Disqualifying the Official: An Exploration of Social Resistance Through the Subculture of Skateboarding

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This paper describes some of the ways in which popular culture may be a site of social resistance. The subculture of skateboarding is described as one form of popular culture that resists capitalist social relations, and the skateboarders' particularly overt resistance to an amateur contest provides a framework for characterizing their daily and more covert behaviors of resistance. Although social resistance has the potential to change dominant social relations, it is often limited by contradictions and accommodations. In this case, the skateboarders' sexist behavior is one of their significant contradictions. Finally, some implications of social resistance are addressed.

Cette étude porte sur la culture populaire comme site possible de résistance sociale. La sous-culture de la planche à roulette est décrite comme une forme de culture populaire qui résiste aux relations sociales capitalistes. La résistance particulièrement explicite de ses pratiquants et pratiquantes à un concours amateur suggère un cadre d'analyse permettant de caractériser leurs comportements de résistance quotidiens. Quoique la résistance sociale peut potentiellement changer les relations sociales dominantes, elle est souvent limitée par les contradictions et compromis. Dans le cas présent, les comportements sexistes des planchistes constituent une des contradictions significatives. En dernier lieu sont discutées certaines implications en terme de résistance sociale.

Popular cultural activities, including sport, have typically been analyzed as a means of reproducing dominant cultural norms and values. From a critical perspective, sport has been viewed as maintaining the dominant group’s position by reaffirming and reproducing inequitable social relations associated with capitalism, patriarchy, and racism (e.g., Bray, 1988; Messner, 1992; Sage, 1990). More recently, sport has also been analyzed as a place where dominant values and norms are challenged and where alternative norms and values are created (e.g., Birrell & Richter, 1987; Klein, 1991; Stevenson, 1991; Young, 1983). This study considers the way in which one form of popular culture, skateboarding, has been used to resist dominant norms and values.

Hegemony Theory

Gramsci’s (1971) concept of hegemony, his insight and analysis of power and social change, necessitates a serious investigation of culture. Hegemony is

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not simply the notion that dominant group ideas are transferred to the minds of subordinate groups through superstructural means. It implies the active consent of the subordinate group in creating and maintaining its subordinate status. This active consent is encouraged by the dominant group’s ability to create limits on the range of what is perceived to be acceptable or even possible. In this way, subordinate groups actively choose from the dominant group’s agenda, maintaining a semblance of freedom while reinforcing the dominant group’s interests.

Active consent occurs not simply by consciously acknowledging certain ideas but by arranging one’s behaviors by those ideas. In other words, active consent occurs by embracing and living out dominant values and norms, and this occurs in the ordinary experiences of people. Hegemony is the process by which ideologies become materialized through the everyday experiences of people: how ideologies are internalized, struggled over, negotiated, opposed, and lived out. Hebdige (1979) described this relationship of ideology and everyday practices: “Since ideology saturates everyday discourse in the form of common sense, it can not be bracketed off from everyday life as a self-contained set of ‘political opinions’ or ‘biased views’” (p. 12). Williams described this relationship as a “decisive” component of hegemony: “What is decisive is not only the conscious system of ideas and beliefs, but the whole lived process as practically organized by specific dominant meanings and values” (1977, p. 109).

Resistance to hegemonic forms of everyday life represents a significant foundation for social change. This change may be reformist or revolutionary, but in any case, social change is created by social actors and not by a predetermined system of evolutionary economics. Notably, the challenge to hegemony occurs in the civil society, in the everyday experiences of people, and this includes popular practices such as sport.

Hegemony, as a theoretical framework, brings light to how the issues of ideology and everyday life are not distinct entities but are interactive: how the dominant ideology affects subordinate subcultures and how those subcultures, in turn, respond to the effects of the dominant ideology. In this way, popular culture is more complex than just a breeding ground of false consciousness or simply a separate social space in which subordinate groups can express their interests. Instead, it is indicative of a dynamic culture, one that is continually being shaped by both hegemonic and counterhegemonic interests.

