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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

London, 2010: three young black men congregated by a low wall have been approached by two police officers. Whilst one officer surveys the men from a step back, her hands tucked into the back of her belt, her colleague is attempting to engage the foremost man who is standing beside a bicycle. There is a university nearby and students mean bikes, perhaps the officers suspect it is stolen. This young man is dressed in a grey Nike tracksuit which tapers in at the ankles, setting off his ‘fresh’ Nike Air trainers. More noteworthy are his eyes, studiously avoiding the gaze of the apprehending officer and scanning some distant horizon as if searching for people he knows. His face shows an expression of detached amusement. His mouth, which is curled disdainfully at the corners, moves to give monosyllabic answers in a manner that is simultaneously bored and mocking. His two friends and the questioning officer’s colleagues have all retreated into themselves, saying and doing little. The young man with the bicycle is performing, not just for those gathered with him, but for anyone else who might see him. The message is clear, he is not engaging with the police and is remaining as defiant as is sensible. He is simultaneously demonstrating his disdain for the authority the police represent and his position as someone who knows how to handle himself on the street.

Casually observed, this brief moment of interaction struck me as having much in common with many others that I had witnessed, both as a researcher of crime and justice in Dublin, Ireland, and as an avid consumer of crime media. Although occurring in London, such performances can be observed on streets and screens throughout the world. From the Favelas of Brazil to scenes from HBO’s acclaimed realist drama The Wire, the sight of young, poor, urban men negotiating the hostility of police forces and indeed that of their peer groups is a readily identifiable trope. Many questions are raised by this: why the similarities between spaces that are distant from each other spatially, socio-economically and indeed representationally (there are obviously huge differences between ‘real’ instances of crime and justice and their mediated representations)?
Understanding Street Culture

The motivation to write this book emerged from such questions and the idea that such brief moments can teach us much about how inclusion and exclusion are produced and reproduced in everyday life (see Ferrell et al., 2008). It is through events like this, and their underpinning socio-economic dynamics, that young, disadvantaged urban males become criminal and/or criminalized, whilst at the same time providing a template for ‘cool’ that is ceaselessly harnessed by the global cultural industries.

Underpinning the above event are issues of racial profiling and ‘stop and search’ powers which disproportionately target young, black men and the underprivileged (Tyler and Wakslerak, 2004; Bowling and Phillips, 2003). The vignette similarly raises questions around street crime that, both police statistics and the popular imaginary suggest, is overwhelmingly associated with the urban poor. What is equally important, although all too often left out of consideration, are issues of culture: the ways in which meanings are created and assigned, because it is through such processes that the social structure is lived and produced. Issues of crime, criminalization and cool are inherently cultural: they stem from the ways in which we see the world and act accordingly. These actions beget reactions which themselves impact on the way we see the world. And the spiral continues. Those living within the most socio-economically disadvantaged urban spaces globally can possess world views that prompt particular ways of knowing, being and acting. For those people living in more financially and socially included positions, these ways of being and acting may generate fear and a sense of threat.

This book is centrally concerned with such matters, exploring and developing the concept of ‘street culture’: the values, dispositions, practices and styles associated with particular sections of disadvantaged urban populations. It seeks to locate this ‘street culture’ within its social and economic contexts: the globalized world of capital and information flows referred to by some social theorists as ‘late’ or ‘high’ modernity (see e.g. Young, 1999; Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991; Bauman, 2000). Above all, the book is concerned with tracing the intricate ways in which street culture is intertwined with processes of social exclusion and inclusion. Global inequalities in wealth and opportunity profoundly impact on inner-city life throughout the world. Whilst economic, material and existential securities ebb, the mediascape distracts from current predicaments by dangling the trappings of conspicuous consumption tantalizingly close to those who cannot hope to afford them. This is a world where welfarism is in decline, where the state no longer hopes to embrace and include all its citizens and more. It is an era of increased social exclusion, where millions are suspended in a position of ‘malign neglect’ (see Tonry, 1996) and criminalized where they seek to attain their own version of inclusion.
Street culture is a product of social, economic and cultural exclusion, and yet it is a process of attempting to remain viable, thriving and included within a specific street milieu. More complicated still, as I will argue, is the symbolic power of street culture, which is often understood as authentic, defiant and vital, in other words ‘cool’. Thus whilst the urban poor are materially and practically excluded, much of their style is simultaneously admired and emulated by sections of the social mainstream. This becomes a symbolic inclusion which is most often a very poor consolation prize, but on rare occasions offers some exceptional individuals the ability to attain a more concrete sense of inclusion through the cultural industries.

