Sociological Theories of Crime & Deviance (6)

Marxist Subcultural theory

Some Marxists have focused on **working-class spectacular youth subcultures** such as **teddy boys** (1950s), **mods and rockers** (1960s), **skinheads** (1970s), **punks** (late 1970s) and **ravers** (1980s/1990s) because these have been defined as deviant by society. They are described as **'spectacular'** because they were highly **visible** in terms of their hairstyles and dress-codes and because their actions often **'shocked'** mainstream society. Marxists have suggested that these youth cultures can be seen as **a form of ideological resistance** to the **dominant adult value system which is shaped by middle-class and capitalist values.**

The **Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS)** was made up of a number of Marxist writers who produced a type of Marxism known as **resistance theory.** This argued that **youth subcultural styles** should be read as a **challenge to class inequality and economic changes in society.** Marxists using a method called **semiotics** (the study of signs –things that mean something deeper than they appear to on the surface) to explore how **deviant youth subcultures use symbolism to resist an oppressive capitalist system.** A number of studies of these youth subcultures were carried out by CCCS sociologists including:

(i)   **Teddy boys**

Tony Jefferson (1976) researched **1950s Teddy Boys**. Teddy boys wore Edwardian style jackets, suede shoes and bootlace ties. He concluded that the bootlace ties were taken from characters in Western films who had to live off their wits - the sort of characters working-class lads aspired to be. The jackets that Teddy boys wore were a subversion of the Edwardian Dandy style which had become popular with the upper middle-class. **Jefferson claimed that the adoption of this dress code showed working-class contempt for the class system and poked fun at their supposed middle-class 'social superiors'.**

(ii)   Skinheads

Phil Cohen (1972) studied early 1970s **skinheads**. He proposed that **the skinhead style was a reaction to the decline of working class communities.** He argued that **skinheads were trying to recreate working class culture** by dressing in grand-dad shirts, work boots and braces, and by acting in a way that **exaggerated masculinity and aggression.**

Many skinheads took out their aggression on **immigrants** and Cohen concludes that **their racist behaviour was a reaction to how they saw immigration breaking up their exclusively white working-class neighbourhoods.** Cohen argued that **skinheads through their dress and behaviour** were demonstrating their **symbolic resistance to social change** and were attempting to **magically re-create their working-class origins.**

(iii)　　　Punk rockers

Dick Hebdige (1979) studied **punk rockers,** an extreme or spectacular youth subculture which was briefly popular between 1976-1978**.** Hebdige looked for the meanings behind the clothes that punks wore. He suggested that **Punk was a form of resistance to the dominant cultural values of British society in the late 1970s** but that the symbolism and style of punk, was not new. Rather, it involved what he called **bricolage,** (a concept that describes the way in which **cultures re-use ordinary objects or commodities to create new meanings**), e.g. punks stuck safety pins in their noses, and used bin liners as a form of clothing. They often combined these with **objects from different contexts** such as sexual bondage gear and swastikas so creating a new subcultural style. Hebdige argues that punks set out to deliberately **shock the establishment and society.**

However, Hebdige notes that capitalist society quickly adapts to such challenges to its cultural dominance. He notes that **punks and other youth subcultures are fairly short-lived** because of **incorporation - capitalism quickly commercializes aspects of youth cultural style, i.e. puts them on sale, and strips them of their ideological significance so that they become just another consumer item.**

Criticisms of Marxist Subcultural theory

(1) Marxists emphasise social class and consequently **neglect gender and ethnicity** as influences on youth subculture.

(2) Marxists are criticised for decoding the style in terms *only* **of opposition and resistance.** This means that they sometimes missed instances when the style is **conservative or supportive of mainstream society**.

(3) In their understandable enthusiasm to depict **youth as creative agents rather than manipulated dummies**, these writers **under-estimate** the extent to which **some changes in youth culture are manufactured by capitalism and shaped by consumerism.**

(4) The cultural symbols are all seen by the CCCS to derive from English working class culture. **American cultural influences such as American designer labels, American music, films etc. which are still influential today are neglected.**

(5) The CCCS see youth cultures **as symbolising a type of political action**. However, this leads to them using **questionable interpretations of youth culture behaviour. They see all deviant or criminal behaviour committed by this type of youth as rational,** e.g. racist attacks by skinheads are justified by Marxists in that they are interpreted as reacting against the loss of jobs and territory created by capitalist immigration policy.

(6) Finally Marxism does not take account the fact that **young people will often move between subcultures, and that older youths mix and match styles/values from a range of subcultures. Adults too may conform for most of the working week, but may re-enter a deviant subculture at specific times (weekend, festivals etc.).**

(7) **If spectacular youth subcultures are a cultural reaction to the inequalities of capitalism why have they diminished in popularity since the 1970s?** The UK has seen **the gap between rich and poor widen in the last forty years but the same period is characterised by the near-invisibility of spectacular deviant youth subcultural movements.** There

are visible subcultures – goths, indies and emos but these seem more individualistic than the teddy boys, mods and rockers, skinheads and punks that preceded them.

(8) **The CCCS fail to consider middle-class youth subcultures** such as the anti-war hippie culture of the 1960s or the hipster culture found in many urban areas today. Ironically the digital and social media revolution that the USA and Western Europe have experienced since the 1980s was initiated and led by ex-hippies such as Steve Jobs and Bill Gates. Other ex-hippies are at the forefront of the environmentalist, vegan and organic-food movements.