**Capitalist Ideology and Sport Practices**

Many researchers have described a dominant sport culture as one in which competition, extrinsic rewards, elitism based on skill, and specialization are central components (e.g., Donnelly, 1993; Stevenson, 1991). In addition, mainstream sport in North America has been associated with bureaucratic social relations (Berlage, 1982; O’Hanlon, 1980; Whitson, 1984). It has been argued that these structures of sport in North America are connected with capitalist ideology and therefore reinforce the lived practices and experiences of capitalist relations (Bray, 1988; Foley, 1990; O’Hanlon, 1980; Whitson, 1984). For example, Whitson (1984) argues that mainstream sports have been framed in the value structures of advanced capitalism: discipline, control, accountability, and bureaucratic rationalization that has created a managerial level of “experts.”
Whitson claims that this reaffirmation of capitalistic values outside of the work force confirmed those values as natural or as "common sense." Similarly, Foley notes, "The great ideological struggle in advanced capitalist societies is not only over explicit political ideologies but also over one's mode of identity expression" (1990, p. 186), and, "Youths practice, learn, and anticipate their different class identities and roles through the way they play football, display peer status, and horse around in the classrooms" (p. 192).

In summary, the structure and relations of corporate bureaucracies are prevalent in mainstream North American sport. When popular cultural activities are structured by corporate bureaucratic social relations, they reproduce the dominant group's position by promoting and legitimizing the values and norms that underlie capitalism. This also decreases the validity of alternative relations. As Donnelly (1988) notes, "Such standardization of cultural forms has carried with it a powerful tendency to naturalize the dominant values and social relations of capitalist consumer culture. With this naturalization comes a loss of choice and a loss of awareness of choices which may be available" (p. 73).

**Challenges to Capitalist Ideologies and Practices in Sport**

As stated previously, hegemony is never secured, and within most practices of popular culture there are elements of hegemony and counterhegemony. Alternative practices, or resistances, are continually challenging the hegemony of the dominant group, but this struggle is full of apparent contradictions because it is encased in a hegemonic while simultaneously trying to break it down. Therefore, many resistant subcultures are not singularly transformative, but they do include forms of challenge as well as forms of accommodation.

Numerous individual and daily resistances occur in mainstream sport, but this study investigates a subcultural form of resistance which entails ritualistic patterns that go beyond individuals testing the limits of organized sport practices. In the subculture of skateboarding, the most blatant form of resistance revealed in this study was the opposition to the corporate bureaucratic forms of sport (and, as a consequence, corporate bureaucratic social relations). This subculture of skateboarding resisted by creating alternative norms and relations that emphasized participant control of the physical activity and open participation rather than elite competition.

**Methods**

Observation, participant-observation, and semistructured in-depth interviews were used to investigate the subculture of skateboarding in northeastern Colorado. In June 1989, I began observing skateboarders in Jamestown and Welton, Colorado, at popular skateboard spots (e.g., parking lots, university pedestrian walkways), skateboard shops, and a locally sponsored skateboard exhibition. The first subjects were friends' children and employees at skateboard

1The names of cities and participants have been changed to help ensure the anonymity of the participants.
shops. I introduced myself to others while they were skateboarding on the streets and asked if I could talk with them. They call themselves “skaters,” and the act of skateboarding they call “skating.” I met one of the female skaters (a rarity) through mutual membership in a local feminist group. I used snowball sampling, so these initial contacts led to many others. Over a 2-year period (1990–1992), I talked with 41 skaters, two skateboard shop owners, and several parents and siblings.

Of the 41 skateboarders, 24 were interviewed more than once, and 6 of those became my best informants since we formed a closer relationship that fostered more trust. This relationship consisted of continual feedback by which they checked the reliability of the information I was gathering and I, in turn, could continually refine and ask more pertinent questions. In addition, I spent over 100 hours observing skateboarders, many of whom I did not interview (they were observed in public spaces). Only 4 of the 41 participants were female. In addition, all were Anglo except for two Hispanic males. The average age of those participating was 16, but ages ranged from 10 to 25 years. The participants had skateboarded for an average of 4 years, but the range of their participation was from 1 to 15 years. My most consistent contacts were from two friendship groups of skaters. The group from Jamestown was younger (ages 10–16 years) and included two Hispanic males; the second group was from Welton, was older (ages 15–25 years), and included a female.

Once the study was complete, the analysis of their subculture was presented to approximately one third of the participants. Their comments served to reaffirm and fine-tune my conclusions. They especially wanted me to note their heterogeneity: Although they shared many norms and values, they did not share all values, and, therefore, just because they were all skateboarders did not mean that they were all good friends or were as homogenous as they are often portrayed in the media.

