YOUTH AND SUBCULTURE AS CREATIVE FORCE

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HANS ARTHUR SKOTT-MYHRE

Youth and Subculture as Creative Force

Creating New Spaces for Radical Youth Work

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Preface

In the summer of 1976 I was living and writing as a street poet in Seattle, Washington. I had left the university following the completion of my bachelor's degree, determined that I would not return and be co-opted by the stifling confines of that bourgeois institution. Working in a yarn factory on the overnight shift and writing poetry during the afternoons filled my workdays. Giving readings in coffeehouse bars and on the street comprised my days off. The poetry readings were part of a collective called the Dogtown Poetry Group. As a subculture within subcultures, we had a vision about poetry and poets. We also had an ethos that included at its centre a commitment to breaking the rules and reshaping the game.

One evening we were giving a reading at a local coffeehouse in the university district. As we finished, we were approached by a group of young men. They asked us if we would like to read our poetry in between bands at an upcoming punk rock show. They said that they thought our poetry would mesh well with punk culture.

While none of us were well acquainted with what punk had become in 1976, we were all very familiar with the origins of punk in the work of the Velvet Underground, Television, Iggy Pop, and more recently, the Sex Pistols. We were also aware of the connections between beatniks such as Allen Ginsburg and William Burroughs and the early punk movement. This connection had been overtly made in the work of punk poet and musician Patti Smith. We saw ourselves within this lineage of punk and poetry, and so when the young men who had invited us to their show said our poetry would fit with their music, it made sense to us. The prospect of the show was, for us, exciting in its possibility for new links between punk and poetry.

The show, however, was not at all what we expected. As it turned out there was a great deal we didn't understand about punk culture. Correspondingly, our hosts from within punk culture didn't understand or appreciate what we were trying to do. Whatever it was that they had first heard in our poetry, their companions at the show did not hear it.

The crowd was loud and rowdy and not at all in the mood to hear spoken poetry. They wanted to hear loud, assaultive punk music, not surrealist-dadaist poetry. For our part, we considered our poetry a kind of street fighting. This kind of tough, no-quarter-taken poetry was best read, in our opinion, under the influence of several beers. In such condition we were in a mood to take on anyone, and after about five minutes of loud and rowdy calls for the return of the music, I remember standing and challenging the entire audience to a fist fight if they didn't quiet down. Much to my surprise, they did – a reaction that marked that particular crowd of punks as most likely poseurs. The evening descended from there and ended with one young man telling us that our poetry was not sufficiently violent to sustain the audience's attention. As a response to this critique, one of our members pulled out a large buck knife and asked the critic whether or not he would like to experience real violence first hand. The invitation was declined, and we left the show very shortly afterwards with a bad taste in our mouths about the whole thing.

This clash of subcultures faded over time as I grew older. Faded, that is, until punk re-entered my life in the summer of 1998. Like many people I had assumed the death of punk somewhere around the demise of the Sex Pistols. It was not a death I grieved much, although in the back of my mind, the old connections of early punk and poetry kept a certain part of punk mythical. But punk had died like the other anarchist movements of my youth: the White Panther Party, the Yippies, the Hog Farm, the Diggers, the Merry Pranksters, the Lamar Harrington Collective, Girls Together Outrageously, 62nd Street House, and others. They were gone and while their spirit might continue to inform my private ethos, my days of anarchist companionship and collective action were long since past and gone.

Like the news of Mark Twain's death, however, reports of the death of punk were greatly exaggerated. It was my son who brought punk back and opened that world to me in ways that have both confirmed my connections to punk as well as my critique of it. As I have watched the transformation of my son from David the skater to Dirty Dave the

punk to Dirty the grunge punk and to Dave the hardcore punk with
the stage name Dirty and then Dave the Trad skin,[1] I have been pro-
foundly altered. As I have watched his band evolve from the first
mixed group of punks and non-punks to the current combination of
hardcores and Trad skins, I have been informed about how our lives
are simultaneously continuous and discontinuous. I have thought a
great deal about tradition, lineage, connection, belonging, and pregen-
erative generations. I have been forced back on my bourgeois self in
ways that challenge my comforts and remind me of my younger inten-
tions. In short, his life and culture are transformative for me in impor-
tant and evocative ways.

