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Postprint / Postprint
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

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https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-226404

The Young Ones

A reassessment of the British New Left's representation of 1950s youth subcultures

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ABSTRACT   Dominant accounts of subcultural analysis have tended to read early British New Left writing on youth as a combination of high culturalist and neo-Marxist approaches. This article reassesses this position by showing the variety of methods and forms of analysis adopted by New Left writers in the 1950s, including autobiographical, ethnographic, sociological, cultural and fictional. In particular, it compares the writing on youth by Richard Hoggart, Stuart Hall and Colin MacInnes. It argues that their representations of youth were intricately bound up with general anxieties and concerns in 1950s culture, which created an ambiguous and dual interpretation of youth in ideological terms. It goes on to suggest that the way in which the subcultural subject was represented in textual and methodological terms affected the way in which it was interpreted ideologically. It also suggests that the traces of this representation are embedded in the way that youth is interpreted today.

KEYWORDS   *1950s, Absolute Beginners, Colin MacInnes, ideology, New Left, representation, Richard Hoggart, Stuart Hall, uses of literacy, youth subcultures*

Representing youth

It is common knowledge that the British teenager was born in the 1950s, which makes the present decade his [sic] fiftieth anniversary.[1] Distinctions (and problems) between adults and adolescents are, of course, as old as writing itself, but the 1950s was the decade in which the word 'teenager' first gained popular usage. The 1950s are special in two ways for the study of youth subcultures. First, the decade saw the invention and reification of the teenager as a distinct target group for the marketing of specific consumer products. Second, 'teenager' became a mark of identity for young adults which articulated their sense of difference from the alternative and often competing categories of child and adult. But is it possible, 50 years on, to say that the teenager has now grown up? In terms of cultural analysis, this seemingly paradoxical question could be

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answered in the affirmative. An often-assumed linear narrative of subcultural theory suggests a progression of increasingly mature models and frameworks for dealing with the ever-present issues of youth. According to this linear model, subcultural theory has moved in a line of development from a sociological and cultural approach in the 1950s and 1960s, to predominantly Marxist, class-based and ethnographic approaches in the 1970s, to an emphasis on the semiotic reading of subcultures in the late 1970s and 1980s, and on to a postmodern identification of 'post-subcultures' and clubcultures in the 1990s (Muggleton, 2000; Redhead, 1997). Youth has remained a central category in British cultural studies. This reliance on a linear narrative of subcultural theory, if not of sub-cultures themselves, is even adopted by Muggleton's (2000) model of postmodern subcultural analysis, seemingly undercutting the 'end of grand narratives' model adopted elsewhere in his book *Inside Subculture*. However, I want to challenge this understanding of subcultural analysis as a linear progression by going back to the 1950s, and to the representation of youth by writers associated with the 1950s New Left. In this article, I look at the competing representations of youth in key British texts from the period to emphasize the diversity, complexity and contestation of subcultural analysis during the period. In particular, I discuss the alternative versions of youth as produced by early New Left writers Richard Hoggart, Stuart Hall and Colin MacInnes.

I have two main intentions, the first of which concerns the dominant reading of the early New Left on youth.[2] The traditional understanding is that the early New Left interpreted youth culture as symptomatic of the rise of a new consumerist market imported from America that represented a threat to older, 'organic' working-class culture. This position is argued almost always with reference to Richard Hoggart's 1957 text, *The Uses of Literacy*. As Graeme Turner writes:

> While he [Hoggart] well describes the complexity and the constitution of the cultural field of youth, he is blind and deaf to the complexity of, let alone the functions served by, the 'full rich life' of contemporary working-class youths. (1996: 46)

Dominic Strinati suggests that, in Hoggart's view:

> The import of American mass culture leads the 'juke-box boys' away from the lived authenticity of their working-class backgrounds and into the empty fantasy world of Americanised pleasures. (1995: 30)

This concentration on Hoggart, however, distorts the early New Left's engagement with youth, which was more complex and diverse than these quotations suggest. Alongside Hoggart, articles by Derek Allcorn, Malcolm Kullman and Clancy Sigal in the pioneering New Left journal

Universities and Left Review, and writing on the subject by Stuart Hall and Colin MacInnes in the 1950s, reveal a range of attitudes and representations of youth that disrupt the suggestion of a homogenous reading by the early British New Left.

My second aim is to argue that this diversity of response to youth in the 1950s was informed, and to a large extent determined, by the form in which the teenage subject was represented and the method of analysis adopted by different commentators. Alongside Hoggart's autobiographical and nascent cultural studies focus on youth there is a variety of forms of representation and methodological approaches adopted by the New Left in the 1950s: sociological (Allcorn, 1958; Hall, 1959a, 1959b); ethnographic interview-based (Duncan and Wilkie, 1958; Kullman, 1958),[3] cultural (Hall, 1959b), parody (Sigal, 1958), literary reviews (Hall, 1959b), and fiction (MacInnes, 1959; Sillitoe, 1958, 1959; Trocchi, 1996; Waterhouse, 1959). As we shall see, this issue of formal representation has an impact on the way in which youth subcultures were interpreted ideologically.

