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Introduction

The roots of British youth culture

It was an American sociologist Talcott Parsons who coined the phrase ‘youth culture’ in 1942; but, appearing in a learned journal in the United States, and at a time when the youth of Europe were being conscripted into military units and taking part in a monumental European and global war, the term does not seem to have reached Britain for over twenty years. In this country it was first taken up by sociologists; most notably, Bryan Wilson, a Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford, who pioneered discussion of British youth culture in a series of newspaper articles that appeared in the mid-1960s. What Wilson meant by the term was the autonomous behaviour of the young and his definition was so broad (and imprecise) that it included various categories of working-class youth (Mods and Rockers, and teenagers, for example), as well as middle-class students. It is tempting to say his use of the term was so elastic because it enabled him to include whichever groups of youth he wanted to write about that week.

There were other sociologists at the time who were drawn to this subject and, like Wilson, were trying to extract from newspaper and other media reports of youth activity deeper meaning and wider significance. The most celebrated group of pioneering ‘youth culture’ researchers were based at the University of Birmingham in a new Department, an offshoot of the English Department, called The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS). Set up in 1962 by a new Professor, Richard Hoggart, whose own roots lay in working-class Hunslet, a suburb of Leeds, it recruited as its first Research Fellow a schoolteacher who hailed from the West Indies and who had written articles on ‘teenagers’ for leftist periodicals like Socialist Commentary. His name was Stuart Hall. Together, Hoggart and his understudy Hall proceeded to recruit a growing body of postgraduate researchers to work on such innovative research topics as Pop Music with special reference to Birmingham; Women’s Magazines; Student Protest; Hippy Culture; and Skinheads.

It was sociologists, therefore, who pioneered the study of youth culture in Britain during the 1960s and the nature of this research was very amorphous and, it appears, highly influenced by reports in the media. Graduate students at Birmingham, for example, were asked to analyse contemporary newspaper accounts of the student protests of the era and to construct dissertations from these impressionistic sources. Already by the late 1960s
journalists were generating escalating column inches on Mods, Rockers, the Beatles, Swinging London, Hippies, the Rolling Stones, student protest at the London School of Economics (LSE) and other universities; and even some historians were getting in on the act. The Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge, Herbert Butterfield, wrote scholarly articles on youth culture – for example, ‘The Discontinuities between the Generations in History: their Effect on the Transmission of Political Experience’, first delivered as the Rede Lecture in Cambridge in 1971. Another Cambridge historian, J. H. Plumb, whose main research was on eighteenth-century political history, toured America in the late 1960s and wrote about Hippies. Cambridge was, in fact, brimming with scholars who were intrigued by youth culture. Besides Butterfield and Plumb there was Philip Abrams, a sociologist at Peterhouse who wrote learned articles on the concept of ‘generations’, which included discussion of youth culture. Professor Denis Brogan, a Professor of Politics at Cambridge and a Fellow of Peterhouse, wrote a regular column in The Spectator, in which he frequently ruminated on youth culture. His topics ranged from the Paris students’ revolt of May ’68 to Cambridge students’ lifestyles and ‘morals’. Even the austere constitutional historian Professor Geoffrey Elton, who was disturbed by the student protests of the late 1960s, was moved to write letters to The Times on the subject and to allude to youth culture in his lectures and books.

Beyond the Ivory Towers of Cambridge and Birmingham during the 1960s youth culture had embedded itself in people’s minds, and was projected before the public not only in newspapers but on television. Everyone in Britain who could read or had access to a television set knew about youth culture. To contemporaries, it meant the Beatles, who emerged in 1963 and generated a form of fan worship not seen in Britain before or since. Crowds of teenage girls queued at airport terminals in Britain, and in the United States, to wave to their pop heroes and to scream at them. Stadiums in the United States were so packed with screaming fans that the band could not hear themselves play and, exasperated, they retired from touring altogether in 1966. British Beatle fans were not as noisy as American teenagers, and there was no fanatical response to the Beatles here as there was in the United States, where the Ku Klux Klan started burning their records during an American tour in 1966 when John Lennon told a journalist that the Beatles were bigger than Jesus Christ. Even so, British Beatlemania did generate some disturbing behaviour. At several concert venues they played during 1963 and 1964, it was discovered afterwards that the seats were stained with urine.

