

Scenes, Subcultures, and the Twenty-First Century

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Rave Culture: The Alteration and Decline of a Music Scene

Tammy Anderson

Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2009. (Winner of the 2010 Charles Horton Cooley Award).

\$27.95 (paper), EAN: 978-1-59213-934-7;

\$84.50 (cloth), EAN: 978-1-59213-933-0;

\$27.95 (eBook), EAN: 978-1-59213-935-4

Subcultural Theory: Traditions and Concepts

By Patrick J. Williams

Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2011.

US\$69.95 (Hardcover);

US\$24.95 (Paperback), ISBN: 978-0-7456-4388-5

In the early 1990s, researchers began to critique the Marxist explanations of subculture that had emerged from the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in the 1970s—explanations that were fashioned in a context of widespread socioeconomic instability. Drawing heavily from empirical research on nascent “clubbing culture,” “post-subculture” theorists argued that subculture had become little more than a “catch-all term for any aspect of social life in which young people, style and music intersect” (Bennett 1999:599). Diverting attention away from the classed and political dimensions of youth culture, they emphasized the processes through which young people constructed identities in a context of hedonism and play. While the postmodern insights that emerged from post-subculture studies have remained formative in subcultural theory, few researchers have considered their durability in the twenty-first century, as clubbing culture has declined while sociopolitical conditions have returned to those that prevailed during the CCCS’ heyday.

Fortunately, the publication of Tammy Anderson’s *Rave Culture: The Alteration and Decline of a Music Scene* and J. Patrick Williams’ *Subcultural Theory: Traditions and Concepts* brings subcultural theory back to speed. Anderson’s book, rooted

in protracted ethnography, charts the alteration and decline of Philadelphia's rave scene from its high point during the mid- to late-1990s to its "diminished and fragmented state today," while Williams provides a comprehensive review and reappraisal of subcultural theory. Both works are timely and of interest to students of subculture, lending insight into the utility of post-subculture studies at a time when neoliberalism has come full circle. They are also of interest to scholars of deviance, symbolic interactionism, and youth culture more generally. This review discusses both books in turn.

The first three chapters of *Rave Culture* elaborate rave's "cultural components," mapping the Philadelphia scene. The scope of Anderson's ethnographic investigation is impressive. After attending countless EDM parties, interviewing dozens of fans, and spending time at record stores with local stakeholders, she renders the subculture in rich detail, capturing its breadth and diversity with articulate prose. Analytically, she transposes the scene's events and institutions onto a continuum ranging from "authentic rave" to "commercial club culture." She also analyzes subcultural participation, probing the motivations of different ravers and then cataloging their variable effects on the scene. Her approach to ethnography is notable for its proximity to early Chicago symbolic interactionism; it shows concern for urban ecology and deviance while placing analytical emphasis on typology.

Chapter four—the book's highpoint—addresses how and why rave culture has changed over the past 20 years, and how participants within the scene have negotiated those changes. While past research limited its attention to the effects of commercialization and social control, Anderson reveals that those forces are not necessarily the most significant explanatory factors in scene decline. While confirming their relevance, she identifies three other variables that affect subcultures: generational schism; cultural otherness and self-destruction; and genre-based subscene fragmentation. Generational schism played the decisive role in rave's demise.

Anderson argues that all demographic cohorts hold distinctive ideologies, styles, and interests, which develop from the social conditions that prevail as they come of age. In rave's case, Generation X failed to recruit sufficient participation from Generation Y as it aged out of the scene. With different life experiences, rave's cultural ethos carried limited appeal to the latter cohort. While Anderson concludes that "a [sub]culture's fate lies in attracting birth cohorts and demographic groups," she molds all of the aforementioned forces into a model that will assist future scholars in predicting and explaining subcultural trajectories (p.112). She deepens her model in chapter five by identifying three forms of "cultural work" that ravers enact in order to combat scene change: restoration, preservation, and adaptation.

Chapter six reports on pilot fieldwork carried out in London and Ibiza, Spain, which investigates whether European scenes show differences in their levels of commercialization, types of participation, types of organization, and modes of cultural work. While her findings are less conclusive due to harnessing fewer data, they sharpen our understanding of rave culture in two ways: First, by highlighting rave's "translocal character," and second, by fleshing out the typologies earlier

developed. Anderson's final chapter speculates on rave's future, which appears grim. However, unlike CCCS scholars, she emphasizes that commercialization does not guarantee its demise; "cultural work" preserves hope for the subculture's future.

By providing a fuller, richer account of scene alteration and decline, Anderson makes a significant contribution to subcultural theory. She adds to the post-subculture perspective on youth culture as well by documenting rave's diversity, global interconnections, internal politicking, and complex relations with the media. Perhaps most importantly, she revives the utility of CCCS scholarship by highlighting the generational character of subcultural activity and accounting for the detrimental impacts of commercialization. Her book avoids its structuralist pitfalls, however, by directing attention to the meanings that ravers attach to their own behaviors. Her focus on the construction of meaning exemplifies the paradigm that Williams advocates in *Subcultural Theory*.

Williams' work "bring[s] together decades' worth of studies on oppositional youth subcultures" in order to synthesize scholarly understanding (p. x). Across its ten chapters, he explores how and why subcultures emerge, how they color the lives of individual participants, how "mainstream society" responds to them, and the extent to which "subculture" continues to possess worth as an analytic concept. Much of the book addresses substantive areas that are identified as key dimensions of subcultural research, including: the ways in which gender, race, and sexuality operate within subculture; youth cultural resistance and its parallels with social movements; identity construction and the pursuit of "authenticity;" subcultural geographies and scales; and stylistic display.

