

# Redefining the subcultural: the sub and the cultural

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Arguing against the previous research's presumption that the subcultural constitutes a single set of meaning, this article addresses the simple question of what constitutes the subcultural? What does it mean when we address an object, practice, identity, or meaning structure as subcultural? Through outlining three dominant strands in regards to how subcultural difference has been defined, the author argues that the previous research on subcultural theory has been preoccupied with a definition of subcultures as being a response to external structural problems, with the result that both the "sub" and the "cultural" become dependent variables. Drawing from his work on punks in Sweden and Indonesia the author argues that although differing, the different strands in regards to subcultural difference can nevertheless be combined into a refinement of subcultural theory that moves beyond style to how objects, actions, and identities are communicated, interpreted, and acted upon. Such a refinement, the author argues, provides for an analysis of plurality within the subcultural in relation to multiple structures of meaning. An increased focus on the prefix sub and its relation to the root cultural allows for a discussion of how the subcultural is symbolically extended and more so, how this involves both conflict and alternative interpretations.

Keywords: mainstream, punk, scene, subcultures, subcultural theory

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## ***Introduction***

There are in fact no masses; there are only ways of seeing people as masses. [...] What we see, neutrally, is other people, many others, people unknown to us. In practice, we mass them, and interpret them, according to some convenient formula. Within its terms, the formula will hold. Yet it is the formula, not the mass, which it is our real business to examine (R. Williams 1960:319).

In his book on subcultural theory, Patrick Williams (2011) argues that instead of just applying the term “subculture” to classify groups and social networks, we need to approach subcultures as a cultural phenomenon based on a shared meaning. Although I agree with Williams, the fact that he feels compelled to make such a claim is more revealing than the actual statement: The theoretical developments that have marked the concept of subculture during its seventy years of existence within social sciences have done little to strengthen the concept’s applicability. Instead the concept of subculture has largely become reduced to what Andy Bennett calls “a convenient ‘catch-all’ term for any aspect of social life in which young people, style and music intersect” (1999:599). Part of this is due to the increasing terminological inflation of the last three decades with concepts such as “communities,” “underground,” “neo-tribes,” “post-subcultures,” “club-cultures,” and “scene” often being used simultaneously and interchangeably with that of “subculture,” without clarifying the difference between them (cf. Fox, 1987, Lull 1987, Thornton 1995, O’Connor 2002). It is in the light of such a development that Williams’s call for a cultural approach to subcultures should be seen. Williams’s point is that if theoretically clarified, the concept of subculture can very well be used alongside for example “scene,” the latter to capture a social and vernacular aspect of subcultural participation and interaction, whereas “subcultures” refer to a cultural and theoretical aspect (2011:33ff).

Accordingly, in this article, my point of departure will be the simple question: What constitutes the subcultural? What does it mean when we address an object, practice, identity, or meaning structure as subcultural? Second, how does the prefix “sub” relate to the root “cultural”? In other words, how are differences and similarities structured? Third, I want to explore the potential plurality of the subcultural, that there can be

multiple definitions within the same subculture. Not only in terms of what the subculture is and should be, but also in regards to what it is not and what it should be separated from; what is in subcultural theory addressed as the mainstream. I start by outlining three dominant strands in subcultural theory in regards to difference, arguing that although subcultural difference is differently approached, it has similar consequences for how subcultural authenticity and subcultural meaning are approached. I argue that this is due to a preoccupation with subcultures as being a response to external structural problems rather than as having a relatively autonomous structure of meanings. The result of the former is that it renders both the “sub” and the “cultural” as dependent variables, that emphasis has been on style rather than meaning, and that the potential plurality of subcultural meaning becomes a theoretical blind spot: we cannot see that we cannot see it. In relation to this, I make use of the Durkheimian distinction between the sacred and the profane, to point to the subcultural as best understood as a meaning-focused, deeply existential boundary work between a differentiated sacred whose purity must be protected against a profane and profaning undifferentiated mainstream. Drawing from the empirical findings of my previous work on punks in Sweden and Indonesia, I provide a definition of the subcultural that relates to a structuring of both similarities and differences among participants as to how the subcultural and the mainstream are defined, interpreted and lived out. I refer to this as a matter of different subcultural positionings of the mainstream, one pointing to what is external to the subcultural, the other to a mainstream conceived of as internal to the subcultural. In so doing, I show that such a definition of the subcultural does not have to stray far from previous subcultural theories.

