Were British Subcultures the Beginnings of Multitude?

Les Subcultures britanniques, prémices des Multitudes ?

Charles Mueller

Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/volume/3180>

DOI: 10.4000/volume.3180

ISSN: 1950-568X

Publisher

Association Mélanie Seteun

Printed version

Date of publication: 15 September 2012

ISBN: 978-2-913169-32-6

ISSN: 1634-5495

Electronic reference

Charles Mueller, "Were British Subcultures the Beginnings of Multitude?", *Volume !* [Online], 9 : 1 | 2012, Online since 01 September 2016, connection on 25 August 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/volume/3180> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/volume.3180>

This text was automatically generated on 25 August 2022.

All rights reserved

Were British Subcultures the Beginnings of Multitude?

Les Subcultures britanniques, prémices des Multitudes ?

Charles Mueller

EDITOR'S NOTE

This text was originally published in *Countercultures & Popular Music* (Farnham, Ashgate, 2014).

- 1 FEW ASPECTS OF POPULAR CULTURE have been more scrutinised by academics than the development of youth subcultures in the United Kingdom from the late 1960s through the 1980s, a fascination that can be attributed to a number of different factors. Scholars have been intrigued by the creative manipulation of signifiers employed by subcultures in crafting their styles, the way in which they inspire and release passion, and their ability to create relationships and provide camaraderie in the face of twentieth-century alienation. But perhaps most significantly, published research into subcultures by members of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies [BCCCS], Dick Hebdige, Angela McRobbie and others were a product of the backlash against criticisms of mass-culture by the Frankfurt School. As Paul Passavant explains, the intellectual environment after the 1960s tended to give consumers credit for being wiser, and recognised that people exercised a degree of autonomy in how they used and created meanings for the products that they purchased. As a result, the idea of the 'duped masses' being manipulated by industry began to wane in academic circles (Passavant 2004a: 1). Subculture theory was undoubtedly part of this trend.
- 2 The gamut of twentieth-century intellectual traditions was used to analyse subcultures: Marxism, semiotics, postmodernism, sociology, gender studies and the theories of Weber, Bourdieu, Gramsci and Barthes among others. This research led to many disparate interpretations. Some saw subcultures as the heirs to the revolutionary counterculture of the 1960s fighting a rearguard action in a lost battle for substantial socio-economic change and maintaining the spark of some of its ideas. Subcultures were also interpreted as a demoralised bohemianism, a noteworthy but pitiable expression of resistance during a time of conservatism when global capital penetrated all of society, and domination completely replaced value in work relations. Still others detected no counterculture component and came to view subcultures as recreational fan-cultures who represent only consumerism and excess. The importance of these studies to understand subcultures is undeniable, however, we should also be open to the possibility that subcultures can best be explained as part of the beginnings of a new social formation that transcends class, race, nationality and gender.
- 3 In two provocative books, *Empire* and *Multitude*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri present a social, economic and philosophical description and critique of globalisation and multinational capitalism that has formed the foundation of Western societies since the early 1970s. The texts substantiate their belief that this new world order is destructive and dehumanising and will gradually dissolve into a global socialism that recognises the value of every human life, and the interconnectedness of those lives on both the social and metaphysical level – what Benedictus de Spinoza referred to as

immanence. These works, based in part on Negri's earlier volume *The Politics of Subversion*, describe counterculture activity that is much different from that of the past, a counterculture that is, at once, more subtle and gradual, but also more effective and far-reaching. The writings also represent an ambitious attempt to update the philosophies of Marx, which both Hardt and Negri feel are inadequate to critique a society that is no longer based on the Fordist factory labour model.

- 4 How Empire will give way to Multitude is a detail that Hardt and Negri leave open to conjecture, and they give us few signs to look for. But the idea that subcultures might be a part of the early stages of Multitude, and whether this best accounts for their social construction, modes of resistance and communication strategies (all of which involved music) is a question worthy of consideration. Negri himself opens the door for such an explanation when he remarks that earlier and inadequate attempts to reform Western societies politically were carried out to the rhythm of the Beatles (Negri 2005: 67), and that the tattoos, piercings and anti-establishment music of punk was a noteworthy gesture of resistance but did not go far enough (Laclau 2004: 28). What is most significant in this regard, however, is Negri's view that social outsiders, a group to which most members of subcultures certainly belonged, 'help others to recognise that we are all monsters – high school outcasts, sexual deviants, freaks, survivors of pathological families, and so forth. And more important these monsters begin to form new alternative networks of affection and social organisation' (Hardt and Negri 2004: 193).
- 5 This chapter begins by briefly summarising Hardt and Negri's arguments, and how previous research in subcultures and their music can be reconciled with a theory of Multitude. It then explores how British subcultures from the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s anticipated many of Hardt and Negri's ideas, and explains why reading subcultures in this way offers perhaps the most satisfactory explanation for their social construction, style and existence. The concluding paragraphs examine how subcultures provide insight into how popular culture, and music in particular, in the present and future could function as part of a new counterculture that undermines Empire and facilitates a state of Multitude.

