

GRAHAM ST JOHN

subcultures?

KEN GELDER

Subcultures: Cultural Histories and Social Practice

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Ken Gelder is one of those authors you can rely on for an entertaining pedagogical ride. *Subcultures* is no exception. The book is a welcome addition to volumes on subcultures appearing in the last few years, most of them far from entertaining. The backstory on the theory and analysis of 'subculture' provides students with an excellent understanding of how this heuristic, based around a term frequently used and abused, came about. It will therefore be indispensable to students in senior level courses in sociology and cultural studies that deal directly with subculture. Though with some qualification. For, while the book offers an explanation of *where* 'subculture' has come from, and *how* it has evolved, it does not address *why* it should be retained as a heuristic. That is, the challenges brought against subculture theory are not squarely met or adequately negotiated in this short book.

From the fascinating exploration of early modern 'roguery', Elizabethan vagabonds and 'organ-grinders', to the sweeping accounts of figures seminal to the development of the Chicago School (for example, Park's 'moral milieu', Albert Cohen's 'subcultural solution', Thrasher's 'inturned' gangs, to Howard Becker's 'deviants', and John Irwin's cosmopolitan 'scenes'), from the archaeology of bar scenes and club cultures to investigations of literary (the Beats) and UK working-class subcultures (which provided the raw material for scholars at Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies), from jazz to hip-hop, from taxi dancers to hacker and other cyber subcultures, the book offers a cultural history of 'subculture' important for understanding the roots of the

heuristic and how it has been applied across heterogeneous social practice. From 'New Age Travellers' to kinky urban leather cults, Gelder demonstrates his great penchant for teasing out insights in the comparison of diverse and obscure material.

The book performs this withering cultural history through its registering of six themes listed early to account for all that has been recognised as 'subcultural', and it offers convincing evidence for the persistence of these themes, which are: their negative relation to work; their ambivalent relation to class; their association with territory rather than property; their trajectory away from home and domesticity; their excessive character; and their refusal of the banal and the massified. It is the determined decoding of subcultures (and 'subculture') scanned for evidence of these themes throughout literary, sociological and anthropological accounts that I imagine inspired the book's otherwise puzzlingly bland cover. Importantly, the book acknowledges how, throughout its career, 'subculture' is a product of the empirical and the imaginary, revelatory and romantic representations produced in literary and sociological accounts.

Where this document succeeds in offering a kind of archaeology of 'subculture', excavating and scanning its various substrata, it fails to square up to recent interventions. There are two points I want to make here. The first relates to what has been broadly referred to as 'post-subculture' theory. Gelder devotes some attention to this debate in a section in chapter five where three critical points of departure from subculture theory are discussed: the non-

romantic attention to everyday life, the recognition that class may not always be a determining factor, and the attention to lifestyle and heterogeneity. This would have been the perfect opportunity to address one of the key theoretical devices employed by post-subcultural critics, the concept of 'neotribe' derived from French sociologist Michel Maffesoli as outlined in his *The Time of the Tribes*. Most textbooks on youth cultures and subcultures these days devote sections to 'neotribes', the comparison of structuralist and post-structuralist lenses fueling healthy debate important, one would imagine, to the cultural history of subculture. Instead of, say, exploring consumer tribes and how they might evince 'sites of shared experiences, expressions of social distinction', (106) or addressing the way critical themes of network and fluidity challenge subculture theory, this elision enables the virtual dismissal of post-subculture theory as too relativist and individualist, and in the process facilitates the retention of 'subculture' as a heuristic device. Maffesoli and 'tribes' are hailed in one paragraph (135–6) of chapter seven 'Anachronistic Self Fashioning', but this is far too little. That chapter smoothes over divergent heuristics through a discussion of Geoff Mains's work on urban leather sexuality and cultures (rather conveniently, Mains appears to use the terms 'subculture' and 'tribe' interchangeably). It is true that Maffesoli has not had much to say about youth subcultures in France or anywhere else, but the theory has been widely adopted. One of the key areas of youth cultural activity in which Maffesolian theory has been applied is dance culture, a not

insignificant development. Although *Subcultures* offers a cultural history of clubbing studies in chapter three, this direction in post-rave research would have been useful to address, since studies offer insights on the intensely social (not exclusively individualistic) dimensions and trajectories of youth and consumer cultures.

