REEVALUATING SUBCULTURE: PRO-LIFE YOUTH AND THE RHETORIC OF RESISTANCE

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A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS
August 2008

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis proposes a new model for subculture study. For over thirty years the field of subculture studies has been fractured by a continuous debate over the value of subculture as an analytical tool and the political implications of employing subculture as a descriptive term. While this thesis acknowledges that this debate has helped produce valuable theoretical and methodological perspectives, the model proposed here is intended to provide new tools to scholars in an attempt to move subculture studies away from the academic debate over the meaning of the term and return to examining the meanings created by subcultural groups.

The subject of this analysis, pro-life youth activist group Rock for Life, demonstrates the viability of this new model by challenging long-held notions about which subcultural groups are worthy of study. Politically, Rock for Life would be considered a conservative organization. Subculture studies, while never openly dismissing the existence of conservative subcultures have, on the whole, been largely silent on the issue. The tendency of subculture studies has been to privilege so-called spectacular subcultures, such as punk. Studies dealing with conservative groups have also tended to favor spectacular displays, such as examinations of skinheads. This thesis moves beyond questions of style and display, focusing instead on the way Rock for Life positions itself rhetorically as resistant to dominant culture.
To my parents and sister - there is more of you in here than you know.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like thank Esther, Madeline and Jeff for their patience, guidance and advice throughout the initial research and writing phase and (especially) the lengthy editing process. I graciously acknowledge the members of my cohort, who listened in good humor to me prattle on for months about my project before I put word one to the page and kept on listening once I started. Finally I would like to thank Melissa, who will never receive as much credit as she deserves for her love and support throughout this project - words cannot do her justice.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State of Subculture Studies</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rock for Life</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER I. ANATOMY OF THE DEBATE: KEY SUBCULTURE AND POST-SUBCULTURE TEXTS</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four Books: Responses to the CCCS “Canon”</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Perspectives: Post-Subculture Theory</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Hybrid Approach: Robert Wood and Albert Cohen</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pro-Life Youth and the Collapse of Subcultural “Space”</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER II. THE CREATION OF IDENTITY: THE INTERSECTION OF FAITH, ACTIVISM AND YOUTH IN FORMATION OF ROCK FOR LIFE’S FRAME OF REFERENCE</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Catholic Identity and Social Activism</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The American Life League, Rock for Life and the Pro-Life Movement</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth Activism in America</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER III. RHETORICAL POSITIONING: PRO-LIFE YOUTH AND THE MEANING OF RESISTANCE</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture of Life/Culture of Death</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------</td>
<td>----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rock and Resistance: Rock for Life’s Construction of Dominant Culture</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Meaning of Resistance</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOTES</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WORKS CITED</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

State of Subculture Studies

This thesis proposes a new model for subculture study. Most importantly, it moves beyond questions of political resistance that have previously been central to subculture study. Rather than attempting to answer whether effective resistance is possible within subcultures, this thesis focuses on how resistance is utilized as a meaningful subcultural symbol by members of the national pro-life youth activist organization Rock for Life. Drawing from existing scholarship on the pro-life movement and subculture study, this thesis demonstrates the need to understand Rock for Life as a subcultural group rooted in a core, foundational philosophy.

Part of the re-evaluation of subculture forwarded here is a direct response to the debate over subculture as a valuable cultural studies concept and the usefulness of the term. This debate is addressed at length in Chapter One. This thesis contends there is no reason to dispose of subculture as a valuable term. Much of the disagreement which has arisen over the past three decades of academic wrangling has more to do with the political implications of any given theory, and can tell us nothing about relationships between individuals, groups or the larger culture of which they are a part. Political implications have meaning only for those who employ one theory instead of another, and say more about the scholar than the subject of study. Still, these issues have had a significant impact on the way subcultures have been studied, a fact this thesis readily acknowledges.

It would be naïve to suggest any single model of subculture study will settle the issue once and for all. It is too much to ask of scholars; we are not often inclined to ‘settle’ for any single answer. What we can ask, hopefully without fear of reproach, is where the debate has led us. Have years of examples, counter-examples, new theoretical perspectives and innovative
methodological suggestions provided us, as cultural studies scholars, with a better understanding of how small groups create and disseminate meaning? Or does the debate signify something a little more mundane, that we are in a rut as far as subculture study is concerned? Perhaps the best answer is yes on both counts, with the understanding that the latter is a little truer than the former. This work suggests the debate over the political implications of subculture theory has done little to advance subculture scholarship. Instead of continuing an academic debate about the meaning of subculture in cultural studies, scholars need to reconsider the meaning of subculture to individuals, groups and the larger culture.

Frame of reference is a concept developed by American subculture theorist Albert K. Cohen. Most recently, this concept has been interpreted in light of subculture study by Canadian sociologist Robert Wood in his book *Straightedge Youth*. A detailed examination of this concept and its application to subculture study is included in Chapter One. Briefly, frame of reference is a way of describing a subcultural group’s “set of overarching and guiding norms, values, and beliefs” (Wood 14). This concept is related to the idea of a foundational philosophy, with one important difference. Although largely in agreement with Wood’s assertion that “frame of reference can be transmitted… to future prospective members” (15) through symbols, this analysis understands frame of reference as a specific system of meaning associated with a particular subcultural group, and too delicate a thing to be easily transmitted between groups. As Wood says: “we can envision… frame of reference as something that perpetually evolves” (16). If constantly evolving, at what point do we consider one group’s frame of reference different than the one from which it evolved? It seems more beneficial to conceive of a subcultural group’s frame of reference as being built in relation to what we can describe as a foundational philosophy. Foundational philosophies, because they are largely stripped of inherent meaning,
are sites for meaning creation, easily transmittable and open to interpretation. This is not to say foundational philosophies cannot evolve. Instead, we can see them as shared, relatively spare notions of belief and behavior that are the catalysts for the creation of group specific frames of reference.

Subcultures are always at least partly defined by their relationship to the mainstream or dominant culture. ‘Sub’ is still a valuable identifier, especially for groups such as Rock for Life that position themselves in opposition to what they perceive as a dominant culture. This is true whether or not the subculture can be interpreted as resistant to or supportive of the societal and cultural rules and restrictions in place at the time of its formation. Subcultures are not necessarily resistant, nor are they necessarily determined by the dominant culture. Rather, subcultures form complex systems of meaning which must be seen as intersecting with similar systems of meaning operating within the dominant culture. This is true if only for the simple fact that members of a subculture are not ever only members of a subculture, but are also always members of the dominant culture. Any resistance interpreted through a subculture’s symbols can only be recognized as such through an understanding of the meaningful link between the symbol and the underlying core philosophy. Similarly, compliance with dominant cultural beliefs (norms) may be signaled by subcultural symbols which are perceived incorrectly as resistant or dismissive. Only by linking subcultural symbols to the underlying core philosophy can the meaning of any single sign be ascertained within the context of a subcultural group. It is the unique interpretation and meaningfulness of subcultural symbols, informed by a core philosophy, which separates subcultural groups from the dominant culture their members also inhabit.

The very nature of a subculture’s core philosophy means that it can be transmitted over space and time, remaining relatively stable compared to the stylistic evolution and shifting symbolic
meanings of subcultural groups. This is evident in the continued existence of punk, straightedge and others, as meaningful subcultures. This is despite the fact that styles and symbolic meanings have both shifted throughout their 30 year existence. Indeed, the stylistic elements of both punk and straightedge have been adopted by groups diametrically opposed to the core philosophies they originally heralded. This is true in the case of Rock for Life, which has relied on these extant symbols to signify their own rhetorical position to the dominant culture. This need not be considered a case of direct appropriation, although an argument could probably be made to support this contention. It is just as likely, however, that the symbols associated with punk and similar symbols associated with the contemporary pro-life youth movement are the same, and only the meaning to each subcultural group has changed. They are still signifiers of a subcultural identity, just different ones. However unlikely it would be for a punk group to adopt the same symbols as a pro-life youth group, there is certainly nothing inherent to the symbols themselves which prevents them from being deployed by both groups simultaneously. Indeed, the appropriation of signs and symbols by newer subcultural groups may only be evidence of a previous group’s success in creating a meaningful subcultural identity, the symbols of which were either misinterpreted, adapted or, if you would prefer, stolen.

The potential for foundational philosophies to be transmitted and adapted over time and space is evident in punk and straightedge subcultures as well as Rock for Life. At the same time subculture theorist Dick Hebdige claimed punk was dead in England, (Hebdige 96) new groups of punks were forming their own subcultural groups in and around Los Angeles. London punks and L.A. punks didn’t look the same, didn’t dress the same and they didn’t make the same kind of music. Yet, both were still punk. To say the particular frame of reference of London punks (provided you could describe them as a single influential group) was transmitted from one
cultural, socioeconomic and racial context to another and evolved separately elsewhere seems
doubtful. It is more likely that the philosophical spirit of punk, the Do It Yourself or D.I.Y.
 ethic, was the catalyst for new interpretations of punk which were superficially very different
from the group from which they originated. Wood documents the adaptation and interpretation
of the ‘straightedge rules’ (no drinking, no drugs and no promiscuous sex) by subcultural groups
in Canada. Straightedge originated in the Washington D.C. area in the early 1980s, and can be
traced directly back not only to a single band, but to an individual person, (then) high school
student Ian McKay. These rules, easily understood and simple to follow, have served as the
basis for a number of differing interpretations, with some groups incorporating religion,
vegetarianism and veganism, and even violence as part of their own frame of reference.
Similarly, Rock for Life and its own brand of pro-life youth activism can be traced to a single
person, pro-life activist and Rock for Life founder Bryan Kemper.

This analysis is not intended to be, nor should it be read as, a definitive work on pro-life
youth subculture. All any scholar interested in subcultures can hope to study are subcultural
groups. Subcultures do not exist as single, tangible objects or sets of symbols and meanings.
Like the larger culture that surrounds them, subcultures are made up of many different
components. Pro-life youth, for example, can be considered part of the pro-life subculture
inasmuch as they ground themselves in a larger pro-life philosophy – the core, foundational
philosophy. In this respect Rock for Life can be seen to be a part of the larger pro-life
movement. But this relationship is not deterministic. If it were, there would be no differences
between pro-life groups. This is not the case: there have been, and there remain, significant
differences between pro-life organizations, youth or otherwise. It is best to consider the link
between Rock for Life and a pro-life philosophy informative, not essential. The group creates a
specific system of meaning in relation to the core pro-life philosophy, but not to the exclusion of other social and cultural factors. The impact of the larger pro-life movement, the youth activist movement and American Catholicism on the creation of Rock for Life’s particular system of meaning is discussed in Chapter Two. All of these elements come together in the creation of Rock for Life’s ‘frame of reference,’ a binding element which distinguishes them as a subcultural group.

Rock for Life

Let us consider this scene. We are standing on a corner, and approaching us from the opposite side of the street is a young man. At first, all we can make out is his black leather jacket, torn fatigues and neon pink Mohawk. As he waits across the street to cross to our corner, we catch a glimpse of his t-shirt. A message stands out on the black cotton background: “You will not silence our message. You will not mock our God. You will stop killing our generation.” The message is powerful, but a little confusing given his attire. “God” seems a little incongruous in light of his aggressive punk style. After the light turns and he crosses, he strikes up a quick conversation and hands us a flyer and a pamphlet. The flyer is for a show his band is putting on at the local Christian youth center, and he’d love it if we came. The pamphlet is from Rock for Life, and in addition to some statistics on abortion contains the same message as the one on his t-shirt. As he walks away, we think we’ve never seen anything like that before. What, exactly, do the seemingly contradictory images of punk style and pro-life activism mean?

Kemper founded Rock for Life in 1993. Originally headquartered in a rented basement in Portland, Oregon, the group relocated to Stafford, Virginia in 1999 at the invitation of Judie Brown, founder and director of the national pro-life organization the American Life League (Jones). Spurred to form the group in light of what he saw as a rash of pro-choice events in the
early 1990s, Kemper was particularly interested in the relationship between pro-choice groups, musicians, and the media. In particular, he was motivated to respond to the creation of Rock for Choice, a project of the Feminist Majority Foundation. Begun as a way to raise money to support pro-choice campaigns, Rock for Choice put on concerts and released CDs, getting the support of popular bands such as Pearl Jam and Nirvana along the way (Jones). Rock for Life was founded to counter this alliance of pro-choice advocates and popular music. Kemper specifically wanted to raise money to help fund crisis pregnancy centers and pro-life organizations (Goodstein).

A former roadie and musician, Kemper was uniquely suited to handle the music side of things, putting on shows and releasing Rock for Life compilation CDs. His experience as a pro-life activist also gave him credibility. Kemper was a part of Operation Rescue, and by his own count has been arrested at least 10 times for violating the Free Access to Clinic Entrances Act (Jones). Kemper also displays an alternative aesthetic, proudly showing off his piercings and tattoos, including a homemade knuckle tattoo that reads “God Rules.” In a very real way, Kemper can be seen to embody the style, mission and attitude of the organization he founded, an influence that is evident when we look at Rock for Life membership and activities.

Lauren Sandler explores the membership of Rock for Life in her January, 2003 article for *The Nation*, “Holy Rock ‘N’ Rollers.” She describes the scene at a local Rock for Life show:

In Hicksville, Long Island, on any given Sunday afternoon, pierced and tattooed teenagers in black clothing gather to listen and watch as groups of kids like themselves tear their fingertips on guitar strings and scream unintelligibly into microphones. All the elements of the indie scene announce themselves: the spiky haircuts, the leather, combat boots, the wide eyes, the acne. At one recent show, Matt Koldinski… took the mike and
did something that would be unthinkable at most hardcore shows. Panting and solemn, he appealed to his audience of peers to come up to him after the show, to talk about their problems and their confusion, to open their hearts to him. (23)

Sandler goes on to describe the leaflet tables for Rock for Life set up in the venue, and the focus on youth and music which sets Rock for Life apart from other pro-life organizations. Rock for Life chapter leaders, usually local teenagers, hold protests at abortion clinics, hand out literature at high schools and set up tables like the one at the show in Long Island. The ‘indie scene’ trappings Sandler describes are an integral component in setting Rock for Life and its members apart from the larger pro-life movement, situating the group as a youth friendly organization resistant to typical youth culture. Koldinski’s otherwise “unthinkable” act is a strong indication of how pro-life youth actively position themselves as separate from other youth. Rock for Life’s ties with organized religion are more difficult to decipher.

Sandler’s interest is to describe Rock for Life in terms of the Evangelical Christian movement. She describes Evangelicals as motivated by the belief that their whole way of life should be dictated by their personal faith, with the expressed intention of strengthening their relationship with God. For Sandler, the connection between religion and politics in Rock for Life can be explained in these terms. “Whether you’re praying in church or at a club, or screaming on a stage or at the doors of an abortion clinic,” Sandler writes, “it’s all just an articulation of the oft-repeated ‘way we live.’ Is it a political movement? Not in the usual sense. But it is a massive and exponentially self-replicating cultural movement that binds itself inherently to politics” (25). Rock for Life certainly positions itself as politically active, but Sandler’s contention that this activism is tied directly to an Evangelical Christian tradition of political involvement does not tell the whole story.
Sandler comes very close to identifying a number of key elements in the creation of Rock for Life’s particular pro-life position. But her attempts to tie the group to the larger Evangelical movement obscure important links to other movements. Rock for Life’s rhetorical position, the language and symbolism which place the group in opposition to dominant culture, is influenced by three specific historical contexts. First, although the group may share elements which are superficially similar to the Evangelical movement, Rock for Life’s strongest tie is to the larger pro-life movement. Rock for Life takes care to present a non-denominational public face, despite the fact that the American Life League, the group which extended the invitation to Kemper to move Rock for Life from Oregon to Virginia, is strongly influenced by conservative Catholic doctrine. This conscious attempt to appeal to individuals across denominational lines can be traced to the pro-life movement of the late 1970s and 1980s, and has had a direct impact on the kinds of actions undertaken by the group.

Rock for Life is also strongly influenced by the struggle of American Catholics to reconcile Church doctrine with their civic identity. Catholics in America have been uniquely positioned, caught between the social and political demands of democracy and Church rules. American Catholics have at times been asked to forego political and social involvement in favor of their faith. Simultaneously, the secular world has demanded that American Catholics participate in systems of government and social institutions for recognition. Catholics have largely come to grips with this split identity, the results of which can be seen in Rock for Life’s willingness to work within the system of government to push for legal redress of their social agenda, specifically the repeal of legalized abortion.

Finally, Rock for Life draws on the history of American middle class youth activism, creating a direct connection between the age of Rock for Life members and the abortion issue. As
Tamara Jones acknowledges, Rock for Life members “consider abortion their Holocaust, and anyone born after 1973 a survivor.” There is also an emphasis on pro-life youth as fighting in a contemporary civil rights movement, drawing a connection between today’s youth and the radical student protests of the 1960s. All of these three elements - the pro-life movement, an American Catholic tradition and middle class youth activism - are discussed in Chapter Two.

