

Exploring the Contemporary British Youth Culture

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ABSTRAKT

Tato práce se zabývá současnou kulturou britské mládeže. Stručně analyzuje její historii za účelem nalezení prvků podobných těm, jenž mohou být pozorovány v dnešní době. Na základě těchto poznatků se práce zaměřuje na podrobnější zkoumání kultury mládeže v posledních dvaceti letech a popisuje postupnou změnu ve vnímání mladých lidí z pozitivního k převážně negativnímu. Cílem práce je nalézt příčiny této zásadní změny.

Klíčová slova:

kultura mládeže, hlavní proud, subkultury, zábavní průmysl, politika, média, sociální vyloučení, kriminalita mládeže, násilný zločin, chavs

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the contemporary British youth culture. It briefly analyses its history in order to discover elements similar to those observed nowadays. On the basis of these findings, the thesis focuses on more detailed study of youth culture in the last twenty years and describes a gradual shift in perception of young people from positive to predominately negative. The aim of this thesis is to find reasons for such a substantial change.

Keywords:

youth culture, mainstream, subcultures, entertainment industries, politics, media, social exclusion, juvenile delinquency, violent crime, chavs

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INTRODUCTION

The second half of the nineties saw a spectacular rise of British culture followed by a wave of national euphoria. This optimistic mood was sparked by phenomenal success associated with youth. Many young people from cultural margins became the mainstream celebrities, praised for their substantial contribution to this renaissance. After long years of political stagnation, a new leader, presenting himself as a youthful agent of modernity, brought a vision of change to the political scene. The national capital, London, was labeled the coolest city on the planet filled with a vibrant youth culture. A decade later, the same place was described in radically different manner. The media brought news obsessed with youth violence on the streets of British cities which were plagued by the knife crime epidemic. Political speeches expressed concerns about law-abiding citizens frightened to go out on a Saturday night because town centres were dominated by gangs of hooded youngsters. The public became increasingly alarmed by the declining moral values of their children and overall state of youth culture.

What is the reason of such a significant shift in portrayal of young people? A closer look into the history of British youth culture reveals that it is not an exceptional case, since many similar can be found throughout the twentieth century. During the affluent sixties youth culture was seen as a symbol of incoming consumer society; young people were celebrated for their music, fashion and hedonistic lifestyle which boosted economic growth. While certain part of youth enjoyed benefits of the prosperity, many others were excluded from this leisure-oriented consumption, since they lacked sufficient disposable income. These young people developed their own way of entertainment which usually collided with the norms and values of the mainstream society. The situation worsened in the following decades, characterised by an economic decline, during which the excluded subcultures became more visible due to a further degradation of their socioeconomic status. This thesis is based on presumption that a similar model is applicable to the present youth; therefore, the aim of the thesis is to prove that predominantly negative perception of the contemporary youth culture is given by growing social and economic inequality among the British classes.

1 YOUTH CULTURES IN THE UK

In order to understand the contemporary British youth culture in a wider context it is essential to know its history. The analysis of events and conditions which caused the emergence of early youth culture, along with the general knowledge of its subsequent evolution, is important not only to maintain continuity of this thesis, but also to discover features which are common to all youth cultures from the very beginning up to the present day.

1.1 Emergence of youth culture

The origins of youth culture can be traced back to post-war Britain. Since the end of the war in 1945, UK faced a huge task of economic and social reconstruction. The following paragraphs analyse the most significant changes that affected the British society and led to the creation of youth culture.

The first thing that deserves a closer look is a shift in young people's earnings. Shortly after the war a military-oriented production was transformed into the civilian economy characterized, among other things, by an increased demand for consumption goods.¹ The reconstruction of economy required a sufficient amount of manpower. The rising demand for labour force "ensured buoyant levels of youth employment and boosted young people's spending power."² According to the research their real income have increased by 50 percent when compared with 1938. This resulted in a considerably higher amount of discretionary money at employed youth's own disposal.³

Another factor that seems to have a substantial impact on formation of youth culture was implementation of the 1944 Education Act which reorganized existing educational system. The act raised the school-leaving age to fifteen and contributed to a considerable expansion of British secondary education.⁴ In consequence of these changes "the increasing number of young people spending an increasing proportion of their youth in age-specific

¹ Alan Booth, *British Economic Development Since 1945 (Documents in Contemporary History)* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 38.

² Bill Osgerby, *Youth Media (Routledge Introductions to Media and Communications)* (London: Routledge, 2004), 9.

³ Mark Abrams, *The Teenage Consumer* (London: Press Exchange, 1959), 9.

⁴ Osgerby, *Youth Media*, 27.

educational institutions from the age of eleven onwards ... was seen, by some commentators, to be creating the pre-conditions for the emergence of a specifically 'adolescent society'.⁵ It is likely that these 'old school ties' built during the compulsory education helped to develop common interests among the youth, which lasted for a certain time even after their integration into employment.

The last important change involved in arrival of youth culture was the spread of mass media, especially television. The first British commercial broadcasting launched by ITV in mid-fifties became a competitor to the public BBC channel. In the beginning, television programmes "were low-key in their youth appeal." However, by the late 1950s a television "genre targeted more specifically at youth was taking a shape."⁶ The media, newly accessible to the masses of British society, represented for some critics "the means of 'imitation' and 'manipulation' on a national scale." In other words, youth culture was considered to be "a result of such 'mindless' imitation by teenagers, fostered by shrewd and 'manipulating' commercial interests."⁷

The combination of conditions mentioned above underpinned by post-war baby boom provided an ideal breeding ground for youth culture. The masses of youngsters with a decent disposable income were allowed to spend on their shared interests and activities. They developed a leisure-oriented culture based on consumption. This enormous potential of "youth's enhanced economic muscle" was soon recognized by the market and led to a great expansion of "the youth-oriented leisure and entertainment industries."⁸ The close relation between youth and commercial interests became the dominant feature of recently emerged youth culture.

1.2 Subsequent development

This chapter aims to outline an evolution of youth culture during the subsequent decades, covering a period of nearly forty years. Since a detailed description of early times is not an objective of this thesis, special attention is paid only to certain themes. These themes are concerned with two completely different approaches towards the youth, which are present

⁵ John Clarke et al., "Subcultures, Cultures and Class," in *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*, ed. Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (London: Routledge, 1990), 20.

⁶ Osgerby, *Youth Media*, 28.

⁷ Clarke et al., *Resistance Through Rituals*, 18-19.

⁸ Osgerby, *Youth Media*, 9.

until nowadays, and therefore necessary to improve readers' understanding of the contemporary youth culture.