### ***Subcultural difference***

If there is one unifying trait throughout the development of subcultural theory, it is that subcultures are articulated as different from the conventional or normal, termed as the mainstream in later works on subcultures. How this difference is approached, however, differs significantly: For the major part of its existence within sociology, subcultural theory has centered on difference as being ascribed. Such

an idea of subcultural participants as being *already different* due to their class position, ethnicity, age, or to spatial dimensions can be traced from the seminal work on the urban, deviant, and lowbrow conducted by the Chicago school in the early 20th century. Among others (cf. Thrasher 1927, Cressey 1932), Robert E. Park (1915) argues that the physical geography of the city—in terms of its advantages and disadvantages, and its proximities and distances—gives rise to social groups being physically delineated by ascribed characteristics, geography, vocation, or class. To Park, this gives rise to different moral milieus within which each individual, including the deviants and marginalized, can locate oneself, feel at ease, and develop and pursue his or her individual dispositions. Hence, these moral worlds constitute a means for an inclusion of marginalized individuals as well as a means for solving problems associated with being marginalized. Albert Cohen (1955) furthers this claim in his work on delinquent gangs by suggesting that delinquency is a consequence of nonconformity in the sense of a norm-guided rejection of societal goal. Based on the assumption that all human action “is an ongoing series of efforts to solve problems” (1955:50), Cohen’s definition of subcultures is equated to their function to provide a solution to the inability to meet social norms and aspirations by replacing them with an alternative morality among others with similar problems and from similar circumstances. The response, argues Cohen, is to invert the moral standards of the larger society, making nonconformity a positive characteristic.

Even though it is highly critical of Cohen and in particular of functionalism, the theoretical work of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in Birmingham builds on a similar idea of an ascribed difference as being the foundation for subcultural formation. Following from a Marxist conception of culture as a way of experiencing life, albeit in a way defined from an already given and historical past, their major work *Resistance Through Rituals* (Clarke et al. 1976) defines subcultures as ideological reactions to material conditions experienced by the working class. Subcultures, this way, emerge as a response of the working class youth to the struggle through which the parent culture is defined and contained through the interests of the dominant culture. The reference to subcultures as part of a larger parent-culture also points to subcultures as the response to what

Phil Cohen ([1972] 2007:539) refers to as a “generational conflict.” Subcultural difference is thus ascribed not only on the basis of class but also in terms of age, with the working class youth resisting the dominant culture through consumerism—appropriating and subverting commodities and their meaning while at the same time differentiating themselves from their parents. Subcultural style, this way, becomes a symbolic solution to material problems experienced within a hegemonic order. Subcultural authenticity then becomes directly linked to this ascribed difference from the dominant. Dick Hebdige (1979), for example, argues that it is this initial difference from the dominant that is the primary determinant of style, as well as the fundamental bearer of subcultural meaning: Subcultures enact the search for and expression of the forbidden aspects of the dominant—primarily a consciousness of class. Consequently, for the CCCS subcultures become the signifier of what cannot otherwise be signified, or as Hebdige has famously put it, “Subcultures represent ‘noise’ (as opposed to sound): interference in the orderly sequence” (1979:90). Similar to Cohen’s (1955) argument, subcultural identities for the CCCS become a re-adjustment rather than a maladjustment: a solution to problems encountered by the parent culture yet lived out by the youth (cf. Gelder 2007:42, 89).

The second approach to subcultural difference retains the inversion of the positive and negative ends of the conformist/nonconformist binary and agrees that subcultures are fundamentally a matter of solving problems. Yet, this approach argues that subcultural difference is *achieved* rather than ascribed. Howard S. Becker (1963) argues, for example, that subcultures are defined as arising in response to the collective experience of problems, but this difference is not imposed on participants, rather it is by choice: The isolation and self-segregation of subcultural groups work to create boundaries to protect the subcultural participants and defend the collective from outside interference (1963:95f). For the jazz musician in Becker’s work this comes down to choosing between conventional commercial success, or “to stay true to artistic standards and then likely fail in larger society” (1963:83).