   It is my relationship with my son and his friends that forms the core
of this book. The conversations I have had with them over a number
of years about being punk and skin is the ground out of which this
writing grows. For this project, I talked in depth with David and five
of his friends. These six young people formed a core around a punk
band that the three young men had founded in high school and which
still exists as of this writing, although with slightly different member-
ship. The young men had all started out as punks in high school but
two of the three had become skinheads, moving the style of music
gradually away from raw punk towards hard-core street punk with
definite Oi influences.[2] In addition to music, clothing style and fashion
are essential elements of the scene for punks and skinheads. All six of
these six young people had at one time dressed fully punk, with
varying arrays of Mohawks, tri-hawks, bi-hawks, body piercings,
safety pins, studded leather jackets with stencils and patches, bondage
pants with zippers, and Doc Martens. Now, however, the two skin-
heads wore flight jackets and jeans, Ben Sherman or Fred Perry shirts
with traditional cropped hair and tattoos. They had removed their
piercings and wore suspenders (braces), pins, and flag patches. The
remaining punk now wore more hardcore street attire including the
requisite Mohawk, with blue jeans, t-shirts and studded leather jacket
over top. Of the two skinheads, one is biracial. For the purposes of this
writing I will refer to the biracial skinhead as Gary and the other skin
as Frank. The remaining punk I will call Tony.

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1 Traditional skinheads are non-racist skins who trace their lineage to the original
   Jamaican-English skins.
2 Oi refers to working-class punk rock associated with skinheads; also called street
   punk.

The young women I talked with had followed a similar trajectory through high school. All of them starting out as punk, wearing mini-skirts with torn fishnet stockings, Mohawks, studded leather jackets, and body piercings. One of the three had stayed traditionally punk while one went on to become a skin-bird with the Chelsea hairstyle, flight jacket, Doc Martens, flags, and pins. The other young woman vacillated between the styles, sometimes combining elements of punk and skin while at other times going fully punk or just hardcore rock and roll. None of the young women were directly involved with bands, although all of them played a major roll in the scene.

I remember a party held in the basement of my house that was attended by a large number of skinheads. At some point after my wife and I had gone to bed, there was a fight between two quite large skin-head boys, during which they began to break things. One of the young women from this study single-handedly broke up the fight, in spite of the fact that she is quite diminutive in stature. I was later told that she reached up and grabbed the main offender by the ear and dragged him into the next room, where she gave him a stern lecture on how he should respect this house because the house was respectful of skin-heads. The result was that my wife and I were wakened at around 3 a.m. by knocking on our door. When we called out 'Come in,' a very large, sheepish skinhead poked his head in and apologized profusely for causing any disruption to our household. I will refer to the young woman who prompted this apology as Betty, the traditional punk as Alice, and the other young woman as Sue.

In this book, I hope to show that youth subculture is not alien or separate but is integrally involved in the most intimate constitution of the world young people and adults share together,[3] and in the possible worlds they might mutually produce if the space between them was collapsed and their differences turned to productive ends. Perhaps then we could find ways to hear what young people have to tell us. As Frank put it,

> Well, you know, there's nobody wants to hear what you have to say. Everybody has their stereotype for us and that's what they want. You know, and the media's been like real nice making good stereotypes for us,

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3 The terms 'youth' and 'youth subculture' will be used interchangeably to some degree throughout the book. As I hope will become clear, the distinction between 'mainstream youth' and 'subcultural youth' is one that hides more than it reveals.

you know. And you know, everybody really wants to keep their stereo-
type cause it's a lot easier to have a scapegoat than it is to have a friend.
You know, and, I mean, if people listen to us they'll understand that we're
more there for them than we are for anybody else.

