

What to retain?

(mid-term revision)

What does this presentation do?

- In this slide show, I propose a set of strategies which will help you systematize the texts we read and concepts we discussed.
- By now, you might feel that you need to relate everything that was said into a coherent structure which would help you remember and work with crucial terms and ideas.
- This presentation will try to satisfy the demand.

I suggested that with every text, you ask a set of questions which guide your reading and help you place the text within a larger context:

- **When** was the text written? **Who** wrote it? What school/tradition/discipline is s/he affiliated to?
- **What problem** did s/he study and why?
- How did s/he approach it? Consider 1) **the disciplinary background** (sociology, philosophy, journalism etc.), 2) **the method** (How was the research executed, how was data collected etc.), and 3) **the style** of the text (How is it written? How is information distributed in the text and communicated to the reader? Who is the supposed reader?)

The Chicago school

- The texts by Park & Cressey represent the early approaches to subcultures (the Chicago school).
- The Chicago Department of Sociology was established in 1892 (!).
- In the early 20th century, Chicago was a vibrant industrial city which attracted waves of immigrants.
- The booming and changing city proposed new issues for the study of modern life and modernity as such; alternative lifestyles and new social types included.
- Proponents of the Chicago school focused on the problem of 'deviance' that seemed to be somehow stimulated or attracted by the city.

How to study city life?

- Park's text gives you a good idea about the dilemmas that early scholars faced – the city proposed many unprecedented paradoxes: proximity/segregation, ghettoization/mobility, norm/exception...
- These extremes were somehow related and they offered many problems to tackle. The early scholars had to come up with ***the right set of questions to ask and methods to use*** in order to propose suitable representations of the city life and explanations of phenomena.
- Sociology was just one such approach – distinct from e.i. criminology, psychology or even literature – and it had to establish its specific set of concerns (what is it that we study and how do we study it?)

Initial doubts and findings

- Park's text manifests that this process was not as easy as we might think. First, there were nebulous observations out of which Park distilled some points of focus and directions to follow. 'Look, there are the zones of "vice, crime and poverty" that might need our attention!' he suggested.
- However, his approach betrays that he was not sure how to tackle the problem he identified – ***different moralities*** (nowadays, we would rather speak of *different lifestyles*). Was it a question for biology, psychology, psychiatry, philosophy, criminology? He mixed them all as he was trying to explain that deviance must be understood as a normal component of city life.
- What *deviance*? Well, he meant those people who differed from the 'norm' for many reasons.

The question of method

- Cressey showed that probably the best way to understand people who seem different from the 'norm' is to spend time with them, talk to them and to other 'experts' (such as social workers, police officers etc.).
- He combined both field work (observation of practices) with interviews (with direct participants as well as second-hand informants) and article journals (secondary sources).

The logic of difference

- He thus discovered that what might seem as a deviant, risky and morally dubious lifestyle is actually *a sophisticated practice with its own rules*, gains and losses (he observed young women who danced with strange men for small change).
- He found out that dancers' stories showed similarities so there was *a pattern* which could be discerned: the life cycles of a taxi dancer.
- One can thus predict who becomes a taxi dancer (a second generation immigrant, not necessarily poor, with family problems, often having previous sexual experience etc.) and what may happen as she joins in.

Structural conditions and agency

- There are two main directions of sociologists' concern:
 - 1) first, they are sensitive to ***structural conditions*** meaning they look at how relations influence what one does/is (family background, work and leisure activities, circle of acquaintances, education, ethnic identity, age etc.)
 - 2) second, they consider how one negotiates these conditions and ***acts*** to gain advantage and control his/her life (strategies, games, intelligence etc.)

Structural conditions and agency - applied

- So even if two dancers have the same position in the structure (work, education, health etc.), one of them may 'succeed' and the other may 'fail' – in the case of taxi dancers, success/failure are navigated by the expectations of the 'norm' – one dancer may get married while another may turn to prostitution.
- Referring to the *social ladder*, these *paths* are seen as 'upward' and 'downward mobility'.