It is necessary to elaborate on the above comment because there was not a ubiquitous skateboard subculture. In fact, a variety of subgroups skateboarded. The skateboarders demonstrated a continuum of hegemonic to counterhegemonic behavior ranging from those who embraced the corporate bureaucratic form of the activity to those who resisted it. This study focused on those who resisted, but even within that group resistance was demonstrated through a variety of styles.

Skaters described those involved in corporate bureaucratic skating as “rats,” individuals who bought the commercially produced paraphernalia and plastered all their belongings with corporate logos. But, more distinctively, they were defined as kids who aspired to skate professionally. These skaters frequently sought sponsorship, which was pursued, for example, by creating videotapes of their skating and sending them to different corporations. In addition, these skaters entered competitions with the intent of seeking the needed recognition for sponsorship.

Another group of skaters resisted the professionalization of their physical activity. They defined skateboarding as a way of living and rejected any notions that the activity should be used a way of making a living. As a consequence, their relationship with commercially produced products was carefully negotiated. For example, they bought commercially produced skateboards (many tried to make their own but claimed they were not as good) but decorated their boards
with their own symbols, which, in a few cases, included poetry. They no longer bought the "right" clothes or commercially produced stickers; instead they were more innovative with their clothing and often created their own stickers, leaving samples displayed where they skated. The styles of expression varied greatly, and the skaters classified each by an association with a type of music or style of skating. Some of these included "hippies," "punks," "skinheads," "frat boys," "metalers" (i.e., those who listened to heavy metal music), "rappers," and "old timers" (e.g., those who did slalom skating as opposed to "trick" skating).

Although the skaters recognized and labeled their internal differences, they also acknowledged their own subcultural status. The following letter to a newspaper editor from a teenage skater illustrates this self-definition:

Skaters have a completely different culture from the norms of the world's society. We dress differently, we have our own language, use our own slang, and live by our own rules. People feel threatened by foreign attitudes. Everyone has his own views on different types of society and their own stereotypes. . . . Please stop viewing us a totally negative race of people. The few people who have come up and watched us skate and spoken to us know that we are nice, educated, and intelligent. (Maeda, 1991, p. 17)

This study concentrates on those who opposed the professionalization of their activity.

**Skateboarding as a Cultural Site of Social Resistance**

As with other popular cultural activities, skateboarding is not inherently counterhegemonic or hegemonic; instead, it may carry both sets of meanings, sometimes simultaneously. As Bennett (1986) stated,

The field of popular culture is structured by the attempt of the ruling class to win hegemony and by the forms of opposition to this endeavor. As such, it consists not simply of an imposed mass culture that is coincident with dominant ideology, nor simply of spontaneously oppositional cultures, but is rather an area of negotiation between the two within which . . . dominant, subordinate and oppositional cultural and ideological values and elements are "mixed" in different permutations. (pp. xv-xvi)

Since the early 1960s, skateboarding in the United States has gone through periods of popularity. At times of high popularity, various commercial interests have tried to capitalize on the activity by promoting it as part of the dominant sport culture, that is, as a legitimate sport, one which promotes competition, win-at-all-costs attitude, and extrinsic rewards. This trend toward commercialization and legitimization appears to be common with many nontraditional sports, such as rock climbing (Donnelly, 1993) and mountain biking (Gray, 1992). The following outlines how this process has occurred in skateboarding.
Corporate Bureaucracy of Skateboarding

The governing body for skateboarding is the National Skateboard Association (NSA). It was founded in 1981 by Frank Hawk, the father of a talented skater, Tony Hawk, and was initially associated with the Boy Scouts of America. In 1986, the NSA received nonprofit corporation status from the State of California. Since then, the board of directors have included the chief executive officers of the major corporations who market to skateboarders (e.g., Vision, Powell/Peralta, Santa Cruz, and Transworld Skateboard and Thrasher magazines; NSA, 1990). At this time, the NSA is the main agency for the industry to encourage the commercial growth of the sport. In order to promote the sport, the NSA sponsors amateur and professional events throughout the country. Recently, state affiliates have been created (e.g., the Colorado Skateboard Association, or CSA).