1.2.1 Youth as a model

The early youth culture and its attitude towards consumption served as a model of modern and prosperous British society. In the following years the new teenage culture “was defined in terms of leisure and leisure goods – coffee and milk bars, fashion clothes and hair styles, cosmetics, rock’n’roll, films and magazines, scooters and motorbikes, dancing and dance halls.”⁹ It was seen as “the vanguard of liberated, exiting and pre-eminently classless” society and the symbol of an incoming consumer culture during the 1950s and 1960s.¹⁰ This positive image of youth was supported by the media and the term ‘teenager’ soon represented not only a specific age group, but turned into a symbol of this “unashamedly hedonistic consumption.”¹¹

In the 1960, a widespread popularity of youth culture attracted the attention of politics who tried “to capitalise on the dynamic aura of youth.” The most significant representatives of this popularity were the Beatles whose fame crossed the British borders and ensured a remarkable commercial success. During their tour in the United States in 1964 the band was invited to the British embassy and on return to UK they were praised by a Conservative Prime Minister “as ‘our best exports’ and ‘a useful contribution to the balance of payments’.” One year later the new Prime Minister Harold Wilson, this time coming from the Labour Party, nominated the Beatles for the Member of the Order of the British Empire award. This deed was considered to be “a calculated appropriation of the imagery of youth” and served as a promotion of his concept of a ‘New Britain’.¹²

The presentation of youth culture as a model reached its climax in 1966 when *Time* magazine released an issue under the headline “London: The Swinging City”. The cover story celebrated the British capital as world’s leading city of 1960s the centre of fashion design and arts with top-class clubs and restaurants. The picture of London as influential city is faithfully captured by the following quotation:

⁹ Simon Firth, *The Sociology of Youth* (Ormskirk: Causeway Press, 1986), 9.

¹⁰ Osgerby, *Youth Media*, 9-10.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 78.

¹² *Ibid.*, 78-79.

London is not keeping the good news to itself. From Carnaby Street, the new, way-out fashion in young men's clothes is spreading around the globe, and so are the hairdos, the hairdon'ts and the sound of beat; in Czechoslovakia alone, there are 500 beat groups, all with English names. London is exporting its plays, its films its fads, its styles, its people. It is also the place to go. It has become the latest mecca for Parisians who are tired of Paris ..."¹³

The article saw young people as agents of this change, ready to spend all their money in the city where "everyone parties with everyone." The magazine emphasized that "youth is the word and deed in London."¹⁴ Although, the cover story tends to exaggerate, it captures a buoyant mood of the late sixties and serves as an illustrative example of the positive media presentation.

1.2.2 Delinquent youth

While a certain part of youth culture became an object of admiration, another was a target of media criticism and state suppression. A delinquency was frequently connected with subcultures which were distinguished by specific styles and patterns of behaviour. In the 1950s gangs of Teddy boys entered the scene. Dressed in "a variation of the zoot suit" these working-class males were seen as culprits of "a 'new' wave of uniquely violent street crime."¹⁵ A decade later, the 'modernists' or mods took their place. They were associated with customized scooters, use of amphetamines and expensive tailored suits. The specific appearance of these subcultures was frequently presented by the media as "a symbol of national decline." This negative presentation had strengthened especially after the clashes with the rockers, their motorcycle-riding rivals, at a number of seaside resorts in 1964. On the other hand, stylish mods were at the same time celebrated as "pacesetters of 1960s élan."¹⁶ This twofold approach seems to be a result of conflict between moral values and needs of youth-oriented industries; it also proves that a rebellious nature of youth culture is to some extent tolerated by the wider society.

Extreme examples of subculture which exceeded the social limits and became a real threat to the public were the skinheads, who developed from hard mods in the late sixties. Unlike their well-dressed predecessors, skinheads' style did not correspond with the

¹³ *Time*, "Great Britain: You Can Walk Across It On the Grass," April 15, 1966, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,835349-1,00.html> (accessed January 28, 2011).

¹⁴ *Time*, "Great Britain: You Can Walk Across It On the Grass."

¹⁵ Bill Osgerby, "Youth Culture," in *A Companion to Contemporary Britain, 1939-2000*, ed. Paul Addison and Harriet Jones (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 130.

¹⁶ Osgerby, *Youth Media*, 73; *Ibid.*, 79.

mainstream but emphasized the working-class origin by heavy boots, braces and cropped hair. Their “defiantly proletarian posture” ensured that they were stigmatized “as public enemy number one.” Although skinheads were strongly influenced by youth culture of black Jamaican immigrants, they became notorious for a series of racist attacks on South Asian newcomers.¹⁷ In the late 1960s the skinhead movement was in opposition to the “middle-class, peace-loving and long-haired” hippie counterculture and represented a revolt against “feminization of men.”¹⁸ They also played an important role in a new wave of football hooliganism that emerged on the terraces of British football stadiums. An early seventies saw a decline of the original skinhead subculture, however a second generation of skins “grew out of the punk movement” at the end of this decade. They preferred a new style which “emphasized the threatening aspects” of their look, such as military ‘bomber’ jackets or tattoos above the neckline.¹⁹ The perception of skinheads even worsened when a part of this subculture got involved in far-right politics connected with British National Front and other neo-fascist parties. Since then, the whole subculture had been stereotyped by the public as a symbol of racism and political extremism.

The gradual radicalization of working-class youth, summarized in foregoing paragraphs, was a result of growing social and economic inequality. Despite the high employment associated with the affluent 1950s and 1960s, position of some youth was worsening. Typical examples were Teddy boys who recruited from unskilled working class. The frustration arising from their low status caused that many of them, along with other non-affiliated youths, were involved in 1958 Notting Hill and Nottingham race riots against scapegoated black immigrants from West Indies.²⁰ The unequal status was also a reason of above-mentioned split inside the mod subculture in the sixties, when the proletarian hard mods separated from their upwardly mobile and well-off counterparts. Finally, the rise of neo-Nazi skinheads was triggered by an “economic decline, scarcity of jobs, and increased immigration”, which “intensified latent racist and right-wing attitudes in British society during the seventies and eighties.”²¹

¹⁷ Osgerby, *A Companion to Contemporary Britain, 1939-2000*, 134.

¹⁸ Timothy S. Brown, “Subcultures, Pop Music and Politics: Skinheads and 'Nazi Rock' in England and Germany,” *Journal of Social History* 38, no. 1 (Fall 2004): 159.

¹⁹ Brown, “Subcultures, Pop Music and Politics,” 159-61.

²⁰ Tony Jefferson, “Cultural Responses of the Teds,” in *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*, 2nd ed., ed. Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 68-69.

²¹ Brown, “Subcultures, Pop Music and Politics,” 162.

2 CONTEMPORARY BRITAIN

The previous chapters indicate that the social and economic changes of British society are always reflected by youth cultures. This establishes a mutual relationship between the majority of society, represented by the state and media, and youth, where the latter are either subject of open admiration or deep contempt. The theme of mutual relations is discussed further in the thesis with a greater focus on issues relating to the contemporary Britain. Apart from the above mentioned, following sections provide a detailed picture concentrated on the most significant examples of the contemporary British youth culture.

2.1 Cool Britannia

The Cool Britannia is commonly used expression that denotes the cultural revival that sparked the wave of national euphoria, hope and optimism during the 1990s. This phenomenon was described for the first time by Stryker McGuire's article published in the international magazine *Newsweek* in 1996. The cover story titled "London Rules: Inside the World's Coolest City" depicted the city with undisguised admiration. The author saw "blossoming" London as the prominent financial centre and the generator of "prosperity and laissez-faire gumption that cascaded across the country." Moreover, he pointed out that city became a "hotspot for art and design" and a magnet for "young people from Europe and beyond." The article regarded immigration from around the world as "a major driving force" of this multicultural place.²² It is a question to what extent author draw an inspiration from previously published story about the 'Swinging London' from 1966; however, the changes taking place in London thirty years later were of some significance to whole Britain.

