

The Sociology of Youth Subcultures

Brian Wilson.

Fight, Flight, or Chill: Subcultures, Youth and Rave into the Twenty-First Century.

McGill-Queens University Press, 2006, 230pp.
\$29.95 paper (0-7735-3061-4), \$80.00 hardcover (0-7735-3013-4)

Robert T. Wood.

Straightedge Youth: Complexity and Contradictions of a Subculture.

Syracuse University Press, 2006, 192pp.
\$US 19.95 hardcover (0-8156-3127-8)

Two new books on youth subcultures by Canadian sociologists are welcome indeed. Wilson's overview of rave culture is an attractive book, beautifully designed by McGill-Queen's University Press. It is a pleasure for once to find a book based on research in Canada rather than a book about youth in Chicago or England. And Wood's introduction to straightedge youth has the thoughtful subtitle 'Complexity and Contradictions of a Subculture.' Since articles on the topic invariably speak of the straightedge culture, or the straightedge youth, Wood's insistence on complexity and differences is an important step forward.

Both books come from a new generation of researchers. Wilson's book started as doctoral research at the sociology department at McMaster University. Wood's work draws on his doctoral dissertation on straightedge youth written at the University of Alberta. The theoretical frameworks are somewhat different, though they have both read many of the same books. Wood's approach is especially interesting because he returns to the classics of American sociology, such as Albert Cohen's *Delinquent Boys* (1955). Wilson draws on the now standard cultural studies literature, often describing an author in a paragraph and then quickly moving on to another idea or approach.

Apart from these differences, both books share a set of practices and working assumptions about how research on youth subculture should be done. Both advocate 'qualitative' research in a way that is never really fully discussed. What this means in practice is strikingly similar in each case. The books are based on some participant observation. There is some textual analysis of media coverage, or of song lyrics. And each book uses a small number of unstructured interviews with participants. The result in each case is a descriptive overview of the scene or youth subculture.

The practices and the theoretical justifications for these practical decisions need to be discussed. For example, each book is based on about 30 unstructured interviews. Is thirty enough? A professional piece of research might have ten times that many. Dezalay and Garth's study of international mediation, *Dealing in Virtue* (Chicago, 1996) is also based on unstructured interviews, but they did 300 interviews. What does it mean to do professional social research? Is it okay to write a book based on 21 interviews? What practical decisions about the allocation of time and research money contributed to this?

Both books justify the choices they made about how to do sociological research by an appeal to a body of writing that has appeared over the last 20 or 30 years. Systematic research is questioned by feminist arguments about power and knowledge. Postmodernism appears to encourage the idea that truth is an illusion and all that is possible is to describe multiple perspectives. So Wood describes multiple perspectives on straightedge by different participants. Wilson describes the different

experiences of participants at Toronto raves. So we get to a notion of complexity in each subculture. It is not one thing. There are multiple variations of each scene and kids experience these scenes in different ways.

Along the way, most of what one thought sociology was about has been almost completely abandoned. The main value of each book is descriptive. Journalists do this too. But journalists seldom have the time to get to know the subject very well and their articles about youth are going to be framed as a social problems, perhaps contributing to a moral panic. Straightedge kids are beating up other kids in Salt Lake City. A rave kid dies from a drug overdose. What the (young) sociologist can offer is at least a more complex description of these youth and their activities. Get beyond the media stereotypes. But even that is offered with a certain amount of irony: perhaps these books are just yet another perspective. And the authors tell us about themselves so we can judge where they're coming from. But most of the claims of what one thought sociology can do have been abandoned. The idea of scientific research elicits a wry grin. Who still believes in that?

The problem is not in the topics of research. It should be possible to do sociology about an underground punk rock scene or all-night dance parties, just as it is possible to do research on 'serious' topics such child poverty or immigration or problem gambling. Pierre Bourdieu insists that the most apparently trivial research area leads to the big sociological issues: social class and power, inequality and symbolic violence. But to do this means not to abandon sociology. A graduate education in sociology should equip the researcher with a solid knowledge of how the society works. What is the class structure in Canada? How does the education system work? Who goes to university and what jobs do they get? How does immigration work in Canada? Who comes here and what happens to them? Then when we turn to a research topic like raves in Toronto it should be situated in terms of this professional knowledge. How do social class, patterns of migrations, changes in attitudes to sexual diversity play themselves out in the field of the all-night dance party? Or straightedge youth in Oakville, Ontario. Who are these youth? To answer these questions is to do sociology.

There are two issues. First, professional social research costs money. So if we want to encourage our research students to publish books based on doctoral research then the research needs to be properly funded. How can a student with no research budget be expected to do systematic research? With course work, teaching as assistants in the university, and personal or family responsibilities, how can we reasonably expect doctoral students to do more than 20 or 30 interviews? Is the research work being passed with the tacit understanding that actually the doctoral candidate did well, working with little or no research budget? The second issue is the extent to which this material reality (lack of funding for systematic research) is then justified by a whole set of arguments about the virtues of a 'qualitative' approach? Who really believes in science anyhow? A bit of participant observation, a bit of textual analysis, and thirty-odd interviews. Given the age and personal interests of the doctoral researcher, and the time available, what else is possible? But this is then dressed up as the virtues of multiple perspectives on the research topic.