Rock for Life’s frame of reference includes a number of significant symbols. Of these, the identification pro-life is the most important, signaling a relationship to the larger pro-life core philosophy as well as a meaningful relationship to the group’s frame of reference. Being pro-life also defines a relationship with the culture at large. The group’s identity is often defined in oppositional terms, a point which is examined in Chapter Three. Rock for Life employs what this analysis calls a “rhetoric of resistance” to construct and maintain a conception of dominant culture. This rhetoric also positions the group in opposition to dominant culture, a stance reinforced through implementation of more traditional subcultural symbols such as t-shirts, music, political and social actions. This rhetoric of resistance operates within Rock for Life’s frame of reference as both a means to convey their pro-life message and as meaningful symbol. This position is central to understanding Rock for Life as a subcultural group and is tied directly to the core pro-life philosophy.

Rock for Life’s rhetoric of resistance extends beyond a particular message, item or action. It is the single most important element in the creation of the group’s frame of reference, and is ingrained in every aspect of the group’s identity. The message “You will not silence our message. You will not mock our God. You will stop killing our generation” is powerful, and meant to be consumed by group members as a way of self-identification (through the group’s website for example) and by non-group members (through public displays of the message on t-
shirts and other items) as a statement of resistance. This is, however, a one-way street. Individuals outside the group cannot understand the act of resistance – wearing the message on a t-shirt in public – in the same way the message is read and understood by members inside the group. The words on a t-shirt have meaning to non-members, but the act of wearing it in public is necessarily, distinctly meaningful to members in a way obscured to non-members. To us on the corner, reading the t-shirt does not in any way validate or support the conception that the act is resistant. To put it another way, it is the group’s conception of resistance that is itself meaningful. The message is meant for public consumption, but the act of disseminating it is a way of reinforcing a subcultural group identity. Rock for Life’s deployment of resistance as an identifying subcultural symbol is discussed in Chapter Three.

What we are ultimately considering when we approach the issue of subcultural groups is the meaning of symbols in relation to a less fluid core philosophy. Subculture analyses informed by cultural studies have tended to overlook the potential of a shared philosophy in favor of examinations of these symbols. There is no doubt that such a focus can prove beneficial, especially when considering the potential for conscious and unconscious appropriation of meaningful signs which have their origin outside a subcultural context. But to focus on these elements to the exclusion of the binding element of a subculture, its core philosophy, is to overlook a key function of the subcultural symbol – the public exhibition of a recognizable, fundamental subcultural identity. Subcultural symbols convey meaningful messages to those with the experience and inclination to look for them.

Individuals who are not members of a particular subculture can read these symbols and may even be able to recognize them as meaningful representations to a specific subcultural group. A mohawk is still ‘punk,’ and a bullet belt is still ‘metal,’ decades after their initial adoption as
subcultural symbols. But non-members bring their own set of assumptions to bear on these symbols, and even if they are able to recognize them as marking a subcultural identity, there is no certainty that non-members are able to grasp the relationship between the symbol and the group’s core philosophy. The bullet belt purchased at Hot Topic is decidedly not metal, and the $100.00 faux hawk from the local salon is clearly not punk. There is, then, something deeper. And if image isn’t everything, how are we to place and examine meaning in subcultures? Where should we begin?

As a subject, Rock for Life presents a unique opportunity to address the issues and complexities of contemporary subculture study. Rock for Life is actively resistant to what they consider to be dominant culture, but in ways which previous subculture studies have not addressed. Whereas work by Dick Hebdige and David Muggleton has considered the importance of style and physical appearance in the creation and maintenance of subcultural group identity, this analysis focuses on the rhetoric employed by Rock for Life to define their relationship with American culture at large. Political resistance as envisioned by early subculture scholars can say little about the position Rock for Life has created and maintained. Rock for Life operates as a politically conservative organization, although they are careful never to identify as such. And unlike skinheads, who often act out violently in defiance of democratic institutions, Rock for Life works with the system, so to speak, utilizing the tools available to them through civic participation. Clearly, Rock for Life is not entirely resistant to the institutions defined by the group as representing dominant culture. In addition to these differences with previous work, as a subject for study Rock for Life provides the opportunity to consider the importance of historical influence in the creation of subcultural meaning. Rock for Life has been influenced by no less than three cultural factors, including the pro-life movement, middle-class youth activism, and the
history of American Catholicism. These influences form the mold for Rock for Life’s frame of reference, and properly contextualizing them is vital to understanding the creation of meaning within the group and the importance of resistance to group identity.

When compared to the characteristics illustrated by studies on punks, Goths, skinheads, bikers, clubbers, ravers, or metalheads, Rock for Life simply doesn’t look like a subcultural group from a cultural studies perspective. The group is conservative, pro-life and mostly middle class. And yet membership in Rock for Life is comprised of socially and politically active young people who consistently and consciously maintain a position of resistance to dominant culture. The omission of conservative groups like Rock for Life from subculture study is due in part to an operative definition of subculture which is “very particular and partial,” (Muggleton 152) informed as it is by political and theoretical concerns which have little to do with subcultural systems of meaning. This thesis is an attempt to move away from the ongoing debate over subculture as a perspective and as a term and get back to the work of examining how groups create, maintain and disseminate meaning. Until we understand how the group understands itself, it is irrelevant whether Rock for Life is ‘truly’ resistant, or if the group is more representative of the dominant culture it opposes than a resistant force to it. This work is an initial step in that direction.
CHAPTER I.
ANATOMY OF THE DEBATE:
KEY SUBCULTURE AND POST-SUBCULTURE TEXTS

Introduction

This analysis is undertaken amidst a vibrant and contentious debate in contemporary cultural studies over the meaning and value of subculture. On the one hand it presents a model for subculture study which allows for groups previously unrecognized by cultural studies scholars, such as Rock for Life, to be examined. On the other hand this analysis challenges cultural studies scholars to move beyond the debate and focus on how subcultural groups create, maintain and disseminate meaning. Stepping away from decades of academic debate is easier said than done, however, and this work must ultimately engage many of the same questions established as necessary by previous subculture studies. The question of political resistance has been chief among these established questions. Resistance has achieved pride of place by virtue of its importance to the work produced by members of the hugely influential Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS). Much of the debate over subculture as it exists today returns to the work of the CCCS, as does this thesis. An understanding of how and why the debate over subculture has impacted subculture study and the importance of resistance is vital to understand how and in what ways Rock for Life challenges previous notions of what ‘subculture’ means.

The work undertaken by CCCS members was greatly influenced by British scholars such as Raymond Williams, E.P. Thompson and Stuart Hall. Janice Radway provides a wonderful summation of this influence in her “Reading Reading the Romance,” noting that at the time of the Centre’s founding British cultural scholars “were turning to ethnographic methods in their
effort to study the necessary ‘struggle, tension and conflict’ between subcultures or different ways of life” (217). Radway continues:

Because this [latter] move originated within the well developed Marxist tradition in Britain, even the earliest work of the Centre made an effort to consider the nature of the relationship between ethnographic investigation of behavior and cultural meaning and ideological analysis of the structures of determination (217).

Stuart Hall, describing the influence of this perspective on subculture studies at the Centre, notes: “the subcultures project differed from both the dominant sociological understanding of ‘society’ and the dominant literary or humanities conception of ‘culture’ in constantly returning to the nexus between culture and power” (Hall and Jefferson ix).

Contemporary critics of this approach focus particular attention on the deterministic element noted by Radway, arguing that a Marxist influence has placed too much emphasis on ideological struggle, reifying subcultures in an attempt to meet the demands of a larger political and theoretical framework. In response, post-subculture critics have attempted to provide theoretical space for the voices of subculture members, pressing for a more rigorous application of ethnographic methods. Critics of the CCCS approach who engage subculture from a post-modern theoretical perspective have even suggested that the term, and perhaps even the concept of ‘culture’ itself, is outmoded, inadequate to the task of explaining modern cultural relationships in a technologically and economically linked world (Chaney 36-48).

In simplest terms, the debate over the relevance of subculture as a viable term within the larger discipline of cultural studies is the result of clashing theoretical perspectives. Just as the work conducted by the CCCS was grounded in the cultural turn and post-Marxist theory, contemporary questions regarding subculture are framed by the theoretical and political concerns
of postmodernism. Taken broadly, the move to postmodern theory is indicative of the struggle amongst academics to come to terms with the increasingly complicated task of explaining how things come to have meaning within groups of individuals. David Chaney argues in his essay “Fragmented Culture and Subcultures” that “the once accepted distinction between ‘sub’ and ‘dominant’ culture can no longer be said to hold true in a world where the so-called dominant culture has fragmented into a plurality of lifestyle sensibilities and preferences” (47). With even the meaning of culture in hot dispute, the impact of the debate on subculture has been widespread.

This is not to say that this question is a new one. Dick Hebdige, CCCS member and subject of many critiques, wrote in Subculture: The Meaning of Style, “Culture is a notoriously ambiguous concept… refracted through centuries of usage, the word has acquired a number of quite different, often contradictory meanings” (5). His comment could easily encompass subculture, with the notable difference that it has taken only three short decades, not centuries, for cultural studies scholars to oppose subculture as a meaningful term within the discipline. But this shared ambiguity over the meaning of culture and subculture, and certainly the ongoing debate concerning the latter, is best evidence to suggest that the rumors of subculture’s death have been greatly exaggerated. It is also an indication that equating ‘culture’ with ‘dominant culture’ was not necessarily a given amongst CCCS contemporaries, as Chaney suggests (41). Many of the criticisms leveled at the work of CCCS scholars are framed in similar terms, arguments that reify the “Birmingham way” as a set standard, (Bennett and Kahn-Harris 1-18) despite comments such as Hebdige’s which contradict the assertion.

This is not a matter of splitting rhetorical hairs. There are a number of books devoted to the debate on subculture, each offering a slightly different take on it and the particular positions of
advocates and critics. Each describes, to one degree or another, the development of cultural theory at CCCS and the implications of theoretical developments for subculture study. And each describes the ‘CCCS approach,’ albeit in somewhat different terms depending on the author.

While the historical importance of the Centre cannot be denied, and the centrality to cultural studies of the work and theory developed there is recognized universally, reducing decades of academic debate to a single unified ‘approach’ is presumptuous. A brief examination of some key texts should provide a solid base of understanding in which to properly place criticisms of subculture as a viable term, as well as acknowledge deficiencies in individual works produced by CCCS members and their contemporaries. From there, with a grasp on the historical and theoretical context of the debate as it stands, we can adequately reevaluate subculture through the particular case of Rock for Life.

*Four Books: Responses to the CCCS “Canon”*

When describing the work of CCCS members, many authors reach for what are considered to be the most illustrative examples of the Centre’s theoretical and methodological foundations. Four primary texts are recognized as the cornerstones of subculture scholarship. Ken Gelder identifies two main texts in his description of the CCCS, Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson’s edited collection *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain* (hereafter *RTR*), and Dick Hebdige’s *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (83). Andy Bennett and Keith Kahn-Harris include Paul Willis’ *Profane Culture* (1), and David Muggleton adds Geoff Mungham and Geoff Pearson’s edited collection *Working Class Youth Culture* (3). The individual importance of these works has made them must cite texts for subculture researchers, and it is partly due to this success that they are popular targets for critics. Both the success and the criticisms of these works have created a link between individual efforts and the CCCS which cannot be
underestimated. For lack of a better term, these four books form the core of a CCCS subculture studies canon.

From a cultural studies perspective, considering these works canonical is counter-intuitive given that cultural studies scholars have often placed themselves in political and discursive positions which are incompatible with the nature and construction of a canon. This would certainly be as true, if not more so, for critics of subculture informed by postmodern cultural theory. And yet these authors and their works have become identified almost totally by their perceived relationship with the Centre they were either members of or associated with. When critics have addressed problems with the theoretical and methodological framework of the CCCS, they have pointed to these texts to support their argument. They have become, simply, the CCCS. Cementing the divergent commentary of multiple scholars together in a single sentence David Muggleton writes in *Inside Subculture*, “Throughout this book I will refer to this corpus of work as ‘the CCCS approach,’” (3). Although there are historical facts which cannot be denied, treating a select group of individual works (which may or may not be in harmony with one another) in such a way does not properly acknowledge the historical, political, academic or social contexts in which they were produced. Nor does it adequately demonstrate the diversity of perspectives present in other work by CCCS scholars. Critics of subculture point to exactly this monolithic conception of the CCCS as evidence of an inherently flawed approach.

Criticisms of individual work have not necessarily been misguided. Much specific criticism is leveled at two works in particular, *Resistance through Rituals* and *Subculture* (Kahn-Harris 16-17; Muggleton 11-12). *Profane Culture* and *Working Class Youth Culture* are less well known, with the former cited as an exception to the CCCS mainstream, (Gelder 91) and the latter either glossed over or left out entirely.² Rather than seeing these two last works as exceptional,
we would benefit more by considering them the result of a dynamic process of academic scholarship. (That these works are considered aberrant within the work of CCCS contemporaries, yet are widely recognized as being representative of the work produced there, hints at the contradictions which have helped to frame this debate for decades.) After addressing these four works and their associated critiques, we can then move to a discussion of contemporary challenges of subculture.

In an essay entitled “Once more around Resistance through Rituals,” written for the 2006 edition of Resistance Through Rituals, Stuart Hall revisits the collection that helped define the “Birmingham approach” to cultural studies developed at CCCS. The title conveys both a sense of familiarity with the subject matter and a measured congeniality at having to address it once again. Marking the 30th anniversary of the first printing of Resistance through Rituals (RTR), this familiarity and a sense of objective distance should not catch the reader off guard. There is also an element to Hall’s prose which suggests, accurately but with no sense of malice, that we’ve all been here before. Indeed, RTR’s success, as seems to be the case with most seminal publications in academia, made it a target for critics inside and outside cultural studies. Criticism of the theories and methodologies adopted by the researchers at Birmingham has been widespread, matched by rebuttals and defenses over three decades of vigorous academic debate. We should feel obliged then, after all this time, to ask a question familiar to Birmingham scholars – what does it all mean?

This kind of question is often cited by critics of CCCS work as a primary failing, evidence of a misguided attempt to shoehorn ‘all’ meaningful cultural practices into a predetermined theoretical framework. Despite this critique, even the most ardent critics of the CCCS approach pay their respects to the legacy of scholarship produced there. This may be part of the problem.
David Muggleton, for example, addresses the importance of Birmingham from the position of critic. In his book *Inside Subculture: The Postmodern Meaning of Style*, Muggleton outlines the problems with the theoretical and methodological frameworks developed in work like *RTR* and suggests, “the CCCS approach has attained the status of an orthodoxy,” simultaneously speaking to Birmingham’s influence and providing a tentative foundation for his own critique (4). Central to Muggleton’s position is the use of “grand theory,” in this case the neo-Marxist position of the CCCS (4-5). He describes his own approach as “not one of assuming, but of demonstrating,” (5) underscoring the view of many critics that the CCCS approach addressed subculture from a perspective which privileged their preferred theory, instead of developing an explanation as a result of ethnographic research.

In his essay, Hall responds to the arguments made by critics like Muggleton by restating the intention of CCCS’ focus on subculture, exemplified in the work published in *RTR*. Hall writes:

> As many pieces in the volume made plain, especially the long theoretical overview ‘Subcultures, cultures and class’, the project was concerned *both* to examine, concretely and in depth, one ‘region’ of contemporary culture *and* to understand how this could be connected in an explanatory, non-reductive way, to broader cultural and social structures. It was thus an attempt to connect the phenomena of youth subcultures to a general social and cultural historical analysis of the social formation (viii).

Offering an explanation for the use of what Muggleton derisively terms “grand” theories, Hall reminds us that “*RTR* was a product of its (theoretical) time,” but the intention was never to “replace what Marx called ‘determination in the last instance by the economic’ with cultural determination,” a charge echoed by Muggleton and others in much of their criticism (ix). Rather, “[t]he objective was to analyse and understand the relationships between those ‘relatively
“autonomous” but never mutually exclusive sets of relations designated as ‘culture’ and ‘society’” (ix).

As a result of this focus, CCCS scholars paid a fair amount of attention to issues of economic and political power. This attention generated a body of critical response, most of which centers on questions of class and deployment of the term in CCCS work. This criticism came early and is often voiced. Hall notes that many of the criticisms initially leveled at the CCCS were put forth by Centre members, and the issue of class was no exception (xii). He writes, “…the prominence we gave to class has remained a constant element” in critiques of the CCCS. Hall continues,

Ros Coward, for example, then a Centre member, accused us of adopting an ‘expressive’ view of the relation between class and culture (i.e., the latter merely mirroring the former, which is determining), and therefore of not giving the culture its own autonomy. Colin Sparks (also a Centre contemporary), on the other hand, accused us of the opposite ‘sin’: of abandoning an orthodox Marxist conception of economic determination for a more culturally inflected Marxism. (xv)

Hall’s response is further evidence of the discrepancy between critics of CCCS work who seek to define the influence of the Centre in broad strokes, and the more nuanced take on the issues expressed by its members. There was no specific ‘way’ espoused by the CCCS, nor was class considered the theoretical lynchpin in all work. Hebdige in particular steps away from class in Subculture, focusing instead on the interplay between culture, society and ethnicity. And despite the canonic status of the work, this particular aspect of Subculture is overlooked by critics who prefer to lump it in with the rest of the class-centric output of the CCCS (Gelder 103).
*Subculture*, like *RTR*, is so closely associated with the CCCS that it is often used as the representative example of the work produced there, sometimes the only example (Gelder 100). As with *RTR*, critics of *Subculture* often rely on its relationship to the theoretical and methodological position of the CCCS, instead of close analysis of Hebdige’s writing to support their arguments. David Muggleton goes so far as to comment on the inadequacy of Hebdige’s position while simultaneously benefiting from his target’s name recognition, titling his rejoinder *Inside Subculture: The Postmodern Meaning of Style*. Muggleton’s title implicitly evokes two critiques. First, Muggleton’s use of “inside” implies that Hebdige’s Gramscian semiotic analysis of punk does not consider the position of the person within the subculture (Hebdige was outside looking in). This is a fair point to make; there is almost no subjective perspective in *Subculture*. Hebdige relied primarily on secondary sources to support his reading of punk. For someone like Muggleton, who claims some experience with punk, the omission of first-hand accounts is an unforgivable flaw. Second, with the addition of “postmodern” to Hebdige’s original title, Muggleton suggests that postmodern theory provides new tools to address the meaning of style, a key element of Hebdige’s analysis, replacing the post-Marxist foundation of *Subculture* with something more fit to the task of detailing current subculture experience.

