

Subcultures

Cultural histories and social practice

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Ken Gelder

Subcultures

This book presents a cultural history of subcultures, covering a remarkable range of subcultural forms and practices. It begins with London's 'Elizabethan underworld', taking the rogue and vagabond as subcultural prototypes: the basis for Marx's later view of subcultures as the *lumpenproletariat*, and Henry Mayhew's view of subcultures as 'those that will not work'. Subcultures are always in some way non-conforming or dissenting. They are social – with their own shared conventions, values, rituals, and so on – but they can also seem 'immersed' or self-absorbed. This book identifies six key ways in which subcultures have generally been understood:

- through their often negative relation to work (as 'idle', 'parasitical', hedonistic, criminal, etc.)
- their negative or ambivalent relation to class
- their association with territory (the 'street', the 'hood', the club, etc.) rather than property
- their movement away from home into non-domestic forms of belonging
- their ties to excess and exaggeration (as opposed to restraint and moderation)
- their refusal of the banalities of ordinary life and in particular, of massification.

Subcultures looks at the way these features find expression across many different sub-cultural groups: from the Ranters to the riot grrrls, from taxi dancers to drag queens and kings, from bebop to hip hop, from dandies to punk, from hobos to leatherfolk, and from hippies and bohemians to digital pirates and virtual communities. It argues that subcultural identity is primarily a matter of narrative and narration, which means that its focus is literary as well as sociological. It also argues for the idea of a *subcultural geography*: that subcultures inhabit places in particular ways, their investment in them being as much imaginary as real and, in some cases, strikingly utopian.

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INTRODUCTION

THIS IS A BOOK ABOUT SUBCULTURES, their cultural histories and their social logics and practices. I wrote it in Melbourne, Australia, where I live, a city which – like so many other cities around the world – no doubt has its fair share of subcultural activity. Skateboarders use the steps and benches in front of Melbourne’s austere public library and they criss-cross the surrounding streets, roaming in their small groups back and forth from pavement to road and in between moving cars and pedestrians. Goths congregate in the inner-city suburbs; for a few recent years a representative magazine, *Goth Nation*, was published out of Melbourne and circulated through the various Goth boutiques and specialist nightclubs. Melbourne in fact has an extensive nightclub ‘scene’, far too elaborate to go into here. It also has a number of drag nightclubs and gay and lesbian bars, along with a wide range of gay and lesbian niche media activity. In the outer suburbs there is the reclusive Seahorse Club, founded in 1975, for older crossdressing participants. There is a widespread ‘underground’ of strip joints and brothels, as well as street-based male and female prostitution. There is a criminal underworld, which police in Melbourne have had great difficulty in regulating – and there are street gangs of one kind or another right across the city. The Ozanam Community in North Melbourne services homeless and ‘marginal’ street people and now publishes a magazine, *Subterrain*, which pays tribute to its itinerant population, describing it, too, as an ‘underworld’ which most of Melbourne almost never sees. The city has its hippies and its ferals, its fregans (who recycle and re-use waste), its neo-punks and its metal (death metal, especially) enthusiasts. Most of the inner city and surrounding suburbs testifies to a remarkably active graffiti subculture; indeed, Melbourne has even been claimed as a ‘stencil graffiti capital’ (Smallman and Nyman 2005), with the work of graffiti artists in the city documented, and celebrated, in Nicholas

Hansen's 2005 film, *Rash* ('Scratch it and it spreads...'). The Australian and New Zealand hip hop magazine *Out4Fame* is published in Melbourne, which also has a lively local hip hop scene. Various 'Hell-Fire' clubs and leatherbars have opened and closed in Melbourne at various times over the last thirty or so years, catering to S/M and fetish interests. There is the Cave Clan, a loose federation of underground travellers who would sign their name in the fashion of the Coca-Cola logo and explore and territorialise Melbourne's extensive underground drainage systems – literally inhabiting an underworld, rather like the Parisian *cataphiles*. And there is the Melbourne branch of Critical Mass, activist cyclists who protest the way in which the city is dominated by roads and cars but who also arrange cycling events as leisured get-togethers: a small-scale social movement, although arguably still subcultural through its 'disaffiliated' structure and 'attitude'. Automobile dragsters around town, on the other hand, are constantly being moved on by police, encouraged to do what they do elsewhere or not at all. Melbourne has seen its teenage subcultures clash in the streets: like the Mods and Sharpies in August 1966 (Sparrow and Sparrow 2004: 73–77). It has also played host to various literary and artistic Bohemian communities, identified as far back as the 1860s by the novelist and journalist Marcus Clarke and again more recently by the writer and poet Alister Kershaw (1991).

