

4.5. Problematizing the idea of subculture: a collective theoretical and practical approach

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Abstract

This paper presents part of the work developed by the History and Theory of Culture Seminar Series during its first course with the idea of confirming that collaborative working dynamics are one of the best tools for researchers to create critical knowledge and approach different subjects. To do that, and after an introductory epigraph to the Seminar's activity, we will share some of the questions and thoughts raised after discussing *Resistance through Rituals* as an evidence of the benefits of this way of working.

Keywords: subculture, reading groups, cultural history, critical theory.

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to present part of the work developed by the History and Theory of Culture Seminar Series during its first course and confirm that collaborative working dynamics are one of the best tools for researchers to create critical knowledge and approach different subjects.

Therefore the paper is divided in two halves. The first one is dedicated to explain briefly the existence of this project, all the activities done during this first year and how does the Seminar work.

After this necessary contextualization we would like to share the results of the working session dedicated to subcultures. Our goal is not to demonstrate that we found a new revolutionary paradigm within subcultural theory, quite the opposite. We want to share the questions and thoughts raised after a two hours discussion held by a group of historians about *Resistance through Rituals* as an evidence of the benefits of collaborative reading and working for young scholars and if it was possible, to get some feedback from the rest of academic community in order to keep on working and improving this Seminar Series.

The "Practical Approach": introducing the History and Theory of Culture Seminar Series.

The History and Theory of Culture Seminar Series (*Seminario de Historia y Teoría de la Cultura*) in the Department of Contemporary History (Complutense University of Madrid) was born firstly as an answer to the lack of an horizontal and democratic space for scientific debate in the department -where there's hardly ever any kind of feedback among researchers- and where the master class is still the dominant way of understanding the transmission of knowledge. Secondly we tried to place contemporary popular culture where it should be in a Contemporary History department: highlighting popular culture is a way of breaking the hegemony of big discourses and big political and economic issues within contemporary history.

How can we do it?

The **Reading Group** was our first proposal: a very popular and consolidate method for producing knowledge in European and American Universities, there was no active reading group in the Department, nor a seminar on popular culture or cultural studies. So, we thought that it would be a good way for covering various aspects of research in the History and Theory of Culture: our main goal would be working together to achieve specified goals as well as discussing about readings.

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What kind of readings? Being our first experience working with this issues we thought that the readings should be mandatory readings: some classic texts of our field with some examples of the latest works would be enough to generate discussions about some of the most important issues in the field. The main goal of the reading group was to raise some questions of interpretation and methodology that will help us to think about what is and which is the role displayed by popular culture in the contemporary western societies. Our methodology is based on focusing more closely on the texts and above all on three mandatory things: 1) the main argument, 2) the form of the text and 3) the relations between form and argument.

All very easy to say, all very hard to do: the learning outcomes we would like to reach were:

- To assess the strengths and weaknesses of scholarly interpretations in relevant academic literature
- To learn to use theoretical tools in a critical way
- To learn from each other –helping each other too- in order to generate collective knowledge

In many ways, the reading group depended crucially on the active and collective participation of the people and we are pleased to say that, during this year, the participants have been more than active. Based on a 2 hours session per month, the dynamics of the reading group consisted on a brief introduction to both the texts (one compulsory and one complementary) and their authors followed by an open debate in which each of the attendant students expressed their thoughts about the ideas discussed. Sharing different opinions influenced by different theoretical backgrounds has produced very interesting results: according to these different backgrounds every student has developed a common approach to each of the subjects highlighting one point, focusing on another and finding different theoretical or practical weaknesses. From all these views we have tried to reach in each session a series of common conclusions proving that this democratic and horizontal way of working generates valid and rewarding knowledge.

A complete list of this last course's reading is included here in order to show the Seminar's orientation:

FIRST QUARTER READINGS

1st session - Tuesday 14 October 2014

Compulsory reading:

Williams, R. (2008). La cultura como algo ordinario. In A. García Ruiz (ed.), *Raymond Williams. Historia y cultura común*. (pp. 37-62). Madrid: La Catarata.

