

Young people, consumer citizenship and protest

The problem with romanticising the relationship to social change

STEVEN MILES

Department of Sociology, Geoffrey Manton Building, Manchester
Metropolitan University, Rosamond Street West, Manchester M15
6LL

s.miles@mmu.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

This paper critically interrogates the assumption that young people operate at the 'cutting edge' of social change. Arguing that the ideological impact of consumption on young people's everyday lives is such that young people are almost obliged to reinforce the status quo rather than to undermine it, the article considers the impact of young people's status as consumer citizens. Using the London riots of 2011 as a means of briefly reflecting upon the degree to which young people are in opposition to the consumer society, the argument is made that youth researchers have tended to romanticize young people's relationship to social change and that this is the result of their own sense of political disillusionment in what is essentially a consumer society.

Key words: Consumption; social change; riots; citizenship.

Sociologists of youth have long assumed, either explicitly or implicitly, that young people live at the 'cutting edge' of social change. In this article I will consider the suggestion that this approach is inherently misleading and constitutes, in fact, a dis-service not only to youth research, but to young people themselves. I will thus present the following provocation: that young people situated in a western late-modern cultural context are rarely radical and are much more likely to be in the habit of reinforcing the status quo, precisely because the world of consumerism in which they are embedded offers them a sense of stability and of belonging which they actively embrace. What is more, I will argue that youth scholars are drawn to a construction of young people as being at the 'cutting edge' as a direct result of their own demise as politically disillusioned citizens of a consumer society (Callinicos 1990). Sociologists of youth are indeed themselves the product of a society in which capital is so dominant that their own critical faculties are stymied. This I will suggest leads them, in turn, to amplify, to exaggerate even, the radical potential of young people as symbols of positive social change.

Although any understanding of young people should be premised on the assumption that young are far from a homogenised group and attach a complex array of meanings to social and cultural contexts, for the purposes of this article a degree of generalisation is perhaps unavoidable. The intention here is nonetheless not to perceive of

young people as a homogeneous group but to understand how the structures which confront them are likely to reproduce particular forms of meaning. By doing so in the context of a consumer society, and through a brief consideration of the London riots of 2011, I intend to throw down the gauntlet to the academic status quo. But in doing so I do not seek to suggest that young people are 'non-resistant', nor do I deny that there are a minority of young people that engage with society in which they live in what some senses may appear to be 'radical' in nature. However, in what follows I will argue that though young people do, of course, have agency as individuals they are much more likely to choose/are obliged to act upon that that agency in a way that reflects and indeed complements their relationship to the consumer society. This contention may undermine an underlying assumption that young people are, somehow, at the 'cutting edge'. My argument is not only that, "in the process of consolidating identities, youth are also constituting their society" (Flannagan, 2013: 104) but that they do so in ways that may reflect the preconceptions of social scientists, embedded in particular social relations. In other words, not only are young people implicated by the consumer society in which they live, but the fact that sociologists of youth are themselves implicated by the same set of relations, undermines their ability to fully comprehend the significance of the circumstances which they endeavour to investigate.

The suggestion that young people, however defined, somehow exist at the cutting edge of social change has long been a preoccupation of youth researchers. Ever since the work of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, social scientists have been intrigued with the contention that working class youths, in particular, might be producing autonomous and indeed oppositional forms of meaning in direct opposition to the mainstream (Hebdige, 1979; Fiske 1991; Winlow and Hall 2006). Distinctive forms of youth sub-culture, from this point of view, could be seen to represent a foil to the dominance of consumer capitalism. As Winlow and Hall (2006) put it, what emerges from this perspective is a sense that young people are somehow inherently resistant and thus potentially transformative. Willis' (1990) work, was indeed, particularly influential in arguing that young people are entirely capable of transforming the politics of consumption for their own ends and hence of living consumer lifestyles in a reflexive critical fashion.

