Chapter 7
Adolescent Self–Consciousness and the En Fusion

John Graham Wilson
Assumption University of Thailand, Thailand

ABSTRACT
This chapter aims to bypass the problem of categorizations for the young, offer an explanation of the en fusion as a quasi-organizational force in relation to youth association, and consider what kind of self-consciousness may be said to have developed amongst adolescents and whether any reflexive self-consciousness can act as a quasi-political force running against media manipulation.

INTRODUCTION
In a previous chapter, it was seen that contemporary youth culture is divided by uncertainties and ambiguities concerning appearance and selfhood, individual distinctiveness, and the search for an identity independent of the adult majority and worthy of the respect of others, especially peers. The indeterminacies of collective and class affiliation reveal an archipelago of dissimilar collectives, forever merging, transforming and disappearing, forever the prey of marketing strategies that seek to capture and disempower oppositional attitudes via marketing research and Trojan horse styles of advertising, converting dissent into consumer practices stimulating revenue for an outside economic oligarchy.

The kind of self-consciousness may be said to have developed amongst the young; reciprocally, in and out of the peer group, in contrast to the inadequate and procrustean depictions currently reflected throughout the mass media. It will be asked whether any reflexive self-consciousness, on the part of youth, can act as a quasi-political force running against media manipulation in the commercial world that is solely concerned with profits. Where youth collectives fail to coagulate into distinct notional groups, alternatives to taxonomy will be sought via a consideration of the en fusion, a French term stemming from Sartre’s later philosophy concerning levels of human association. This is effected through the contrastive notion of seriality – a lone, socially disconnected condition – as compared to fusing groups involved in reciprocity and shared goals via perceived exigencies.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-6120-0.ch007
BACKGROUND

A working definition of any sociological phenomenon should satisfy both rigor and adequate coverage but this chapter notes that alienation rarely fits into any clear-cut categories as defined by a unifying set of attributes.

In print, academics frequently argue about what constitutes group membership (Kruks, 1992). Some theorists move away from the notion of set-theoretic subcultural identities, preferring to describe adolescents as permanently in transition where youth culture is but a fleeting set of options where young people transit through a succession of influences. But this has been contradicted by Bennett (2005) who insists class divisions are very much operative and there are still structurally embedded inequalities that supervene (Bennett, 2005; Shildrick & MacDonald, 2006). Moreover, theorists like Wearing et al. (2013) maintain that youth represents a quasi-political force wielding the power to contradict and threaten hegemonies.

How is one to create systems of classification amongst youth collectives according to, say, age group, gender, social, class, location, dress, behaviour and attitudes? Is this best accommodated by the fuzzy thinking in current sociology as vague differences between a subculture, a clubculture and a lifestyle? (see Winter & Kron, 2009). And how do such distinctions fuse or separate? What precise descriptors would satisfy critical readers from different theoretical persuasions? (Hollands, 2002). Attitudes – especially those bound up with the quaternity concerning states of alienation, are what notionally aggregate amidst variety, but these often report subjective outlooks, and have no objective status in the world—especially in relation to assertions concerning what they think they are not.¹

A variety of commentators, appreciating that collectives have few discernible boundaries, and no strict criteria for inclusion or exclusion, have tried to narrow the referents as in the case of Winter and Kron’s (2009) considerations regarding ambiguity; in our case, about whether an individual is classed as “in” or “out” of a particular peer group (Nahon, 2011; Santamarina & Chameau, 1987; Winter & Kron, 2009). Defining oneself by what one is not would be problematic for any set-theoretic system of classification; and yet perhaps, in part, explainable by Sartre’s concept of alterity—the ever-present sense of negation as a vacuum pointing to our sense of aloneness—absence as an impressively negative presence within social relations.²

Hollands (2002) reports that even amidst the hybrid forms of youth identity currently in the north of England, night-time economies mostly managed by corporate concerns, show important distinctions based on spatial divisions and socially segmented consumption that could be classified as independent of selectivity and subjective choices. These youth groups are quick to discriminate and classify amongst each other as in the case of students, “townies,” “scallies,” “Kevs,” and “charvers.” For Hollands, traditional styles of masculinity and territoriality prevail. But then, for Thornton (1995), sub-cultural capital is simply mediated through displays of taste based around concepts surrounding authenticity and inauthenticity, hipness, as contrasted with the mainstream, or the subcultural underground versus mass media and commodification. (Hollands, 2010; Thornton, 1995). However, a major theme, throughout, is that consumption-related behaviour is a principal means by which social standing is accomplished as an ongoing process. And the protean nature of youth collectives often renders concepts too vague, and hence not sociologically useful. There is a need to constantly postulate (or invent) boundary demarcations—and then promptly dismantle them.