

## **Subculture, or the Sickness unto Death<sup>1</sup>**

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*Per Otnes*

### **Summary:**

Kierkegaard's *Sickness unto death* deals with *despair* of various types, basically that of wanting or not wanting to be oneself. This paper suggests that subcultures (hereafter SC), and subcultural studies, may be seen as cases in point, i.e. definitely marked by traces of similar despairs.

Changing concepts of culture generally are reviewed, from Tylor to 'culture has to go' Ingold, the conclusions being that culture spells conflict and that a metonymic turn is in order. As for SCs, a major change in usage is dated to c. 1970. Earlier, SCs were conceived as local, not age-specific and relatively closed groups. After, they're dispersed, highly age-specific, i.e. juvenile, and wide open, notably for media attention. Simultaneously, a change of method took place, from functionalism to the 'interpretation of meaning'.

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Susanna M. Solli for her thorough comments on an earlier version.

Based mainly on Hebdige's and Gottdiener's analysis of the punk SC we endeavour to demonstrate that today, a 'real' SC is indistinguishable from the media image thereof (and *vice versa*), hence contingent rather than creative, acted on rather than acting, or 'done not doing'. Or in the terms of Willis/Hurd, 'all style and taste cultures express something of a general trend to find and make identity outside of work'.

So less variant, less distinct or deviant movements are suggested for future studies, tentatively called juxta- or intra-cultures, applying interpretative or dialectic approaches. The symbolic creativity, 'latent resistance' or subdued grievance in such circles cannot be taken *a priori* to be less vital, less factual, than the hypervisible juvenile effervescent SCs which have dominated public and professional attention during two decades.

## **Introduction**

What follows will examine subculture as a concept, if it is indeed a concept, its origins, growth, and possible decline; and to what extent it may be related to Kierkegaard's (1849/1929) concept of despair, 'a disease of the self'.

Why Kierkegaard? His *The sickness unto death* is a fascinating theory; even if not, perhaps, entirely tenable it is exceptionally perceptive on self-deception. In brief outline:

The self is a relationship which relates to itself, or the relationship in so far as the relationship relates to itself... In the relationship between two the relationship is the third, as a negative unit ... If conversely the relationship

relates to itself, then that latter relationship is the positive third, that is to say, the self... Despair is a sickness of the spirit, in the self, by implication a triple: desperately not being aware of having a self (inessential despair); (a self) desperately not willing to be itself; (a self) desperately willing to be itself. (1849/1929:143)

Quite a mouthful. A more palatable version: An I, a Self relates to lots of different things — relations of use, talk, reflection, etc., gathering experience, forming opinions of the world, its things and tools, of other selves etc. Among these different entities the I itself also figures more or less prominently; laying plans for itself, praising or criticising itself, forming more or less stable ideas of what it can or cannot manage etc. The I, in many brief and passing ways, relates to its own activities or passivities, which tend over time to approach settled forms — thus becoming 'the positive third' of the quote, a relationship of its own, more or less fixed, by and through innumerable single instances of relating<sup>2</sup>.

So far for the self. Despair<sup>3</sup> may arise in it as forever new instances of relating occur, in accord or not with its fixed form up to now. Kierkegaard speaks first of not being willing to be one's self, as 'the despair of *weakness*'. Take for example Hjalmar Ekdal of Ibsen's *The wild duck*, a photographer and a father who is not really trying very hard to be either, and further, not relating to that fact, except theatrically and ephemerally when disaster strikes<sup>4</sup>. Next, the 'despair of *defiance*' (or baulkiness, Da. *Trods* is not easily translated), or desperately willing to be one's self, that is fashioning a self for oneself

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<sup>2</sup> As an analogy, think of semiology's concepts signifier and signified, with signification emerging as a third, a more durable relation between the two.

<sup>3</sup> From Lat. *de-spero*, lose (all) hope, inexact as a translation of Da. *fortvivle*, Germ. *verzweifeln*, literally 'excess of doubt or division' (*tivl* is related to Gk. *diplos*, divided, twofold), in present use approx. 'being beside oneself with distress, not knowing what to do', so somewhere between despair and resignation, indecision. *Depression* is a later psychological euphemism, narrower and more passive than the active despair, *fortvivle*.

<sup>4</sup> Hence approaching a case of despair bordering on the 'inessential' - not being aware of having a self, with real despair surfacing only rarely. - The choice of instances here and below is not random; it is well known that Ibsen was inspired by Kierkegaard .

- fitting, attainable or not. Sticking with Ibsen, perhaps Eilert Løvborg of *Hedda Gabler*, he who writes on 'the course of future's culture'. Or Solness of *The Master Builder*, who dares at last to mount the apex of his structure. And of course, *Brand*. All fail to be sure, but only after having made great efforts, their despair plainly visible.

For a lesser, or a different literary example, take Presley's *Hound dog*, who's 'never gonna rebel and ain't no friend of mine', for the first type. For the second, those 'rebels' or 'rockers' themselves who desperately want to succeed for themselves against the current, both before and after their movement's surge.

### **The hypotheses: Subculture<sup>5</sup> as despair**

Which anticipates the link to present-day SCs: we hypothesise that two types of SC adherents can be distinguished, corresponding roughly to Kierkegaard's latter two types: (1) weakness, or those who don't really want to ever go entirely SCal but are content by toying or playing with it, keeping an amount of 'role distance'; and (2) defiance, or those who want to go all the way but remain dimly aware that their aim isn't really well attainable, except perhaps for the rare few who consequently live the life of 'endangered species', such as the Jimi Hendrixes, Janice Joplins, Jim Morrisons, Kurt Cobains etc. - or the Baudelaires, Mozarts, van Goghs, Charlie Parkers, Jack Kerouacs, certainly not forgetting Søren Kierkegaard himself, this text being his last extensive work six years before his premature death at 43.