Given that young people represent a conduit through which scholars can understand a whole raft of social scientific issues and considering scholars' commitment to youth as life-stage in which key dimensions of identity formation and risk-taking are played out, it is entirely understandable that young people are assumed by many commentators to occupy a privileged position as a lens through which social change can better be understood. Young people are apparently risk-takers, identity-seekers, technology-

users, and new experiences and challenges play a key role in the construction of their everyday lives (see Furlong and Cartmel, 2006; France 2000). Apparently free from the constraints of older generations and open to the possibilities that confront them on a daily basis young people are seemingly better equipped and less set in their ways than other social groups and as such are able to experiment in ways that justify particularly close sociological attention, hence the very existence of the sub-discipline of Youth Studies.

The above assumptions have much to do with an assessment that young people very much live life in limbo, apparently unsure of where their futures might lie (Roberts, 1995). The restlessness of the youth experience can be said to reflect the unpredictability that characterises modern society. It is in this sense then that youth is a barometer for broader social change. Authors such as Rushkoff (1997) have thus described young people as the 'advance scouts' of postmodernity, experiencing what adults will experience in the future, but in the immediacy of the now. From this point of view we live in a new kind of world in which the old certainties no longer apply, and in which young people lead the way in navigating a route through them. The world is a chaotic place and young people apparently embrace the uncertainty that this implies,

“Our children, ironically, have already made their move. They are leading us in our evolution past linear thinking, duality, mechanism, hierarchy, metaphor, and God himself toward a dynamic, holistic, animalistic, weightless, and recapitulated culture. Chaos is their natural environment.” (Rushkoff, 1997: 269)

For Smith (2011) youth is a period of identity exploration that is in turn characterised by a sense of transience, confusion, disappointment and sometimes even, emotional devastation. Such processes are social and not uniquely individual in nature. But Smith goes on to argue that there could be a case for suggesting that although the processes of socialization are similar in principle to what they have been throughout history, the conditions affecting socialization today are actually significantly different to those experienced by previous generations, so that the consequences of the choices young people are obliged to make are far more serious than they would have been in the past. This version of events produces an image of young people as gallantly battling against the tide and establishing their albeit vulnerable identities, regardless of the odds stacked against them. But such troubles are not unique to the experience of young people, they are the norm in a market-driven society; that society has created the framework in which young people live and the people that study them live. The proposition here then is that as the ‘advance scouts’ of a consumer

society, the subtleties of which youth scholars are not always fully versed in, young people are almost obliged to reproduce the status quo and this is a process in which youth scholars are in danger of being complicit, should they assume young people do so reflexively.

One way of understanding the above process is in the context of citizenship. Smith *et al.* (2005) argue that young people are better understood as 'citizens in the making' as opposed to 'deficient citizens', and in doing so point out that the literature has tended to homogenise young people. However, in critiquing this analysis Burke (2005) suggests that such a view simply perpetuates a passive view of young people who are waiting for citizenship to be bestowed upon them, thereby undermining the ability of young people to operate as social actors making a difference to the society in which they live. It would indeed be politically incorrect to suggest that young people are passive in this way. As sociologists it goes against a long-established belief system to deny the ability of young people to make a difference. For France (2007), far from being cultural dupes of fashion and clothing, mere recipients of media-driven messages, young people are active and reflexive in their consumption habits. France describes a fragmenting and fracturing of youth in late modernity, a process by which young people's cultural rights as expressed through lifestyles and identities are simply not sufficiently recognised. But the fact that young people can be active and reflexive consumers, should not lead us to assume that young

people can't just as easily be less pro-active and reflexive in what it is they buy or aspire to buy and how they relate to the wider world. The assumption that young people are inevitably pro-active 'citizens' obliges us as social scientists to first, recognise that young people are on the receiving end of unequal power relationships and second, to assume that they are able to rise above such inequalities to actively intervene in the world in ways that we assume to be progressive in nature (see Swartz and Arnot, 2013).