2.1.1 Cultural revival

The main agents of this cultural renaissance were young British artists whose achievements in many fields contributed to the mood of national pride. For example, in fashion industry, London-born couturier Alexander McQueen was appointed a head designer of the top Parisian fashion house Givenchy. Stella McCartney, daughter of famous Beatles member,

²² Stryker McGuire, "This Time I've Come to Bury Cool Britannia," *Observer*, March 29, 2009. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2009/mar/29/cool-britannia-g20-blair-brown> (accessed February 11, 2011).

became a creative director of another French luxury fashion brand Chloé, bringing a “sense of Englishness” to its designs.²³ The Young British Artists movement including, among others, Damien Hirst, Sarah Lucas and Abigail Lane received an international recognition that made London a leading centre of contemporary cultural production. The British visual arts transformed from being a “province of a cultural elite” to the “new rock and roll” consumed as a part of a “hip urban lifestyle.” The young artists became the UK’s cultural brand and “another facet of the entertainment and tourism industries.”²⁴

Although the new wave of young visual artists, fashion designers, writers and filmmakers substantially influenced the youth culture of the nineties, it was the music which dominated the era. During the late 1980s and early 1990s a new style of electronic music was introduced to the number of British young people. The imported modern sounds of acid house spread across the UK with astonishing speed, entering not only dance floors of prominent clubs, but also initiating a wave of illegal warehouse and open-air parties. These so-called ‘raves’ running throughout the night, marked the beginning of a new kind of club culture which subsequently developed into the lucrative business sector. The acid house phenomenon was also followed by rising use of fashionable dance drugs among which the MDMA, more commonly known as ‘ecstasy’, became “British clubbers’ recreational drug of choice.”²⁵

Apart from increasing popularity of the electronic dance music, the 1990s saw a rise of UK’s Asian youth culture. It was an outcome of various music projects introduced by the second generation of South Asian immigrants. Although these British-born young people had “critically different experiences and attitudes” compared to the older generation of parents,²⁶ their cultural roots were partially expressed through the music. Many of them were inspired by ‘bhangra’ folk dance of Punjabi origin which they frequently used in the form of traditional instrumentation or lyrics. This combination of eastern and western musical heritage served as their only “unifying feature” since they represented numerous styles, ranging from the “sophisticated layered electronic sounds of Talvin Singh” and

²³ Bruce Wallace, “Cool Britannia,” *Maclean's*, April 28, 1997, 38.

²⁴ Valerie Reardon, “British Art in the Twenty-first Century,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern British Culture*, ed. Michael Higgins, Clarissa Smith and John Storey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 190-91.

²⁵ Osgerby, *Youth Media*, 87-88.

²⁶ Rupa Huq, “From the Margins to Mainstream?: Representations of British Asian Youth Musical Cultural Expression from Bhangra to Asian Underground Music,” *Young* 11, no. 1 (2003): 30.

“relaxed three-chord guitar music of Cornershop” to the “militant Muslim rap of Fun-Da-Mental.”²⁷ Throughout the decade British Asian music, subsequently labelled as Asian Underground, left marginal scene and “reached a number of milestones in terms of its mainstream visibility.”²⁸

The proliferation of modern trends in music, cultural influences and alternative ideas resulted in emergence of new subcultures characterised by a fusion of various features. This in a sense initiated a transition from previous decades of predominant subcultures towards the “simultaneous pluralism of styles.” The traditional styles like punk or skinheads did not disappear but provided a basis for a multitude of derived subcultures.²⁹ Some of these subcultures such as crusties, combining elements of punk with a range of cross-cultural references and political activism, or youth associated with the above-mentioned rave scene, illegal dance parties and specific drugs, were in opposition to the conventional values and frequently criticised in the media. However, unlike their predecessors they stayed in margins, eclipsed by the mainstream youth culture.

An important element that signaled a growing power of entertainment industries during the nineties was international success of the Spice Girls. This manufactured mainstream pop group formed in 1994 was “aggressively marketed” to young girls “with a message of safe sex and loving your mother.”³⁰ Two years later their song ‘Wannabe’ topped the singles charts in many countries and the Spice Girls became a Britain’s most profitable music export of recent times. The group was also immediately labelled as an “inauthentic industry fabrication,” criticized for lack of “musical credibility” and “accused of insincerity with respect to their feminist ‘girl power’ message.”³¹ Despite these critics, which certainly did not have any impact on the targeted customers, the phenomenal success of the Spice Girls greatly contributed to the burst of national euphoria.

²⁷ Huq, “From the Margins to Mainstream?,” 33.

²⁸ Rupa Huq, *Beyond Subculture: Pop, Youth and Identity in a Postcolonial World* (London: Routledge, 2006), 68.

²⁹ Birgit Richard, “Fashion, Brands, and Logos,” in *Contemporary Youth Culture: An International Encyclopedia*, ed. Shirley Steinberg, Priya Parmar and Birgit Richard, vol. 2 (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2006), 379.

³⁰ Huq, *Beyond Subculture*, 143.

³¹ Elizabeth Eva Leach, “Vicars of ‘Wannabe’: Authenticity and the Spice Girls,” *Popular Music* 20, no. 2 (2001): 148.

The last prominent representatives of the UK's music scene and perhaps the most visible icons of the cultural renaissance were Britpop bands. Britpop emerged in the first half of the decade when Seattle-based grunge groups were experiencing commercial success and dominated the rock world. In the UK, a new independent style drawing inspiration from a long musical heritage was represented mainly by bands such as Suede, Elastica, Pulp, Blur and Oasis. Many commentators saw them as a response to grunge movement and a form of cultural resistance to the American music influence.³² Britpop groups were also positioned against electronic sounds of contemporary acid house which "inherently cut it off from thirty-five years of rock history."³³ Their music seemed to be aimed specifically at British musical tastes and intended to emphasize their own culture.

For example, Suede "strongly celebrated their British roots while opposing any US influence," Pulp gained popularity after releasing a "bunch of wry songs about everyday life" and finally "there was Oasis with their narratives of class-consciousness."³⁴ The national themes were also present in rivalry between Blur and Oasis, "reminiscent of earlier 1960s Beatles versus Stones or 1970s Pistols versus Clash." The duel of the "supposedly uncouth Mancunians" and "sophisticated Blur" from Colchester, Essex symbolized both the "UK's age-old north-south divide and class war." Nevertheless, it should be mentioned that Britpop bands such as Blur and Suede originating from prosperous area around British capital "often downplayed middle class roots" and "adopted mock working class London cockney accents in their singing voices."³⁵

The young British musicians' significant contribution to the phenomenon of Cool Britannia is indisputable. During the nineties the Union Jack, in previous two decades stigmatized by far-right political activists, appeared on Noel Gallagher's electric guitar or Geri Halliwell's dress and provided a sense of recovered national identity for many people. In addition, the productivity of British youth culture considerably boosted entertainment industries in scale comparable with 1960s. Therefore, in March 1997 the American magazine of culture, style and business *Vanity Fair* issued a special report headed "London

³² Huq, *Beyond Subculture*, 141-42.