Empire and Multitude: A Brief Overview

- 6 One must read *Empire* in its entirety to fully understand how Hardt and Negri perceive the current state of national and international politics. The book does, however, rearticulate common fears concerning globalisation already present in the public consciousness. They describe a system of abject, deregulated capitalism that has transformed the world into one gigantic factory, and brought about an all-consuming subsumption that pervades every aspect of human existence. The global imperative is the unfettered circulation of goods and services and the accumulation of profits. All other objectives and values must be marginalised or systematically eliminated. In discussing the actual size and scope of Empire, Paul Passavant states, 'in contrast to colonial empires of the past, this one has no boundaries', Empire's homogenising, disciplinary power is not just omnipresent, *it is life itself* – from the absorption of labour into the mechanisms of production, to messages in the mass media, Nike T-shirts, credit checks, surveillance videos, there is no 'outside' space to oppose it (Passavant 2004b: 100).

- 7 According to Hardt and Negri, production in Empire can be divided into the physical and affective spheres. Physical production is decentred, dispersed across the globe and often preoccupied with producing goods that are useless in terms of actual utility. Production and accumulation now frequently exist for their own sake rather than to fulfil needs. Affective labour is concerned with inciting desire, cultivating hospitality and creating culture, social relations, languages and information. In Empire affective labour has supplanted factory labour as the dominant and most influential type. Hardt and Negri are quick to point out that 'the hegemony of immaterial labour does not make all work rewarding, nor does it lessen the hierarchy and command in the workplace and the polarisation of the labour market' (2004: 111).
- 8 Although Hardt and Negri stress that Marxist criticism is still valid and traditional class struggles are still possible, they feel that new strategies are required to confront and dissolve Empire in ways that reflect new economic and social realities that are difficult to reconcile with Marx's ideas. Negri expands the definition of the proletariat to include all those who labour under the rule of capital and are subject to exploitation. He argues that even though the concept of real wages has lost its meaning in the postmodern era many people still live in abject poverty. For those who do have their biological needs met, the struggle is now about justice, security, time and quality of life (Negri 2005: 178). However, writing with Hardt, Negri believes that humankind's path to a richer, more rewarding life is through the emergence and development of Multitude, a new global socialist formation that guarantees its citizens a sustainable income, a basic education, freedom of information and unfettered communication. Multitude is not a mindless, unthinking mob but a global network of coordinated labour that leads to a state of absolute democracy and that transcends race and national boundaries to form an 'irreducible multiplicity' (Hardt and Negri 2004: 105). Hardt and Negri emphasise that perhaps the best way to understand their ideas is not to ask 'what is Multitude?' but 'what can Multitude become?' (ibid.: 105). They insist that Multitude is not a political call to action such as 'workers of the world unite' but a name given to describe what has been happening, and what will continue to happen in the social and political spheres (ibid.: 220).
- 9 The formation of Multitude is distinct from other forms of countercultural activity in that the transformation will occur gradually rather than through mass protest, although physical conflict can play a role in its development. Multitude is essentially a realisation of Gramsci's ideal of the working classes articulating a plurality of struggles (Haslett 2000: 273). Hardt and Negri recognise that since the 1960s the instability of the individual subject has made collective action difficult, and that planned socialism is perhaps not realistically possible in an advanced capitalist system. Hardt and Negri feel that alienation and anomie exists in such a chronic state that only the cumulative weight of communication and media technologies and the fruits of affective labour in their totality will help to rectify the radical deficit of empathy and connectedness that exists.

Multitude and Immanence

- 10 Hardt and Negri's theory of Multitude has a metaphysical basis in Spinoza's idea of immanence, the life force inherent in all beings that is both singular and part of a universal whole. They believe that a democracy based on immanence would be much

stronger than any constitution offered by the state, and would ideally function in a manner similar to Spinoza's concept of the human body; a 'multitude of multitudes' comprising individual natures that act in concert without any hierarchy (2004: 190). Multitude is therefore not a representable totality but a set of singularities. Individuals and groups create Multitude through a 'plurality of actions that do not need to be articulated between themselves' (Laclau 2004: 26). Hardt and Negri's reading of Spinoza is selective, but it is not difficult to comprehend how Spinoza's writings could be used as a counterpoint to Empire. For example, based on Spinoza's belief that the best governance comes about when there is a balance of political forces, and that citizens have more rights when they act together than when they act alone, Hardt and Negri conclude that global capitalism has given people a misguided confidence in individualism that leaves them vulnerable. In Hardt/Negri's view global capital undermines the freedoms that Spinoza believed the state should guarantee, by circumventing the laws and will of the populace, and by destroying their intellect (the place where Spinoza believed immanence resided) through propaganda and the control of information.