Muggleton’s critique extends beyond his denunciation of “grand theory,” however, sharing with the reader his personal reaction to Hebdige’s work as someone who “lived punk,” agreeing with Gottdeiner by way of quotation that “Hebdige ‘fails in explaining the meaning of punk’” (2; 7). Whether explaining the meaning of punk was the point of *Subculture* is unaddressed, despite the rebuke by Muggleton that this is a failure. This omission is probably unfair; Hebdige subtitled his work *The Meaning of Style*, after all, not *The Meaning of Punk*. Muggleton is concerned with presenting “the subjective viewpoints of the youth subculturalists themselves,”
and his study is an attempt to solve with ethnography what he sees as the failing of the “CCCS approach” (3). Given Muggleton’s own experience as a punk it is not unfair to ask whether some of his reaction to Hebdige is informed by an impulse to counter theoretical analysis with personal accounts.

Noting the sheer volume of critical work aimed at the CCCS, Muggleton suggests there may be a strong tendency amongst these critics to make theoretical space for their own voices. Remarking on Hilary Pilkington’s comment that it is fashionable to criticize the CCCS work on subculture, Muggleton writes,

> Although this is a situation I welcome, it is surely less to do with fashion than with changes in the balance of power in the academic community. Lovatt and Purkis have observed how much research in the sociology of popular culture is being undertaken by relatively young academics, ‘many of whom are already immersed in their chosen culture prior to intellectual engagement with it.’ This situation is producing a new cohort of academic taste-makers for whom the deficiencies of established theories are likely to be thrown into sharp relief by their own personal experiences as, say, punks or clubbers. If it is not stretching the point too far, perhaps their subsequent critiques can be understood as a need to satisfy what Andy Medhurst has referred to as ‘the urge to shout – no, I know more about it than you, because I was there.’ (4).

Whether these changes have furthered the discipline is a topic we will return to. For the moment it is enough to consider the possibility that arguments offered by critics of subculture may be motivated by personal interests in providing space for their own subjectivity as well as the perspectives of subculture members.
The creation and use of subcultural symbols is linked with questions of subjectivity. For post-subculture critics, the lack of subjective voice in works like Hebdige’s throws serious doubt on whether a scholar can be an authority on what subcultural symbols mean. *Subculture* does not provide ethnographic evidence in support of his analysis, and thus can be rightly critiqued for not providing a comprehensive reading of the subculture texts he is engaged with. And while the theoretical foundation of Hebdige’s analysis can be seen as shot-through with political implications, he is specifically concerned with objects – as elements of style – and their meanings. In Hebdige’s estimation, “the meaning of subculture is always in dispute, and style is the area in which the opposing definitions…” (the meaning of the subculture to its members and to the members of the dominant culture), “clash with the most dramatic force” (3). With the possible exception of class, Hebdige’s focus on the material matrix of subculture is the single most criticized aspect of his work in *Subculture*, leading to charges that he was a victim of the spectacular displays of punk, distracted from the obvious by the audacity of punk style (Kahn-Harris 16-17; Bennett and Kahn-Harris 9). Hebdige’s focus on objects has also led critics to consider the possibility that his work is merely a long form reification of subculture in general, losing sight of the interaction of culture and society and imagining meaning where, in fact, there may be none (Thornton 9).

Much has been made of Hebdige’s description of style as symbolizing ‘refusal’ or ‘resistance,’ notions which are tied to the conception of subculture as being grounded first and foremost in class identity. As Andy Bennett and Keith Kahn Harris argue, it is this “unqualified equation of post-war patterns of youth consumerism with notions of working class resistance” which draw the most critical attention (7). “Such a premise,” they go on to say, “rests on the essentialist notion that members of subcultures were indeed exclusively, or even predominantly,
working-class,” a premise which is proven through “theoretical conjecture rather than proven fact” (7). Ken Gelder notes in his book *Subcultures: Cultural Histories and Social Practice* however, that this emphasis on class is largely absent from *Subculture*, and for very practical reasons. Gelder writes,

> It has often been noted that punk subculture was more middle class than working class, coming not out of working class communities at all but contrived instead out of a ‘bohemian’ English art school scene. In fact, Hebdige had already recognized this and talked instead about the way punk *performed* its ‘working-classness’ as a kind of signifier. But the focus on working-class-derived subcultures meant that the perspectives of CCCS researchers were limited: for example (with the exception of Hebdige), regarding them as the outcome of local pressures on working class communities… (103)

This exception is noteworthy, as Gelder is one of the few who contextualize the argument made by Hebdige beyond the model of the CCCS common in most criticism.

At the same time Bennett and Kahn-Harris decry the “unqualified equation” of working class subcultural consumption with political resistance, they also recognize that this is not a universally accepted conception. In Bennett and Kahn-Harris’ estimation, Geoff Mungham and Geoff Pearson’s edited collection *Working Class Youth Culture* offers a “sustained focus on the mundane practices of ‘ordinary’ young people” (8) despite the inclusion of work by Tony Jefferson, co-editor of *RTR*. Without descending into a semantic argument, Mungham and Pearson identify their focus as working class culture, explicitly distancing themselves from subculture while not negating it as a possibility. Indeed, the possibility that subculture membership is one way for working class youth to express themselves, but certainly not the only way, is seen as missing from the CCCS canon. And yet *Working Class Youth Culture*, published
in the same year as *RTR*, offers precisely the same criticism. Once again we are presented with the nagging recognition of another exception within the work of the CCCS. This may be the reason for *Working Class Youth Culture* receiving, as Bennett and Kahn-Harris state, “far less attention,” as it represents a significant, contradictory contribution to the early debate on the meaning and necessity of subculture at odds with the perception of what the CCCS was (8).

Muggleton offers a similar caveat in his brief acknowledgement of Paul Willis’ *Profane Culture*. Describing the relationship of the four key CCCS texts to one another, Muggleton argues that they all “display many of the same methodological and theoretical inadequacies” (3). Chief among these inadequacies is the failure, as noted earlier, to properly examine the subjectivities of subculture participants. Muggleton is careful to point out, however, that Willis’ work, as an ethnographic study, is “the qualified exception” within the body of CCCS work (3). In “Once more around *Resistance Through Rituals*,” Hall addresses the purpose behind the volume’s original introduction in an effort to re-contextualize the book for new readers. Hall writes that the introduction “marked the volume’s relation to work that was ongoing elsewhere in the Centre and subsequently published, especially Paul Willis’ *Learning to Labour* and *Profane Culture*” (vii). If Willis’ work is so closely related to the articles contained in *RTR*, Muggleton’s willingness to make an exception of it is particularly significant, especially in light of his conception of the CCCS approach.

The exceptions outlined above are meaningful. They are the first warning signs that conceptions of a CCCS approach are flawed because they are not properly contextualized. Much of post-subculture theory argues for the development of new tools, new perspectives which are less likely to result in the kinds of essentializing, generalizing analyses cited by post-subculture scholars for embodying the misguided theory of the CCCS. And yet many of the same theorists
rely on precisely these kinds of totalizing conceptions to make their case for a new perspective. We cannot sincerely argue that work produced by CCCS members is flawless. But work should be engaged individually, with an eye to properly placing the work, its author, its reception and the atmosphere in which it was produced in relation to one another. The debate over subculture has led to a number of assumptions, some grounded in fact, some in misconception. Reducing all of the early work on subculture to little more than an inherently flawed, general approach clouds the issue of whether subculture is still a viable perspective.

**New Perspectives: Post-Subculture Theory**

If criticism of the CCCS lacks context, failing to take into account the differences and debates undertaken at the time by Centre members, then subculture scholars influenced by postmodern theories seem preoccupied with context, a concern which has resulted in a number of proposed terms, methods and meanings. David Muggleton and Rupert Weinzierl outline the fractured nature of contemporary subculture studies in the introductory essay to their edited collection *The Post-Subcultures Reader*. They identify two strands in the debate, although they are careful to note that these strands “are neither wholly encompassing nor mutually exclusive, and some [scholars] may work either all outside of, or into, both positions” (5). The qualification is an important one, suggesting that there is no real replacement for subculture as the primary term within cultural studies and, because of the absence of a successor, that the issue is still hotly contested. It may be possible to see Muggleton and Weinzierl’s qualification as an indication of how cultural studies in general, and subculture study in particular, have become more interdisciplinary over time. It also suggests, however, that subculture study is currently without a firm theoretical or methodological foundation. We should not be surprised that there are so many disagreements in regard to subculture if scholars can, perhaps without even knowing it,
cross theoretical and methodological boundaries other scholars feel should not be breached. In the absence of being able to clearly articulate what you’re doing, and how, the most obvious criticism would seem to be that nothing is being done at all.

The first strand identified by Muggleton and Weinzierl “attempts to jettison the whole theoretical apparatus of the CCCS and establish a new framework for the analysis of contemporary subcultural phenomena” (5) while maintaining subculture as a useful term. The use of “contemporary” is important, as one of the primary arguments for replacing the CCCS’s theoretical base is the questionable applicability of an outmoded perspective. Despite an intensive 15 year search for a “new dominant paradigm” to replace the theoretical underpinnings of the CCCS, even with “the emergence of new methodological, theoretical and substantive concerns,” there is no heir apparent (Muggleton and Weinzierl 5). Muggleton and Weinzierl note that even within the first strand of argument for a new perspective, three separate theoretical positions are considered potential candidates to replace the post-Marxist foundation favored by members of the CCCS. The theories of Pierre Bourdieu, Judith Butler and Michel Maffesoli are all considered worthwhile, but no single approach has been favored significantly over another (5). As the debate continues, it seems unlikely any particular theorist will be favored over another, as each is supported by a small, ardent group within cultural studies.

The second strand of post-subculture theory recognized by Muggleton and Weinzierl is described as a more vehement rejection of the “theoretical orthodoxies of the CCCS” (5). Work in line with this approach suggests the complete demolition of previous conceptions of subculture, going so far as to argue that the term itself is no longer a useful description of the complex relationships between “post-subcultural formations” and the dominant culture with which they interact (6). A variety of terms have been suggested to replace subculture, sometimes
with very specific contexts at the center of their meaning. Among those cited by Muggleton and Weinzerl: Armadeep Singh’s ‘channels’ and ‘subchannels’, Weinzerl’s ‘temporary substream networks’, Andy Bennett’s ‘neo-tribes’ and Redhead’s ‘clubcultures’, a term also favored by Sarah Thornton (6). In this case it is easy to see the conflation of two considerations which should remain separate: the viability of the term itself and its previous use. The argument is not based on whether the model applied by researchers at Birmingham was adequate to the task at the time it was developed (though there are those who suggest it was not), but on the question of whether current considerations are beyond the scope of this perspective. Chaney’s concern, noted earlier, reflects the importance some critics place on cultural changes in their arguments against the continued use of the term, grounded as it is in the construction of a CCCS approach.

Sarah Thornton’s Clubculture is the new Subculture. Highly regarded for its deft weaving of Bourdieu into post-subculture theory, (Marchart 90) Thornton’s work is also very accessible. Self described as a “post-Birmingham” study, (8) Thornton takes great care to distance herself from the “tradition,” (read: obsolescence) of the CCCS while simultaneously recognizing the importance of their work. Not surprisingly, Thornton does not ascribe to the definition of subculture associated with the CCCS, critiquing it as “empirically unworkable” (8). Instead, she adopts two interconnected definitions. Subcultures are “taste cultures which are labeled by media as subcultures,” and “subcultural” practices are synonymous with “those practices that clubbers call ‘underground’” (8). Thornton further distinguishes her work by suggesting it “harks back to the studies of Chicago School sociologists whose concern for researching empirical social groups always took precedence over their elaboration of theory” (8).

However, it is Thornton’s artful use of Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital which has distinguished her work in the post-subculture field. Thornton describes club cultures as
stratified, with clear lines of demarcation drawn between those clubbers who are considered to be ‘in the know and those who are not, distinctions made on the basis of what she terms subcultural capital. But she is also concerned with the nature of the relationship between club cultures and the media, an exchange that can have a direct impact on the nature of subcultural capital and what is valued within the club culture. Thornton argues that “various media and businesses” are “integral to the authentication of cultural practices,” a point which furthers her argument that “commercial culture and popular culture are not only inextricable in practice, but also in theory” (9). Gelder sums up the importance of this argument in terms of subculture, writing “club cultures do tend to imagine themselves as discrete ‘social worlds’ through the distinction they invariably draw between themselves and the ‘mainstream’ – a distinction which is crucial to their valorization as a subculture, although it may also be more imagined than real in its effects” (63).

There is little room for political action in Thornton’s conception of club culture, although she takes care to identify her analysis as “explicitly concerned with cultural change” (9). Cultural change is examined by looking at the history of recording and recorded events and their shifting authenticity, following it up with ethnographic research in order to detail how the acid house “subculture” became the rave movement. Remarking on Birmingham in a parenthetical aside, Thornton writes “for all their concern with rebellion and resistance, this tradition gave little consideration to social change,” arguing that her own work is “not about dominant ideologies and subversive subcultures, but about subcultural ideologies” (9).

Thornton is making an important distinction between what she sees as the overtly political agenda of the CCCS and the preoccupation with the larger relationship of global capitalism and democracy to individual groups and citizens. Informed in part by Marxist literary theory, it is
not surprising that some CCCS scholars were concerned with the resistant potential of the working class (Jenks 112-120). Thornton’s comments are in line with Muggleton’s to some degree, echoing his call for ethnographic analysis to make space for the voice of subculture participants. She is primarily concerned with the creation of ideology at the level of the subcultural group, a perspective that has something in common with the work of Robert Wood and Albert Cohen, which forms the backbone of this analysis of Rock for Life. For Thornton, Wood and Cohen, the subversive potential of a subculture is less important than the creation of meaning within a subcultural group. This position is complicated somewhat in the case of Rock for Life, a group which has created a system of meaning centered on a rhetoric of resistance which positions the group in opposition to what it considers to be dominant culture.

*The Hybrid Approach: Robert Wood and Albert Cohen*

Canadian subculture researcher Robert Wood offers a theoretical framework which seems to address many of the issues raised by post-subculture critics. Taking a step back, so to speak, seems to be the answer for Wood, and like Thornton he relies on more ‘classical’ sociological theory and method to engage the topic of subculture. Wood’s focus is straightedge youth, and in a move reminiscent of Muggleton he identifies his own personal relationship with the subculture he intends to study. He writes, “All researchers necessarily have at least some relationship with the people and issues that they study, and the nature of the relationship can pose limitations for the research process” (1). Although Wood “never (in my mind) officially became straightedge,” his experience with his local scene led to a process of self-evaluation and a love of the music (4). Wood’s caveat also gives the best indication of his primary research concern – the decision to become straightedge is just that, a decision, and there is an element of personal identification concurrent with group (subculture) membership that cannot be overlooked. As he says, Wood
“began to wonder why some people become straightedge,” and “if the meaning of straightedge changed for them as time passed” (5).

Wood is willing to grant the possibility, based on his own experience and the development of the subculture, that even if people transition into and out of straightedge, a subcultural group’s frame of reference can exist beyond individual involvement. He correctly states that “much subculture theory implicitly paints subculture as a static phenomenon, implying that subcultures remain essentially unchanged over time and space,” (12) a case that could be made not only against CCCS-informed studies, but also studies by post-subculture critics. In his historical account of straightedge, Wood describes the transitions within the subculture from the early 1980s through the present day. Fashion changed, as did certain political and social practices, but a core set of subcultural values remained. Wood is interested in moving beyond an examination of these values in favor of pushing the boundaries of subculture study. He describes his mission to not focus “solely on the core values of straightedge or the common cultural referents that supposedly bind the subculture together,” but to explore “the complexities and internal contradictions of straightedge. Indeed, complexity and contradiction are key themes needed to revitalize what has become a stagnant body of subculture theory” (13).