The first type - weakness - would seem to harbour a double, if less acute, despair: That of not wanting to remain an ordinary lower-class youth, and simultaneously wanting to approach but not to be totally engulfed by, a set of SCal ways or symbols, well expressed by Phil Cohen (1972, here quoted from Hebdige 1979:77)

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<sup>5</sup> Review of definitions below.

... a compromise solution between two contradictory needs: the need to create and express autonomy and difference from parents ... and the need to maintain their parental identifications ... (to) express and resolve, albeit magically, the contradictions which remain hidden or unresolved in the parent culture.

The second or defiant type is more clear-cut. The all-out SC member is also desperately wanting to be what s/he is (yet) *not*, not to be what s/he is (now). But at the outset or apex of the movement it is more likely to be all defiant, a ostentative contrast, going for a maximum or to the brink. Come time, this may change into weariness, despondency or resignation; or into nostalgia, 'those were the days', 'Frankie's wild years', *auch ich in Arkadien* etc. – cf. Baudrillard 1997 on the role of pastiche in art.

Suggesting that SC may involve this 'sickness' — or despair, duplicity, self-deception, as a lasting or passing phase — does not at all imply its being 'less real' or less worthy of attention. It is, not unlike infatuation, probably more intense than 'ordinary life', especially the second or defiant type; a high-strung phase - perhaps enviable - of hyper-life, more real than the commonplace real, some would hold. More about the role of enthusiasm or fascination inside and out of SCs later.

### **'Social despair' - and its limits**

Now for Kierkegaard's less tenable views: The implication, not explicit but also not explicitly ruled out, that any self is despair and nothing but despair in one of the three forms mentioned, should be avoided. The idea, if that was Kierkegaard's or is anybody else's, that 'the sickness unto death' is a dominant state, is not tenable. Life is not all weakness or defiance, it is resolution and perseverance as well. Cf.

the 'Parson's sermon' of Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* - the farmer who did his job, all of it, dodging enlistment and other sidetracking efforts<sup>6</sup>. That is, a self, or a self-other-relation, at ease with itself – a case of routinely won objectivation (*eu-pragia*<sup>7</sup>), as it was. However, selves such as that are no problem – and admittedly perhaps not very frequently found. Who doesn't ask oneself 'Is this really me?', 'Can't win 'em all, can you?', or 'Am I not overdoing it?' every so often? So the focus remains on selves in despair – in, dare we say, sub-pathologic states or aspects, prominent if not dominant; more come-and-go than either-or, perhaps.

Further, Kierkegaard of course knew nothing about a social psychology such as George Herbert Mead's (1934), the much later idea<sup>8</sup> of a self being formed, not through self-reflection but through 'the play, the game and the generalised other'. Today's self is not by far a 'self-made self', it's more of a latecomer, confined to doing the best of the remnants left by a number of 'significant (and less significant) others'. We, our Selves, however cherished or rejected, are not alone in the world; we are made and shaped by others, whom we continue to rub against, pat affectionately, pay limited attention etc. The influence of others may work both as an excuse for not trying to change ourselves even when we can, but it may certainly form real opposition, obstacles, enemy forces as well. So the despair of SCs may be less a 'disease of the self' and more a 'disease of the self-other relation', more about which later when we discuss the non-autonomy of SCs.

Elsewhere (Otnes 1997a: 7,11), I have outlined, 'the converse Kierkegaard', a worse and more basic form of despair, 'a disease of your Other': (a) not believing that you have an Other, or (b) believing that you have one but suspecting that your self has been entirely

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<sup>6</sup> From Kierkegaard's *Either-Or* certainly the character B, the devoted husband, and perhaps even A, the seducer, are integral, balanced, reflective characters, not (often) desperate.

<sup>7</sup> Greek for good, successful work or practice.

<sup>8</sup> Not necessarily later; this may relate to K.'s wholesale rejection of Hegelianism, including the 'master vs. slave dialectics', certainly among Mead's inspirations.

engulfed by him/her, or (c) suspecting that *you* have engulfed him/her, i.e. taken over all control of that other. Simplified, (a) 'nothing new under the sun'; (b) the unease of the total follower, or 'Am I not being lived, not living?'; and (c) 'do I have to take all the decisions here?' respectively. In their inessential forms, traditional, existential despair implies 'being nobody in a world of bodies', while social despair implies being somebody without anybody else, as if alone in an empty world. 'Vanity of vanities; all is vanity' (Eccl. 1:2). The essential versions involve acknowledging your Other/your Self, but then, overstating or shying away from your insight.

All of which are traceable, in more or less direct forms, within or around SCs, as we shall see.

A complicating factor of recent origins is 'the Generalised *Observer*' - the Media: Today we don't know who we are until we see it on TV/other media. *Videor ergo sum*<sup>9</sup> - in the Warhol age of '15 min.'s world fame for all' who or what is not being seen does not exist.

So far for our hypotheses; now for their substantiation, working through the words, the concepts and their histories.

## **Culture, the general concept**

As is well known, definitions of culture generally abound (cf. Kuper 1997). A recent local definition by anthropologist Unni Vikan (1995:17) may do as well as any:

Today we can agree that culture refers to the sum of learned (as opposed to biological) knowledge and

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<sup>9</sup> 'I'm being seen therefore I am'.

experience in a group<sup>10</sup>. Earlier, we held that these values had to be unanimous and that they were transmitted from one generation to the next, which has proved to be untenable.

Schütz (1937/1964:93) is worth quoting on the failing coherence of a dominant culture, from the point of view of a sociologist 'stranger' or immigrant/refugee:

...the knowledge of the man who acts and thinks within the world of his daily life is not homogeneous; it is (1) incoherent, (2) only partially clear and (3) not at all free from contradictions.