In the opening vignette, one can observe how the young man being questioned is keen to demonstrate that he is more concerned about appearing to be non-cooperative with the police than the consequences that may stem from being viewed as breaking the law. Whether or not he is involved in bike theft is moot, the issue is that he feels he must indicate that he is au fait or at the very least tolerant of such behaviour. He must indicate that he is worthy of respect as a potential street entrepreneur, capable of generating income in a manner that does not compromise his autonomy as a tough, rugged male. Part of this performance is his overt rejection of the police whom he may well distrust and view as hostile, but certainly must publicly regard as such. Any failure to do so may mark him as less worthy of respect and deference within a violent street world in which rates of interpersonal violence and predatory theft are high, and the recourse to the state as protector of property or person is taboo.

Exclusion from the social and economic mainstream necessitates for some the adoption of particular values, concerns and practices, which facilitate survival and a culturally mediated notion of success. For some, the need to perform to strong street cultural standards is constant, for others it is temporarily required to negotiate a journey through a ‘tough’ part of the city, whilst many more simply adopt street styles and practices as a consumer choice or as a prosthetic element of their cultural practice in their quest to narrate themselves distinctively (see Lury, 1998). The young man in the vignette is dressed in a particular way, adopting a particular posture – all of which contribute to his embodiment of a ‘street style’ that has no doubt been read by the police officers as a possible indication of involvement with criminality (see Ferrell, 2004). Of course, the assignment of these meanings is highly problematic: a majority of disadvantaged, urban, males have little or no involvement in street crime, and indeed, street styles have been popularized and mass marketed by the youth cultural industries and are not necessarily a clear indication of socio-economic status.
Understanding street culture, I will argue, can illuminate many of contemporary society’s issues, problems and trends. With regard to crime, street cultural logics unfold in a range of behaviours from theft and violence, to drug trading and rioting. Moreover, fear of ‘the street’ (and disadvantaged populations generally) provides a powerful underpinning to processes of criminalization. Questions will be raised around the ways in which vast swathes of the global population are expected to materially support themselves and those dependant on them, against the extent to which ‘official’, ‘recognized’ and/or ‘legitimate’ means of subsistence are available to do so. Engaging with these phenomena provides a means of observing the operation of class, poverty, prejudice, power and exploitation in a world that is arguably more brutal and uncertain than liberal and progressive.

Beyond the ‘instrumentality’ (practical, utilitarian concerns) of street criminality, the book places an emphasis on understanding street culture’s ‘expressivity’ (emotional, existential and aesthetic concerns). Beyond material subsistence, this provides a paradigm for the realization of a broader set of experiences: dignity, creativity, pleasure to name but a few. The street’s art, music, style, sport and dance have come to be widely influential in the mainstream. Thus, the ubiquitous street dance movies, suburban skate parks and appearances by rappers and dancehall artists in pop records belong to another form of cultural exploitation, albeit far less deleterious to the urban poor. As will become clear, across decades and continents, researchers have uncovered similar outlooks, values and attitudes associated with urban socioeconomic marginalization. The aim of this book is to trace how and why this is, weaving together a theoretical frame to understand street culture’s significance in contemporary, global terms.

**Why study street culture?**

The book does this by focusing on some of street culture’s most visible manifestations in the realms of criminal lifestyles and urban cool. Despite the term’s common, popular use and research identifying street cultures operating in such diverse locations, which include the USA (Anderson, 1999; Bourgois, 1995/2003), UK (Gunter, 2008; Hallsworth and Silverstone, 2009), Ireland (Ilan, 2013), Norway (Sandberg and Pedersen, 2009), Russia (Stephenson, 2001), Brazil (Goldstein, 2003), Jamaica (Gunst, 2003; Stolzoff, 2000), Australia (White and Mason, 2006) and Africa (Institut français de recherche en Afrique, 1997), this is the first book to explore the topic in a more global, conceptual manner. Exploring the links between urban expressivity, urban poverty, crime and criminalization seems to be more of a minority activity than once it was. Drawing such connections is useful where forms
of cultural expression (e.g., graffiti, rap and dancehall music) are censured, censored or criminalized and whilst these forms of expression may form part of the everyday life of those individuals who are involved in more serious criminality. Moreover, where street cultural tropes appear so frequently within popular culture and the political imaginary, it becomes germane both to ask why and to analyse the ways in which this occurs.