Paul Gilroy has suggested that 'thinking about identity' was a major characteristic of the early New Left and British cultural studies work produced in the 1950s and 1960s. As he writes:

> It may be that an interest in identity and its political workings in a variety of different social and historical sites provided a point of intersection between divergent intellectual interests from which a self-conscious cultural studies was gradually born. (1996: 231)

This 'thinking about identity', he goes on to suggest, is the key impulse behind the three central texts of the emerging New Left: Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* (1958), Raymond Williams's *The Long Revolution* (1961) and Edward Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1968[1963]). Gilroy identifies the impulse to articulate a particular sense of identity, centred on the English working classes, which informs all of these texts and is crucial to the New Left's representation of youth. Following Gilroy, I argue that the core work of the New Left on youth should be read as a series of texts that articulated contemporary anxieties about the nature of identity, in terms of class, gender and the nation, and which were responding to specific changes in social, political and cultural relationships. The representation of 1950s youth, therefore, was bound up with recurrent anxieties and concerns in 1950s culture and society generally: consumerism, Americanization, classlessness, the 'affluent society' — all of which appeared to be partly responsible for disaffected and delinquent teenagers bent on undirected violence and uncontrolled sexuality.

Two points need to be stressed before proceeding. First, it is important to identify the partiality of focus in the representation of 1950s youth by

the New Left. Youth is predominantly represented in terms of masculinity. As Angela MacRobbie and Jenny Garber (1975: 209) pointed out in the mid-1970s: 'Very little has been written about the role of girls in youth subcultural groupings.' Also, the emphasis on 1950s representations of youth tended to perceive it as a working-class phenomenon. The combination of Teddy boys, angry young men and issues around mass consumerism combined to emphasize the location of youth subcultures in working-class culture. In terms of ethnicity, the main focus in the 1950s was on white youth subcultures despite consistent references to the (usually negative) influence of black immigrant subcultures on white working-class youth.[4] Second, the British New Left appear to have been approaching the subject of youth and youth culture independently of similar work that was going on in America. This is somewhat surprising, given the identification by virtually all the British writers I discuss of the importance of American influences on British youth culture during the period. Despite this, there is no reference by Hoggart, Hall, Kullman, Allcorn or MacInnes to the pioneering work done by the Chicago School in this area, in particular, by Milton M. Gordon (1947; see Gelder and Thornton, 1997: 40–3), Albert K. Cohen (1955) and Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin (1960). This suggests that the British New Left felt themselves to be not only identifying new social and cultural frameworks in their discussion of youth, but also developing new ways of approaching and analysing this subject that were distinct to the British situation.

'Barbarians in Wonderland': Hoggart's reading of 1950s youth subcultures[5]

The popularity of the teenager, as a cultural figure, was created and maintained in the 1950s largely by the popular press and the burgeoning pop market. However, there were concrete social and economic factors pertaining during the period that precipitated the creation of this new sociological and cultural category. The 1950s economic boom meant that a distinct subcultural group of adolescents and young adults was emerging that had free capital (due to increased employment opportunities) without having the financial commitments required by family and children.[6] From its inception, the figure of the teenager marked a duality of representation. On the one hand, it supplied a new market to be targeted for specific consumer products from the fashion, music and film industries. On the other hand, it represented a new identity to which young adults could attach themselves as a way of escaping, or at least delaying, their incorporation into a parent or dominant culture. This seemingly paradoxical duality of the teenager – both a cultural manifestation of emerging post-industrial consumerism and a point of resistance to that economy – informs the way in which youth subcultures were addressed and under-

stood by the early New Left.

In particular, the New Left was made uneasy by the very visibility of this new social category of youth. It recognized the importance of appealing to youth as part of a project of swelling the ranks of committed socialists by appealing to, and attempting to politicize, a new generation of activists; but at the same time, it was extremely suspicious of what it saw as youth's passive acceptance of the ideologies of an Americanized form of consumer capitalism. As Kevin Davey (1999: 81) has argued, the early New Left's analysis of youth was informed by a combination of 'Western Marxist critique of mass culture' and 'establishment defenders of distinction'. Consequently, youth subcultures were often interpreted either as examples of the process of false consciousness that reproduced the consumerism of late capitalism, or as a growing cultural malaise caused by the massification of culture, and described rhetorically in pseudo-medical tropes of transgression, delinquency and hysteria.