Becker’s focus on the maintenance of subcultural boundaries to the commercial, as well as the individual participants’ strategies to isolate and protect the creative and deviant, is crucial in understanding the development of subcultural theory as centered around style and commitment. The subcultural studies that ensued in the 1980s and

1990s challenged the CCCS's assumption of a stable and homogeneous subcultural style. Michael Brake (1985:15), for example, points out that subcultures are not static or homogeneous, but rather they include both complexity and diversity. His argument is similar to Becker's, although Brake starts with the assumption that subcultural participants share the same collective problem due to contradictions in the social structure. Varieties in subcultural styles are for Brake then a consequence of how these problems are lived out by the individual. This approach to subcultures as being structured through an achieved difference also represents a slight change in what the subcultural is opposing. Whereas in the work of the CCCS, Becker, and Cohen subcultures are placed in opposition to the dominant, normal, conventional or square, Brake's focus on the lived-out part of the subcultural places the subcultural as juxtaposed to the mainstream (cf. Hebdige 1979:102). Further, following from Becker's claim of staying true to artistic standards, authenticity is again tied to consistency throughout this difference, yet it is achieved through commitment to maintaining the opposition to the mainstream. As I argued above, for Hebdige, as well as for the rest of the CCCS (cf. Clarke et al. 1976, Clarke 1976), subcultural authenticity lies in the formation of style. This first "authentic" moment of resistance creates a distinction between the "originals"—the "self-conscious innovators" to whom style made sense—and the "hangers-on"—attracted by the mass mediated defusion and diffusion of this meaning (Hebdige 1979:122). Following the shift to approaching difference as being achieved rather than ascribed, subcultural heterogeneity is instead ordered through the extent to which participants resist the mainstream society. In relation to punk, for example, James Lull (1987), Kathryn J. Fox (1987), Stephen W. Baron (1989), and Lauraine Leblanc (1999) all argue that although all participants share punk's resistance to the dominant culture, what differs is the consistency between behavior and punk beliefs: To behave rightly is to prove commitment, and this in turn decides the social positions within the subculture, making stylistic diversity a matter of differences in commitment. The more radical style is in relation to the mainstream, the more committed participants are said to be. Subcultural difference to the mainstream is thus achieved through radical hairstyles, tattoos, giving up school, housing and employment, or through politics.

The third approach to subcultural theory builds on subcultural difference as achieved by the actions of subcultural participants, yet it does so by calling into question the objective status of both difference and the mainstream. This approach was largely initiated by postmodern subcultural theorists critical of the previous subcultural research for having constructed subcultural boundaries and authenticities, such as Steve Redhead (1990, 1993). Redhead (1990:25, cf. Widdicombe and Wooffitt 1995:19ff) proposes that authentic subcultures are a product of subcultural theories focused on resistance. Similarly, David Muggleton (2000:100f) argues that commitment as a basis for stratification risks obfuscating individual interpretations of style. The postmodern approach to subcultures and the call for a deconstruction of the boundary between an innovative inside and an exploitive outside resonate well with another major question of 1990s subcultural theory: whether subcultures can be seen as existing independently from, and in absolute opposition to, mass media and commercial interests. Ulf Hannerz (1992) and Sarah Thornton (1995) both question the objective status of the mainstream, as well as that of resistance. Thornton (1995:116ff), for example, argues that subcultures do not rise and grow mysteriously in isolation from the mass media (cf. Osgerby 2013). Rather, she argues that the media is part of creating subcultures. Hence, instead of presupposing a homogeneous conventional mainstream that the subculture is different from, Thornton (1995), followed by Muggleton (1997, 2000) and Ryan Moore (2005), argues that the mainstream is merely a subcultural other used to differentiate between the heterogeneous in-group and the homogeneous out-group, affirming its own distinctive character. Subcultural difference, in this sense, is neither ascribed nor achieved, but instead constructed and narrated (Gelder 2007). Subcultural difference becomes a matter of taking positions, of drawing boundaries between the conceived different and the equally conceived undifferentiated. As Hannerz puts it, “subcultures tend to be collectivized perspectives toward perspectives” (1992:78).

The stress on difference as narrated also marks a break with the postmodern approach by focusing on the similarities that draw participants together, rather than emphasizing difference, individuality, and heterogeneity. Paul Hodkinson refers to this as a “cultural substance” (2002:29); meanings and symbols might very well differ between participants, as well as their reasons for subcultural

participation in the first place, yet what ties these people together is a shared set of values and tastes. This is how cultural substance is contrasted to fluidity: through a focus on similarities rather than differences in terms of style, identity, commitment, and relation to the outside world. A central consequence of this perspective is the break with the CCCS's focus on youth, as subcultures as well as their participants are increasingly addressed as ageing (cf. Hodkinson 2011, Bennett and Taylor 2012). Williams' (2011) call for a cultural approach to the subcultural that opened this article refines this narrated difference further in addressing subcultural difference as a constructed and narrated boundary that exists in the shared interaction and beliefs among participants. This interaction among participants, however, is still based on a shared similarity that gives rise to discursive structures affecting how participants experience their world. Subcultural authenticity is thus still tied to commitment, albeit not to a subcultural core or resistance, but rather to subcultural identification. As Williams (2011:9f) puts it, authenticity is an ongoing process that is negotiated by individuals and groups.