was transformed into a national youth cult stretching from Stoke Newington to Scotland and touching great provincial cities like Manchester, where the Mods wore their hair long to distinguish themselves from the southern Mods on display every week in the teen pop programme *Ready Steady Go!* Arguably, the Mods were a more important cultural phenomenon than the Beatles because they generated the first geographically mobile, national youth movement that empowered thousands of youths and young females. In essence, these Mod youths were trying to create new youth communities by the sea, well away from the postwar suburbs their parents had been relocated to after the Blitz. Certainly, the Mods were an organic youth movement that emerged from working-class communities, including ethnic communities (the pioneers were young Jewish boys like Mark Feld, who transformed himself from a cheeky teenage Mod of north London c.1960 into the first Glam rock superstar of the 1970s, Marc Bolan). Moreover, it could be argued that the Beatles did not generate a youth culture at all; merely a youth audience of passive teenage (mainly female) fans who became superfluous when the group stopped touring Britain in 1965.

By the late sixties, British youth culture had become synonymous with drug use, promiscuity, and student unrest. In London, the London School of Economics was forced to close for over three weeks in early 1969 when student demonstrators occupied its buildings, and, two years earlier, a porter had died during one confrontation there. There was even a debate in the House of Commons on the ‘trouble’ at the LSE in 1969, after two of its lecturers had been sacked and following further outbreaks of student discontent. The ‘Establishment’ were so worried about youth culture they decided to interview one of its leaders in July 1967. The interview was filmed and shown in a peak-time slot one Monday evening. It appeared on ITV’s award-winning current affairs programme *World in Action* and the 30-minute interview was with a 23-year-old pop star who, in fact, had been a student at the London School of Economics in the early 1960s. When he left after just two years, one of his tutors told a colleague: ‘... came to see me today. He says he’s leaving the LSE and wants to join a Rhythm and Blues band. A pity. He’s a bright student. Can’t see there’s any money in that.’ But the student in question was a millionaire when he met the new Editor of *The Times*, William Rees-Mogg, two church leaders and a senior politician in July 1967. He flew into the meeting, held on the lawn of a country house in Essex, by helicopter. He was regarded by those who questioned him as a leader of the ‘new youth culture’ and they wanted to find out whether it was a threat to the stability, and institutions, of British society. His name was Mick Jagger and several million TV viewers watched and listened on that Monday evening in July 1967, as he expounded his views on the new youth culture.
Historians and British Youth Culture

How have historians defined youth culture? It has to be said at the outset that several historians of early twentieth-century Britain have tended to shy away from using the term ’youth culture’; no doubt because it is linked so closely with the decades of affluence and classlessness, the 1950s and 1960s, in scholarly surveys of postwar Britain. Thus, while historians of early twentieth-century Britain have undertaken pioneering research on youth – primarily working-class youth – and have shed light on their labour market behaviour, work cultures, spending behaviour (though not their saving patterns), youth movements, delinquency, smoking habits, gang life and so on, they have not explored how far youth culture transcended class experiences; and how far it represents new ways of living pursued by different categories of youth; students and young workers, for example. Indeed, during the 1920s and 1930s, youth of different social classes in Britain were involved in creative collaborations with each other. These interactions strongly suggest there was a conscious attempt during these years to construct a youth culture well away from the conventional youth arenas of cinemas and dance halls.

The following study, therefore, takes a different tack from existing historical and sociological research on twentieth-century youth culture by identifying and tracing two strands in twentieth-century youth history. Firstly, the book charts the emergence of youth lifestyles in mainstream society that were shaped by material changes in society – the expansion of white-collar work, for example, between the Wars, helped generate female youth lifestyles such as the Flapper. Much later, during the 1960s, the vibrant cultural world of ‘Swinging London’ generated, though not in the ways conventionally argued, the Mod culture of London and the provinces. Secondly, there is a more subterranean world of youth culture largely hidden from conventional social histories of twentieth-century Britain; namely, the world of middle-class or elite youth, who were often shaping youth culture as a conscious pursuit of ‘new ways of living’. This involved extensive travel, cultural contact with youth of other nations and other social classes, and a highly innovative marrying of high culture and folk culture (intellectual discussions were combined with arduous hikes; performances of choral music with folk dance; Morris dances in genteel Cotswold villages with folk dance tours of working-class communities in Northern England). Is it fanciful to draw a distinction between urban youth lifestyles and a broader category of youth activity involving a pursuit of ‘new ways of living’? The following study will attempt to draw out the differences between these two manifestations of twentieth-century British youth culture, by surveying a wealth of evidence which does seem to suggest two enduring and meaningful pathways through the bricolage
of twentieth-century youth culture. Certainly, it is far too crude to regard all youth experiences as being shaped by class, region, gender, and work. The history of twentieth-century youth culture cannot be conceptualised using such blunt categories without losing a strong sense of the dynamics and vibrancy within youth communities, even in a decade such as the 1920s when class divisions in British society were well defined.27