The aim of the NSA is clearly to create an organized, competitive, and commercialized sport of skateboarding. The NSA states its purposes as follows:

1. To maintain the NSA as a nonprofit corporation for the international betterment of skateboarding and recognition of skateboarding as a sport.
2. To establish an office to be the headquarters for the association in order to communicate with the world on skateboard matters and keep records. (NSA, 1990)

The current president of the NSA, Don Bostick, reiterated this commitment to a corporate form of sport by describing the NSA’s goal as making skateboarding “more professional and more accepted, . . . similar to Little League” (personal communication, November 25, 1991).

Subculture of Skateboarding

Members of the subculture whom I observed used the materials created by the skateboard industry, but they did so in a manner that did not fully support the industry’s goal of mainstreaming (“Little Leaguing”) skateboarding. Resistance to such bureaucratization was also demonstrated in the structure and values of the subculture. There were no exclusive positions, no championships, no elite standards, no end goal to achieve, and nothing to win. Doug, a 25-year-old skater from Welton, described how skating was different from organized sports: “I don’t hear skaters whining about, you know, other people being better than them or striving to be, or bumming out because they’re not mastering something, whereas in other athletics they do, they’re really, ya, there’s a pressure to succeed where there isn’t in skateboarding because there’s not huge goals to attain.” In this environment there was little need to compete, as Sam, a young teen from Jamestown, stated: “You don’t need to be all that good to have fun . . . [you] don’t have to compete to have fun.” In fact, competitive attitudes were discouraged, as reflected in the following statement by Jeff, a 17-year-old from Welton: “Nobody really seemed to like competitive natures. For instance, me, Philip, and a couple of our friends all found that to be a really turn off. This guy would pull a really good trick and rub it in their faces. And then there’s Hugh who can do stuff and he doesn’t go, ‘oh wow, bet you can’t.’ But he’s fun to be with . . . and he encourages you, so that’s pretty cool.”
Within this flexible and informal structure, the skateboarders controlled the physical activity, and they were the experts. This popular practice of skateboarding had no rules, no coaches, and no referees. As Craig, a 21-year-old from Welton, suggested, "It's not as military minded [as other sports] there are no manuals or no coaches . . . [you're] not part of a machine, [you] go at your own pace, to each his own." The participants created their own tricks and games, and they determined which tricks they practiced and how long. In the process of controlling their own physical activity, the participants also controlled their own bodies. Such values and behaviors oppose those associated with corporate bureaucratic relations, and in the grassroots practice of skateboarding resistance is evident in the creation of a participant-controlled activity that de-emphasizes competition. There is also tension between the grassroots practice of skateboarding and the bureaucratized form of the activity. The following example of overt and explicit resistance is reprised in the more covert and subtle everyday acts of resistance described subsequently.

Amateur Contest as an Overt Example of Resistance

In the summer of 1991 the Colorado Skateboard Association (CSA) sponsored a series of eight amateur contests along the eastern flank of the Rocky Mountains including the cities of Colorado Springs, Denver, and Jamestown. I attended three of these events. Although the CSA was the major sponsor, most of the work was done at the local level. In each of the cities a local skateboard shop created the contest course and coordinated staff and officials including the CSA volunteers, the judges, and commentators. The CSA volunteers were adult women who handled the finances, registration, and record keeping. The judges were the local skateboarding leaders who were older and also employees at the local skateboard shop. Another local skater would comment in disc jockey style between the music that was blasted over a public address system. Those who officially participated paid an initial $40 fee and $10 more for each competition in which they participated.

Most of those attending the contests were not actually competing but rather participating in the peripheral activities of watching, fraternizing, and skating apart from the contest. These skaters used the contests to meet new people, learn new tricks, and skate on new and challenging courses which they rushed to during the warm-up periods. In addition, many of the contestants were skaters who closely associated with the grassroots form of skateboarding but who defined and used the contest as an opportunity to meet personal needs as opposed to fully adopting the values of the CSA. As Doug stated, "Skaters, even in contests, it's more an attitude of having your best run, making all your tricks as opposed to beating somebody. It's not 'I got to beat this guy, this is the guy I'm going to beat.' " This negotiation between a corporate form of skateboarding and the interests of the skaters is reflected in the registration process. Contestants placed themselves into an appropriate category based on age and experience. Each contestant then had a corresponding registration number and color to denote the category pinned on his shirt (there were no females in the competition). Many of the skaters pinned their numbers so they were difficult to read (e.g., upside down, or at the very bottom of the shirt). This intentional rejection of conformity
demonstrates that these skaters were not fully dedicated to values of mainstream sport.

