Subculture, Resistance, Violence and the Female Perspective

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An exploration of the female perspective on the role violence plays in the resistance paradigm and the history of subculture as pertaining to females.

This paper aims to discuss the concept of resistance through investigating subculture. Specifically, the role of female gender in the resistance paradigm will be discussed in relation to its intersection with politics and history. Violence in resistance will be acknowledged as an agent for political change and recognition. Looking at the evolution of subculture from the Chicago School of Sociology 1920-1940, to the second wave Birmingham School subcultural theory of the 1970s. Investigating the place in history that suffragettes occupy in relation to subculture. Finally, regarding the post subcultural theory through the female perspective, using the Riot Grrl Zine and the #Metoo movement as examples of where subculture, gender and politics intersect.

The first literary examples focusing on youth culture and subculture emerged from the Chicago School. Their studies focused on the first half of last century 1900-1950. Prior to World War One the focus on youth culture was quantitative and looked at deviance and crime (Jenson, 2018). But after the War there is a new focus on qualitative data, a need to explain these observations that extended beyond numbers and data. “Youth Culture emerged out of a much wider debate about the whole nature of post war social change” (Clarke, Hall, Jefferson & Roberts 1976, p.13). Some academics doubted the validity of the idea of youth culture and did not agree that youth could have separate looks, ideas and belief systems to their parents. Others believed it was the war that had created youth culture due to absent Fathers, abnormal family life and other stresses that war produce.

The arrival of ‘teddy boys’ (a style of dressing for men and a taste for rock-and-roll music) signalled that youth culture did exist. At this time most sociologists were white male sand there appears to be little interest in researching female subculture. This resulted in an incomplete narrow representation of girls. It is like girls are peripheral to the subculture, “Some aspects of the new ‘Youth Culture’ were seen, portentously, as representing the worst effects of a new ‘mass culture’ – its tendency to ‘unbend the springs’ of working-class action and resistance.” (Clarke, Hall, Jefferson & Roberts 1976, p.12). A focus on understanding resistance became important in research of Youth Culture.

The Birmingham School of Theorists popularised the study of working-class youth through a prism of ritual and style. At this time, we had one newspaper published a day and the news was on the radio or TV (if you were rich), once a day. I propose information was disseminated at a much slower rate as it is today with the internet, twenty-four-hour news cycles and constant stimulation in our lives. It is this faster flow of information that has seen us arrive in the post subcultural space. Muggleton and Weinzierl (2003) support my point of view by stating “In a postmodern world, subcultural style, music and meaning becomes diffused, and maybe even accepted, in mainstream culture at a rate previously thought unimaginable” (Muggleton, Weinzierl 2003, p.16). According to post subcultural theorists, ‘resistance’ comes primarily in the form of consumerist escape focused on personal fulfillment (Haenfler 2014). Looking at female subcultures it is easy to identify personal fulfillment as a guiding force. Suffragettes wanted the vote, Riot Grrrls Zine don’t want to be seen in binary terms and #Metoo women don’t want to be sexually assaulted. To understand the concept of ‘resistance’ fully it is useful to apply examples to its different forms so that we can understand the motivations behind it.

Resistance is a complex social phenomenon that can be individual or expressed as a group. Raby (2005) argues that “resistance varies between pleasurable and playful rebellion during childhood and adulthood to moments of deviance from social norms in which individuals focus effort directly contesting specific agents of social control” (Raby 2005, p.161). Most definitions of resistance include action and opposition. When regarding the different schools of thought on resistance we can identify passive-active, micro-macro and overt-covert.

The level of intention in a resistant act is the distinguishing factor between passive and active resistance (Williams 2009, p.23). An example for passive resistance may be becoming a vegetarian for personal reasons, not because you want to influence others to give up meat. Later we will look at the #Metoo movement, a group against sexual harassment and assault. #Metoo is a good example of active resistance whereby the participants in this subculture want to change the status quo and effect political change.

Micro-macro refers to individual and group resistance. An example for Micro resistance is my 15-year-old child purchasing her clothes for $3 dollars an item as an expression of her anti materialism. At a macro level subcultural groups can influence and create political change, such as the suffragettes who achieved votes for women in 1918. So, I propose that women have always been part of subcultural
groups, it is just that no one was researching them in this context.

Overt resistance is visible and recognised by targets and observers. Covert resistance is intentional resistance which goes unnoticed by targets, yet culturally aware observers recognize the act as resistance (Holland and Einwohner 2004). This can be seen when we look back at the genesis of the #Metoo movement. It started in 2006 with Tarana Burke, an African-American civil rights activist. We also see a pertinent example of race disadvantaging Tarana Burke when she formed the #Metoo movement in 2006. Moore (2017) recently published a paper on the ways in which social inequality is reproduced in the discipline of sociology in reference to women of colour. She found writing this paper to be very difficult and was able to identify that even in these times of diversity and inclusion we are still seeing examples of the women of colour point of view or opinion being considered less important (Moore 2017, p.203).

Taking a look more specifically at girls and young women in subculture during the 1960s we can see that they are often represented by researchers in a very stereotypical way. They are viewed in relation to how good looking they are or referred to as being lesser or dumb. Women appear as an adjunct to male subcultures, motorcycle gangs being a good example of the female as a girlfriend but not the main disrupter, she was portrayed in a purely sexual manner by researchers (Hall, Jefferson 2012). Another example is Fyvel (1963) who refers to teenage girls as being “dumb, passive, crudely painted” when he acknowledges them in his study of ‘teddy boys’ (Fyvel 1963, p.95). The academics of that time viewed gender through a very narrow spectrum.