Each of these subcultures – and one can think of many more – creates its own geography, a set of places or sites (some of which last longer than others) through which it gains cohesion and identity. This book will develop the notion of a *subcultural geography* as it charts a range of subcultures and – just as importantly in a study like this – a range of approaches to subcultures. It is true that subcultures have been around in one form or another for a very long time. But they have been chronicled by others for a long time, too: documented, analysed, classified, rationalised, monitored, scrutinised, and so on. In some cases, societies at various times and for various reasons have legislated against them and attempted to regulate and/or reform them, sometimes successfully, often not. Every subculture – every social group, large or small, which can be considered as in some way subcultural – carries a set of narratives about itself, some of which are generated internally while others, usually more visible and pervasive, are developed and deployed in and by the society around it. The notion that subcultures are a matter of *narration* will also be important to this book (which generates a further set of narratives about subcultures in its turn). How accurate or real a narrative about or even by a subculture might be is a question that has rightly preoccupied researchers and commentators. From another perspective, however, accuracy is beside the point. Narratives by or about a subculture come into being and produce a set of effects (or, affects) and reactions: fascination, envy, anxiety, disdain, revulsion, legislation, social reform, etc. They are never neutral. Every narrative by or about a subculture is a matter of position-taking – both within that subculture and outside it – a feature this book will spend much of its time accounting for.

The most common narrative about subcultures is, of course, one that casts them as nonconformist and non-normative: different, dissenting, or (to use a term sometimes applied to subcultures by others) 'deviant'. This book will give this particular narrative a history, tracing it back to accounts of the 'Elizabethan underworld' in order to establish the primary cultural logics through which subcultures have for so long been understood. It is worth noting that the most influential modern study of subcultures – Dick Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979) – looks almost exclusively at post-1950s activities and has very little to say about subcultures before this time. It is, in other words, a synchronic study, reading a set of British youth subcultures in their contemporary moment and, indeed, celebrating the sheer *fact* of their contemporaneity as a way (so it seemed) of revitalising a moribund and demoralised cultural predicament in Britain under the Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher – who came to power the same year Hebdige's book was published. The present book might very well have a similar sort of purpose: speaking up for subcultures in the context of a neo-conservative cultural and political shift in the contemporary landscape, one which (in my own local context) routinely lends its privileges to 'ordinary' or 'mainstream' Australians at the expense of social minorities. My aim, however, is to be diachronic, giving subcultures and, in particular, *approaches* to subcultures a deeper history. There are at least six prevailing cultural logics about subcultures – that is, six ways of accounting for and identifying subcultures, culturally speaking – that we can list here. First, subcultures have routinely been understood and evaluated negatively in terms of their relation to labour or work. Many subcultures might not work at all (which means they are 'idle' or 'unproductive', or 'at leisure', or pleasure-seeking, hedonistic, self-indulgent); or, their relation to labour might be understood as parasitical, or as a kind of alternative 'mirror-image' to legitimate work practices (so that one might even speak, in a certain sense, of a subcultural 'career'); or, whatever labour a subculture undertakes might simply be understood as in some way unsanctioned or even criminal. In the late eighteenth century, for example, a set of narratives built themselves around the prostitute's 'career' along exactly these lines, as I shall note in Chapter 1. Second (and this point follows on from the first), subcultures are often understood ambivalently at best in relation to class. In some accounts, subcultures are seen as having deviated from their class background altogether, disavowing class affiliations or even 'transcending' class as a result of the particular cultural adjustments they have made. On the other hand, for Karl Marx around the middle of the nineteenth century – as I shall also note later on – subcultures were in fact the *lumpenproletariat*: that is, groups of people *below* class-based identity and without class consciousness, self-interested rather than class affiliated: a view that has persisted. Third, subcultures are usually located at one remove from property ownership. Subcultures territorialise their places rather than own them, and it is in this way that their modes of belonging and their claims on place find expression. Fourth, subcultures generally come

together outside of the domestic sphere, away from home and family. A typical subcultural narrative, as we shall see, is precisely that of one's initial deviation from home and the subsequent adjustment into subcultural forms of homeliness and belonging *outside* of the family circle. A fifth cultural logic tends to equate subcultures with excess or exaggeration, registering the 'deviance' of a subculture through a range of excessive attributes – behaviour, styles and dress, noise, argot or language, consumption, and so on – which are then contrasted with the restraints and moderations of 'normal' populations. We shall also see this cultural logic at work throughout this book, although its explanatory force can ebb and flow (allowing some subcultures, in fact, even to be identified with restraint itself, with austerity, self-discipline, etc.). Finally, a sixth, related cultural logic – put to use in Dick Hebdige's book, for example – develops out of the late nineteenth century and casts modern subcultures in opposition to the banalities of mass cultural forms. Here, subcultural identity is pitched against the conformist pressures of mass society and massification. At the same time, however, it is also understood as a structured refusal of one of mass society's prevailing 'symptoms', alienation.