³³ John Harris, *The Last Party: Britpop, Blair and the Demise of English Rock* (London: Harper Perennial, 2004), 202.

³⁴ Stan Hawkins, *The British Pop Dandy: Masculinity, Popular Music and Culture* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2009), 52.

³⁵ Huq, *Beyond Subculture*, 141-42; *Ibid.*, 152.

Swings! Again!” with a front page depicting Oasis singer Liam Gallagher and his fiancée lying on the Union Jack bedding. Like in the swinging sixties, importance and value of contemporary youth culture was recognized by politicians. A subsequent chapter describes how young Labour leader Tony Blair capitalised on this wave of national euphoria and youthfulness.

2.1.2 Political change

Apart from cultural revival, Cool Britannia represented the country’s transition from a long rule of Conservative governments to election of modernized ‘New Labour’. The political change preceded a lengthy but effective campaign, in which the theme of national rejuvenation was substantially important. In 1995, Tony Blair articulated his vision of future Britain and promised to “make this the young country of my generation's dreams.”³⁶ Under his leadership the Labour Party strived to “present themselves as agents of modernity.” This strategy obviously copied Harold Wilson’s earlier effort to associate his “vision of a reinvigorated ‘New Britain’” with a spectacular commercial success of the Beatles in the 1960s. Blair was also inspired by Bill Clinton who presented himself as “‘youth friendly’ man of the people” during his presidential campaign in 1992. Both of these politicians had a close affinity with youth culture, given by the fact that they grew up in the time of major cultural changes. While Clinton played saxophone and admitted smoking cannabis as a student, Blair was a lead singer in a rock band called Ugly Rumours.³⁷

The Labour leader’s first attempt to connect his person with the contemporary cultural revival was the appearance at the UK’s annual music awards ceremony that was organized by *Q* magazine in 1994. In the opening speech he clearly summarized the reasons of his involvement, “Rock’n’roll is not just an important part of our culture, it’s an important part of our way of life. It’s an important industry; it’s an important employer of people; it’s immensely important to the future of this country.” Moreover, he criticized the Parliament for its inability to acknowledge the significance of the music industry.³⁸ The Tony Blair’s participation in similar events was not rare; on the contrary, it became a regular practice.

³⁶ Tony Blair, “Leader's Speech, Brighton 1995,” British Political Speech, <http://www.britishpoliticalspeech.org/speech-archive.htm?speech=201> (accessed April 1, 2011).

³⁷ Osgerby, *Youth Media*, 92-94.

³⁸ Harris, *The Last Party*, 191.

The following year he appeared at the same ceremony again, and at the 1996 Brit Awards, he paid tribute to Britpop's success for placing British music back "at the top of the world" where it belongs.³⁹

The forthcoming election even intensified Blair's efforts to capitalise on the mood of national euphoria. In 1996, England hosted the European Football Championship after thirty years since their fabled World Cup victory at London's Wembley Stadium. The official national team anthem 'Three Lions' composed by English comedians with music provided by Britpop band the Lightning Seeds included symbolic lyrics, "Jules Rimet still gleaming / Thirty years of hurt, never stopped me dreaming" followed with chorus "Football's coming home".⁴⁰ The parts of this widely popular song evoking national sentiment were used by Blair in his emotive speech to the Labour Party conference where he claimed, "Seventeen years of hurt never stopped us dreaming. Labour's coming home!"⁴¹

The Labour's campaign became "unashamedly populist" shortly before the general election, when they released D-Ream's 'Things Can Only Get Better' as their theme song. The party also "called upon both of Britpop's leading bands, Blur and Oasis, to support them."⁴² However, in May 1997, all the efforts proved to be worthwhile because after eighteen years in opposition Labour Party returned to power with a landslide and Tony Blair joined the icons of Cool Britannia. The victory was celebrated at 10 Downing Street reception with the participation of various representatives of cultural industries including Britpop star Noel Gallagher.

The phenomenon of Cool Britannia faded by the end of the decade, when the Britpop celebrities begun to oppose the government's actions. Many of them were disappointed by "Labour's failure to deliver on election promises to help young people and the poor." The first sign of this anti-government movement appeared at the British music industry awards ceremony in 1998 when Danbert Nobacon of the anarchist-influenced popular band Chumbawamba emptied an ice bucket over John Prescott, the Deputy Prime Minister, as a

³⁹ Harris, *The Last Party*, 273.

⁴⁰ Rupa Huq, "Labouring the Point? The Politics of Britpop in 'New Britain'," in *Britpop and the English Music Tradition*, ed. Andy Bennett and Jon Stratton (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2010), 89-90.

⁴¹ Tony Blair, "Leader's Speech, Blackpool 1996," British Political Speech, <http://www.britishpoliticalspeech.org/speech-archive.htm?speech=202> (accessed April 1, 2011).

⁴² Martin Cloonan, *Popular Music and the State in the UK: Culture, Trade or Industry?* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2007), 39.

“protest against government welfare policies.” Labour received another strike from *New Musical Express*; this influential magazine published an issue featuring a picture of a “distinctly malevolent-looking” Tony Blair on the front cover. It was accompanied by the headline “Ever Had the Feeling You’ve Been Cheated?” and the editorial entitled “The Labour Government’s War On You” criticized Blair’s initiatives such as compulsory work programmes for unemployed youth or imposition of student tuition fees. These policies were seen as a “cynical betrayal of British youth” and many musicians developed a feeling of being abused. Although the government ignored the critics, they abandoned the themes of Cool Britannia and moved to a “more authoritarian stance.” A new “trademark” of the Blair’s government became a “crusade against crime and delinquent youth.”⁴³

⁴³ Osgerby, *Youth Media*, 94-95.

3 CRISIS OF YOUTH CULTURE

The previous chapter concludes that by the end of the millennium the Labour Party dramatically shifted focus from celebrating the achievements of youth culture to resolving the problems with juvenile crime and delinquency. It is obvious that these issues did not emerge overnight but were present throughout the decade, as evidenced by many references in Tony Blair's speeches both before and after the general election. Therefore, their later appearance on a large scale is a result of the British governments' chronic inability to find appropriate solutions to the long-term social problems.

3.1 Socially excluded youth

The social exclusion is one of the most important elements behind the negative publicity associated with the contemporary youth culture. A key role in this issue plays socially disadvantaged young people from deprived areas of Britain. The following chapters aim to describe causes of their segregation, which are related to disintegration of traditional working-class structures, and also resulting consequences such as anti-social behaviour, rise of violent crime and creation of specific underclass culture.

