

# Teenage rebellion.

## The end.

### In the beginning (Warsame)

There was a time before teenagers.

The Romans recognised youth as a discrete life stage in ancient Rome, but thought it was all about integration into politics and commitment to the army.<sup>1</sup>

The pre-history of the “teenager” as we think of this life phase today was the last quarter of 19<sup>th</sup> century and the end of the Second World War.<sup>2</sup>

In 1870s, a teen from Nice – Marie Bashkirtseff – set the template for the expressive, adolescent celebrity with the publishing success of her diaries, and her pre-mature death.<sup>3</sup>



By the 1920s youth culture was picking up pace, with “drink, drugs, sex, flappers and frantic dancing.”<sup>4</sup>

And a new notion of what youth was about was ushered in by the Allies’ Victory, and by the crucial role of the US in this:

“The hedonistic, frivolous, slightly solipsistic New World teenager untroubled by ideology was the perfect antidote to the failure of Old World notions, whether romantic or patriotic, socialistic or fascistic.”<sup>5</sup>

These new notions about what youth was about were encapsulated in a new word: teenager.

**We wanna be free. We wanna be free to do what we wanna do. And we wanna get loaded. And we wanna have a good time. (Gillespie / Innes / Young)**

Since teenager was coined as a term in 1944, a procession of youth sub-cultures have danced, sung, stomped and sulked their way through the cultural history of the West. Teddy boys, Bikers, Mods,

<sup>1</sup> *Restless Youth in Ancient Rome*, Eyben, Routledge, 1993

<sup>2</sup> *Teenage: The Creation of Youth 1875 – 1945*, Jon Savage, Pimlico, 2008

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>4</sup> From The Independent’s review of *The Creation of Youth* <http://bit.ly/9abot2>

<sup>5</sup> <http://bit.ly/9abot2>

Rockers, Hippies, Punks, Ravers and Grungers. All of these sub-cultures had their own look, their own musical accompaniment, their own ideologies, and their own beef with the *status quo*.

Teddy Boys raged violently against the stultifying conformity of the post-war period, their unwillingness to heed the instructions of their elders brought starkly to attention by the riots which became associated with screenings of *Blackboard Jungle*.<sup>6</sup>

The Hippies told a political culture defined by the Cold War and nuclear proliferation to give peace a chance, and told squares to chill out.<sup>7</sup>



The Punk movement started out by rejecting of a stodgy and self-indulgent musical scene and their rejection quickly grew to encompass pretty much any social or cultural institution that wasn't their own.<sup>8</sup>

Ravers and Grungers were as-one in rejecting the culture of rampant materialism unleashed by the radically pro-market governments of Maggie Thatcher and Ronald Reagan.<sup>9</sup>

In short, while specific sub-cultures have come and gone, collective youth rebellion, in one form or another, were pretty much a constant between the 1950s and the 90s in the West.

These were indeed high-times for teen rebels.

### My way or the highway (Durst / Borland / Rivers / Lethal / Otto)

While not solely teen movements, all of these sub-cultures attracted teens in large numbers. For all of them a particular set of historical circumstances interacted with adolescents' primal drive to define an independent identity.

Development psychologists since Erik Erikson<sup>10</sup> have identified adolescence as the life stage in which people most intensively attempt to define who they are and how they fit in.

Since the Second World War, this period of identity development in adolescents has been seen as inherently leading to confrontation with parents, teachers and other social institutions embodying authority.



<sup>6</sup> The film dealt with the attempts of an inner-city teacher to engage his reluctant students. The riots which ensued from screenings in a number of locations in the UK, are often said to be the starting point for visible teen rebellion in the UK: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackboard\\_Jungle](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackboard_Jungle)

<sup>7</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hippies>

<sup>8</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Punk\\_subculture](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Punk_subculture)

<sup>9</sup> The sleeve art for Prodigy's 1994 album Music for the Jilted Generation is emblematic of rave's (largely implicit) political ideology: <http://bit.ly/awwroi>

<sup>10</sup> Erikson coined the term *identity crisis*, referring to a period when an individual loses the sense of having a historically continuous identity.

