficult and ambivalent one. The marketing of computer games or rock music, for example, increasingly seems to reflect a broadening of the youth demographic – a sense that 'youthfulness' is something that can be invoked, packaged and sold to people who are not by any stretch of the imagination any longer youthful. As *Andy Bennett* (2007) has pointed out, forms of popular music that were once identified as exclusive to youth are now increasingly attracting multi-generational audiences: this applies not just to well-established styles (like punk and metal) that have established, 'die-hard' fans, but also to newer electronic dance styles. Similar phenomena can arguably be identified in areas such as fashion and the fitness industry. As *Bennett* suggests, contemporary marketing often implies that you are 'as young as you feel'. However, there may also be a contrary process of reaction here. Young people may come to resent older people trespassing on 'their' territory, and seek to defend it by deploying ever more arcane and inaccessible forms of cultural capital. Meanwhile, marketers and media producers may find themselves trapped in an ever-moving spiral of credibility, where broadening one's audience comes to be seen as a form of 'sell-out' and a betrayal of authenticity.

'Youth' is, of course, a matter of lived experience; but its cultural meanings are socially and historically defined. At present – at least in Western societies – it appears that

these meanings have become more problematic, and more contested. While it has always been seen as a state of transition, the status of youth seems to have become ever more provisional and uncertain. In this context, we might well ask whether it still makes sense to think of 'youth culture' as something that is specific to young people at all.

4   The global and the local

Much of the discussion thus far requires further qualification and rethinking once we begin to include a global perspective. For several years, one of the present authors (DB) taught a Masters' course about youth culture to a very diverse group of international students. The course often began with an autobiographical 'icebreaker', in which the students were invited to describe their own relationship with youth culture, and specifically with the role of media. The exercise was designed to raise broader questions – for example, about what it means to be a 'member' of a youth culture – but it also very clearly demonstrated a range of cultural differences. In terms of media, what the students recalled from their own youth was often a complex mixture of the global and the local. They talked about mainstream British or US pop music or Hollywood teen movies, but also about Brazilian funk, Danish death metal, Japanese anime and cosplay, or French ska. Furthermore, it was clear from the comparisons between them that 'youth' as a specific life stage, and 'youth culture' as an aspect of that stage, was not a universal experience. For many of them, youth was not about resistance, subversion and subculture at all: it was a period of relative conformity, of remaining close to their parents and their parents' values, and of doing what was expected of them. While some described themselves as members of specific 'subcultural' groups, this was not a common experience: most were aware of such groups, but felt ambivalent and uncertain about the possibility of identifying with them.

Teaching these students – and indeed younger, but equally diverse, groups of undergraduates – about the canonical texts of youth culture research ('*Birmingham* and beyond') reinforced a sense that the academic debate about youth culture is highly culturally and historically specific – indeed, almost parochial in its limited scope. As we have suggested, the CCCS approach arise from a particular moment in the history of post-war Britain, and from a particular *interpretation* of that history. Its cultural specificity – or even its parochialism – is not simply about the specific phenomena it explored (the skinheads, the teddy boys or the punks), but also about the theories that were used to explain them.

As teachers and researchers, we have become increasingly aware of the potential mismatch here, between the experiences of our global students and the kind of research and theory that they can use to help them understand those experiences. It remains important for students to read 'canonical' texts – although we can certainly have a debate about which texts are in or out. But the abiding question is whether that canon of texts any longer equips us with the theoretical concepts and tools that we need in a context of increasing global diversity and mobility. As numerous commentators have argued, we need to understand the various manifestations of global youth culture not just in relation to broad theories of globalisation but also in the context of specific local histories and circumstances (see *Volkmer* 2012 for a full discussion of theories of globalisation and local

media research). This 'globalising turn' in youth culture research is manifest in many other recent texts (e.g. *Huq* 2005; *Maira/Soep* 2005; *Nayak* 2003; *Nilan/Feixa* 2006), and represents a much-needed opening out of the field.

Meanwhile, of course, the media play a crucial role in these changing relationships between the global and the local. Young people are now growing up with significantly greater access to globalised media: media companies are increasingly constructing and targeting global markets, and young people are using new media to form and sustain transnational connections. Growing numbers of them have also experienced global migration, and inhabit communities in which a wide range of global cultures mix and cross-fertilise (see *de Block/Buckingham* 2007). New media technologies offer new possibilities for transnational connectedness and dialogue; and yet the media market is increasingly dominated by a small number of global corporations. These developments are manifested in youth culture in specific ways, through the emergence of a global *lingua franca* (for example in the form of MTV or celebrity culture) and through the development of new 'hybrid' forms (as in the case of hip-hop or bhangra).