To achieve his goal, Wood looks to a number of subculture theories that have been largely overlooked by scholars engaged in the subculture/post-subculture debate. Principle among these is Albert Cohen’s concept of “frame of reference.” Cohen’s primary work focused on youth gangs. As described by Wood, “a subculture’s frame of reference is a set of socially constructed definitions and ‘group standards’… a set of overarching and guiding norms, values and beliefs” (14). Acting as both a guide to the subculture and a rulebook of sorts, a subculture’s frame of reference may continue to exist beyond its initial creation, even if it reflects to some extent the
“subjective experiences and social interactions” of the subculture members who participated in its formation (15). This means that far from being a temporary creation located within a specific space, a subculture can be transmitted through time and space. Wood elaborates,

This tendency for a frame of reference to achieve autonomy from its creators is especially evident in contemporary subcultures, where norms, values, and beliefs become encoded into the subculture’s texts, objects, symbols, styles, spaces and rituals. Once encoded in these things, the subculture’s frame of reference can be transmitted, long after its initial creators have left, to future prospective members. (15)

Each member of a subculture, however, acts in relation to and upon this frame of reference, resulting in an evolving, shifting construct “so long as there are people who fashion their identities in relation to it” (16).

Rock for Life’s frame of reference has certainly been transmitted across time and space. Bryan Kemper, founder and guiding voice for Rock for Life has since left the group, and yet his influence is still clearly evident in the style and rhetorical stance favored by the group. However, subcultural groups are not necessarily reliant upon a single influence for their rhetorical stance, style or political orientation. Frames of reference are by definition created by the people who interact with them. Because of this they can be seen to reflect social, economic, racial and political influences introduced by subcultural group members as individuals and as a group. Rock for Life has managed to maintain a relatively static frame of reference through their rhetorical positioning and the fact that it has, in large part, been transmitted by members in person or through creative action. Rock for Life sets up tables at national Christian rock festivals, holds their own annual conference, and has a webpage. The group’s organizational structure has maintained a frame of reference and transmitted it over time and space. As
influential as Kemper was in the formation of the group, Rock for Life’s relationship to the larger core pro-life philosophy is the primary influence on the creation of their frame of reference, distinguishing them as a subcultural group within the larger pro-life subculture.

Wood’s recognition of the subjectivities of subculture members would no doubt be of interest to a great many post-subculture critics who feel CCCS-inspired studies lack first hand accounts. He also addresses the positioning of subculture relative to dominant culture, an issue addressed by Thornton. Wood maintains the perspective that “most subcultures emerge at least partially in reaction to some aspect of mainstream or dominant culture” and hope to create some “insulation” from it (16). He is careful to argue, however, that no matter the perceived or created relationship, “subcultures and mainstream culture are inextricably connected” (16). Again reaching back to older sociological work, Wood cites David Matza’s argument³ (16-17) that much sociological research tends to over-emphasize a distinction between subculture and dominant culture. Sarah Thornton’s argument that media is a central component in the construction of a subculture is presaged in many ways by Matza’s work. As summed up by Wood:

Matza claims that [a subculture’s] members invariably are encircled by the members of mainstream society in such contexts as school, neighborhood, work, church and the mass media. Thus, although the subculture may provide at least partial insulation from the influences of the mainstream culture, the same subculture, as a result of its encirclement, “necessarily reflects the permeation of conventional agents.” Subcultures, therefore, emerge and sustain themselves with a latent cultural support from conventional sources and traditions and often reflect mainstream culture in important and significant ways. (17)
With an acknowledgement of the work of the CCCS, particularly Hebdige’s *Subculture*, Wood contends that there are legitimate reasons to examine the styles, symbols, language and music of straightedge as meaningful representations of straightedgers’ “experiences, perceptions, values, and beliefs,” at least some of which react to and reflect dominant culture.

Rock for Life is like any other subcultural group in that they have a set of distinct symbols which reflect their relationship with dominant culture. As discussed in Chapter Three, the group’s rhetoric of resistance places almost every element of Rock for Life’s frame of reference in relation to their conception of dominant culture. The “experiences, perceptions, values and beliefs” of Rock for Life members are consciously and directly imbued in t-shirts, protest slogans, prayer circles and music lyrics. All of these things are intended, at least in part, to be consumed by members of the dominant culture who are not Rock for Life members, a topic discussed at length in Chapter Three. Rock for Life members self-identify as reacting to what they consider to be a detrimental and dangerous American culture. Their political activity and social activism are subcultural symbols themselves. The t-shirt slogans and music lyrics may be intended to carry a specific message to those outside the group, but wearing the shirt and writing the lyrics have a deeper meaning in light of Rock for Life’s frame of reference.

The theoretical perspective of Wood’s analysis has been dealt with at some length here for three reasons. First, the tools he arranges are (relatively) new to cultural studies, representing an alternative foundation which includes aspects of arguments made on both sides of the subculture/post-subculture debate. Wood’s theoretical foundation is largely sociological, as his adoption of Cohen shows. Methodologically Wood is more in line with post-subculture scholars who privilege, or at least make plenty of room for, the subjective voice of subcultural group
members. This hybrid approach combines the strengths of two theoretical and methodological perspectives which had previously been incompatible.

Secondly, Wood provides potential theoretical solutions to many of the legitimate criticisms of subculture study. Subcultural groups are not static, reified entities but fluid, dynamic systems of meaning which can and do change based on their members’ actions and creation of meaning. Nor are they always already extant. Rather, the relationship between subcultures and dominant culture is indeterminate – they are conceived to be in communication with one another. And finally, Wood’s foundation allows for an examination of subcultural texts (including music, style, symbols and language) similar to CCCS members’ use of semiotic analysis, but outside of the political considerations still associated with such a perspective. Moreover, this allows for subcultures to be transmitted over space and time, opening the door for the possibility of non-local, decentralized subcultures with no easily defined space. Each of these three considerations will prove useful in examining Rock for Life as a subcultural group.

With Rock for Life we have a subcultural group founded with the expressed intent of challenging elements of dominant culture with which its founding members disagreed. There is no need to read into the group’s subcultural symbols to determine where the group positions itself in relation to dominant culture. Yet Wood’s perspective allows us to consider the act of creating those symbols and disseminating a political message as meaningful in its own right. In contrast to CCCS members’ semiotic approach, Wood’s approach can be used to examine Rock for Life’s subcultural symbols without needing to definitively state through interpretation what they exclusively mean. Instead we are free to consider these symbols as expressing two interrelated yet separate meanings, the meaning of the symbol to those outside the group and what it means for Rock for Life members to present that symbol outside the group. As a result,
we can illustrate the central role their rhetoric of resistance plays in the group’s frame of reference.

Pro-Life Youth and the Collapse of Subcultural Space

Thornton states in *Club Cultures*, “One of the main ways youth carve out virtual, and claim actual, space is by filling it with their music” (19). Her focus on clubs and raves informs her statement, but music has been generally associated with subcultures throughout sociological and cultural studies treatments (Becker; Haenfler; Hoggart 28-31). While concert going and the consumption of music have been identified as key acts of subcultural identification (Kahn-Harris; Purcell 25-38; Walser ix-xviii) the locations where subculture members meet and engage one another have been trickier to define theoretically (Kahn-Harris 11-13). Wood’s work with straightedge, beneficial as it is, still presents a number of questions about how to describe the relationship between subcultural groups and their foundational philosophy. Chief among them is the seemingly impossible task of reconciling a number of different subjective positions, represented by localized subculture groups and their particular frame of reference to the subjective positions of musicians and other subculture members not bound to any specific region or locale.

Straightedge, for example, was founded largely on the work of a single band, Minor Threat, which was itself the mouthpiece for one man in particular, Ian MacKaye (Wood 7). Wood’s theoretical model allows for differing interpretations of symbols, language and music within subcultural groups, and we cannot realistically consider the possibility of straightedgers being simply ‘MacKaye clones.’ Still, there are a number of different groups, spread out internationally, which self-identify as straightedge. Cohen’s frame of reference is a valuable tool for considering localized interpretations of subcultural meaning, but we need to adjust it slightly to account for
the transmission of a frame of reference across time and space. In a sense, frame of reference is too specific. Based on the interpretations of subcultural groups members’ experiences, the meanings associated with subcultural texts can be seen as primarily local or group-specific. And while symbols, music and language may be conveyed through media across national borders, there is no guarantee, despite their adoption, that groups read and utilize them the same way. They still, however, allow members in subcultural groups, separated by time and space, to self identify with a meaningful set of rules, beliefs and values beyond the potential or implied meaning of subcultural objects. They are still straightedge, but how?

Straightedge is defined in large part by three simple rules: don’t drink, don’t do drugs, and don’t have casual or promiscuous sex (Wood 7-8). Adherence to these rules can be advertised through music lyrics, t-shirts, tattoos, pins, patches – anything capable of holding a message. They represent more than just a code of conduct, however, signaling to subculture members and nonmembers alike a lifestyle choice, a worldview, a philosophy. The shared philosophy of subculture members and their broadest core values are what makes transmission of subculture over time and space possible. Styles change, bands break up, but the philosophy remains. The continuing vitality of straightedge as a subculture can perhaps best be seen as following a similar track to that of punk. Both have remained identifiable subcultures despite, or perhaps because of, their international transmission. Unsurprisingly, both have a relatively broad core philosophy open to interpretation and adaptation. Straightedge, defined by its three rules, was preceded by the punk ethic, Do It Yourself.

With these examples in mind we can begin to consider another potential subculture, pro-life youth. Similarly bound by a broad philosophy, the identification pro-life carries with it a meaning that exists beyond boundaries of style, religious affiliation, musical tastes and symbols.
Subcultural symbols need not be confined within local contexts. National concert tours, websites, television shows and radio programs all represent a decentralized system of subcultural consumption that exists not in spite of, but because of, the transmittable nature of subcultures in an age of globalization and technological saturation. Rather than signaling the end of a subculture’s viability, the transference of a particular set of subcultural symbols may be considered the first step in the evolution and transmission of meaning across space and time.

Pro-life youth groups such as Rock for Life have an international presence, a reach made possible by the shared understanding amongst different pro-life youth groups of what it means to be pro-life. Rock for Life lists chapters in 28 states and three Canadian provinces on their website. Many of Rock for Life’s chapters were founded by teenagers, pro-life youth who put on concerts in their local communities and hand out pro-life literature (Goodstein; Jones; Sandler). Described as a “project” of the American Life League on their website, Rock for Life can be seen to reflect their parent organization’s Catholic influence, promoting a pro-life platform that extends beyond an anti-abortion message. Life is defined on the group’s website as encompassing the whole period from “fertilization to natural death,” and Rock for Life condemns euthanasia, artificial birth control and the death penalty. Although this broader understanding of the group’s pro-life position is important, the moral and political issue of significance for Rock for Life is abortion.

The next chapter details the relationship of pro-life youth, particularly those associated with Rock for Life, with the dominant culture. Rock for Life has been influenced by three distinctly American historical and traditional movements, each of which has had a vital role in molding the group’s frame of reference. As a pro-life group, Rock for Life is tied directly to a history of pro-life social activism. Their public displays of faith, including prayer circles and pro-life visibility
actions are the result of decades of internal debate and external reaction to previous pro-life organizations, including the National Right to Life Committee and Operation Rescue. As a group with a strong affiliation to the American Life League, Rock for Life can also be seen to operate within an American Catholic tradition of social and political action. The group’s willingness to work within systems of power through boycotts and petition campaigns, lobbying government officials and public institutions, is the end result of over a century of American Catholic struggle to define civic and religious identity. Finally, Rock for Life draws on a history of middle-class youth activism to position itself as a group defined in part by what Stuart Hall calls “generational disaffiliation” (ix). Each of these factors has resulted in the creation of a group-specific frame of reference which positions Rock for Life in opposition to dominant culture. This rhetoric of resistance is a significant subcultural symbol, identifying members to one another, and defining the relationship of the group to the culture at large.

In the case of Rock for Life we can look to older traditions of social activism and their impact on Rock for Life’s frame of reference in much the same way Hebdige sought to contextualize punk in relation to a history of working class subcultures in England. This is undertaken to provide the necessary historical background for understanding how Rock for Life employs a rhetoric of resistance, and should not be seen as an attempt to politicize the group theoretically, as Hebdige has often been accused of. Properly contextualizing subcultural groups through an examination of the factors which influence the formation of their frame of reference is vital if we are to understand how subcultural groups position themselves in relation to dominant culture. This has not often been done in previous subculture work. Interestingly, Hebdige took great care to place his analysis, and punk for that matter, within a specific period of social and economic
unease. Subcultural groups are social creations, and grasping the means of their creation, as discussed in Chapter Two, is the first step in understanding their meaning.
CHAPTER II.
THE CREATION OF IDENTITY:
THE INTERSECTION OF FAITH, ACTIVISM AND YOUTH IN
THE FORMATION OF ROCK FOR LIFE’S FRAME OF REFERENCE

Introduction

A subcultural group’s frame of reference is a system of meaning which is constantly being adjusted by the input of members. These members are also members of the larger culture, and because of this we can conceive subcultural groups as always being in communication with the larger culture. Additionally, subcultural groups have a distinct link to a core foundational philosophy that also makes them a part of a community of subcultural groups that may share some superficial similarities as well as core philosophy. This thesis focuses on Rock for Life because the group offers an opportunity to examine the intersection of a number of different social and subcultural factors, all of which can be seen to operate in the creation of a frame of reference capable of geographic and chronologic transmission. This chapter contextualizes all three of the major influences that have come to bear on Rock for Life’s frame of reference.

Rock for Life was founded as a direct response to what the group perceives as a dominant culture. Because all of these factors come together to inform Rock for Life’s rhetoric of resistance, and the interrelationship between seemingly contradictory aspects of the group’s influences can be difficult to parse out, it is vital that we understand the pertinent historical movements and traditions which have had an effect on Rock for Life’s particular frame of reference. In the absence of such understanding it would be easy to dismiss Rock for Life as a calculated, politically motivated creation of the pro-life movement. Instead, by examining the group’s influences, we can see the impact historical movements and traditions have in the creation of subcultural frames of reference. In all, Rock for Life has been influenced by three
such movements and traditions: the pro-life movement, an Americanist Catholic tradition, and middle class youth social activism.

Rock for Life members self-identify as pro-life, a label which carries with it a host of specific political, social and moral beliefs that may not be clearly evident upon initial examination. In their article “Many Are Called but Few Obey: Ideological Commitment and Activism in Operation Rescue,” Rhys H. Williams and Jeffrey Blackburn use interviews with Operation Rescue members to examine how self described pro-life activists position themselves in relation to broader social issues. Building on previous efforts to explore what it means to call oneself pro-life, Williams and Blackburn note that, “‘the abortion issue’ is actually a conglomeration of potentially distinct issues, policies, positions, and players” (167). Abortion, and by extension a pro-life stance, is described by Williams and Blackburn as a symbol with important political ramifications (167). Williams and Blackburn found that respondents were likely to see abortion as an example of general moral decay, linking it to “the promiscuity of youth, the breakdown in morals in the family, the divorce rate, the AIDS plague…materialism…education, and the TV” (qtd. 174). Abortion may be the specific socio-political cause for individual activism, but a pro-life stance signals a broader relationship to the culture in general, a relationship that is understood by other pro-life activists to have specific political and religious meaning.

The specific examples provided by Williams and Blackburn can be seen as generally conservative, and it may be difficult to separate these views, many of which are shared by Rock for Life members, from the larger social conservative movement in the United States. It is important to recognize, however, that Rock for Life positions itself rhetorically as a force against dominant culture, utilizing the language of youth and political activism to code itself as a radical voice against the socio-political framework of American culture. We can situate this kind of
rhetorical positioning when we consider Rock for Life and its members as a subcultural group within the larger pro-life movement. The pro-life movement is described by Williams and Blackburn as a “social movement,” made up of “groups of people mobilized to challenge political power from outside the institutionalized corridors of influence” (167). Williams and Blackburn go on to describe the role of symbols within social movements, commenting that they often rely on symbols to motivate and influence members, onlookers, and those in power (167).

The use of this kind of rhetorical framing, and the complex relationship between themselves, the larger pro-life movement and the dominant culture, define Rock for Life as a subcultural group. It is in many ways distinct from each of the historical and social contexts which preceded its creation, and yet can still be seen as the end result of the intersection of a number of social movements and struggles for identity. As an organization influenced by Catholic doctrine Rock for Life embodies the impact of over one hundred years of debate and struggle to define Catholic identity in an American context. As a pro-life organization, Rock for Life is at the center of a complex relationship between public faith, social action and political involvement. As a youth organization, Rock for Life has incorporated a history of middle class youth activism and political involvement to create a morally based, socio-political action group with broad, cross-denominational appeal. Each of these contexts has resulted in the creation of a specific frame of reference for Rock for Life members, while maintaining a vital, core pro-life philosophy.

This does not mean, however, that Rock for Life should be considered outside the historical context of American Catholic social activism or issues of American Catholic identity. On the contrary, there are very deep connections between Rock for Life’s call to political action and long-standing conflicts between Catholics and the struggle to reconcile religious identity with American identity. American Catholics have a long and contentious history of struggling to find
a balance between the everyday realities of a changing world and their doctrine. Regardless of a particular member’s religious affiliation, this history has informed not only Rock for Life’s frame of reference, but also their rhetorical response to American culture in relationship to their core pro-life philosophy.