The central aspect of twentieth-century youth culture explored in this survey, therefore, is the creativity underpinning modern British youth cultures.28 As will be revealed, highly creative student movements have shaped youth culture at certain periods (the 1920s, for example); but youth movements run by adults, such as the Boy Scouts or Boys’ Brigade, do not appear in this study as they were targeted at adolescents and one of the central claims of this book is that youth culture is largely shaped by 18–25-year-olds.29 It is not simply a story of the young controlling and promoting their own ‘ways of living’. In certain environments youth culture was held back – in Northern Ireland, for example – by the patriarchal nature of the society and by the ubiquitous religious influences being targeted at the young. But, as Chapter 4 argues, even in traditional societies like early twentieth-century Northern Ireland youth were endeavouring to define and pursue a culture of their own, and, indeed, were hijacking institutions run by adults to pursue their own preoccupations and lifestyles.

Youth culture, this study suggests, transcends class; but age caused fractures within British youth culture at certain periods. The concept of generation is a slippery one. Bryan Wilson wrote of the youth culture of the 1960s as a ‘War of the Generations’ and this was echoed by politicians and journalists during the decade, some of whom saw youth pop stars such as Mick Jagger as harbingers of a new generational divide in British society.30 It is also the case, however, that in the universities a generation lasted just three years. Moreover, within the student body there could be quite distinct generations at a given period. The Ex-Service students who entered British universities in 1919 are a case in point. The tensions between these students who had been in the First World War and the students who arrived straight from school in 1919 were significant and are explored in Chapter 2.31

The chronology and themes of the book

The following study will establish that the history of youth culture in twentieth-century Britain has a definite beginning around 1920. At this stage, there were youth cultures rather than a youth culture; but those who organised youth clearly had ideas and visions and they have left a significant amount of material for the archival historian to probe. Much of this material will be utilised for the first time in this study.32 The book is a thematic study concerned with what Arthur Marwick has neatly called ‘youth as agent,
not as object’. Its protagonists include university students as well as the working-class youths who have received most attention from social historians. The prime focus is on the 18–25 age-group and, moreover, those who were single; but it is not primarily a study of working-class youth; nor of the teenager, though individual chapters cover these subjects. The core of the book probes the individuals, institutions and cults that have shaped the lives of the under 25s in Britain during the period from c.1920 down to the late Sixties – a secret world, in many respects, before the Second World War.

Social commentators of the 1950s and 1960s seem to have been oblivious of developments in youth culture, especially in the universities, before the Second World War. By the mid-1950s youth culture meant Elvis Presley and the Teddy Boy and was seen as synonymous with popular music, and delinquency. As John Lennon once observed: ‘Before Elvis there was nothing.’ But learned academics ought to have known better. Moreover, they only seem to have scratched the surface of the youth culture of their own day. Richard Hoggart, for example (the focus of Chapter 6), wrote about the Teddy Boy in his classic book *The Uses of Literacy* (1957); but in a severely critical way. Hoggart depicted Teddy Boys as mindless yobs who spent all their free time in coffee bars and whose only contribution to society was to tip money into jukeboxes and, occasionally, to wiggle their hips to a song they liked. Hoggart, a pioneering ‘cultural studies’ scholar, saw youth culture as an alien presence in Britain; an unwelcome aspect of the so-called ‘Americanisation’ of British society during the 1950s. But this was far from the truth. It had a lineage in Britain stretching back to the 1920s, and the youths he observed in milk bars during the Fifties were far less liberated than he suggested. As they dropped their spending money into the jukeboxes they were probably thinking sombre thoughts. These were the unfortunate youths who were drafted into the armed services at 18 and were sent all over the world to undertake their two years of compulsory military service; a feature of their lives that Hoggart totally ignored. How they coped with this experience and how it shaped their lives subsequently, and indeed how the National Service experience altered Youth Culture, are themes Hoggart never addresses in his celebrated account of working-class life.