What if pro-active citizenship isn't young people's natural environment? What if the assumption that chaos does come naturally to young people says more about the worldviews of the adults seeking to understand them than it does about young people themselves? In this context Barnham (2004) suggests that a notion of young people in a state of chaos, and not least that portrayed by the media, bears limited resemblance to the experience of most young people and that in fact young people are completely immersed in the immediacy of a life built around entertainment. For Barnham young people construct spaces that allow them to live out a different set of rules. The question arises however, as to whether these spaces represent a direct contribution to or demonstration of social change or an escape from it? Barnham argues that such spaces have helped to produce a creative and influential generation of skaters, sneaker collectors, clubbers and the like who are passionate about the 'scene' in which they operate.

“While it is easy to argue that every young generation seeks to distance itself from the activities and beliefs of the culture that it is inheriting, today’s disconnect/zones are different from previous ones because they tend to ignore rather than reject, the laws and morality that they feel are irrelevant, and replace them with their own. They find places where they can behave as they please, where they have influence and recognition”. (309)

Unfortunately, Barnham’s position underestimates the ideological context in which young people construct their everyday lives.

‘Behaving as they please’ may not represent any kind of an escape or assertion of young people’s identities at all. Such behaviour may, in fact, tie young people to the very dominant culture from which they are apparently attempting to distance themselves. Barnham’s suggestion that young people pick and choose their realities and in doing so create their own liminal spaces that sit outwith the system’s influence reflects a situation in which sociologists of youth are liable to underestimate the ideological power of the consumer society: namely, its ability to incorporate forms of ‘self-determination’ into the bigger picture in such a way that the broader orthodoxy remains unhindered. As Winlow and Hall (2006) point out, even if we were to accept that young people are somehow inherently resistant we might be obliged to come to the conclusion that such resistance appears not to have succeeded given that the

majority of young people continue to engage so enthusiastically with the principles underpinning the consumer society.

What is resistance?

It is of course important to recognise that resistance takes many forms, and that to generalise about young people and their (lack of) resistant tendencies is misleading. As such, Fornäs (1995) has argued that complicated patterns of resistance criss-cross as they frame everyday cultural and social practices. From this point of view resistance should not be idealised: rather it is played out in highly contradictory and often unexpected ways. Resistance exists of course, but it is often played out in a cultural cocoon. A good example of this is what has been described as the DiY (McKay 1998) culture of the 1990s, certainly that in the USA, which could be said to have offered young people, a depoliticized space that was far more about cultural production than it was political action. It constituted a collective response to the mainstream, but not one that was fashioned by aspirations for a genuine alternative,

“Within the underground culture, the alienation that marks the rest of society is challenged, denounced, battled, and vanquished. But since all of this happens on a purely cultural plane, it has little real effect on the causes of alienation on the wider society. In fact, one could argue that underground culture sublimates anger that

otherwise might have been expressed in political action”

(Duncombe 1997, p. 190)

If we accept that young people’s resistance is often manifested in cultural form then we can equally accept that consumption, just like any other arena of social practice, is not a demonstration of unadulterated social control, but a space in which shifting and intersecting interactions are in a state of constant uncertainty and flow. The point here is that it would be entirely misleading to suggest a binary in position in which resistance is good and consumption bad.

Young people as consumers

Perhaps the key question here centres on whether this perceived degree of self-reliance leads to a situation in which young people’s ability to be autonomous is fatally undermined by their status as experimental consumers. That in other words, in order to ensure some semblance of everyday stability young people are obliged to look around them to identify a means of ensuring such stability on an everyday basis. The suggestion here is that young people’s relationship to the market, as played through their experience as consumers, fulfils this role.

I would indeed like to suggest in this context that it is very difficult for young people to assert a sense of identity beyond the norms that

are laid down for them by the market. As such, young people rarely find themselves in a position where they are able to challenge dominant social norms. For some authors such as Oyeleye (2014), young people are victims who have been particularly affected by the 'ravages' of neoliberalisation. Giroux (2010) is particularly vehement in his condemnation of the impact neoliberalism has had on young people's lives. For Giroux young people have to pay the price for a society destroyed by the merging of the market, consumerism and militarism. Giroux argues that young people are increasingly separated from other generations leaving them unprotected from the ravages of the market, given that adults themselves are so folded into and dependant upon a system of consumption. If young people are educated in anything today, they are primarily educated in how to consume.