Rock for Life’s parent organization, the American Life League is firmly rooted in both the pro-life movement and a tradition of Catholic social activism. In addition to Rock for Life, the American Life League supports their own campaign against Planned Parenthood and offers a publication, *Celebrate Life* magazine. The American Life League’s commitment to Catholic faith is evident on their website. A notable contribution from one of the organization’s founders, Judie Brown, is entitled “Good Catholics.” This overt Catholic presence is not seen on Rock for Life’s mainpage. Although the relationship with the American Life League is never hidden or glossed over, the focus is obviously shifted from cultivating a visible Catholic-identified image to one more broadly targeted at ‘youth.’

Rock for Life’s relationship with the American Life League is important for two reasons. First, it allows us to place Rock for Life within a historical context, specifically the relationship of American Catholics to the general culture. The history of Catholic social activism has informed Rock for Life in specific ways, generally through a Catholic identity, and specifically through the pro-life activist history of the American Life League. Secondly, the distinction between the more overt Catholic identification of the American Life League, compared to the broader message aimed at pro-life youth espoused by Rock for Life, provides the opportunity to explore pro-life beliefs as a subcultural symbol for pro-life youth. The use of this symbol by pro-life youth will vary, even amongst Rock for Life members who have taken the Pro-Life Youth Pledge. Being pro-life does not only identify someone as an advocate against abortion; it
places him or her within or against sets of culturally and socially defined positions, of which religious affiliation is simply a single, albeit important, part.

*American Catholic Identity and Social Activism*

In the latter decades of the nineteenth century this struggle became a matter of international interest to the church, breaking the laity and clergy into two roughly opposing camps. The American Life League’s balance of Catholic faith and social action can be traced historically to the Americanist Heresy debate which took place at the turn of the 20th century. Brevity requires a description of this debate in the broadest terms. As Philip Gleason describes the core issues in his book *Contending with Modernity*, “the controversies arose from divergent responses by different groups of ecclesiastical leaders to the social, cultural, and intellectual challenges of a rapidly changing world” (7). What made this controversy particularly American was the struggle amongst Catholics in the United States to reconcile the political ideology of their nation with the doctrinal authority of the Church.

One group, known as the conservatives, considered the modern world an encroachment on faith. To combat the corrupting influences of modern life, conservatives looked to reinforce ties with the church. It is important to recognize that conservative Catholics were not responding to any element of modern life in particular. They were concerned with what can broadly be termed the modern way of thinking. They emphasized discipline and loyalty to the papacy, undertaking a “vigorous polemical campaign to hold off the forces of infidelity and bolster the morale of the faithful” (Gleason 8). Conservative Catholics felt that faith needed to be buttressed against the corrupting power of the world outside the church.

In opposition to the conservatives were the liberal Catholics, or Americanists, who felt that their faith dictated participation in political and social institutions. Liberal Catholics were quick
to acknowledge the dangers of the modern world, but they also recognized the potential of modern advances to further a general understanding of nature and society. Furthermore, the liberals believed that the modern world’s support of freedom and individual opportunity was a worthwhile project, and should be embraced by the church. The liberals, Gleason writes, “believed this approach was fully in line with Leo XIII’s thinking, and that the Pope also shared their conviction that American culture [in contrast to European countries] most fully realized the possibilities for good in modern civilization” (8).

The Pope did not, however, share their feelings. In his *Testem Benevolentiae*, an encyclical addressed directly to American Catholics, Leo XIII outlined the church’s position in opposition to liberal Catholic sentiments. As divine revelation, he argued, Catholic faith should not be adjusted in light of merely philosophical, societal or cultural changes. Liberal Catholics at the time were largely unperturbed by the pronouncement, responding to the papal argument by saying it was reacting to positions not actually held by them. On paper, at least, conservative Catholics had won a major victory over the forces of the modern world. In practice, little changed. While the Papal encyclical did have a chilling effect on liberal Catholic intellectuals and sympathetic members of the church hierarchy, the laity and clergy were largely unaffected. The struggle of American Catholics to reconcile two seemingly opposed identities, one Catholic the other American, remained, and would inform the debate over modernism in the twentieth century.

Like the conservative/liberal opposition of the nineteenth century, the late 20th and early 21st century debate over modernity is defined by ideological opposition. But unlike the Americanist controversy, questions of modernity have often been engaged by, if not rooted in, the constructed identity of the Catholic laity. Liberal Catholics of the previous century were defined in most part
by a willingness to consider the separation of church and state a negotiable compromise, and it wouldn’t be unfair to suggest contemporary liberal Catholics take a similar approach.

Contemporary conservative Catholics are defined by their relationship with a combination of religious, social and cultural beliefs. As Scott Appleby and Mary Jo Weaver describe the catalyst for their study of modern American conservative Catholics, *Being Right*:

> [T]here was a significant body of American Catholics united in their opposition to *modernity*, a word that could be expanded to include postconciliar “abuses,” pro-choice rhetoric, insufficient respect for papal authority, failure to obey Catholic teaching about artificial birth control, the tendency to lose touch with the great voices of the “Catholic Revival” in the 1930s and 1940s, and abandonment of the devotional tradition of the church, and a disregard for the sound conclusions of scholastic theology (vii).

It is easy to see the direct engagement of conservative Catholics with what can be referred to as doctrinal issues.

The rise of Catholic conservatism can be seen as the result of a long-standing, simmering Americanism harkening back to the late nineteenth century. The political and social forces condemned in the 1880s by Leo XIII as detrimental to the conveyance of true faith are now integral to the execution of a social and political agenda informed by conservative Catholic belief. As a pro-life organization, the American Life League actively engages in the type of social and political action which Leo XIII felt undermined Catholic doctrine. The American Life League fights for a conservative Catholic voice in the abortion debate by openly supporting large-scale social actions such as the annual March for Life. The group describes itself on its website as “the nation’s largest pro-life educational organization” and claims over 300,000 supporters.
Rock for Life’s willingness to operate within the institutions of American culture is in line with American Catholic attempts to create space for their voice within the liberal democratic system. In 1999, then director Bryan Kemper initiated a bold plan to counter a pro-choice petition drive sponsored by Rock for Choice. Rock for Choice gathered some 50,000 signatures in support of abortion rights on petitions which were then delivered to Congress and the White House (Jones). In response, Rock for Life planned to submit 100,000 signatures to their Pro-Life Youth Pledge. The pledge was circulated at Christian music festivals and other events and, significantly, organizers lobbied the Vatican for their endorsement. Rock for Life’s willingness to work within American cultural institutions (petitioning Congress and the White House), while simultaneously recognizing the importance of their link to religious doctrine, is indicative of the kind of balance between civic and religious identity American Catholics have sought to achieve.

In his essay “Notes on Catholic Americanism and Catholic Radicalism: Toward a Counter-Tradition of Catholic Social Ethics,” Michael Baxter notes that “Catholics working in the field of social ethics have been positioning themselves with what can be called a ‘Catholic Americanist Tradition,’” grounded in the assertion that “there exists a fundamental harmony between Catholicism and the political arrangement of the United States” (53). This tradition is claimed by “neo-liberals” and “neo-conservatives alike,” according to Baxter, and can be defined by its relationship with the polis (53). Catholics who act in line with the Americanist Tradition identify the polis “with the modern state, in particular the United States of America,” and rely on it “as the primary mechanism of the implementation of justice” (53-4). Both the American Life League and Rock for Life actively pursue a social and political agenda informed by their shared pro-life position, seeking legislative and legal solutions to bring American culture in line with
their moral belief. In this way, we can see both groups as operating within a Catholic Americanist Tradition as defined by Baxter.

Baxter, Appleby and Weaver all speak to the continued effort amongst American Catholics to link their religious identity with their American identity. While the conservative Catholics of the Americanist heresy were loathe to consider the potential of working with a secular government, contemporary conservative Catholics have chosen to work within the system to affect cultural changes based on faith. Interestingly, this is the same strategy adopted by liberal feminists, the group largely responsible for shifting public policy in favor of a woman’s right to choose.

Groups such as the American Life League and Rock for Life act on behalf of their religious faith largely unimpeded by the prospect of damaging their relationship with the church, although this does not prevent criticism of liberal Catholics for doing the same. Judie Brown criticizes the group Catholics for a Free Choice in an essay posted to the American Life league’s website. In the essay Brown acknowledges that Catholics for a Free Choice have been the subject of several critical pieces released by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), a clerical group which she is also critical of, though in her opinion the group has not been admonished enough. Brown argues that while the attention paid to a Catholic pro-choice group is welcome, the “USCCB statements fall short of instructing the leadership and membership of CFFC that their actions remove them from communion with the Catholic Church.”

While her essay tackles issues of American Catholic hierarchy and the relationship of liberal Catholics to the larger church, Brown relies heavily on appeals to American identity to make space for her pro-life voice. The American Life League’s website features a banner ad on its front page which reads “Pro Lifers Get Free Speech Too!” next to a screaming face emblazoned with the American flag. At once a symbol of defiance and of patriotism, the screaming face and
accompanying message convey the message that pro-life activists are not only straining to be heard, they are fighting an implied denial of their right to free expression as Americans. This rhetorical position has much in common with Rock for Life’s frame of reference and the group’s self-identification as being resistant to dominant culture.

The American Life League, Rock for Life, and the Pro-Life Movement

Though individual pro-life youth groups may align themselves to specific religious faiths, pro-life youth are less bound to denominational identity than to their pro-life identity. Rock for Life is morally grounded in Catholic doctrine through their association with the American Life League, but their message is inclusive. Evidence of Rock for Life’s inclusive message can be found in the group’s registration form for their annual Training and Activism Weekend, made available as a download on their website. The training weekend is scheduled each year to coincide with the anniversary of the Supreme Court decision legalizing abortion. In addition to offering practical workshops on staging protests and motivational seminars from long-time pro-life activists, there are a number of scheduled events with clear religious meaning. Not all are specifically Catholic, and there seems to be a conscious attempt to appeal to a broad religious base. The registration form promises “Music, Worship, Fellowship and Fun,” a combination of terms which offers a condensed view of what the weekend will offer while remaining open and non-commital about which, if any, particular religious position will be privileged. Time is set aside during the weekend for “religious services,” “prayer circles” were scheduled for outside the Supreme Court and Planned Parenthood offices, and there were a number of evenings featuring “praise and worship music.” The only obviously Catholic religious events were daily Masses and a “pro-life Mass at the Basilica,” none of which was scheduled as mandatory. “Worship” is up to the attendee, and although no particular religious doctrine is favored over another, it is
clear that some relationship with a Christian denomination is assumed. Still, a pro-life stance is favored above all else.

This is due in part to the group’s history prior to their association with the American Life League. Rock for Life was founded by Bryan Kemper, a self-described born-again Christian more in line with the Evangelical movement than a Catholic pro-life tradition. He describes the moment of realization that pro-life activism was his calling in prophetic terms. Kemper says God gave him, “a literal vision for Rock for Life. I saw the concerts, the kids in the streets. I knew that’s what my life had to be” (Sandler 24). When Rock for Life was offered the opportunity to come under the umbrella of the American Life League, any denominational affiliation or doctrinal connection gave way to the benefits of working with a national pro-life organization. Being pro-life was more important than maintaining any particular religious affiliation. There are no attempts made in their literature, handouts or webpage to portray Rock for Life as an overtly Catholic activist group, nor is there an attempt to hide the group’s non-Catholic past. As a group, Rock for Life places more emphasis on youth and a pro-life identity than church membership.

Although informed by conservative Catholic belief, the American Life League positions itself and its work outside Catholic doctrine. The willingness of the group to take Rock for Life into its fold also demonstrates the group’s interest in participating in larger cultural battles, co-sponsoring the annual Training and Activism Weekend and Rock for Life’s national concert and educational tours. The pro-life movement in America has been marked by continued attempts on behalf of pro-life activists to create a stable, sustainable platform for the reconciliation of public faith, social action and political involvement. Such a platform has been elusive. Over the past thirty years a number of organizations, some with stronger religious affiliations than others, have
risen to prominence only to fall when challenged by other pro-life groups (Cuneo). Although the larger pro-life movement can be seen as fractured, we should bear in mind that such divisions are often based on differences between frames of reference – the core pro-life philosophy remains unchanged. It is, however, still important to consider these differences when looking closely at a single group such as Rock for Life within the larger pro-life movement.

Practical and religious disagreements between pro-life groups still operate as signifiers of identity, and in the case of Rock for Life, have played a vital role in shaping the mission, position and image of the group. Rock for Life distances itself from the violence and civil disobedience which characterized the pro-life actions of groups such as Operation Rescue, even though one of the group’s founders, Bryan Kemper, had been affiliated with Operation Rescue in his early days as a pro-life activist. Rock for Life members are dedicated to non-violent protest, almost to the point of passivity. Kemper describes the group’s position: “We don’t yell or condemn people. You don’t go up to a woman and say, ‘You baby killer.’ We’re here to help, and offer an option. If someone does something violent to us, we either walk away or stand there and take it” (Jones). Prayer vigils and silent pro-life visibility actions are the norm for Rock for Life. This is in stark contrast to the violent actions which have become celebrated in some pro-life circles. The same year Rock for Life was founded, a young man named Joshua Graff firebombed a local abortion clinic in Houston, Texas. Describing his actions, Graff said he felt like he “had a purpose. It felt like it was the right thing” (Jones). Although both Rock for Life and the organizations which support actions such as Graff’s can be said to be pro-life, there are significant, meaningful differences between them.

Michael W. Cuneo is cautious of the term “pro-life movement” for just these reasons, noting, “there are, more accurately, several different movements, or movement factions, with different
and sometimes competing strategies, ideologies and personalities” (271). Cuneo is particularly interested in what he terms the “turn to militancy” amongst Catholic pro-life activists in the 1980s. Militancy in this case is defined by Cuneo as direct action, the blockading of clinics, civil disobedience and risk of arrest. Cuneo describes these activists as “deeply conservative on almost all cultural and religious counts,” they are Catholics who view direct action against abortion as, “a protest simultaneously against the killing of unborn life and the secularization of faith in American Catholicism” (271). This kind of direct action, while initially undertaken almost exclusively by Catholics, was quickly adopted by Evangelical Christians. Perhaps the most widely known Evangelical group to take Catholic direct action and adapt it to fit their own religious beliefs is Operation Rescue, a group which gained a reputation for styling their public displays of faith against abortion as civil disobedience. Through the late 1970s and the 1980s, Evangelical and Conservative Catholic opposition to abortion was joined in part through Operation Rescue which, although it was informed primarily by Evangelical Christianity, welcomed and even encouraged Catholic support. The sympathetic alliance between the two groups is described by Cuneo as remarkable, “considering their inherited theological and cultural differences” (272). The early cooperation of Evangelical and Catholic pro-life activists is echoed in Rock for Life’s attempt to create broad, non-denominational appeal by limiting direct references to their own particular religious affiliation. The focus on public displays of faith and social action supported by Rock for Life are also hallmarks of the early cross-denomination relationships between pro-life groups.

The early pro-life movement, though strongly rooted in religious doctrine, took what Cuneo describes as a “pragmatic and reformist approach” to challenging abortion (270). The move to direct action, described above, occurred when activists became disenchanted with working
within the system. Reformists were generally willing to sacrifice an overtly religious message in favor of one which framed their position “in terms suitably commensurate with the predominantly secular and liberal disposition of American culture” (271). But by the mid 1980s, some activists within the pro-life movement who had been tenaciously pursuing their goal within the legal and political system for more than ten years were more willing to take their message and their commitment to the street. One group born from the growing rift between pragmatists and militants was the American Life League (originally the American Life Lobby).

The early national leader in the pro-life movement was the National Right for Life Committee (NRLC). Formed in 1970, the early NRLC was strongly supported by the Catholic Church. A pragmatist group, the NRLC sought to counter pro-choice opponents through public relations, political and legal maneuvering, and scientific logic (Cuneo 274). Five months after the Supreme Court decision on *Roe v. Wade*, however, the NRLC severed ties with the Catholic Church in an attempt to present a less religiously-centered front against abortion. Separate from the Church, the NRLC was free to counter accusations that opposition to abortion was a “peculiarly Catholic preoccupation,” and the group worked to create a cross-denominational coalition with other Christians, appointing a Protestant woman their first president (Cuneo 274). This did not, however, eliminate debate within the organization. There remained a central, unresolved issue within the newly independent NRLC: artificial contraception.

Contraception was the issue which drove Judie Brown and her husband to form the American Life League in 1979 (Cuneo 280-1). Though the NRLC had severed formal ties with the Catholic Church, its membership was still largely Catholic. These members were opposed not only to abortion, but to contraception as well. The attempt to position the NRLC as a more
secular group, distanced from Catholic doctrine, led its administrators to seek a compromise.

Cuneo writes that the group:

…could hardly denounce artificial contraception without incurring public opprobrium, but neither could they recommend it as a preventive to abortion without offending their largely Catholic constituency. The solution they adopted – which was to declare the NRLC scrupulously neutral on the subject – wound up satisfying virtually no one (274).