Complementary reading:

Adorno, T. and Horkheimer, M. (1998). La industria cultural. Ilustración como engaño de masas. In T. Adorno and M. Horkheimer, *Dialéctica de la ilustración. Fragmentos filosóficos*. (pp. 165-212). Madrid: Editorial Trotta.

2nd session – Tuesday 11 November 2014

Compulsory reading:

Chartier R. (1994). Cultura popular, retorno a un concepto historiográfico. *Manuscrits: Revista d'història moderna*, 12, 43-62.

Complementary reading:

Ginzburg, C. (2001). Prefacio. In C. Ginzburg, *El queso y los gusanos. El cosmos según un molinero del siglo XVI*. (pp. 9-28). Barcelona: Ediciones Península.

3rd session – Tuesday 9 December 2014

Compulsory reading:

Clarke, J., Hall, S., Jefferson, T. and Roberts, B. (2014). Subculturas, culturas y clase. In S. Hall and T. Jefferson (eds.), *Rituales de resistencia. Subculturas juveniles en la Gran Bretaña de posguerra*. (pp. 61-142). Madrid: Traficantes de Sueños.

Complementary reading:

Clarke, J. (2014). Estilo. In S. Hall and T. Jefferson (eds.), *Rituales de resistencia. Subculturas juveniles en la Gran Bretaña de posguerra*. (pp. 271-291). Madrid: Traficantes de Sueños.

4th session – Tuesday 13 January 2015

Compulsory reading:

Jenkins, H. (2008). Photoshop para la democracia: la nueva relación entre política y cultura popular. In H. Jenkins, *Convergence culture. La cultura de la convergencia de los medios de comunicación*. (pp. 209-238). Barcelona: Paidós.

Complementary reading:

Dorfman, A. and Mattelart, A. (2012). La máquina de las ideas. In A. Dorfman and A. Mattelart, *Para leer al pato Donald. Comunicación de masas y colonialismo*. (pp. 115-137). Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI.

The readings were sent by email 15 days before each session. During the first quarter we (Fernando and José Emilio, both authors of this papers and the Seminar's coordinators) were leading the sessions, doing the introduction for the readings and asking some questions in order to focus the discussion to the main issues. Most of the times the discussions were vivid and produced a fruitful debate among the participants. All these sessions were recorded and sent by email to each one of the participants in order to have the chance of rethink about the main points of the sessions. Although the sessions were running well during the second quarter we decided to ask for people to lead them: some students were volunteers (Pablo Sánchez López, Patricia Gil Salgado y Federico Peñate Domínguez) and decided to add some new text proposals, that is why most of the second quarter reading list was made by them:

SECOND QUARTER READINGS

5th session - Monday 09 February 2015

Compulsory reading:

Goffman, E. (1991). La ritualización de la feminidad (1976). In E. Goffman, *Los momentos y sus hombres*. (pp. 135-169). Barcelona: Paidós.

Complementary reading:

Hall, S. (2009). The spectacle of the other. In S. Hall (ed.), *Representations. Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. (pp.223-279). London: Sage and The Open University.

6th session – Tuesday 10 March 2015

Compulsory readings:

Rincón, A. (2014). Introducción: Cine, Género y Poder. In A. Rincón, *Representaciones de género en el cine español (1939-1982). Figuras y Fisuras*. (pp.15-27), Madrid: Centro de Estudios Políticos y Constitucionales.

Rincón, A. (2014). Conclusión. In A. Rincón, *Representaciones de género en el cine español (1939-1982). Figuras y Fisuras*. (pp. 337-349). Madrid: Centro de Estudios Políticos y Constitucionales.

Complementary reading:

Abril Curto, G. (2010). Cultura visual y espacio público-político. *Cuadernos de Información y Comunicación*, vol. 15, 21-36.