So, adhering to a dominant culture does not, perhaps, involve so much being in total conformity as being in a tacit, as if automatic, agreement to avoid situations and questions which would expose the muddles or contradictions of dominance – the *doxa*, or discourse taken as if self-evident (Bourdieu 1977:164ff).

Østerberg's (1997:11) definition is particularly elegant. After defining sociology as 'the science of social conflict and integration', and cultural sociology as the branch which '... deals with culture in the wide and narrower sense, in the light of social conflict and integration', he goes on:

The concept of culture in the wide sense comprises all *giving form* to our existence; custom and etiquette, rituals and institutions of all types... Culture in the narrower sense comprises activities and arrangements which mirror, express and appraise culture in the wide sense.

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<sup>10</sup> This innocent-looking addition, "in a group", is in fact essential. Culture is a relational concept, meaningless if the specification *in which group?* is lacking.



The unease of innumerable writers trying to conceptually unite 'high' and 'low', elite or mass culture, resolved in three simple words - mirror, express, appraise!

Some pages later Østerberg introduces hegemony<sup>11</sup>:

The modern culture is a hegemonic world culture, admitting non-modern traits from early on - Chinese interiors, Persian carpets, Turkish janissary music... All of this does not threaten modernity's hegemony; it is rather an aspect of modernity as a dialectical concept: modern culture will acquaint itself with everything (1997:32–3).

So, no more than 'old' foreign interior items do 'recent' salsa, neo-punk, 'camp' interiors, or Mongolian overtone chant in themselves threaten the general, hegemonic culture of modernity, nor do they of necessity constitute SCs; they testify rather to the great resilience of modernity.

The present author's preference, however, is for a less elegant formula, culture as

a set of artefacts typically used and customs typically observed among a set of persons.

Most standard general definitions, remember, were formed in opposition to the materialism of the preceding researcher generation; not so much that of the Marxian type - in existence but rare - but of the ethnographic type, *Musée de l'Homme*-type artefact collections, the 'museum science'. Present anthropologists, re-assuming on occasion the ethnographer label, are starting to transcend that, a typical title being Daniel Miller's '*Things ain't what they used to be*' (1983). Pure, as if immaterial, knowledge

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<sup>11</sup> Hegemony: an amalgam of numerically small, usually elite parties, who by uniting on crucial issues manage to dominate other, as or more numerous parties, the point being that each party to the hegemonic coalition would be too weak to effect domination alone.

simply cannot be formed without material artefacts being used on raw or semi-processed materials.

Recently serious and vociferous doubts are being raised on the applicability of the general concept of culture in anthropology, cf. Longva (1997). Phrases such as '*culture has to go*' (Ingold 1993) or '*scrap culture*' (Kuper 1997) has occurred in earnest. We cannot go into that debate here; suffice to say that the concept is, by some, beginning to be seen as too general or embracing, too static ('reifying exotism'), too loaded, carrying unhappy connotations etc., and so perhaps better replaced by less general yet not very specific successors — a whole family of terms such as custom, fad, field, habit, identity, lifestyle, movement, mentality, network, tradition, even lifeworld or value system — a whole family of *petits récits*, in 'post-modern' terms.

In sum so far, culture generally is a concept and an entity in flux, not fully stable; it is disputed, not altogether consensual, i.e. following Schütz, not coherent, only partially clear, and containing contradictions. Or following Østerberg, it is part of the general study of social conflict and integration.

This is what I call 'the metonymic turn' in cultural studies, the problem of which consists much less in finding a general, unanimous definition, and much more in selecting crucial, revealing, informative single sets of traits for closer study. 'Random sampling' of cultural items would be senseless — and continued discussion of the general concept not much less so.

We've touched on the 'culture of whom?' problem<sup>12</sup>: *Whose* custom, knowledge etc. is this? No less a problem is the 'culture for whom?', or *discourse* problem: Who are speaking, studying, appraising etc. whose — who else's? — culture? This may be related to Pike's (1967) *emic-etic* distinction, the idea that anthropological fieldwork can be subdivided in emic or actors' point of view studies, and studies from

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<sup>12</sup> Note 10 above.

the etic or external, expert, comparative point of view, the linguistic distinction of phonemics and phonetics being the model. This is, however, problematic in terms of epistemology, notably Skjervheim's 1957/1976 discussion of the *participant* and *observer* positions, his point being that a pure, good-faith neutral observer is on reflection not really possible (cf. also Otnes 1997b). Social scientists<sup>13</sup> can only pretend to be uncommitted or 'neutral'; value, consciously or not is always present; it cannot be exorcised out of the profession, not even by linguistics or philosophers.

So the etic or 'neutral scientific observer' is a perplexing position, yet the distinction may serve a purpose. Knowing who is speaking does matter: a member of the culture or an outside social science observer, 'neutral' or partisan? Notably, a culture's self-image will be very reluctant to admit openly those incoherences, confusions and contradictions (Schütz) which are everyday commonplaces for the social scientist.

### **What culture is not**

In a comic strip, Hagar the viking is telling his son: 'Culture is everything we do in order to be admired by others'. In the following strip, his son asks 'Can you tell me what is not culture?', which leaves Hagar with no answer through a sleepless night.

Professionals, of course, are often weary of discussing culture in general. For one good reason, the classic version of the concept will seem too inclusive, ecumenical, non-dialectic: *It has no, or no basic or evident opposite; it doesn't exclude anything*. Inclusive almost to

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<sup>13</sup> Why, perhaps even linguists – so much of language on closer view has to do with social distance, social inequality, class, education or its lack (Bourdieu 1982, e.g. his discussion of Labov p. 87 ff.).

the point of positivism, it tends in practice if not in principle to be dealt with as if 'above' or 'beside' social conflicts and difference.

