

# 1 INTRODUCTION

## PROFANITY AND CREATIVITY

The sheer surprise of a living culture is a slap to reverie. Real, bustling, startling cultures move. They exist. They are something in the world. They suddenly leave behind—empty, exposed, ugly—*ideas* of poverty, deprivation, existence and culture. Real events can save us much philosophy.

This book presents two important cultures generated during the 1960s and still widely influential today—the motor-bike boys, sometimes known as rockers, and the hippies, sometimes known as heads or freaks. The form of the book is of two ethnographic accounts of the inner meanings, style and movement of these cultures, but the essential theme of the book is that oppressed, subordinate or minority groups can have a hand in the construction of their own vibrant cultures and are not merely dupes: the fall guys in a social system stacked overwhelmingly against them and dominated by capitalist media and commercial provision. Not only this, but their *profane* creativity shows us the only route for radical *cultural* change. In

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particular they mark out the aridity of abstract or purely theoretical solutions. It is only real people at work on real objects in an uncertain world who actually produce new movements in style, consciousness and feeling—new arts in life.

The oppression of working-class youth, the alienation of middle-class youth, can be analysed. The social sciences show the oppression and share the alienation. They outline ‘the problem’. They say something must give, something must happen. But it is only in the factories, on the streets, in the bars, in the dance halls, in the tower flats, in the two-up-and-two-downs that contradictions and problems are *lived through* to particular outcomes. It is in these places where direct experience, ways of living, creative acts and penetrations—cultures—redefine problems, break the stasis of meaning, and reset the possibilities somewhat for all of us. And this material<sup>1</sup> experience has not had the benefit of prior validation, of collective discussion, of the security of the common line. It is embedded in the real engagement of experience with the world: in the *dialectic* of cultural life. This is not to say that living cultures do not ‘know’ the nature of the conditions which produced them. They ‘know’ them, however, not in words, but in their structures, form and style. They ‘know’ them as the unsaid precondition for certain kinds of behaviour, as the only possible if silent context which make particular repertoires of action and interest mean anything at all. Not only this, but they ‘know’ what surrounds them sufficiently to seize and creatively exploit aspects of it to express their own zest and identity—so partially changing their conditions of existence. This is, precisely the *dialectic* of cultural life.

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The social sciences could never produce a bedizened, solid motor-bike, an embroidered sheepskin coat, an outrageous rock 'n' roll record. Yet these things speak most profoundly to an age,<sup>2</sup> as vulgar theories damage it. They are the astonishing products of one real outcome when many were contesting, when there were a thousand possibilities. They show us the real movement of experience in the concrete world. Life is the laboratory. Life is the thing. Ethnography is not simply description, it's about capturing that.

Culture, then, is not simply about a relationship with what is called 'art', or with 'the best which has been thought and said', or with the restricted or the refined. I see cultural experience essentially as shared material experience. It does not proceed either from individual variation and proclivity, or from the specifications downwards of a gigantic social order. It comes from direct involvement with the everyday world. It is in relation to the commonplace, to trivia and the slow accumulation of concrete lessons that individuals *in groups*, come to recognize their subjectivity. The determinations of the wider social system are borne in upon the social individual in a thousand different and variable ways. Tastes, feelings, likes and dislikes are developed in minute articulation with the concrete world.

The essential and primitive distinction I wish to make is not an idealist one between 'art' and 'non-art', but between two types of human involvement with this world: between a random or arbitrary relationship, and a reciprocal, or, as I have called it, *dialectical relationship*. All material experience is a complex combination of both, but we need to separate them in thought in order to take a grip on what is distinctive in new cultural forms.

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Random relationships, though a ‘fact of nature’ and necessary for survival perhaps, are not only unintended from the point of view of the group experiencing them, but do not express anything of particular internal importance or relevance. There is no creative articulation of meaning through a *responsive* field of external items. Commodity production continuously expands the field of items for such relationships. It provides toothpaste, spanners, cans of beans, roads, tower blocks and all the glitter of the new consciousness/cultural industry.