Colin MacInnes, an acute writer on youth culture of the late 1950s and 1960s, assumed its history only went back to the early 1950s. He is often cited by cultural studies academics as a pioneer in the study of youth cultures; but he had a limited grasp of the history of youth culture in Britain. He had only moved to England permanently in the late 1940s (he was in his mid-forties, in fact, when his teenager novel *Absolute Beginners* was published in 1959). Although he was born in England in August 1914 (the month the First World War began), he emigrated to Australia
with his mother and brother in 1919. His own youth during the ‘Roaring Twenties’ was spent living in a Melbourne suburb and staying at sheep stations in rural Australia where he and his brother Graham were surrounded by wilderness. MacInnes’s insights into late 1950s’ London teenagers deserve attention – but he admitted himself that the teenagers in his novel *Absolute Beginners* were fantasy teenagers dreamed up in his mind. He undertook no archival research on British teenage lifestyles of the 1950s. Moreover, Colin MacInnes is an acquired taste. The teenage ‘speak’ he employs in *Absolute Beginners* grates with some readers. One recent British historian of the Fifties and Sixties, Dominic Sandbrook, who has written two hugely entertaining and comprehensive surveys of the period from 1956 to 1970, finds MacInnes’s novel thoroughly unconvincing. It is undeniably derivative, aping the ‘beat’ novels of the American 1950s – J. D. Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye* (1951) especially. But Sandbrook’s judgement on MacInnes as a feeble chronicler of British youth culture is too harsh. He entirely ignores, for example, MacInnes’s journalism and it is here, especially in his weekly *New Society* column ‘Out of the Way’, that the evolution of his thoughts on youth culture and ‘the Permissive Society’ of the 1960s are to be found rather than in his novels.

Another widely cited but entirely unhistorical source on British youth culture is Mark Abrams; the pioneer market researcher who published two slim pamphlets on teenage consumers in the late 1950s and early 1960s. He tried to measure the economic worth of the teenager for advertisers; but he was not interested in more complex questions such as what teenagers thought – either about politics, the Monarchy, their work, or National Service, for example. He entirely ignored regional patterns of teenage spending and, furthermore, he did not consult historical records on teenage consumerism, but generated his own data in the form of questionnaires and social surveys. His work is widely quoted by cultural studies academics but historians are more sceptical of its superficial findings.

The historian of youth culture, therefore, has a difficult task. The history of youth culture since the 1950s has been written, very largely, by sociologists or literary writers such as Richard Hoggart and Colin MacInnes, whose work is, to say the least, problematic for the historian. Chapter 6, below, focuses on an analysis of Hoggart’s writings on British Youth Culture and it reveals that even a perceptive social commentator, and pioneer of the cultural studies approach to youth culture, had a very superficial and unhistorical understanding of the subject. The sociology of youth cultures and youth subcultures is also of limited value to the social historian because, with one or two exceptions, it does not utilise historical evidence, and for this reason it does not feature prominently in this study.

The scope of this work is therefore both ambitious and uncharted. Thus far, in the work of social historians, youth culture is essentially taken to
be working-class youth cultures in provincial England, and among the key concepts explored are their lifestyles, gender experiences, and how far class, poverty and affluence have ‘shaped’ British youth culture. But, as will be revealed, there is far more to be said about the history of British youth culture. It began, as we will discover, as an experiment in new ways of living and among elite youth in the universities, not in the dance halls or cinemas of interwar Manchester or Salford. It will be argued below that youth culture was a very protracted development in Britain. We are dealing with a concept that, initially, took root in the Universities between the Wars, and could exist in the minds of a generation long before it was noticed and measured by market researchers in the 1950s.

