

Mid-term paper

workshopping

The essay theme

- In this exam task, I would like to invite you to consider two approaches to thinking about subcultures (or culture in general). One approach proposes that culture – as a mode of expression, meaningful practices, way of living etc. – can be appropriated. To put it simply, one group (being more powerful) takes culture from another group and makes it its own. For example, Madonna’s ‘Vogue’ could be seen as an example of cultural appropriation of Latino and black gay cultural practice of ‘voguing’. Another approach would claim that culture does not ‘belong’ to a group but rather it is always relational, a matter of constant exchange, contact, borrowing and combining. For example, gay men who practice ‘voguing’ mimic Madonna as she imitates Hollywood actresses of the ‘50s and so on in a chain of borrowings.
- I’d like you to turn to the texts we read and see how these two arguments could be supported/refuted with the help of examples from the texts. Below are some suggestions which you may or may not follow. Put together an essay of 5 pages minimum (double-spaced) in which you discuss issues of cultural appropriation vs. hybridity using examples from the texts. You can consult other sources as well.

How to proceed towards a successful essay paper?

- To produce a decent essay, you often need **to re-read** sections of relevant texts and/or come back to your reading notes.
- You may start with **a map of ideas** which you develop into the first draft.
- Ideally, you involve **an external reader** to give you his/her opinion on the draft.
- After you include the comments of your reader and **double-check the paper** for grammar and style problems, your paper is ready for submission.

What should an essay do? Introduction

- Introduce the problem that you wish to deal with. In the introduction, it may be too early to define the terms you will be using. Rather, use the limited space of it to present what you actually achieved in the essay. It may be just a line presenting your **main argument**, your focus of interest.
- Stating your **aim** and **outcome** clearly in the intro guarantees to your reader an efficient and compact message ('This is what I am interested in, this is what I found out/proposed.').

What should an essay do? The body

- In the body of the text, you can use the space for definitions if needed.
- Make sure you consecrate enough attention to **the debate**. Don't just list categories and illustrate them with examples which you support by quotes. Show your reader that you can think about the subject proposed!
- Avoid replacing an argument by a quote!

What should an essay do? Conclusion

- Yes, even a short paper needs a conclusion! You may:
- summarize what you did,
- ask questions regarding the ideas which remain beyond the scope of the paper but could be interesting to look at in the future.
- The ultimate section of your paper is **bibliography**; it shows that you consulted relevant sources and give them credit by the use of a selected **citation style**.
- At this moment, you may want to return to **the title** and adjust it to fit your essay – it should reflect your achievement as well as serve as a teaser.

Problems to address:

- Careful about using an appropriate **tone/register/style!**
- Examples (what problems can you find?):
 - “I’d also like to mention...”
 - “In 1932, he wrote an interesting chapter called...”
 - “Well, finally I can repeat some of my findings.”
 - “It is very hard to define the word culture or subculture.”

Problems to address:

- Be exact! Names, dates, places...
- However, do not confuse your paper with writing an encyclopedia entry! Provide relevant info only!
- In your paper, you engage in an academic debate which means that you build on what was said before and add your analysis, propositions, ideas.
- You always need to clearly **distinguish your voice** from the words of your sources. Even if you paraphrase, let us know that you do so!
- **References:** (name, year, page number)
- Choose a citation style and use it consistently!

Problems to address:

- How should your essay read?
- Reading your colleagues' papers might help you realize how you wish to present information in your paper. What reads better? **Small sections vs. a coherent text?**
- Did your peer succeed in explaining what he meant? Did she provide links between sections and paragraphs thus making the text flow easily? Did he make paragraphs/sections to structure the thoughts? Is his text too fragmented and so fails to hold together?

Problems to address:

- Use **problematic terms** cautiously!
- Note that these terms – ‘Negro’, ‘Oriental’ – were used in the late ‘20s which is before the civil rights movement and the de-colonization so both of these words are loaded and are nowadays seen as derogatory.
- Putting problematic terms into **quotes** signals that you are aware of the debates which surround them; such as the notion of ‘race’.

Problems to address:

- Careful with **the use of WE**. Let us know who you mean by the first person of plural.
- By using WE, do you wish to express: the Zeitgeist (the spirit of the period), “our modern era”, shared concerns of a group you feel you belong to?
- You may **identify as a group member** or express concerns that you feel should interest people but make sure you clearly say it!
- Otherwise, you end up sounding like a trend journalist or a universalizing essayist.

Thinking sociologically about subcultures (or any other concept)

- Concepts are **working representations** (unstable and imaginary); they are outcomes of explanations supported by arguments and often attacked in debates.
- Therefore, they should not be treated as actual entities, as real existing forms/groups which you can unproblematically recognize across various contexts (as natural species or chemical substances).

Thinking sociologically about subcultures (or any other concept)

- Subcultures, counter-cultures, popular culture or other terms may help us **represent social reality** around us.
- However, we should be aware of the **imaginary** nature of these terms as well as of their **history**.
- In other words, even if concepts and theories tend **to travel** - we borrow them as tools which help us explain perceived reality -, we should take into consideration their **constructed** nature and the context in which they were developed and the purposes they served previously.