- 11 In addition to Hardt/Negri's faith in the unifying power of immanence, Multitude's theoretical foundation has an additional component: Foucault's concept of biopolitics, the process of harnessing human potential as a group. The biopolitics of Multitude is a 'power of the flesh', a force of boundless potential. They describe an elemental power that continuously expands social being, producing in excess of every traditional political and economic measure of value (Hardt and Negri 2004: 192). This biopower is made possible through the types of social relations produced by global capitalism, the predominance of immaterial affective labour, and by the seamless interconnectedness of labour and life. Not only do these relationships create biopower in and of themselves, affective labour also creates a distinct kind of antagonism that adds fuel to the fire:

The wealth it [immaterial labour] creates is taken away and this is a source of its antagonism. Yet it retains its capacity to produce wealth and this is its power. In this combination of antagonism and power lies the making of revolutionary subjectivity. (ibid.: 153)

Multitude and the Study of Subcultures

- 12 Hardt and Negri explain the importance of the media and affective labour in creating new relationships that will facilitate the formation of Multitude. They do not explain what effect the culture created by these groups might have, or ways that these groups might effectively spread messages that undermine Empire. This presents an obstacle to understanding previous scholarship on subcultures in the context of Hardt and Negri's theories as many of these earlier studies are largely debates over whether subcultures (and the music and style associated with them) represent rebellion or consumerism. Presumably some critical discourse would be needed within these new networks; their mere formation would not be enough to promote change. They would need to acknowledge and bear witness to Empire's dehumanising effects. They would need to be driven by subversiveness, which Negri defines as 'the radical nature of truth' (Negri 2005: 59). Truths such as equality, freedom and the promotion of life would need to be kept within the public consciousness in order to counter Empire's deceptive messages.

- 13 If one accepts Negri's definition of subversion as 'the radical nature of truth' then the Marx-influenced theorists who viewed subcultures as a type of counterculture must necessarily be considered the forerunners to a reading of subcultures based on *Multitude*. For example, Hebdige's analysis recognised, for example, that mods and punks were not operating outside of Empire's system of alienation but were a part of it. The point is echoed by Hardt and Negri who write: 'When the flesh of Multitude is imprisoned and transformed into the body of global capital it finds itself both within and against the powers of capitalist globalisation' (2004: 101), a state of being that can be seen in both the music and style of subcultures. Marx-influenced readings of the art created by subcultures are not unlike Terry Eagleton's interpretations of the popular fiction produced by writers like Charles Dickens whose stories simultaneously express admiration and revulsion, amusement and fear of bourgeoisie capitalism, a conflict that gave his writing a tension that should be considered a strength rather than a weakness (Eagleton 1976: 35). The creativity of subcultures, and much of their music in particular, disrupted capital's ability to gain a monopoly over the affections and mode of thinking (affective labour) of individuals, an important step toward Multitude, for as Hardt and Negri point out, the commodities of affective labour largely constitute social life itself.
- 14 Hebdige understood the continuing importance of class in social relations. He indirectly foreshadowed Negri's position that outcasts and the poor are no longer politically inert, and that young people are now in a position to show workers the way forward by forming alternative networks and evacuating sites of power (Negri 2005: 48). Like Hardt and Negri, Hebdige was aware that alternative media such as indie music labels, pirate radio and fanzines were not only important in forming new relationships that challenged class stereotypes propagated by conventional media, but also represented an attempt at transforming the means of production with the limited resources that were available. Hebdige understood that even if subculture's revolt through style and music did perhaps reflect Hardt/Negri's point that 'the wretched of the earth want to go to Disneyland and not the barricades' (Bull 2004: 225) (echoing Baudrillard's sentiments that people favour signs more than revolution), resistance through sign-systems is still a gesture worth making, for if society is governed by sign values as much as economic production, then any attempts to express refusal or transform the public consciousness must take place, to a large degree, on the semiotic level.
- 15 Many subsequent theorists have found fault with Marxist readings, but their arguments do not necessarily undermine the idea of subcultures as an early sign of Multitude. For example, Dave Laing (1985), and Sarah Thornton (1996), call into question the idea of British subcultures as an authentic form of class-protest because they believe that participants were not truly operating from a Marxist mindset advocating the total overthrow of capitalism, and that the whole idea of an adversarial binary distinction between subcultures and 'mainstream' society is fictitious, and was projected onto, for example, punk and goth by the Marx-inspired theorists themselves. In *Empire*, however, Hardt/Negri do postulate that a 'mainstream' ideology and culture did exist, and continues to exist. It is a value system based on a misguided faith in individualism, and a celebration of globalised laissez-faire. The resulting effects of this ideology of Empire create conditions that can generate opposition, an opposition that was reflected in the fashion, literature and music created by subcultures to varying degrees. Art, however,

does more than just reflect the concerns and ideologies of its time, it also provides a glimpse into what it feels like to live in those conditions, something that the music of subcultures arguably accomplished to a greater degree than most varieties of popular music. Music played a part in the postmodern and radical bohemian strategy of total refusal, total negativity (which Žižek reminds us is really all that the poor have with which to protest save violence) and the cultivation of extreme otherness that can be seen in most British subcultures (Žižek 2004: 260). The affective content of the style and music of subcultures pointed to needs that the larger code of capitalism did not allow for, and this holds significance for the development of Multitude. In a passage reminiscent of Hardt and Negri's thinking, Jean Baudrillard writes:

Nonetheless this emergence of needs, however formal and subdued, is never without danger for the social order – as is the liberation of any productive forces. Apart from being the dimension of exploitation, it is also the origin of the most violent social contradictions, of class struggle. Who can say what historical contradictions the emergence and exploitation of this new productive force – that of needs – holds in store for us? (Baudrillard 1981: 84)

- 16 Multitude is Hardt and Negri's answer to Baudrillard's rhetorical question. The fact that not every subculture participant was a disciple of Marx did not render their concerns invalid or prove that the style and music of subcultures contained no countercultural element as Hardt and Negri emphasise that it is the collective weight of mass-dissatisfaction with Empire's conditions that will result in Multitude's evolution, not a Marxist ideology agreed upon by the populace.
- 17 Another reason why scholars such as Laing and Thornton are dismissive of aims to assign proletarian significance to the music and fashion of punk is because it was, in part, created by a few artists, promoters and producers, and spread through media exposure. In Hardt and Negri's theory, however, the influence of the media on subcultures does not negate their authenticity. If any social movement helps promote an awareness of immanence, it is of value regardless of how it is spread or created. Further, the affective content of commodities was shaped by subcultures and signified more than a celebration of capitalism. Music was particularly life-affirming in that the lyrics, timbres and rhythms inspired emotional connections that cannot be quantified in terms of value and utility. In this way music in subcultures represented an attempt to bring back a measure of the symbolic in a society made indifferent by Empire's domineering ideology of utility, value and accumulation. The ability of the affective content of music to overshadow its status as a commodity makes it invaluable to the development of Multitude. As British subcultures demonstrated, music was a primary means of achieving their alternative networks of affective and social organisation. British subcultures can be interpreted as an attempt at breaking the cycle of alienation and false individualism that helps to sustain Empire. The music associated with subcultures bore witness to Empire's dehumanising effects, and helped to radicalise the nature of truth. It served as an affective and important counterpoint to the propaganda of Empire.
- 18 The belief of Ian Chambers (1985) and Bo Reimer (1995) that subcultures represented an attempt to escape socio-economic class rather than represent or redefine it is likewise not antithetical to a Marxist interpretation as people typically do not try to escape, transcend or cover up that which is positive and pleasing. In this way their reading further illustrates the negative effects of Empire.

- 19 Much of the scholarship on subcultures produced after Hebdige has abandoned a Marxist or post-Marxist approach in favour of sociology, gender studies and examining subcultures in an international context, all of which are vital to understanding the subculture phenomenon. However, this tendency to downplay or reject the influence of economic factors on the development of subcultures, drawing attention away from Empire's devastating effects, could be seen as an example of what Hardt and Negri are referring to when they observe that 'such lack of focus, and such intense discussion and debate over this fragmentation is also symptomatic of the current weakness and impotence of the left since the 1970s' (2004: 219).¹

Subcultures and the Beginnings of Multitude

- 20 The distinct type of socialism outlined in *Multitude* was anticipated by British subcultures in a number of ways. First, Hardt/Negri make it clear that Multitude is a class concept and that classes are defined through their lines of collective struggle (2004: 104). Subcultures were one of a multitude of different struggles against the most destructive and alienating acts of capital. Hardt/Negri assert that 'the common currency that runs through so many struggles today – at local, regional, and global levels – is the desire for democracy' (ibid.: xvi). Much of the anger, fear and fetishisation of power that comes through in the music of subcultures sprang from people feeling that they had no control over their lives. Second, one must consider the relationships produced through the affective labour (and music in particular) of subcultures. The music and style produced by British subcultures provides strong support for Hardt and Negri's position that 'Despite the myriad mechanisms of hierarchy and subordination, the poor constantly express an enormous power of life and production'. 'The closer we look at the lives and activity of the poor we see how enormously creative and powerful they are, and indeed, we will argue, how much they are part of the circuits of social and biopolitical production' (ibid.: 129).
- 21 Subcultures were formed in an environment that included a massive shift in the focus of Britain's economy from industrial to affective labour, the relocation of jobs to markets overseas, the huge influx of immigrants from developing countries to England, and unprecedented job insecurity for native workers – all hallmarks of Empire. England had adopted numerous, modest socialist reforms by the time that subcultures were developing. But the pessimism, nihilism, preoccupation with the macabre, and the angst portrayed and/or expressed, both literally and metaphorically, in the fashion, art and especially the music associated with the majority of subcultures illustrates Negri's point that under Empire socialism is deliberately ineffectual as it is designed to serve the needs of global capitalism and not to help the needy or strengthen social bonds as it should.
- 22 Subcultural style also supports Hardt/Negri's belief that, in Empire and Multitude, all forms of labour power are involved in the process of social production. They write: 'to the extent that social production is increasingly defined by immaterial labour such as cooperation and the construction of social relationships and networks of communication, the activity of all in society, including the poor become more and more directly productive' (ibid.: 131). Subcultures gave the poor, unemployed and underemployed a particularly bold and dramatic voice and a means in which to take part in social production. As an example one need only consider the relationships born

out of the remarkable creativity and imagination of the music associated with subcultures: the virtuosity and social commentary displayed in so much British heavy metal; the energy perception, wit and humour of punk; and the imaginative way that goth artists attacked Empire through feminism, camp, parody and the celebration of macabre culture. A particularly valuable type of social production created by the colourful, flamboyant and sometimes grotesque styles associated with subcultures was the way in which they kept the concerns of the lower classes within the public eye. A point raised repeatedly by Baudrillard is that in postmodernity the poor simply vanish because they are not part of the media culture (2002: 128–9). One can assert that even the most reactionary or anti-social of subcultures played a part in preventing the disappearance of the poor.