There are several key themes that need to be explored in relation to youth culture in Britain; some familiar, others not. So much of the story of youth culture in twentieth-century Britain is still unknown, but not unknowable. Historians have studied the teenage consumer from the 1920s down to the late 1950s; but hardly any detailed research has been conducted on the Flapper Cult of early twentieth-century Britain, a cult that was widely debated in the House of Commons during the Twenties when Baldwin’s Conservative Party were pushing through legislation that in 1928 enfranchised ‘the Flapper’ – young females of 21 to 30 (females over 30 having been given the vote in 1918). Chapter 3 explores the development of the Flapper lifestyle in early twentieth-century Britain. There are sociological surveys of the history of juvenile delinquency in England, most notably Geoffrey Pearson’s *Hooligan: A History of Respectable Fears* (1983), Stephen Humphries’ *Hooligans or Rebels? An Oral History of Working-Class Childhood and Youth, 1889–1939* (1981), and Stanley Cohen’s *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (1972), on the Mods and Rockers. But far less is known about the history of juvenile and youth delinquency in Northern Ireland, which is discussed in detail below.

Any history of British youth culture must confront the theme of rebellion, whether in the urban gangs of late Victorian and Edwardian Salford or among the Mods and Rockers of the 1960s. But the idea of rebellion in British youth culture is probably less significant over the twentieth century than the idea of community. It is interesting, for example, that many of the Mods and Rockers of the 1960s were products of new London suburbs. In pursuit of new communities of their own, they escaped these concrete postwar suburbs at weekends and on public holidays. So much of the existing work on the Mods stresses their affluence, but this has been greatly exaggerated. The Mods were, in fact, largely excluded from the cultural environment of ‘Swinging London’, which centred on the discotheques of London’s West End.

The idea of community as a central concept shaping youth culture in twentieth-century Britain emerges strongly at several points in this story. It
was crucial to the pioneers of youth culture in Cambridge during the 1920s, like Rolf Gardiner. Moreover, the different youth communities of even a single university town such as Cambridge are depicted in the undergraduate novels of the interwar years, which emerged as a new genre of British fiction between the Wars.\textsuperscript{57} What mattered to these interwar student cultures were personal relationships, travel and the search for new youth communities.\textsuperscript{58} These were powerful dynamics in the lives of British students between the Wars. Moreover, in Northern Ireland the idea of serving communities, especially working-class communities, has underpinned student culture for much of the twentieth century. Even the students of the late 1960s maintained ties with working-class communities throughout their university years and served these communities in their protests at university.\textsuperscript{59}

The intellectual currents in youth culture form a significant theme in this study. Youth culture actually developed as a philosophy of life in early twentieth-century Britain.\textsuperscript{60} It can be probed through an exploration of the literature its pioneers, university students, generated: articles in student periodicals, poems, their diaries, undergraduate novels and other sources. These are neglected sources and they are of fundamental importance if historians are ever to understand the minds behind the development of youth culture in twentieth-century Britain.\textsuperscript{61} Social investigators and sociologists have, at various points over the twentieth century, tried to gauge the attitudes of youth to all sorts of subjects – their work, courtship, sex, politics, the Monarchy, and politicians: from Pearl Jephcott’s surveys of girl factory workers in the 1940s to Ferdynand Zweig’s interviews with university students in the early 1960s.\textsuperscript{62} These works rarely provide insights into the creativity of youth, which has always been the central dynamic in youth culture. One of the central arguments of this work will be that youth culture in Britain has always involved creativity; whether the focus is university students developing their ideas about youth culture in Ivory Towers, or youth pop groups emerging from Northern cities during the late 1950s and early 1960s.\textsuperscript{63}

The history of British youth culture over the twentieth century has been significantly shaped by youth of the middle classes; which is a neglected theme in existing histories of youth.\textsuperscript{64} They were the prime movers in the development of youth culture in the first half of the twentieth century; or, to be more precise, it was middle-class students in a limited number of universities who were the prime movers. Cambridge was, perhaps, the most significant city for Youth Culture between the Wars in that the pioneers of British youth culture, Rolf Gardiner for example, studied at Cambridge. Moreover, even after the Second World War the city continued to influence British youth culture. It produced the most celebrated psychedelic pop group of the 1960s, Pink Floyd; youth entrepreneurs such as John Dunbar (who married Marianne Faithfull); the student pop star
and subsequent media and youth entrepreneur Jonathan King (who had a Number 1 single in Britain in 1967 when he was still an undergraduate at Trinity College, Cambridge); and, in more recent times, Cambridge has produced the author of the definitive book on Punk Rock, Jon Savage, and the brilliant young music and pop-culture journalist Simon Reynolds.65