This is exemplified in Hoggart's discussion of the 'Juke-Box Boys' in *The Uses of Literacy*. His reading is based on the detrimental effects on British youth caused by Americanization and the resulting deterioration of 'organic' working-class culture. He describes the teenagers in the 'milk bars' as 'less intelligent than the average, and therefore even more exposed to the debilitating mass-trends of the day' (1958: 249). Victims of a false consciousness, the teenagers nevertheless represent a frightening vision of the future for British culture:

> They [the Juke-Box Boys] are ground between the millstones of technocracy and democracy . . . figures some important contemporary forces are tending to create, the directionless and tamed helots of a machine-minding class . . . The hedonistic but passive barbarian who rides in a fifty-horsepower bus for threepence, to see a five million-dollar film for one-and-eightpence, is not simply a social oddity; he is a portent. (1958: 249–50)

In this passage, the teenagers are seen as both symptomatic of new consumer forces but also as a threat to the organic older working-class culture, a 'portent' of the future. The implicit Leavisite model of cultural value informing Hoggart's approach leads him to a model that distances the teenager, 'others' him, as a marginalized figure who is to be sympathized with and feared at the same time.

Hoggart produces a critical reading of youth subculture as exemplifying the process of 'massification', but he is equivocal in terms of the causes of this. He is not sure whether to apportion blame for rejecting older working-class culture to the youthful individuals themselves, or to the appealing superficiality of an Americanized culture to which these groups were (mistakenly, in his view) attracted. He certainly views youth in ideological terms as politically, socially and culturally apathetic, stimulated only on a surface level by shallow consumer products that were designed to appeal to their limited powers of critical judgement:

[T]his is all a thin and pallid sort of dissipation, a sort of spiritual dry-rot amid the odour of boiled milk. Many of the customers – their clothes, their hairstyles, their facial expressions all indicate – are living to a large extent in a myth-world compounded of a few simple elements which they take to be those of American life. (1957: 248)

Hoggart's observation of youth culture is, of course, part of his agenda of celebrating traditional working-class culture. As Hebdige (1988b: 51) observes, his interpretation of youth is based on his project to 'preserv[e] the "texture" of working-class life against the bland allure of post-war affluence – television, high wages, and consumerism'.[7] Furthermore, the presence of alternative youth subcultures threatened the New Left project of constructing a new socialist and culturalist politics of proletarian solidarity and homogeneity. As Dominic Strinati (1995: 31) argues, Hoggart's text proposed the idea that '"genuine" working-class community [was] in the process of being dissolved into cultural oblivion by mass culture and Americanization'.

The issue of form in which youth culture was observed is important here. Hoggart acknowledged the inadequacy of available methodologies of cultural analysis in the 1950s for dealing with subcultural representations of youth. His approach in *The Uses of Literacy* where he discusses youth culture is essentially autobiographical and anecdotal, in the sense that he presents the reader with accounts of his personal observations of teenagers as he encounters them in the real world. His position in relation to his subjects, therefore, is external. He does not interview the teenagers and consequently his interpretation of their culture is based only on observation. He recognized the limitations of this approach in relation to one of the main forms of youth culture: 'pop songs'. Hoggart writes:

The songs seem to get more deeply under the emotional skin than the stories. Or the problem may be chiefly that I lack, in dealing with songs, the critical equipment I am accustomed to use on the printed word. (1958: 224)

Here, Hoggart identified the difficulty in discussing popular songs precisely because he did not feel that he had the analytical tools or critical vocabulary to analyse their effects adequately. He is left with the imprecise description of the communicative power of their 'get[ting] … under the emotional skin'. Hoggart recognized that the form of analysis he was deploying failed to represent the important function of the pop song as a bonding element in the structure and internal cohesiveness of youth subcultures. This shift in focus reveals a difficulty that his text has in identifying distinctions between representations of youth through external observation of their practices and lifestyles in the milk bars, and the forms of cultural expression in which youth was trying to articulate and voice its concerns. This marks the beginnings of a break between sociological and cultural studies approaches to youth, but remains undeveloped in Hoggart's book.

Reading subcultural fictions: Stuart Hall

However, Hoggart's position was not the only one adopted by New Left commentators on youth in the 1950s. Derek Allcorn's article, 'The Unnoticed Generation' (1958), focuses predominantly on the debilitating aspects of youth groups, but he does acknowledge the egalitarianism produced within the groups that overlook distinctions of class and background:

> Of all the social groupings in modern industrial societies, peer-groups seem to approach most closely to Simmel's notion of 'pure-sociability,' which entails social intercourse between equals 'for its own sake' . . . I think then that the constant practice of reciprocity and the use of similar mechanisms goes some way to explaining how the emergence of an established leadership in [youth] peer-groups is inhibited. It does not, however, explain how such a high value comes to be set upon equality, nor how the peer-group comes to be the principal embodiment of egalitarianism in the everyday life of the young men. (1958: 56–7)

Despite the fact that this egalitarianism does not extend to women or ethnic minorities, as Allcorn is keen to point out, the potential for these groups to resist the class hierarchies embedded in the dominant culture is acknowledged. This produces a very different interpretation of youth than that assumed to be the main focus on New Left and later CCCS (Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies) models of youth as reflecting the class relations of the parent and dominant culture in displaced forms (Muggleton, 2000).