However, this is not simply a matter of changing relations between 'centre' and 'periphery': on the contrary, youth cultures typically display a complex and uneven negotiation between the global and the local. For some young people, the 'flows' of global capital can be enjoyed and embraced in ways that increase the repertoire of expressive youth cultures and styles. For others who are geographically displaced and living transitional lives, their relationship to global cultures may seem distant and remote; and there remain significant inequalities in access to media, both within nations and at a global level. The study of youth culture in this wider global context thus challenges the limitations of place-based research, and necessitates a less parochial approach; and it also requires innovative methodologies for accessing the cultural worlds of young people.

5   The place of media

Media have always occupied a rather awkward position in research on youth culture. In much of the early CCCS work, media were implicitly identified with mainstream adult society and with the operation of hegemonic power. They were seen as purveyors of misrepresentations (as in 'moral panics') or of 'the dominant ideology', a mysterious force that was seen to impose consensus and obedience to the social order, even among those whose interests it did not serve. Following the theory of 'repressive tolerance', the media's attempts to respond to youth culture were judged to merely recuperate and commodify its resistant potential (*Hebdige* 1979). Over time, however, that narrative came to be challenged: it was recognised that youth culture was always mediated (or 'mediatised'), and that the protagonists of youth subcultures often used the media in very deliberate ways for their own purposes. Academic accounts emerging in the wake of the 'club cultures' of the early 1990s (e.g. *McRobbie* 1994; *Thornton* 1995) moved significantly beyond the conspiratorial views of the early CCCS approach. Recent debates on the centrality of the media in social and cultural developments utilise the concept of mediatization to acknowledge the widespread and growing significance of media institutions and technologies and their capacity to shape *all* spheres of culture and society (*Couldry/Hepp* 2013; *Deacon/Stanyer* 2014; *Hepp/Krotz.* 2015). Commentary on the explanatory power of me-

diatization point to its malleability as a term to describe media-centred approaches that ascribe varying degrees of power to the pervasive presence of communication technologies in social relations and cultural institutions (*Krotz* 2014). While there is some debate about the nature and scope of the media in late modernity to exercise power in ways that extend beyond mediation, mediatization remains a contested concept that has yet to be fully embraced by researchers of youth culture.

The emergence of digital media, and especially of so-called 'participatory' or 'social' media, marks a further shift, and indicates a further need for rethinking. Clearly, it is important to avoid the kind of idealistic celebration that has often characterised both academic and popular accounts of these developments. Nevertheless, these new media do offer significant opportunities for communication and self-representation, and young people are often in the vanguard of such practices. To date, however, there has been relatively little cross-fertilisation or dialogue between youth culture research and the growing body of academic work on young people and new media. There is often passing mention of youth culture in new media research – for example, in the large-scale MacArthur Foundation studies (e.g. *Ito* et al. 2010) or the monumental European surveys on young people and internet safety (e.g. *Livingstone/Haddon/Görzig/Ólafsson* 2011) – but in general the topic seems conspicuous by its absence. Meanwhile, publications on youth culture tend to include only token chapters on digital media, as though authentic youth culture is still seen to be happening offline.

The popular conception of young people as 'digital natives' or as a 'digital generation' has rightfully come in for considerable criticism (e.g. *Buckingham* 2006; *Herring* 2008; *Thomas* 2011). Such arguments typically rest on a combination of technological determinism and an essentialising or exoticising view of young people. Here again, it is important to insist that much of what young people (and indeed adults) are doing online or with mobile technologies is not spectacular or glamorous or revolutionary, but fairly mundane and banal. Yet the fact remains that most young people today have grown up with relatively instant access to digital technology – and here it is important to include those in the developing world, for whom that technology most frequently takes a mobile form. It may well be that much of what they are doing online is simply a displacement or an extension of what previous generations were doing offline; and it may well be that the distinction between online and offline is rapidly becoming meaningless. However, a principled scepticism and a longer-term historical approach should not lead us to ignore what is genuinely new.

Here again, the analysis of online youth culture needs to extend beyond the spectacular *sub*cultures of fan communities, hackers and dedicated gamers that have already been disproportionately heavily researched. The more mundane processes of self-representation on social networking sites, the routine exchanging of photographs on mobile phones, and the commenting on video clips on sharing sites, are everyday aspects of contemporary youth culture that are in need of more sustained and systematic research. Meanwhile, it is important to recognise the consequences of a culture of constant connectivity, in which the imperatives of self-advertisement are so critical and so intense. In this new situation, the forms of identity and relationship that are central to how we think about youth culture may well be changing in some quite profound and unpredictable ways.

6   Who's rethinking?

Finally, it would be worth asking about who is involved in this rethinking. We have already raised several questions about *them* – about how we identify and analyse the youth we select to study. But what about *us* – the researchers, academics and perhaps public commentators who are doing this? How do *we* relate to *them*? And how do we respond to growing calls for a more reflexive approach to social research?