Some of the issues considered by this book have traditionally been spread between various disciplines: criminology, sociology, anthropology, youth studies, urban studies, human geography, subcultural studies, hip-hop studies and others. And by no means meant as a last word on street culture, this book seeks to provide a single space from which to continue these debates; to set out and theorize what we know; and to raise questions that will be useful as part of future research agendas.

Making sense of street culture

‘Culture’ is a notoriously difficult word to use accurately. This book thus relies on Raymond Williams’ (1986: 87–93) often cited three-part definition, recognizing that the word refers to: the artefacts that humans produce (as various kinds of media, styles and modes of expressivity); the way in which humans make sense of the world and live their lives (through the development of norms, values, definitions, rituals, etc.); and the processes by which things come to be (how phenomena are cultivated). Recognizing that culture is dynamic, mutable and shifting, rather than static, it might nevertheless be argued that there is something fundamental about the experience of social exclusion, however differently the cultures it spawns might manifest. It is important to realize therefore that there are both distinctive street cultures at the local and regional levels and a more universal street culture that exists at the level of ideas and concepts. Debates in social theory have considered precisely this tension between the specific and the general. Much as economic circumstances might change, however, Paul Willis argues that ‘the working class is the bottom half of… [the] gradient no matter how its atoms move’ (1977: 129, emphasis in original). Notions of relativity apply to exclusion and thus whilst the urban poor in the developed world do not suffer many of the same material deprivations as their counterparts in the developing world, they arguably have some commonality in their experiences of marginality. For Charlesworth:

Styles of being constitute distinct social groups at the deepest level of being. Class is one of those critical mediations of being, and this [his] book tries to show why, across the world, a Pakistani farmer of the Mirpur valley shares
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an attitude to perception, experience, persons, objects and belief with a working class person in Rotherham [England] (2000: 17).

In other words, whilst the particular characteristics of being socially, economically and culturally excluded vary hugely over time and between places, states and regions, there is something ultimately similar around the experience of being excluded. It is this experience, this state of being, that might be said to be fundamental to street culture. Thus within this book where a variety of terms and phrases are used to describe the population groups associated with it – for example, ‘the urban poor’, ‘disadvantaged city residents’, etc. – it is recognized that their experiences will be similar on one level, whilst distinct on another. The goal of this book, therefore, is to identify common orientations and principles as opposed to universal rules.

The diversity of lived experience is a key feature of much of the source material for this book, which consists, in many cases, of detailed ethnographic research conducted by those who have immersed themselves in the communities they study. From 1920s Chicago to near-contemporary Brazil, this approach to producing knowledge has independently identified the common principles discussed later in the chapter. Drawing on the most contemporary perspectives, including those from outside the Anglo-American world, allows this book to offer a more fulsome and comprehensive account of street culture than has previously been attempted. Moreover, the book draws liberally upon media sources which are either forms of street cultural expressivity themselves or treatments of street cultural themes. The breadth of manifestations of street culture, either as a means of ordering life, governing particular actions or interactions, or indeed as an influence on media practice necessitates an expansive and flexible means of thinking about it: a street cultural spectrum.

The remainder of this chapter thus establishes and elaborates on a number of issues that are crucial to this idea. Firstly, I set out what is meant by street culture and how it will be used to understand the various phenomena discussed in this book. I set out what might be termed ‘street cultural concerns’ which make clear how socio-economic forces manifest in the everyday beliefs, values and behaviours of certain sections of the urban poor. Street culture shares particular principles, styles and aesthetics across continents (Figure 1.1). I will set out the discourses that relate to ‘cool’ and demonstrate how these relate strongly to the central concerns of street culture. In doing all this, I make the case for understanding street culture in a manner that recognizes its paradoxes: how it is distant and yet proximate to ‘mainstream’ values, simultaneously feared and valued, avoided and sought out. I furthermore argue that it is important to locate this understanding within a wider consideration of socio-economic principles: globalization,
consumerism, neoliberalism, individualization, urbanization, flux and media saturation.