7th session – Tuesday 14 April 2015

Compulsory reading:

Morley, D. (1998). Populismo, revisionismo y los "nuevos" estudios de audiencia. In Curran, J., Morley, D. and Walkerdine, V. (eds.), *Estudios culturales y comunicación. Análisis, producción y consumo cultural de las políticas de identidad y el posmodernismo*. (pp. 417-437). Barcelona: Paidós.

Complementary readings:

Curran, J. (1998). El nuevo revisionismo en los estudios de comunicación: una reevaluación. In Curran, J., Morley, D. and Walkerdine, V. (eds.), *Estudios culturales y comunicación. Análisis, producción y consumo cultural de las políticas de identidad y el posmodernismo*. (pp. 383-415). Barcelona: Paidós.

Curran, J. (1998). Debate mediático: una réplica. In Curran, J., Morley, D. and Walkerdine, V. (eds.), *Estudios culturales y comunicación. Análisis, producción y consumo cultural de las políticas de identidad y el posmodernismo*. (pp. 439-454). Barcelona: Paidós.

8th session – Tuesday 12 May 2015

Compulsory reading:

Crabtree, G. (2013). Modding as digital reenactment: A case study of the battlefield series. In A. B.R. Elliot & M.W. Kapell (eds.), *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History*. (pp. 199-212). London: Bloomsbury.

Complementary reading:

Juul, J. (2005). Video games and the classic game model. In J. Juul, *Half-real: video games between rules and fictional worlds*. (pp. 24-54). Cambridge (Massachusetts): MIT Press.

The closing session entitled: *Historia y Teoría de la cultura, un taller de lecturas: los resultados provisionales de un proyecto en desarrollo* (8 June 2015) was led by us (the coordinators) and it was a discussion about the future of the reading group: the students gave us their impressions about the whole course sharing with us some

critics and comments in order to improve the results of our project. All of them were pretty interesting and we would like to summarize some of them:

- To write overviews with the conclusions of each session.
- Each mandatory text should be in the opposite approach from the other one in order to compare them from a critical point of view.
- To focus the whole course on a specific issue, wide enough to be analyzed in different sessions.
- To have the chance to do research on specific issues arose during the course
- To do extraordinary sessions as a working group, supervising collectively each research.

The parallel activities. During these months we did some parallel activities in-and-out of the Academia; here you got some of them:

- Book Launch: *Rituales de Resistencia*, published by Traficantes de Sueños (translation of the seminal book from the CCCS: *Resistance through Rituals*). 16 December 2014 at 11:30am. We organized this event in the Department of Contemporary History (UCM) in the room 21 (10th floor) with the support of the Director of the Department and the staff of Traficantes de Sueños: two people from the Publishing house came to the University to do a talk about the book but there were not enough audience –most of the students were doing exams on those days- so, under those circumstances, we decided to cancel the event with the deal of organizing another event next year. While events can fail for many reasons, we contend that the main reason was a problem with the schedule: we did not realize that during those days it was the examination period so most of the students could not attend the event. It was our first activity, the first time that we organized a book launch with a publishing house but we failed. Indeed, it was a deception but, as Samuel Beckett said, we decided to try again even if we will fail again, we will fail better.
- Book Launch and Symposium at Traficantes de Sueños Bookstore (Madrid): We decided to attend the Symposium *Culturas juveniles* hoy organized by Traficantes de Sueños (22 January 2015 from 4:00pm to 9:00pm) with brilliant speakers as **Carles Feixa** (Department of Geography and Sociology, University of Lleida, JOVIS, European Youth Studies, International Sociological Association, KISMIF Project, Spain) **Amparo Lasén** (Department of Sociology, Complutense University of Madrid) **Joana Bonet** (Journalist) **Jorge Benedicto** (Department of Sociology, UNED) and **Beatriz García** (Traficantes de Sueños Staff). This successful event consisted on a mind-blowing discussion on theoretical positions to address the context of youth culture in late modernity articulating the subcultural approach as a tool for youth culture analysis. Then Carles presented the translation of the seminal classic book from the CCCS: *Resistance through Rituals* published by Traficantes de Sueños and the rest of the speakers presented his last book, *De la Generación@ a la #Generacion* (Feixa, 2014).
- “Mapas de Acción” by Yolanda Domínguez. We decided to attend the exposition organized by Yolanda Domínguez -(Madrid, 1977) visual artist, she studied Fine Arts in Madrid’s Complutense University and gained an MA in Art and New Technologies at the European University of Madrid and in Contemporary Photography in Madrid’s EFTI School -. She gave us some clues to understand her work as a tool for awakening social consciousness and empower people through performative and relational actions. Actions like “Poses” (a comment on female representation within the fashion industry) or “Accessible and Accessory” (a critic on the use of women’s bodies as an advertising gadget). It took place on Serendipia Space (12 February 2015 at 7.30pm)