The kinds of narratives through which these various cultural logics are conveyed are not new and, as I have said, this book will in fact give them a history: a cultural history, or perhaps I should say, a subcultural history. But there is one more point to make about subcultures in this Introduction, before the book properly begins. Subcultures are social 'worlds' and their nonconformity or non-normativity must always be understood in social terms. Researchers from the Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago, the so-called 'Chicago School' – so important to subcultural studies during the first half of the twentieth century – rightly insisted that subcultural 'deviance' is not a matter of individual pathology, nor is it an individualised 'refusal' of normative social practices, moralities, and so on (so that strictly speaking, the opening account in Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, of Jean Genet's alienated act of nonconformity in prison, is not in itself an instance of subcultural practice at all). Subcultural 'deviance' or difference is instead a matter of social affiliation. But the *social* here is understood in a particular way. This book will outline a set of key terms for understanding the social aspects of subcultures – community, scene, network, tribe, club, gang, and so on. Each of these terms has a particular application and relevance, depending on the subculture, the predicament in which it finds itself and the kinds of meaning or significance that commentators invest into it. If there is such a thing as 'subcultural studies' – and I think that there is, although it hasn't quite achieved a legitimate disciplinary identity – then this is its primary focus: the analysis of subcultures in terms of their sociality and social practice. This, too, is as much imagined and narrated as it is experienced and indeed, as this book will suggest, the one constantly works to inform the other.

SUBCULTURES

A vagabond history

The Elizabethan underworld

THE BEST PLACE TO BEGIN a cultural history of subcultures (although medievalists may disagree) is in mid-sixteenth-century London, with the emergence here of an ‘Elizabethan underworld’ and the popularisation of a genre of pamphlet-writing loosely referred to as ‘rogue literature’, devoted to the chronicling of criminal types and criminal activities in and around the city. Criminal underworlds certainly existed before this time and in many other places. However, early modern London saw not only the rise of a myriad of discrete, underground criminal networks but also a proliferation of imaginative narratives *about* them. Gilbert Walker’s *A Manifest Detection of the most vile and detestable use of Dice-Play, and other practices like the same* (1552) was an ‘exposé’ of card and dice cheats, while John Awdeley’s *Fraternity of Vagabonds* (probably 1565) was an account of various criminal orders (‘Cozeners and Shifters’, ‘Knaves’) and criminal types (the ruffler, the whipjack, the forgerer, the ring-faller, and so on). We might also think of the playwright Robert Greene’s various ‘Cony-catching’ pamphlets from the 1590s, concerned with thieves and blackmailers and confidence-tricksters. Thomas Harman, a Justice of the Peace and author of *A Caveat or Warning for Common Cursitors, vulgarly called Vagabonds* (1567), is credited with coining the word ‘rogue’, a broadly applicable term describing vagrants and thieves who ‘used disguise, rhetorical play, and counterfeit gestures, to insinuate themselves into lawful and political contexts’ (Dionne and Mentz 2004: 1–2). The term thus already carries with it imaginative possibilities: implying a kind of performative act, the creation of a fictional self, as well as linguistic display. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, the sixteenth-century London rogue

has attracted the attention of literary scholarship in particular, going back as far as Edward Viles and Frederick J. Furnivall's *The Rogues and Vagabonds of Shakespeare's Youth* (1880) and F.W. Chandler's two-volume *Literature of Roguery* (1907). In 1930, on the other hand, an especially influential anthology of rogue literature was compiled by a Professor of the History of Education from King's College, London: A.V. Judges's *The Elizabethan Underworld*. 'The tendency in literary criticism', he complained, 'has been, on the whole, to overlook the historical value of these descriptive writings. Historians themselves have hardly glanced at them...' (Judges 1965: xiii).

Judges's anthology of rogue literature, produced during the Depression in England, worked as a defence of the rogue and the vagabond, regarding them as victims of punitive Elizabethan social laws: 'Tudor despotism', as he called it. The word *vagabond* was given legal definition during Elizabeth's reign, tied to idleness and vagrancy, crimes which elicited harsh penalties. Poor laws, along with enclosure laws and laws requiring proof of residency (a 'principle of settlement'), underwrote an 'elaborate system of central control' (xxxvii), which excluded itinerant or displaced people from citizenship and in many cases treated them as nothing less than 'enemies of the community' (xv). At best, their relationship to the state was cast as parasitical, a feature strikingly expressed in William Harrison's account of vagabonds in *Description of England* (1597) which had characterised them as 'the caterpillars in the commonwealth' who 'lick the sweat from the true labourers [sic] brows' and 'stray and wander about, as creatures abhorring all labour and every honest exercise' (cited in Dionne 1997: 36). Even so, Judges wrote,

still they came, tramping singly or in groups along the country highways, sneaking into barns and hovels on the fringes of the towns, adapting themselves to city life to swell the ranks of the criminal classes of London...everywhere unsettling the common folk, and disturbing the conventions of an orderly regime.