Categories of social positioning

- The dancers *move* in many senses: across the dance floor, between dance halls within the city, between cities... but they also *migrate socially* – it is this last movement that interests Cressey.
- Their status changes with respect to their interactions as they cross ‘racial’ borders, zones in the city (less or more respectable dance halls), as they attach themselves to men and receive their social positioning as if by contagion (e.i. by marrying a Filipino) but they can also move backwards and partially regain their status in the dominant society (e.i. by adopting the racist attitude).

Drawing a map of differences

- It is not the individual dancer that is the main concern of the Chicago school researcher – dancers could be replaced by drug takers, hustlers or jazz musicians – but rather *their lifestyle, their ‘rules of the game’*. Why do they act as they do? What do they gain? How come they don’t aspire to living as ‘normal people’ do? What keeps them away from this ‘ideal’?
- Finally, one could hear a tone of sympathy that the researchers had for their subjects of research – some of them even became enthusiastic billiard players or jazz club visitors and understood that ‘deviants’ have their own systems of merits, their slang and style... that these were ***cultures within cultures – subcultures***.

Subcultures – lost & found

- When you observe the life of the term ‘subculture’, you may see that it appears and fades out at particular moments and places.
- Subcultures re-emerged in the post-war (WWII) Britain both as a practice (Teddies, Greasers, Mods, Rockers etc.) and a domain of study.
- The next school we consider is the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (since 1964).

The Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies

- Initially, the CCCS located in Birmingham was not a traditional department but rather a combination of alternative educational institutions.
- Some of its early figures were of *working-class background* and were deeply concerned about the study of their class, its history, its cultural meanings and future as well as with adult education (nowadays, we would call it *activism*).

Resistance through Rituals (1976)

- The texts we read (on the Mods) make a part of the collection of working papers written by the graduate students at CCCS (Cohen's text is extensively cited there).
- They used to meet to discuss the topics of utmost importance and often related to ***their own identities*** (as working-class young men, feminist women, Brits of 'color' etc.).
- As the issues they discussed could not have been divorced from their personal concerns, they did not see them only as a study material but as ***a matter of politics*** as well. They shared passion for the New Left politics concerned mainly with identity issues (politics as a part of life strategies, negotiations of social and cultural issues not just parliamentary politics and government composition).

Resistance through Rituals II.

- Being young themselves – and aspiring scholars – they observed what was said about young people in the media and by other ‘expert’ voices (educators, politicians, doctors etc.).
- They proposed new perspectives on the prospects of the British youth (concerned primarily with class and later also with gender and ‘race’).

Resistance through Rituals III.

- So what were the problematic claims that they *questioned/opposed* in their research?
- **The ‘affluence-consensus-embourgeoisement thesis’:** many commentators insisted that after WWII, life standard rose significantly and that the strict class division characteristic for Britain was losing relevance.
- The changes were most visibly manifested on the youth – they earned more, they had more leisure time, they studied longer, the market catered to them so they shopped enthusiastically for items such as records and clothes or could at least afford to buy a cinema ticket, milkshakes in bars or listen to jukebox.

Resistance through Rituals III.

- Of course, many commentators were concerned that the youth was getting out of touch with the culture of their parents, *the tradition was being eroded*.
- The early CCCS figures Williams, Hoggart, Thompson perceived that the traditional working-class culture was being replaced by the mass produced culture and that Britain was getting Americanized.
- We'll hear more arguments problematizing the 'mass culture' coming from the Frankfurt school (Adorno, Kracauer, Benjamin).

Resistance through Rituals IV.

- Next generations at the CCCS were less concerned about the disappearance of the working-class tradition. They rather observed that particular groups of young men paid a lot of *attention to style and territory demarcation*. They creatively used mass produced items and thus *reworked working-class tradition into something else*.
- Not even the CCCS scholars could figure out the political potential of these new style-obsessed, energized young men occupying the street. 'Will they be able to articulate an agenda (a political program) for the working class addressing the new problems? Or maybe this is not their concern at all and they 'fight' through other means...,' the CCCS scholars thought.