### ***The subcultural fallacy in regards to plurality***

Building on the more recent developments in subcultural theory outlined above, I want to address what is still lacking in subcultural theory—that is, the failure to deal with plural mainstreams and plural structures of meanings within the same subculture. Unsurprisingly, this fallacy follows from how subcultural difference is defined: For the CCCS (Clarke et al. 1976; Hebdige 1979) and Cohen (1955), subcultures arise in order to solve a *particular* problem based on *general causes*. Accordingly, what are investigated are the forms of this reaction, as subcultural difference is ascribed a priori. Hence, the particular problem gives rise to a particular form of resistance. When plurality does appear it can similarly be dismissed as merely a sign of the subculture's destined decline due to the arrival of participants whose ascribed status differs from that of the "original" members (cf. Hebdige 1979:91, 103). Subcultural heterogeneity is thus explained away in terms of maintaining a single subcultural core established in relation to existing socio-economic structures, most often class (cf. Worley 2013).



Although the ensuing critique against the work of the CCCS focuses on the restriction of the subcultural to the working class, the definition of subcultural difference as achieved merely substitutes class with commitment. Subcultural heterogeneity is effectively explained away by pointing to a perceived consistency to a single authentic core. Punk studies constitute a striking example of this: Baron (1989:299) notes, for example, that the punk subculture is heterogeneous, and that the rebel is but one attitude, the subcultural allowing for plural responses to different goals and problems. However, on the same page he reduces these differences to one single meaning in defining them as a matter of different levels of commitment to resisting the dominant culture. Fox's (1987) distinction between core and peripheral participants based on their commitment is another example of explaining differences through a single uniform meaning. Fox differentiates here between "hardcores," who incorporate and embody punk as a permanent way of life by endorsing a radical style and a rejection of 'normal' life, and "softcores," who look the part but are not as ideologically committed and loyal as the hardcores. Leblanc makes a similar distinction, as she argues that "punk was, and is, about living out a rebellion against authority" (1999:34), while simultaneously ordering differences among the punks she studied by combining radical style with subcultural commitment, stating that "punks with mohawks and tattoos were deemed to be more committed to the scene than those who had 'convertible' haircuts" (1999:86, cf. Wallach 2005). Even when this stress on radical style is called into question, heterogeneities are ordered in relation to a single subcultural path of development (cf. Andes 1998, Dowd et al. 2004).

The third approach to subcultural difference breaks with the idea of authenticity as equaling commitment, defining subcultural styles and heterogeneities as a matter of fluidity and individuality. From such point of view, differences among participants are addressed first as a matter of style surfing and individual meaning (Muggleton 1997, Polhemus 1997) and second as the consequence of postmodern conditions such as the hyperinflation of images (Muggleton 2000, Clarke 2003). Collective differences among subcultural participants are thus explained as remnants of different reactions to socio-economic changes stemming from this postmodern condition (Moore 2004). The

more recent development of subcultural difference as narrated is in part a reaction to, and in part a continuation of, the work of postmodern subcultural theorists. Retaining that the boundary to the mainstream is constructed and far from fixed, internal differences are then linked to individuality and personal strategies *within* a similarly shared subcultural substance (Thornton 1997, MacDonald 2001, Hodgkinson 2002, Williams 2011). Style is similarly tweaked as part of a process that delineates the authentic and the inauthentic at the same time (Force 2009).

Counter to all of the above, my argument is that these differences, both among theoretical approaches and among the participants in their data, point to the impossibility of maintaining a single uniform subcultural logic. Having said that, I now turn to how these approaches can be combined so as to include heterogeneity in terms of how the subcultural and what it opposes are structured.

### ***The sub of the subcultural***

Thornton (1997:4) notes that traditionally, the “sub” in subcultural studies has referred to the subordinate, subaltern, and subterranean. This particularly relates to the work on subcultures in which participants are seen as included in “society” yet considered deviant and thus beneath it. The definition provided by Clarke et al. (1976:13), for example, is that the sub refers to subcultures as a part of larger cultural structures. This definition of the sub harks back to the initial definitions of subcultures as sub-societies (Green 1946, Gordon 1947), and remains an important implicit reference to the prefix sub as embedded in a wider whole. Unsurprisingly, for much of the work that followed from the CCCS, the sub has come to stand for the subversive as in the rebellious and resistant, in line with a definition of difference as achieved. The more recent work on subcultures adds to this in its emphasis on how the distance from the mainstream is constructed and communicated. Nancy MacDonald (2001) for example argues that the prefix sub refers to a contrastive dimension used to define and separate participants’ identities. Agency is then on the part of the participants, that they construct, portray and perceive themselves as a boundaried isolated group. The sub, MacDonald notes, is less a matter of being

different from or beneath other groups, but rather of a constructed separation. The sub, similar to authenticity, is thus being worked (cf. Williams & Hannerz 2014).