Not that suggested opposites have been lacking: culture vs. nature or biology; vs. structure; vs. unculture, barbarism (cf. Østerberg 1991, Wiggen 1998); vs. savagery, anarchy etc. All however to little avail: Untouched, 'virgin' nature or biology is becoming a great rarity<sup>14</sup>; structural theories have cultures of their own ('corporation culture', 'culture of rationality'); 'barbarian' and 'savage' cultures are by now banalities, with us since Tylor's classic (1871). Likewise, the endless debates over 'high' or 'low', 'elite' or 'common', 'ordinary' or 'extraordinary', culture. Is there really anything 'too barbarian' 'or 'too low' for the term culture? War, or military culture? Fascist culture? Torturist culture? Genocide culture? Studies of all exist.

Next, taking our definitions literally would imply that non-culture is 'not (yet) learned knowledge and experience', or 'un-knowledge, inexperience' in a group (Vikan), or not patterned, chance events or actions<sup>15</sup>. Or following Østerberg, traits of our existence which as yet have no (recognisable) form; formlessness, poor or bad form. The problem with both lies in specifications: How do we (or any group) know what we don't (yet) know? or how do we recognise a form as not recognisable?

These paradoxes are real, I hold, but in practice not too difficult to surmount<sup>16</sup>. That requires, however, admitting openly that culture is strife and struggle, not (only) cohesion, consensus. Scientists can and should admit that, when trying to work in *etic* principle. But admitting it in practice is exactly what any dominant or *emic* culture cannot so readily do: It can - under pressure - recognise opposition yet rarely let

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<sup>14</sup> Culture in the etymological sense would have wilderness, or laying fallow, as its opposite. Or even being uncultivated in the agricultural sense, which would exclude nomads and gatherers — hence untenable, opposed to real use.

<sup>15</sup> But watch it, the moment chance becomes principle that, too, is culture.

<sup>16</sup> For a simple example take jurisprudence's, or etiquette's admitting that although many rules are unequivocal, some may yet remain unclear.

go of hegemony willingly. A hegemonic culture's belief in its own integrity or totality is a core, an essential element. The current catchphrase 'we are all creoles now' doesn't really change that, it only involves acknowledging a conglomerate in the bedrock mountain's role.

Paraphrasing Kierkegaard we could say that *totality's despair is to lack divisibility; and divisibility's to lack totality*<sup>17</sup>. One compromise, a case of his 'weakness', is what I call *alterity by contrast*<sup>18</sup>: Instead of outlining the core, the essence, the integrity of one's own culture, one takes refuge in the denial of conspicuous contrast: 'At least, I'm not black, immigrant, a criminal, hooligan', etc. etc. Or, for a dominant culture's dissidents, 'defiance' in the form of high hopes for contrasts to eventually challenge dominance: 'How promising, the ways of the blacks, immigrants, teds, rockers, punks' etc. etc.

The trick of including struggles over culture within the concept is a nice try but still too inclusive, involving no real *negatio*, no ruling out. Østerbergs idea of conflict and cohesion as integral parts is promising, however, and Bourdieu's distinction (1984), a changing but arguably an objective hierarchy of tastes. The trick is taking this idea from the programmatic to the implementation and system stages, well done by both, yet with more system to it in Bourdieu.

In fact, the tradition of scientific culture studies is selectivity, not totality. For Tylor, culture was language, arithmetic, creeds, beliefs, myth, and nothing much else. For traditional (European) ethnology it was very largely based on 'natural cycles' such as individual's or household's 'life cycles'<sup>19</sup>, the seasons'; or the 'near-far'-dimension — from personal clothing to world trade say; or typologies of various

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<sup>17</sup> In the original the opposites are infinitude-finitude, and possibility-necessity

<sup>18</sup> Or scapegoating, in common, inexact terms. Touraine's (1978) *opposition* phase of social movements also comes to mind.

<sup>19</sup> With the famous *rites de passage* concept highlighting the more dramatic changes of ordinary (life) cycles.

sorts, such as Benedict's (following Nietzsche) Apollonian vs. Dionysian, Malinowski's Magic, science and religion etc.

## **The term and concept in original use: SC I**

Turning now to our sub-field proper, SC as a term in wider use is of *recent* origin, not found e.g. in the *Shorter Oxford* of 1983, included, however, in the *Concise Oxford* of 1990. A likely guess as to influential originators of today's use<sup>20</sup> would be Stuart Hall and his circle in Birmingham, an early instance being found in Hall & Jefferson (1976). As a single most successful propagator of the term, Hall's follower Dick Hebdige stands out, whose *Subculture: The meaning of style* from 1979 in its ninth printing by 1996, a slim contemporary, may I say sub-classic, is admirable in many ways.

However that may be, there is something of a watershed in the use of the term SC around the late sixties or early seventies. Take Broom & Selznick (1968:71), once a celebrated text in wide use, according to which, SC is

... a pattern that is in significant respects distinctive but that has important continuities with a host or dominant culture... (It) contains some of the dominant cultural values but also contains values, perspectives or lifestyles peculiar to itself. Every group has some patterns of its own, but the patterns of a specialised group do not necessarily affect the total life of its members and, therefore, do not comprise a subculture. A subculture, on the other hand, has a more general influence on the person and tends to give him a discernible identity.

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. the next subtitle.

Examples include occupational SCs such as the military, or residential, ethnic or social-class based SCs, all of which '...tend to be coextensive with local communities and thus provide a setting for the entire round of life'.

A typical SC was seen as based on occupation, or '...more typical ... on residential, ethnic, or social-class criteria'. Core examples would include military or garrison values etc., ghetto gangs, or local communities such as the much reported Amish<sup>21</sup>. Locality is singled out as a most embracing criterion.