It should not be forgotten that there were far more students from working-class backgrounds in British universities between the Wars than is often recognised; and Oxford and Cambridge educated 50 per cent of the 27,000 Ex-Service students who entered the universities in 1919, a staggering social transformation in the British university system that has never been properly investigated.66 But it remains the case that the students who pioneered youth culture in Britain were middle-class and upper middle-class youths such as Rolf Gardiner.67 The history of youth culture, at least in Britain, is therefore not only a story about the juvenile delinquent, the Teddy Boy and the birth of ‘the teenager’, as is often argued.68 Youth culture has evolved, by and large, through the efforts of middle-class youth. Indeed, individuals from middle-class and even upper middle-class families have been, over the course of the twentieth century, among the most active youth culture enthusiasts: from the middle-class youths who pioneered youth culture in the early 1920s down to middle-class youth pop stars of the Sixties and beyond, such as Mick Jagger, the Pink Floyd, and the latest pop icons of the early twenty-first century, the public school-educated teen pop group ‘Keane’, named after the nanny who looked after the group’s lead singer Tom Chaplin in childhood.69

Finally, it will emerge in this historical survey that, at certain periods over the course of the twentieth century, youth cultures have existed, or were developing, in extremely close proximity to some of the twentieth century’s most eminent historians. A. J. P. Taylor was a young Lecturer at Manchester University during the 1930s when the city’s youth would have been flooding into dance halls such as the Ritz, just off Oxford Road and close to the University where Taylor worked.70 Hugh Trevor-Roper was researching his first book, a biography of Archbishop Laud (1940), when the Hitler Youth were at their peak, and his second book, The Last Days of Hitler, when a neo-Nazi youth movement had appeared in postwar Germany.71 J. H. Plumb and Geoffrey Elton were teaching at Cambridge during the student protests of the late 1960s; which, in Cambridge, culminated in the Garden House riot of 1970. It ended in a high-profile, and protracted, court case in which six Cambridge undergraduates were sent to prison for up to two years and two others were sent to borstal.72 Given, therefore, that youth were involved in important contemporary events, and indeed even generating them, the question arises: why did these eminent British historians not study youth culture and consider whether it had a role in shaping history?
Youth culture was certainly not ignored by contemporaries even as early as the 1930s. The classic example is the ‘King and Country’ debate held in the Oxford Union in February 1933. The Oxford students who attended that debate voted decisively not to support their King and Country in the event of a European war. It was reported at the time that Hitler paid close attention to the event and to the public outcry in the British national press afterwards. Churchill, at the time a backbench Conservative MP, was so alarmed by the message it sent out to Europe that he refused to visit Oxford University for several years.73

Then there was the case of Artur Axmann, the Head of the Hitler Youth, who did not shape History but at least survived to tell it. In April 1945 the young Oxford historian Hugh Trevor-Roper (then only 31) was sent to Germany to piece together the final stages of the War in Berlin. He established that one of the last people summoned to Hitler’s Bunker just before he committed suicide, in April 1945, was Artur Axmann, who had replaced Baldur von Schirach as the Head of the Hitler Youth in 1941. Axmann managed to escape from Berlin in April 1945 and when he was eventually arrested, in March 1946, he was found with several other members of a new neo-Nazi youth movement.74

These examples of youth involvement in political events, both prior to and after 1945, strongly suggest that the development of youth culture and its impact on British society, and its impact on British universities such as Cambridge University during the 1960s, is a significant theme in Modern British History. Moreover, a comprehensive history of British youth culture needs to deal not just with consumerism and fashion; with youth delinquency and ‘class resistance’ to bourgeois institutions such as schools and youth movements, and other sociological themes; but also with the individuals who have shaped British youth culture as a cultural movement.75 The following study places the cultural movements of the young at the core of the history of British youth culture between c.1920 and c.1970 in order to explain a phenomenon – youth culture – that mattered to large numbers of young people over this period.
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