Some authors have indeed argued that young people themselves see consumption as unproblematic (and far from a war-like state), as an arena of self-expression and choice. They effectively see the 'good life' as being lived through consumption. In his empirical work with young people aged 18 to 23 in the US, Smith (2011) found that young people held very shallow notions of what a 'good life' might be, almost entirely according to their ability to consume. What Smith describes is a very individualistic culture; a society that if it coalesces at all, does so around autonomous individuality in which traditional forms of external authority such as the family and the

church have been usurped by the onslaught of commercial media which defines the good life materially. In this context the assumption that today's generation of young people are leading a new vanguard of politically motivated civic-awareness is liable to be misplaced.

Young people as citizens

There is no reason to suspect that young people's everyday experience is not a valid indicator of what contemporary society is all about, but their experience is likely to be more about reproducing everyday patterns of consumption than it is about challenging those patterns. As a means of beginning to consider this argument it is useful to think about the nature of young people as 'political beings' and as citizens of a consumer society. Traditionally, young people have tended to be viewed as operating at either end of a spectrum, either as politically disengaged or as actively political in alternative and progressive ways. One variation on the latter model is that young people are less and less involved in formal politics and are more and more likely to practice their politics through the micro-politics of everyday life. For Manning (2013) for example, young people are highly reflexive and operate a practice of ethics in which political principles are applied to everyday life experiences. This is a responsive form of politics that materializes not in the call for sweeping social changes, but in incremental forms of personal change that cross over permeable public/private spheres. Various authors have tried to explain the complexities of resistance. For

example, Pickerill and Chatteron (2006) talk about the existence of 'autonomous geographies': "Spaces where there is a desire to constitute non-capitalist, collective forms of politics, identity and citizenship" (p. 730) This is a form of oppositional politics built upon the enactment of change in everyday lives, which in turn challenges the long worn-out dichotomy of global-bad; local-good. Such spaces constitute moments rather than movements of resistance. Similarly, Aapola *et al.* (2005) argue that for young women in particular 'dispersed activism' takes place in a variety of discursive spaces. Consumption is one of those spaces, but it is also so intimately tied up to dominant power relations that it's effect is almost entirely dissipated.

And herein lies a key point: we could argue that the sociological significance of young people is undermined by the observation that any social impact they have is played out at the individual level: that, in other words, young people's discovery of liminal spaces encourages a particular state of affairs in which individual actions are rendered harmless. Such a position is indeed founded upon the ability of young people to make choices in their lives. For Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2001) this comes hand-in-hand with negotiating a way through a risk society. From this point of view young people are not lacking in values because their politics do not reflect a mainstream agenda, they are working their way through a new kind

of society and adapting to that society in such a way that offers them maximum day-to-day stability.

Young people are socialized into a world in which freedom and choice are paramount. Their choice to assert their political beliefs through their everyday lives increases the personal impact of their actions, but decreases their ability to influence broader social change. This commitment to a new society, I am arguing, does not then come without a cost, as it increases the sense of transience that characterizes youth experience and in doing so ties them to a particular way of being through consumption. In effect, young people consume goods as citizens (Ward, 2008). Under these conditions, young people's commitment to social change can only thus operate within the parameters that consumption provides. To put this another way this apparent disengagement from a sense of wanting to change the world could be described as an indicator of quiescence (McDowell *et al.* 2013).

It has been argued in the above context that leisure has potential as a new form of political participation. Riley *et al.* (2010) suggest that political participation may actually be occurring at an informal level *through* consumption. Pointing out that consumption, lifestyle and leisure activities are as important in the process of self-production as more traditional anchors for identity, Riley *et al.* argue that discourses of choice, rights and self-responsibility are being re-

appropriated away from associations with a responsibility to the state to more leisure-based activities.