There has been some useful discussion in recent years about the relationship between 'insider' and 'outsider' research on youth culture (e.g. *Best* 2007; *Hodkinson* 2005; *MacRae* 2007). However, we would argue that the large majority of youth culture researchers are *by definition* outsiders: they are people who were formerly young. This does not invalidate the whole enterprise, but it does point to the need for rather more critical reflexivity than has often been the case. Youth culture researchers are by no means immune from the tendency to exoticise, to romanticise, or to vicariously identify with those whom they study. Like many public commentators, and indeed many other adults, they can easily fall prey to the pleasures of nostalgia or wish-fulfilment. Alternatively, they can implicitly judge present-day youth cultures with the 'wisdom' of hindsight, and indeed with a kind of historical condescension: young people weren't like that in *our* day.

In research and in many other fields of practice – education, marketing, welfare, politics, media – the figure of 'youth' is variously imagined, represented, invoked, deployed and addressed; and in the process, its reference point acquires a somewhat elusive quality. Research, like media, is a form of representation; and while this is unavoidable, it needs to be acknowledged. Perhaps we should be most suspicious of it when it purports – as youth culture research often does – to speak *on behalf of* those whom it claims to represent. This often creates difficulties when we seek to respond to the growing demand for 'youth voice': ethically, methodologically and politically, 'giving voice' to young people, or enabling them to 'find' and use their own voices – while a laudable aim – is unlikely to be a straightforward matter. We need to trace the proliferation of the concept of youth, the sites in which it circulates or has currency and the different social actors who use it, in order to produce complex ways of seeing how it functions, how we come to know what we think we know of 'youth' and the social practices from which the concept emerges.

Steve Woolgar (2012) has argued that we should treat reified, revered and standardized ideas like 'childhood' (and by extension, youth) as gerunds in order to convert them into objects of analysis, studying 'youthing', or how youth is produced, assembled, and rendered in different contexts, through considerable and significant work, albeit involving mundane devices, ordinary technologies and unremarkable objects. Neither 'youth' nor 'culture' pre-exists its enactment in practices – in social, political, cultural and symbolic acts of making (*Isin* 2008), of identities as 'youthful' or 'young', and texts as 'youth-culture'. In this way, *Woolgar* argues, we can show how these entrenched conceptual entities are not natural and inevitable but *could be otherwise*.

We therefore need to attend more critically to what has been termed 'the social life of methods'; how method is 'performative. It helps to produce realities. …. [it] is not, and never could be, innocent or purely technical' (*Law* 2004). *Law* goes on to state that 'presence' also makes 'absence' – as making youth more visible might mean making gender, for instance, less so: the former invokes a generational narrative around age differences where feminist slogans about 'girls and women' draw forth more solidaristic narratives of

shared, gendered experiences and what kinds of intergenerational relations are possible. We should attend to how the methods and analyses of the social sciences themselves have contributed to making young people 'researchable subjects', have developed norms embedded in institutional practices, and are coming to set the horizons of how young people can account for themselves. Researchers cannot stand outside this process. Acknowledging how we create social realities and social worlds might enable us to attend more closely to the ambiguities of research processes, their productive and performative elements, their capacity to produce knowledges about areas of life that might otherwise remain invisible – and to locate what is unexpected and truly creative in what young people do and say.

7 Conclusion

In suggesting the need for some rethinking in youth culture research, we also feel there is a need to maintain some continuities with established traditions. Youth cultures are undoubtedly protean and ever-changing, especially in an age of global media; and youth culture research needs to change with them. Yet if it is to account for the present and the future of youth cultures, it is vital that research should also learn from and build upon the achievements of the past. The concepts used to understand youth in 1970s Britain may have been challenged, critiqued or outlived their usefulness but the empirical work of the period remains an important source of documentation and analysis. In rethinking the idea of youth culture in this paper, we point to the impact of social change in young people's lives. Deindustrialisation and the regeneration of city centres in the UK have reconfigured the ways in which young people occupy space and organise their leisure time. *Hollands* (1995) identifies a significant shift from production to consumption as youthful identities are increasingly organised around the night-time economy of 'going out', spending time and money in the large and uniformly contrived city centre spaces redeveloped by multinational corporations. The increased commodification and commercialisation of all areas of social life appears to produce a mundane mainstreaming of youth cultural practice that limits the possibilities for the emergence of subcultural space (*Muggleton/Weinzierl* 2003). Further studies have critiqued the concept of subculture itself and tried to find other terms to express young people's relationship to culture and self-expression. 'Scenes', 'tribes' and 'neo-tribes' have emerged as contenders for the subcultural crown (*Bennett* 1999; *Maffesoli* 1995). While we acknowledge the many 'blind spots' of the Resistance through Rituals period, we argue for a re-reading of this body of work through a critical lens that retains the foundational features of this approach as a way of speaking to key themes of late modernity. As political and academic agendas highlight a renewed interest in social inequality, the self-styled activities of young people, once again, come into view as a comment on the present and the future, in ways that may re-open generative readings of youthful experience in 'new times'.

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