In my work on how punks in Sweden and Indonesia define and make sense of what punk is and should be, what it opposes, and what it should be against (Hannerz 2013, 2015), I show how punks mobilize and authenticate identities and styles through a boundary work that ensures that the mainstream remains both different and out of reach of the subcultural. Such an analysis draws from Hebdige's (1979:102) claim that a communicated and significant difference from the mainstream constitutes "the 'point' behind" both the representation of the collective as well as the division of the world according to this distinction between the different and undifferentiated. Yet, instead of combining this with the theories of Saussure and Gramsci, as Hebdige does, I suggest that we look to Emile Durkheim's (1915) idea of the foundation of religious thought as a division of the world into a sacred and a profane domain. Similar to how Durkheim speaks of the sacred and the profane as interrelated—the sacred is set apart by collective ideals specifying what must not come in contact with it—the mainstream and the subcultural are thus treated as relational by definition. Such a perspective combines Hebdige's idea of difference as the point behind subcultural structuring with Becker's stress on the maintenance of a boundary to what is perceived as threatening the subcultural, and finally with MacDonald's definition of the sub as a separation that is being continuously worked. By analyzing how punks mobilize and authenticate styles and identities, I point in total to six different definitions of the mainstream, each referring to a particular articulation of the subcultural sacred and with different consequences that enable some performances of punk to be authenticated while limiting or excluding others (Hannerz 2015:196). Drawing from extensive fieldwork and interviews with punks in nine different cities in two countries over the course of ten years, I show that how the mainstream is defined, communicated, and acted upon has direct consequences for how subcultural styles and identities are mobilized. When the mainstream is defined as an encompassing normal and undifferentiated outside, participants enact a script of a shared sense of always having been different so as to, one

the one hand, authenticate their own style and identities, and on the other, to establish and strengthen the definition of, and separation to, a mainstream characterized by a desire to be like everyone else. The consequence is that conspicuous style and standing out are seen as representative of the subcultural sacred: the consistency of an extrinsic display to a communicated intrinsic difference. (Hannerz 2015: 39-54)

Such a mobilization of difference contrasts deeply with that of the boundary to the mainstream as being worked internally to punk. This definition of the mainstream refers to the shallow punks, obsessed with conspicuous style and being different. This separation is in turn established and strengthened through a script of development by which the subcultural sacred is established as the conscious move beyond the mere being of punk to becoming part of a collective depth. This involves the active distancing from the shallow as participants invalidate their own initial subcultural participation as something superficial and embarrassing, so as to prove an achievement of depth. Authentications of styles and identities thus concern an absence of style, articulating dress and appearance as being practical and something that participants are largely oblivious to (Hannerz 2015:85-99).

The introduction of the Durkheimian notion of the sacred and the profane in relation to this communicated difference specifies that the binary distinction between the subcultural and the mainstream is not only meaningful, but that its structuring aspects penetrate social structures and categorizations, specifying who is in and who is out (Alexander 2006:569). It is this very differentiation that creates and defines what constitutes the undifferentiated “others” from which the subcultural is separated. *Consequently, I want to refine the definition of the mainstream so that it refers to the negative outcome of such a perceived and portrayed difference*, rather than being reduced to everything that is not subcultural. Instead of dividing the world into subcultural participants and a non-subcultural outside, the focus on the communicated part of both the subcultural and the mainstream means that the mirage of subcultural homogeneity can be abandoned, as focus is on the contrastive dimension of the relationship to the mainstream, rather than the mainstream as being something physically out there (cf. Hannerz 1992:81).