“Leisure may therefore be understood as a site for new forms of political participation because it represents a shift of drive, energy, motivation, enthusiasm, finance and knowledge towards the goal of self-determination and sovereignty over oneself – or doing what you want to do – through activities outside of paid employment or ‘appropriate consumption. When pleasure becomes constructed in this way, it thus radically undermines the neo-liberal model of dutiful citizenship” (p. 37)

Riley *et al.* describe Electronic Dance Music Culture is an example of a leisure activity that gives young consumers a particular sense of belonging in which young people can construct alternative subjectivities. Riley *et al.* claim that this constitutes a radical re-appropriation of neo-liberal rhetoric from the realm of work to leisure in the form of the so-called ‘pleasure-citizen’, the argument being that these young people engage in hedonistic often non-commercial activities that may actually serve to undermine the dominant neo-liberal model. A similar example is provided in the work of Sernhede (2011) who points out that while on the one hand the lived realities of hip-hop culture in Sweden problematizes the social reality that young people with immigrant backgrounds are forced to face, on the other they actively and complicitly reproduce

dominant power relations. They do so, unavoidably perhaps, in light of an increasingly individualised education system, the economic reality of which they are obliged to reproduce, but also through a sub-cultural celebration of consumer culture through their consumption in general and adoration for clothes and cars in particular. These young people are thus obliged to behave in ways that may inadvertently reproduce the very society which apparently excludes them. This tendency is reflected further in Newell's (2012) work on the consumption habits of young unemployed men on the Ivory Coast who spend excessively on brand-name clothing, accessories and technology in such a way that they construct an illusion of wealth and of western cultural riches. These young men or 'bluffeurs' produce success by feigning its existence: a profoundly modern process that values performance over authenticity and which simultaneously demonstrates the inauthenticity that sits at the heart of Modernity. What Newell is describing here is what he calls 'the art of the surface' in which young people use consumption to authenticate their ability to making a living. They dupe their peers with imagery that establishes their reputation as legitimate modern urban citizens. But this process inevitably ties these young people to a Western definition of what it means to belong. It creates a new world of reality for the young people concerned but in doing so it reproduces the dominant reality of the consumer society.

Whether or not they have access to such means of commodified expression, young consumers are active participants: their place in society is not so much determined by what they consume as what they aspire to consume. In this sense we are all 'flawed consumers' (Bauman, 1998) and in our commitment to aspirational consumption we reproduce the society around us. Young people's leisure is however, contained and as such constitutes no kind of a threat to the dominant structures of power. In this context, Garcia Canclini (2001) argues that in consumers' selection and appropriation of goods we define what we consider to be publically valuable. We effectively combine elements of pragmatism and pleasure in how it is we present ourselves to the world. We thus use consumption as a means of achieving a sense of well-being: it provides a resource through which we can establish that we belong to the consumer society. In this way consumption allows us to participate in public life,

"... when we recognize that when we consume we also think, select and reelaborate social meaning, it becomes necessary to analyse how this mode of appropriation of goods and signs conditions more active forms of participation than those that are grouped under the label of consumption. In other words, we should ask ourselves if consumption does not entail doing something that sustains, nourishes, and to a certain extent constitutes a new mode of being citizens." (p. 26)

Young people, protest and the London riots

The above analysis presents a particular set of challenges for how Youth Studies positions itself. As a means of addressing this issue, I want to briefly consider the specific instance of young people's relationship to resistance as expressed through the 2011 London riots which provide a useful illustration of how some of the above tensions are played out through a consumer society. Consider youth protest more broadly. If we accept that consumption is the primary means of belonging in contemporary society and that this encourages a degree of compliance on the part of young people then such a realisation may undermine a vision of young people as the drivers of social change. Under such circumstances our understanding of young people as protestors may need to be re-evaluated. There is indeed a danger that the sociology of youth disproportionately romanticizes its vision of young people as being at the forefront of radical social change and in doing so fetishizes young people as the drivers of such change. A commitment to an understanding of young people as meaningful actors and as significant contributors to the social realm may lead to a kind of wishful thinking in which too many assumptions are made about the impact young people have upon the world around them. For example, as Drotner (1996) points out the mere act of irony or pastiches does not in itself constitute subversion. Of course, young people resist, but the nature of this protest may say more about the