Defining street culture

In the next chapter, approximately 150 years of scholarship, history and public imagination around the lifestyles of the urban poor are considered. It is through building on this legacy that the following more contemporary ideas derive.

Philippe Bourgois, studying the lives of the East Harlem crack dealers, defined street culture as ‘a complex and conflictual web of beliefs, symbols, modes of interaction, values and ideologies that have emerged in the opposition to exclusion from mainstream society’ (1995/2003: 8). Street culture, he maintains, is a means of realizing self-worth and dignity, facilitating surviving (and at times even thriving) for the multiply-disadvantaged in post-industrial society. Where the urban poor cannot realistically expect much more than subsistence drudgery and humiliating deference, no matter their commitment to work within the mainstream economy, the illicit economy becomes more significant. Moreover, where employment exists primarily within a service sector which values deference, ‘polish’ and exaggerated manners, Bourgois’ participants who had inherited postures, accents and attitudes from a rural Puerto Rican heritage were disadvantaged. By deploying their inherited

Figure 1.1 A hip-hop show in Paris, from a visual standpoint alone, could be anywhere in the world. Photo by Simon Wheatley
notions of rugged masculinity – strength, toughness and autonomy – however, they could combine the leisure of street life with the earnings of the drug trade. Here they were advantaged, although the extent to which their culture might be labelled as ‘oppositional’ merits further discussion later.

Notions of toughness, independence and dignity emerge particularly strongly in a second study that has been fundamental in establishing street culture as a topic of contemporary debate. Elijah Anderson’s *Code of the Street* (1999), in extensive ethnographic detail, sets out the ‘rules’ and norms which underpin violence in a disadvantaged area of Philadelphia. According to this study, ‘respect’ is a measure of one’s standing in the street. It is most frequently earned through the embodiment of a violent potential and/or reputation. Where state apparatuses such as the police are experienced as discriminatory and oppressive, communities cohere around the notion that they are to be viewed as hostile. In such circumstances, interpersonal violence becomes a key means of settling disputes and generating power. Where communities experience exclusion from the state (and indeed where there is no effective state in the first place), parallel economies, welfare and justice systems can emerge as street cultural groups become institutionalized (see Hagedorn, 2008).

Street cultural norms and deference to members of such powerful (often armed) groups can become a form of ‘governance from below’ (see Lea and Stenson, 2007). For Anderson, street culture is a ‘people’s culture’ (1999: 10), the continuance of pre-modern modes of social configuration and comportment. It can thus be understood as stemming from the exclusion (or ejection) of large swathes of the world’s population to varying extents from the modernist project: the formal economy, human rights, dignities and basic protections, technological progress and membership of a stable, functional community. These exclusions, of course, vary widely between the global north and south and indeed within them. Furthermore, individuals are likely to utilize their agency to respond to exclusion in a range of different ways. These are important caveats that should be born in mind when attempting to provide a comprehensive and operationalizable definition of street culture in the contemporary world.

‘Street culture’ is the values, dispositions, practices and styles associated with particular sections of disadvantaged populations. These involve practically negotiating (relative or absolute) material deprivation as well as asserting alternative and/or parallel systems of normativity and expressivity in the face of cultural subordination. The term can be used to refer to a wide variety of practices that are linked to everyday life amongst the urban poor, but it is most vividly expressed by and identified with young men (street femininity will be discussed in detail in Chapter 3). Street cultures have specific historic roots and yet share a number of common characteristics born out of
the more ubiquitous effects of exclusion (it is possible thus to speak about both ‘street culture’ and ‘street cultures’). A fusion of tradition and the globalized consumerism which has more than partially displaced it, street culture is a residualized variant of rugged working-class culture in an era of globalized neoliberal economics and political consensus (these concepts are examined in greater detail in Chapter 7). Street culture is the folk culture of the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