3.1.1 Underclass

It is necessary to search in the history of the UK in order to find roots of social inequality among certain parts of British society. The most relevant causes can be found during the conservative era of Thatcherism connected with an industrial restructuring and trade-union reforms. Since Mrs Thatcher came to power in 1979 "many former steel, coal mining and dock areas have become industrial wastelands." This restructuring of British economy strongly affected many working-class communities. "From 1951 to 1979, unemployment never rose above 1.5 million. Under the Tories from 1979 to 1997 it was as high as 3.5 million and rarely below 2 million."⁴⁴

Apart from high level of unemployment, a gap between people in full-time job and those dependent on social welfare benefits has dramatically expanded. While the living standards of employed have increased, the others have experienced a substantial worsening. This decrease in income led to the development of underclass. The underclass

⁴⁴ Frank McDonough, "Class and Politics," in *British Cultural Identities*, 3rd ed., ed. Mike Storry and Peter Childs (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 188.

families represents the lowest stratum which is excluded from the consumer society and is “poor and politically apathetic.” The issues such as long term unemployment and homelessness are real threat to these families.⁴⁵

Furthermore, the ‘security net’ provided by British welfare system represents rather a ‘poverty trap’. It means that income of people dependent on social security benefits is reduced if they work. For that reason they prefer being unemployed and thus “become further isolated in society.”⁴⁶ The children born into these low-income families tend to have no career aspirations for future and follow the similar pattern of unemployment and benefit dependence as their parents. The lack of employment, motivation and stable family background seem to be crucial problems which leave underclass youth with very few possibilities of escaping from these structures.

The vicious circle of poverty and social exclusion is a serious political issue of the last twenty years. For example, in the late nineties, Gordon Brown, Chancellor of the Exchequer and future Prime Minister tried to tackle the unemployment and poverty trap by introducing a series of welfare system reforms. The aim of the Labour government was to “abolish family poverty” and “ensure that every child has the best start in life.”⁴⁷ However, ten years later, the Tory leader and also future Prime Minister, David Cameron claimed that “some of Britain's unemployed are worse off when they accept a job” and promised to reorganise the benefit system and “put an end to the ‘poverty trap’.”⁴⁸ This signifies either lack of broad political consensus on the important issue or a complicated problem beyond simple political solution.

An interesting comment on Britain’s inability to cope with the underclass was offered by journalist and television presenter Andrew Neil during the BBC survey about UK’s class system. He summarized that “old blue-collar working class” has divided into two parts and practically disappeared. The first part “moved into white-collar jobs” and became lower-middle class, while the second formed underclass with all of its features. Neil stressed that solutions which helped traditional working-class to get on do not work under

⁴⁵ McDonough, *British Cultural Identities*, 188-89.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 189-90.

⁴⁷ Gordon Brown, “Tackling the Poverty Trap,” *Guardian*, September 7, 1999. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/1999/sep/07/welfare-reform.labour> (accessed February 21, 2011).

⁴⁸ Michael Savage, “Cameron Pledges End to Poverty Trap For Jobless,” *Independent*, October 28, 2009. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/cameron-pledges-end-to-poverty-trap-for-jobless-1810510.html> (accessed February 21, 2011).

these new conditions. He concludes by saying that Britain has no idea how to deal with the underclass and the only solution reached so far was to “herd them into reservations” represented by council estates.⁴⁹

These deprived areas which can be found across the UK have become synonymous with high criminality level, drug abuse and moral decline. An example of such inner-city community is Clyde Court housing estate in Leeds investigated by the Observer reporter Amelia Hill. In her article, one of the respondents described the situation as follows: “Decent, proud and law-abiding residents are kept prisoners in their own homes through fear of the gangs that rule the streets.” Another one admits that she feels sorry for some of these gang members and explains: “The kids hitting their teenage years now are third-generation drug addicts, with no experience of parenting. They have never lived in a house where people have gone to work and have no idea of what it means to live without violence and squalor. They’re practically feral.”⁵⁰ Although the situation varies depending on ability of residents and local authorities to face the problems, in many places actions of youth gangs resulted in fatal consequences.

3.1.2 Violent crime

The violent crime among young people attracted close public attention in 2007. During that year 26 teenagers aged from ten to nineteen were killed in stabbing or shooting incidents within London area. The number of deaths represented a significant increase from previous “stable average of 17 a year since 2000.”⁵¹ However, the most important role in growing panic about youth delinquency played sensationalist media coverage. The series of reports depicting murders in lurid details left British public in a state of shock and initiated actions to stop this phenomenon.

The first to react was Prime Minister Gordon Brown who declared that “kids are out of control ... they are roaming the streets” and admitted that Britain faces a real issue of teenage criminality. Moreover, he promised to do everything to tackle knife crime in the

⁴⁹ Andrew Neil, “Rise of the British Underclass,” BBC, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00dd1b1> (accessed February 21, 2011).

⁵⁰ Amelia Hill, “Council Estate Decline Spawns New Underclass,” *Observer*, November 30, 2003. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2003/nov/30/housing.uknews> (accessed February 22, 2011).

⁵¹ Christine Jeavans, “Mapping UK’s Teen Murder Toll,” *BBC News*, December 15, 2008. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/7777963.stm (accessed February 24, 2011).

UK and introduced government strategy of punishment and prevention.⁵² The government's reaction encompassed intensified application of stop and search powers and increased police surveillance in problematic areas. These actions served as an addition to the 2006 Violent Crime Reduction Act imposing rise of maximum sentence for carrying a knife from two to four years and other mostly repressive measures. They also launched a national campaign that involved young people in creation of anti-knife crime advertisements. The campaign, distributed through websites, radio and mobile phones, started with two viral videos showing graphic pictures of serious stab wounds and fake CCTV footage of knife attack. Apart from involving youth, a series of adverts was aimed at mothers to encourage them to talk to their children about the issue.⁵³ Many other public organisations, communities and individuals participated in anti-knife crime campaign too.

Despite all efforts to stop teenage homicides a number of victims even increased in 2008. In British capital 29 youths were violently killed and murder toll reached more than 70 across the country.⁵⁴ The worsening of figures was induced by the fact that majority of campaigns was launched during the same year and thus it took some time to see the desired effect. This claim can be underpinned by a substantial reduction of murders in 2009, when the number of young victims fell to 14 in London alone.⁵⁵

The issue of violent crimes sparked an intense debate about the reasons behind this problem. A report published by the House of Commons' Home Affairs Committee in 2009 saw the above-mentioned sensationalist media coverage as one of the causes. The negative media portrayal of young people as "feral youths" contributed to fear among them and initiated an "arms race." The picture of dangerous streets where "everyone else is carrying a knife fuels a vicious circle."⁵⁶ Generally, youth's tendency to carry knives rose with the publicity of knife related crime. According to conducted surveys self-protection is the main

⁵² Gordon Brown, "January Press Conference (8 January 2008)," The National Archives, <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20080905093035/number10.gov.uk/page14198> (accessed February 24, 2011).

⁵³ Alexi Mostrous, "Hard-Hitting Anti-Knife Campaign Is Launched as Police Seize 200 Weapons," *Times*, May 29, 2008. <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article4026074.ece?token=null&offset=0&page=1> (accessed February 25, 2011).

⁵⁴ Jeavans, "Mapping UK's Teen Murder Toll," *BBC News*.

⁵⁵ Kevin Everard, "Advice On... Knife Crime," *Children and Young People Now*, November 2010, 17.

