subculture ⋆ As the prefix implies, *sub*cultures are significant and distinctive negotiations located within wider cultures. These correspond with the particular positions, ambiguities and specific contradictions faced by certain social groups within wider social and historical structures. ⋆ The term and its supporting theory have developed almost exclusively in the study and explanation of youth, notably with regard to **deviance**. Here it has served to displace earlier ideas of a unified and separate 'youth culture' corresponding to *all* young people (for example, Eisenstadt 1956; Parsons 1954) by attempting to synthesize both age and social class as determinants of the differing subcultural identities and activities of young people. In this way the concept hinges on several important assumptions.

First, that western societies are characterized principally by their division into social **classes**, based on inequalities of **power** and wealth, and their consequent relations of dominance and subordination. Second, that these unequal and conflicting divisions and relations are realized and articulated in the form of class **cultures**, themselves sets of complex cultural responses to particular social class positions. Third, within these class cultures (often referred to in this context as 'parent cultures') youth negotiate and advance 'their own' distinctive and especially symbolic *subcultural* responses to the problems posed not only by age or generational status, subordination and control, but also by class position and inequality, particularly as they are experienced and combined in the spheres of education, work and leisure. As Clarke *et al.* (1976) argue:

> Sub-cultures, then, must first be related to the 'parent cultures' of which they are a sub set. But sub-cultures must *also* be

analysed in terms of their relation to the dominant culture – the overall disposition of cultural power in the society as a whole. (p. 13)

Within this framework, subcultural analysis has generated and continues to propose an important way of deconstructing and understanding the appearance, behaviour and significance of differing youth groups in the postwar UK. Specific studies (see Brake 1980; Hebdige 1979, for résumé), have concentrated predominantly on working-class youth subcultural groups, emphasizing the ways in which their often 'spectacular' appearances (their **styles** of fashion and dress, for example) and their 'spectacular' activities (especially those defined as deviant and threatening) represent meaningful forms of specific subcultural response and resistance, through specialized subcultural identities and **rituals**. Subcultures thus function to win, or at least contest, 'cultural space' for their members; in so doing they also generate and confirm important modes of both collective and individual identity and **orientation** towards the dominant **values** of the wider social and cultural order.

Subcultural theory has established and now comprises the orthodox approach to the study of youth. However, this orthodoxy is not above criticism, as recent debates and work have suggested. Briefly, there are two particular problems. First, the tendency for subcultures to be interpreted as significant *only* in terms of resistance. This, for example, has produced an unbalanced concentration on those subcultural activities and styles that could be construed as offering resistance, or radical opposition, as opposed to **conformity**, acceptance or incorporation. Second, subcultural accounts of youth have displayed an even more glaring imbalance with regard to **gender** divisions. In their focus on mainly working-class but overwhelmingly male subjects, as McRobbie (1980) suggests, 'Women and the whole question of sexual division have been marginalised' (p. 37).