Further, if the mainstream is defined by the articulations of difference that set the subcultural apart, it means that it negatively represents such a distinctive status rather than everything that is not subcultural. This brings an important aspect to the subculture/mainstream binary, as prohibitions are not confined to ideological assumptions—e.g., the mass media and commercial forces diluting the authenticity of the resistance against the dominant—but rather refer to the formlessness of the profane that is seen to threaten the sanctity of the form (Douglas 1966). Among the punks I followed, for example, the commercial was differently defined and acted upon; whereas to some participants it was defined as institutions outside of punk seeking to capitalize on punk and turn it into another commodity, to others it was entirely kept within punk and referred to bands and participants that desired individual profit rather than a collective cause. Neither of these communicated and acted upon the commercial in terms of an anti-capitalist or anti-consumerist stance, but rather so as to order and secure the boundary between the set apart sacred and the undifferentiated mainstream. Different definitions of the mainstream thus gave rise to different mobilization of actions, styles and identities. My point here is that it is the same pattern of meaning that defines both the set apart and the undifferentiated; in this sense, the mainstream can only be traced by investigating how subcultural participants communicate their difference. This way, *the “sub” of the subcultural should be refined so as to point not so much to a subset of meaning within something larger, but rather to a defined subset of meanings that includes that which it opposes*. The subcultural defines the mainstream at the same time as it communicates and portrays its separation from it. It constructs and communicates what the undifferentiated others stand for. Rather than being embedded in a larger whole, the “sub” refers to the embedding of the mainstream in this distinction (Hannerz 2015:23). The mainstream is thus disenthralled from an inherent meaning as “the outside,” but also from a single meaning. Instead, it points to the mainstream as belonging as much to the subcultural as does the articulated difference. Having said that, I now want to move on to the similarities in structuring subcultural heterogeneities.

### ***The cultural of the subcultural***

Rather than centered on a single uniform core, the punk subculture in both Sweden and Indonesia were held together by similarly structured differences based on how the mainstream was positioned as either internal or external to punk. These similar differences were sustained regardless of participants' gender, class background, ascribed ethnic background, age and years of involvement (Hannerz 2015:81, 99). In mapping out these differences, I show that an exploration of subcultural meaning thus has to involve an examination of the subcultural formulas of classification and interpretation through which objects, actions, space, and identities are communicated, interpreted and acted upon. Jeffrey Alexander and Philip Smith (2003:12) refer to this as the relative autonomy of culture: to analytically separate the meanings from the objects, investigating the supraindividual "interpretative grids" that symbolically structure what we experience emotionally, cognitively, and morally (Alexander 2003:31). Accordingly the root "culture," in relation to the prefix sub, is best understood as an adjective—cultural—rather than as a noun. The cultural is not a thing or a dependent variable to be studied or grasped physically or metaphysically, but a contrastive dimensional thread that runs through *all* subcultural communication and interpretation (Appadurai 1998:12f, Alexander 2003:7). This means not only that subcultural difference is communicated, but that it refers to the communication of a significant difference, in the sense that it works to establish and strengthen the mobilization of subcultural identities and actions.

To merely argue that the subcultural is that which is conceived and communicated as different from an unspecified "other" would not be a satisfactory definition, as it would then be only another empty categorization. Moore (2005:250) notes, for example, that our contemporary society is obsessed with differentiation from the mass. Swimmers might, for example, define themselves as different from walkers and joggers, but this alone does not make them a subculture. What needs to be added is a patterned similarity in terms of adherence to a subcultural structure—that in order for a subcultural distinction to be significant, it requires depth. This is similar to what Hodkinson (2002:30) refers to as a cultural substance: subcultures are defined by a shared and distinctive set of tastes and values shared by participants.

Yet, whereas Hodkinson focuses mainly on substance as pointing to subcultural objects, identities, commitment, or relative autonomy, I want to focus on the subcultural structure of meaning within which objects and identities, as well as commitment and autonomy, are made subcultural; in short, how subcultural meaning is extended and materialized. This must include a dialectic approach to subcultural difference and similarity, investigating how different boundary works converge into similarly shared patterns of meaning within which the communicated difference to a mainstream is both meaningful and reproduced (cf. Geertz 1973:211ff, Lamont 2000). It becomes a combination of what Arjun Appadurai refers to as the differences that express and mobilize group identities, and the similarities Clifford Geertz talks about in terms of extending these through analogies and metaphors. To Geertz metaphors and analogies work to extend the boundaries of the cultural system; subcultural actions and objects are thus performed as having a resonance with, and extending the binary logic of, the background. Action and objects then become “an act of recognition, a pairing in which an object (or an event, an act, an emotion) is identified by placing it against the background of an appropriate symbol” (Geertz 1973:215). To argue that actions and objects are subcultural is to say that they are based on, refer to, and contribute to a collective understanding of the separation from a defined mainstream. If validated as successful, they then work to extend the patterned representations of the background as the performance is fused with it, and thus mobilize subcultural identities or styles (Alexander 2004). Hence subcultural representations are used to establish boundaries between real and fake along the subcultural/mainstream binary as they draw upon an internal meaning that is part of the boundary work to the outside (Fine 1998:138).