So far, no mention of youth or other age groups<sup>22</sup> at all, nor of the role of the media, nor of symbolism. SC emerges as a somewhat derogatory term. Broom & Selznick ends, however, by quoting a 'contrasting view', stressing the autonomy and positive distinctive values of juvenile, working-class subcultures (1968:72), i.e. a more positive account.

The great *International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* has no separate entry for SC<sup>23</sup>. The term is, however, listed in its Index, with 11 separate entries, three of which to be found under 'delinquency' (whereas 'deviance' is absent, except for 'sex' below), three others special cases thereof ('drug addiction' (two entries) and 'homicide'), two more concern 'homosexuality' and 'sexual deviation'. The penultimate two are starting to approach present use - 'class culture' and 'political culture', both of which, while conceding that studies of subordinate cultures dominate ('culture of poverty', 'mass culture') yet do discuss the study of political or class 'elite cultures' as well. Only the last instance, 'educational organisation' is more or less plainly in

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<sup>21</sup> Or perhaps *1732 Høtten*, a recent Norwegian film caricature version of a local rural SC at its worst.

<sup>22</sup> Though it should be noted that B&S cites Al Cohen's book entitled *Delinquent Boys*. — This is not an etymological study and so may be proved wrong by future such, but I've found no earlier use of SC as a term or concept than in Cohen's book from 1955.

<sup>23</sup> Its 26 volume successor planned for 2001 or c. 30 years later, will include entries both of subculture and counter culture.

accord with the contemporary usage - a short discussion of 'student subcultures'.

## **Recent use: SC II**

Approaching now the other side of the watershed we shall start, not with Hebdige's book but with a local Norwegian use, Østerberg (1997) once more. Here, with reference to Hebdige, 'the subcultural' is outlined as

lifestyles or forms of living which deviate notably from the dominant (hegemonic) culture patterns. Sometimes, subcultures stand in open conflict with the dominant or official culture, constituting a 'counter culture'. More often, subculture and main culture agree to differ, and the subcultures encapsulate themselves (1997:18).

The *Concise Oxford* (1990) in some contrast takes 'beliefs or interests *at variance with* the larger culture' as SC's specific trait - weaker and wider, it seems, than the Norwegian formula *avviker betydelig* or 'deviates notably'.

Now to Hebdige himself, starting with the narrower, or rather, the distinct, *counter culture*:

The term counter culture refers to the amalgam of 'alternative' middle-class youth cultures - the hippies, the flower children, the yippies - which grew out of the 60s, and came to prominence during the period 1967-70. As Hall (& Jefferson) (1976) have noted, the counter culture can be distinguished from the subcultures we have been studying by its explicitly political and ideological forms of its opposition to the dominant culture (political action,



coherent philosophies, manifestos, etc.), by its elaboration of alternative institutions (...), its 'stretching' of the transitional stage beyond the teens, and its blurring of the relations, so rigorously maintained in subculture, between work, home, family, school, and leisure<sup>24</sup>. Whereas opposition in subculture is, as we have seen, displaced into symbolic forms of resistance, the revolt of middle class youth tends to be more articulate, more confident ... more easily 'read' (1979:148).

The core terms here are *symbolic forms of resistance*. Subculture as sub-surface, yet not crystallised protest or potential opposition, is stressed repeatedly, more so than in the 'parent' text of Hall & Jefferson (1976), which admits *degrees* of SCs, more or *less* distinct. Both, however, deal with juvenile groups, movements or cohorts, almost to exclusion. At this stage, it would appear that older peoples' roles in SCs are strictly those of spectators, opponents or supporters, enemies or fans, never full members.

Here as elsewhere in Hebdige's text SC appears as something of a fuzzy set, developed around a small set of instances, notably the punk movement, targeted more on demonstrating the power of a semiotic, symbol-reading type of analysis, than on developing a general analytic concept, i.e. a complete and exhaustive classification of all more or less deviant, distinctive, or 'at variance', life-styles or life-forms or social movements. A model for research, not a definition, is proposed.

Most writers still tend to attribute an inordinate significance to the opposition between young and old, .. rites of passage ... What is missing ... is any explanation of why these particular forms should occur at this particular moment. (Hebdige 1979:73)

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<sup>24</sup> Slightly overstated in my opinion. While some SC members can and do make efforts to keep their 'variant' ways well out of sight for all outsiders (high segregativity, cf. Hannerz 1980), others such ways are difficult to hide. A punk's safety pin, chains and dog collar can be taken off, not their hairdo.

There is mention of a sequence of successive juvenile movements, some of them specified (teds, mods, ska, rastas, hippies), to which others could be added, at least from dada and surrealism on, through the swing freaks' mass wave of the 30ies, with existentialism, jazzfans, beatniks, rockers, skins following, and further taggers, hip-hop, grunge, 'generation X', and 'XTC', to house, techno, scratching and what not; faster changes and smaller staying power over the years, it seems.

Hebdige exemplifies a paradigm change, sort of, in anthropology and - to some extent in sociology too - from functionalism into semiology or hermeneutics, 'the interpretation of meaning'. Prominent analyses concern the use of symbols in bricolage, i.e. surprising or shocking selection and juxtaposition, prototypically punk's safety pin earring<sup>25</sup>

A half in-, half outsider myself, I have wondered whether Hebdige's (and similar) accounts would be at all intelligible for a person who knew absolutely nothing about the Punk movement, its Ted and Mod predecessors etc. Though he admits to '... a kind of romanticism...' (1979:138), or fascination more precisely, his book does at times approach a fan club sort of thing, a cohort or its observers taking their fancy with them into social science and advancing age.