- 23 Another major criticism of Marxist interpretations of subcultures is based on the premise that subcultures were only concerned with consumerism, play and providing recreational space. It is suggested that the accusations of commodity fetishism against subcultures and countercultures have always been overblown (poor youths had little disposable income) and the recreational aspects of subculture participation is best understood in terms of Multitude. In Negri's analysis, for example, extensive destitution is a tool used by capital to keep individuals isolated since 'poverty leads to economic blackmail, the destruction of the imagination, the reawakening of atavistic fears, and encourages monstrous piety' (Negri 2005: 96). Subcultures, their style, music and values, can be seen as a way to combat economic blackmail, ward off atavistic fears and as an affirmation of the power of the imagination. Instead of seeing subcultures as hedonistic, one should recognise the limited ways in which people from the lowest classes could spend their free time, and the limitations of their life experiences. Striking a blow against the celebration of piety is also a blow against the life-draining ideology behind Empire. Negri believes that the relationship between capital and labour is not dialectical but antagonistic, no longer exclusively a battle for real wages. The struggle is now for justice, time and quality of life, as capital continuously makes new demands on the workforce (ibid.: 178). In these terms, free-time and the sign-value of subcultural style are both subversive and life-affirming symbols.²
- 24 The loose unity of subcultures, and the sense of individuality as well as camaraderie that they inspired among their members is similar to the ideal of unity in Multitude; 'singularities that act in common' but are not swallowed up by the whole (Hardt and Negri 2004: 105). Hardt/Negri agree with postmodern theorists that identities are subject to fracture and multiplicity but they do not feel that this stands in the way of creating social bonds.³ In fact, hybrid identities, though not revolutionary in and of themselves, are a precondition for it (Bull 2004: 229). Even before they brought Spinoza's concept of immanence to bear on the idea of unity in the postmodern, Negri stated earlier that 'production, consumption, knowledge, the desire for transformation and equality do not produce equivalent and interchangeable individuals' (Negri 2005: 207), and in this way subcultures represent in microcosm an early manifestation of biopower. The more fragmented and mobile the postmodern subjects are, the more abstract their productive capabilities and the greater their potential for cooperation rather than functioning as interchangeable cogs in the machine of capital.
- 25 The theory of a Multitude made up of groups of singularities acting in common was anticipated not just by single subcultures but by all the British subcultures combined. Hardt/Negri explain:

The multitude is composed of innumerable internal differences that can never be reduced to a single identity – different cultures, races, ethnicities, genders, and sexual orientations; different forms of labour; different ways of living; different views of the world; and different desires. The multitude is a multiplicity of all these differences. (2004: xiv)

- 26 They repeatedly stress that in Multitude social differences will remain different, but there will be a common that is shared, a common that is ‘not so much discovered as it is produced’. Subcultures voiced opposition to powers and circumstances that can consistently be traced back to Empire, or were a symptom of a social problem that was rooted in the negative consequences of Empire.⁴ This was their common. For example, skinheads attacked the subsumption of British traditions and daily life by global capital (Hebdige 1979: 55–8). Goth criticised Empire’s origins in the masculine logic of production (Mueller 2008: 90–120), and punks rebelled against symbols of privilege, pillars of society and phony optimism through their abrasive rhetoric, fashion and music (Hebdige 1979, Laing 1985). Many of the same themes appear again and again in the music and symbolic language of punk, goth, mod and heavy metal rockers, their diverse styles reflecting many of the same social concerns.⁵ One of the most common targets of subcultures was nuclear proliferation, which Negri identifies as one of Empire’s most potent symbols declaring that ‘nuclear terror appears as fixed accumulation, as fixed social capital’. He writes:

If the brutality of social relationships is at a maximum, terror must be extreme. In material terms, capital’s drive toward terror is orchestrated by the practice and ideology of nuclear power. It is important, even if banal, at this stage, to emphasise that the drive toward terror is not a result of some demonical quality of capital. Rather the origin and mechanism of such a tendency find their origin in the dialectic of capital’s expropriation of productive cooperation from which they derive their degree of intensity. (Negri 2005: 123)