(Judges 1965: xv)

Here is a powerful expression of the ability of underworld people to survive the legislation against them, form themselves into 'classes' and continue to 'disturb' the dominant social order. Judges's long introduction to this important anthology was mostly devoted to the ways in which Elizabethans upheld and applied the law. In a later anthology of rogue literature, however – this time compiled by a literary critic – the focus was on the *nature* of those criminal classes and whether or not they might indeed be understood as subcultural. Gamini Salgado's *Cony-Catchers and Bawdy Baskets* (1972) renewed interest in Elizabethan writings about cony-catchers ('cony' being a slang term for rabbit) and various other rogue types. But he also wanted to claim that the underworlds these people inhabited were not only organised but *social*:

Seen through the disapproving eyes of respectable citizens they were nothing but a disorderly and disorganized rabble, dropouts from the social ladder. But seen from within, they appear to be like nothing so much as a mirror-image of the Elizabethan world-picture: a little world, tightly organized into its own ranks and with its own rules, as rigid in its own way as the most elaborate protocol at court or ritual in church.

(Salgado 1972: 13)

This remark is no doubt a reply to E.M.W. Tillyard's influential book, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (1942), which conveyed a sense of the orderliness of Elizabethan life, real and/or imaginary, but had nothing to say about early modern underworlds at all. Salgado doesn't reject orderliness, however. He retains Tillyard's 'world picture', but now transfers it to the criminal under-classes themselves: they are just as orderly and hierarchical as the Elizabethan aristocracy. An important way of understanding subcultures is thus offered here, that even as they appear disorderly to outsiders they are from their own perspective 'tightly organised', their social worlds structured by rules and protocols.

Salgado went on to write a book called *The Elizabethan Underworld* (1977), using the same title as Judges's earlier anthology. It evokes a sense of sixteenth-century London as overrun by underworld folk of various kinds, each of them inhabiting their own zones – the brothel districts, for example – but also flowing freely through the city: segregated in some respects, all too proximate in others. This is a picturesque (and picaresque) account, relishing its rogue characters or types which it describes at some length. But other disciplines were also interested in Elizabethan underworlds. John McMullan's *The Canting Crew: London's Criminal Underworld 1550–1700* (1984) came out of criminology, a discipline which as we shall see has been of particular importance to subcultural studies. I have wanted to suggest that the Elizabethan figure of the vagabond is especially important to subcultural studies because it was understood in terms of its parasitical relations to labour and its rootlessness and the fact that it was not tied to property, even though it might be tied for a time to a particular place. Salgado calls the vagabond underworld a 'society of the road' (Salgado 1977: 130), rather like gypsies who were also of concern to early modern legislators. For McMullan, the rootlessness of vagabonds and rogues was in fact directed at London itself, since the population of the city increased dramatically in the late sixteenth century. We shall also come to see (in Chapter 2 especially) that migration and immigration are so often the foundational events for subcultural identity, and this is certainly how McMullan saw it as vagrant groups moved into London to take advantage of its wealth, its size and its social complexities. Soon, London played host to 'a myriad of diverse social universes' (McMullan 1984: 17). Criminal underworlds flourished, concentrating their skills and teaching them

to new recruits. London's geography might even be mapped out in terms of the various underworlds that thrived there: 'Criminal areas came to possess an elaborate yet unofficial social world with its own criminal vocabulary, criminal technology, division of labour, apprenticeship system, criminal haunts, and style of collective life' (157).

There is now, according to Craig Dionne and Steve Mentz, a sub-discipline of early modern historical research called 'Rogue Studies' (Dionne and Mentz 2004: 11). Dionne argues that the rogue literature of the late sixteenth century played a major role in subcultural formation, helping to 'reshape the image of the hapless vagabond into the covert member of a vast criminal underground of organised guilds, complete with their own internally coherent barter economy, master-apprentice relations, secret languages, and patrons' (Dionne 2004: 33). Dionne and Mentz are literary critics, however, and naturally enough they return our attention to the *imaginative* features of rogue literature. They criticise McMullan for 'bestowing authenticity on characters and incidents' from Elizabethan texts that are not necessarily realistic – or authentic. They criticise Salgado, too, for accepting these underworld narratives as real. But just how imaginary *were* the subcultures of Elizabethan London? Dionne and Mentz call for a 'middle position', one that combines fact with fiction and blends real documentation with imaginative effects – perhaps rather as the writers of rogue literature, like Robert Greene, did themselves: 'The basic fact-or-fiction split – between reading the rogue as a historical figure who "reveals" something about the real social conditions of early modern England, or analysing this figure as a cultural construction who "represents" an imagined response to cultural stimuli – remains an active divide in studies of early modern roguery' (Dionne and Mentz 2004: 22). Subcultural studies can also be divided along similar lines, as later chapters will suggest.