If we are serious about wanting doctoral students to publish their work on completion of their degrees then the research must be funded. I would suggest that on completion of general examinations that each Canadian Ph.D. student in sociology be allocated a research account of \$10,000. Its use should be supervised by faculty. This material change, rather than any theory or philosophy of knowledge, would completely change how social research is done and expectations about doctoral research.

Wood says that he encountered straight-edge kids who were not punk. However, straightedge is

basically a variant of hardcore punk subculture. It emerged with the Washington DC band called Minor Threat and its singer Ian MacKaye about 1981. The subculture developed in a generally conservative and macho way on the East Coast, to the extent that MacKaye distanced himself from it. A second generation was inaugurated by the band Youth of Today about 1986. In the 1990s the generally conservative and macho culture was challenged by a more radical and often college-educated generation. The record label Ebullition and its zine *Heartattack* (1994-2006) played a key role in this leftist version. Straightedge kids do not fit the stereotype of punk style. Instead of leather jackets and mohawks, the look is either sports clothing (Champion brand was especially popular) or loose clothing often obtained on group trips to Goodwill stores, and obscure band t-shirts. The classic signifier of straightedge is an X made with a black marker on the back of the hand. This was originally a mark of being underage at a punk show in a bar or club.

The philosophy of straightedge varies over time and between individuals. MacKaye's original idea was to resist peer pressure to use alcohol and drugs. He always insisted in individuality and thinking things through for yourself. However straightedge became codified as a punk subculture that rejected drugs and alcohol. MacKaye added to this irresponsible or casual sex. The subculture later picked up issues of animal rights and for many people it includes being vegetarian or vegan. In more conservative bands themes of being 'clean' and 'pure' begin to take on racist overtones, though the scene in general is strongly anti-racist. In some bands the respect for life is turned into being anti-abortion. The scene is dominated by young men, but in general the manifest values are against sexism. In the 1990s there was a moral panic in the media about straightedge kids in places like Salt Lake City who were accused of beating up other kids who drink and do drugs. This moral panic resulted in a wave of academic articles on the topic, some of them of very poor quality.

Wood's book does not get off to a very good start. On the first page he says that the book is an important part of his career. Surely this is for other sociologists to decide. For the book, he did 21 interviews of about an hour each. Presumably because of the absence of a straightedge scene in his university city, these interviews were all done by phone. He contacted people through the Internet and had quite a high rejection rate. (People agreed to participate and then did not follow through.) His sample seems to include younger straightedge kids who frequent message boards and much older figures from well-known bands, such as Ian MacKaye. He does not give a list of his interviewees, their ages and cities. Nor does he give his interview schedule. There is a certain amount of bluff about these interviews. He says that the questions were developed according to Robert E. Stake's model of issue development. The reference leads to a box in Stake (1994) with eight lines of text. It is hardly an explicit model of 'issue development' and tells us nothing of how the interviews were done and what they were about.

Wood has the bad luck that another book on the same topic appeared at the same time, Ross Haenfler's *Straight Edge: Hardcore Punk, Clean-Living Youth and Social Change* (Rutgers University Press, 2006). Haenfler has been part of the scene since 1989. His book is based on seven years of participant observation with straightedge kids in Denver / Boulder. He did a total of 37 interviews, in person and lasting an average of 70 minutes. Looking through this book (based on many of the same methodological ideas as Wood and Wilson) one becomes very aware of the gaps in Wood's treatment. A live concert (called a show in the scene) is undoubtedly the central and most important social and artistic event. Kids look forward to shows and remember them for years afterwards. Friends are made at shows and records bought from tables at the back of the room (also often giving a chance to talk with someone from the band). There isn't a single description of a straightedge punk show in Wood's book. It is like writing a book about universities and saying nothing about the lectures that the professors give there.

The second glaring gap is that Wood says nothing about the leftist straightedge tendency of the 1990s. Haenfler calls this 'Emo Influenced / Politically Correct' and it is one of five major trends that he describes in straightedge history. This tendency was represented by the fanzine *Heartattack*, one of half a dozen major punk fanzines in the USA during the 1990s. (A package of back issues is still available for \$5 or \$10 at www.ebullition.com.) Wood devotes seven pages to an insignificant movement of satanic punks in the 1990s but doesn't even mention a huge movement of radical, often college-educated straightedge kids and the bands they supported. Since he doesn't give a list of his interviewees, their ages and cities, one can only guess that he interviewed people who were too young to have experienced this, who got into straightedge through commercial record labels like Victory, or were part of the earlier movement (like Ian MacKaye, who is quoted throughout the book). From a postmodern perspective one could say what is the problem? There are multiple perspectives on straightedge and doubtless many have not been included in Wood's survey. But from a sociological perspective one concludes that the omission of this important trend in the 1990s amounts to a fundamental misunderstanding of the whole field. It would be like writing about American universities and including Harvard, Yale and Chicago, but leaving out a more radical school like Berkeley.