⁵⁶ House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, *Knife Crime* (London: The Stationery Office, 2009), 30.

motive for the illegal possession of such weapon. This means that the fear of being assaulted overcome concern about possible custodial sentences. From this point of view, strengthened stop and search powers and rise of sentences may lead to wrongful criminalisation of, under normal circumstances, non-delinquent youths. The report also mentioned that there is a strong link between “past victimisation and knife-carrying”, since a youngster armed with knife is more likely to become a victim himself. Therefore, the focus should be laid on “helping young people to feel safer.” In this case media can be an important implement lowering the fear from being stabbed. Their power applied in more positive way can “mobilise communities against knife crime” and serve as a base for anti-knife crime campaigns as was described in the second paragraph of this chapter.⁵⁷

Although the violent crime among young people became a national phenomenon, it is closely connected with the problems of deprived communities. The chapter about underclass explained that the specific conditions resulted in creation of socially and economically disadvantaged stratum of society. This lower class concentrated in poor inner-city and suburban areas across the Britain suffers from many complex problems which provide a seedbed for teenage crime. The disadvantaged youth coming from underclass families tend to have no aspirations to improve their status, distorted moral values and are more likely to become involved in criminal behaviour. Therefore it is unsurprising that the offence such as knife crime is also concentrated in these deprived districts of large cities.⁵⁸ Due to these facts social exclusion is considered the fundamental cause of violent crime.

In 2007, however, Tony Blair claimed that “the spate of knife and gun murders in London was not being caused by poverty, but a distinctive black culture.” He added that “violence would not be stopped ‘by pretending it is not young black kids doing it’.”⁵⁹ Blair’s statement, apart from being entirely politically incorrect, expressed a widely acknowledged opinion fuelled by a media focus on the series of murders in the UK’s capital. The general view of black youth as culprits of violent crime simply outweighed the fact that outside the London, offenders were predominantly white. Subsequent studies have

⁵⁷ House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, *Knife Crime*, 30.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁵⁹ Patrick Wintour and Vikram Dodd, “Blair Blames Spate of Murders On Black Culture,” *Guardian*, April 12, 2007. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2007/apr/12/ukcrime.race> (accessed March 2, 2011).

proved that ethnic composition of youth delinquents varies by location but a direct link between violent crime and ethnicity is nonexistent.⁶⁰ Generally speaking, in south London districts with large African-Caribbean community such as Peckham and Brixton, offenders and victims are overwhelmingly black, while in Glasgow with less populous ethnic minority, they are more likely to be white. Furthermore, some ethnic minorities have usually higher rates of poverty and are frequently present in the deprived areas of British cities; therefore, they are predisposed to suffer from problems associated with these conditions. From this perspective, ethnicity is not a root cause of violent crime and thus other aspects of social exclusion need to be analysed.

Shortly after the above-mentioned controversial statement, Tony Blair admitted that economic inequality is an issue to be solved, but the real problem behind the murders is an environment in which these young people were brought up, and blamed single-parent families for providing “lack of appropriate role models.”⁶¹ He implied that the problem lies in the family breakdown affecting underclass neighbourhoods and touched upon perhaps the most discussed issue causing juvenile delinquency. According to American social scientist Charles Murray, who has been studying UK’s underclass since late eighties, family breakdown is behind insufficient socialisation of youth which prevents them from acquiring “norms of self-control, consideration for others and concept that actions have consequences.”⁶² It is highly probable that lack of these qualities leads to unsocial behaviour and in some cases even to violent crime. However, the question is to what extent the unstable families are present in deprived areas. Murray claimed that “illegitimacy is overwhelmingly a lower-class phenomenon” and estimated its rate for year 2000 up to 15 percent among the “professional classes” in contrast to over 50 percent among the “unskilled and unemployed.”⁶³ Despite Murray’s preoccupation with importance of traditional family his very persuasive conclusions have been affirmed by many others.

For example, the report issued by Home Affairs Committee stated that “extreme parental neglect” results in increased aggression of young people, because it suppresses the development of abilities regulating the anger. It also indicated that dysfunctional families

⁶⁰ House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, *Knife Crime*, 23.

⁶¹ Wintour and Dodd, “Blair Blames Spate of Murders On Black Culture,” *Guardian*.

⁶² Charles Murray, “The British Underclass: Ten Years Later,” *The Public Interest* (Fall 2001): 31.

⁶³ Murray, “The British Underclass,” 34.

are not able to provide their children with enough parental support and opportunities to develop self-worth. All these factors were seen as crucial determinants of violent crime.⁶⁴ The similar opinion expressed Alfred Hitchcock, former head of the Tackling Knives Action Program, who said, “Those experiencing a loving, caring relationship with their parents from a young age are less likely to become involved in violence.”⁶⁵ The last one to mention is Camila Batmanghelidjh, the founder of charitable organization Kids Company, who claimed that “no child is born a criminal or a killer.” She saw the reasons behind becoming a perpetrator in prior crimes committed against the child.⁶⁶

It is evident that unstable family background, economic deprivation and fear generated by sensationalist media coverage were the main causes behind the violent crime which culminated in the knife-crime epidemic in 2008. However, while the media functioned as the last straw triggering the panic, the negative aspects of social exclusion represented a long-term problem associated not only with the escalation of violent crime, but with the British juvenile delinquency in general. Since the delinquent youth culture provided a basis for subsequent emergence of knife crime, it is important to describe the events preceding this widespread phenomenon.

3.1.3 Anti-social behaviour

During the nineties, offences of lower-class youths were usually connected with petty crimes such as theft, vandalism, disorder, etc. Although lethal violent crime was also present, it constituted a minority of cases and did not exceed the normal levels. On the other hand, the anti-social behaviour of these youth gradually contributed to the public despise and fear. The rising moral panic over this declining youth culture provoked political responses. In 1998, the Labour government introduced the Anti-Social Behaviour Order abbreviated as ASBO. The order was designed, among other things, to prevent young people from being prosecuted at an early age. Instead of criminal trial for committing a minor offence they were given an ASBO outside the court system. The sentence was intended to stop youths from repeating their crimes; most frequently, they

⁶⁴ House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, *Knife Crime*, 36.

⁶⁵ Neil Puffett, “Root Causes of Knife Crime Exposed,” *Children and Young People Now*, June 2009, 11.

⁶⁶ Camila Batmanghelidjh, “No Child Is Born a Criminal,” *Guardian*, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/video/2010/jun/05/child-criminal-camila-batmanghelidjh> (accessed March 3, 2011).

were banned from visiting certain places or doing particular things. However, the overall effectiveness of ASBOs was in question.

