

SUBCULTURE

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[*sub-*, “below”, *culture*] It. *Subcultura*; Fr. *Subculture*; Germ. *Subkultur*; Span. *Subcultura*. The concept has been used in sociology to indicate groups whose culture, norms, habits, and/or ideology diverge from those of the dominant culture or are opposed to it (in which case we would rather speak of *counter-culture*). Initially the concept was used to indicate deviant and criminal groups, or individuals perceived and labeled as outsiders located at the margin of society. Subsequently the term was used with reference to alternative practices in the lifestyle of young people, as an expression of their desire for autonomy and as a way of distancing themselves from mainstream culture through stylistic and aesthetic choices, for instance in fashion and music. The subsequent debates called the existence of cohesive and fixed subcultures into question and challenged the view that stylistic choices were expressions of social and political stances, rather than acts of constructing of personal identity and group belonging through aesthetic means.

ORIGINS AND CONTEMPORARY DEBATE

Durkheim (1964) was the first to point out how in every human group there is a consensus around a shared set of norms and values that defines a society’s boundaries. At the same time, deviance from these norms is a natural and expected expression of human autonomy and, in some circumstances, an agent of social change. On the one hand, too much deviance causes marginalization and a state of normlessness. On the other hand, too little deviation is a sign of excessive social control. Georg Simmel (1908) similarly defined the notion of being a “stranger” as someone not quite belonging, an individual at the periphery of society. According to this definition, the notion of subculture has been used to indicate groups defined by their status outside of the mainstream and, at the same time, through their internal cohesiveness enacted through the use of shared symbols, collective representations, and common values that enable group solidarity.

From its initial meaning referring to deviant groups in the first half of the twentieth century, the concept of subculture has undergone a significant change since the 1960s, particularly thanks to the work of the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham (Hall, Jefferson 1976), which focused on British youth culture. Subcultures were described then as collective expressions of working-class individuals to changes taking place in post-war society: teddy boys, mods, skinheads, punks, and rockers defined their identity through style, music consumption, and the unusual appropriation of items of consumer culture. Dick Hebdige (1979) is perhaps the most representative researcher of this approach. In his book *Subculture. The Meaning of Style* he starts from the Gramscian concept of cultural hegemony, showing how the social impetus for resistance and change is driven by subordinate groups not directly, but obliquely through alternative stylistic choices and cultural appropriation: "commodities can be symbolically 'repossessed' in everyday life, and endowed with implicitly oppositional meanings" (Hebdige 1979: 16). Aesthetic choices ("the profoundly superficial level of appearances", Hebdige 1979:17) – particularly in music and clothing –, are based on a creative *bricolage* of cultural elements – and become means of the affirmation of one's own autonomy and subversive practices of "semiotic guerilla warfare" against the hegemonic culture, to use Umberto Eco's (1972) expression.

The assumption that subcultures are phenomena of political resistance was later criticized on two main grounds. The first objection was that the idea of immutable and rigidly defined social groups is not consistent with the variability with which individuals can adopt and modify styles of specific subcultures by dynamically modifying their affiliation with them (Polhemus 1997). According to a post-modernist interpretation, the Birmingham school and Hebdige's contribution overestimates the coherence and rigidity of subcultural groups: social aggregations, although expressed through specific aesthetic choices, are changeable and can involve different individuals. Styles can "travel" through a community in a dynamic way, since individuals can adopt and move away from them. Michel Maffesoli (1996) defined this dynamic and the associated shifting social aggregations as "neo-tribes," or bonds that lacked the rigidity of a closed group, which "refer more to a certain ambience, a state of mind, and is preferably to be expressed through lifestyles that favour appearance and form" (1996: 98).

The second objection, which is at the center of the so-called "post-subcultural" turn (Muggleton 1997, Muggleton, Weinzierl 2003) see subcultures mostly as apolitical phenomena of identity construction. According to this view, individuals appropriate symbols, fashions, and styles not as a form of counter-cultural resistance, but as a mean of self-expression and group affiliation. This interpretation would be also better suited to explain the apparent contemporary decline of youth subcultures, which are no longer identifiable in coherent and ideologically motivated aggregations, but are more similar to fashion and lifestyle trends. Appearing too tied to a group identity, in fact, would even work against a stronger need for individuality and autonomy.

This perspective tends to pay little attention to social divisions and inequalities as the original source of youth subcultures, and focuses instead on the more hedonistic consumption of (mostly) affluent individuals and thus rejects the significance of class-based subcultures. However, it cannot be denied that commodification, conformity, and standardization affect subcultures even when they are the expression

of rebellion from marginal groups. This happens as soon as their styles acquire popularity and commercial success, as the example of American "hip-hop" illustrates. In this regard, Roberts (2005), paraphrasing Adorno, speaks of "sub-cultural industry" referring to the paradox of the commercialization of symbolic sub-cultural practices, which is often opposed to the very mechanisms of commercialization. Even when subcultures are originally animated by a subversive spirit, they are rapidly incorporated into the market mechanism. The emphasis on the consumption and spectacularization of subcultures through mass media generates what Sarah Thornton (1995) calls "subcultural capital", which draws on the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1984) and his notion of "cultural capital" as expressed by taste. In this formation, it is not social protest, but social distinctiveness that drives subcultural aesthetic choices.

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