Much like mainstream culture, street culture is rife with complexities, contradictions and dissonances. For example, both spirituality and violence can be simultaneously valued. Indeed, street life and cultures are replete with humour, laughter, playfulness, friendships, joys, irreverence, community and collective effervescence, together with misery, oppression, deprivation, competition, conflict, violence, addiction, illness, worry, stress and pain. The extent to which street cultures represent alternatives to, or simply marginalized variants of, mainstream cultures remains open to debate. Nevertheless, street culture often entails a level of suspicion of, and antipathy to, formal mainstream social institutions, particularly where they are associated with coercive practices. It can thus involve a certain level of defiance (see Chapter 8), although care should be taken to avoid romanticizing ways of life which often involve various degrees of exploitation experienced, inflicted or both.

The use of ‘street’ as the defining prefix is not simply because it is less potentially derogatory than other options, but because the street as a physical and symbolic space is central to understanding this way of life. As will be discussed later, often the small living spaces available to the urban poor mean that surrounding public spaces become central to their social life. Unlike parks, community halls, etc. which may or may not exist in the disadvantaged neighbourhood, streets (paved or otherwise) always will. Moreover, the use of the street prefix conjures notions of informality: as in the ‘street food’ that may be enjoyed without the rituals and rules of dining. And this informality is significant: street ethnographers are almost always struck by the vibrancy, noise, warmth, closeness and visceral qualities of street life, whilst even the earliest urban sociologists noted that personal relationships are considerably more significant than formal rules in the lifeworlds of the disadvantaged.

Street culture should not be conflated with crime and violence, which may or may not be practised by those who adhere to some level of street cultural orientation. Whilst a strong dedication to street culture can suggest a particular motivation towards committing crime, or at least a tolerance and understanding for those who do participate, the nexus of socio-economic status, cultural orientation and individual behaviour is complex to the extent that it defies simplistic causal explanations. Many of the studies considered in
this book reflect the degree to which those who offend often ‘drift’ between legitimate, semi-legitimate and illegitimate forms of income generation and leisure (Matza, 1964; Bourgois, 1995/2003). Similarly, fragments of street culture may be adopted and exhibited by those who wish to avoid predation in violent areas and coexist with street cultural populations (Anderson, 1999). Moreover, there are those who draw on street culture merely as a symbolizer of ‘cool’.

Drawing on the work of Gunter (2008) and Daniel (2012), it is therefore proposed that street culture is best understood in terms of existing as a continuum, spectrum or scale, along which there are a number of degrees of adherence and practice. At the weaker points on the scale, adherents might simply ‘hang around’ in street spaces and engage in some of the culture’s more expressive practices. At the stronger points on the spectrum, individuals might for example use street cultural modes of violence to generate their income. There are a number of loose typologies of relationships that individuals might have to street culture: active or passive adherents either strongly or weakly embedded; those who coexist with street culture in their everyday life whilst identifying themselves against it; those who embody street cultural styles and aesthetics but attempt to eschew the rough behaviours associated with it; those who actively seek to adopt street cultural style as a decontextualized consumer or leisure choice; and those who consume street cultural styles unreflexively.

As is discussed further in Chapter 3, a range of factors, from regional and national context to socio-economic status and age, as well as individual agency, tend to influence both the characteristics and strength of prevailing street cultures at the local level as well as the individual’s relationship to it. Furthermore, and as explored further in Chapter 5, it is possible for general youth cultures to be perceived inaccurately as street cultures, as there can be a tendency for young people to transgress and seek autonomy in public spaces, regardless of the styles they choose to adopt. Perhaps this contributes to the wider social anxieties that exist around the conduct of young people (Figure 1.2).

Street culture’s existence as an identifiable phenomenon is predicated on the manner in which it is perceived and interpreted by those who hold and exercise power and often associate it with deviance and inferiority. Such meanings are bound up with its associations to crime and criminalization. Elements of street culture, however, have also been harnessed by the cultural industries to market a range of youth cultural products; a most obvious but certainly not sole example being the ‘gangsta’ tropes popularized by rap music (see Ferrell et al., 2008; Quinn, 2005; Ilan, 2012). As will be demonstrated, this is because street culture is often linked to a variety of vibrant stylistic practices and considered to be vital, authentic, the epitome of ‘cool’ and saturated with
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