To paraphrase Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter, “Call this the Pink Floyd theory of Socialisation”.<sup>11</sup>

For all this time teen confrontation with the *status quo* has been amplified through mass media. The press, radio and TV stations have – whether celebrating or condemning it – glorified rebellious youth movements. The more attention they have got, the more young people have been drawn in.<sup>12</sup>

### Things aren't like they used to be (Auerbach, Carney)

Then something changed.

Between the Teddy Boys in the fifties and the Ravers and Grungers in the 90s, the longest gap between rebellious youth sub-cultures was less than a decade. The Ravers and Grungers' best days were behind them by the mid-90s. And since then...

We decided to test the theory that there is no contemporary rebellious youth sub-culture by asking a panel of late teens and young adults who *they* consider to be the more heirs to the Hippies and the rest<sup>13</sup>. They came up with four suggestions: EMOs, Scene Kids, Hipsters and Chavs.

“I don't think there is an **'organised' collective movement**, nor one that can be quite so **easily/visually identified** as those of the past were.”

*(Claudia, 18)*



But none of these really cut the mustard as rebellious youth sub-cultures in the same way that earlier sub-cultures did.

Emo<sup>14</sup> is a musical style and accompanying look, but not a collective movement opposing anything in particular.

Scene Kids are too young, too upbeat and too busy making friends on MySpace (once) and Facebook (now) to be against anything.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Taken from the authors of “anti-consumerist” rhetoric *The Rebel Sell*, of which the key argument is summarised here: <http://this.org/magazine/2002/11/01/the-rebel-sell/>

<sup>12</sup> Interactionist and Post-structuralist theorists have both recognised the role of mass media in creating youth subcultures. A good summary here: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Youth\\_subculture](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Youth_subculture)

<sup>13</sup> The quotes in large font throughout the remainder of this essay are from this survey.

<sup>14</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emo#Fashion\\_and\\_stereotype](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emo#Fashion_and_stereotype)

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Scene%20Kid>

Hipsters dislike mainstream music, film and fashion, but do not question or oppose the political and social system which produces mainstream culture.<sup>16</sup>

And Chavs: their claim is the strongest. While the term was originally and still is used derogatorily. But, in the same way that “gay” and “nigger” were co-opted by the communities who were the objects of these terms, “chav” has been co-opted by the people it describes. In a sense this is an act of rebellion against the prejudices of people who use the term. They have a look, a set of musical preferences and a vague rejection of the institutions which judge them while rejecting them. But it’s still hard to say that Chavs are a movement of collective youth rebellion in the same way that Punks, Hippies or Bikers were: their resistance to the status quo is just too focused on posturing.

#### **Think 4 yourself (Miller / Xavier / McNutt / Alexander)**

The absence of any collective movement of youth rebellion is reflected in depictions of what it means to be a teenager today.

In *Skins*, Channel 4’s teen drama whose fifth series is now in production, the *leitmotif* is the free house. Free houses, and the parties which result from them, are frequently the venues for the characters’ most outrageous antics, and so drive the plot. But more than this, free houses are thematic: they encapsulate the idea that the teens in *Skins* are essentially able to do exactly what they want<sup>17</sup>.

The venue for the party changes but the spirit doesn’t. The characters drink, smoke, take drugs and have sex not because they are being told not to, nor as part of a wider program of rebellion against the *status quo*. They have no reason to rebel against anything – they are able to do exactly as they want so what is there to rebel against anyway?



#### **And now I gotta reason (Lydon / Jones / Cook / Matlock)**



A wide range of explanations have been advanced for the lack of movements of collective rebellion among teens today.