The contests generally followed a set pattern. The order of participation was from the youngest and least experienced to the oldest and most experienced. Between each category there were warm-up periods in which only those who were about to compete were supposed to skate. For the competition, the participants in each category were to perform two rounds of a 2-minute routine on a skateboard course that consisted of a variety of obstacles such as ramps and parking blocks (none of the courses was standardized).

At one of the competitions, the CSA volunteers became concerned about the use of the warm-up periods because several skaters who were not officially entered were using the facilities, and even some who had officially entered were warming up out of sequence. This breach of CSA rules led to an announcement that only those who were about to compete could skate during the warm-up periods, and that included those who had paid an entrance fee but were skating out of turn. The CSA volunteers backed the announcement by adding that anyone who broke these rules would be disqualified. Neither the contestants nor the other skaters paid any heed to this and continued to skate on the equipment during the warm-up periods. The CSA representatives went out on the course and started to police the event. They ejected those who did not have a registration number pinned to their clothes and wrote down the numbers of those who were skating out of turn. Next, they announced over the public address system the numbers of those who had been disqualified.

The loose but smoothly running competition halted as skaters went to the judges’ stand to protest. The judges referred the protests to the CSA volunteers. Three skaters argued that the purpose of the event was to encourage skateboarding and that the organizers were not accomplishing that goal by limiting the use of the course. As the argument took place, most of the other skaters observed it, and the announcer started rapping, "You have all been D.Q.'ed . . . D.Q., you went to the Dairy Queen . . . D.Q., dumb queer, the dumb queer went to the Dairy Queen." Finally, a resolution was reached and it was announced that no one was disqualified, but instead the skaters were asked to allow the contestants to use their warm-up period without interference. In other words, the contest returned to a "free-skate" event. At the next competition, which was held 2 weeks later, the commentator sarcastically reminded people, while nonregistered skaters were on the course, that if anyone broke the rules they could be disqualified. No disqualifications occurred. The ability of the skaters to resist and negotiate with the CSA representatives demonstrated that they successfully challenged the official agenda.

The skateboarders’ resistance to the CSA-sponsored competition is an overt example of the struggle between the values of corporate bureaucratic interests (e.g., control by authority, elite competition) and the grassroots interests (e.g., control by participants, open participation). This overt opposition was indicative of the more subtle resistance that also occurred at these competitions.

De-emphasizing Elite Competition

The most frequently observed form of resistance during these amateur contests was opposition to the competitive environment. This was displayed
through a variety of behaviors. First, the lack of anxiety about competing was pervasive. The skaters had 2 minutes to impress the judges, but it was quite apparent that very few of the skaters had practiced a routine and there were few attempts to maximize the number of tricks. The majority of the skaters took their time skating a few tricks, taking a breather, and then continuing. This lack of concern for the outcome was particularly striking for one who had been heavily engaged in competitive athletics—the atmosphere was quite different. Not only did the skaters not have a planned routine or try to maximize their number of tricks, but they actually made fun of themselves while performing. For example, at one event the participants passed a curly brown wig through the crowd. Several skaters of various skill levels wore this during their 2 minutes. In addition, skaters who fell or made obvious errors in their tricks commonly stopped and bowed or laughed at themselves and then continued with their 2-minute run (as opposed to, for example, throwing a board or yelling obscenities in disgust).

The second behavior that contradicted the competitive environment that the CSA was trying to create was the extraordinary amount of support, both physical and emotional, the skaters gave each other. For example, most skaters do not own protective gear such as helmets and knee pads, yet the CSA required them to wear such equipment during contests. During these events, the skaters who owned protective gear commonly shared it among the participants. Skaters also demonstrated support when participants lost control and possession of their skateboards during the 2-minute run. In these cases, either the skateboards were quickly recovered by other participants, or other participants rolled their own skateboards out to the skater who had lost his. In addition, when participants made exceptional tricks or good runs, the skaters would show their support by clapping, screaming, and whistling.

I saw no overt signs of competitive attitude, no "in your face, I’m better than you are" gestures such as finger pointing at other participants. No one boasted after a good run, and there were no "end zone" dances of celebration. When skaters were satisfied they expressed it as a personal accomplishment, such as, "Wow, that’s the first time I ever pulled off that trick." They did not openly express these as a means of demonstrating superior qualities or of socially bettering themselves.