Much more interesting than this individual criticism, however, is a general point, so to speak the 'post-Derrida' (1974:158): *c'est du hors-texte, ça*. The meaning of SCs is hardly possible to grasp through texts alone; it requires having seen the events, the props and costumes, at least on pictures or screens; having heard the stories or the music, an ability to recognise a style by its less obvious details etc. A commendable start for a total outsider would be the thoroughly

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<sup>25</sup> Jean Genet's Vaseline tube is Hebdige's starting point, the police reading it as a sign of the male homosexual, most often thought of as a *lasting* SC, not a passing stage; a 'master status' (Hughes), however unofficial. As a sign, his tube will disclose rather than signify; unlike punk's safety pin it is not for willed display. In Peirce's terms it's an index not a symbol, signal rather than sign.

illustrated *Les mouvements de mode expliqués aux parents* (Obalk et al. 1986), an eloquent resignation of the written text into pictures.

## **The changes reviewed**

Summing up so far, SC before c. 1970 (SC I) implied being: (1) distinctive, but also with continuities to a dominant culture, and so by implication dominated, not itself dominant (2) affecting the total life of its members, (3) locally based, (4) closed or kept apart, (5) not (often) restricted to youth or other age cohorts alone.

In short, SC I is (1) distinct, (2) total, (3) local, (4) not widely known, and (5) inter- not intra-cohort.

After, the typical use of the term has changed considerably. SCs are still distinct albeit with continuities, but further the weight is rather on what SCs are *not*: *not* entirely closed and certainly not little-known; *not* 'counter culture' cf. above, i.e. of symbolic or indirect resistance, not outright, conscious or political protest, *not* (often or very) delinquent; *not* absolutely total, i.e. members can to an extent pass in and out of it and remain members; and *not* local, i.e. not having clear geographical borders, although some SCs celebrate 'sacred', symbolic, originary places such as Graceland, King's Road or Woodstock.

In short once more, SC II is still (1) distinct, but (2) segregative<sup>26</sup> rather than total, (3) widely, even generally publicised, i.e. receiving, provoking and being provoked by dominant media attention, (4) an age cohort, typically a group of youth in the late teens or early twenties - and later, as typically, revived or an object of nostalgic attention as that cohort and its older fans advance in age. SCs are above all (5) new, selective '... expressive forms ... each (moving)

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<sup>26</sup> Hannerz' (1980:255ff) term, a network type with subsets kept apart albeit not entirely.

through a cycle of resistance and defusion...' (Hebdige 1979:130, 132).

### **SC IIs are not fields (*champs*), not autonomous social systems**

Gottdiener (1995:243-52) gives a vivid account of how he first discovered and gradually learned to decipher or 'read' punk, its music, style and ideas. Leaning on Hebdige but even more on later works by Marcus (1989) and Savage (1992), he traces a main root of punk in situationism, personified in the *Sex Pistols'* Malcolm McLaren, who had a background both as an activist in the Paris of May 1968 and in Guy Debord's *L'internationale situationiste*. Marcus, according to Gottdiener

... shows how McLaren wedded his knowledge of situationism and the *enrage* (sic) student group of Paris, 1968, to the sale of clothing. Wanting to broaden the market for his boutique items, he promoted a rock band of dubious musicianship as the standard-bearers for the new look. McLaren turned situationist ideology into a commodity, first through fashion, and then through rock music. Marcus shows how Punk, as the commodification of anarchism, succeeded beyond anyone's expectations. (1995:251)

He criticises Hebdige, who '...could not decipher the code of Punk' (1995:249), a major shortcoming for a researcher who aimed exactly for that - if indeed he's correct, for Hebdige did surmise the root specified by Gottdiener/Marcus above. Hebdige succeeds, I think, in explaining some noted punk symbols such as the much-adoed safety pin, chains, plastic etc., which stand for pain, poverty and being dominated — but, all flaunted as ironic 'jewellery', 'fashion' etc. as against 'real', expensive earrings, necklaces, silk. The historic root in

pre-punk's contrast to and envy of Black, immigrant Caribbean youth culture (ska, reggae), is less convincing though: The differences are clear but their influence not really demonstrated.

Both Gottdiener and Hebdige, however, remain punk fans, more or less fascinated by the phenomenon.

Similar cases of fascinated nostalgia are well known in Norway as well. With hippie and ultra-leftist movements waning in the late 70ies, new juvenile groups emerged, practising illegal occupation of vacant housing etc. For some years they celebrated the custom of 'the night before the 1st of May' - youth drinking and dancing in Oslo's city streets, including occasional vandalism, looting and clashes with the police. The morning after, the usually so quiet city streets would be full of debris and reek of lachrymogenes. There were studies made, by sympathisers/participants (e.g. Fryjordet 1986), supervised by sympathising post-gauchiste senior researchers<sup>27</sup>. The events came to an end in 1985, by shrewdly organised public competition: NRK, or the local BBC started to broadcast major rock/pop events, irresistible for the young people involved, that very night.

Who, then, are the instigators of SCs? In the old sense (SC I) this was by and large an insulated thing, with few or restricted outside influences. Not so in the recent sense: We cannot really speak of a SC - SC II - without acknowledging the major influence of the media, both as willed and provoked from within a SC, and as best-selling headlines etc. constructed from without it. Stan Cohen's (1972) *inventory* concept is in point, the exaggeration and distortion etc. required to depict SC as a 'folk devil', a marketable commodity — first a scare, later, 'defused' as chic mimicry or play-along. For a contemporary SC, public attention, or 'visibility', equals life; it simply can't emerge without.

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<sup>27</sup> Such as Terje Rød Larsen, today top-rung UN adviser on the Israel-Palestine conflict.

Noteworthy, too, is the case of the SC researchers themselves. A contemporary SC with no media attention cannot be, agreed. But what about a completely unresearched case? Aren't their - our - fascination and its role in subsequent teaching *as* required?