Vagabondiana

The figure of the rogue and the idea of rogues' communities – 'canting crews' – persisted in British writing into the Restoration and beyond. Richard Head's *The English Rogue and Other Extravagants* (1665) begins to look fondly at the rogue, chronicling an 'excessive' lifestyle of brothel-cruising and deception. Extravagance becomes the thing that links the rogue to his aristocratic Restoration counterpart, the rake: this is the argument Harold Weber makes, for example, noting that both socio-literary types embodied a 'refusal to accept conventional social restraints' as they pursued financial gain and sexual license (Weber 1984: 15). The rogue moves into picaresque literature in the late seventeenth and eighteenth century – a genre influenced by earlier Spanish models – and is usually cast as an individualised figure moving episodically and nomadically through the world, increasingly sentimentalised as

the genre goes on. Other narratives about subcultural types were much less sentimental, however. The famous eighteenth-century English painter William Hogarth produced his well-known series of engravings, *The Rake's Progress*, in 1735: eight plates which represented the rake's rise in fortune and subsequent terrible decline. Hogarth had also produced an earlier set of engravings, *The Harlot's Progress*: the narrative cycle of a prostitute, Moll Hackabout, from her migration into the city and the establishment of a social network through which her career could develop, through to her imprisonment and finally her death, presumably from venereal disease. For Sophie Carter, *The Harlot's Progress* was not a unique work; rather, it reflected a cultural narrative about prostitution already available during the early eighteenth century, familiar but also fascinating enough for many people actually to want to buy the prints for themselves. There was, she writes, 'an established and venerable framework for describing the life of the archetypal London prostitute in use in popular print culture since the late seventeenth century at the very least' (Carter 2004: 33). The prostitute is understood here in a particular way, vulnerable at first but also drawn to vice, an aberrant figure whose innate 'deviance' is all too easily revealed – and which works to condemn her at the end. Elsewhere, Tony Henderson has suggested that London's prostitutes in the early eighteenth century were in fact networked and adaptable, retaining a certain amount of agency and choice in their work, preferring 'the relative independence' of streetwalking in pairs or groups (rather than alone, like Hogarth's harlot) – heavily policed and always risking infection but experiencing, as their careers as prostitutes came to an end, 'little difficulty in reintegrating into a part of society which the great majority of them had never really left' (Henderson 1999: 51). As we have seen with rogue literature, however, fact and fiction – narrative and reality – are not so easy to disentangle. And the persuasiveness of a culturally available narrative may indeed be great enough to make whatever realities one might uncover pale into insignificance.

Certainly the image of the prostitute as a figure migrating into the city and then inhabiting particular zones within it retained – and still retains – its cultural force. The prostitute here also parallels the narrative of the vagabond, a rootless character similarly understood as innately drawn to vice. Rogues and vagabonds preoccupied social legislators and moral crusaders in Britain throughout the eighteenth century and into the Regency period: a period which, as Donald A. Low remarks in his book, *Thieves' Kitchen: The Regency Underworld*, might otherwise conventionally be associated with the novels of Jane Austen, that is, 'with social poise...an ideal of elegance and moral alertness' and a classical sense of order (Low 1982: 1). Low's account of the Regency underworld in London recalls Salgado's account of the Elizabethan underworld in that city, as well as Kellow Chesney's earlier popular study, *The Victorian Underworld* (1970). Each of these books provides a counter-narrative to any investment in a 'world picture' of metropolitan order and stability.

Like Salgado, Low emphasises the rapid increase of London's population at this time and the way it played host to large numbers of itinerant people. He chronicles a range of moral and legal concerns amongst respectable citizens and officials; but he also notes the ways in which rogues and vagabonds worked as a kind of spectacle, eliciting fascination just as much as repulsion. In 1817, the Keeper of Prints in the British Museum, John Thomas Smith, published *Vagabondiana, or Anecdotes of Mendicant Wanderers through the Streets of London*. Smith wrote rather sternly about beggars in London as a public nuisance and worried in particular about how difficult it could be to distinguish 'industrious' beggars from 'sturdy impostors' – that is, reality from fiction – although he also characterised begging as a declining phenomenon, with new Vagrancy Laws designed to remove them from the streets. But he sketched them, too, in the already well-established tradition of what were called 'Cries', artistic renderings of urban outcasts and 'anchorless' people (see Shesgreen 2002), and his pictures conveyed a sense of the street-based beggar's often quite elaborate costume aesthetics. Lionel Rose has suggested that beggars in Regency London were so 'varied and raggedly picturesque...that a picaresque literary sub-culture grew up around them, a product of myth and folklore in which the "Jovial Beggar" was somewhat enviously depicted as the carefree antithesis of the work-bound "flats" (mugs) they preyed upon' (Rose 1988: 23). The gypsy, too, figured in this way, especially through the romantic autobiographical novels of the English linguist George Borrow, *Lavengro* (1851) and its sequel, *The Romany Rye* (1857), which see the author leaving London to go out on the open road to mix with gypsies and celebrate their wanderlust. The narrative emerging here is quite different to Hogarth's representation of the eighteenth-century prostitute. It shows that the beggar and vagabond – as well as eliciting moral disapproval from many – could also find themselves inhabiting a certain kind of romance, built around one's attraction to (or nostalgias for) a 'carefree' existence and a wandering life free from the duties of family and work.