Most of the activities were closely related with the topics discussed in the reading group and we should say that we achieved our goals. Furthermore, we were very pleased to announce to our students that we were selected to do a talk in the International Conference “Keep It Simple, Make It Fast (KISMIF), Crossing Borders of Underground Music Scenes” (Porto, 15-17 July 2015). We thought that it would be the best place for introducing the History and Theory of Culture Seminar Series as well as some of the conclusions developed in our sessions, specially the one dedicated to discussing the idea of youth subculture. Now, after having a great time at the conference –as well as a really positive feedback-, we have no doubt it was a good idea.

Next year wishes (2015/2016)

As a conclusion for the first part of the paper, we would like to add some proposals for the next course. Please feel free to contact us if you have any further questions or concerns:

- Internationalization: We argue that creating successful social networks is the best way for achieving our goals. Moreover it is a good way for keeping up to date in changing field like this; that is why we are pleased to announce that for the next year we are going to work with a Young researcher from the University of Guadalajara (México) whose main area of research is the representation of the past in the mass media, focused on the television field.
- Reading Group: It will continue being the main activity of the History & Theory of Culture Seminar Series, but for the next year we will try to focus the whole course on a specific issue, wide enough to be analyzed in different sessions: in our last session we decided to propose the issue of the *Mass Media and Power Relations*, something that will give us the chance for working with different media (press, radio, television, photograph) and the power relations involved on them (gender, class, ethnicity).
- Working Group Sessions: as an optional parallel activity, we proposed the organization of a working group for doing research on these areas. Our main goal would be to work together over these issues in a democratic and horizontal atmosphere that help us to put into practice this way of working that generates valid and rewarding knowledge.
- Parallel Activities: We would like to continue doing parallel activities in-and-out of the Academia. We argue that it would be interesting to organize two events during the course (one in the first quarter and one in the second quarter). One of them would be a one day symposium where young researchers will present their works in progress and get feedback from an open debate between them and the audience. Possible topics for this symposium are: *Gender, Herstory and Cultural Products* and *Films and (as) popular culture and their relation with our past*. The second activity would be an encounter between scholars and people from different professional areas related with medias that usually represent the past (i.e. film producers, publishers, radio personalities, actors, scriptwriters). Working with these two world's point of view we will be able to include the non-academically-indoctrinated perspectives and their questions into the academia debate and generate a discussion about how media deal with the past and the consequences of these (non-innocent) representations. We know that planning these events would not be easy but we bet it will be of worth: Secret to success is '*Renew Or Die*'.

The “theoretical approach”: what happens when a group of cultural historians think about the idea of subculture?

In the first part of this paper we have seen the origins and the working dynamics of the Seminar Series. Now, in this second half, we would like to present part of it results. Thus we are going to focus on the 3rd session (9 December 2014), the one dedicated to youth subcultures, and share with you the questions and ideas produced by the open collective debate.

However before exposing those questions and theoretical issues, we should explain the reasons why we decided to work with the idea of subculture in the *Seminario de Historia y Teoría de la Cultura*. There are three main reasons behind this decision.

