NEWER HAS SO MUCH BEEN WRITTEN BY SO MANY ABOUT SO FEW, OR, WHY YOUTH RESEARCH?

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NEVER HAS SO MUCH BEEN WRITTEN BY SO MANY ABOUT SO FEW, OR, WHY YOUTH RESEARCH?

BY

KEITH ROE

Many of us who study youth do not regard ourselves primarily as youth researchers. For instance, I am a pedagogue-cum-media researcher who happens to specialize, in part, in some of the interrelations between young people, the media and the school. This is, naturally, a matter of perspective, but there is an essential difference between conducting research into the pedagogical process; or the ways in which youth use the media; and conducting research into youth or 'youth culture' per se.

I stress this first because, like young people, I need a secure sense of identity and I am not really sure what youth research or youth culture research actually is, and I am not wholly convinced that youth researchers do either. Second, because I sincerely do not believe that youth research, as a separate field of study, has a particularly bright future. In most respects it is altogether too limited a perspective, a heuristic cul-de-sac, the constraints of which many are already beginning to experience. It is noticeable that, in their self-definitions and activity, some youth researchers are already gliding over from 'youth' and 'youth culture' to the wider terms of reference of popular culture and cultural studies: and I think that they are right, for conceptually I subsume youth research under a wider cultural perspective. An examination of the literature suggests that it is in the field of cultural studies

that many youth researchers trace their intellectual roots.

For me there is also an element of 'deja vu' involved here. In many respects the development of media research in the past few decades, with its similar explosive development and attempts at legitimation among a younger generation of researchers, is a forerunner of what is happening to youth research. One important lesson to be learned here is that, in its earlier development, media research was often compared to a railway junction - a place which many pass but where few stay long!

However, the analogy with media research is not complete, for its growth coincided with a rapid growth in the diffusion and extent of use of electronic media. The growth of youth research, by contrast, is now facing a situation which, with the possible exception of the 1930's, is unique since the advent of industrialization in Europe, namely the fact that in many countries youth is currently in significant demographic decline. One effect of this tendency may well be that 'youth research' is going to have an even more difficult time establishing and legitimizing itself than media research has had.

Is it not a little curious that while 'youth' as a social category is in demographic decline, 'youth research' and 'youth culture' research is growing explosively as an area of academic activity among predominantly non-youthful researchers? For some time now we have been hearing comments about the 'greying' of media research and I wonder if it is not time to start talking of the 'greying' of youth research? If so, then it is necessary to

start to examine the relation which we ourselves as researchers have to young people, and the cultural forms which we spend so much time researching and writing about. What lies behind our preoccupation with youth? Behind our construction of youth as a specific social category and research object? What lies behind the self-image of the youth researcher? (Or for that matter the self-image of the media researcher)?

There are a number of other vital questions involved here. Is our concern with youth in fact little more than a form of moral entrepreneurship, the manufacture of a marketable commodity in the welfare economy? Are we, to use Bourdieu's (1980, 1984) terms, not making explicit that which is essential, namely that our preoccupation with youth and youth culture can better be traced to our own problematic position within the social space; and to our own struggles to legitimate and convert the forms of capital that we as a group possess; than to the problems and struggles of youth themselves? If so, then in the name of critical self-awareness or, if you prefer, intellectual honesty, this should be made explicit and acknowledged.

Before we address this question directly it would be appropriate to look at one or two historical analogies. According to historians of popular culture (see e.g. Burke, 1979), it was in the decades around 1800, when traditional popular culture in Europe was beginning to disappear, that the 'people' began to interest intellectuals. This interest was associated with the movement of cultural primitivism and reaction against the rationalism of the enlightenment, as well as with the rise of nationalism. An example was the Swedish Gothic Society, founded

in 1811 whose members, "took 'Gothic' names and worked for the revival of the old Swedish or 'Gothic' virtues....the impulse to the formation of this society, which was at once literary, antiquarian, moral and political, was the shock to the Swedes caused by their loss of Finland to Russia in 1809." (ibid: p.11).

The threat of foreign domination, a threat experienced economically, culturally and militarily in the Nordic area to this day, appears to have led to a series of nativistic attempts by some societies to revive their traditional culture. Furthermore, it seems that this was particularly the case on the cultural periphery of Europe, and in peripheral areas of individual countries. The culture of these areas was seen as being in serious decline and needing to be recorded and, if possible, rehabilitated. It was a case of the 'centre invading the periphery' in the sense that 'popular culture' was discovered and constructed by intellectuals and imposed on the people with whom they desired to identify (ibid). Is it accidental that in our own time concern with youth culture should have become so great at a time when, in many respects, Europe has moved towards the periphery of world affairs, and when youth as a social category is in demographic decline in many parts of Europe?