Subcultures are sometimes sentimentalised, sometimes not; and the narratives they are given are therefore sometimes romantic, sometimes anti-romantic, depending on the case or, rather, depending on the uses to which a subculture is put and the investments being made in them. If vagabond and rogue communities are cast as largely parasitical and self-interested, in pursuit of financial gain and 'extravagance', then it might be difficult to make a politically progressive investment in them, for example. Around the middle of the nineteenth century, Karl Marx had argued that the *working* classes or proletariat carried with them the possibility of revolution precisely because their labour both organised and defined them: making them conscious of their classed position and therefore enlightened about the level of their exploitation. But the vagabond underclasses – what Marx unflatteringly called the *lumpenproletariat* – only attracted his scorn. Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of*

Louis Bonaparte (1851–52) was a commentary on the French *coup d'état* carried out by Napoleon I's nephew in December 1851. To lend support to his cause, Louis Bonaparte had gathered together not a revolutionary working class but a ragtag of vagrant subcultures, which Marx lists as follows:

On the pretext of founding a benevolent society, the *lumpenproletariat* of Paris had been organized into secret sections, each section being led by Bonapartist agents, with a Bonapartist general at the head of the whole. Alongside decayed *roués* with doubtful means of subsistence and of doubtful origin, alongside ruined and adventurous offshoots of the bourgeoisie, were vagabonds, discharged soldiers, discharged jail-birds, escaped galley-slaves, swindlers, mountebanks, *lazzaroni* [Italian idlers and beggars], pickpockets, tricksters, gamblers, *maquereaux* [procurers], brothel-keepers, porters, *litterati*, organ-grinders, rag-pickers, knife-grinders, tinkers, beggars, in short the whole indefinite, disintegrated mass thrown hither and thither, which the French term *la Bohème*.

(Tucker 1972: 479)

Far from having organised revolutionary potential, the *lumpenproletariat* were instead, for Marx, susceptible to whatever reactionary ideologies and movements came along, self-interested rather than class conscious, 'unenlightened' and therefore easily led – which explained, for Marx, why they so readily gave their support to Louis Bonaparte's 'bourgeois' claim to power.

By the mid-nineteenth century, however, the problem for political and social theorists, among many others, was that itinerants and vagabonds of various kinds were increasingly inhabiting the major cities across Europe and in the United States – and it was proving difficult (just as it still is, today) to know exactly what to do with them. What does a city do with its prostitutes and brothels? Or its beggars and vagrants? Or its street gangs? Or its criminal underworlds? Policing is one way of dealing with these phenomena, typically with little success; but social classification and identification has been another, and by the later part of the nineteenth century these kinds of projects could also be tied to large-scale programmes of social reform. Studies of subcultures as we know them today find their origins in several of the human sciences emerging during this period: criminology and social reportage, as well as anthropology and ethnography, those classificatory human sciences which had gained momentum in the wake of colonialism and the spread of the various European empires into other countries. In England in the late 1840s and 1850s, these disciplinary positions were wonderfully combined in the work of Henry Mayhew, a journalist for the *Morning Chronicle* newspaper who travelled across London interviewing and chronicling its many underclasses. His work – a massive project of social classification – was published in 1861–62 as *London Labour and the London Poor*.