One of those left unsatisfied by the group’s decision was Judie Brown. An administrator for the NRLC for a number of years, the nondenominational stance of the group and its position (or lack thereof) on artificial contraception became too much for Brown to bear. She describes her disagreement, as quoted by Cuneo:

The NRLC refused to admit that the pill and IUD are abortificients. And more than that, their entire stance on contraception has been a monumental lie. Ninety-nine percent of the time, contraception results in abortion. How could they claim to be dealing with abortion when they refused to deal with this basic reality? Even before I left the organization, I believed their nondenominational and nonreligious emphasis to be totally ineffective. The practice of religion belongs in the public arena. It is so wrong to suppress this. We should be able to say that abortion is a sin against God and God’s law (280-81).

Brown’s position is not only an example of the prevalence of an Americanist tradition within Catholic pro-life activism, it also lays the framework for the position of Rock for Life in regard to public faith, social action and political involvement. Rock for Life utilizes public prayer and the morality of a higher power to advocate for its social agenda. Although the group was more closely aligned with an Evangelical Christian tradition when founded, Rock for Life’s use of
public displays of faith is in line with Julie Brown’s own beliefs, as evidenced in the quote above. Even though Rock for Life does not openly identify with one denomination over another, there is clearly some association with previous religious action in support of the pro-life cause.

Rock for Life supports public displays of faith as both a political statement and an affirmation of their moral obligation to oppose socio-political support of abortion, and the group regularly posts their actions on their website via an events calendar. But their public actions are not limited to religious displays. Rock for Life participates in larger, non-denominational marches and conventions. The concerts and political actions organized by Rock for Life are open to everyone, although like most subcultural groups, the symbols employed by the group generally limit attendance to those with a similar worldview. Rock for Life chapters actively advertise local shows with pro-life messages, holding them in storefront venues, Christian youth centers or even churches. Pro-life brochures, pins, t-shirts and comments are encouraged, not only for the bands but also for attendees (Beaujon; Jones; Sandler). All of these symbols, while necessary for the maintenance of pro-life identity, may also prove too difficult a barrier for the non-member who was just hoping to see a local band.

Politically, Rock for Life betrays no specific allegiance to a particular ideology or party, though they take what can be considered conservative positions when compared to progressive views. This is important because of the relationship the group has with both the pro-life movement and an American Catholic tradition. Although both of these influences can be considered conservative, Rock for Life has focused instead on elements of each which support their rhetoric of resistance. Being conservative or religious is, if it is addressed at all, simply another way of stating one’s opposition to what the group considers to be dominant culture. The most important element in the group’s identity and the identity of its members is their pro-life
position. The fact that Rock for Life is a group that heavily relies on the style and language of American youth to present its message demands consideration of a third cultural influence and its impact on the creation of Rock for Life’s frame of reference: the legacy of middle class youth activism in America.

Youth Activism in America

Rock for Life positions itself as a youth-oriented activist organization. Most of the members and chapter organizers are teenagers or young adults, attending high school or college (Jones). The group actively seeks to combine a moral pro-life position with political and social action. Political involvement on behalf of Rock for Life members is not only allowed, but expected. Rock for Life members have petitioned Congress and the White House. When Nancy Pelosi was named House Chairman in 2007, Rock for Life members attempted to join her inaugural breakfast meeting in the hopes of directly addressing her stance on abortion, an event documented at length in the group’s website blog.

Rock for Life materials, including their website, clearly associate abortion with cultural and social decline. There is little distinction made between abortion as a moral issue and as a cultural one, although faith is cited as the motivating force behind political action. The focus on youth, however, combines the moral obligation of religious faith with a cultural expectation shared by those on both sides of the abortion debate that young people are a strong, viable force for political change in America. This has not always been the case, and there are serious questions to ask about the political efficacy of youth activism post-Vietnam. Yet youth activists and organizations like Rock for Life seem to take the efficacy of youth activism as a given. The teenage years are meant to be a time when wearing your political and religious beliefs on your sleeve is allowed, with the free time to act on both. “Music, Worship, Fellowship and Fun,” as
promised in Rock for Life’s 2008 Training and Activism Weekend registration form, is a combination worth exploring if we are to place political activism within the larger framework of American youth culture. In short, American youth can be expected to be politically active, but in turn they expect to be able to have fun doing it.

In his sociological examination of youth culture, *Comparative Youth Culture*, Michael Brake notes the importance of class association in the formation of an activist identity. He writes, “adolescence and early adulthood is a period for reshaping values and ideas… the young can explore, within the parameters of their immediate class situation, certain elements of achieved versus ascribed identity” (24). Operating outside the framework of cultural studies (he is a sociologist), Brake’s acknowledgement allows him some room to explore the meaning of political action across multiple classes. This position allows Brake to focus almost exclusively on middle-class youth culture. Unfettered by the political implications of a post-Marxist theoretical foundation, Brake is free to assert that politically active youth can move “beyond class” when focused on larger issues (105). It is worth noting that in his description of protest movements in America, Brake includes abortion among other “large single-issue campaigns” such as the Vietnam War, the draft, and the civil rights movement (106). Abortion, in Brake’s opinion at least, has been a meaningful issue to youth activists for as long as subculture has been debated amongst academics. This fact has been largely unacknowledged outside of women’s studies.

These movements were dominated in large part by middle class college students, despite the connotations that egalitarian, class-neutral monikers such as ‘the Sixties,’ ‘hippies’ or ‘the counterculture’ may imply. Although the 1960s saw an increase in college enrollment, this had more to do with the economic successes of baby-boomer parents than with more open college
admissions policies. Access was still limited to those who could afford tuition. The protest movements of the 1960s, as Brake contends, were middle-class protests inasmuch as college students formed the foundation of each movement’s base (107). National movements can be expected to draw supporters from different socio-economic backgrounds. What concerned sociologists and other youth culture researchers during and directly after the social and cultural challenges of the 1960s was why such resistance should be centered within the class and generation of those who stood to reap the most benefit from maintaining the status quo. We will see that the youth pro-life movement is also made up of middle class teens and young adults who, informed by their religious faith, are railing against what they contend is a morally bankrupt mainstream culture.

For Brake, the catalyst for student radicalism in America was the Civil Rights Movement. “American students,” he writes “began to question a system which stressed its justice and democracy, but did nothing about the legal rights of its own minority groups” (107). Notably, these students were not overtly concerned with class politics, tending to focus specifically on single issues (107). As a result, there was a relatively fluid shift from a concern with civil rights into anti-Vietnam demonstrations, free speech advocacy, and women’s rights. Summarizing the impact of the student protest movements, Brake writes:

Looking back over the 1960s and mid-1970s certain issues show themselves. In America, because of the lack of a hard class-consciousness, class-based politics were not a heritage and did not fit a collective solution as easily as in Europe. People began to explore their oppression outside of class lines…The counterculture, composed of middle-class radicals and bohemians, protested not out of poverty, but against an affluence which had no moral content (113).
Here, we can see another connection between the history of youth activism in America and the contemporary pro-life movement. While it would be disingenuous to say that youth oriented pro-life groups such as Rock for Life have a political agenda similar to those espoused by activists during the 1960s, there is a shared motivation between the two, as Brake suggests. Both the counterculture of the 1960s and members of Rock for Life describe their activism and attendant philosophies as informed by morality. The difference being that Rock for Life members draw on a direct link between their organization and Catholic doctrine, whereas the counterculture relied on less specific appeals to a general morality.

A number of pro-life activists have made a direct connection between their movement and the civil rights protests of the 1960s. Williams and Blackburn comment that a common theme amongst Operation Rescue members was the “‘necessity’ defense to justify civil disobedience, familiar to students of Ghandi and M.L. King” (174). The movement itself, and not just its methods, was also compared to the fight for civil rights. In 1983, pro-life journalist David Andrusko drew a direct connection between American ideals and the pro-life movement, echoing an argument familiar to civil rights activists. He wrote:

When you think about it, there is a fundamental irony at the heart of the battle to save children. For it is the pro-life movement, scorned and ridiculed by the media as a ‘reactionary’ force, that is the principle defender of the most revolutionary idea of the American experiment – the idea that all men and all women and all children, born and unborn, are created equal. (qtd. Cuneo 276)

More recently, politicians sympathetic to the pro-life movement have employed similar arguments. Speaking on the occasion of the annual March for Life in 2004, Representative Joe Pitts said that since the decision on *Roe v. Wade*, “we have denied the most fundamental of all
human rights to 40 million American children” (Ward and Barnes). In a press release from the same year, Jason Jones, director of American Life League’s youth outreach, made similar comments. Jones is quoted: “The inalienable right to life is the primary civil right that must be respected before any other civil rights can even exist” (Rock for Life). This type of argument has been made often by Rock for Life. In 1999 press release entitled “Buying Music for Christmas? Buyer Beware!” for example, Bryan Kemper commented, “Abortion is the ultimate hate crime” (Rock for Life).

If Brake provides a broad historical footing, Michael Dennis narrows the focus considerably, linking the national youth protest movements of the 1960s to contemporary radical youth. And like Brake, Dennis focuses his attention on middle class youth. His intent is to explain the lead up to the Battle of Seattle, the large scale protests of the World Trade Organization in 1999, protests he acknowledges were “overwhelmingly young and white” (16). Dennis sees the protests in Seattle as the culmination of a “renewed enthusiasm for democratic participation and social engagement,” cultivated in part to counter the effects of “suburban meaninglessness” and “post-modern drift” (6). Dennis continues,

> Using the tactics of civil disobedience and street theatre borrowed from an earlier generation of American activists, the youth formed an oppositional subculture that exalted community interests over the 90s ethic of fulfillment through individual consumption… this new subculture, grounded in participatory democracy and direct action, represented a break with a youth subculture defined more by its style of personal protest than by its commitment to political action (7 emphasis in original).

Although Rock for Life chooses alternative social and political action to civil disobedience and street theatre, Dennis’ point that the new youth culture witnessed in Seattle demonstrated a
new commitment to political action does have some connection to Rock for Life. Political action is expected of Rock for Life members, and though it may also operate as a symbol within the group’s frame of reference, it is not only a stylistic gesture. For Dennis, the distinction between simply looking the part, so to speak, and being more thoughtfully involved in political protest marks a shift within subcultures. It is no longer good enough to say you are politically involved; you have to act. That it is once again young, white, middle-class youth with the time, energy and opportunity to be involved in such radical action is significant to this analysis, as his description can be applied successfully to the membership of Rock for Life.

Dennis also links the success of the renewed youth radical movement to a system of group and organization support. Dennis remarks on the success of youth leadership conferences to help build community, quoting Ted Hargrave of Youth for Environmental Sanity, “We have found again and again, that there is power in coming together to do nothing but hang out and build relationships” (11). This kind of ‘covert activism,’ building strong relationships which can be fostered long-term, is a focus of Rock for Life as well. Tamara Jones describes a scene at Bryan Kemper’s Virginia apartment two days before 1999’s March for Life. Kemper’s apartment looks “like a campground,” temporary home to “a snowboarder from Oregon, and an art student from San Francisco… and a couple of college missionaries from Wisconsin who are glued to a video game while the others put together a thousand packets of antiabortion leaflets to hand out at the protest” (Jones). The scene is convivial, and creating an atmosphere of acceptance and relaxation seems to suit the young particularly well. In her feature on Lauren Sandler’s book Righteous: Dispatches from the Evangelical Youth Movement, Jane Lampman describes the trend towards relationship building as a conversion tool. Quoting Sandler, Lampman describes the new “relationship evangelism”: “Once bonds are forged over a beloved band or football team, then
the Evangelical message” can work its way into a relationship ... [what one Evangelical] calls being “sneaky deep”” (Lampman).

Although Rock for Life’s goal is not religious conversion, the formation of personal bonds is important to getting out the group’s pro-life message. Jones drives this point home in her article when she details the arrival of a pizza delivery boy to the Kempers’ apartment. Jones writes:

When the delivery boy arrives at the apartment door with the pizza, Bryan invites him inside and immediately engages him: What kind of music does he like, would he like one of their CDs, here take one. With the free CD comes a fistful of antiabortion literature. "Thanks, I could've used one of these recently," the kid responds. Bryan invites him to come back and visit, and the kid seems interested, sizing up the scene with a quick, approving glance… (Jones)

The ability to directly connect to teenagers and young Americans exemplified by Kemper’s interaction with the pizza boy has become the model for Rock for Life’s interaction with members and non-members.

Conclusion

Rock for Life is a pro-life youth activist organization with demonstrable ties to American Catholicism. Each of the three influences which have helped form Rock for Life’s frame of reference is clearly evident in the group’s mission, composition and philosophical base. What we cannot overlook is that each member of Rock for Life can also be seen as a subject with multiple identities. As discussed in this chapter, calling oneself pro-life carries with it a number of specific political and social beliefs beyond abortion. Being young in America arguably carries a set of expectations and beliefs held by both youth and the larger culture. For Rock for Life members these expectations are something to be fought against, as we will see in Chapter Three.
Rock for Life’s frame of reference serves as an organizing set of meanings that order aspects of individual identity to fit the group. Being pro-life is more important to Rock for Life members than being Catholic, for example. And because Rock for Life members are also members of the larger culture they are required to negotiate their identity to some degree. Members are ‘pro-life youth activists’ in the same way others are ‘pro-life’ or their classmates are ‘punk’; each identifying label carries with it specific meanings that are significant within the subcultural group as well as the larger culture.

The registration form for the training weekend is an example of the negotiation of identities necessary for pro-life youth. The intersections of youth, pro-life advocacy, religious belief and dominant culture is evident from the list of scheduled activities. For Rock for Life members, these activities and their meanings represent elements of their shared frame of reference which act in support of the core pro-life philosophy. Considered as a whole, the Training and Activism Weekend can be understood to act in a way similar to Hargrave’s evaluation of his own group - the chance to bond and form relationships is not to be underestimated. The recognition of, and support for, a larger group identity is implied in each of the four activities. Music took the form of a sponsored concert, held at the hotel. Worship and fellowship took the form of planned activities as well, although they were almost certainly not limited to specific church services or prayer circles. And if these opportunities were not enough on their own, being together with hundreds of other like-minded young Americans would certainly provide a chance for fun. But the individual events advertised by Rock for Life in their registration form underscore a specific set of shared understandings and expectations.

Returning to the combination of “Music, Worship, Fellowship and Fun,” for a moment, it is worth considering that these things are listed as separate bullet items on the registration form
under the heading “Registration Includes,” along with a hotel room and an event sweatshirt. Rock for Life’s Training and Activism Weekend is an opportunity for pro-life youth to meet and network with others from across the country. It is also a chance for them to reaffirm their identity and position as pro-life youth relative to the larger pro-life community. While there are specific youth oriented activities, like rock concerts, there are also a number of educational and motivational workshops to provide “effective, pro-life activism” from “effective and experienced pro-life veterans.” The relationship of pro-life youth to the larger, dominant culture is also reinforced. The Training and Activism Weekend was scheduled to coincide with the 34th annual March for Life, with a separate prayer event scheduled at a local Planned Parenthood.

Each of the three historical and traditional influences discussed in this chapter has helped to create a frame of reference incorporating all of the shared meanings, understandings and expectations woven into events like the Training and Activism Weekend. All of these elements serve to support the group’s rhetoric of resistance, either by reinforcing cultural ideals of youthful energy and political action or interpreting the histories of American Catholics and the pro-life movement to inform their social actions. Properly contextualized, these influences provide the necessary foundation to explore Rock for Life’s positioning of itself as resistant to dominant culture. In the following chapter, we will look at the ways in which Rock for Life has created and maintained an oppositional stance while also working within larger cultural systems of meaning. In particular, we will consider Rock for Life’s employment of resistance as a subcultural symbol.
CHAPTER III.
RHETORICAL POSITIONING:
PRO-LIFE YOUTH AND THE MEANING OF RESISTANCE

Introduction

Rock for Life is a subcultural group that defines itself in part through public worship and social action. Their t-shirts, bumper-stickers, tattoos, protest signs, music and displays of devotion are all intended to be seen, read and interpreted by those outside the group. The straightforward slogans on Rock for Life t-shirts, such as “Abortion is Homicide” and “Abortion is Mean,” are difficult to misinterpret. It can be equally difficult for some, especially people with pro-choice beliefs, to consider such intentional displays as a mark of subcultural identity. The political, social and religious implications of such messages obscure the non-member’s view of the deeper meaning connecting the wearer to his or her group’s frame of reference and the core pro-life philosophy. The shirt, and the act of wearing the shirt in public are, however, potent subcultural symbols. The message is not the locus of meaning for the subcultural group member, although it may be for the person reading it. It serves as an expression of the relationship of the member wearing it to Rock for Life’s frame of reference and the core pro-life philosophy. The message, and what it means to outsiders, is a symbol itself.

We can read the kinds of messages discussed above as subcultural symbols in light of Rock for Life’s rhetorical construction of resistance. Rock for Life positions itself in opposition to what it describes as a liberal, corrupting dominant culture. As a pro-life organization, Rock for Life’s primary evidence that the dominant culture is liberal is the legal support of abortion. Their position within the larger conservative Catholic pro-life movement also dictates that Rock for Life is against the death penalty, euthanasia and artificial contraception. These stances are not universally shared by other pro-life groups, some of which have advocated violence against
abortion providers (Aho). Nor is Rock for Life’s commitment to public worship as a protest tool shared by all Catholic pro-life groups. These differences clearly separate Rock for Life from other pro-life groups while retaining a link to the core pro-life philosophy. Being pro-life is itself a potent subcultural symbol, as discussed in the last chapter. For Rock for Life members, however, there is also a strong element of resistance coded into the rhetoric of the group. As pro-life activists, they position themselves as resistant to, indeed battling against, a culture of death. But even as Rock for Life engages what it considers to be dominant cultural institutions, decrying their influence and lobbying for their destruction, the group actively employs methods in accordance with their own specific set of pro-life ideals which are very similar to those they are lobbying against.