A later research, conducted by the Youth Justice Board among the offenders from disadvantaged groups, revealed that nearly half of the examined young people failed to comply with their order. Moreover, it stated that “ASBOs functioned as a ‘badge of honour’, rather than addressing the causes of the behaviour.”⁶⁷ From this perspective, the order can be seen as counterproductive since it became a symbol of certain status, and therefore may encourage youth to delinquent behaviour. The study also mentioned doubts of many professionals working directly with young people or those involved in tackling youth crime in a different way. They expressed concern about the effectiveness of ASBOs and questioned their positive impact on behaviour.⁶⁸

The strictly repressive attitude towards the juvenile delinquency, represented by Anti-Social Behaviour Order, became the object of criticism from Labour’s political opponents. In 2006, Nick Clegg, Home Affairs spokesman for the Liberal Democrats, blamed this strategy for “demonising thousands of young people” and stressed its inability to “deal with the complexities of anti-social behaviour.”⁶⁹ The most notable statement on this issue gave Conservative leader David Cameron in his speech to the Centre for Social Justice. He declared that “hoodies” - young people from deprived areas are “response to a problem, not a problem itself.” Although Cameron supported the importance of law enforcement, he saw ASBO system alone as a short-term solution to the problem of youth crime. Tory leader stressed that the long-term answer to anti-social behaviour is about understanding the causes of crime and improving the emotional development of young people. He proposed to share responsibility for tackling juvenile delinquency by giving power to the experts on youth problems and non-profit organizations.⁷⁰ Nevertheless, this suggested educational rather than repressive approach supported by many professionals was later ridiculed by Labour as ‘hug a hoodie’.

⁶⁷ Youth Justice Board, *A Summary of Research Into Anti-Social Behaviour Orders Given to Young People Between January 2004 and January 2005* (London: Youth Justice Board, 2006), 16-17.

⁶⁸ Youth Justice Board, *A Summary of Research Into Anti-Social Behaviour Orders*, 15.

⁶⁹ Nick Clegg, “Half of Asbo Holders Breach Order,” BBC News, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/politics/6214662.stm (accessed March 12, 2011).

⁷⁰ David Cameron, “Speech to the Centre For Social Justice,” BBC, http://news.bbc.co.uk/player/nol/newsid_5160000/newsid_5166200/5166248.stm?bw=nb&mp=wm&news=1&bbcws=1 (accessed March 13, 2011).

A broad political and social consensus on the significance of both repressive and educational attitude towards the criminality of socially excluded youth appeared during the knife-crime crisis. The fatal consequences of this phenomenon raised serious concerns about the state of youth culture and many people realized that the problem is in the approach. After the repressive actions were complemented with various educational-based activities level of violent crimes had stabilised. However, the anti-social behaviour of young people is still an issue. The above-mentioned critics of Labour's strictly repressive policy are in power nowadays, and therefore their promised actions may confirm or disprove the effectiveness of the new approach.

3.1.4 Chav culture

The phenomenon of chav culture is tightly connected with the socially excluded white youth living in the deprived neighbourhoods, dependent on welfare benefits and suffering from intergenerational unemployment as a result of the above-mentioned disintegration of traditional working-class structures. In the 1990s, these young people acquired a number of different names depending on the place of their residence. For example, in Liverpool they were referred to as 'scallies', 'neds' in Scotland or 'charvers' in Newcastle. The underclass youth also developed a specific behaviour and style which were subsequently stereotyped and ridiculed by media, along with the title 'chavs' that encompasses all the other regional variations and became used on a national scale. Therefore, in the contemporary language term chav is a "catchall epithet used to pour scorn on everyone from unwed teenage mothers to high-profile celebrities."⁷¹ In order to explore the original meaning from which this stereotype is derived the following paragraphs are dedicated to the description of an underclass subculture 'charver kids' or simply 'charvers' studied by Anoop Nayak in Northeast region of England.

The 'charvers' originated in a community which unlike the other working-class societies in the area did not adapt to the economic restructuring caused by de-industrialization and fell into poverty and "long-term familial unemployment." In response to their destitute conditions 'charvers' resorted to "survivalist strategies of existence"

⁷¹ Keith Hayward and Majid Yar, "The 'Chav' Phenomenon: Consumption, Media and the Construction of a New Underclass," *Crime Media Culture* 2, no. 1 (2006): 15-16.

comprising various illegal activities.⁷² Nayak notes that these actions ranging from minor offences to shoplifting and theft were “means of contributing to the household economy” and also “a type of *cultural apprenticeship* through which children and especially young males developed the knowledge and skills required for a career of crime.” It is not clear to what extent ‘charvers’ were involved in more serious crimes in the area, however, the author claims that for some young people these practices represented the “culture of the estate” while for others they “were embedded in deeper familial networks of crime and intimidation.”⁷³

Apart from participation in illegal activities, the economic deprivation caused that ‘charvers’ were “excluded from the night-time economy which involved smart dress codes and the additional expense of entrance fees, drinks, and so forth.” Moreover, their ill fame even worsened this exclusion, as evidenced by an advertising campaign of a local nightclub, which promoted itself as “Friendly, multi-racial, and totally *Charver-free*”. Excluded from the mainstream night-time economy, ‘charvers’ attended the more accessible illegal rave events organised in “squats and disused buildings.”⁷⁴ They also created their own way of street-based leisure that included “‘hanging out’ on street corners, drinking cans of beer, smoking and chatting to friends.”⁷⁵

In addition, ‘charver kids’ were distinguished from other young people in the estate by a specific appearance. The most characteristic features of their look were “brightly coloured tracksuits, including brands such as Kappa or Adidas,” accompanied by a pair of “chunky trainers.” Another distinctive attribute of this particular subculture was a fringe hairstyle usually combined with bleached hair. These features along with “fake bronze tans” and tendency to wear heavy gold jewellery were “interpreted by other youth as a signifier of ‘bad taste’ and a wilful display of lower-class credentials.” The author also implies that some attributes of the ‘charver’ style were similar to “many metropolitan black youth” and therefore contributed to further devaluation of their status among the local white working-class society.⁷⁶

⁷² Anoop Nayak, *Race, Place and Globalization: Youth Cultures in a Changing World* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2003), 10.

⁷³ Nayak, *Race, Place and Globalization*, 85-86.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁷⁵ Anoop Nayak, “Displaced Masculinities: Chavs, Youth and Class in the Post-Industrial City,” *Sociology* 40, no. 5 (2006): 820.

⁷⁶ Nayak, *Race, Place and Globalization*, 89-90.

The negative perception associated with ‘charver kids’ was partially embodied in the inferior status of their families and the deprived community as a whole. These unemployed lower-class people were stigmatized by locals as the “undeserving poor”, “parasitic” and “beyond the pale”.⁷⁷ Parents were often described as having “lax attitudes regarding drugs, crime and under-age drinking.” Furthermore, the low age of mothers and size of certain families were seen as indicators of “sexual promiscuity and a calculated strategy to maximize state benefits.” The community itself became a “symbol of lower class urban decline” and “Britain’s equivalent to ‘white trash’.”⁷⁸ In this context, young ‘charvers’, linked to the street crime and anti-social behaviour, represented another threat to the law-abiding citizens and initiated a wave of moral panic during which certain visible attributes of their culture were perceived as the key identifying signs of delinquency, low social background or vulgarity.