The subtitle, *A Cyclopaedia of the Condition and Earnings of Those That Will Work, Those That Cannot Work, and Those That Will Not Work*, gave expression to exactly those relations to labour and productivity that had worked to distinguish mainstream or respectable society from vagabond subcultures for so long. But Mayhew invoked another powerful distinction drawn from nineteenth-century anthropology, which had conventionally characterised civilised people as settled or sedentary, and ‘native’ and uncivilised populations around them or elsewhere as nomadic: that is, vagrant. For Mayhew, this binary also seemed to distinguish the myriad street folk he interviewed and chronicled – street vendors, performers, runaways, prostitutes, itinerant workers, various kinds of criminals, and so on – from respectable metropolitan Londoners. Here is part of a section titled ‘Of Wandering Tribes in General’, which opens Mayhew’s great study:

Of the thousand millions of human beings that are said to constitute the population of the entire globe, there are – socially, morally, and perhaps even physically considered – but two distinct and broadly marked races, viz., the wanderers and the settlers – the vagabond and the citizen – the nomadic and the civilized tribes... The nomad is... distinguished from the civilised man by his repugnance to regular and continuous labour – by his want of providence in laying up a store for the future – by his inability to perceive consequences ever so slightly removed from immediate apprehension – by his passion for stupefying herbs and roots, and, when possible, for intoxicating fermented liquors – by his extraordinary powers of enduring privation – by his comparable sensibility to pain – by an immoderate love of gaming, frequently risking his own personal liberty upon a single cast – by his love of libidinous dances – by the pleasure he experiences in witnessing the suffering of sentient creatures – by his delight in warfare and all perilous sports – by his desire for vengeance – by the looseness of his notions as to property – by the absence of chastity among his women, and his disregard of female honour – and lastly, by his vague sense of religion – his rude idea of a Creator, and utter absence of all appreciation of the mercy of the Divine Spirit.

(Mayhew 1968: 1–2)

This remarkable tally of (mostly negative) character traits entrenches a number of cultural logics we have already seen in relation to vagabonds – rootlessness, the refusal of organised labour, detachment from property, self-interest – as if they are now embedded in a readily available discourse through which such people are eternally condemned to be represented. And it adds some more, such as the potential for drug addiction and intoxication. But Mayhew wasn’t remote from his subjects: he talked to them, close up. Andrew Tolson has looked

at Mayhew's role as an interviewer, seeing the interview itself as a new social 'technology' in the later nineteenth century and a 'special journalistic genre', a way of evoking (in this case) a street's 'lived culture' for a reading public (Tolson 1990). Mayhew's chronicles allow his subjects to speak, to express themselves, a fact that radically distances his work from commentaries about subcultural life which remain remote from their subjects – or, as Elizabethan rogue literature sometimes did, which might actually invent or fabricate a subcultural speaking subject.

On the other hand, drawing on the work of Michel Foucault, Tolson suggests that even an interviewer as sympathetic as Mayhew nevertheless worked within a larger framework of governmentality and social regulation: positioning his subjects, othering them, 'subjectifying' them. Mayhew preserved his own distinction from street cultures – consistent with the distinction he had made between the settled and the vagrant – even as he interviewed them and walked amongst them. Later on, however, it was not unusual for outsiders to *masquerade* as vagrants or tramps in order to chronicle metropolitan underworlds at first hand. In the mid-1860s, the newspaper journalist and hack novelist James Greenwood wrote a series of lurid pieces for the *Pall Mall Gazette* based on his overnight experiences in a London workhouse. For Seth Koven, this is an example of *slumming*, where otherwise respectable middle-class 'adventurers' leave their homes and transform themselves (what Koven calls 'self-fashioning') into a member of the vagrant underclass in order to experience first hand, if only for a moment, the 'true' nature of vagrant life. The accounts that slummers such as Greenwood produced were not neutral or dispassionate: quite the opposite, it would seem. Even the fact of visiting these underclasses at night has a narrative or rhetorical effect: 'The darkness of night and his imposture as a casual [i.e. one of the "casual poor"] make possible the "true" revelations Greenwood offers readers, whereas the light of day and the sanctioned apparatus of state inspection can only produce concealment and hypocrisy' (Koven 2004: 46). Darkness reveals here, while light conceals: this is a typically subcultural inversion, but it is also a part of the project of the Enlightenment, that is, the need to shine a light on (or, to enlighten) the many dark corners of the world. Later 'slum explorers' masquerading as vagabonds included the novelists Jack London and George Orwell, an Eton-educated writer who went on the road as a tramp to experience first hand what it meant to be 'down and out'. Slumming again has something anthropological about it and, indeed, it is also associated with the slummer's experience of racial difference. Kevin Mumford (1997) has used the term to describe white participation in the sex districts of Harlem in New York in the 1920s, with their speakeasies and jazz clubs – and Mumford and Koven both note the prurient interest in sexual activity, promiscuity (rather like Mayhew's 'absence of chastity') and homosexuality in particular, that slummers could bring to bear on the people they visited.