*Culture of Life/Culture of Death*

Rock for Life frames their pro-life activism in terms which also serve to support their views of dominant culture. Williams and Blackburn note in their article “Many are Called but Few Obey” that abortion is a “condensed symbol,” often encompassing many seemingly peripheral issues depending on the subject’s particular stance as either pro-life or pro-choice (170). They go on to describe the “cultural-reform goals” of Operation Rescue leader Randall Terry (172). Williams and Blackburn address Terry’s use of the abortion issue as a kind of vanguard movement. Terry is quoted: “we will defeat the abortion holocaust, restore religious and civil liberties to individuals, bring justice to our judicial system, see common decency return, and the godless, hedonistic, sexually perverted mind-set of today will be pushed back into the closet” (172). Although Terry was writing in 1988, a very similar view of American culture is shared by Rock for Life today. If Terry was focused on eliminating abortion as a way to correct the general cultural failings of the nation, Rock for Life pays more attention to abortion as the result
of such failings. Indeed, the relationship between the two positions is clear, even if there are subtle differences in how each argument is framed.

Both Terry’s comments and the rhetoric of Rock for Life portray a dominant culture that is more concerned with immediate self-gratification than higher moral purposes. The hedonism Terry speaks of in the quote above can be linked to another comment, also quoted in Williams and Blackburn. Terry is quoted: “the reason the church has not stood against abortion is because Christians have bowed to the knee of America’s god – the god of the self” (172). Terry’s criticism of America as a selfish culture devoid of moral commitment is shared by Rock for Life. This criticism and arguments similar to it are often used by Rock for Life members to portray abortion as a socially accepted moral deviation indicative of America’s selfishness.

As an organization informed by conservative Catholic belief, Rock for Life is adamantly against artificial contraception, calling the use of birth control pills and other preventatives “chemical abortion” on the group’s website. A passage about contraception, also on Rock for Life’s website, echoes Terry’s condemnation of a selfish culture, tying selfishness to contraception implicitly:

What birth control has done for our society is turn little babies into disposable objects. Pregnancy is no longer seen as a blessing, but a curse. Parents of large families are looked down upon instead of held in high esteem. We now place more value on getting big salaries, driving nice cars, and living in huge homes. Young married couples want to wait years before starting families because they have learned from our society that children will take away their freedom. So if a child is conceived at the wrong time or is unplanned, abortion becomes a likely option for the couple who cannot see that children are a great blessing.
According to Rock for Life, the selfishness of the upwardly mobile couple countermands not only the natural inclination to have a family, especially a large family, it can even lead to abortion if the couple is blinded to the “blessing” of children. The passage also references a vague past when such selfishness was not prevalent. Children have been “turn[ed] into” disposable objects, pregnancy is “no longer” seen as a blessing, and large families are not “held in high esteem,” all because we place more value on economic success and personal freedom “now” than we once did.

Rock for Life’s critique of selfishness as a cultural value as shown in the above quote can be compared to the militant tone of the Pro-Life Youth Pledge. Available on the website and in Rock for Life literature, the Pro-Life Youth Pledge is meant for young pro-life youth activists and serves as an affirmation of individual values, a way of identifying as pro-life to other youth, and as a statement of opposition to the culture-at-large. It reads:

We are a loud and determined voice for Truth and Life in this culture of death. We stand on the truth of Jesus Christ whom all of our strength comes from. We stand for the protection of all human life from conception (fertilization) until natural death, with no exceptions, no compromise, and no apologies. We are fed up with the lies that MTV, Planned Parenthood and our government are pushing down our throats. We will no longer sit silently by as our generation is being systematically slaughtered through surgical and chemical abortion. This is OUR generation, these are OUR brothers and sisters and we commit to fighting for their lives. You will not silence our message, you will not mock our God, and you will stop killing our generation!

Far from being simply critical, the Pro-Life Youth Pledge is part demand, part call to action. If selfishness can be seen as a symptom of a dominant culture concerned primarily with individual
economic success and meeting immediate needs, urges and wants, the Pro-Life Youth Pledge challenges the separate institutions which support or profit from such a culture.

The positioning of pro-life youth, and Rock for Life in particular, as the vocal minority against the culture of death seems to call on the heritage of American youth activism discussed in the previous chapter. The identification as part of a targeted generation and the unity of such implied by “brothers and sisters” also supports an “Us vs. Them” rhetorical position. There is also a powerful spiritual undertone to the phrase “brothers and sisters,” as it references themes of fellowship and solidarity. Such themes are capable of cutting across denominational boundaries and appealing to Catholics and Protestants alike. The direct reference to Jesus Christ is also decidedly neutral, betraying no particular denominational bias.

The institutions identified in the Pledge form the backbone of Rock for Life’s construction of the dominant culture as a culture of death. A section on the Rock for Life webpage entitled “The Dark Side” details Rock for Life’s issues with each of the institutions named in the Pledge, with different degrees of criticism. Planned Parenthood in particular is referenced by Rock for Life as the face of what they call the “abortion industry.” Rock for Life states: “for over 60 years, Planned Parenthood has worked to convince young people and adults that contraception is something as simple and as healthy as brushing our teeth, and abortion is a procedure as normal as a physical checkup…These lies have made a mighty healthy profit for Planned Parenthood. They cashed in over $50 million on the sale of abortion and birth control to teenagers just last year.” MTV’s inclusion in the Pledge is a direct reference not only to popular culture’s role in the creation and support of a culture of death, but a recognition of MTV’s position as an influential youth media outlet. Rock for Life cites MTV’s College Invasion Tour, which included safe sex information, as “another example of the sick, twisted morals that MTV pushes
on young people!” Rock for Life’s admonition of the government is a direct reference to the Supreme Court’s decision in *Roe v. Wade*, but also refers to government policies and laws in support of reproductive education. Rock for Life describes the government’s role in maintaining a culture of death thusly: “the U.S. has made the ability of a woman to obtain an abortion, one of the most accessible and protected rights of this century!”

Planned Parenthood, MTV and the government can all be considered stand-ins for much larger movements, institutions or aspects of American culture. MTV represents youth-oriented popular culture, especially music. Planned Parenthood is perhaps best understood as representing the larger successes of liberal feminism, the movement primarily responsible for legalizing abortion. But as the passage on selfishness quoted above illustrates, Rock for Life does not see abortion as a women’s rights issue; to them it is a social and cultural issue which affects everyone. Even in their criticism of our selfish dominant culture, Rock for Life is careful to consider the possibility of abortion as a “young couple’s” decision, reflecting a conservative inclination to implicitly support sex and reproduction only when it occurs within specific boundaries. Even though the group readily engages the issues of unwed mothers and teenage pregnancy, they frame their argument squarely within the confines of monogamous, heterosexual relations.

Rock for Life’s position in regard to the government is more complex. Rock for Life has sponsored voter registration drives to mobilize pro-life youth, and has actively petitioned Congress (Jones). They also recognize some government officials and politicians as allies. During the 32nd March for Life, held in January 2005, George W. Bush addressed pro-life supporters via telephone, saying: “we are working to promote a culture of life” (Ward and Doolittle). The President’s language is certainly in line with Rock for Life’s rhetoric, and the
group’s willingness to work within the system runs counter to the militant overtones of the Pledge. Interestingly, the Pledge makes no mention of the legal process, despite the reference to abortion as a protected right in “The Dark Side.” By keeping the message of opposition strong and the targets general, the Pledge is a site where self-identification as a supporter of its message can also have meaning. The Pledge is less a practical mission statement than a badge of support and understanding. Still, we can understand Rock for Life’s use of the government as including pro-choice legislators and the legal system which has consistently upheld the 1973 decision.

Much of Rock for Life’s cultural commentary cannot be categorized as fitting into any single one of the aforementioned institutions or movements. Rather, the criticisms levied by Rock for Life against the prevailing “culture of death” cite multiple factors, often addressing the interrelationship between two or more institutions. As a youth oriented pro-life activist group with a heavy interest in music, Rock for Life pays particular attention to issues involving popular music and musicians. Much of the group’s commentary utilizes music as the jumping off point for further cultural commentary. Although Rock for Life’s rhetorical positioning is evident in the critique of a selfish culture and the oppositional tenor of the Pro-Life Youth Pledge, Rock for Life’s frame of reference and the underlying pro-life philosophy are reinforced through the continued engagement of pro-life issues within popular music. Rock for Life’s public responses come off initially as simply supporting a pro-life agenda, but in many cases the rhetoric employed by the group serves to strengthen the oppositional, resistant position of the group in relation to the dominant culture.

*Rock and Resistance: Rock for Life’s Construction of Dominant Culture*

The self-conscious placement of Rock for Life in opposition to dominant culture has led to a number of very public disagreements with bands, organizations and institutions which the group
has identified as supporting a culture of death. The American Life League’s campaign against Planned Parenthood, for example, is shared by Rock for Life. In 1999 Rock for Life issued two press releases calling for a boycott of the Lilith Fair tour and subsequent CD release on the grounds that a portion of concert proceeds was donated to Planned Parenthood. Planned Parenthood is described in the May 28, 1999 Rock for Life press release as “the nation’s leading abortion industry organization.” The same press release cites a previous release titled “New Lilith Fair CD helps pay for deaths of future fans” (Rock for Life). The description of Planned Parenthood as the leading organization in the “abortion industry” gives us the first indication of Rock for Life’s conception of America’s dominant culture. Abortion is a for-profit service in the eyes of Rock for Life members, an industry supported by the culture at large. Rock for Life is particularly interested in exposing what they term ‘pro-abortion supporters’ within the ranks of American pop culture figures. The public call to boycott the tour and the CD highlights Rock for Life’s concern with this support, and the connection between music artists and abortion is a frequent topic of Rock for Life press releases and public news accounts.

Rock for Life’s call for a boycott of Lilith Fair and its products overtly identifies the group as pro-life inasmuch as their primary argument against Lilith Fair is the festival’s support of legalized abortion. The May 28, 1999 press release and another, from July 21, also provide evidence of the connection between Rock for Life’s pro-life position and a more general opposition to a liberal dominant culture. The May 28 press release identifies Planned Parenthood’s sex education site Teenwire.com as a “web site designed to corrupt the minds of the young… parents should not allow their children to attend Lilith Fair concerts this summer as the Teen Wire information will also be distributed at the events” (Rock for Life). The press release also notes, “the content of the Teen Wire web site is likened to the many web sites
warranting congressional action to protect children” (Rock for Life). In addition to the warning about Teenwire.com’s content, Rock for Life’s founder, Bryan Kemper, cites the exclusivity of Lilith Fair’s non-profit information areas as evidence of a pro-abortion bias. In the July 21 press release titled “Lilith Fair’s Pro-Abortion Bias Leaves Some Women’s Issues in the Dust,” Kemper urges “pro-life women and pro-lifers in general” to not attend Lilith Fair. Kemper is quoted as saying:

Access to non-profit areas at all Lilith Fair concerts has been denied to pro-life women’s groups, including Feminists for Life and Rock For Life… Lilith Fair is supposed to represent women and their views, but they’re keeping the real message censored… Lilith Fair makes plenty of room for organizations that murder little babies and even gives them money to do it, but they won’t allow a voice from those women who wish to save little children… But what can you say? The whole “Lilith” idea is based on a mythological woman who is really the ultimate lesbian avenger out to kill children in their sleep. Look it up! The symbolism is pretty deep here. (Rock for Life)

Kemper’s argument illustrates Rock for Life’s rhetorical position in opposition to dominant culture in a number of ways. He identifies Rock for Life as a pro-life women’s group, not a pro-life youth group. In this particular instance, calling Rock for Life a women’s group positions Rock for Life not only as a marginalized voice in the larger culture, but within the specific context of the Lilith Fair as well. Lilith Fair was created by female musicians who felt the need to mark out their own territory in the crowded, male dominated music industry. The tour was a direct response to the marginalized position of women in music, as producers, composers, performers and consumers. By claiming that a tour initiated with the goal of providing space for
women in music was in fact excluding women with whom the tour organizers disagreed, Kemper positioned Rock for Life as a marginalized, resistant group unfairly barred from the event.

Kemper’s claim that the group has been shut out also serves to place Rock for Life in a marginalized position relative to the dominant culture, represented in this case by Lilith Fair. This is an especially powerful claim when coupled with the assertion that Rock for Life, as a women’s group, has “the real message,” a message the abortion industry and their partners in pop culture, Lilith Fair, are trying to keep from getting out. There is also a veiled allusion to truth made by Kemper when he challenges the reader to verify his claim that Lilith is a mythological figure, a child-killing lesbian. Although the effectiveness of this kind of challenge as a rhetorical strategy can be debated, it is clear Kemper is interested in portraying Lilith Fair as a liberal (lesbian), pro-abortion event actively preventing Rock for Life from voicing its conservative, non-mythology based opposition. Kemper’s argument is indicative of a larger cultural opposition which has at its root a core pro-life philosophy, and a pro-life identity informed by Rock for Life’s frame of reference.

A national press release from later the same year offers another example of Rock for Life’s rhetorical positioning. In a statement released on October 4, 1999 titled “Rock for Life Buyers and Parents Beware! Rage Against the Machine Promotes Violence, Hate Crimes and Death,” group members are urged to actively campaign against the band. As with their call for a boycott of Lilith Fair, Rock for Life group leaders cite Rage Against the Machine’s support of pro-abortion organizations as the primary reason to boycott. The release begins by stating that the band supports “the pro-abortion and anti-Christian organizations Rock for Choice and Refuse and Resist,” but moves on to address more general cultural concerns. Rock for Life points to Rage Against the Machine’s website for evidence of their support of destructive cultural values.
Specifically, Rock for Life cites the band’s suggested reading list, which includes work by Mumia Abu-Jamal, Karl Marx, Vladimir Lenin and Friedrich Nietzsche. Rock for Life director Erik Whittington is quoted in the release:

Marx is the author of the most oppressive regimes in history, Lenin starved millions of his own people and Nietzsche’s philosophy justified the Nazi regime. Is this the kind of band parents want their children listening to? ... Is it any wonder why tragedies such as the one at Columbine High School take place?... We’ve had enough of violence, hate and death. Turn Rage Against the Machine off. (Rock for Life)

Whittington clearly links the availability of works by communist theorists to one of America’s most horrific school shootings. And despite the questionable phrasing of his statements and their dubious accuracy, Whittington takes care to bring the whole issue back to the prevalence of violence in a culture of death.

Whittington’s argument also connects Rage Against the Machine’s popularity to the potential for widespread dissemination of these destructive cultural values. He states, “because music fans continue to buy Rage Against the Machine CDs and concert tickets, the band is given a huge platform to spew their hateful propaganda while thousands numbfully accept it as gospel” (Rock for Life). The popularity of the band, Whittington argues, is both the result of, and results in, an audience which is “numb,” a consumer group swayed not by the content of the message necessarily, but by the position of the people conveying it. The “huge platform” Whittington warns of extends beyond music to include MTV, the music press, concerts and band merchandise. According to Rock for Life, popular culture and the band’s popularity work together to disseminate Rage Against the Machine’s message of “violence, hate and death,” with obvious and terrible consequences.
Rock for Life’s responses are particularly telling, both in the case of the Lilith Fair boycott and the statement against Rage Against the Machine. At the same time Rock for Life was calling for concert and CD boycotts, they were launching their own tours and releasing their own CDs. The “huge platform” provided by popular culture is not the problem for Rock for Life, the message is. Instead of advocating for a completely new system, Rock for Life seeks to provide alternatives to the dominant entertainments and their message of death. In a press release dated August 21, 2000, Rock for Life announced the release of a “Best Of” CD featuring a dozen songs donated to the group for inclusion on the album. In the release Whittington states, “this CD is a way to use music to spread the message that all human life, from fertilization to natural death, is special and should be protected by law” (Rock for Life). Rock for Life’s willingness to work within the capitalist system (and the legal system, as indicated by his call for life to be “protected by law”) is indicative of an Americanist Catholic approach to social reform. Rock for Life’s standard strategy in regards to popular culture products is to boycott them, a clear recognition of the power of consumers in a capitalist marketplace. But while the group acknowledges this power, Rock for Life’s rhetoric clearly places the group as an island in the stream, constantly working to reverse the flow of destructive cultural ideals disseminated by the dominant culture.