Nevertheless, these attributes such as specific appearance and street-based leisure were applicable not only to the underclass group of ‘charver kids’ but to an array of other young people. Therefore, it was a question of time for the word ‘charver’ to spread beyond its place of origin and slightly broadened its meaning. This is affirmed by Nayak who states that by the end of his field research the “term became more extensively applied to any young person of unemployed or lower-class background who exhibited a particular subcultural style.”⁷⁹ As was mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, in contemporary popular discourse, the widely publicised term *chav* subsequently replaced all the other regional equivalents, used to denote the socially excluded or delinquent white youth. In addition, the media attention given to this phenomenon resulted in its gradual establishment in British mainstream culture.

A typical example which covers all stereotypes regarding chavs is a fictional character Vicky Pollard from popular comedy sketch show *Little Britain* broadcasted on BBC television. Vicky is depicted as an ill-educated peroxide blonde from council estate, wearing a pink Kappa tracksuit and cheap gold jewellery. Moreover, she is portrayed as an irresponsible teenage mother often involved in anti-social and delinquent behaviour. This infamous figure, which is a satirical amalgam of attributes associated with deprived young

⁷⁷ Nayak, *Race, Place and Globalization*, 10.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 96-97.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 82.

people, became an icon of British chav culture and substantially contributed to its further popularization. In 2005, this new cultural trend was reflected by the Collins English Dictionary which included the word chav into its latest edition as “a young working-class person who dresses in casual sport clothes”.⁸⁰ Although the definition was a considerable simplification of the original meaning, the fact that the term appeared in a serious dictionary underpinned its position in contemporary language and society.

During the first decade of the twenty-first century, chav culture also became an object of commercial interests and various marketing activities. For example, a supermarket chain ASDA applied to register “the iconic British term ‘chav’” as a trademark for its own line of confectionery. The company explained this step as an attempt to “blend popular culture with novelty candy.”⁸¹ On the other hand, while the supermarket giant decided to embrace chav culture, a luxury fashion company Burberry tried desperately to disassociate itself from these connotations. A reason for this effort was given by a massive popularity of Burberry’s beige check pattern among the chavs. This distinctive tartan, “once associated with A-listers,” became the “uniform of a rather different social group.” Since the luxury and expensive fashion was hardly affordable for the low-income youth the demand was satisfied with a deluge of “counterfeit Burberry check.” However, the biggest threat was the association with lower classes which discouraged traditional customers; therefore, the company was forced to reduce the “visibility of their distinctive pattern.”⁸²

The opening paragraph of this chapter mentioned that the current usage of the term chav encompasses multiple meanings, the majority of which are related to social and economic deprivation. Nevertheless, these definitions cannot be applied to so-called ‘celebrity chavs’ who exhibit wealth and glamorous lifestyle. There are several reasons why particular celebrities of pop culture, modelling or sport are considered to be chavs. The most obvious is the lavish lifestyle which, among other things, includes passion for branded clothes and accessories. The illustrative examples of such behaviour are the

⁸⁰ Chavs Find Their Place in a Dictionary, *Telegraph*, June 9, 2005. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/4196413/Chavs-find-their-place-in-a-dictionary.html> (accessed April 17, 2011).

⁸¹ Catherine Boal, “Asda Bid For ‘Chav’ Candy,” *Confectionery News*, August 23, 2006. <http://www.confectionerynews.com/Processing-Packaging/ASDA-bid-for-chav-candy> (accessed April 22, 2011).

⁸² Claire Bothwell, “Burberry Versus the Chavs,” *BBC News*, October 28, 2005. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/4381140.stm> (accessed April 22, 2011).

Beckhams and their “well-documented penchant for designer products,” or former soap opera actress Danniella Westbrook, presented by tabloids as Burberry-wearing and “self-styled ‘Queen of the Chavs’.”⁸³ Despite substantial income inequality between socially excluded chavs and their affluent counterparts, their common interest in flashy style is apparent. Therefore, chavs can be seen as occupants of “a strange hinterland between fashion victimhood and council-estate alienation.”⁸⁴ Another reason for the derogative epithet chav is that certain celebrities have become “rapidly and unexpectedly wealthy or publicly visible.” This provoked negative associations with the “undeserving recipients of wealth,” represented by people dependent on social security benefits.⁸⁵

Along with the gradual integration of chavs into the British mainstream culture, the prevailing negative portrayal became an object of strong criticism. The stereotype of vulgar, delinquent and uneducated member of the society was seen as an insult to many successful people of lower-class background. A fierce critic of this “social racism” is Julie Burchill, an English writer and columnist, who openly describes herself as “proud to be a chav.”⁸⁶ In 2005, she presented a documentary film about the chavs, where she emphasised their contribution to “the cultural prestige of this nation” and blamed middle classes for the animosity, saying that “they’re jealous because we not they are our nation’s heroes.”⁸⁷ It is evident that chav is an “increasingly complex identity category”, since some of the representatives of contemporary culture have adopted the term as an “affirmative sub-cultural identity.” However, the more positive connotations seem to be attributed only to “those who have acquired enough cultural capital and social mobility to ‘rise above the filth’.”⁸⁸

⁸³ Hayward and Yar, “The ‘Chav’ Phenomenon,” 22.

⁸⁴ Jo Croft, “Youth Culture and Style,” in *British Cultural Identities*, 3rd ed., ed. Mike Storry and Peter Childs (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 171.

⁸⁵ Imogen Tyler and Bruce Bennett, “Celebrity Chav: Fame, Femininity and Social Class,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 13, no. 3 (2010): 379; *Ibid.*, 388.

⁸⁶ Julie Burchill, “Yeah But, No But, Why I’m Proud to Be a Chav,” *Sunday Times*, February 18, 2005. http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/article515509.ece (accessed April 26, 2011).

⁸⁷ Julie Burchill, “Chavs,” Sky One, 2005.

⁸⁸ Imogen Tyler, “Chav Scum: The Filthy Politics of Social Class in Contemporary Britain,” *M/C Journal* (2006), <http://journal.media-culture.org.au/0610/09-tyler.php> (accessed April 26, 2011).

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this thesis is to prove that predominantly negative perception of the contemporary youth culture is given by growing social and economic inequality among the British classes. It is evidenced by the analysis of various sources regarding youths and based on presumption that the present state is influenced by factors similar to those of previous decades. The study of contemporary youth begins with the cultural revival in the nineties. Although this era was affected by the economic recession and industrial restructuring of the preceding years, the remarkable success of youth culture, generated by a number of different art projects, diverted public attention from complicated social issues and contributed to the national optimism. Politics recognized the importance of entertainment industries and strived to capitalise on its potential.

The national euphoria faded by the end of the millennium and thus revealed the issues of growing youth deprivation and criminality. These problems were mainly connected with the socially excluded young people from lower-class families caught in the poverty trap. Their anti-social behaviour, which later culminated in the series of violent crimes, initiated a moral panic among the mainstream society. This panic was reflected in politics which opportunistically moved from the celebration of youth culture to the more repressive stance. The crisis inevitably appeared in the media coverage. The sensationalist headlines of tabloid newspapers and politically biased broadsheet articles gradually created an image of delinquent and feral youth. The derogative connotations became also associated with the specific youth culture which originated in the deprived areas across the country. Since some characteristic features of this culture have been subsequently adopted by many other young people of working-class background, the negative portrayal of contemporary youth has assumed considerable proportions.

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