Stuart Hall (1959b) further opens up this debate in a *Universities and Left Review* article on Colin MacInnes's *Absolute Beginners* (1959). Hall's article is part of a review of several contemporary works on youth (including E.R. Braithwaite's *To Sir With Love*; 1959)[8] and, to a certain extent, corresponds with some Hoggartian interpretations of youth subcultures. It combines an analysis of the cultural practices and consumption of teenagers, an attempt to locate these within a sociological framework, and an analysis of their representation in literary works. In the first two sections of the article, he identifies socio-economic causes in the 'super-structural' elements of working-class education that result in 'young people compensat[ing] for their frustrations by an escape into the womb-world of mass entertainments' (1959b: 21), which he regards as 'a creation by the commercial world', and to which 'young people are the most culturally exposed' (1959b: 20). Following Hoggart, Hall identifies a lack of agency in the relationship between individual teenagers and the cultural products that they consume, that forms a framework of exploitation:

> In response to the cultural exploitation . . . many teenagers erect cultural

barriers themselves: so that their leisure world absorbs and consumes all the emotional vitality and the fantasy and imaginative projections of adolescence, and becomes a wholly self-enclosed universe. (1959b: 20)

However, in the final section of the article, Hall's emphasis moves from a sociological and economic approach to a discussion of the cultural, formal and aesthetic representations of youth subcultures. This move allows him to trace the potentially radical characteristics of youth that he considers are represented most clearly in MacInnes's novel. Hall begins by identifying the existence of a new form of teenage subculture:

In London, at any rate, we are witnessing a 'quiet' revolution within the teenage revolution itself.

He describes this new subculture as:

A fast-talking, smooth-running, hustling generation with an ad-lib gift of the gab, quick sensitivities and responses ... They are city birds ... remarkably self-possessed ... They despise the masses ... They seem culturally exploited rather than socially deprived. (1959b: 23)

Hall's description, here, identifies a form of youth subculture that does not fit easily with Hoggart's homogenized construction of working-class youth, most often represented by the Teds. This 'new' subculture corresponds more to that described by MacInnes in *Absolute Beginners*, one which associates with jazz music and culture, which celebrates a romanticized association with black identity, and perhaps is more prevalent among middle-class, rather than working-class youth: 'the very smart young men and women of the metropolitan jazz clubs' (1959b: 23). The radicalism of this form of youth subculture, therefore, represents an ideologically different interpretation to Hoggart's reading.

Hall's article also readdresses the terms and models in which youth is analysed. In the last section of the article, Hall is concerned with the 'cultural' impact of youth rather than its position in terms of economic conditions. This allows him to suggest a potentially 'revolutionary' element in youth subcultures as a cultural rather than a *political* or class-based phenomenon, associating youth with a cultural avant-garde rather than a socialist politics based on economics in the last instance. It is significant, therefore, that the response to youth subcultures alters specifically when the category of analysis changes from the socio-economic to the cultural. This move allows Hall to reintroduce the political with a changed emphasis on the role of youth: 'It would not be the first revolution which came out of social deprivation, nor the first Utopia with absolute beginnings' (1959b: 25). This shift in emphasis anticipates the later readings of youth subcultures produced by Dick Hebdige (1988a), who is predominantly concerned with their stylistic manifestations rather than a restricting focus on the socio-economic conditions that produce

them, and thus disrupts the linear progression model of the historical analysis of youth.

It is important to stress that the emphasis placed in this article on style and cultural production is achieved through analysis of a *fictional* representation. Although Hall is keen to emphasise the 'authenticity', 'committed' and 'social documentary' form of MacInnes's novel, all of which are value-loaded terms for Hall, he stresses the success of *Absolute Beginners* as a 'novel rather than a piece of inspired journalism' (1959b: 24). It is significant, therefore, that the form in which the teenage subject is presented for analysis determines to a large extent the way in which youth is interpreted not only in social and cultural terms, but also ideologically. Hall seems to be tentatively suggesting that the articulation of youth through fictional forms facilitates an alternative and contesting reading to that produced by the mainstream press and by Hoggart's style of analysis: 'Perhaps Mr. MacInnes has done this generation more justice than others who have written about the same subject' (1959b: 25).

Hall, with Paddy Whannel (1964), develops this cultural reading of youth styles and forms in *The Popular Arts*. In this book, Hall and Whannel concentrate more closely on the aesthetic representations of youth culture rather than on socio-economic preconditions, and again the representation of youth is articulated in relation to a different emphasis. They refer to teenage culture in terms of 'symbols and meanings' that represent 'an *authentic* response ... [to] a society in transition' (1964: 273; emphasis added). Here, the sense of youth subculture 'reflecting' an inherent false consciousness has gone and been replaced by a focus on the cultural production of youth as an 'authentic' response. The shift to a reading of style and culture again allows Hall to suggest the radical potential of youth:

> Sometimes this response can be seen in direct terms – kinds of radical political energy with certain clear-cut symbolic targets (the threat of nuclear weapons, political apathy ... 'the Establishment'). Sometimes, the response takes the form of a radical shift in social habits – for example, the slow but certain revolution in sexual morality among young people. (1964: 273)