Rock for Life’s position does not prevent them, however, from utilizing messages contained in products of the dominant culture to their own ends. In fall 2000, Rock for Life released a statement thanking Kid Rock “for confirming post-abortion trauma in men” (Rock for Life). Whittington related Kid Rock’s song “Abortion” to the continuing debate surrounding post-abortion trauma, citing it as evidence against “Big Abortion” (Rock for Life). “If Kid Rock is willing to confirm the reality of post-abortion trauma in men,” Whittington argues, “then why
does Big Abortion deny that post-abortion trauma exists?” The existence of such a song, produced by a popular rock artist, is cited by Whittington as an example of the shaky ground “Big Abortion” has built its argument on. The argument suggests a reasoning that operates as an “if, then” proposition. If somebody as openly hedonistic as Kid Rock is willing to say this, then you really have to wonder how seriously to take the arguments of pro-abortion organizations. Lending credence to the supposition that we are meant to see Kid Rock as an otherwise poor role model, the press release includes this caveat: “Rock For Life does not endorse Kid Rock’s music or lifestyle” (Rock for Life). Kid Rock is only useful to Rock for Life as an example of the fallibility of pro-abortion arguments. His larger place in popular culture and the negative message of his “music and lifestyle” cannot be overcome simply by expressing the existence of post-abortion trauma. Despite Rock for Life’s use of him as an example, Kid Rock is not pro-life.

More recently, Rock for Life has publicly challenged Amnesty International to answer for its adoption of a new worldwide policy to support abortion rights for women who have become pregnant as the result of rape, or for whom carrying a child could be fatal (Henderson). This policy shift would be reason enough for Rock for Life to issue a public statement, given the group’s philosophy. The group’s argument, however, focused on the connection between Amnesty’s policy shift and the pro-life stance of musicians who had recently contributed to an Amnesty International fundraising CD. The album, which features covers of John Lennon songs by acts such as Green Day, U2, Christina Aguilera and Avril Lavigne, was released to help raise money for survivors of the ongoing conflict in Darfur. Interestingly, Amnesty’s policy shift was made in part to help support women in the war-torn region who became pregnant as the result of rape. For Rock for Life, the timing of the CD release and Amnesty’s move to what Rock for
Life considers a more lenient position on abortion is nothing more than a backhanded attempt to present popular artists as supportive of abortion, when some of them may, in fact, not be.

Rock for Life director Erik Whittington calls Amnesty’s conditional support of abortion, made official two-months after the fundraising CD was released, “hypocrisy” (Chittendon and Gadher). He is quoted:

The human suffering going on right now in Darfur is horrific. To add insult to injury, however, using this tragic abuse of human rights to raise money for a pro-abortion organization is hypocritical and beyond belief. The manipulation of musicians to fund this hypocrisy is maddening… We are writing to all the artists to ask for their views. We know bands like Green Day are against us because we have had stalls at festivals where the band has burnt our literature on stage. Others, like U2, are more neutral.

Whittington’s initial concern is the support of a “pro-abortion organization,” and the use of musicians to help buttress that support amongst a broader audience. At least two artists, Christina Aguilera and Avril Lavigne, have expressed pro-life beliefs (Chittendon and Gadher). Interestingly, both were also raised Catholic, a point which may have played a role in Rock for Life’s response. Rock for Life’s substantive argument seems to be made on behalf of these two artists; Rock for Life has accused Amnesty International of “duping” Aguilera and Lavigne specifically. But Whittington quickly returns to familiar rhetorical ground, ultimately framing the argument as an “Us vs. Them” proposition. When Whittington recounts the story of Green Day burning Rock for Life literature on stage, he describes the band as “against us,” placing Green Day within the larger category of “Them,” pro-abortion supporters and organizations. Rock for Life’s public reaction to Amnesty International operates as something more than an attempt to raise awareness of a multi-national organization’s policy shift, and whether that shift
manipulated musicians. Their public reaction is framed to reinforce Rock for Life’s rhetorical position as oppositional to the dominant culture.

Rock for Life’s rhetorical positioning, whether through the Pro-Life Youth Pledge or press releases, heralds the group’s opposition to the culture of death. Rhetorical efforts in and of themselves should not be seen as inherently resistant. They may, however, be seen as representatives of the potential for resistance. No more than the passive consumption of a t-shirt slogan equates to activism on behalf of the person wearing the shirt, stating you stand for something other than the dominant culture doesn’t mean you separate yourself from the dominant culture. If, as discussed in Chapter One, we can agree that subcultural group members are also always members of the dominant culture, true separatism is impossible. This is further complicated in the case of Rock for Life by their willingness to work within not only the larger capitalist economic structure, but government and religious institutions as well. There is very little about Rock for Life’s actions which can be considered, initially at least, resistant in traditional subculture studies terms. Instead of considering resistance in political or economic terms, we must look at resistance as a subcultural symbol.

*The Meaning of Resistance*

Resistance is meaningful only within the context of any subcultural group’s frame of reference. The subculture theory of the CCCS has been criticized for trying to find resistant trends in subcultural groups to support a pre-defined theoretical position. This criticism has been overstated, as discussed in previous chapters of this thesis. Moreover, questions of resistance – whether a group is truly resistant to dominant culture – miss the larger issue, specifically whether the subcultural group in question is really trying to be resistant. Previous studies, by both CCCS-informed subculture researchers and post-subculture scholars, have been bogged down in
questions of resistance and the viability of subcultures to effect social and political change. Many of these studies have offered insightful analyses of subcultural groups, but few address what resistance means to the group itself. As a result, scholars have focused on a question which ultimately does not fit the case; the intention, after all, has been (or should have been) to offer analysis of subcultures, not philosophical treatises on the possibility of true resistance.

There is no ‘true resistance’ to dominant culture. The meaning of resistance is constructed in concert with a subcultural group’s perception of the dominant culture. Multiple subcultural groups with a shared core philosophy but differing frames of reference may have opposite conceptions of ‘resistance’ based on their individual rhetorical positions. Rock for Life, for example, has a non-violence policy, and throughout its history has had no violent altercations with police or pro-choice organizations (Jones). This is despite echoing Operation Rescue leader Randall Terry’s description of a selfish culture. Some Operation Rescue members openly advocated violence, including abortion clinic bombings and murdering abortion providers (Williams and Blackburn). Both Rock for Life and Operation Rescue have at their core a pro-life philosophy, but their differing frames of reference result in distinct definitions of resistance.

Rock for Life members resist dominant culture in ways which are meaningful within their frame of reference. When Rock for Life members choose an independently produced contemporary Christian release over a mainstream CD, they are resisting the popular entertainment created within a culture of death. The album, even if it doesn’t contain an overt pro-life message, still functions as a subcultural symbol. The act of purchasing the CD, of choosing one over the other, is also a symbolic act with an understood meaning between group members. Previous subculture research would perhaps be inclined to suggest that such symbolic resistance is empty, that there is no real power in it. Again, this supposes the subcultural group
is trying to be resistant in the same way the researcher is describing. If we are to study
subcultural groups first and assign theoretical meaning later, we must see that the power of
resistance, or resistant acts, lies in the meaningful relationship of a subcultural group’s members
to one another, their frame of reference, and their shared symbols. Resistance is a group-specific
subcultural symbol, dependent upon both the group’s frame of reference and the operative
conception of the dominant culture for its meaning.

David Muggleton discusses the importance of allowing subcultural groups to speak for
themselves insofar as their resistant behavior is concerned (152). Muggleton notes that it is
possible, provided the proper subcultural model is employed, to understand the multiplicity of
meanings which may be in circulation at any given time in a subcultural group. He states:

[T]here could be as many types of subcultural resistance (or ways of demonstrating core
commitment) as there are members who hold these different definitions. What typically
occurs in practice, however, is that the academic imposes an *a priori*, holistic and
objective standard of resistance – commitment to a lifestyle outside conventional society
– against which the great majority of subculturalists are inauthenticated and marginalized
because they do not measure up to this (actually very particular and partial) definition.

(152)

Muggleton’s point is well taken. What this analysis has suggested is a model – the core
philosophy/frame of reference model – that is capable, with the implementation of ethnographic
methods and data collection, of providing a space within academic research for the varied voices
and experiences of subcultural group members. But it also suggests that there is a binding
element which operates to consolidate meaning within specific frames of reference. Each
member may have a different view of what resistance means, but to be a member of a subcultural
group necessitates a way of authenticating (to borrow from Muggleton for a moment) resistant acts within the group’s frame of reference. Muggleton is correct to say that resistance should not be determined by the scholar, but his suggestion is too open ended to be practical in application. There must be a shared understanding between group members about what resistance means, and the forms it takes, if resistance is to operate as a meaningful symbol. There may be as many types of subcultural resistance as there are groups, but applying the same standard to individuals reduces subcultural systems of meaning into nothing more than differences in personal taste.

Muggleton also touches on a question discussed at length in the conclusion of this analysis. In the previous quote Muggleton was talking specifically about differences between what academics see as resistant in a particular subcultural group and what subcultural group members considered resistant. In the case of Rock for Life, we have a group which superficially meets very few of the criteria which seem to dominate the groups often chosen for subculture study. Some Rock for Life members may dress like punks, but as punk style has become integrated into youth fashion on the whole, it may be harder to tell at first glance which subculture to place them in. This is made more difficult by the group’s contradictory rhetoric. Rock for Life is a socially and politically conservative organization. Yet they never call themselves conservative. Their inter-denominational positioning makes it hard to place the group as a whole within any one specific religious doctrine, despite their ties to conservative Catholicism.

Instead of focusing attention on which elements make Rock for Life a subcultural group, this thesis has shown that the group’s rhetoric of resistance, the core of Rock for Life’s frame of reference, is the result of multiple influences and continued interaction by members. The effectiveness of the group’s rhetoric is not (and should not be) the most pressing question to subculture scholars at this point. Understanding how the group creates and disseminates
meaning is the first step to revealing the importance and impact of such rhetoric in American culture. If any given culture is made up of multiple perspectives then it should be the goal of scholars to examine how perspectives are formed and transmitted over time and space, with the understanding that their own point of view is but one of many, and not necessarily the most important.
CONCLUSION

Cultural studies is not a discipline which should be primarily concerned with determining what actions constitute ‘true’ anything. Cultural studies is best suited to examining why things are believed to be true, how they become socially accepted and supported, and who benefits from that acceptance and support. These same concerns can be addressed in subculture study, with the understanding that political implications should only come after sufficient analysis, if at all. Rock for Life’s use of resistance as a subcultural symbol forces cultural studies scholars to move beyond questions of whether true resistance is possible and focus once again on how subcultural groups develop and maintain systems of meaning. Members of Rock for Life are in constant communication with the dominant culture they rhetorically oppose, and their symbols are constantly employed to reinforce this opposition. Resistance to America’s culture of death is predicated on a shared understanding of the relationship between Rock for Life’s members, the group’s frame of reference, and their rhetorical position. Documenting and respecting this relationship in all subcultural groups is vital if cultural studies is to make progress and escape the rut decades of political and theoretical wrangling have created.

Clearly, Rock for Life supports what many would consider to be a conservative social and political perspective. This does not, or should not, diminish the argument that they are a subcultural group. Rock for Life’s political activity and conservatism present scholars with a unique opportunity to explore the ways in which previous subculture study has been remiss in examining all of the potential permutations of subculture and subcultural groups. This analysis is an example of how, with some adjustments, groups like Rock for Life can be considered in terms which have otherwise been reserved for other, more academically acceptable subjects such as punk and straightedge. Whether we are inclined to agree with their rhetorical position or are
critical of it, the use and deployment of resistance as a meaningful symbol by socially and politically conservative groups is an area worth studying in depth. Doing so would not only correct a glaring void in contemporary subculture study, but could also lead to a better understanding of how conservative groups construct and disseminate meaning in the larger culture.

Still, this analysis cannot be seen as apolitical. Rock for Life is a politically active organization, and its rhetorical position is grounded in political ideals. As we saw in Chapter Two, some of these ideals come from the seemingly incompatible traditions of the pro-life movement, American Catholicism and middle-class youth activism. Although Rock for Life does not openly position itself as socially conservative, its agenda must be interpreted as such. The group’s conception of dominant culture is coded as liberal; however, the willingness of group members to work within the larger governmental and economic system can be seen to ultimately support the culture they rhetorically oppose. For these reasons alone it would be disingenuous to claim that this work is bereft of actual or potential political meaning. But recognizing this does little to illuminate the meaning created by group members themselves, and in any case can only be seen after undertaking a study such as this in the first place. The subcultural group creates meaning long before the scholar takes notice. Indeed, it is often the successful creation and public display of meaningful subcultural symbols which draws the scholar’s attention in the first place.

This work suggests a model for subculture study which readily makes the distinction between the political concerns of academic theorists and the more practical political activity of groups such as Rock for Life. Post-subculture critics have made the case that the kind of resistance implied by Hebdige’s work can no longer be considered valid. Post-modern theory has largely
done away with the idea of a single dominant culture, and so there is nothing to be resistant against in Hebdige’s model. This position does not address the crucial question of whether or not the subcultural group being studied takes this into consideration. Rock for Life’s construction of a dominant culture may or may not fit into academic models or definitions, but their relationship to it is vital to their frame of reference. Larger political concerns expressed by scholars and informed by academic theory must come second to the active positioning of the group by its members. All subcultural groups position themselves, and this positioning should be examined first before academics attempt to determine a position for them. This approach is not only vital to understanding how a subcultural group has interpreted the influences which have helped to mold its frame of reference, but it is an approach interested in respecting the point of view of the subjects being studied.

Subculture analysis informed by post-modern theory may not have the same potentially dangerous deterministic tendencies as cultural studies critics consumed with questions about the possibility of true resistance, but such analysis is equally problematic. David Chaney’s argument that the distinction between subcultures and dominant cultures is no longer relevant “in a world where the so-called dominant culture has fragmented into a plurality of lifestyle sensibilities and preferences” (47) contradicts David Muggleton’s call for privileging the voice of the subject in subculture study. In the case of Rock for Life, their distinction between themselves as a resistant group and the larger culture is vitally important to their group identity. A scholar working within Chaney’s framework would be hard pressed to take Rock for Life’s rhetoric seriously.

This analysis has relied on the terms suggested by Albert Cohen and Robert Wood – frame of reference, symbol - because they are strong, working alternatives to the problematic approaches suggested by other scholars. Subculture study as envisioned by the members of the CCCS was
hindered in part by a theoretical position which privileged groups who could be seen as resistant in a post-Marxist framework. However, textual analysis, their primary method, remains a valuable tool for initial examinations of subcultural groups, and has been heavily employed in this analysis. Post-subculture scholars informed by post-modern theory have justly argued for the inclusion of subcultural members’ perspectives. It is unclear, however, how a post-modern view “emphasizing the importance of discursive rearticulation” (Zizek 20) has room for groups which create oppositional relationships to dominant culture.

The historical factors that have influenced Rock for Life’s frame of reference provide a remarkable example of how important it is to place a subcultural group into context. Without an understanding of how pro-life activism, American Catholicism and middle-class youth activism have influenced Rock for Life’s frame of reference, scholars would be hard-pressed to explain the seemingly irreconcilable contradiction of the group’s rhetoric of resistance. Some scholars, perhaps relying on superficial elements such as style and music, may even have dismissed Rock for Life as an amalgamation of mainstream, commodified signs of youthful rebellion, but not a subcultural group. By understanding the cultural influences which define the group’s frame of reference, Rock for Life can be seen as a subcultural group, albeit one with a social and political perspective previously overlooked in subculture study.

As originally conceived, this analysis intended to include a significant subjective viewpoint. Interviews and surveys with Rock for Life administrators, members, concert attendees and activists, as well as pro-life band members, were planned for but not executed. Time constraints and travel restrictions made data collection nearly impossible. Completing this unfinished aspect will flesh out the work outlined in this analysis and provide space for Rock for Life’s members’ voices.
This analysis suggests a refocusing of subculture study back onto subcultures and away from the heated debate over the meaning of the term and its political implications. We’ve seen how arguments over theoretical approaches and methodology have led to what Wood calls “a stagnant body of subculture theory” (13). By returning attention to the creation of systems of meaning within subcultural groups, cultural studies scholars can begin to break out of the continuing debate over subculture. The core philosophy/frame of reference model also alleviates the tendency to reify a subculture as a single, immutable entity. Such conceptions no longer apply, especially when we consider that the subculture which was the catalyst for much of the debate as it stands today, punk, is still relevant 30 years from its inception.

Additionally, reevaluation of other subculture studies presents the opportunity to implement the analytic model suggested here. As alluded to in a number of the examples included in this analysis, the application of the core philosophy/frame of reference model to the punk, goth and skinhead subcultures can be expected to provide valuable insight into the ever shifting meanings of subcultural group symbols in relation to core philosophies. Instead of adapting subculture theory as subcultures have evolved, scholars have become preoccupied with questioning whether the initial work ‘got it right.’ As cultural studies moves forward, we must remain focused on the systems of meaning created by individuals and groups. The model suggested here, articulated through an analysis of Rock for Life, is suggested with this goal in mind. Cultural studies scholars should be concerned first and foremost with the systems of meaning created by subcultural groups, including members’ own perspectives on resistance, before applying their own set of theoretical or political meanings.
NOTES

1 It is perhaps ironic that so much time and effort has been expended over the course of three decades in trying to describe the meaning of these words amongst academics whose interests lie in explaining meanings within small groups to others.

2 In Muggleton and Weinzierl’s collection for example, Pearson and Mungham’s work is cited only three times in some 20 separate chapters, despite the assertion of the editors that *Working Class Youth Culture* is a “crucial” text for understanding the “political and methodological assumptions of CCCS subcultural theory” (4n).

3 Also cited by Hebdige (180), interestingly enough.
WORKS CITED