It is through this relation between the prefix sub and the root cultural that the different definitions of the mainstream within punk outlined above should be assessed. What these definitions of the mainstream, as well as their associated scripts, have in common is that they work to separate the set apart sacred from the undifferentiated profane, the particular from the general. Where they differ is in how this distinction is perceived and portrayed: different definitions of the mainstream bring different articulations of the subcultural sacred, as well as of the prohibitions meant to protect the latter. By combining



the similar consequences of different enactments of punk in my more recent work (Hannerz 2015), I point to how punk is structured through interrelated patterns of meaning. The first of these patterns combines different definitions of the mainstream as the normal, the obedient, and the commercial through a consistency in terms of how the subcultural binary is worked and extended: Regardless of whether the mainstream is people in general who strive to be like everyone else, the homogeneous mass that is too afraid to break free from the restrictions that keeps them in place, or if it concerns institutions that seek to profit from punk, these definitions identify the boundary to the mainstream as concerning what is perceived as external to punk. Punk in this sense is the absence of outside agents, be they passive consumers or active exploiters. This pattern works to extend the subcultural scripts that mobilize the exclusion of these mainstreams as well as set the groundwork for subcultural identification, communication, and authentication to become a quest for individual rights. To be punk in this sense is to physically and symbolically take on the mainstream in order to secure a number of basic individual rights: the right to be different, the right to be yourself, and the right to do what you want. Beside the analogous extension of punk to the freed individual, there is a similar analogy to that of standing out; the subcultural sacred is established, secured and defended in a direct confrontation with the mainstream, either on the street, in school, or in media. Indeed, the most revered bands in relation to this subcultural pattern were those who had made a career, sold a lot of records, and still refused to sign to a major label, participate in morning TV shows, or if they had done so, refused to change or give up their subcultural ideas, style and identities. I have referred to this pattern as a convex subcultural pattern because it bends towards the outside (Hannerz 2015: 82-5).

In sharp contrast to this subcultural pattern stands a second subcultural pattern that instead combines the distinction against a shallow, style-centered, hedonist and dependent mass of punks: Punks in general are here perceived to have destroyed what punk should be through their focus on standing out, having fun, and thinking of, and doing for, themselves. Calls are made to establish a physical separation from the mainstream punks through an emphasis on a collective freed space: *the scene*. The definite use of *the scene* is also used to capture a translocal character of the subcultural sacred (Hodkinson 2002, Moore 2007): it



refers to all participants in the world who fight to achieve distance from the mass of punks. Politics are here claimed and authenticated as a vital tool for ensuring an equal and emancipating space, yet at the same time they are predominantly used to separate between participants, rather than liberating them. Freedom, in this sense, is defined as a collective freedom from, rather than a freedom for. When this pattern is enacted there are no distinctions or prohibitions aimed at what is deemed as external to the subcultural. Instead, the scripts through which participants mobilize and authenticate their subcultural identities rest on a reactive stance towards punk: Dress, appearance, objects, politics and actions are authenticated as *not* dressing, looking, doing, and thinking like the defined mainstream punks. At the same time as this draw upon the boundary against an internal mainstream, it establishes and strengthens the point behind such a boundary work. As long as the defined non-subcultural remains outside of the subcultural, it has little, if any, meaning within a concave pattern. Lastly, the internal distinction of the background and its foreground scripts all have the consequence of subordinating the individual to the collective: individual consistency becomes something polluting as a continuous development, and allegiance to the rules and regulations of the collective are to ensure the maintenance and protection of the scene. I refer to this as a concave subcultural pattern as it bends inwards (Hannerz 2015:131-3).

This similar structuring of the subcultural heterogeneities is the cultural dimension of the subcultural. There were no difference for example between how punks in Sweden and Indonesia defined, communicated, and acted upon the mainstream, despite the extensive socio-economic, geographic, and infrastructural differences between the two cultures. This cultural dimension extends the meaning of the prefix sub as it involves what Derrida (1988:18) refers to as the “citational” and “iterable” quality of speech, success being a matter of repeating that which is already coded and established. Geertz (1973:211) makes a similar note in arguing that the success or failure of symbolic extensions of the known to the as of yet unfamiliar depends on whether they manage to represent an analogous relation to a patterned set of meanings that are already ordered. If the analogy appears, the already known is extended to include the unfamiliar, and if it does not appear then it has failed (cf. Alexander and Mast 2006). To act within the subcultural is to enact the subcultural pattern that precedes

or is superimposed on the act. It becomes a performance against these background representations of meaning (Alexander 2004:529).