The competitive environment was often mocked through the explicit lack of concern with regard to time. In all the competitions, the precision and accuracy of timing were disregarded. The commentator had the job of starting and stopping the participant through verbal cues. Often, the commentator would purposefully miscue the participant. For example, the commentator would start the run and then say "time over" 20 seconds later, followed by "just kidding." In addition, the participants often felt no obligation to the clock because several skaters ended their run after they felt it was completed, and not when the official time had expired.

**Daily Practices of Resistance**

Scott (1990) argues that most resistances occur on a subtle and daily basis, what he refers to as "hidden transcripts." These hidden resistances occur in a language that only the subculture can understand, and it is within subordinate
subcultures that a logic of resistance is created. This subtle, covert, and daily resistance is what Scott calls "infrapolitics," because it is the grounding on which overt political movements stand. As Scott states, "Each of the forms of disguised resistance, of infrapolitics, is the silent partner of a loud form of public resistance. Thus, piecemeal squatting is the infrapolitical equivalent of an open land invasion: both are aimed at resisting the appropriation of land" (1990, p. 199). The overt resistance to the CSA-sponsored contest exemplifies the skaters' behaviors and the values of their typical daily interactions; it illuminates the infrapolitics of the subculture of skateboarding. One parallel that can be drawn between the amateur contest and the skateboarders' daily practices is the opposition to elite competition.

*De-emphasizing Elite Competition*

Especially significant for the subculture of skateboarders was creating a physical activity in which most people could participate, and to encourage participation they de-emphasized the role of competition. In fact, the skaters were very outspoken against competition when used as a means to an elite and exclusive status. All the skaters were asked to describe the characteristics of a skater, and I phrased the question as, "What makes a skater cool or uncool?" Overwhelmingly, they responded that an uncool skater was competitive and exclusive, while a cool skater was supportive and did not show off. Charles blatantly stated, "Skaters who are assholes are people who brag or skate to compete." Within the subculture there were status differences, but they were not established through competition with others. There were two criteria for high status: One must be highly skilled and creative, and one must not use those skills to belittle others. Although there was skill differentiation, it was not used to promote exclusivity from others because status is gained primarily by promoting cooperation and inclusion. Brian, a young teenager from Welton, commented on this attitude:

Well, we don't, we're not like competitive, like saying, "I can ollie [a specific skater stunt] higher than you so get away from me," and stuff like that. We're like, we just want to do a few things people are doing, and skaters help out skaters... and if I were to ask a good skater like some people I skate with, like Brad Jones, he's the best skater I know in Welton. If I asked him, he would like give me tips and stuff, you know, on how to do it, and that's just how we do it, we want to show other people how to skate.

My 2 years of observing skaters' interactions confirms these statements. Skaters were very supportive of each other. It was common to see skaters who on their first meeting encouraged each other, gave tips, and laughed at their own mistakes. When I frequented the various privately owned skateboard parks, I often saw the more skilled skaters help the newcomers, especially in the skill of dropping into a half-pipe ramp. A half-pipe is a ramp that literally looks like piping cut in half lengthwise. The basic technique is to roll back and forth in the half-pipe. The next step is to "drop in" to the half-pipe. To drop in is to start skating from the top edge of the ramp. The skater situates the board so that
only the two back wheels are touching the edge of the ramp while most of the board is extended in the air and toward the middle of the ramp. The skater places most of his or her weight on the back wheels, and then to drop in, the skater rolls the back wheels over the edge and drops the nose of the board into the ramp, which starts the rolling motion down the side of the ramp. Dropping in is nerve-racking, and, therefore, emotional support along with technical tips is very helpful.

The support given by skaters is in marked contrast to what is common in more traditional sports being played by young people. For example, one day I passed a public tennis court where two preadolescent boys were playing tennis. They were yelling at each other about how good they were and announcing how they were going to “kick” the other one’s “ass.” Unlike the skaters, they did not show each other tips on playing, support the good shots of the other, or laugh at each other. The significant aspect of this observation was the response I received when describing this incident to a group of skaters in Welton. One of the skaters, Doug, commented, “That’s because we don’t skate against somebody, we skate with them.”

The implications of competition for friendships and self-esteem were concerns addressed by many skaters. They felt that the lack of competition enhanced opportunities for friendship and self-esteem, while sport that emphasized competition was a difficult place to make friendships and foster self-esteem. For example, Eric stated, “In skating you’re only responsible for you. If you mess up, you won’t mess up the whole team, [you’re] not going to lose friends over messing up in skating. . . . If you’re the worst one on the baseball team others give you shit [and that] makes you feel bad. In skating if you are bad, no one makes you feel bad about that.”