Secondly, although it goes unstated, *Subcultures* is careful to retain the distinction between 'subculture' and 'movement' in social analysis. This distinction remains loyal to the attentions of the majority of research throughout the history of 'subculture'. To consider how the social formations under consideration as 'subcultures' might also possess 'movement' identity would certainly have upset the parameters set out early, and challenged the idea of subculture as this is typically known. But much of the material drawn upon offers opportunity to address the role of 'subcultures' in identifications, histories, and mobilisations, beyond the immediate associations in question, or in which these associations are implicated. For instance, the hippies and other 'countercultural' agents discussed in chapter one surely enact a range of movement concerns, their associations being communities of opposition as indeed made apparent by George McKay and Kevin Hetherington, whose research is drawn upon. Studies of electronic dance music cultures (clubs, raves, hip-hop, techno, and so on) offer an opportunity to explore those moments when 'subcultures' might become 'movements'. Those moments, for instance, when locales of identification and practices of belonging are subject to pressure (aesthetic, moral, legal, official, for

example) and where social aesthetics contextualise the pursuit of wider causes. There appears to be much scope to draw attention to race/ethnicity, queer and gender 'identity politics' that crops up throughout the book though unstated as such. Here subcultures are performative contexts for causes other than simply their own 'ghettoised' micro-social reproduction. And the opportunity to discuss the role of subculture in new religious and or alternative spiritual movements (with specific relation to paganism (136)) is quickly lost to an analysis of kinky leathers cults.

The final opportunity for this kind of rapprochement was in the last chapter, on cyber-subcultures. Here is the only occasion anti-corporate (or alter-globalisation) activism (for instance in the form of 'culture jamming') attracts attention, but only insofar as it is sealed off in some kind of utopian apparatus articulated via Hakim Bey's registering of 'a shadowy sort of counter-Net'. It is important to remember that Bey (aka Peter Lamborn Wilson) argued that the internet was a tool to facilitate the immediacy of the (off-line) 'temporary autonomous zone' whose occupants are driven by the desire for difference. In this final chapter, activists are clocked, but only when they lurk in the virtual shadows of the internet. In any case, gestures of hacker and cyberpunk defiance are swallowed up in a discussion of 'trolling'. Am I missing something here? If activism can be considered an appropriate theme to pursue when manifesting in on-line 'communities' and gestures, then why not off-line in the 'meat' space that has been the terrain of 'subculture' studies for most of its career?

Why will something subcultural not be found in difference-seeking social enclaves populated by those responding to various lifeworld crises, and mobilising around concomitant causes? Fair trade, global justice, ecological sustainability, and so on, are causes that both attract and affirm micro- or subcultural networks—those, for instance, who gather at counter-summits, social forums, reclaimed sites, and other protest zones designed to reproduce identity at the same time as they hail, resist, or expose villains, corporate, state or otherwise. The simultaneous ‘sign of rebellion and mark of belonging’ that McWilliams indicates signifies zootsuits for Mexican and African-Americans (126), is a curious simultaneity that could be extended to say, the black mask for anarchists, the old growth tree for environmentalists, the dance floor for ravers, the subvertisement for anticorporate activists and so on. The ways punk, anarchism, techno-rave, hip-hop, paganism and other formations have informed cultural movements, animating their proactive social aesthetics, and/or have been themselves politicised, deserves attention if subculture studies is to retain continuing relevance. It’s almost as if Gelder is poised to make this leap before the cyberculture chapter, and the book, abruptly ends.

A conclusion would have helped here. A conclusion recognising the sub/cultural dimension of movements and the movement dimensions of subcultures might have been too much to ask given the parameters of measurement the author strictly adheres to, but any conclusion rounding up the many loose, albeit intriguing, tangents, would have been useful.

Without a final account to respond to one cannot adequately address whether the author isn’t clinging unnecessarily to this socio-cultural unit of measurement. Though one suspects he is.

Subcultures is a faithful contribution to subculture studies, offering an indispensable account of how it came to be. This is not an enviable task, and Ken Gelder has skilfully pulled together complex literary, ethnographic, and scholarly histories. For this reason, the book should be read by anyone with a stake or interest in subcultures. Those who want to learn more about the perceived failings of ‘subculture’ within recent debates, and, moreover, why it should be retained in contemporary and future analytical trajectories, will likely be disappointed.

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