Hence, to return to the matter of depth, to argue for a subcultural structure to be significant is to say that it extends the distinction from an undifferentiated mainstream to a pattern of articulated differences that address a variety of styles—including actions, objects, appearances, and tastes—interpreted and validated through a shared language (i.e., a patterned set of meanings within which actions and objects are seen to fit) (Fine 1998:102). The argument that extensions of the binary are what distinguish the subcultural means that if we are to speak of male-, class-, or youth-based subcultures it is because these distinctions are articulated as analogous to the distinction between the subcultural and the mainstream. As Macdonald (2001:150) notes, what goes for one subcultural group does not have to be the same for another, nor, in the light of the discussion above, does it have to be the same *within* the same subculture. The deeper the subcultural structure, the more areas of everyday life are integrated and made to fit, making it possible to differentiate between shallower or deeper subcultural structures in terms of salience and extension (Hannerz 1992:72f). Swimmers' possible distinction from walkers or runners would thus be significant if that distinction was extended analogically to, for example, prohibitions regarding dress and action: e.g., not eating land-living animals, not wearing colors other than shades of blue and green, not having a wet hair look, etc.. Consequently, rather than Paul Willis' (1978:198ff) famous reference to objects being homologous depending on their objective possibilities, the analogous extensions of something symbolically representing something else rather points to such successful extensions appearing *as if* they had these possibilities (Trondman et al. 2011:584).

### **Concluding remarks**

Throughout this article I have sought to argue for a refinement of subcultural theory that moves beyond style to how objects, actions, and identities are communicated, interpreted, and ultimately acted upon. The foundation for this subcultural structuring rests on an articulated difference to the undifferentiated, or what is here referred to as the mainstream. It is a boundary work that defines the set apart sacred

by its distance from the undifferentiated profane. This distinction is extended through prohibitions concerning the profane, specifying who and what can come in contact with the sacred. These prohibitions, and the sacred characteristics that they specify, are the deep meaning structure of the subcultural. The articulation of these prohibitions, and thus also the characteristics that are set apart as belonging to the sacred, are dependent on the distinction between the subcultural and the mainstream: What is conceived of as constituting the latter has consequences for what needs to be protected and from whom.

In relation to this, I have argued that subcultural identities and authenticities as performances rely on these structures to be claimed, validated, or refuted. This implies a dialectic process between difference and similarity, a definition of a shared subcultural sacred through the prohibitions to the profane mainstream. Hence, both the sacred and the profane are constructed through these prohibitions. This, I argue, has consequences for how we can approach how subcultural participants perceive, interpret, and act upon a defined mainstream, but also how objects, actions, and identities are authenticated or invalidated. Further, different interpretations and definitions of these analogies bring differences in terms of subcultural structures. Different patterns can be differently symbolically extended, fusing some actions while dismissing others. When extended through analogies these differences bring about different subcultural authenticities.

Given Bennett's claim that the subcultural risks becoming a watered down catch-all phrase, my aspiration with this article is to prove the opposite: That the subcultural as a concept has an important place in the analysis of the ordering of styles, identities and actions. In so doing, it relies on Williams's claim that the cultural aspect of the concept needs to be further stressed. As Matthew Worley (2013:626) argues, whereas focus has been on the meaning projected onto the subcultural, we must not forget the meaning drawn from it. The refinement presented here does not deviate much from previous subcultural theory; instead, by focusing on the prefix *sub* and its relation to the root *cultural*, I have shown how the concept can be developed so as to explain differences between subcultures in terms of these structures of interrelated meanings: Participants extend the subcultural binary through analogous binary correspondences that mobilize action, objects, and

identities as subcultural. At the same time, this approach provides for an analysis of plurality within the subcultural in relation to multiple structures of meaning, allowing for a discussion of how the subcultural is symbolically extended and how this process is far from given as it involves both conflict and alternative interpretations. From such a point of view there are no subcultural objects, only meanings; thus, the same object can have a number of possible meanings even within the same subcultural structure. Consequently, such an approach is, unlike previous subcultural theories, able to address and assess subcultural heterogeneities without having to champion the individual, fluidity of style, or one group's commitment and authenticity.

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