The vast majority of skaters explicitly differentiated skateboarding from mainstream competitive sport. Pamela, a 19-year-old skater, made this comparison:

Soccer is a lot of pressure . . . you have to be as good if not better than everybody else, you have to be, otherwise you don’t get to play at all. Skating you can’t do that. You just have to push yourself harder and harder. Swimming is just sort of there, you get timed, now for me you go against the clock. Now when you skate you don’t go against anything, you just skate. That’s what it is.

In addition, skaters often mocked the mainstream emphasis on competition and winning. For example, Jeff and Philip shared with me an inside joke about dancing that they used to ridicule the pervasiveness of competition and the win-at-all-costs attitude. Philip, Jeff’s younger brother, plays in a local rock-and-roll band, and the type of music they play usually involves a “pit,” which is a dance space where dancing is rough and there is plenty of physical contact. Philip: “And this guy walks by and he’s wearing a Yankees hat and a Jordan T-shirt, a typical jock looking guy, and he walks by and he leans over to his friend and he goes, “Man, is there going to be a pit here, if there is, dude, I’m going to win.”” Both Philip and Jeff laughed, and Jeff commented, “The object is not to win.” The general de-emphasis on competition indicates that the meaning of
skating is based on other standards, and for skaters I talked with, these were values that promoted the participants' control of the activity.

**Participant Control**

Another parallel that can be drawn between the skateboarders' behavior at the amateur contest and their daily practices was the resistance to an elite or authoritarian-controlled sport, because in both situations the participants controlled their activity. The popular practice of skateboarding does not use rules, referees, coaches, or organized contests. As Paul claimed, "[You] don't need uniforms, and no coach to tell you what to do and how to do it." Kathleen, an 18-year-old skater, added, "No referees, no penalties, no set plays. You can do it anywhere and there is not a lot of training." This lack of formal structure led to a very flexible environment where the participants not only controlled their own activity but engaged in creative endeavors. Often, the skaters created and named their own games and tricks. The two brothers, Jeff and Philip, discussed this flexible and creative emphasis. Philip: "Skateboarding is young and there are so many new tricks people are doing, it's not like baseball where all the rules have been set down." Jeff: "Well, there are no rules to skating." Philip: "When was the last time someone invented something in baseball?"

Most of the skating I observed was not bound by rules; rather, it tested the physical limits and imagination of the participants. Generally, a skating session involved practicing certain techniques, finding fun places to skate, and trying to do new tricks on the new obstacles found. When skaters created more organized forms of games, they were the ones who made the rules. Different groups of skaters created different games, but all incorporated some form of risk-taking challenges. Variations of follow-the-leader were common. Generally, a skater led a line of others through various tricks and obstacles; when the leader made a mistake (couldn't "land" a trick), then he or she went to the back of the line and the next person was the new leader.

The lack of elite control was reflected in the lack of elite standards; as Craig commented, "There is no such thing as a perfect '10' for a trick." Skaters challenged themselves at whatever level of skill they had. Effort and participation were essential to skating, not achieving some elite defined objective. These values and the ability to control their physical activity often led to feelings of empowerment. Many skaters expressed this simply by stating that they loved to learn new tricks and enjoyed seeing themselves improve. Grace, a 21-year-old skater, drew the connection more explicitly by discussing how she did not want skating to become a sport because she did not want practices, coaches, and specific tricks to learn: "For who's to say what trick is better? I like to do stuff that feels cool, that gives me butterflies in my stomach."

The participants' desire to control their activity was reflected in their statements about having more flexibility to be creative or to be expressive through skateboarding. For example, James, a college freshman, wrote this in an English paper: "Skating to me is all about having a good time. This is easy to do while skating since to me skating is relaxing. Skating is all based on being creative with the mind. This starts with the mind, then goes to the tricks I do." Doug claimed,
A lot of them [skaters] are really involved with artistic endeavors, are very artistic. You can see the parallel; it’s kind of a freedom of expression that skating is. How do you express yourself playing football, playing basketball? When you’re skating it’s, basically skating reflects your mood at the time and how you’re skating, what you are doing, you know, it’s definitely, you know, a way to express yourself.