The first one is the importance of subculture(s) as one of the most spectacular products within popular culture. Subcultures are, in our humble opinion, one of the most interesting popular phenomena since the post-war years, when they appeared. Therefore it made sense that after two sessions in which we worked with general notions of culture (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1998; Williams, 2008) and popular culture (Chartier, 1994; Ginzburg, 2001), the third one focused on a concrete aspect of popular culture, and that was, as said before, subcultures. The way anthropology, sociology and semiotics are involved in the study of subcultures was also very appealing, as well as the fact that they are a clear example of how culture and ideology are sites of (magical) resistance and struggle against the dominant and hegemonic discourses, giving subaltern groups – working class youngsters – the chance of contesting the power dynamics in contemporary societies.

Our second reason was introducing the students attending to the Seminar Series to Cultural Studies. This discipline remains unknown for almost all the historians, as it is not normally taught during the History degree. As one of our main goals and ideals is to promote interdisciplinary frameworks we consider that Cultural Studies are a very useful tool for historians attending to their features: they, somehow, embody interdisciplinarity, they have focused on popular culture since their inception and they have always presented a high level of critical and political commitment – at least the first generation. Thus it seemed a good way of filling in some theoretical blanks in our background.

Finally, the third reason why we decided to work with subcultures in one of our sessions is closely related with the appearance of the Spanish translation of *Resistance Through Rituals*. Traficantes de Sueños (a publishing house from Madrid with a high level of political commitment) published in 2014 *Rituales de Resistencia* (Hall & Jefferson, 2014), the first time the book was easily available and translated in our country (although with a weak title translation, from our humble point of view).

This seemed to be both a reason for celebration and a good chance to widen our theoretical perspectives. Our commitment was such that we even organized a (failed) book launch event in our department and weeks after the session we attended as a group to a symposium on youth cultures in order to get a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. Carles Feixa, maybe the biggest Spanish specialist on subcultures, was the main speaker in that symposium and his talk was really exciting and enriching for us.

So, once we have seen what took us to include subcultures as discussion topic, it is time to see how we organised the session itself.

Preparing the session

According to the reading group's working dynamics we had to choose two texts, which would be the basis of our debate. Considering the wide range of topics covered by *Resistance Through Rituals* (*Rituales de Resistencia*) we decided that a chapter of theoretical content should be the compulsory reading, as it will provide a wide context to understand subcultures. "Subculturas, culturas y clase" (Clarke, Hall, Jefferson & Roberts, 2014) was the best option as it gave us the general theoretical lines to approach the concept of subculture from the CCCS' point of view. Thus the complementary reading should focus on a concrete aspect of subcultural theory. Clarke's chapter on subcultural style (Clarke, 2014) suited this requirement as it deals with one of the most interesting and spectacular subcultural features. Its anthropological influences and the way it explains how these subcultural styles are at some point adopted by the dominant culture and turned into means of consumption, losing their counterhegemonic values and becoming mere fashions, were appealing enough to convince ourselves about the decision.

So, we had the texts to discuss. However we were aware that selecting only two chapters from such an important book was a way of narrowing our point of view as we were not dealing with some other aspects of subcultures as important as style. That was a risk we had to assume. Only a partial approach to the subject was possible considering the format and we think it worked pretty well, attending to the conclusions we reached.

But before presenting the results of our work we have to bear in mind that what we are going to expose is the result of an open collective debate between historians. A group of historians with different scientific interests (our research areas include: social movements such as free radios or the pro-bicycle collectives, Spanish cinema and nationalism during the 1920's, the relationship between historic narratives and videogames, female representations in Spanish photography in the 20th century, prisoner camps in Madrid during the Civil War, scientific publications during the francoist dictatorship or women and public radio from 1960 to 1975) that were dealing with subcultures almost for the first time (only one of the seminar's coordinators had read the book before). We know that we are not going to change the way subcultures are understood, that is not our goal. What we pretend is to show the outputs of this almost DIY intellectual project (no funding, almost counterhegemonic in our institution), confirm that horizontal/participatory dynamics are an inspiring and productive way of working and, why not, get some feedback from the subcultural academic community in order to keep on working and getting a deeper understanding of this phenomenon.

