

The Creative Launcher

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Formation of Subcultures: Resistance to Hegemony of Dominant Class

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Abstract

Dominant class employs hegemonic power to control subordinate groups of society. Instead of using physical violence, they seek the consent of marginalized people. In a sharp contrast to common submission to hegemonic powers, subcultures encounter dominant ideology by producing their own style, music, attire and phrases. Subcultures address invisible power structures by forming alternative discourses and practices. Subcultures like Hip-hop and Rap emerge from the marginal space and gradually develop into a level where they even pose threat to main stream cultural gestures. Bricolage is a one of the powerful strategies which subcultures manipulate to appropriate the artifacts of the dominant class. At the same time, dominant ideology in turn attempts to contain subcultures.

Key Words- *Subculture, Hegemony, Dominant Class, Style.*

The concepts of both ideology and hegemony are based on the consent from the subjects. In his “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses”, Althusser elucidates his notion of ideology:

I shall then suggest that ideology ‘acts’ or ‘functions’ in such a way that it ‘recruits’ subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or ‘transforms’ the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called *interpellation* or hailing, and which can be

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imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: 'Hey, you there! (Althusser 147).

As shown in the case of ideology, hegemony also tries to get the consent of the subordinate groups but the unyielding subcultures like Punk and Hip-hop react to the dominating attempts. The hegemony tries to impart the feeling of normalcy by which the existing power structure exists. As counter entities, subcultures set patterns by themselves eschewing the hegemonic intentions. Still, the hegemony endeavors to contain and appropriate subcultural patterns to the existing system even at the cost of its own change. The white appropriation of the distinctive black cultural traditions like jazz, rap and blues are the typical example of this attempt. It can be termed as a type of cultural infiltration. Invisible ideology of the dominant culture is exposed by subcultures and the existing style and fashion and normality are deconstructed. Rap and Hip-hop are counter cultures emanated from margins which stand against mainstream culture. In order to project these subcultures, they have to register their own style and distinctiveness.

Patrick Williams in his article "The Multidimensionality of Resistance in Youth-Subcultural Studies passive" theorizes the three dimensions of subcultural resistance as passive – active; micro– macro; and overt – covert (20-29). Williams, in his discussion, makes it clear that these pairs are not binary pairs and these are not stable and fixed categories as they overlap and develop consequently in to other dimensions. As clear from his analysis, resistance through consumption is treated as passive mode of resistance as it is a resistance through appropriation. Subcultural rituals are also based on appropriation where the cultural forms of the dominant groups are reassembled with the subversive intentions. Active subcultural resistance takes place when it is done powerfully through direct methods. Whereas the micro resistance is a resistance of individual level with the subjective motives, the macro resistance is a collective level resistance. In between these two, there is a Meso level subcultural resistance. It is the subcultural resistance of small groups like school gangs, music concerts and peer group gatherings. Here Williams talks on Haenfler's study on

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straightedge youth who keep away from the usual addiction of the societal groups to drugs, tobacco, sexuality and alcohol. Macro subcultural resistance is rebellious against the power and inequality of the social institutions and on which Merton had made an intense analysis.

As it is clear from Williams, overt is a visible type of resistance from the part of the subcultural groups like undertaking public protest and campaign against the dominance and inequality. Tattooed bodies and unusual hairstyles are some of the overt signs of their resistant appearance. The resistance in the covert will be limited to the private spaces of the subcultural groups as seen, for example, in the club cultures and singing groups. Hardcore dancing and zine writings, limited to female bedrooms and chatting groups, are some of such covert subcultural field.

Subcultures disrupt the exploitive set up of the prevailing social system. From the marginal space, they improve into autonomous systems. It contributed new styles to market. The question of subculture's stability in resisting the dominant ideology is very important as there appears the tendency of individuals to glide back to the dominant culture putting aside the project of social transformation. There are plenty of instances where the disenchanted groups turn to apolitical spaces. By 1960s there was a global tendency of subcultures turning in to a resistant mode. Eschewing the status quo, build an alternative political trend. In 1990s Post Subcultural theory, avoiding the concepts of Birmingham Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), is influenced by Bourdieu and post-structuralism highlighted diversified sub-cultural styles and trends. Punk can be seen as a prototypical anti-capitalist subculture which emerged from the marginal space.