A project such as this, which brings together my world as an aca-
demic with the world of young people, inevitably involves a process
of translation. I will endeavor to walk a line between two very dif-
ferent sets of descriptions: those that emerge through the interviews
with the youth identifying as punk or skinhead, and my own per-
sonal and academic reflections on those interviews. This book is thus
a kind of auto-ethnography in which I will take the information from
my involvement in the world of the skins and punks I have known
and combine it with what others have written from both inside and
outside that world. I will then reflect on that material in three ways:
first, as an academic reflection on youth and youth subculture to see
if it offers us any insight into our current historical moment; second,
as a theoretical self-reflection on the nature of subculture as a set of
youth-adult relations; and finally, as a self-reflection on the implica-
tions of these theories and insights for constituting a new set of
youth-adult relations that collapses the binary categories of youth
versus adult. I will define this new kind of youth-adult relations as
radical youth work.

In order to begin this process of collapsing the separation between
young people and adults in their mutual constitution of present and
future worlds, we need to begin with what it means to be an adult
and to be a young person, both as social categories and as pro-
foundly personal identities. To do that, I will argue that it is neces-
sary to think about youth and adults as both produced by the dom-
inant discourses in society and as capable of producing new
descriptions and possibilities for social forms and identities. In Part
One of the book, I will explore the possibility that youth subcultures
offer us an opportunity to rethink questions of identity, the use of
language, our definitions of the body, the use of time, and the use of
space. I will argue that these possibilities are directly related to, and
in some sense prefigure, significant elements of our current post-
modern moment that have implications for both youth and adults in
the world they share. In Part Two, I will investigate the implications
of Part One for youth-adult relationships for practices within the
field of youth work. In addition, I will propose a new model of

youth work that builds on both postmodern theory and on what I have learned from the punks and skins I interviewed. Finally, the question of how to educate youth workers within the world of the postmodern will be explored, and a new pedagogy of youth work will be suggested.

PART ONE

What of Youth and Subculture?

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1 The Question of Identity: To Perform Ourselves

To begin to think about the question of identity as both a social problem and a social possibility, we need to begin with that foundational aspect of Western society that underlies both identity and political relations between groups: the subject. In the traditional Western view there are two forms of the subject. The first of these, as outlined by Balibar (1994), is the *subjectus*. *Subjectus* is a term that 'refers to *subjection* or *submission*, i.e. the fact that a (generally) human person (man, woman or child) is *subjected to* the more or less absolute, more or less legitimate authority of a superior power, e.g., a "sovereign." This sovereign being may be another human or supra-human, or an "inner" sovereign or master, or even simply a transcendent (impersonal) *law*' (p. 8).

This is the subject with which we are all most familiar. The traditional relationship upon which many of our ideas about youth-adult relations are premised is that of the sovereign or king.[1] In this set of relations there is always someone who has the ultimate authority. In the Western nuclear family this is generally the parent. In the broader social context the parental authority over youth can be distributed to teachers, adult relatives, coaches, youth workers, religious leaders, police, or other functionaries of the state. Of course, parents and all adults are also subject as citizens to sovereign authority through their submission to a society of law. In this sense, a significant portion of our modern identities are formed and structured according to our relation to sovereign authority.

As Tarulli and Skott-Myhre (2006) have pointed out elsewhere, this subject is like the characters in the type of literature that is driven and

1 See Foucault (1976).

controlled by the author's voice. In such writing, the truths of the text are always subordinated to the author's ultimate authority over meaning. Like the characters in such texts, the subject as subjectus is defined in terms of its submission to an overarching authorial vision – its autonomy, creativity, and freedom are essentially closed off by the unitary, monologic voice of an omniscient other/self (Bakhtin, 1984).

The subjectus is a subject whose goal it is to be defined clearly and finally as a coherent set of descriptions and actions without any loose ends or unexplained aspects of character. Unfortunately, as a completed entity enclosed within itself, such a subject enjoys no existential surplus or 'breathing space' from which to undermine, challenge, or simply surprise the author-sovereign (Žižek, 1989).

To rethink the relationship between youth and adults as a field of possibility for worlds to come requires the ability to conceive of a different kind of subject, one that exceeds the traditional definitions of the psychological individual or the political citizen as subjectus. To rethink youth-adult relationships, we need to engage an alternative subject also found in Western thought, although given comparatively little attention: the *subjectum*.