Let’s start with the basics – weight of numbers. The demographic point of view links the post-war baby boom with the flowering of the Hippie movement in the mid-late sixties. Weight of numbers gave this generation greater cohort consciousness than youth generations which had gone before. The problem with this argument is that it doesn’t explain why there were rebellious youth sub-cultures at times when teens accounted for a relatively small share of the population.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> ... And it is perhaps this passivity which explains the particular antipathy which Hipsters have aroused among cultural critics: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hipster\\_%28contemporary\\_subculture%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hipster_%28contemporary_subculture%29)

<sup>17</sup> It is telling that it was a scene from a house party which was used to promote the first series: <http://bit.ly/bKKz3G>

<sup>18</sup> This applies to Teddy Boys, Ravers and Grungers in particular. All of these emerged during periods when teens accounted for a relatively small share of the population. The impact of cohort population share on cultural trends can usefully be explored using the excellent interactive pyramid on the Office for National Statistics website: [http://www.statistics.gov.uk/populationestimates/flash\\_pyramid/UK-pyramid/pyramid6\\_30.html](http://www.statistics.gov.uk/populationestimates/flash_pyramid/UK-pyramid/pyramid6_30.html)

### Smells like teen spirit (Cobain / Grohl / Novoselic)

A more compelling explanation is that teenage collective rebellion has eaten itself.<sup>19</sup> Teenage rebellion has always been predicated on the notion that your generation is the only one that gets it. But this idea feels empty to 21<sup>st</sup> century teens, for whom every generation up to 50 years older than them have had their own collect teenage rebellions. What is rebellious about being a rebellious teen today? Perhaps the most rebellious teen movement today is the “Straight Edge” who abstains from vices of all sorts<sup>20</sup>.

And not just this: 21<sup>st</sup> century teens must live with the fact that many of these one-time teen rebels continue to behave the way they did when they were real teenage rebel.



“I don’t want to **copy** my parents and grandparents”  
*(Jenny, 18)*



“Limp Bizkit Puff Daddy and the host of other artists who make up what a writer for The Face once termed “the voice of mildly pissed off white American youth” expresses the collapse of youth culture as a distinct class within society and discourse. Here the teenager’s death takes place through assimilation, bringing to a close half a century of resistant sub-cultural activity.”<sup>21</sup>

The narrative of the teenager as rebel against societal constraints has collapsed since “we are all teenagers now. Pop culture – once considered marginal – is now fully integrated into all levels of society.”<sup>22</sup>

These arguments are convincing but a full explanation needs to take in contemporary adolescent aspirations.

### When I grow up I wanna be famous. I wanna be a star. I wanna be in movies (Jerkins / Thomas / Thomas / McCarty / Samwell-Smith)

Celebrity used to be largely a spectator sport. For teens today celebrity is an everyday aspiration.<sup>23</sup>

The rise of reality TV and talent shows like X-Factor reflect the emergence of a more individualistic and personally ambitious outlook among young people: who wants to think about cohort consciousness when instead you could get yourself a future courtesy of Cheryl Cole, Louis Walsh, or Simon Cowell?



<sup>19</sup> See *The Death of the Teenager*, Pil and Galia Kollektiv: <http://www.kollektiv.co.uk/Teenager.html>

<sup>20</sup> Wiki provides a good intro to Straight Edge [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Straight\\_edge](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Straight_edge) A quick straw-poll among friends and family suggested that the Kollektiv’s view that Straight Edge is the true movement of teen rebellion today is not shared by their “non-straight” peers.

<sup>21</sup> The Kollektiv’s thought-provoking essay is available is well worth a read in full: <http://www.kollektiv.co.uk/Teenager.html> John Savage argues along similar lines in *Teenage: The Creation of Youth- 1875 – 1945*, Pimlico.

<sup>22</sup> Quote from here: <http://bit.ly/akBLBW>

<sup>23</sup> The infiltration of the cult of celebrity among teenagers and children appears to be second only to spiralling red tape among the concerns of UK teachers. See [here](#) and [here](#).

## Talkin bout my generation (Townsend)

Q. If a celebrity is a person who has become a super-brand, then what is someone who has 1000 Friends on Facebook?

A. A micro-celebrity.

The missing piece is the internet, and in particular teens' use of social media as an essential tool to understand and define their identity.

