

Youth Culture in Modern Britain, c.1920–c.1970: From Ivory Tower to Global Movement – a New History

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Given that the growth in the cultural prominence of the young was one of the most remarkable features of western society in the 20th century, serious historical studies of youth culture do not come along as often as they should. For this reason I was very pleased to be asked to review David Fowler's new book, which contains much original archive research. Chapters cover such diverse topics as the flapper cult of the 1920s, experimental youth movements of the inter-war period, youth culture and juvenile delinquency in Northern Ireland, the emergence of the academic study of youth culture in the 1950s and 1960s, student culture in the 1960s, mod culture and pop culture. In so doing, Fowler considers both the ways in which young people talked about themselves and the ways they were viewed by adults. The book is chronologically broader, but thematically narrower, than its title suggests. Despite the focus on the years between c.1920 and c.1970, we are treated to an opening chapter on Edwardian cults of youth from the boy labourers of urban Britain to the Cambridge Neo-Pagans, along with a closing postscript on the Spice Girls. By contrast, although chapters cover a variety of episodes in modern youth history, there is no overarching narrative of youth culture by which to contextualise the individual case studies (more of this later). Nevertheless, Fowler has drilled some fascinating bore-holes into the history of 20th-century British youth, and the breadth and variety of examples discussed are a welcome and indeed important antidote to the historic tendency to focus on the post-1950s period. Fowler is cautious of imposing too heavy a grand narrative on his material, but ultimately concludes that 'Central to that history are the youths of the middle classes' and that

Youth culture developed in Britain over the course of the twentieth century by organic means,

through word of mouth, domestic and foreign travel, cultural contact between elite youths and working class communities, Mods observing each other and their outfits in suburban dance halls, countercultural youth pop groups like the Pink Floyd learning their repertoire in the basement of a Cambridge pub, and so on. Youth culture, in other words, is not merely an offshoot of mass culture (p. 198).

What impressed me about the book? First, Fowler displays a refreshing appetite to challenge some questionable interpretations of 20th-century youth which have become normative both in the popular imagination and in some academic historiography. Notably, he contends that the genesis of modern British youth culture occurred much earlier than the traditional focus on the 1950s and 1960s has led us to believe. There are some particularly good discussions of the way that the myth of the 'novelty' of youth culture was established by academic sociologists and cultural commentators in the 1950s and 1960s (including such luminaries as Richard Hoggart and Bryan Wilson), some of whom had very little first-hand experience of their subject-matter. Fowler argues that even those scholars who did engage in serious primary research often failed to historicise their accounts, leading them to overlook points of continuity with the youth cultures of the early 20th century, and earlier pioneers who blazed a trail for youth. As Fowler rightly notes, middle-class youth have received scant attention from historians of youth culture. Consequently, the book devotes considerable attention to higher education, particularly in the 1920s and 1960s (the expansion of which is suggested to be concurrent with, and influential upon, the appearance of new youth cultures) and the role of students in fermenting youth movements. Chapter two is devoted to the intriguing figure of Rolf Gardiner, Cambridge graduate, prolific writer and morris dancer, sometime activist for the Kibbo Kift Kindred (a more folksy, less regimented rival to Boy Scouts and Boys' Brigade) and later Nazi sympathiser. Fowler credits Gardiner as architect of one of the earliest attempts to frame youth culture as a distinct counterculture and philosophy of life in the 1920s. One might argue that in a comparatively short book such as this, Gardiner receives a disproportionate amount of attention. However, as a case study, the chapter certainly persuades that serious attempts by young people to create distinct youth cultures predates the explosion of youth cultures in the 1950s and 1960s.