young people that don't protest than about those that do. Indeed talk of the igniting of "the fighting spirit in the young, so long rendered invisible" (Oyeleye 2014) is at best premature. Such instances should not be read across as evidence of radical generational change, but as individual incidences of resistance they may tell us more about those who aren't protesting than those who are. For example, Giroux's (2014) critique of the Occupy Wall Street protests as representing an entirely new form of democracy and politics "in which power and resources are shared and economic justice and democratic values work in the interest of the common wellbeing and social responsibility" (p. 106) constitutes a form of wishful thinking. In a somewhat more sophisticated analysis Badiou (2012) argues that the riots reflect a society which adheres to the primacy of things, of commodities, above all else. However much young people may have a case in demonstrating about the world of regime of "capitalist gangsters" that surround them, they are inevitably onto a loser as "the destruction or theft of a few goods in the frenzy of a riot is infinitely more culpable than the police assassination of a young man – the assassination that caused the riot" (p. 19). And herein lies precisely the point. The structures with which young people are obliged to contend are so all-powerful that their ability to be genuinely radical and impactful are inevitably diluted.

Of course there are a whole range of explanations for the London riots and why it is that young people came to participate in them that may or may not be connected to the existence of a consumer society. These include: 1) An effort on the part of those young people involved to 'get one over' on the police who for many constituted a gang of their own making; 2) the effects of peer pressure which obliged many young people to get involved; 3) The opportunity to make a mark; to make history and 4) The sheer excitement of the event (Morrell 2011; Smith, 2011b). For some the London riots constitute more of a protest than a riot (Lewis *et al.* 2011): what went on was therefore an expression of a range of grievances that reflected a pervasive sense of injustice, and not least joblessness, a lack of money and a lack of life opportunities. As Lewis *et al.* point out in their seminal work on the subject young people felt dislocated from the opportunities they saw from others and were expressing as much. But the fact is that looting was the most common type of unlawful activity associated with the riots. The cost in insurance claims alone was an estimated £300 million. The Guardian and LSE report 'Reading the Riots' (2011) describes a situation in which explanations for such looting were complex and varied, and in which that those who were interviewed often explained it as a matter of greed and opportunity: a reaction to a society fuelled by greed and a response to a sense of exclusion from that society. The report quotes the pressure and hunger that young people felt to consume particular brands, as well as the sense that

the looting element of the riots just felt 'natural'. This point alone constitutes a significant statement about the significance of consumption to young people's lives: the benefit of the consumer society to young people is that it provides them with a means of belonging.

There have been, as Kennelly (2014) points out, several examples of youth protest in countries such as Canada, Argentina, Iceland, Spain, and more recently Hong Kong, but as she goes on to point out many such protests have been largely symbolic in nature. There is potential for such protest to facilitate social change, but such change is at best incremental. The most committed of protestors are indeed arguably most in danger of reproducing the spectacle of the consumer society through celebratory protests that often simplify what it is they oppose while reaffirming the fact that such protests cannot exit out with the parameters laid down by the consumer society.

Zygmunt Bauman (2011) describes the UK riots of 2011 which took place over a four day period as "riots of defective and disqualified consumers". His argument is that contemporary society is as much founded upon the objects of desire that we are unable to purchase, as the ones we are. For Bauman we live in an aspirational culture in which what we can't consumer affects our status and our self-perception as much as what we can. From this point of view we can

understand the London riots, given that 50% of crime associated with the riots were acquisitive in nature (although recognising of course that 50% were not), as something more than a straightforward affront to the orthodoxy of the consumer society. The riots represented an expression of flawed consumption; a desire to seek recognition in a society which prizes the kind of recognition that consumption bestows upon us. For Bauman looting and the property damage that came with it represents an effort on the part of young people to take what they could and to destroy what they could not.