Thinking sociologically about subcultures (or any other concept)

- Now, you should have at least an idea how scholars at different places started thinking about subcultures/counter-culture/youth or popular culture and why.
- You may have noticed that the way scholars thought about these terms and the debates they were engaged in were **conditional** to such factors as their disciplinary background, their situatedness, their identification (as working-class, feminist, Marxists or liberals etc.)...
- I encourage you to consider why particular concepts were developed, what debates they reacted to, what purposes they served:

Thinking sociologically about subcultures (or any other concepts)

- How did Park discuss immigrant colonies as a vital part of the modern city life? What did Cressey achieve mapping the pattern of alternative careers for young second generation migrant women? Why did Corrigan study boys who engaged in 'doing nothing'? Why did Cohen discuss street gangs of working-class men in connection to the changing space of their neighborhood and of the family structure? Why did Hebdige discuss the kind of jobs that Mods did during the daytime? Why did McRobbie and Garber propose that research on subcultures is biased? Where did they suggest we should look instead to find young women engaging in (sub)cultural activities? Etc.

Some clarifications:

- What is the relation between ‘culture(s)’ and ‘individuality’?
- ‘Subculture’ and ‘counter-culture’, two terms for the same thing?
- What does the notion of ‘parent culture’ refer to?
- How is ‘popular culture’ related to ‘common culture’, ‘dominant culture’, ‘mass culture’ and ‘subculture(s)’?
- Why do we need so many terms?

(Your) ideas, questions, discussions

- “[...] But they just danced not prostituted. [...] These dance halls were not something special in the U.S. in the early 30s. [...] At first for white [taxi-dancers], it was uncomfortable to dance with [‘colored’ men].”
- *According to Cressey, what is the line between taxi-dancing and prostitution?*
- *It would be interesting to understand how the occurrence of dance halls was related to the influx of migrant workers to metropolises.*
- *Where there any ‘colored’ dancers?*

(Your) ideas, questions, discussions

- “With regard to that, the example above [the discussion on the ‘Indian’ headdress] should not be considered [as an instance of] cultural appropriation [because] the ones wearing it were [hipsters] not the dominant mainstream culture. Being themselves a minor subculture, they do not have the power to ‘steal meaning’ [...] therefore, it is rather a case of hybridization than appropriation.”

(Your) ideas, questions, discussions

- Understanding **cultural appropriation** as
 - 1) Adoption and use of manners, items, sounds...
 - 2) Assimilation to a (different) group
 - 3) Emulation of a despised group in order to create a counter-identity to confront the dominant culture
 - 4) Enhancing one's image using some aspects of the oppressed group's style and capitalizing on it
 - 5) Continuation of exploitation and oppression by symbolic means

(Your) ideas, questions, discussions

- “Naturally, if a symbol of culture that is based on opposing the dominant culture becomes part of that dominant culture, it loses its strength and meaning.”
- “Unlike a culture with roots independent of the dominant culture, cultural objects of subculture cannot exist independently of the dominant culture; they have to oppose it.”

(Your) ideas, questions, discussions

- “Trying to be considered Hollywood stars made [taxi dancers] take a lot from another group and pretend it’s their own lifestyle which is almost the definition of cultural appropriation.”
- “Often, the new names of the [dancers] sounded more exotic to the [dance hall customers].”
- “[...] we can think of their practice of name changing as [an instance] of cultural appropriation.”

(Your) ideas, questions, discussions

- “As well as taxi dancers, [Corrigan’s] boys want to fit in and adapt to the surroundings and do everything that their subculture’s society expects.”
- “[Corrigan’s boys] just stand on the street and are bored.”
- “It may even look like there is no culture at all.”

(Your) ideas, questions, discussions

- “Nowadays, information on any culture is available at the click of a button for anyone with internet access. This makes it easier to join aspects of different cultures together. People may use this tool to take aspects of other cultures and make it their own or they may use it for the exchange of information and use it to combine information to make new cultures.”

(Your) ideas, questions, discussions

- “[...] we might have a tendency to assign a negative meaning to the term ‘cultural appropriation’. It might be seen as a theft or plagiarism.”
- “Culture is the central element, [while] subculture is the rest [...].”
- “Rozsak argues that it is for the first time when the counterculture is not oppressed by force or by argumentation against it but when [it] is implemented in the major cultural scheme [...]; it becomes part of the mainstream.”

(Your) ideas, questions, discussions

- “Subculture is a community of people characterized by some common features such as the same style of dressing, behavior and recognition of certain values.”
- “Members of a subculture make a conscious effort to present themselves in a way that deviates from the mainstream society.”
- “[Taxi dancers] are not banded together against a certain group, such as the hipsters against squares.”

(Your) ideas, questions, discussions

- “[Subcultures] cannot be adopted automatically because [it] is not (only) a style to be worn. Without a relation between the person who ‘wears’ a subcultural style and the historical background of the subculture, there is no transmission, even though there can be pre-existing similarities between the two. For example, someone who wears saggy pants without knowing they originate from black prisoners and without having any relation to racial oppression or delinquency, becomes a caricature.”