The 'radical' is identified here in terms of social and political connections, but the emphasis is on the cultural manifestations of this radicalism in terms of *form* and style:

> In these and other ways the younger generation have acted as a creative minority, pioneering ahead of the puritan restraints so deeply built into English bourgeois morality, towards a code of behaviour in our view more humane and civilized. Much of the active participation of the younger generation in their own sub-culture has this flavour about it – a spontaneous and generative response to a frequently bewildering and confused social situation. In these conditions the problems of the young seem important largely because they are symptomatic of the society as a whole. (1964: 273–4)

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Here, the positive evaluation of youth subculture is predicated on a changed definition of the 'radical', as Hall's emphasis is on the cultural and stylistic rather than the political or economic. Youth is still a 'problem', but one that is a representation of the problems involved within the whole of society and therefore, from a socialist position, of capitalism as the dominant mode of production. Rather than youth being defined as a reflection of the cultural effects of contemporary social and economic conditions, it becomes representative of a position from which a critique of those conditions may be developed.

Teenage kicks: Colin MacInnes's *Absolute Beginners*

It seems apparent then that 1950s interpretations of youth culture were dependent on the form in which they were accessed and observed, and this can be extended to fictional representations of youth. The importance of narrative forms is important here, especially in its role producing cultural identities; what Alan Sinfield (1989: 23) calls 'stories we tell ourselves'. Andrew Gibson (1999) has argued, following Levinas, that narrative fiction is more open to the representation of the concerns of 'others' because of the effect of closing down the distance between the subject and object of a narrative discourse, especially in fiction that deploys first-person narration delivered by a 'narrator-character' who is involved in the action of a novel. As Gibson writes:

> There is a radical distinctness . . . to the mode of narration that Genette called
> extradiegetic-homodiegetic . . . The narrator is also an experiencer. He or she
> is engaged, involved in the world narrated. Thus narration as reflection
> appears to supervene upon pre-reflective experience. The ethics of narrator-
> character or focalized narration thus entails a play of levels and dimensions.
> (1999: 27)

It is significant in this respect that many examples of what we might call youth subcultural fiction produced during the 1950s – Alan Sillitoe's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1958) and *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1959), Colin MacInnes's *Absolute Beginners* (1959), Keith Waterhouse's *Billy Liar* (1959), J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* (1952) and Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) – all use this kind of narration.[9]

Colin MacInnes's *Absolute Beginners*, in particular, is concerned to articulate a wide range of attitudes towards youth in the 1950s, while simultaneously offering an implicit critique of the way in which teenagers were being represented in both the media and academic analyses. His novel emphasizes the spectacular power of youth subcultures and offers a contesting representation to that found in both the mainstream media and in the Hoggart-influenced writings of the New Left.

The central character in the novel is a 19-year-old unnamed teenager, through whose narrative voice the reader is introduced to the subcultural world of London's youth. The teenage hero is a photographer, which thematically foregrounds the 'documentary' nature of the text: the photographer's job being to record and document events and practices but from a certain distance, from a point of detached observation. Therefore, he is placed initially on the margins of this subculture, not (he believes) exploited by it, but maintaining a hustling independent existence on its edges. The text includes several passages which represent this 'sociological' or 'documentary' function of the text, for example, the description of teenage fashion and the specific and multiple identities within youth culture in the long description of the differences in dress between the skiffle and trad jazz uniform of the Misery Kid and his cultural opposite 'number', the 'sharp mod jazz' Dean Swift (1964: 70). The narrative perspective at the opening of the novel represents the social observer who is familiar with the culture that he is observing, and can also supply an external commentary on it. This duality of narrative perspective represents a negotiation of distance and proximity to the world of the teenage subculture. The significance of this methodological approach is foregrounded towards the end of the novel, when the teenager is forced to confront directly the racial violence evidenced in the description of the Notting Hill riots of August 1958. At this point in the text he is forced out of his role as external observer and becomes part of the action, represented in the text by the rejection of his camera: 'I took up my Rolleiflex, but put it down again, because it didn't seem useful any longer' (1964: 218).

The photojournalist emblem in the novel implicitly reflects and comments upon what MacInnes saw as the tendency in 1950s sociological and journalistic analysis to misrepresent youth. As he commented in a 1959 article:

> As one . . . scans the acreage of fish-and-chip dailies and the very square footage of the very predictable weeklies . . . it is amazing – it really is – how very little one can learn about life in England here and now . . . what really revealing things have we had about the millions of teenagers, about the Teds? (1986[1959]: 206)

As a reaction to this felt misrepresentation, MacInnes constructed an idiosyncratic narrative voice in his novel that attempted to provide an authentic representation of 1950s teenage subculture's mode of address:

> He didn't wig this, so giving me a kindly smile, he stepped away to make himself respectable again. I put a disc on to his hi-fi, my choice being Billie H., who sends me even more than Ella does, but only when, as now, I'm tired, and also, what with seeing Suze again, and working hard with my Rolleiflex and

then this moronic conversation, graveyard gloomy. But Lady Day has suffered so much in her life she carries it all for you, and soon I was quite a cheerful cat again. (1964: 27–8).