- 27 In other words, capital expropriates labour and alienates the worker but imposes a social unity by forcing them to be a part of state violence of which the bomb is the ultimate symbol. The music of heavy metal rockers disavowed nuclear weapons and their enforced social relations most forcefully in songs such as ‘Electric Funeral’ by Black Sabbath, and ‘Revelation (Mother Earth)’ by Ozzy Osbourne.⁶ Anti-nuclear songs, however, can be found in the punk musical cannon with tracks like the Ramones’ ‘Planet Earth 1988’ and ‘Stop the World’ by the Clash, as well as in the music from the goth movement with songs such as ‘Black Planet’ by the Sisters of Mercy and ‘Blow the House Down’ by Siouxsie and the Banshees.
- 28 Although the participants of England’s youth cultures probably did not see themselves as global citizens to the degree that Hardt/Negri envision for a future Multitude, they did resist attempts by global capital to define and appropriate nationalism and patriotism. Under Empire the loyalty of the poor and working classes to the nation-state gradually fades as social programmes are cut, workplace safety and environmental standards are weakened, and the government places the desires of global capital ahead of the needs of the population. The loss of industrial labour as the primary site for friendships and social bonding also exacerbates this decline in feelings of national identity (Sassen 2004: 183).
- 29 Subcultures flourished at a time when British nationalism was enjoying a resurgence with the Falklands War, the celebration of the royal wedding, and the rise of Thatcher’s conservatism. Subcultures helped to reclaim attempts by the political right to

homogenise and define British national identity. Their strategies included turning signifiers of Britishness against their original meanings⁷ or by making use of culture with subversive connotations in British society. For example, goth appropriated elements of English gothic literature and signifiers from classic horror films, which have traditionally carried degenerate connotations in British society (Mueller 2008: 69–90). Subcultures not only seemed to confound expectations about people's position in the social structure, they also undermined definitions of patriotism that benefited Empire over the people of Britain.

- 30 The subcultures of the 1970s and 1980s, along with the fashion, music, art and writing that gave them a sense of identity, serve as an early example of Hardt/Negri's vision of the potential of affective labour, and their observation that the production of capital is the production of social life in the postmodern era. When they speak of commodities such as music inciting passion, excitement and a thirst for life, Hardt/Negri do not see commodity fetishism in the way that a traditional Marxist critic would, or see people being dominated and ruled by objects the way Baudrillard did. Instead they equate this passion with liberation for two reasons: first, this passion creates relationships that invite unity that in turn creates the biopower necessary for Multitude; second, this passion and these relationships have important semiotic value symbolising social wealth and the inability of capital to subsume, capture and control all aspects of the human experience (Hardt and Negri 2004: 147). Under Empire it is a subversive act to suggest that there is a life beyond the legal, national or financial (Passavant 2004a: 9).
- 31 Of course Hardt and Negri are speaking of the present in their writings and of the typical citizen's relationship with the products of affective labour, however, during the time when subcultures flourished in Britain their commodities inspired passion due to their subversive sign-value, so at the time some commodities had more liberating potential than others. The passion felt by, for example, mods, goths, punks and so on for their style and music was also inspired by their working-class background, and because, as Hebdige points out, it helped them say the right things at the right time and signify a sensibility (Hebdige 1979: 122).
- 32 Affects, Hardt and Negri remind us, refer equally to the body and mind. Affects such as joy and sadness reveal the present state of life in the entire organism, expressing a certain state of the body along with a certain mode of thinking (2004: 108). Because of this affective ability the music, fashion and artwork produced by subcultures was more than just an outward show of refusal through the manipulation of signifiers; the sentiment of refusal permeated the individual's entire being. This explains why the art and style of each distinct subculture was dominated by one overriding affect.
- 33 Subcultures further illustrate the potential power of affective labour to create social unity by the way these movements energised and influenced one another. Hebdige documents how most of Britain's subcultures were linked in some way to the culture of the black population, which was itself an amalgamation of carefully selected elements from their Jamaican heritage (1979: 48–9). The hardships endured by one ethnic group inspired a style that was given a fresh context and new layers of meaning by another group.⁸ What is most significant for the concept of Multitude, however, is that subcultures produced a relationship with one another. Hardt/Negri observe that the creation of new languages (of which subcultural styles and music are an example) is one of the primary products of immaterial labour that produces Multitude (2004: 108). At this point subcultures were united by sharing signs of refusal, but in Hardt/Negri's

theory the element of refusal would not necessarily have to be present; the interaction of languages and groups is what is most important. The manifestation of biopower that subcultures represent demands that their political significance be reconsidered.