One should always be wary of historical parallels, but the modern construction of youth culture seems to me to be analogous to the historical construction of popular culture in a number of respects. First, there is a similar problem of definition of a vague social category. Who constitutes youth? What is youth culture? As with 'the people' and 'popular' definitions vary,

scmetimes being all-inclusive, sometimes restricted to certain (often spectacularly different) segments of the population (cf. Parsons, 1942; Erikson, 1968; Musgrove, 1968; Cohen 1955; 1970; Clarke, 1974; Murdock and McCron, 1976; Brake; 1980; Rutter, 1980; Fornäs et al, 1987). Second, there are also elements of nostalgia, romanticism and cultural protectionism in contemporary youth research (cf. Roe, 1989). Third, there is a problematic relation to rationality, especially identifiable in the discourse surrounding modernity and post-modernity. In this discourse youth is often portrayed as either too rational and too self-aware; or else too irrational, frivolous and fatuous (cf. Lundberg, 1989; Roe, 1989).

At times 'youth culture' seems to mean whatever intellectuals choose it to mean and the sceptic is led to wonder whether
it has really ever been more than an ideological construction. At
the theoretical level this may be a fruitful enterprise but there
are risks as well as benefits to be obtained from constructing
and institutionalizing 'youth' and 'youth research', not least
because our motives are not always innocent.

According to Phil Cohen (1986) most contemporary youth policy-making and much post-war youth research has rested on a small number of core assumptions which, he argues, insofar as they are institutionalized in policy and practice actually inhibit the development of more fruitful and differentiated perspectives. He also argues for the construction of historical parallels, since focusing on the "perennial association between the juvenile and the delinquent helps expose the scapegoating mechanisms whereby youth is made to represent a whole series of

conflicts which originate elsewhere in society". Essentially, we need to see that,

"Youth professionals do have a material stake in the youth question - it is the source of their livelihoods. However critical our awareness of the ideological implications, we have a vested interest in moral panics about 'youth problems' because they help generate public support for our projects. It has not been unknown for hard pressed researchers or agencies even to start a moral panic of their own about young people 'at risk' in order to put pressure on funding bodies."

(ibid: p. 247).

In Sweden many examples of this kind of strategy may be found. My favourite was reported in Sydsvenska Dagbladet (The South Swedish Daily News) on 20th January 1983 in an article entitled, "Own Home with Video Unsuitable Milieu for Children". The article summarized a report to be presented to the city authorities listing what were regarded as unsuitable milieux for children and adolescents in the city. At the time a fierce debate was raging in Sweden over the nature of video use by young people; a debate which has been characterized as a fully fledged 'moral panic' (Roe, 1985); so that it was not unnatural that the newspaper should seize on that particular aspect for its eyecatching headline. In addition to their own homes, other 'unsuitable' mileux in the city were listed. These included, pinball machine arcades (which, we might agree, is reasonable), the city's largest indoor sports centre (where there were also pinball machines), all the city's discoteques, the municipal park (where, it had been reported, alcohol could be purchased), the University Student Union building (reasons unspecified),

schoolyards and school common rooms (reasons unspecified), bus stops, kiosks, and hamburger/grill bars (reasons unspecified).

We can ask ourselves, 'what is left?' One alternative is the Churches, well it wasn't them, they at least are not normally that stupid. By a process of elimination the answer should not be difficult to find - the youth clubs - it was the Leisure Department (Fritidsförvaltningen) which presented the report, doubtless with the intention of claiming to be able to cure this 'problem', given, of course, sufficient extra resources.

We can merely gasp in amazement and ridicule at this, admittedly brazen and extreme example, but it is important to remember that the strategy is a not uncommon one in association with youth field-work. With regard to research it is also the case that the great majority of projects and studies are still 'social problem' oriented (often according to researchers own definitions), and claim to provide 'saving' strategies.

Three years ago in Helsinki I made the problematic relation which intellectuals studying the media have to culture a major theme in my address to the Nordic Conference of Mass Media Researchers (see Roe, 1987a; cf. 1987b). Applying Bourdieu's framework to media research I reminded them that, as intellectuals, we are simultaneously involved in researching, debating and writing about various forms of culture and in struggles for cultural legitimacy. Bourdieu (1980, 1984) has taught us that the struggle over the legitimate definition of culture is total, involving every dimension of existence. I believe it is our

struggles in this respect that we have a marked tendency to project and transfer onto youth and youth research.

However, before taking up Bourdieu's framework again, I would like to forestall one line of criticism of his work not infrequently voiced at seminars in Sweden. This takes the form of a dismissal of Bourdieu's work because its empirical focus is on the French cultural setting. Now, this argument has always puzzled me, first because presumably only a fool would dispute the fact that Sweden is different from France, and second, because, while Marx wrote predominantly about Britain and Germany, Durkheim about France, Freud about his Viennese patients, Willis about 'lads' in England, and Ziehe about youth in the Federal Republic of Germany; presumably because these were the contexts with which they were most familiar; so far I have not noticed that this has in any way hindered the widespread and fruitful application of their work in the Nordic context. I can only assume that this kind of criticism is raised by those who have not really understood the role of theory and analytical method in research. It is not the specific empirical details of Bourdieu's work which make it important (indeed even for France the data presented are very old) but rather the heuristic efficacy of the theoretical model; a model that has already been shown to be fruitful in the in the Swedish context (see e.g. Roe, 1983, Brody, 1985; Palme, 1987; 1989).