“Some people treat it as a **competition** as to who has the most friends, photos, birthday comments”

(Katherine, 19)

Behaviour is motivation filtered through opportunity<sup>24</sup>. Teen behaviour today is different because their motivation (to define an identity and a place in society for themselves) is filtered through a dramatically altered set of opportunities. Specifically, unlike their parents, gen x and every other generation, they are building their identity in the internet age, not the mass media age.

“No one controls what I do on the Internet. I could do **anything** if I wanted to.”

(Jess, 18)

The internet has much to recommend it as a tool to define their identity for teens.

Firstly, it is largely outside the control not just of their parents but of all other social institutions which embody authority.<sup>25</sup>

It allows young people to experiment with new identities. It is a safe space<sup>26</sup> in which to try out new identities, keeping those they like and jettisoning those which they don't, and all without their parents making them feel self-conscious.

As the writers of *Hanging out, Messing Around and Geeking it*<sup>27</sup> summarise: “we can consider them [social networking sites] an integral part of developing a sense of personal identity as a social being.”<sup>28</sup>

## When you're growing up in small town, you say no one famous ever came from here (Reed)

A recurring motif for the bands which youth sub-cultures have gravitated towards has been small town mentality. For teenagers since the Second World War small towns limitations have been physical as well as psychological limitation.

“With the Internet...people are more comfortable with being different because they don't feel alone.”

(Jess, 18)

Today these geographical limitations are much less restrictive because the internet allows teenagers to connect to people like them who could be anywhere.... so long as that wherever has an internet

<sup>24</sup> A key theme in *Cognitive Surplus*, Clay Shirky, Penguin 2010

<sup>25</sup> From a copyright point of view, largely outside the organisations whose job it is to protect this. It is an interesting historical irony that whereas all the preceding rebellious youth sub-cultures ultimately enriched the big music companies, the least rebellious youth generation since the Second World War has, via illegal downloading, brought the music business to its knees.

<sup>26</sup> And safe in terms of the risk of a teen being the victim of a predatory behaviour by an older adult. See *Hanging Out, Messing Around and Geeking Out*, MIT Press pp p91 for data which belies the focus which the media pay to the dangers of young people using the internet.

<sup>27</sup> MIT Press, 2007

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

connection. From *Hanging Out*, *Messing Around* and *Geeking Out* again, today “teens value the opportunity to gain social support that they cannot find locally.”<sup>29</sup>



A great example of this is 14 year old Rebecca Flint (aka Beckii Cruel) who, from her bedroom on the Isle of Mann, became a Japanese megastar, simply by uploading videos of herself dancing the Danjo on YouTube.<sup>30</sup>

In short social media is an increasingly essential tool in teenagers’ personal identity projects, and its use both reflects and supports a generation which is more individualistic in its outlook than previous generations of teens.

Teens today are too busy developing who they are and building their own personal *brand* online, to spend time thinking about what the rest of their cohort believes, wears and listens to. Teen rebellion in the collective sense has just ceased to be compelling narrative for them.

### This is the next century (Albarn / Coxon / James / Rowntree)

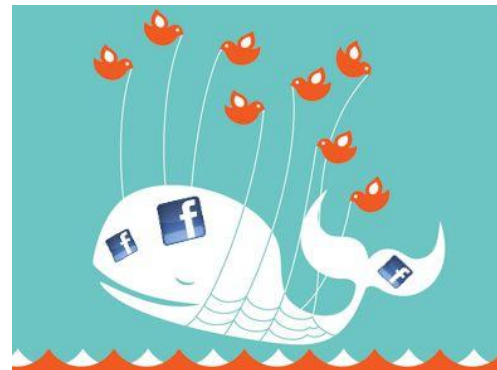
Is that it? The death of teenage rebellion.

We think so.

Where once there was largely inconsequential mass rebellion against “them” (whoever “they” were), now there is personal activism.

Where once there was waving outside a building, now there is building momentum for your own personal bugbear through social media.

And for those less driven... well, there’s the Like button on Facebook of course.



<sup>29</sup> Ibid

<sup>30</sup> More on this [here](#)