The new approach to subcultures

- ‘It is their *style* that is politically meaningful. Style is their mode of communication, their new sign language which we have to read.’ So the main method associated with the CCCS was not urban ethnography (as was the case with the Chicago school) but rather *a combination of Marxist (actually Gramscian) analysis with structuralism* (a theoretical approach combining anthropological research with linguistics).
- Basically, what you may want to remember is that the CCCS scholars relied more on ***interpretation*** than field work or statistical data. They departed from observation, newspaper articles and their knowledge of Gramsci’s theory. The result was a playful mix which, when applied to subcultural style, proposed to offer ‘*readings*’ of *the style* as if style was a text on a page.
- A subculture was ‘read’ as a coherent group listening to a specific music, wearing particular clothing items, meeting at specific places... all this was meaningful, ***a system of signs***.

Subculture – a concept I.

- You may observe that for the CCCS, subculture had a different meaning than for the Chicago school. There were other concerns at play that charged the concept differently. In other words, there were other debates going on under the heading of subculture, other theories and methods were employed, different situations were observed, different politics pursued.
- You may rightfully ask whether there is any connection whatsoever between the concept of subculture by the Chicago school and the CCCS. Why should the two be tied together into one line of ‘subculture studies’?

Subculture – a concept II.

- If the Chicago school was interested in *mapping the logic of deviant lifestyles*, the CCCS was using the research of subcultures as a way to *attack the idea of the 'norm'* which correlated with the middle-class standard masked as the universal benchmark of acceptable living.
- The CCCS adopted the theoretical weaponry of Antonio Gramsci (an Italian Marxist philosopher imprisoned under Mussolini) to support their views on the changes in British society. They accepted the crucial Marxian premises of the class struggle, of the working class exploitation and its suppression under the dominant culture. Moreover, they incorporated Gramsci's innovations which ascribe more agency to the oppressed.

The CCCS subculture and identity politics I.

- As you probably understood by now, the point of the CCCS research was not just to 'catch' reality by the most suitable representations (concepts) and provide convincing explanations (theories) of social processes.
- Rather, their mission was to understand the transformations of the working-class identity and propose how it could be politicized. They felt that the problems of the working class were not solved but simply reshaped (remember Cohen's critique of redevelopment which resulted in disintegration of the communal and family ties, changes in the character of work made small businesses disappear etc.)

The CCCS subculture and identity politics II.

- Both Cohen and Hebdige understood subculturalists as young men struggling for the new 'face' of their class identity. Their 'play' with costumes, bikes and music was understood as a possible rehearsal for the future (Mods were testing the 'upward' while Skinheads the 'downward' option – just like with taxi dancers, we can think of different paths along the social ladder).
- These gestures were seen by the CCCS scholars as politically meaningful, as ways by which young working-class men ***symbolically negotiate*** their social position in the changing society.

The CCCS subculture and identity politics III.

- If you think of a way ***to represent social worlds*** (a ladder, a chessboard, a network, a map?), there are marks for *class* but there are also other influential categories – gender, ‘race’, ethnicity, sexuality, nationality, age, health etc.
- Some CCCS scholars argued that subcultures cannot be studied solely through the category of class. Subculture is not an exclusive cultural expression of working-class young men. We will continue following these lines of argumentation.

To be continued...

- The point of this presentation was:
 - 1) to offer you guidelines for ordering the material you read within the field of 'subculture studies, studies of youth and popular culture'
 - 2) to get acquainted with two schools whose perspectives on subcultures were influential
 - 3) to understand that debates on subcultures emerged in particular contexts and historical situations
 - 4) You may thus ask 'Did subcultures exist before they were studied or are they rather a product of such study?'