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Is Style Action or Agency? A Social Structural Essay on Hebdige's Subculture

Glenn W. Muschert*

Both cultural studies and sociology are concerned with human (individual or group) activity. Many scholars in cultural studies have jumped the sociological ship, because sociology is unable to offer agentic accounts of social activity. Conversely, sociologists might find writings cultural studies, such as Hebdige's (1979) *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, unsatisfying because they generally do not include social structural analysis. Further, while sociology differentiates between types of activity (action versus agency), cultural studies focuses on what people *do*, regardless of its social structural underpinnings. Hebdige, although he alludes often to Marx, fails to offer an adequate account of the structure of subcultural action. Given its lack of lack of social structural explanation, *Subculture* fails to explain why the groups engage in the behavior they undertake.

Subculture, despite its short-comings has been influential in sociology and cultural studies. For example, the work has a seminal position within subcultural studies, which has spawned edited readers (e.g., Gelder and Thornton 1997), a *Post-Subcultures Reader* (Muggleton and Weinzierl 2003), and was included in *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords* (Durham and Kellner 2001). Shortly after its publication in 1979, reviews of the book appeared in the following journals: *American Journal of Sociology* (Adler 1982), *Contemporary Sociology*

(Torode 1981), *Monthly Review* (Gaut 1984), *New Society* (Frith 1980), and *Sociology* (Pearson 1980). More recently, others have written about the influence the text has had in cultural studies (“Used Books” 1995; Willis 1993). What is most sociologically interesting about these reviews, especially those from more radical journals, is that, with one exception, they do not address *Subculture*’s weak conceptualization of structure/agency question latent in class conscious behavior. The noted exception is Willis (1993) who discusses the actions of the punk stylists as being limited by their social structural limitations of the commodities and exchanges on which they depend as the raw materials of their stylistic innovations. This review is an attempt to clarify the weaknesses in Hebdige’s conceptualization of social action.

After reading *Subculture*, one retains a fundamental sociological question: are subcultural activities examples of normative action or agency? On the one hand, if subculture is an expression of normative roles, then the expression is structural in origin. However, on the other hand, if subcultures articulate the contradictions inherent in their class consciousness, then their formation of subculture might best be understood as agentic. The first interpretation follows from the Durkheimian nomothetic deductive model, and the second is from the Marxist dialectical materialist tradition. Hebdige bypasses this sociological question, and, in so doing, reduces his account of subcultural formation to an ideographic account.

Hebdige describes working class British youth subcultures, but he does not offer a theoretical framework for understanding the social mechanism through which these subcultures develop. Clarke raises this issue when he asks, “How do we analytically leap from the desire for a solution to the adoption of a particular style?” (1981:82). At best, *Subculture* is a descriptive account of punks and others. At worst, in Hebdige’s words, “It is highly unlikely...that the members of any of the subcultures describe in [the] book will recognize themselves” (139).

The main flaw in *Subculture* is theoretical in nature. An application of the sociological concepts of action and agency might allow us to provide two divergent accounts of punk rock's stylistic innovators. The action version would explain subcultural formations as individuals or groups following their normative roles. In a structural functionalist model, deviant groups are functional for the collective, because they reinforce consensus of values. The agency account would explain subcultural formation as individual or group expression of class consciousness or will. In a marxian framework, cultures develop cognitive models that will allow them to reconcile the contradictions inherent in the relations of production. Because he ignores this distinction, Hebdige does not specify which *story* he wants to tell. For Hebdige, the process through which subcultures form is *bricolage*: the creation of semiotic systems "which perfectly equip their users to 'think' their own world" (p. 103).

A satisfactory social structural account of *bricolage* might appear as follows: If "action can be basically defined as *behavior performed in the belief that it will accomplish as desired goal*" (Porpora 1987:69 [italics in original]), then it might be possible to describe subcultural formation as individuals following their role expectations. Certain types of individuals, due to their relative functional (or dysfunctional) socialization, might articulate non-normative values. That the members of subcultures consistently come from working class backgrounds seems to support this interpretation. The functionalist calculus of subcultural expression might read appear as follows: Since society needs deviance to reify its norms, the existence of a social milieu that produces subcultures might be functional for the whole. Working class youth might not identify with social norms, and thereby exhibit a higher tendency to form deviant subcultures. Although the disenfranchisement of some members of society (the subcultural dupes) might be unpleasant for them, it serves the functional needs of the society as a whole. In

Subculture, then, punks may serve the functional needs of society, because in that they provided the British with someone to point at. While this interpretation may have face validity, it is unlikely that Hebdige has anything close to a nomothetic deductive explanation of subcultures in mind.

The alternative is that Hebdige understand *bricolage* as agency. Naturally, he superficially alludes to Marx in saying that “[m]en make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please, but under circumstances directly encountered given and transmitted from the past” (Marx 1934 [Cited in Hebdige 1979:80]). The account, as viewed through marxian sociology, lacks depth in its consideration of the interplay between the agent and social structure. From this perspective, the most satisfying portions of *Subculture* are history of the development of Rastafarianism and other black subcultures (Chapters 2 and 3). The development of the group’s subcultural style relates to its historical role in the British colonial economy, and black subcultures are opposed to the white dominant culture. As Thompson (1963) might say, the black subcultures were *present at their own making*.. Here agents strategically enter social discourse in which they take calculated actions to rearticulate their social consciousnesses. While there are infinite possibilities for assembling *bricolage*, social structure reduces these possibilities from infinite to myriad. There are still many creative options, and a marxian might attempt to define the choice the agents actually made in terms of *praxis* (enlightened production). The choice of particular semiotic system of expression is in terms of the subcultural group’s awareness of its own position.

According to Hebdige’s account, unlike black subcultures, the punks and others were not *present at their own making*. It is not clear against whom the punks are dialectically opposed, because Hebdige explains that they are articulating the contradictions inherent in their class

consciousness. Hebdige does not characterize the white working class youth as possessing a centuries-long history in the British economy, as he does the blacks. These subcultures articulate unspecified interests and histories, and there is no way to determine whether they make strategic choices of style to express themselves. There are, as always, myriad possibilities for *bricolage*, but how could Hebdige explain *why* the punks decided to be punks? Even if we assume, as does Hebdige, the British class structure, why might two subcultures emerge from similar class situations, only to choose two almost antithetical styles, as with the mods and the skinheads? Within the *Subculture* narrative, the tools to answer this question are unavailable.

Despite its shortcomings, Hebdige's *Subculture* is an enjoyable story will continue to occupy its position as a seminal work in cultural studies. The major weakness of the work is that it lacks social scientific analysis of the interplay between structure and agency in the emergence of the punk rock subculture. Still, Hebdige does tell a good tale, and this is perhaps why he begins and ends the book with references to Genet, another adroit weaver of yarns.

***Direct correspondence to:**

Miami University
Department of Sociology and Gerontology
375 Upham Hall
Oxford, Ohio 45056-1879
Voice: 513-529-1812
Fax: 513-529-8525
Email: muschegw@muohio.edu

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