Here, the incorporation of unofficial and unlicensed language ('wig', 'sends', 'cat') and references to the insider's knowledge of a specific subcultural interpretive community ('Billie H.', 'Ella', 'Lady Day'), creates a disruption of standard English that acts as a performative statement of opposition to dominant culture. The style announces itself as distinct from standard English and thereby operates as a statement or proclamation of rejection and critique of dominant cultural values. Although this does not reproduce the authentic voice of actual teenagers in an ethnographic sense, it represents, through its performative presentation of a stylized subcultural language, the ideological function of style in youth subcultures. As Dick Hebdige (1988a: 102) argues: 'The communication of a significant *difference*, then (and the parallel communication of a group *identity*), is the "point" behind the style of all spectacular subcultures.' The construction of the teenager's voice in MacInnes's novel, through its foregrounding of an alternative stylistic discourse, is a textual representation of this function of subculture to distance itself from the mainstream, and operates as a process of identity-forming empowerment.

MacInnes's text also offers a contrasting representation of youth to the homogenizing effect produced by Hoggart's reading of the 'Juke-Box Boys' by identifying multiple subcultures within the homogenizing term 'youth'. The representations of Teds, Mods (although this description had not yet been coined when *Absolute Beginners* was published), 'trad' and 'mod' jazz followers, as well as the younger 'teen' cultures, problematize the singular definition of youth subculture and achieve a complexity that is lacking in Hoggart's writing.

Ultimately, however, *Absolute Beginners* offers an unstable and ambivalent reading of youth that reflects a contradictory response of anxiety and attraction towards the new teenage phenomenon. On the one hand, the novel records the potential of youth to subvert dominant power structures and cultural beliefs, while on the other, it records the appropriation and commodification of youth and its reliance on the economic frameworks of consumerism.

MacInnes's teenager is convinced that the teenage phenomenon carries the *possibility* of a radical disruption of dominant power relationships:

[Y]outh has power, a kind of divine power straight from mother nature . . . As for the boys and girls, the dear young absolute beginners, I sometimes feel that if they only *knew* this fact, this very simple fact, namely how powerful they really are, then they could rise up overnight and enslave the old tax-payers, the whole damn lot of them. (1964: 13)

However, this power is significantly circumscribed by the fact that the teenagers are unaware of their revolutionary potential. This passage significantly deploys a traditional Marxist vocabulary that represents the image of a subjected marginalized group rising up to overthrow the dominant group, but the radical discourse is deflected from a category of class distinction to one of age. The subjugated group here are the exploited teenagers who, it is intimated, have the power to rise up and *culturally* overthrow the dominant culture. This image is repeated in the following passage:

> [E]ven here in this Soho, the headquarters of the adult mafia, you could everywhere see the signs of un-silent teenage revolution. The disc shops with those lovely sleeves set in their windows, the most original thing to come out in our lifetime, and the kids inside them purchasing guitars, or spending fortunes on the songs of the Top Twenty. The shirt-stores and bra-stores with cine-star photos in the window selling all the exclusive teenage drag I've been describing. The hair-style saloons where they inflict the blow-wave torture on the kids for hours on end. The cosmetic shops – to make girls of seventeen, fifteen, even thirteen, look like pale rinsed-out sophisticates. Scooters and bubble-cars driven madly down the roads by kids who, a few years ago, were pushing toy ones on the pavement. And everywhere you go the narrow coffee bars and darkened cellars with the kids packed tight, just whispering, like bees inside the hive waiting for a glorious queen bee to appear. (1964: 74)

The focus on style here, as signifying the radical aesthetics of youth subcultures, is close to Dick Hebdige's reading of the radical potential of youth. As he writes:

> We should ... not underestimate the signifying power of the spectacular subculture not only as a metaphor for potential anarchy 'out there' but as an actual mechanism of semiotic disorder. (1998a: 90)

However, what is significant in MacInnes in terms of the radical nature of youth subcultures, is that the weapons of this new teenage revolution are precisely the consumer products that will ensure that it fails to threaten the dominant *economic* ideology, and therefore, in class terms, can never successfully achieve any fundamental challenge to dominant power structures. Again, as Hebdige writes: 'It is difficult ... to maintain any absolute distinction between commercial exploitation on the one hand and creativity/originality on the other' (1988a: 95). MacInnes also identifies the way in which any original authentic teenage culture is gradually appropriated through commodification: 'They buy us younger every year' (1964: 10). Therefore, the radical potential of the teenage 'revolution' is ultimately diluted through its commodification and incorporation into hegemonic capitalist power structures. This is identified by the very

young, but very experienced character in the novel, Wizard, who epito-
mizes the darker undercurrent of teenage subculture. As this character
observes:

> It's been a two-way twist, this teenage party. Exploitation of the kiddoes by the
> conscripts, and exploitation of themselves by the crafty little absolute
> beginners. The net result? 'Teenager's become a dirty word or, at any rate, a
> square one. (1964: 10)

Nevertheless, the text simultaneously envisages the possibility of a
more radical, 'utopian' subcultural discourse that can reject the codes of
the dominant culture. This discourse is necessarily underground, existing
as it does on the margins of dominant society, and is represented by the
musical and cultural expression of jazz. The importance of musical styles
as signifying ideological positions is crucial in *Absolute Beginners*, and
again corresponds to Hebdige's reading of the aesthetics of youth culture.
Hebdige (1988a: 47) reads the 'moment' of 1950s jazz as an 'unprecedented
convergence of black and white'. Jazz, in MacInnes's text, represents the
potential revolutionary spirit that idealistically removes all prejudices of
class, age, race, gender and sexuality. The text suggests that this utopian
vision was contained in the original impulse for the teenage culture, that
it was once pure and uncontaminated by commercialism:

> This teenage ball had a real splendour in the days when the kids discovered
> that, for the first time since centuries of kingdom-come, they'd money, which
> hitherto had always been denied to us at the best time in life to use it, namely,
> when you're young and strong, and also before the newspapers and telly got
> hold of this teenage fable and prostituted it as conscripts seem to do to
> everything they touch. Yes, I tell you, it had had a real savage splendour . . .
> our world was to be our world . . . (1964: 10–11).

This discourse of empowerment, represented by jazz, is defined here as
an actual societal possibility. It becomes a form of aestheticized social
critique (but not ultimately of revolution) that allows MacInnes to
construct an alternative radical discourse that contests Hoggart's reading
of youth as delinquent and susceptible to the debilitating cultural effects
of consumer capitalism. Jazz culture is specifically celebrated in the novel
for its refusal to prejudice any group and this form of social inclusion
represents the incorporation of a range of radical positions into an ideal-
ized vision of an emergent identity:

> But the great thing about the jazz world, and all the kids that enter into it, is
> that no one, not a soul, cares what your class is, or what your race is, or what
> your income, or if you're boy, or girl, or bent, or versatile, or what you are – so
> long as you behave yourself, and have left all that crap behind you, too, when
> you come in the jazz club door. (1964: 68–9)

It is apparent, however, that MacInnes's novel also offers a parallel and darker interpretation alongside the reading of youth subcultures as ideologically radical and 'utopian'. In fact, MacInnes produces a more (politically) ambivalent reading of youth that stresses 1950s anxieties about the instability and undecidability of the release of these radical forces. Georges Bataille's (1997a, 1997b) theory on the relationship between the 'heterogeneous' and 'homogeneous' forces of society is useful in this context. In Bataillean terms, youth culture can be read as representing a heterogeneous force that destabilizes the homogeneity of dominant society. For Bataille, '*Violence, excess, delirium, madness* characterize heterogeneous elements to varying degrees: active as persons or mobs, they result from breaking the laws of social *homogeneity*' (1997b: 142). The transgressive nature, violence and excess of the subcultural world described by MacInnes's teenager represents a textual unleashing of the underground, rejected and repressed forces of society. The representation of the teenage jazz subculture in *Absolute Beginners* corresponds to the model of excess and non-productive consumption that Bataille identifies as the 'heterogeneous': forces of human psychology that represent the excluded components, the detritus of homogeneous bourgeois society. For Bataille, as Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (1997: 22) have pointed out, the heterogeneous forces of non-productive consumption are revealed when 'the unproductive expenditure of energy ... is released from within homogeneous society by sacrifices and festival'. In *Absolute Beginners*, the heterogeneous excess is 'spent' through the dual subcultural modes of empowerment represented by the consumption of subcultural artefacts: fashion, music, appearance; and 'consumption' of the jazz club experience.

However, the Bataillean concept of the heterogeneous also reveals a negative function that problematizes the ideological construction of the radical nature of heterogeneous excess. In 'The Psychological Structure of Fascism', Bataille (1997b: 139) presents an alternative product of the release of the heterogeneous in terms of the creation of a general unification of prohibited forces onto the figure of a 'fascist' leader as the 'transcendent object of collective affinity'. This process 'amounts to a negation of the fundamental revolutionary effervescence' of the heterogeneous, combining it with residual elements of the homogeneous such as 'duty, discipline and obedience' (1985b: 139). In *Absolute Beginners*, this 'negative' aspect of the heterogeneous is represented by the existence of the neo-Nazi group that the teenager visits and of which his former friend Wizard is a member:

> Then I looked at Wizard. And on my friend's face, as he stared up at this orator [from the White Protection League], I saw an expression that made me shiver ... his wiry little body was all clenched, and something was staring through his eyes that came from God knows where, and he raised on his toes, and shot

up his arms all rigid, and he cried out, shrill like a final cry, 'Keep England White'. (1964: 220)

Wizard represents the liberatory potential of youth culture perverted from a discourse of equality towards a negative empowerment that resubjugates black culture in the process of empowering white English working-class youth. This character, therefore, articulates contemporary anxieties in the collective psychology of the nation in relation to the presence of black subcultures in the colonial 'centre'. Taken as a whole, MacInnes's fictional representation of teenage subcultures produces a complex and often contradictory reading of youth that mirrors the variety of attitudes towards the figure of the teenager in 1950s culture.

