

Youth subcultures: phil cohen



A critical evaluation of the work of Phil Cohen in relation to our understanding of youth subcultures

According to Cohen (1972), the redevelopment of London's working-class neighbourhoods which favoured social elites or the gentry resulted in the marginalization of working class residents, loss of community and deterioration of collective power in the East End. Thus, there was a breakdown of socio-cultural interaction and dynamics that led to the development of youth subcultures. The objective of this paper is to examine Cohen's perspective on the impact of rapid development in London to development in the 1950's which prompted the subcultures. These subcultures became a critical channel for socialization and political action but also created distance with mainstream society that led to conflict and alienation (Fiske et al, 2009). Cohen's (1972) perspectives, which were based on his examinations of the impact of London's 1950's redevelopment highlights how public policies can have such a profound effect on individual and social order and perception. Today, many cities, not only London are dealing with an influx of migration which has significantly increased intercultural interactions. Though these trends have the potential to enrich society, there is also the challenge of having to deal with increased conflict and greater competition which often threatens already marginalized populations the most.

In the 1950's, the city managers of London launched a rapid development project designed to revitalize the capital which still was not able to recover from the damages of the Second World War. This urban renewal project was designed to attract new residents as well as revitalize key areas of the city for trade and commerce. Many of the areas that were targeted for

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redevelopments were already resided in by working-class families who were then moved to what Cohen describes as fringe neighbourhoods. The areas were settled into by migrants who redesigned the areas according to their individual cultural and social backgrounds. This created a divide between neighbourhoods: the new development was for the social elite, young professionals and affluent immigrants and the suburbs which housed the relocated residents were typically known to be run-down and underdeveloped areas. As the discrepancy of quality of life became apparent to authorities, the city planning authorities sought mitigate the situation by launching the development of high-rise housing projects specifically for working-class families. City administrators also endeavoured to attract back original residents through encouraging participation in new industries and trade and commerce channels.

However, Cohen believes that the effort further marginalized these populations and increased the social and economic challenges of urban life. Cohen also gives particular attention to what he calls the collapse of “matrilocal residence”, a term which he uses to refer to the tendency of nuclear family extensions to reside in close proximity to each other. This further limits the capacity of families and individuals to sustain social ties and support systems which in turn is associated with the breakdown of shared values, mores and standards of conduct. Cohen also believes that the redevelopment created unprecedented economic and social stress among the working class. He points out that post-World War II, many family enterprises, traditionally the backbone of local trade and industries, were facing severe competition from industries and at the same time, labour and

experts were being channelled to these industries from traditional family enterprises. There was even a campaign for the latter: it was deemed nationalistic to support the growth on these large-scale private industries that suffered from the war. At the same time, there was also an effort to promote the modernization project as a national development agenda, to reposition the country as the leader of trade and commerce in Europe. The publicity is said to have severely hampered labour supply among community industries creating the notion of labour aristocracy.

The population that was most affected by these trends were new entrants to the labour market. The transition between the working environment of their parents and the working conditions brought on by the redevelopment were significant according to Cohen because they required not only the accommodation of new labour conditional but also a new social, economic and political order in very short period of time. To cope with the stress of these developments, according to Cohen, these populations created subculture groups to have a sense of identity and social reference. From this perspective, Cohen characterizes subcultures symbolic structures, not actually representing the individuals who make up the groups, representing a lifestyle or social perspective that does not fully conform to mainstream society. Identification of these subcultures can be made through a set of social subsystems which include their manner of dress, the music that is associated with them, the language or lexicon used, and the rituals and customs that are coupled with membership or identity.

According to a report developed by the World Bank (2009), the typical stress of community living are multiplies in urban settings because of the

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intensification of competition for resources, spaces and opportunities. At the same time, Rothwell (2003) points out that in time of stress, individuals need greater social reinforcement to be able to have a sense of security and belongingness. In the case illustrated by Cohen (1972) of London's redevelopment in the 1950's, he suggests that the economic, social and political challenges that the working class of the era had to deal with contributed to the increase of urban stress and the breakdown of traditional support systems which in turn created the platform for the development of subcultures. Similarly, Majhanovich (2002) points out that the development of subordinate organizations is an indication that there are populations feel under-represented or unrecognized without necessarily becoming a functional organization. Thus, their organization is a means of collecting power for representation or just recognition. This also support's Cohen's (1972) assertion that subcultures are symbolic organizations, where membership is often individually defined and association can be only conceptual.