In considering the construction of youth research, it is necessary to acknowledge the fact that we belong to that group which Bourdieu terms 'the new-style autodidacts', i.e those who have acquired the bulk of their cultural capital in and through

education, rather than from their social origins. This group is characterized by those who have maintained a long relation and place in higher education but who have been relatively poorly rewarded by this long association; a fact that leads them to invest in areas disclaimed by the educational system. It is these autodidacts who make up what Bourdieu terms 'the new petite-bourgeoisie of social scientists, social workers, youth workers, radio and television employees, magazine journalists etc.' and who overpopulate the 'alternatives' of biodynamics, creativity courses, meditation, dance, ecology, free cinema, avant-garde theatre, pottery, therapy, vegetarianism, weaving etc. (and, we might add, progressive and avant-garde rock). All of these activities, claims Bourdieu are nothing more than an 'inventory of social flying, a desperate attempt to deny the gravity of the social field.'

Drawing attention to these relationships should not merely be seen as a form of self-flaggelation but as an aid to progress in our research,

"Social science may expect to derive its most decisive progress from a constant effort to undertake a sociological critique of sociological reasoning - that is to establish the social derivation not only of the categories of thought which it consciously or unconsciously deploys...but also of the concepts which it uses, and which are often no more than commonsense notions introduced uncritically into scholarly discourse...or of the problems which it elects to study, which not infrequently are nothing but more or less skillfully disguised versions of the latest 'social problems'."

(Bourdieu, 1988: xii).

These comments seem particularly appropriate to youth research and progress in the field necessarily involves the tasks of 'objectifying the objectifying subject, of classifying the social classifiers, and of studying the historical conditions of our own production, in order to gain theoretical control over our own structures and inclinations' (ibid). In this way,

> "Far from leading to a nihilistic attack on science, like certain so-called 'postmodern' analyses, which do no more than add the flavour of the month dressed with a soupcon of 'French radical chic' to the age-old irrationalist rejection of science, and more especially of social science, under the aegis of a denunciation of 'positivism' and 'scientiism', this sort of sociological experimentation applied to sociological study itself aims to demonstrate that sociology can escape from the vicious circle of historicism or sociologism, and that.. ..it need only make use of the knowledge which it provides of the social world in which science is produced, in order to try to gain control over the effects of the social determinisms which affect both this world, and, unless extreme caution is exercised, scientific discourse itself....Sociology claims an epistemological privilege....by the fact of being able to reinvest in scientific practice its own scientific gains, in the form of a sociological increase in epistemological vigilance." (Bourdieu, ibid: xiii).

We ought to acknowledge that we are agents in the permanent rivalry of the academic field and that we occupy a determined position within it. Self-recognition here would reveal the foundations of our theoretical propensities, world views and claims for legitimation. As a new area of study we do have problems with regard to academic legitimation. However, new areas of study also provide opportunities for 'new-style autodidacts' to by-pass the existing structure of legitimation and to create

new definitions and distinctions. This is why intellectual novelties such as youth research demonstrably appeal most to students of the humanities and marginal disciplines within the social sciences. Such disciplines are typically filled with students of bourgeois origins who have been academically down-classed compared to their peers in medicine and law, science and technology, combined with a smattering of survivors from proletarian origins. As a result of their experience many of them are inclined to 'denounce science', and to gravitate towards what Bourdieu calls 'French radical chic' (such as avant-garde radical philosophy or 'the masquerade of postmodernism'). It is precisely these areas which 'offer a de-luxe refuge allowing all those wishing to demonstrate grand ambitions in theory the maximum symbolic profit for the cheapest educational entry fee' (Bourdieu, ibid).

Unfortunately, as Phil Cohen (ibid) has pointed out, even these 'solutions' involve, once more disconnecting the youth question from young people. They are excluded and reduced to silence as research strategies favour "the interpretation of signifying practices in terms of their own internal devices of meaning." Only the detached 'texts', 'signs' and 'symbols' of youth are needed - not young people themselves". There are obvious academic interests involved here; but really, for youth and the construction of youth research, what is the gain?

In the normal course of events all this would be marginal and unimportant, a game of intellectual trivial pursuits. But when, as appears to be happening, the number of youth researchers grows substantially, when higher civil servants start seriously

to listen to what they say, even worse, when youth workers and researchers become higher civil servants; then, while on the one hand I am pleased, because of course I too have a material stake in the progress of the field, on the other hand I get nervous and start asking myself some fundamental questions.

Is the 'construction of youth and youth research' just another case of the centre invading the periphery? Just another case of the colonization and control of cultural forms by fractions of the intellectual petite-bourgeoisie? Are we merely becoming the self-appointed pharisees of a selective tradition of youth culture? Why is so much being written by so many about so few? What is youth research? Most important of all WHY is youth research? It is these questions which we need to discuss and find answers to.

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