Conclusions

Two main conclusions can be drawn here that have an impact on the way in which youth continues to be represented in the media and in social and cultural analysis. First, many of the forms and characteristics of teenage representation in the 1950s are still embedded in the way that youth is represented today. This can be identified in the ambiguous and contra-dictory way in which teenagers are represented ideologically, despite the postmodern deconstruction of models of society based on dominant/ subordinate and youth/parent dichotomies. Youth culture continues to occupy a space in social and cultural analysis that combines both a site of potential radicalism and an unthinking acceptance of dominant social and economic frameworks. On the one hand, youth is still represented in terms of social problems (vandalism, street crime, misuse of drugs, adolescent pregnancies, etc.) in which transgressive and heterogeneous behaviour presents a threat to the morals and codes of homogenous society. On the other hand, youth is seen as a politically passive and ideologically naive social category where the culture industry continues to implant con-sumerist ideologies through a combination of humour, banality, false ideals and ambitions in teen soap operas, Saturday morning shows and the ever-present respect for pop idols. The majority of actual teenagers, of course, lie somewhere between these two extreme representations and are forced to negotiate their own identities in relation to both of them.

The second conclusion to be drawn from this article concerns formal issues of representation. The analysis of 1950s youth has shown that the form in which the teenage subject was set up for analysis and the analytic methodology that was used profoundly affected the interpretation of youth in ideological terms. This factor continues to be relevant and should be borne in mind in the development of policy based on sociological and cultural analysis of youth. The figures of youth produced in such studies remain constructed figures, despite the pains to which individual writers attempt to authenticate their procedures. This relates as much to the post-

modern, ethnographic and interview-based studies as it does to the theoretical approaches adopted by CCCS in the 1970s. Fictional representations of youth continue to add to the complexity of this issue. Fiction offers an alternative textual space for the representation of subcultural identity that is often at odds with the main forms of sociological and cultural studies analyses during any particular period. What is significant is that the constructed images and interpretations of youth are as much dependent on the form in which they are presented as they are indicators of actual youth cultures, practices and attitudes.

Notes

1. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1989 edition: 713), the unlikely 'father' of the teenager is W.H. Auden, who was the first British writer to use the word in 1948.
2. A few terms need to be clarified here. The distinction between 'teenager', 'adolescent' and 'youth' is fairly interchangeable in the early New Left writing, and seems to refer to an age range between 13 and 19 years. 'Youth culture' refers to the entertainments, practices and commodities that are targeted at, and consumed by, this group. The use of the term 'youth subcultures' seems to be a later designation, in the British context at least. Although Milton M. Gordon and Albert K. Cohen were theorizing the concept in a North American context in the 1940s and 1950s, I could not find the term used by the British New Left until the later 1960s and certainly not in the 1950s writing on youth (Cohen, 1955; Gordon, 1947).
3. Michael Kullman based his analysis of youth on his interviews with a number of teenagers in a secondary modern school, and his article includes some of their responses. Greta Duncan and Roy Wilkie's article was based on interviews with male and female teenagers from the Knightswood Community Centre in Glasgow. The 'ethnographic', questionnaire approach adopted in both these texts is very different from Hoggart's external observation of teenagers in *The Uses of Literacy*.
4. There are, of course, notable exceptions here, such as Colin MacInnes' *City of Spades* (1957) and Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), in which an attempt is made to focus on black youth subcultures.
5. The quotation is taken from *The Uses of Literacy* (Hoggart, 1958: 193).
6. Between 1951 and 1963 wages rose by 72 percent, while prices rose by only 45 percent (Hewison, 1981: 6).
7. A similar approach is adopted by Michael Kullman, who stressed the cultural paucity of youth culture, regarding pop forms such as rock 'n' roll as indicative of entertainment for the mis-educated. Kullman records the preponderance of what he calls 'anti-culture' in popular youth cultures to be the result of the early segregation of British youth in education because of the 11-plus examination. His definition of working-class youth subculture as 'anti-culture' indicates a particular construction of what 'culture' means based on older models of high and low culture (Kullman, 1958).
8. Braithwaite's (1959) book is an account of a black teacher working in an east end 'progressive' school that, although an autobiographical account,

reads more like a documentary novel. It is interesting to note that in discussing this text Hall chooses to concentrate on the socio-economic and class issues raised by the book, rather than the racial prejudices, encounters and tensions which form the book's primary subject matter.

9. Strictly speaking, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* and *Billy Liar* use third-person narration but it is focalized through a single character in both novels – a style of narration that Gibson includes in his classification.

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