Subcultures and the Future of Multitude

- 34 The individuals who participated in subcultures were only showing the signs of exploitation, and fear of the future. They probably did not imagine the type of globalised socialism, and the dismantling of current power structures as envisioned by Hardt and Negri. Subcultures were active at a time when hybrid identities were less common, when the difference between economic production and cultural production were more distinct. This threw the styles of ted, mod, goth and punk into greater contrast with the rest of society. However, most of the social issues that preoccupied subcultures were the result of changes and conditions brought on by the globalisation of capital-Empire. The style and music of the various social movements frequently illustrated how interconnected personal, gender and racial problems were, and traceable back to problems in economic production. They demonstrated the importance of subverting and appropriating signifiers that govern society in order to express resistance in late capitalism. Considering that the connection between signs and referents is still strong enough to facilitate domination in Empire, then rebellion through style is not insignificant. Although scholarship on subcultures has sometimes made too much of the participants as consumers, they did bring a passion to their art, fashion and music that foregrounded and celebrated its affective content while downplaying its status as commodities. The emotional intensity of the art kept important ideas in the consciousness of the participants and brought them together in a way that demonstrated Hardt and Negri's point that 'our innovative and creative capacities are always greater than the productivity of capital' (2004: 146). In that sense the passion of subcultures was just as important as their expressions of refusal in their foreshadowing of Multitude.
- 35 The music associated with British subcultures does point to another way that music could help bring Multitude into being. The way that goth bands, for example, drew inspiration from horror films and gothic literature shows how popular music might present new possibilities for collaboration between creative artists in order to signify immanence and to create more powerful and critical products of affective labour. In Multitude what artists signify to their audience must strike a balance between producer and transformer. Ideally the romantic notion of the artist as an inspired creator would need to be maintained in some fashion to remind people of their 'divine spark', their unique individuality that contributes to the whole rather than being swallowed up by it. Celebrating the individuality of creative artists of all types would need to be considerably different from the way that the romantic view of the artist has been used by capital to promote an individualism that alienates and weakens the whole. At the same time the Marxist view of the artist as a transformer of ready-made materials into values, myths, forms and ideologies (Eagleton 1976: 69) must also be foregrounded in the music and image of recording artists to signify Multitude and the interconnectedness of different forms of labour.

- 36 The music must be created in close collaboration ‘with the past and present thought of others’ so that each new idea, sound or image will invite new collaborations. Hardt and Negri write:

the production of languages, finally, both natural languages and artificial languages [music as well] and various kinds of code is always collaborative and always creates new means of collaboration. In all these ways, in immaterial production the creation of cooperation has become internal to labour and thus external to capital. (2004: 147)

- 37 If subcultures can be considered part of the first embryonic step toward Multitude then it is clear that popular music and style cultures can continue to play a role in the transformation of consciousness necessary for this new formation to take place. Joel Bakan believes that musicians and subcultures need to become more radical, and express refusal based on a deeper and more informed analysis of social problems:

The question to ask however is not what can popular music or popular culture do to facilitate social change, but what can we do to help popular music and popular culture bring about a more developed social conscience’ [personal telephone conversation 23 June 2010].

- 38 During the 1970s and 1980s British subcultures often expressed hostility against each other because they allowed themselves to be divided by issues of sexuality, race and lifestyle, largely ignoring how they were united by the same set of concerns for their future and for British society. The various subcultures in Britain did not, as Hardt and Negri might say, fully appreciate the common that they produced and its productive potential. Future subcultures and social movements cannot make this mistake. Expressing an awareness of immanence must remain their main focus.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BULL, M. 2004. “Smooth Politics”, in *Empire’s New Clothes: Reading Hardt and Negri*, edited by P. A. Passavant and J. Dean. New York and London: Routledge, 217-230.
- CHAMBERS, I. 1985. *Urban Rhythms: Pop Music and Popular Culture*. London: Macmillan.
- CROFT, J. 1997. “Youth, Culture, and Age”, in *British Cultural Identities*, edited by M. Storry and P. Childs. New York and London: Routledge, 163-198.
- DUNN, T. L. 2004. “Sovereignty, Multitudes, Absolute Democracy: A Discussion between Thomas L. Dunn and Michael Hardt about Hardt and Negri’s Empire”, in *Empire’s New Clothes: Reading Hardt and Negri*, edited by P. A. Passavant and J. Dean. New York and London: Routledge, 163-73.
- HARDT, M. and A. NEGRI. 2001. *Empire*. London and Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.
- HARDT, M. and A. NEGRI. 2004. *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*. New York: Penguin.
- HEBDIGE, D. 1979. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. London and New York: Routledge.

- J. CLARKE, S. HALL, T. JEFFERSON, and B. ROBERTS. 1997. "Subcultures, Cultures and Class", in *The Subcultures Reader*, edited by K. Gelder and S. Thornton. London and New York: Routledge, 100-111.
- LACLAU, E. 2004. "Can Immanence Explain Social Struggle?" in *Empire's New Clothes: Reading Hardt and Negri*, edited by P. A. Passavant and J. Dean. New York and London: Routledge, 21-30.
- LAING, D. 1985. *One Chord Wonders: Power and Meaning in Punk Rock*. Philadelphia: Open University Press.
- MCDONOUGH, F. 1997. "Class and Politics", in *British Cultural Identities*, edited by M. STORRY and P. CHILDS. New York and London: Routledge, 201-223.
- MCROBBIE, A. and J. GRABER. 1997. "Girls and Subcultures", in *The Subcultures Reader*, edited by K. GELDER and S. THORNTON, London and New York: Routledge, 112-120.
- MUELLER, C. 2008. *The Music of the Goth Subculture: Postmodernism and Aesthetics*. Ph.D. Florida State University.
- MUGGLETON, D. 2000. *Subculture: The Postmodern Meaning of Style*. Oxford: Berg.
- NEGRI, A. 2005. *The Politics of Subversion: A Manifesto for the Twenty-First Century* [1989]. Cambridge: Polity.
- Passavant, P. A. 2004. "Postmodern Republicanism", in *Empire's New Clothes: Reading Hardt and Negri*, edited by P. A. Passavant and J. Dean. New York and London: Routledge, 1-20.
- PASSAVANT, P. A. 2004. "From Empire's Law to Multitude's Rights: Law, Representation, and Revolution", in *Empire's New Clothes: Reading Hardt and Negri*, edited by P. A. PASSAVANT and J. DEAN. New York and London: Routledge, 95-119.
- REINER, B. 1995. "Youth and Modern Lifestyles", in *Youth Cultures in Late Modernity*, edited by J. FORNAS and G. BOLIN. London: Sage, 76-92.
- THORNTON, S. 1996. *Club Cultures: Music, Media, and Subcultural Capital*. Hanover: University Press of New England.