The particular relationship between consumption and the riots has been much debated. Thus, Isaksen and Roper (2012) have described a process in which self-esteem is effectively commodified. They argue that at a time of 'crisis and confusion', in which young people experience high levels of insecurity and self-doubt, they may well seek comfort via the ability to fit in with their peers through the opportunities that consumption provides. As such, the inability to afford branded products may result in feelings of inadequacy and social exclusion. Isaksen and Roper go on to argue that this may have more severe implications for low-income young people than it does for those from middle or high-income households. Such patterns were apparently reflected in the riots. The Riots, Communities and Victims Panel (RCVP) (2012) suggested that the riots spoke of a lack of hope and dreams for the future on the part of

young people: a picture in which young people leave school early, unprepared for the challenges ahead. But in this context Slater's (2011) contention that the reception of the riots as a disturbance of civil peace represents an affront to the role of surplus and exchange value appears flawed.

In their analysis of the relationship between crime and consumerism, Hall *et al.* (2008) argue that symbols of social distinction play an absolutely key role not in articulating some kind of opposition to a sense of social exclusion, but in reflecting fantasy versions of their identities back to them. This constitutes what they describe as a culture of narcissism that was most clearly expressed in the desire to use forms of conspicuous consumption to rise up the 'mainstream ladder'. The riots were a call for help; a call to the mainstream to which many young people do not feel they belong. But as such in a sense it also constitutes a reaffirmation of the consumer society as the legitimate underpinning of contemporary social life.

If anything, acquisitive crime is about a constant search to belong: to counter-balance the chaos to which Rushkoff refers above. This reflects Jones and Wallace's (1992) reflection on youth as an interstitial phase in which young people have neither the stabilities or the resources to exist as fully fledged citizens of a consumer culture. Young people can be said to be disfavoured, the spectre of

unemployment being a more and more prescient reality. But their anger, at least as far as the London riots were concerned, is not with consumer capitalism, but with the fact that they are excluded from the opportunities that consumer capitalism provides. As Moxon (2011) puts it, “The Janus-faced truth of the riots is that they represented a disruption to social order whilst simultaneously suggesting the strength and vitality of the consumer culture that is now such a central plank of social life in this country” (6.2). Not only were the riots underlined by a desire to partake in a consumer society, but the actual mechanics of the riots were underpinned by that society, notably through the collective action facilitated by social media (Baker, 2012).

It is of course important not to get carried away here. It would be wrong to portray the riots as simply the by-product of consumerist angst. More important than that is that such protests gave young people a sense of temporary relief. They effectively consume the riot. As Bloom (2012) puts it, the riots can just as easily be explained as the psycho-social act of self-motivated individuals as emanating from class position or economic insecurity. The riot creates a space where at least temporarily the individual is no longer passive. He or she is taking control. In effect, “It is a form of theatre in which the self is ‘acted out’ in order for it to recognise itself in the acting. There is no ‘self’ beyond the riot, only a ‘self’ created through the act of rioting” (Bloom, 2012, p. 122 -123). As a

form of resistance rioting offers the rioter a partial sense of belonging. In this sense such acts are primarily about reacting to the humiliation of the present (Bloom, 2012).

Conclusion

I argued back in 2000 that the future of the sociology of youth is perhaps about engaging with a world that is just as much about continuity as it is about change and that in the context of young people's changing lives a sociology of youth should be best concerned with, as Tait (1993: 52) puts it, "the doing of specific types of work on the self". My contention was that youth lifestyles orient young people to the ups and downs of everyday life (Miles, 2000). That in other words, consumption provides a sense of stability in an otherwise unstable world. It is questionable whether the sociology of youth has managed to learn such lessons. Youth research often shies away from explicitly recognising that young people most commonly find themselves in a position where they reproduce dominant power structures as to do so would undermine the critical habitus of the sociological imagination.

For Garcia Canclini (2001) consumption has the potential to be a site of cognitive value. Such a contention is itself inherently challenging given that social scientists have tended to be wary of the freedoms and choices (and lack of) that consumption provides. However, if we accept that as far as communities exist they increasingly coalesce

around form of symbolic consumption built upon shared tastes and interests, the unpalatable conclusion may inevitably be that this could provide a shared basis for participation *through* consumption.