Argot, slang and cant

Mayhew was fascinated by the often obscure languages of London's street cultures, their 'argot' – a word originally used to refer to thieves' slang. There has been, for many years, extensive interest from linguists – amateur and professional – in the argot of subcultures, as in the example of George Borrow noted above. A word used to describe the argot of swindlers and cony-catchers by the chroniclers of Elizabethan underworlds was 'cant', from the Latin *canere*, to sing, a word perhaps associated with the singing (for alms) of beggars and wandering friars. In the first volume of her excellent two-volume study, *A History of Cant and Slang Dictionaries*, Julie Coleman draws some important distinctions between what she calls different 'language labels' (Coleman 2004a: 3). *Standard English* is widely understood and shared, generally giving 'no indication through vocabulary, grammar, or syntax of its users' regional origins or social status' (3). *Jargon* is usually used by distinct professional working groups and/or those with an interest in technical matters. *Slang* is used 'by a closed group of people, often united by common interests' (4), not attached to work or profession and therefore, potentially at least, subcultural. It might be associated with youth and fashionable trends, as in Max Décharné's informative but rather nostalgic *Straight From the Fridge, Dad: A Dictionary of Hipster Slang* (2000). Another word for fashionable slang was *flash*. But slang was also associated with vagabond communities and criminal underworlds, as in Eric Partridge's *American Tramp and Underworld Slang* (1931) or Gary Simes's *Australian Underworld Slang* (1993). For Coleman, *cant* 'goes one step further' than *jargon*: 'Its primary purpose is to deceive, to defraud, and to conceal. It is the language used by beggars and criminals to hide their dishonest and illegal activities from potential victims' (2004a: 4). Her first volume begins with the 114-word glossary of Elizabethan vagabond cant attached to Harman's *A Caveat or Warning for Common Coursitors*, and the various instances of cant dialogue Harman supplies (e.g. 'I couched a hogshead in a Skypper this darke-mans' [25]). Harman drew on some earlier sources for his glossary which was then used in turn as a source to be modified and extended by others, such as Richard Head, later on. The eighteenth century saw the publication of some stand-alone canting dictionaries, liberally used (as the earlier glossaries of cant words had also been) in much of the rogue and vagabond literature produced during this time.

Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* – his great, authoritative compilation of modern Standard English words – was published in 1755. Thirty years later, with Johnson's dictionary still very much in circulation, Captain Francis Grose, an antiquarian, published his *Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* (1785): a compilation of cant terms drawn from many sources as well as what Grose, in his preface to the second edition, called 'burlesque phrases, quaint allusions, and nicknames for persons, things and places' (Grose

1963: 7–8). For Coleman, Grose's dictionary worked in quite the opposite way to Johnson's, especially through its celebration of the ephemerality of subcultural language:

While Johnson viewed change as regrettable but unavoidable, Grose saw the mutability of language not only as essential, but also as something to be celebrated. Johnson avoided listing short-lived terms and those not dignified by tradition. For Grose, the more novel, the more transient terms are, the more reason there was for recording them...Grose's *Classical Dictionary* is in some ways an antidote to Johnson's: its contents are neither uplifting nor educational; its purpose is to amuse and entertain.

(Coleman 2004b: 4–5)

This is a Dictionary without a higher purpose, in other words, cut loose from pedagogical imperatives. Further elaborations soon followed. In 1819, the confidence trickster James Hardy Vaux – who was twice transported to Australia as a convict – published a lengthy glossary of slang and 'flash language'. A few years later, Pierce Egan, who had written about Regency underworlds in his popular *Life in London* series begun in 1824, produced a new edition of Grose's dictionary. The interest in slang languages began to diversify – and so did the various 'underworlds' which spoke them. Perhaps the most prolific recorder of slang was Eric Partridge, who had published his *Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* in 1937. Partridge had studied Classics, French and English in Queensland, Australia, serving in the army in the First World War – his first book was a collection, *Songs and Slang of the British Soldier (1914–1918)*. He then became a full-time writer and researcher, well known for occupying the same desk in the British Library almost every day. Partridge compiled or assisted with a number of specialised slang dictionaries, including the elaborately titled, *A Dictionary of the Underworld, British and American: Being the Vocabulary of Crooks, Criminals, Racketeers, Beggars and Tramps, Convicts, the Commercial Underworld, the Drug Traffic, The White Slave Traffic, Spivs* (1949).

Not least because of their amateur status, dictionaries of underworld slang were not always reliable or accurate. They certainly paid tribute to the ephemerality of language but they could also create a nostalgic, discrete view of underworld language as it once was – or might have been. We can see nostalgia at work in the remarkable glossaries of a contemporary of Partridge's. David W. Maurer was a professional sociolinguist from the United States, well known for his bestselling account of confidence tricksters, *The Big Con* (1940). Like Partridge, Maurer had chronicled the slang of many different social groups, not always underworld subcultures: fishermen, for example. But he also worked with criminal, gambling and drug underworlds. In his essay, 'The Argot of Narcotic Addicts' (1936), Maurer defines underworlds

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