Myriad views prevail on the political edge of subcultures. Dealing with some subcultures it is argued that the subcultural groups just engage in their leisure activities which have no political overtones. There are discussions on subcultures that they are subversive but their practioners are not conscious of its political edge. And there are subcultures which are self consciously subversive and resistant to the dominant trends and ways. As an instance, Skateboarder subculture assert their freedom by doing it in the public spaces where it has

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been prohibited by government. So it symbolically and realistically questions the rules and norms of the dominant powers.

It was Claude Levi Strauss who has first introduced the concept of “social bricolage”. In *The Savage Mind*, he explains how a ‘bricoleur’ assembles different myth units and forms things of new patterns in order to sort out new solutions (12). Drawing on this notion of Levi Strauss, Hebdige expands his concept of subcultural style. He explains how mods and teddy boys function as bricoleurs appropriating the pre-existing objects and styles in to new cultural contexts effectuating new cultural significations (104). So the practices and styles of these subcultures are ridiculously subversive of the styles and practices of mainstream. Hebdige’s example of ‘Teddy boy’s theft’ of the Edwardian style and its appropriation can be produced as the typical example of style bricolage. In a sense they “defetishize” the existing style of the mainstream and “refetishize” it in a new subcultural context.

As the difference itself prone to shake the fabrics of the dominant structure, all subcultural styles are oppositional to the existing styles and trends of the mainstream culture. “Distinctions are never just assertions of equal difference: they usually entail some claim to authority and presume the inferiority of others” (Thornton 201). The performers of subcultures like that of Skateboarding focus on their appearance and style than function. They appear stylish in their shoes and such instruments. “MOST sports equipment is designed to be functional first, stylish second. For skateboarders, and their shoes, this pattern is often reversed” (Porter).

Club culture cannot be explained in terms of specific characteristics and trends as their member and styles keep changing. It is limited to the gangs of familiar individuals. Drawing on Bourdieu’s notion, Thornton calls club cultures as “taste culture”. As an opposition to the mainstream cultural trend, Thornton projects “hipness” as the hallmark of subcultures. As Thornton explains hipness is not a one specific style and in her phrase it is a “mysterious attitude” (Thornton 201) and that can be “objectified” through fashionable haircuts and such other stylistic distinctions.

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Pierre Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital, on the contrary to Marxian economic determinism, is a knowledge or experience based upon one's upbringing and social background. And there is no such a proportional relation between economic capital and cultural capital. Drawing on the theory of Bourdieu, Sarah Thornton coins her phrase "subcultural capital". Subcultures develop their own styles, fashions in dress, hair, slang, music and the like which will have its own subcultural capital within a particular group which assert their group identity and turn resistant to the mainstream cultural gestures. Thornton explains "hipness as a type of subcultural capital" (Bourdieu 202). "Subcultural capital is objectified in the form of fashionable haircuts and carefully assembled record collections" (202-3) and media wields a crucial role in the dissemination of subcultural capital.

Particular schemes of taste shape different classes and their consumptions. Usually the market space will be engaged by the products suited for gratifying the taste of the popular or dominant groups. This usual occupying and consumption of the dominant cultural goods hide other classes, their tastes and their goods in the market space. Bourdieu explains how taste works "Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinction they make, between the beautiful and the ugly." (Bourdieu 6). Here the subcultures enter in to the market space introducing their own taste and consumptions.

As Patrick Williams puts it: "The consumptive aspects of youth-subcultural resistance were first theorized by the CCCS. On street corners, in dance halls, on the open road, and at weekend holiday spots, working-class youths created social spaces and stylistic practices that *to CCCS researchers* represented resistance to dominant culture"(23). Consumption of one specific subcultural product is a metaphoric manifestation for that particular subculture in the market space, where the products of the dominant culture dominate. In this sense the new market space can be seen as a main location of the cultural competition. Subcultural member's consumption resists the products of the dominant market. As the style varies, the consumption of their objects also varies. Skateboarding products are highly marketed in

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Western countries. As the products enter into market, these subcultures ensure their market space and gradually their cultural space.

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