The subjectum is not defined in relation to sovereign authority. Instead, it is defined through its ability to creatively produce itself. We are also all familiar with this subject as the creative personality found in artists, musicians, filmmakers, and children. Unfortunately, in Western society such creative self-production is considered something of a luxury granted to those individuals with extraordinary talent in particular artistic, entertainment, or athletic arenas.[2] The significant exception to this is children, who are allowed a certain latitude to creatively produce themselves, although always within the confines of adult sovereignty.

Subject to Capitalism

Ambivalence towards the creatively produced subject within capitalist society is explained by Marx (1978/1992, pp. 146–201) as the result of two developments within capitalism. The first of these is the need for capital to separate the subject from control over his own

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2 Although it should be noted that within the regimes of postmodern capitalism such creative latitude is increasingly short-lived and tied to commercial viability rather than simple talent.

creative process. This is necessary because in order to create the conditions in which profit (capital) can be accumulated, the capitalist must own the means of creativity and production. In other words, the creative production of each subject must come under the sovereign control of the capitalist class so it can be turned towards the business of making money.[3] This separation of the subject from the products of her own creativity produces what Marx terms alienation. The subjectus under the sovereign regime of capitalism is precisely such an alienated subject. Indeed, it could be argued that it is just such alienation that underlies the rift between youth and adults, with youth comprising that ambiguous category of social subjects that still maintains some freedom over their own creative production.

Clearly, however, this limited freedom is severely eroded under conditions of late-stage capitalism, wherein all creative production becomes available for sale.[4] This second development, or what Marx (1993) called the moment of total subsumption, is the moment at which all types of production become available for exploitation. In such a moment any alternative to capitalism seems impossible or unlikely. It seems as though capitalism is the only possible system and that all aspects of life operate under its logic. While a full explication of this phenomenon is beyond our scope here, suffice it to say that as capitalism has taken hold globally, it has also deployed the rapid development of technological networks that reach into all aspects of human life. This expansion of technological capital goes beyond the hours we spend working and begins to include the time that we spend outside the workplace. As Hardt and Negri (2004) point out, under such conditions all of our creativity is turned towards profit, including the affective and communication skills used in our relationships; that is, the very ways in which we produce ourselves. Under these conditions, the desire for the freedom to creatively produce ourselves without the constraints of capitalist production makes the exploration of the subjectum, or the subject that is free to creatively act, imperative for any project that proposes youth-adult relations as the ground for producing new worlds.

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3 See S. Thompson (2004) for a very nice explication of this problem in DIY punk.
4 See Quart (2003), Giroux (2000), and Negri (1996b).

The Subject That Is Not Subject to ...

Since the subjectum is premised in creativity itself, it is not limited by social category or defined by the narrow confines of the subjectus. Indeed, Hardt and Negri (2004) argue (following Spinoza) that the creative force of the subjectum is found outside any restriction placed upon it by the boundaries of the modern individual that demand a private social self separated from community. This is not to say, however, that such a subject is under the rule of the common community either. Indeed, the subjectum deploys both the radical difference found in each expressive capacity of the singular subject and the commonalities found between us in our connections and collisions within one another in the course of daily life.

In fact, I will argue here that the subjectum cannot be found in the singular subject alone as creative genius or child, or in the special circumstance of talent. Rather, the subjectum can only be found in the intersections where we come together to produce the world. Certainly one place where that occurs is in the sets of relations between the social categories called youth and those called adult. In this coming together we amplify the force of each creative singular subject. Such a subject is neither youth nor adult but is made up of the set of relations formed by the collision between both categories of social identity. Such relations are neither stable nor fixed but originate and extend themselves through a movement that is driven both by historical contingency and the contemporary shifts in the ways we now produce the postmodern world.