The list of Works Cited at the end of the book does not separate out music recordings. I went through the list carefully and discovered that over 50% of the recordings come from just two record labels. Both Revelation and Victory Records are associated with more conservative youth-crew, or with commercial metal-influenced straightedge bands. There is not a single record from more radical 1990s labels such as Bloodlink Records or Ebullition.

Wood claims that straightedge culture gained latent support from the war on drugs in the USA in the early 1980s. It is possible there is something to this. Punk kids hear the rhetoric of conservative politicians the same as everyone else. However, Wood gives no interview evidence to support his claim. Opposition to the Reagan Administration was very common in punk culture in the early 1980s. Reading through a fairly conservative straightedge zine from the period, I find no evidence whatsoever of war against drugs rhetoric. In *Schism: New York Fanzine* (reprinted by Bridge Nine Records in 2005) the rhetoric is entirely about being an individual and loyalty to your straightedge friends.

In spite of the postmodern tendencies of Wood's book, its language and publishing conventions are fairly conservative. It would have been nice to have had (perhaps) two of the interviews to read. Although I argue for a return to a more rigorous sociology, I also believe that any research on youth subcultures is invariably indebted to basic research done by members of the scene: discographies, band histories, interviews, chronologies for different cities, etc. Much of this invaluable work done by fans is now online. For me there is something wrong with a book that registers a fact only when a footnote can be made to an academic article (often third-rate) but fanzines and invaluable books of interviews such as Beth Lahickey's *All Ages: Reflections on Straight Edge* (Revelation, 1997) are not sufficiently recognized as resources.

Brain Wilson's book is based on research on raves in Toronto. He attended a total of 13 dance events and interviewed 37 participants. The strength of the book is its detailed descriptions of raves. The main purpose is to counter media stereotypes of these events. This is important because moral panics based on these images threatened to make raves illegal. Wilson uses his interview material mainly to show different individual attitudes to the scene. Some people are advocates of the philosophy of Peace, Love, Unity and Respect (PLUR), whereas others simply are interested in a good time. Some organizers are motivated by profits and the disc jockeys who play records and mix sounds are invariably paid for their work

The valuable descriptive material is sandwiched between theoretical discussions that seem irresolvable. Writers are introduced (John Downing, George Lipsitz, Stephen Duncombe) with the idea that their books illuminate a point (they often do) and then dropped again, never to reappear. The main discussion towards the end of the book is whether this rave scene offers 'resistance' or not. The term is from a famous book, Hall and Jefferson ed. *Resistance Through Rituals* (originally published in 1975) but whether a subculture offers 'resistance' is a fairly moot topic. Most subcultures are complicated and can't be reduced to this single dimension.

At one point Wilson mentions that there are significant differences between raves in the gay community, those mostly attended by people of color, and the mainly white, mainly middle-class events that he actually attended. The most obvious response from a sociologist is why didn't you study this difference? Wilson like Wood makes much of the fact that there are individual differences, individual perspectives on the scene. But if you only do about 30 interviews with a fairly homogeneous population what do you expect? With this kind of research method how could you ever discover social patterns? Differences of social class, 'race' and education require a bigger research sample in order to be uncovered.

It seems that systematic research on the social background of people attending raves has been abandoned. The people doing this in Canada are not sociologists but researchers at various addiction research foundations. What are the implications of abandoning part of our field to medical researchers? Even if Wilson could not afford this kind of systematic research why does he not use its findings as part of his own work? Any serious research project should use both systematic survey research (if it is available) along with observation and interviews. It makes no sense whatsoever to reject information on your topic because it is not 'qualitative'.

If the people supervising this research had insisted that a general descriptive overview (even if well done) is not sufficient, what could have resulted? Surely all the organizers of raves in Toronto would have to be interviewed in depth. And based on the differences between rave organizers, a map of the field could be constructed. Then the disc jockeys would have to be interviewed. Who are they and what are their career patterns? How do you become a rave DJ? Then we would need an overview of the record labels. What companies produce this dance music? How does that market work? Perhaps a systematic chapter on the drug industry would have been too dangerous for the researcher. But where are these drugs manufactured? How are they distributed and sold? There is a brief mention that Toronto police tolerate raves. So the police need to be interviewed (off the record if need be). And then finally the experiences of ravers themselves, but now studied systematically. What is their social class? Are they college kids? What are the social differences by 'race' and sexual orientation? In this kind of systematic way a sociological picture can be constructed of the field. If the main interest of both of these published books is ultimately their subject matter (straightedge and rave) we need to ask hard questions of our discipline. What specifically has sociology contributed?

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