Williams' most important achievement in the project ensues from redeveloping and reclaiming subculture as a useful sociological concept. In an age of media saturation, rapid commercialization, and cultural hybrids built on little more than pastiche, many researchers have dismissed the analytic worth of the subculture concept. Post-subculture theorists contend that the subcultures of yore (marked by distinctive styles, ideological homology, and clear boundaries) are no longer possible in the "simulated" milieu of late capitalism. In place of subculture, they have configured a range of new concepts, such as "neo-tribe," "lifestyle," and "figuration," to describe postmodern youth cultural formations. Departing from them, Williams calls for an end to the "rhetoric of newness." Instead, he argues that "rather than pit concepts against one another as if they were all epistemologically equal and competitive . . . scholars might instead . . . explor[e] how they may be used in concert to better understand youth cultural activities today" (p. 36).

With this idea in mind, he develops a constructionist perspective on subculture that seeks to better understand how young people create social worlds. The approach encourages subcultural researchers to "investigate subcultures from multiple positions, to use multiple methods, and to seek an understanding of what subcultures mean to the people who live them" (p. 188). In this view, subcultures represent groups of individuals who are connected to one another through interaction and

shared interest rather than “objectivist” criteria. By focusing on subcultural *processes* in lieu of subculturalists themselves, Williams shows how subcultures serve as resources that enable young people to construct positive self-concepts, develop critical thinking skills, and assemble networks of supportive peers. They cannot be dismissed as dysfunctional responses to social strain (criminology), “magical solutions” to class-based inequality (the CCCS), or evidence of postmodern superficiality (post-subculture studies), although those qualities inform *some* dimensions of subcultural activity.

Williams makes a second achievement by extending his constructionist approach to the theorization of authenticity. From the advent of subculture studies, researchers have concerned themselves with the integrity of youth cultural production, lamenting the ways in which the culture industry appropriates and destroys subcultural innovations. This concern plays a prominent role in Anderson’s study of the *decline* of Philadelphia’s rave scene. Much of her ethnography involves separating rave’s “authentic” cultural components from “commercial club culture” and delineating between cultural insiders and outsiders (she classifies some participants, for example, as “pretenders”). In so doing, she, like many sociologists, approaches authenticity from a realist/objectivist perspective.

Williams, however, argues that categories like “outsider” and “pretender” reflect neither the “objective” authenticity of scene participants nor their subjective understandings of their own behavior. Rather, they reflect the attitudes of researchers and their key informants (of her 49 interviews, Anderson, for example, interviewed only eight “outsiders”). Put differently, no scene member would personally define herself as a “pretender” or view her engagement with commercial culture as “inauthentic.” Williams, as such, calls for scholars to treat authenticity as a social construction—a subjective claim that is legitimated or denied by relevant others. He argues that construing authenticity as a social fact marginalizes the experiences of those located on the peripheries of subcultural life.

Subcultural Theory offers a third contribution in its attention to the ways in which the dynamics of race, gender, and sexuality operate within subculture. While scholars built subcultural theory on the concept of social class, they gave little direct attention to the ways in which other status characteristics affect young people. Williams highlights the role that women and people of color have played in oppositional youth movements, analyzing how subcultural activity both reproduces and transforms dominant social relations. He might have strengthened these efforts by making a stronger theoretical intervention (his efforts focus on documentation). Future work should more critically consider how sustained emphasis on white male experience has constrained extant sociological accounts of subcultural style, resistance, and authenticity.

Beyond the achievements listed above, Williams forges interesting new ground in two other areas. First, the book offers a novel frame through which to understand and explain youth resistance. Williams develops a three-dimensional model that explicates resistance according to its passive/active, micro/macro, and overt/covert

qualities. Relative to prior work, the model offers a powerful way to frame subcultural resistance—one that illuminates the efficacy of youth activity while taking care not to construe “anything which is consumed and popular . . . as oppositional” (McRobbie 1994:39). Williams also explores the relationship between geography and subculture—devoting a full chapter to issues of scale. While almost all prior case studies of subculture have identified how geographical setting and the pursuit of territory shape subcultural ideology/style, few have attempted to theorize the relationship between youth experience and geography in a systematic way. He makes a particularly important intervention by discussing the role that virtual spaces/communities occupy in the social worlds of young people today.

Rave Culture and *Subcultural Theory* lay important tracks in the field of youth cultural studies. Each reclaims the 1970s insights of CCCS scholars while heeding critiques made by post-subculture studies in the 1990s. Each also contributes powerful new data to the Chicago School’s legacy of urban ethnography and deviance studies, returning symbolic interactionism to its roots without looking backward. By combining the ostensibly divergent paradigms of the CCCS and post-subculture scholars with an interactionist sensibility, the pair represents an emerging approach to subculture studies that is well-suited to interrogate youth cultural activity in the new millennium.

References

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Philip G. Lewin is a PhD candidate in sociology at the University of Georgia. His work on authenticity, subculture and youth resistance can be found in *Authenticity in Self, Culture and Society* (Ashgate, 2009) and *The Art of Social Critique* (Lexington Books, 2012). His dissertation research examines patronage politics, poor people’s survival networks, and civic participation in an Appalachian town.