Cohen's definition of subcultures can be challenging but studying the examples that he provides is a great resource in understanding his perspective. Some of the challenges in his definition lie in his characterization of the phenomenon as symbolical rather than a collective of individuals. Another area of difficulty is the mechanism how youth membership in subcultures actually delays adulthood. Based on Cohen's perspective, there is a suggestion is that there is almost a combative relationship between subcultures and mainstream society. This can be particularly apparent in view of his characterizations of subcultures as having

Mohawks or being active in counter-culture movements. New research is more liberal, if not democratic, in its view of subcultures, noting that any group that creates an association with a particular mode of life or belief system that does not fully conform to social precepts can be considered as a subculture (Neuliep, 2006). However, this should be seen in the context of contemporary society where diversity is more widely recognized and is being lobbied for in all sectors and levels of society.

Though Cohen's paper is supposedly limited to 1950's working class London, he makes significant extensions from this population to include lower and middle class families. Essentially, Cohen's main distinction is between what he considers the elite and what he considers as ordinary people. It seems that Cohen is grouping them together primarily because they did not have ready access to the areas that were eyed for redevelopment which implies that the population criteria used by Cohen was not based on socio-economic level but rather a geographic one. This raises some concern regarding the demographic and psychographic homogeneity of these groups. In turn, this may have an implication on the conclusions made by Cohen on the social and psychological impact of the redevelopment project. However, this may not have an impact on his theories regarding the development of subcultures but will challenge the rationale he proposes for their initiation which he generally attributed to socio-economic stress. In parallel studies developed by contemporary researchers such as Rothwell (2003) and Neuliep (2006) regarding the development of sub-cultural ethnic groups, they point out that motivations are more socio-politically oriented.

Analysis of the Cohen texts also shows some deficiency in the evidence that he provides for his arguments. These are not to the degree that one questions the authenticity of his assertions but some of his more emotive ideas could benefit from statistics or corollary studies to support the assertion that the 1950's redevelopment in London is a primary reason for the rise in subcultures that developed in subsequent years. However, it should also be recognized that since the text is already dated and thus, contemporary readers may not be able to readily relate holistically to the social conditions and context that are being discussed. Both Majhanovich (2002) and Fiske and associates (2009) point out that these generational divides can have a significant impact on how conditions are perceived and ultimately, how relationships and correlations are going to be recognized. It is also this rationale that Cohen (1972) believes is the reason why some subcultures were constructed and perceived to be anti-establishment or to be non-conformist. It can also be one of the reasons why the subcultures are being associated with youth cultural and political movements: young members of a society, when thrust into social independence, have to navigate to orientation inculcated to them by authorities whose experience is based on an antecedent social context and may develop a sense of incongruity. At the same time, because younger populations may have less social investments and responsibilities, there is greater freedom for self-expression and in developing subcultures.

Moreover, because growth and development are future-oriented and create social stress, younger members of a society who have yet to establish themselves are more vulnerable to its impact. According to Essess and

associates (2001), perceptions of competition, identity and social roles are often issues that become critical to an individual's self valuation and thus, the need for affirmative social memberships. Cohen (1972) acknowledges the rationale for city planners for the redevelopment initiative but points out that they were remiss in mitigating its negative impacts. Worse, the efforts to reverse the resulting problems only increased the problems by the displaced working class families. Essentially, planners were not able to consider how the new social conditions can impact relationships, associations and identification of affected populations. Thus, these groups were not only further marginalized but were not equipped with access to traditional social groups to communicate their concerns or to lobby for action. In the article developed by Mueller (2005), peripheral populations are often sacrificed in the name of growth and development, however without the extension of the benefits of growth and development to these populations, quality of life cannot be raised. At the same time, the growth of disparities in social, economic and political status can be a source of conflict can then impede long-term growth and development goals.

Cohen's (1972) analysis of the impact of redevelopment of London in the 1950's marks a greater awareness of the impact of public policies to social, economic and political dynamics that will prevail. Though the motives behind the redevelopment undoubtedly was motivated by the desire to improve the quality of life of all citizenry, Cohen's makes a valid point in citing that he efforts contributed to the urban stress that working class families were already dealing with. However, the research would have definitely benefitted from more extensive empirical evidence or the corroboration of parallel

studies on the development of subcultures. In conclusion, Cohen's paper provides critical insights on the impact of urban redevelopment to various populations, the changes in stress that can occur, and the responsibility of planners in ensuring that programs benefit the public as a whole and not just a few. In today's context of ever-increasing cultural and socially diversity, subcultures will likely grow. In the context of its publication, there is no doubt that Cohen provided critical insights into the issue of not only youth culture and politics but also urban, growth and development concerns as well. The challenge now is not so much to control these developments but to be able to recognize such trends as a part of the growing diversity of modern societies and how to utilize them support growth and development.

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