A popularised question in the post-modern era has been ‘are girls really absent from the subcultural landscape?’ Hall and Jefferson (2006) theorise that their absence is due to “popular press and media portrayal concentrated on the sensational incidents associated with subculture (for example the Teddy Boy killings).” Therefore, it is violence that qualifies for attention and some academics speculate women engage in far less violent acts than men thereby rendering them unnoticed. Once again, I think of the suffragettes. They engaged in many acts of violence from 1914-1918 and these acts were newsworthy at that time. Their deeds went way beyond the modern-day narrative we are told at school, they protested in the streets. They also smashed windows, cut telephone and telegraph wires, burnt down post boxes, vandalised paintings and statues, set fire to theatres and sporting pavilions and detonated several bombs at banks (Purvis 1995). It worked, and they got the vote for women in 1918. A very important political act. Perhaps it is not the violence that led to women getting the vote but the result of the violence, which is the disruption to people’s lives. The bank was closed, and telegraph lines were down, this impacted on everyone, not just women.

So, at this time we have a dichotomy where violence begets publicity and other groups of female non-violent subculture can potentially go unnoticed. For example, the 1920s ‘Flapper’, a woman who dressed in a fluid, glamorous way who came to be seen as attractive, reckless and independent. She is another example of subculture in females, but she was not violent, therefore she was not newsworthy. The idea of ‘flappers’ faded by the 1930s, but they have been kept alive via prominent authors such as F. Scott Fitzgerald who relished a modern perspective of those times (Latham Tomko 2001).

We have passed through the start of the twentieth century whereby women did indeed exist in subcultures as suffragettes and flappers. In examining the mid twentieth century we can see women were not represented truthfully in the academic landscape. Now to arrive in the 1990s with the rise of movements such as ‘The Riot Grrrl Zine’ and the ‘#Metoo’ movement in the 2000s. Both of these movements are non-violent. Interestingly, I note that the suffragettes, Riot Grrrl Zine and the #Metoo subcultural groupings cross through different classes, incorporating working and middle classes, this creates a feeling of ‘sisterhood’. And so; we are seeing a progression in the recognition of girls and young women in the subcultural landscape.

The Riot Grrrl Zine challenged behaviours and gender norms. It was an underground feminist movement tied to punk music and gender politics. They wanted to unpack the idea of women being limited to mutually exclusive types. For example, a woman can be girly, wear a bikini and still be super intelligent. Attacking the narrative, we have all heard at some time in our life… ‘you are the smart one, your sister is the beautiful one’. They disseminated their message in a non-violent, anonymous way. They would have secret meetings and produce public information in the form of posters and cartoons that addressed oppression, violence, objectification and misogyny. When I think of this subcultural group of women, I see their political contribution as quite significant. They entered politics in the public sphere of printed material on sign posts and street corners and they were then able to transition into the private sphere of the home (LeBlanc 2002). They started a conversation and that conversation led to women having a collective point of view, ‘we need to be treated better’. This means future girls and boys are part of a generational change and we have real progress. So, as we moved from the 1990s into the 2000s and a new generation of young women grew up, they were told ‘that is not ok’. We have subcultural groups like The Riot Grrrl Zine to thank for political awareness.

A prominent group in today’s landscape is the #Metoo movement. This movement did not gain broad recognition until 2017 when celebrity Alyssa Milano encouraged women to say #Metoo following the Harvey Wirstein sexual abuse allegations. Here we see the celebrity as a commodity that can be of use, advantage or value in society (Ferris 2007). It is a non-violent movement that uses the internet to communicate. I think we are still at the very beginning of our understanding in
how we can get this to transfer into very real change in the political landscape. This is not just about sex, gender, or discrimination. I think it is much more about the abuse of power and how we define masculinity in our culture (Regulskas 2018). The #Metoo movement is still discussing abuse on a case by case basis and we are not hearing the voice of disgust emerging from where the power base lies. A good example for this lack of emotion and care would be the ongoing legal action pertaining to sexual assault charges for former NFL and NRL player Jarryd Hayne. He has been accused of raping a woman during his time with the San Francisco 49ers in 2015. Police did not prosecute Hayne over the alleged rape however the victim is pursuing him in civil court, with a trial set for 2020. Hayne is also facing separate criminal assault charges in Australia for an unrelated matter. Hayne has been charged with aggravated sexual assault and inflicting actual bodily harm to a female victim on the night of the 2018 Grand Final. A person facing multiple sexual assault charges with little disruption to his liberty. So, we find ourselves at a collective junction. No women want this to continue and it is of grave concern that real change has not occurred. #Metoo swings from the highs of three hundred thousand tweets per month to the lows of very little political change but it is not over yet. We are at a critical point in time where women have to continue the fight and being identified in subcultural groups gives us a lot more visibility than acting alone.

In concluding it has been discovered that resistance is a complex topic bound by opposition and outdated thought processes. Since the turn of the twentieth century the most obvious example of where women have been able to cause real political change via a subcultural group has occurred in tandem with violence, the suffragettes getting the vote. During the mid-twentieth century a decline in the way women are portrayed in subcultural groups can be clearly identified by their absence in literature, and when they are portrayed it is as an accessory to the men that were being studied. Today females have a voice via subcultural movements such as #Metoo but the impact of these movements is ambiguous. Real political change has historically taken place with violence and this is a worrying reflection on society.

REFERENCES