In the long term such random relations act to condition subjectivity in a way which is beyond the control of the individual or group. This is one of the profoundest meanings of domination. The deadliest domination comes through the domination of trivia. This book, however, considers this level in another light. It examines how people—uncertainly, through unforeseen consequence and often without consciousness or purpose—take at least a hand in their own day-to-day making. We will look at two minority and excluded cultures whose forms look random and arbitrary from the outside and incapable of expressing any significant internal cultural meanings, to judge how far their central relationships are actually reciprocal, expressive and developmental. These cultures are important and full of lessons for us because the things of the world which surround them, and through which they are developed and expressed, are without conventional ‘cultural’ or ‘artistic’ significance. These cultures work through profane materials: simple functional commodities, drugs, chemicals and cultural commodities exploitatively produced by the new ‘consciousness industry’. And yet from the rubbish available within a preconstituted market these groups do generate viable cultures, and through their work on re-

ceived commodities and categories, actually formulate a living, lived out and concretized critique of the society which produces these distorted, insulting, often meaningless things. After the main ethnographic accounts, further chapters explore the particular relationship of both cultures to their most important constitutive material items: the motor-bike and rock 'n' roll for the motor-bike boys, drugs and progressive music for the hippies.

The essence of the cultural relationship I explore in these chapters is that certain items in the cultural field of a social group come to closely parallel its structure of feeling and characteristic concerns.<sup>3</sup> Having posited itself, shown its existence, manifested an identity in concrete worldly items, the social group has a degree of conscious and unconscious security. It does not have the same struggle with the void of possibilities its culture and identity might have been. And with this stored and coded image safely locked up within cultural items the social group can then, in a reverse dialectical moment, learn from and be influenced by its own cultural field and develop its feelings, attitudes and taste in relation to perhaps a widening circle of art forms, cultural items and objects—in particular directions first instituted by itself and its own needs. Thus internally modified, the social group can then further choose new objects, select or change the originals, so as to reset the structure and form of its cultural field—and so institute a further confirming circuit of the *dialectic*. It is in this process of mutual adaption and selection that particular cultural items come at all to resemble the structure and form of the social group, so to speak, in the first place.

This is not necessarily to place consciousness and human will at the centre of the stage, or to imply that specific cultural forms or activities are the result of the conscious

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purpose of particular social groups.<sup>4</sup> The form of exchange between the social group and its cultural field might be at many levels. Some may be conscious, others unconscious, many unintended and finally surprising to the participants. Not only the materials, but the course and development of a culture may be unspecified, not prefigured in any rule book and finally profane. Furthermore those things which are reflected and expressed in the cultural field relate to the position of the social group in the social structure. They may be unpleasant or specifically repressed from the consciousness of the group. Cultural expressions are even likely to be displaced, distorted or condensed reflections of barely understood, or 'misunderstood', knots of feeling, contradiction and frustration—as well as forms of action on these things. It is this degree of specificity which means we can learn from them. We learn from the culture, not from its explicit consciousness.

It is clear from this view of culture that the dominant class in society has certain profound advantages. It has the greatest access to 'culture' and the greatest agency with which to change and modify items in its cultural field. Its members have greater, time and money to develop their sensibilities, and they control the basic institutions which maintain the society, and the position of their class within it, as well as the daily context of their detailed lives. All this is to be recognized, but if they are mainly the beneficiaries of capitalism, they are also partly its victims. The dominant class is most victim to the illusions and false promises of its own ideology. What looks like the last gift of privilege—cultural attainment and a living sensual involvement with the world—turns out to be its opposite: stultification, reification and pretence. The conflation of art and culture with social élitism and exclusion<sup>5</sup> leads to

conformist hesitancy and the minimum strategy of knowing the accepted wisdom. Despite their objective privilege and their power in material production of all kinds, the dominant class is least suited to see and explore the unexpected, the double edge, the revolutionary in what it produces.

It is the worst productions out of the dead hand of the market which surround oppressed and minority groups: what capitalism has rejected, thrown aside, thoughtlessly produced or carelessly sustained to keep the cynical commercial penny turning. But because they are surrounded by plastic ersatz and the detritus of the bourgeoisie, there is for all that a more desperate need not to be duped, but to find meaning and potential within what they find<sup>6</sup>—they have nothing else. And in certain respects their eyes are clearer. For all the shit, there is a freedom in the market, on the streets, in the pubs and in the dance halls. And what is provided cynically for the profit of others and not for the benefit of the individual at least avoids certain kinds of moral over-rides. There is no restrictive embrace implicit in the social conventions of valuing something not for itself, but for the exclusion it brings. Though the whole commodity form provides powerful implications for the manner of its consumption, it by no means enforces them. Commodities can be taken out of context, claimed in a particular way, developed and repossessed to express something deeply and thereby to change somewhat the very feelings which are their product.<sup>7</sup> And all this can happen under the very nose of the dominant class—and with their products.

