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Keeping the Faith: A History of Northern Soul

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Von: Torben Willberg, Center for Metropolitan Studies, Technische Universität Berlin

Workshop: How to Write and Conceptualize the History of Youth Cultures

In the well known essay collection „Resistance through Rituals“ Stuart Hall wrote: „The social and political meaning of Youth Cultures is not easy to assess: though their visibility has been consistently high. ‘Youth’ appeared as an emergent category in post-war Britain, one of the most striking and visible manifestations of social change in the period. ‘Youth’ provided the focus for official reports, pieces of legislation, official interventions. It was signified as a social problem by the moral guardians of the society—something we ‘ought to do something about’. Above all, Youth played an important role as a cornerstone in the construction of the understanding, interpretation and quasi-explanations about the period.“ (Hall 1991: 9). Hall makes clear that social change in post-war Britain can not be analysed without research on the transformative and powerful role of youth cultures.

With a strong focus on Britain the workshop „How to Write and Conceptualize the History of Youth Cultures“ explored how youth cultures contributed, challenged as well as negotiated cultural, political and economic changes in everyday life. Taking actual debates in social, political and cultural history into account, the presentations offered new insights in the transformative character of youth cultures after the Second World War. Important topics included: the relationships between youth cultures and shifts in the world economy related to the international division of labour, the emergence of a dominant service sector and the development of post-fordism geo-political shifts, the class system in Britain, the end of the British empire and new patterns of migration, changes in gender roles and sexual relations, new forms of urbanisation and urban development as well as new technologies and the role of the (new) media.

The workshop focussed on the conceptualisation and writing the history of youth cultures. This was achieved by splitting the workshop into four panels, each focusing on the topics mentioned above: 1. driving forces for youth cultures, 2. the influence of space on youth, 3. gender dimensions of youth cultures and their history, 4. the transformation of work and leisure regimes.

1. PANEL "Driving Forces of Youth Cultures"

The first panel of the workshop pursued socio-economic changes in the 1970s as major influences on the development of youth cultures in Britain. Addressing both Punk and Post-Punk, both talks examined the reaction of young people in Britain to the economic decline and the transformation of the welfare state.

MATTHEW WORLEY (UNIVERSITY OF READING) focused in his presentation on the existential feeling of teenage angst. Boredom and alienation characterized the everyday life of teenagers living in the suburbs and inner-cities of 1970s England. For Worley, Punk cultures recognized and explored such existential feelings, articulating what was often implicit in prior youth cultures like Rock 'n' Roll and the Hippie culture, but also the socio-economic framework of the 1970s. Thereby, Punk was in part a revolt against both the disintegrated fordistic monotony of post-war capital and the drab social security of social-democratic consensus.

DAVID WILKINSON's (MANCHESTER METROPOLITAN UNIVERSITY) paper analysed the connection of Post-Punk and the Libertarian Left in Britain. When the Sex Pistols split up and

Margaret Thatcher was elected, in 1978, Punk became a rebellion without a message. Nevertheless Punk established a DIY culture which included a broad spectrum of independent releases in music and zines. Based on this, Post-Punk reflected the industrial decline of cities like Manchester and contributed to socio-economic change in different ways. This was primarily in testing alternative ways of life, experimenting with different ways of music and arts and formulating utopias. Affected by the crisis of the labour party and the labour movement after the lost election in 1978, the Libertarian Left appeared stronger than before. Sharing the idea of Utopianism the Post-Punk scene and the Libertarian Left got intertwined and created the idea of hedonism without consumerism. Bands like „Gang of Four“ or „The Fall“ reflected in their songs the vision of the Libertarian Left. Although the impact on the society at the end was rarely limited, the Post-Punk scene functioned as a distributor of ideas which had an impact on people and their thoughts in other positions.

2. PANEL "From the Urban to the Rural. The Influence of Space on Youth Culture"

The second panel of the workshop concentrated on the spatial dimension of youth cultures and asked if the new emerging forms of urbanisation and the everyday life in the countryside influenced the lifestyle of teenagers. In both, the urban and rural, youth cultures were reference points for each other. Furthermore, this panel dealt with the problem of writing youth cultures' history.

SIAN EDWARDS (UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX) took a close look at the emergence of youth cultures in the countryside. Her presentation dealt with the transfer of knowledge of youth cultures from cities to the countryside, as well as how youth cultures were experienced and lived by rural teenagers. While youth cultures were associated with hedonism and disobedience, the modern world was seen as cut off from nature. With this in mind, the talk explored the differences between urban and rural youth cultures, and showed how a rebellious space for young people in the countryside was constituted.

FELIX FUHG (HUMBOLDT UNIVERSITY BERLIN) focused on the specifics and characteristics of the metropolitan society in London and their effects on the emergence and development of youth cultures in the 1960s. Starting from Louis Wirth's famous article "Urbanism as a way of life" he pointed out that the metropolitan space after the Second World War functioned as a contact zone between teenagers and global processes and dynamics. Thus, one of the main influences linked to globalisation was migration, but also the circulation of pop-cultural images and commodities, as well as the transformations of the world economy. Often youth cultures served as an avant-garde, and, thereby, teenagers shaped different ways of urban life by challenging and negotiating urban change.