A second valuable feature of the book is the extent to which Fowler has returned to some familiar episodes in youth historiography and subjected them to careful archive research. Thus in Chapter eight, which explores the student protests of 1968 and the Wilson government's response, Fowler argues that far from constituting open generational warfare, students in Britain were little interested in revolution (particularly in comparison to their Parisian counterparts). Moreover, on the 'establishment' side, cabinet papers reveal Home Secretary James Callaghan was relatively unperturbed by the protests. In similar vein, Fowler analyses the notorious 1967 trial of Mick Jagger, Keith Richards and Robert Fraser for possession of illegal drugs. Widely reported at the time as evidence of a growing generation gap in morals and worldviews, Jagger and Richards are shown to be little interested in 'youth culture' as such, while even many culturally conservative 'establishment' figures felt the two pop stars had been harshly treated by the courts and the media. (In fact, opinion surveys of the time suggest class – rather than age – was the most significant demographic indicator of opinion on the episode). At several turns, then, Fowler argues that the supposed generation gap was much less sheer than has sometimes been supposed. In fact the notion that the 1960s were uncomplicatedly a period of youth revolt and a growing generation gap has been challenged by several scholars. Arthur Marwick, for example, asserts that while youth cultures were frequently puzzling, even unsettling, to many adults, many older adults and authority figures were in reality more inclined to treat young people with 'measured judgement' than with unreserved condemnation – at least in part because they themselves were sympathetic to young people's appetite for freedom of expression.⁽¹⁾ In this respect, certain arguments are not entirely new, and Fowler's book occasionally asks more questions of folk memory than it does of academic historiography. Nevertheless, his contention that a 'generation gap' interpretation of the 1960s has been overlaid certainly rings true for my own research area (Christianity and generational change) where the drift from organised religion in the 1960s probably owed at least as much to parents enforcing religious practice less strongly amongst their children, as to any youth revolt against organised religion *per se*.⁽²⁾

In these ways then, Fowler deserves credit for expanding our field of vision and exploding some persistent myths. However, though I would recommend this book to any student of 20th-century youth culture or social history, I do also have some reservations, some of which are quite substantial. For me, the most serious issue is the absence of any developed discussion of what youth culture actually is. Defining youth culture is by no means straightforward, and definitional debates have been a fairly constant thread of debate in the sociological and cultural studies literature in particular. However, for a general historical audience (such as may benefit from this book), it might have helped to include a brief definitional overview, along with a more developed justification as to how the term was to be used here. Fowler does helpfully trace the etymology of the term in the 20th century, and a brief 'note on the text' in the preface distinguishes between 'Youth Culture' (as a specific version) and 'youth culture' (in a generic sense). On p. 4, a further distinction is made between 'youth lifestyles' and 'youth culture' as a pursuit of new ways of living. This is briefly elaborated at several further points in the book. However, a more comprehensive map of the term's various meanings, and a definitional compass for this study, might have been helpful. In the absence of these, it sometimes became difficult to distinguish how the terms were being used at different points.

This was most problematic when it came to evaluating the core thesis that youth culture was the product of a particular period of time and set of influences. For example, on p. 5, Fowler suggests that 'the history of youth culture in 20th-century Britain has quite a definite beginning around 1920', whilst on p. 19 he suggests that 'youth culture was first identified with middle-class families in Britain' in the 1880s. If 'youth culture' in fact meant something slightly different in each case, some further explanation or qualification would have been helpful. Again, the distinction on p. 4 between 'youth lifestyles' and 'youth culture' could have been more clearly delineated. At what point does 'youth lifestyle' become 'youth culture'? At certain points, Fowler implies that 'youth culture' encompasses both the lifestyles of youth and more deliberate attempts to create youth movements and philosophies of life; at other times, 'youth culture' is distinguished from the mass of young people's artefacts and leisure habits as something more intentional. In fact, I thought I discerned at least four potential meanings here which required further disentangling and sharper definition: a) youth culture as a set of attitudes or behaviours mainly characteristic of the young; b) youth culture as a

recognisable cultural milieu distinct from those of childhood or adulthood; c) specific youth cultures or 'youth cults' – e.g., Mod culture; d) an intentional search by the young for new ideals or philosophies of life in which ideals of 'youth' are paradigmatic, such as advocated by Rolf Gardiner. Given that it would also be possible to conceive of youth culture as 'whatever young people thought and did' (cf. some – albeit rather general – definitions of 'culture'), clarity was vital. However, this was not always supplied. For example on pp. 197–8, Fowler concludes that 'the Beatles were not in any meaningful sense a reflection on youth culture during the 1960s'. Whilst I share much of Fowler's scepticism of what might be called the 'Philip Larkin' school of contemporary history (3), this is a controversial claim and needs careful substantiation. While the book features an interesting survey of established (older adult) commentators' views of the Beatles, it contained little direct evidence of young peoples' own attitudes to the band or impressions of their longer-term significance for youth. Although the phenomenon of Beatlemania is discussed, Fowler's argument otherwise rests on the fact that the Mods – 'the most visible, geographically mobile and cohesive youth cult of the period' – were little interested in the Beatles' music. Whilst this may be true, lack of interest amongst one particular 'youth cult' says little in itself about the Beatles' contribution to any wider sense of 'youth culture' (however homogenous or diffusive we take that to be).