We might even say that the characteristic of a certain kind of creative cultural development is the exploitation of qualities, capacities and potentials in those profane things

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which the dominant society has thrown aside, produced 'as business', or left undeveloped for cultural meaning. Despite their appalling and deprived location and despite the huge advantages of the dominant class, it is sometimes the dispossessed who are best placed to exploit the revolutionary double edge of unexplored things around us. It is the acid of profane cultures which eats away the bourgeois scales from the commonplace.

This is a grand claim. In fact the years since the high points of the 1960s cultural upheaval make indulgence and romanticism less a danger. Despite their achievements, and the potentials they indicate, the hippy and bike cultures introduced no lasting change. Perhaps what we should learn is at a level of theory and example: ways of thinking through cultural change for the next time. It is much clearer now that both cultures reproduced—even creatively—the weaknesses, brutality and limitations of their own structural locations and parent class cultures. There can no longer be any false elision between their creative achievements in a particular determinate context and larger programmes for change or even challenge to society. Not only this, but the very fullness and boldness of their cultural commitment and working through of problems and perspectives at the level of life-style engendered its own massive and tragic failure: an inability to break from cultural forms into any kind of political activity or power struggle to change or challenge the main institutions of society, patterns, of work, vested interests or the most basic organization of the social classes. The cultures did not secure the conditions for their own continuance or the modification of those brutalizing and repressive determinations which made them, in the first place, what they were; struggling as the weaker partner. These basic

limitations are more obvious now, and bring out in the cultures, increasingly an air of tragedy and fatalism evident in certain central dynamics down to the disorganization and suffering of particular individuals.

Still these cultures teach us that revolutionary cultural change will only come from reinterpretations, reformations of consciousness, and fermentation from below around the most trivial, everyday and commonplace items. Such change cannot be simply provided from above, or from ideas. It is not a matter of reorganizing the same pieces. It is not just a question of the big armies. It concerns thinking and feeling and how things are seen: new eyes on old objects. Big change is no change unless it changes the small: our commonsense beings, commonplace habits, and accepted use of everyday objects. Cultural change must have the profanity of daring the world—not its ideas. We must listen to the streets before we listen at the towers.

The hippies and bikeboys were in the struggles of the 1960s. They were not bystanders. They produced something. We can look at it and learn from it.

The two cultures presented in this book are quite different. Their choice was not, however, random. They share many things.

They were both minority cultures and existed in material conditions which would be described conventionally as deprived. Of course this was, to some extent, voluntary in the case of the hippies. They were modern apostates. They turned their backs on the supposed material and cultural advantages of a middle-class life-style. The motorbike boys were, on the other hand, the uncalled. They had no choice about their socioeconomic circumstances.

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They also both existed in a crucially modern world. This is a world which is post Elvis Presley, and post the controversy about the 'generation gap'. Both groups are deeply involved in the appreciation of forms of pop music, and understand something of the wider symbolic articulations of the pop world. In their different ways, the cultures represent, in fact, twin high peaks in the short history of pop music. The motor-bike boys liked early rock 'n' roll of the 1950s—the generally accredited golden age of pop: the hippies were involved in the post-Beatles high point of 'progressive' music.

Though the actual form of their preferred music is very different, both cultures arise in the post-McLuhan world of telecommunications. Music was relayed and enjoyed only because of the advances in telecommunications and electronics. The characteristic form of appreciation is of music which is recorded and depends on the precise configuration of voice and backing. The ascendancy of pop music marked the decline of sheet music as the main distributed form of popular music. Sheet music could be played in very different ways by different groups at different times. The essence of music, the common denominator between groups, was the notation on the sheet. In the age of pop music, the only text is the actual record. This makes the precise style and intonation of the singer very important, so that the same song by a different singer is a completely different artefact. This ability of telecommunications to displace the formal written mode allows a real immediacy between singer and audience even though vastly separated socially and geographically. It opens up all kinds of possibilities for a new idiom shared simultaneously across disparate communities. In their different ways both cultures benefited from this.

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The main difference between the cultures is, of course, in their locating parent cultures. The motor-bike boys were broadly from the working class, and the hippies broadly from the middle class. They are similar, however, in representing for us the most durable, extreme, creative variants of these class cultures within the youth-cultural mode. The motor-bike boys were exploring and extending versions of ‘rough’ working-class themes. The hippies were exploring and broadening a middle-class tradition of the bohemian intelligentsia—especially as drawn into the lumpen or déclassé urban milieu. It is possible to suggest that all other distinctive life-styles lie somewhere between these two in terms of their class-cultural nature and location. They can, to some extent, be thought out in terms of these extremes.