NOTES

1. Although Negri has been unsympathetic to much postmodern theory, I have seen no evidence that neither he nor Michael Hardt question the value of non-Marxist criticism. They do suggest, however, that the importance of immanence and the problems of Empire often get lost in the vertigo of competing academic theories.
2. As an example see Hebdige's explanation of the lifestyle and subversiveness of the mod subculture (1979: 63). Also see Hardt and Negri's discussion of the importance of abandoning sites of power throughout *Empire* and *Multitude*.
3. Scholars concerned with race and gender have expressed scepticism about hybrid identities believing that hybrid will inevitably mean 'white male'. Hardt and Negri do not dwell on how women and minorities might experience Multitude differently just as they do subcultures. Hardt/Negri state that they are focusing on class and labour in their writings as these areas have been neglected in recent years. They applaud racial and feminist activism and make it clear that their vision of Multitude contains no racial or gender hierarchies. See Hardt and Negri (2004: 273-4, and especially 224).

4. Although some may see nihilistic, or far-right subcultures as antithetical to Multitude it can be argued that these groups all stem from what Terry Eagleton refers to as 'a lack of nourishment'; the current social environment of 'sterile ideologies' that are 'unable to make significant connections or offer adequate discourses' (1976: 58). According to Hardt/Negri, Empire is the crux of the problem so these subcultures are not as divorced from the idea of Multitude as it may seem.
 5. Once again, it is not being suggested that all subcultures were driven by identical concerns, only that there was a considerable overlapping of the same concerns among different subcultures.
 6. Although it should be self-evident the music being discussed here is British heavy metal and not the American style of glam metal which was quite distinct from its European counterpart.
 7. See Hebdige's remarks on punk and the Teddy Boys throughout *Subculture*.
 8. Hardt and Negri believe that the ascendancy of Empire is the root cause of most racial problems since the 1960s because Empire has everything to gain by dividing the populace through racism. They feel that race is determined politically more by collective struggle rather than by skin colour. This provided another point of commonality between black and white subcultures in Britain (2004: 104).
-

ABSTRACTS

In this essay, I explore how subcultures from the 1970s and 1980s anticipated many of Hardt and Negri's ideas, and explains why understanding these style movements in terms of Empire and Multitude offers a fresh and compelling perspective on subcultures. The British movements punk, mod, goth, etc. represent a particularly good example of subcultures functioning as an early manifestation of the "alternative networks of affection and organization" described in *Multitude* since their discourse voiced many of the same socio-economic concerns, but used diverse styles to represent their values and anxieties. They also developed under a conservative government that epitomized the ideals of Empire, and operated within a relatively confined geographic space. Previous scholarship on subcultures by Dick Hebdige, Sarah Thornton, David Muggleton, and others is analyzed and shown to be reconcilable to a reading subculture style based on Hardt and Negri.

Dans cet essai, nous explorons ensuite la façon dont les subcultures, des années 1970 aux années 1980, préfigurèrent de nombreux concepts du travail de Hardt et Negri, et expliquons les notions d'empire et de multitude permettent de comprendre ces mouvements stylistiques de façon neuve. Les mouvements britanniques mod, punk, goth, etc., fonctionnaient comme une manifestation de « réseaux alternatifs d'affection et d'organisation », dans la mesure où leurs discours exprimaient les mêmes préoccupations socioéconomiques, tout en utilisant des styles divers pour représenter leurs valeurs et soucis. Ils se développèrent par ailleurs sous des gouvernements conservateurs qui incarnaient les idées de l'Empire, et opéraient au sein d'un espace géographique relativement confiné. Les travaux sur les subcultures de Hebdige, Thornton, Muggleton entrent ainsi en dialogue avec ceux de Hardt et Negri.

INDEX

Keywords: subcultures, counterculture / resistance, politics / activism

Mots-clés: subcultures, contre-culture / résistance, politique / militantisme

Chronological index: 1960-1969, 1970-1979, 1980-1989

Subjects: rock'n'roll / rockabilly, goth / gothic, punk / hardcore punk

AUTHOR

CHARLES MUELLER

Charles MUELLER is a professional guitarist and studio musician in Portland Oregon. He earned a Masters degree in Music Education from Portland State University and a PhD in historical musicology from Florida State University where he wrote a dissertation on the goth subculture. His scholarship continues to focus on music and subcultures, and the effect of the Cold War on popular music.