Take Punk, then, was it mainly McLaren's personal lucky conspiracy? Or was it the work of the media, the music and its stars, the fashions? Cohen's inventory idea is a form of labelling really, or 'taking stock', but by the media mainly. Now what about the stocktaking of others, participants, passers-by, sympathisers, relatives, readers/listeners/viewers, 'worriers', police, schools, trend-watchers or brokers looking for new market ideas — once more certainly not forgetting the researchers them/ourselves? Our answer is that a present SC cannot well arise and last its brief life span without the efforts of all these types of activities. So a SC is certainly not the work of its members alone, however involved, fascinated, devoted — or 'desperately not wanting to be swallowed by the machinations of distant, outside forces', cf. below.

Fennefoss (1996) discusses a case in point in a study of 'youth events' in a Southern Norwegian town. There was agreement that 'something happened' but not on what label would fit. A policeman who caught a glimpse of Fennefoss' field note form with the subheading 'rebellion' (Norw. '*opprør*') cried out in protest to his superior, 'he's calling it a rebellion!! Local definitions were 'riots', or 'disturbances', 'hooliganism' or 'noisy youth' but certainly not anything near 'rebellion', despite the fact that on occasion, shop windows were broken followed by some looting.

In conclusion Fennefoss embraces Bourdieu's idea of 'a struggle over classifications' (Bourdieu 1985), or *jeu de champ, illusio*. Any field is constantly (re-)constructing itself, always as a mixture of resignation and new initiatives. We note the fact that the 'primary field' - the noisy youth - has no control over in what category their activities will belong in the end. Other players, border actors or members of other

fields (*champs*) are as or more decisive: police, local and national press, other media, local politicians, parent groups, scared or understanding neighbours etc.

## **Desperately social**

Our task was to demonstrate a link between being a SC member and Kierkegaard's conception of despair. Summing up so far, what have we found? Does joining a SC imply an amount of '... desperately (not) willing to be oneself? To an extent, yes. Juvenile prospective members seek and try out new identities, in despair because there is no going back, no remaining a child<sup>28</sup>. Some overshoot, a few hit bull's-eyes, and others, the majority, try less hard.

But this is by far not the whole story. The error of a plain positive answer lies in its tacit assumption that the relevant facts are SCs, their symbols and young aspiring members, *and nothing else*. If anything, we have demonstrated that there is a wealth of other agencies, non-members mostly, who play decisive roles in forming the SCs' life-cycles - in fact that this is the crucial aspect of the major change of phase from SC I into SC II (cf. above). Why, even youth itself is (paraphrasing Foucault) 'a fairly recent invention', born from the ban on child labour and the rise of compulsory education. Contemporary SCs are nearly approaching the role Baudrillard assigns to terrorism: '...masses, media et terrorisme dans leur affinité triangulaire' (1982:62).

The limits of Kierkegaard read as an individualistic position becomes evident. To-day, 'chacun est renvoyé à soi. Et chacun sait que ce *soi* est peu' (Lyotard 1979:30). Self-made selves are poor propositions, inside and out of SCs. So we have recourse in the sociological reading - or further elaboration - which we called 'social despair': the anguish

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<sup>28</sup> *Des yeux purs dans les bois/cherchent en pleurant la tête habitable* (René Char).

of having no Other, or of being dominated by, or of dominating, our Others out of their essential role.

Briefly, if you consider taking up SCal ways, how can you know that you're not in fact a media product or image - 'being lived, not living'? That is indeed the fate of the aspiring diasporic punk, or house etc. adherent: Read the signs from afar and start by copying! Conversely, if you try, McLarenwise, to create deeds or symbols of your own, watch out or you'll be an invisible media director, using media inertia or stereotyped responses against themselves yet down the stream to 'defusion'.

Both alternatives may be enjoyed, of course - taking up the uniform, or planting potentially splashing ideas. But typically, *not for long* - for the suspicion, approaching despair, will arise: My Others aren't so different after all. So, as mentioned, when a SC comes of age it survives as nostalgia - most often bleak.

The third possibility, that of not seeing that you have an Other, would seem to be simultaneously the most promising and most desperate of all. Sennett's 'culture of presentation' from *The fall of public man* (1974) offers one model<sup>29</sup>: Today, all of us have a repertoire of distinct ways — splendidly both given and taken at face value. Even respectable Daniel Bell is said to have proposed a 'straight in the morning, hip at night' formula. Anything goes, provided it's well enacted. No tomorrow, no Other, nothing but presentation. Nothing but surfaces, not even below or behind surfaces. Bring in the clowns! Or have they/we been here always?

Yet these three 'social despair' types all share a degree of *consciousness*, as a tinge at least, not often outspoken<sup>30</sup>. Which brings us back, both to Kierkegaard, and to that great, overarching

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<sup>29</sup> His most recent book (1998) outlines markedly different models.

<sup>30</sup> Baudelaire's *spleen* is a marvellous opposite case, "... au fond de l'inconnu pour trouver du nouveau!"



'generalised Other', the dominant culture. Kierkegaard's text starts with reflections on despair 'whether or not it is conscious'. We've mentioned above that 'the despair of totality is to lack divisibility', and vice versa. As a form of despair this strikes even in the absence of all consciousness, of all desperate reflections.

And this is the specific form exactly of totality, of the dominant culture, the 'main street' or main stream of 'just plain folks' or 'decent, ordinary people'. Such people know, or surmise, that they're are everything, society's heart or backbone, yet have less and less an idea of what that 'everything' really is: Perhaps just Adorno's (1970) *misgelungene Kultur*, Culture as failure?

And the less they/we know, the more they/we need the comfort of conspicuous cases of what they/we're *not*. This is SCs, or any similar ostentatious contrasts, in their main social role, being played, not playing: They serve to save the dominant culture from its own, increasing, non-coherence.