The session: thinking, debating and wondering about the idea of subculture

After introducing briefly both texts and some of the authors, specially Stuart Hall, and giving some notes on the history of Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, we opened our debate and immediately some interesting questions were made and some of them are going to be exposed here.

The general opinion was that, somehow, the idea of subculture appears, according to our understanding of CCCS' statements, as something fixed, almost monolithic. This made us question the limits and boundaries of subcultures.

The centrality of social classes in the CCCS' analysis was the first issue we dealt with. Without denying the existence of classes and their importance, we wondered about subcultures' permeability and their boundaries. Is it possible to break with the classic dichotomy: working class-subcultures/middle class-countercultures? Could subcultures become inter-class phenomena? Could not leisure oriented activities, such as northern soul all-nighters, become a meeting point for youngsters from different social origins? Would social mobility affect somehow this apparently strict division?

Following with class issues it took us a big effort to understand clearly the relations existing between subcultures, parent culture and dominant culture and once with did it a new question appeared. If working class culture can generate subcultures and middle class culture can be the origin of countercultures, could the dominant culture generate its own version of subcultures? If it could, would they be more than mere fashion and consumerism?

Other point that attracted our attention was that some British subcultures (mods, skinheads, etc.) from post-war years are present worldwide nowadays. It seemed clear that this expansion happened once these cults had been commodified by the hegemonic culture, losing their "critical" features. Once this happens, can we talk exporting and importing subcultures? Or should we analyse it in terms of translating this subcultures into new national contexts? We considered that the second approach was the best as both time and space are crucial contextual defining elements of subcultures which raised one new question: would it be possible that subcultures lose their class features through this translation? Some examples, like the appearance of mods in Spain during the early 1980s, were briefly commented and we confirmed that this had actually happened as many of Spanish mods during those days were middle class kids that became modernists for fashion related reasons not as a way of contesting an unfruitful life.

Style issues also appeared during the session as it is one of the most interesting and astonishing subcultural features. After talking about the idea of *bricolage* and how style is constructed and developed some comments on the possible role of advertising in this process were made. Is mainstream advertising somehow involved in the development of different styles? Do subcultures own their own advertising methods and channels? How are styles spread within the limits of subcultures?

This took us to think about the different levels of belonging existing in subcultural world. Is being a member of a subculture a full time occupation? Is it possible to have different degrees of commitment with a subculture? Do these different degrees affect features such as style? Which place do subcultures have in identity generation processes? Are they dominant identities? Do they prevail over other identities such as the one provided by the job, local area or even religion?

Being historians time is an important variable for us and obviously we wondered if the analysis contained in *Rituales de Resistencia*, closely related to a specific historical context, can be still useful today. Even more, is the idea of subculture itself valid in today's context? We did not reach a consensus at this point, but it seemed clear that some important updates are needed – during the KISMIF conference we discovered the whole post-subcultures theory and we realised that there were a lot of reading waiting for regarding these issues.

To conclude with this epigraph we would like to include one last question that was raised during the seminar session: are subcultures really such a threatening phenomenon to dominant culture that they have to be incorporated and turned into commodities? Should not their lack of clear political agenda and thus their inability to produce real social changes be a reason to observe them as simply anecdotes or curiosities?

We thought it was a good idea to follow the CCCS' ideas regarding this and firmly believe that, although magically, subcultures are or were a significant site of resistance.

Conclusions

As we said we were not pretending to stir up subcultural studies. Our main goal was sharing with you this collective experience and proving that horizontal collaborative work dynamics constitute a satisfactory and worthwhile means of generating knowledge and criticism.

Different researchers, different readers, different interests and different theoretical backgrounds all combined provide a more complete approach to any subject, even more if they work with it for the first time.

Considering this our faith on the History and Theory of Culture Seminar Series grows everyday as its effectiveness has been demonstrated here.

Finally we would like to ask all the specialists on subcultures and scholars coordinating similar projects out there for feedback and recommendations. Recommended readings, new working dynamics and any piece of advice is welcome as the Seminar Series is an alive and work in progress experience.

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