Subjects of Postmodernity

To speak of identity and subjectivity within the context of postmodernity is both complex and challenging. To do so, we must remember that the postmodern is a space between historical periods. It is neither the full ending of the modern period, with its grand and unifying narratives, nor whatever it is that will come next. It is in this sense a period of radical indeterminacy. To articulate the intersection of youth and adults as productive of new social worlds engages both these categories as definitionally in flux. Indeed, such flux provides more than adequate fuel for the many fields of inquiry, both modern and postmodern, that strive to make sense of adults and youth within the postmodern space.

In keeping with the theme of the subjectum, however, I propose to examine youth-adult relations as a question of creative force. Such force comprises the social categories of youth and adults in the sense of their production as a specific kind of social subjectivity. This is a peculiar kind of subjectivity that is never still. It exists ahead of our perception, like a horizon that recedes as we approach it. As soon as we think we know who we are, we can immediately see the possibility of who we might become. Both the person that we are in any given moment as well as the person we are becoming are products of all the interactions we have had with others. This also includes our own history of struggle, both personal and collective, in our sets of prescribed social roles such as worker, child, adult, youth, male, female, and so on. The question of particular interest here is: does the subjectum, as that subject which is in constant creative becoming, offer a position for rethinking youth-adult relations, one in which the social binary of youth-adult is collapsed into a relation that flees the social containment of both terms?

Put another way, I am proposing that youth and adults within the postmodern world cannot easily be reduced to fixed social categories or psychological constructs but must be seen, instead, as both historically laden and prophetic in their production of whatever it is that will come next. The question then becomes: how might we conceive of the relation between the terms 'adult' and 'youth'?

The Subject and Development

One of the main ways in which we tend to think of youth and adulthood is in terms of development. Certainly one of the defining characteristics of the two terms is premised on the idea that young people are developing into adults and that adults, in rather specific ways, are different from young people. This discourse that arises in modernist psychology produces a relationship of sovereignty and hierarchy between young people and adults that doesn't function particularly well within our definition of the subjectum. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) challenge the modern view when they propose that

> The ... child [does] not become; it is becoming itself that is a child ... The child does not become an adult any more than the girl becomes a woman; the girl is the becoming-woman of each sex, just as the child is the becoming-young of every age. Knowing how to age does not mean

remaining young; it means extracting from one's age the particles, the speeds and slownesses, the flows that constitute the youth of *that* age ... It is age itself that is a becoming-child. (p. 277)

Here, Deleuze and Guattari propose a model of child that is distinct from our more common conception of childhood as a space separate from the adult world, bounded by time and evolutionary development. Instead, they suggest a subject that never becomes adult nor remains young. Child, in their view, is taken out of developmental time or age and no longer refers to a subject that has a certain level of maturation. Indeed, child here refers to the creative expressions of life force, that is, the subjectum, that occur in different ways at different points in time for each subject. In this way we can say that child as a subjectivity never arrives but is constantly renewed as a unique expression of both location and time throughout the lifespan. Put another way, we might say that child as defined by Deleuze and Guattari is an event rather than a subject in the traditional sense.

This view of child exceeds the categories of childhood and threatens the bounded world of adulthood. It proposes that to be child goes beyond the current debates in child rights that argue that the child is a subject on its own without reference to adult status. It goes outside the ideologies of innocent childhood with its nostalgic yearnings for a lost Eden. It claims instead the status of child as a common attribute in all human subjectivity. In other words, child is not a period of time but instead a quality of creative force that is active in different ways at different times in the life of a subject. It is critical to those elements of the social realm that would dominate and appropriate the creative force of life, such as the modes of capitalism discussed above, that such a child be radically excluded from the world defined as adult. In this view, childhood as a space of absolute expressive desire must be produced as an outside or other to adulthood.

We might well say that in order to sustain the alienated subjectivity of late-stage capital, it is essential that child, youth, and adult must be maintained as radically separate subjects defined in time as moments that pass and cannot be regained. The world of the child, with its freedom of time and creativity, must appear radically separate and unobtainable to the 'mature' adult. Similarly, the world of the youth, with its relative creative freedom and capacity for 'resistance' and 'rebellion,' must be created as not only unavailable to the adult but unattractive and unhealthy as well. The adult's 'childish' desire to be fully and playfully creative must always be turned to the benefit of the