### **Post-SCs: Intra- or Juxta-Cultures, or 'a circulation of SCs'?**

Both Hebdige's and Hall & Jefferson's books are by now past their teens. Paul Willis' (1990) more recent *Common culture* may have been first in outlining a third phase, a definite if not widely publicised move *away* from SC studies conceived as movements of juvenile symbolic resistance. Willis credits Geoff Hurd with the idea that:

... a spectacular subculture is strictly impossible because all style and taste cultures, to some degree or another, express something of a general trend to find and make identity outside the realm of work (1990:16).

Also, in Hall and associates' five recent volumes for the Open university press (1997), the same change is pervasive if not really highlighted. For example, the words SC, and even 'youth', 'juvenile', 'age', are rarely found in the indices, and if so, more used by fringe, not central co-authors. Instead, a general model for cultural studies is offered, 'the circuit of culture', a circle involving 'regulation, consumption, production, identity and representation' – all interrelated but with the latter on top; the production and circulation of meaning or sense, to phrase it simply. For example, in their *Story of the Sony walkman* (1997), the focus is on an artefact not produced for SCal use alone.

Further, in one basic inspiration for SCal and cultural studies, Hoggart (1957), his *resilience* concept – ironic distance to the products of mass culture – is a fairly widespread trait of the working classes, i.e. a majority of the people. Similarly for Raymond Williams' (1958, here quoted after Willis' 1990) catch-phrase, 'culture is ordinary' – widespread once again.

This would seem to open the field for numerous lesser, or less 'visible', movements, such as bridge or chess playing, short-lived 'crazes' such as Rubik's cube, or the perennial *da-fort* of the yo-yo. Or 'cults' built around films, videos, CDs, stars or other stage or media products. Or 'alternative' movements, around astrology, witchcraft, or other 'arcana', macrobiotic food, and no end of exoticism gaining followers. Or collecting, or hunting, knitting, bingo – not forgetting Eliot's precursory of *inter alia* 'dog races, dart boards, boiling of cabbage' etc.

Some of these are more properly called leisure activities, or more or less well-bred pass-times. Immoderate adherents may certainly be 'at variance', even 'deviate' from the 'larger' or 'dominant' culture. Yet in moderate form they are most often acceptable, recognised 'variances', not threatening, 'visible' or headline-hitting; routine attention, not news; humdrum, not scandal. Some, though, may have a past of scandal, even persecution ('post- or ex-SCs' such as jazz, rock) while

most have been acceptable hobbies all along (intra- or juxta- i.e. side cultures).

Bridge, bingo etc. may sound boring to some. But does social science know beforehand, without closer study, that the symbol use in such contexts is less creative, even less of a 'resistance', than that of noisier, more 'visible' youth cohorts? We do know, however, that cultural studies don't really take off until difference emerges. Whosoever says culture, says difference, hierarchy. The tradition of a 'cultural analysis' which knows how to create a commotion but no animosity is, may I say, barely supportable even if well supported.

### **Concluding remarks**

Here is the basis of dominant culture's own 'sickness unto death' or despair — that of *not having an Other* - our worse and more basic despair than Kierkegaard's. Total unity cannot be, it has to be established *in contrast to* - something else, something different, 'at variance': an Other, a deviant group, a SC. If one of these sides is impaired, the other will suffer as well, as a result, unless Alterity is recast as a challenge, a potential for Ego change, not a mere contrast.

In Kierkegaard's terms, 'The despair of infinity is to lack limits'. A whole will have to struggle trying to build its own bounds. Durkheim's theory of punishment comes to mind: 'Punishment is above all designed to act upon upright people ... its true function is to maintain social cohesion intact...' (1893/1964:108). It's by highlighting and ostracising contrast that 'the moral majority' maintains its shady self-image.

Contemporary SCs, we have suggested, are more and more diluted, short-lived, and machinated by the marketing interest rather than borne by participants' enthusiasm, then over time there will arise a

need for finding fresh, or longer-lived, or more conspicuously variant or deviant SCs or 'post-SCs', able to create new, striking, 'offensive' symbols etc. They will come, make their headlines, pass their summit and end as 'diluted', but with the requisite power to shock, which is exactly what a weakening dominant or super culture needs. Take McLaren's case, which made his point plus a whole movement 'despite resistance', hence a case of power in Weber's classic sense. Later, lesser, ephemeral cases such as *Generation X* (Coupland 1992) and *Generation XTC* (Böple et al. 1997) are market, not movement successes, comparatively powerless<sup>31</sup> We may safely predict that there will be more to come, both milder and wilder.

There is also the case of Baudrillard (1997), a case of parallel thinking from a different field - 'high art' and its decay. For example Warhol doing his Campbell soup cans in the 60ies was brilliant, transcending whereas Warhol repeating himself towards the end of his career *vraiment nul*, only pastiche, repetition, old hat, not even travesty. Similarly for 'neo-punk', 'neo-tagging' or similar movements: What was shocking and revealing some decades ago can hardly be much else than boring today.

Based on the work of Sarah Thornton it has been suggested that 'sub-cultural capital' is short-lived<sup>32</sup>. Very credible indeed, but are not the elements of host, dominant or hegemonic culture becoming as short-lived these days? In the words of Yeats' well-known poem, "Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold". That was 80 years ago, yet no less a most fitting phrase today. Perhaps even what's left of hegemony is becoming fragmented.

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<sup>31</sup> Though there are some 30 titles, – books, videos, games – related to the Generation X trademark found on 'the world's largest bookshop'. Some would-be SCs have left the streets and hit the web screens.

<sup>32</sup> Oral communication from colleague Willy Pedersen.

Some of my students have assumed that I am against SCs in theory or practice. I'm not; I propose retaining the concept, only softened and widened, so as to counteract youths' and the media's near monopoly of it in recent years, and to open it up for the less conspicuous and marketable movements and social relationships, tentatively called micro-, infra- or juxta-cultures. And not less, open for studies of elements of what used to be hegemonic culture, as if they were constructed much like what subcultures used to be.

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