3. PANEL "Gendering Youth Cultures and its History"

With a special focus on the work practices of historians and the use of sources the presentations of the third panel dealt with female youth cultures. The contributions showed that girls had a massive impact on social change driven by youth cultures, and that the female perspective in the research field of youth cultures is still underrepresented.

LUCY ROBINSON (UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX) reflected her role as a historian through the work with girls in projects related to youth cultures. Her main topics highlighted the experiences of girls within popular culture and subcultural self-identification. Thereby, self-identities are always a part of networks which formulate subcultural identities. From her work with girls she drew comparisons to the work of historians. While historians are taking concepts of the past to affect the present, the girls in one of the projects changed lyrics of a song to affect their identity. Robinson demonstrated how the understanding of the perspectives of girls of this time provides new insights, and is essential in the writing the history of youth cultures.

LAURA CATHERINE COFIELD (UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX) investigated the forms in which fans affected subcultures. Her case study focused on Riot Grrrls, a feminist subculture related to Punk. For Riot Grrrls the subculture is strongly related to political statements. Cofield drew attention on the meaning of being a fan and taking part in the cultural production of fans. The boundaries between fandom and feminism blurred here, recognizing that being a fan itself was seen as a political statement. Cofield examined the liminality of fan-culture and highlighted at the same time the tensions between self-identification and identity politics within the Riot Grrrls scene.

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4. PANEL "The Transformation of the Work and Leisure Regime and its impact on Teenagers"

The last panel of the workshop linked the history of Britain's post-war working class to the emergence of youth cultures. The contributions showed how economic changes and their impact on teenagers transformed the image, function and representation of class in Britain.

KEITH GILDART (UNIVERSITY OF WOLVERHAMPTON) examined the impact of Rock'n'Roll on industrial cities. His focus was on the 'ordinary cities', as Jennifer Robinson called them, in Northern England. Gildart offered an alternative way of writing the history of work, class and locality by reconstructing linkages through cultural formations. Therefore, he investigated the transfer of pop-cultural knowledge from the USA to England and the acquisition of it by the British working class. He showed that local life in the 1950s and 1960s was the space in which the acquisition took place. Local areas and communities were the breeding ground for changes in the relationship between class, race, popular music and youth culture in post-war Britain. Thereby, music was not identified with the USA, but with particular experiences of the working class. With this in mind, the working class culture was not swept away by popular American music, but transformed in its self-imagination, self-representation and self-conception.

STEPHEN CATTERALL (UNIVERSITY OF HUDDERSFIELD) described in his talk a distinctive class-perspective in the British Northern Soul scene. Following on a brief history of Soul music in England and the upcoming of the Northern Soul scene, he analysed the identity and the connectivity of this scene. Catterall highlighted that the formation and development of the Soul Scene in England was always related to the developments of industrial cities. His presentation gave also a reflection on the sources for the history of youth cultures and how historians can use them in different ways. Catterall pointed out that the use of memories of youth cultures participants is essential for novel research questions and outcomes.

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The workshop closed with presentation on the conservation of youth cultures and their archival challenges. DANIEL SCHNEIDER (ARCHIV DER JUGENDKULTUREN BERLIN) gave an introduction to the archive of youth cultures in Berlin, and discussed the diversity of the sources in the collection. Schneider gave insights about the difficulties of archiving youth cultures. Youth cultures are very good at documenting themselves, but at the same time youth cultures do not produce classical archival material which fit into the collections of traditional archives and libraries. Furthermore, many youth cultures are very self-referential without any interest in processes of conservation. Thereby, it is important from an archival but also researchers point of view to collect different outcomes of youth cultures: clothing, writings as well as codes of conduct and performances.

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The workshop examined youth cultures from different perspectives within historical studies. A broader light was given on the idea of writing youth cultures' history. The talks of Keith Gildart and Stephen Catterall based on the perspective of labour history in terms of work and leisure. Both

emphasized the role of youth cultures to establish a working class' self-confidence. Felix Fuhg's presentation, however, highlighted the influences of global transformations on the development of youth cultures in metropolitan areas. Influenced by a critical understanding of the academic's role, Lucy Robinson gave a self-reflexive view on working on youth cultures. Matthew Worley and David Wilkinson pointed out how important youth cultures were for dealing with socio-economic conditions of Britain in the 1970s and 1980s.

The contributions made clear that the history of social change in Britain after the Second World War will be incomplete without the history of youth and sub-cultures. The workshop showed that the cultures of teenagers can not be researched disregarding society. Furthermore, social developments always found expression in youth cultures. However, at the same time youth cultures often serve as motors of social, economic and cultural developments. Picking up actual discussions in different sub-disciplines of history, the presentations all in all highlighted the transformative power of youth on society, already highlighted in Karl Mannheims "Diagnosis of our Time." In the shadow of the Second World War he wrote in 1943: "It is not only as to prestige of the young people that societies differ, but also as to whether the young are integrated into groups or into a movement which, as such, influences the course of events." (Karl Mannheim: Diagnosis of our Time: Wartime).

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