My second reservation relates to the overall structure and flow of the book. As a collection of studies in different aspects of youth culture, the book is very worthwhile in itself. However, I think it could have been even better with more contextualisation of each episode a) within its own time b) within a longer narrative about youth culture c) within the social construction of age more generally. Regarding the first, I frequently asked myself how far one could generalise from the episodes narrated, or the extent to which variations or alternatives existed. For example, Rolf Gardiner's conscious attempts to bring working- and middle-class youth together in the 1920s through outdoor activity strongly echoes the spirit of the Duke of York's Camps for Boys (begun in 1921), which were also founded by a committed young activist with high ideals – even if, in that particular case, he happened to be royal. If Gardiner's initiatives were qualitatively different from other youth movements and experiments being conducted in the 1920s, in what ways? Similarly, the fascinating discussions of student culture at the LSE and Cambridge beg the question whether similar ideas were finding voice at other British universities, or whether London and Cambridge were for any reason different. Second, it might have helped to provide a general sketch of the evolution of youth culture(s) through the 20th century to help the reader 'join the dots' between the various episodes explored in the book. If as Fowler argues there was no 'youth culture' (only 'youth cultures') before 1920 (p. 5), at what point, if at all, did something more homogenous and/or self-conscious emerge? Similarly, if Fowler is correct to regard the 1920s and 1960s as the most creative phases in modern British youth culture (an idea which itself needs careful explication, to avoid any hints of 'golden age' thinking), it might have bolstered the argument to give a brief overview of the 1940s and 1950s (which receive much less attention) in order to demonstrate their comparative lack of creativity. Third, the book might have benefited further from consideration of the changing construction of 'youth' within the whole life course. How did the very notion of 'youth' change across the 20th century? How was 'youth' defined in ways not directly related to age? (Fowler rightly implies, for example, that in the mid-20th century, a single person might continue to be identified as a 'youth' into their early 20s, while young married couples were rarely characterised as 'youths' in the same way. There is more scope to explore issues of this kind). Moreover, what did 'youth' signify in contrast to childhood or adulthood, and how far did children and adults also directly or indirectly shape 'youth culture' (depending on what is meant by the term)? The case of Rolf Gardiner demonstrates the salience of this question: though he possessed a more highly developed philosophy of youth than most, Gardiner was never 'anti-age' and indeed drew many of his ideas from older adults who inspired him (p. 40). Likewise if the suburban dance hall was an important incubator of youth culture it seems important to consider the ways these were run and managed by dance hall proprietors and local licensing authorities – in addition to what young people themselves were thinking, doing and making of what was provided whilst they were there. Fowler takes the very reasonable decision to focus on 'youth as agent, not as object' (p. 5, Arthur Marwick's phrase) but it is worth acknowledging that this was only part of the story. Suggesting further topics for inclusion can sometimes seem like a cheap hit, since it is only possible to cover so much in a single volume. However, in this case, space for further contextualisation could have been achieved without sacrificing too much breadth or argument by eliminating a few cases where ideas or information were repeated, and by

substantially trimming the endnotes (which run to 65 pages and together with the other annexes constitute a full third of the book).

Having expressed some reservations, however, I still think that the book constitutes a 'must read' for anyone approaching the history of youth in 20th-century Britain, and indeed, any historian trying to write a general account of British society in the period. This is because despite my perception of certain omissions and difficulties of structure and argument, it moves the history of British youth culture convincingly beyond the 'usual suspects'. Fowler notes John Lennon's famous claim that 'before Elvis, there was nothing'. Dedicated commentators on youth and pop culture have long recognised that as an (almost certainly mischievous) exaggeration, but Fowler's book demonstrates as much to a wider historical audience, restoring a fascinating range of alternative episodes in youth culture to scholarly attention along the way. Fowler implicitly acknowledges that youth cultures have very often adopted a dismissive attitude to the past, seeking to break with traditions and cut free from the influence of parents and elders. However, he also suggests (through the cases of Gardiner and others) that the most prophetic youth voices have known their history well. Likewise, today's students should find their view of youth expanded by reading Fowler's book and evaluating its arguments for themselves.

Notes

1. Arthur Marwick, *The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy and the United States, c. 1958–c. 1973* (Oxford, 1998). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. See for example: Elizabeth Roberts, *Women and Families: an Oral History, 1940–1970* (Oxford, 1995); Hugh McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (Oxford, 2007). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. 'Sexual intercourse began / In nineteen sixty-three / (which was rather late for me) - / Between the end of the Chatterley ban / And the Beatles' first LP' (Philip Larkin, *Annus Mirabilis*). [Back to \(3\)](#)

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