A key notion in this respect is that of resistance. The mere study of resistance brings with it a degree of moral authority. Sociologists, in particular, come from a place in which the unequal distribution of power is a given: any suggestion that ordinary people cannot resist such inequality is almost anathema to the disciplinary routes of sociology. In this respect, as Hollander and Einwohner put it (2004) studying resistance serves a purpose: it helps restore, “the balance between oppression and agency” (p. 550) in other words, resistance is a moral tool, it gives scholarship moral meaning and authority. It fulfils the sociological scholars need to be on ‘the right side’.

But the above path is a dangerous one. As Bolin (1999) puts it, young people are active in some ways and highly structured in others, “... that the audience member is an active constructor or constructress of meaning does not mean that s/he is dominant in this relation – that s/he is likely to produce any kind of meaning out of a text...” (p. 54) There is always a danger that a focus on young people’s identities in all it’s myriad manifestations leads to a downplay of macro-structure and an overplay of the micro. But this isn’t just about young people as the object of academic study. It reflects a process identified by Callinicos (1989) in his broader

discussion of postmodernity. For Callinicos the middle classes, as represented in this instance by the sociologist of youth is a product of a particular kind of political disillusionment: a sense of an ending, itself associated with the dominance of a consumer society and specifically the belief on the part of academics that in the shadow of the dominance of capital, they can barely any longer make a difference. In the case of sociology of youth, it might thus be said that an investment in a vision of radical youth represents a last ditch attempt to locate hope in the next generation: that in other words, youth researchers, themselves members of a new middle class living through the over-consumerist dynamic of western capitalism have themselves adapted to the more conciliatory world implied by the consumer society. In effect, youth scholars are consumers of the 'advance scouting' in which young people apparently partake. The fancy-free economic days of the 1980s may be long gone, but the implications of the onset of a consumer society are manifest in a world which our power to change has apparently been increasingly undermined.

If we can accept that the sociology of youth is predisposed to seeing young people in the above way, despite the wide variety of forms that youth can take and the complex meanings in which they endow their everyday lives, then this may lead us to underestimate the ideological complexity of young people's lives: the ways in which, for example, young people appear to be prepared to give up some

freedoms in order to take on board the other freedoms, however partial, that consumerism provides. Young people effectively define their citizenship through such choices (see Sernhede 2011).

For Hopper (2003) the consumer unlike the citizen, has no sense of duty and obligation other than to themselves. If this is the case it represents an important realisation that young people are perhaps only of sociological interest in their own right and that their value of as some kind of proxy measure of social change more broadly is at best unsound. This is the by-product of a mind-set in which social scientists of youth are prone to see the best in young people, but also of a way of thinking in which young people are the 'good guys'.

In youth researchers' (for the most part middle class) perception of young people as one of those groups who feel the pain of social exclusion so directly, our tendency is to seek out the ways in which young people fight against the disempowerment they experience on a daily basis, even if such actions pale in comparison to their broader tendency to reinforce the status quo. The vision subsequently drawn of young people constitutes a dis-service to them insofar as it implies a degree of agency that simply doesn't exist in such an idealised form. The experience of young people is defined by the fact that such agency is constrained within broader social structures over which they, and indeed the scholars who study them, have limited control. Ultimately then, this article constitutes something of a call to arms: a call for a reassessment of

what it means to be a young person and how it is that scholars of youth underestimate the extent to which they themselves are implicated in the very mediations that they see being played out in lives of young people on a daily basis.

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Steven Miles is Professor of Sociology at Manchester Metropolitan University, UK, and author of *Spaces for Consumption: Pleasure and Placelessness in the Post-Industrial City* (Sage; 2010). His work has focused on the relationship between consumption and identity in its myriad forms and includes *Youth Lifestyles in a Changing World*

(OUP; 2000). He has also undertaken research looking at the role of performance training in the development of young people's aspirations and identities. He is currently editor of the *Journal of Consumer Culture* and he has written in a number of journals including *Sociology*, *Cultural Trends* and *Urban Studies*.