Although it can be argued that one can express oneself through organized sport, what Doug argued for was the degree of flexibility in that expression. In a separate interview, Mark explicitly addressed this by claiming that different styles of skating are accepted, whereas he felt one would be kicked off the football team for having a different style. Grace’s statement about her frustration over the commercialization of skating epitomizes these concerns: “[Skateboarding] is a symbol of freedom that can’t be cut up and processed and sold, [one] can’t do that with freedom.”

The opposition of skateboarders to the CSA-sponsored contest is an overt and explicit example of the daily and more subtle resistance to the values and norms associated with corporate bureaucracies and corporate bureaucratic sport. Skateboarders resisted the values and norms of elite competition, and authority as expert, by encouraging cooperation and creating a participant-controlled activity.

**Resistance and Social Change**

Popular culture is a site in which both hegemonic and counterhegemonic interests are expressed and lived simultaneously, and although resistance behaviors have the potential to transform dominant social relations into more equitable social relations, resistance does not automatically lead to wide-scale social change. Many resistance theorists note that the behavior they study may ostensibly oppose or challenge dominant social relations, but that does not guarantee that social change will take place (Aggelton, 1987; King, 1982; Lesko, 1988; Scott, 1990; Stevenson, 1991; Willis, 1977; Young, 1983). In fact, oppositional behavior is often full of contradictions that can lead to the reproduction of dominant social relations. Those who study resistance place the outcome of that behavior on a continuum of social change, from behavior that leads to social change to behavior that actually reproduces the dominant norms and values (e.g., Willis, 1977).

The two most common categories of resistance behavior are challenges and accommodations. Challenges are the behaviors that effectively change dominant relations, whereas accommodations are behaviors full of contradiction that do not effectively change dominant relations and, therefore, may sometimes reproduce them. For example, Stevenson (1991) described some of the contradictions he found in elite Christian athletes that limited the potential for social change. Although their Christian behavior challenged some common forms of cheating, their behavior did not effectively challenge or change the dominant structure of elite sport. Similarly, Young (1983) found that the rugby players in his study resisted some dominant relations but simultaneously reinforced others. The rugby players resisted the mainstream values that emphasize winning and the work ethic but reproduced sexist values through their behavior at social occasions, most notably in the ritual drinking songs.
The most common contradiction evident in the skateboarders was their sexist behavior. The female skater is a notable exception: Only 4 of the 41 skaters I interviewed were females. Females who were associated with skateboarding were commonly placed in the marginal roles of girlfriend or supporter and were often referred to as "Skate Betties." The females I interviewed were quite aware of these attitudes that discouraged their participation, yet they continued to skateboard because they enjoyed it for many of the same reasons as males. For many females, the males' behavior discouraged them from participating or marginalized them by labeling them as Skate Betties. Therefore, the transformative benefits of resistance were limited primarily to males. In addition, a small faction of the skateboarders were self-proclaimed racists, calling themselves "skinheads." The comments about the disqualifications during the contest, such as "the dumb queer went to the Dairy Queen," may also indicate homophobia. Although the subculture of skateboarders resists many of the social relations associated with capitalism, in an apparent contradiction to what might be expected it generally does not resist those associated with sexism, racism, and homophobia.

Also, the vast majority of the skaters did not intend their behavior to have widespread social ramifications; their intention was much more individual or small-group oriented, local rather than global. The contradictions that arise in oppositional subcultures limit the potential and scale of change. Notwithstanding, some change did occur because of the alternative nature of the subculture. Essentially, the skaters wanted and created an alternative sport, one that fit their needs of participation and control. This type of resistance is more closely associated with Scott's (1990) notion of "infrapolitics" because its emphasis is on creating and maintaining a self-governing activity in which alternative relations can be lived, rather than advancing these relations to alter other social institutions. However, given the recent admonitions to "act locally and think globally," the potential for more widespread social change exists in such local "alternatives."

Implications of Social Resistance

The implications of social resistance are based on the assumption that human behavior is not determined solely by a dominant ideology or economic relations, but rather that humans are able to respond creatively to their social and economic conditions through various daily and cultural practices. As McLaren (1985) stated, "At the level of human agency, hegemony is both sustained and contested through our 'style' of engaging in the world and the ways in which we ritualize our daily lives: our general embodiments, our rhythmical practices, and our lived forms of resistance" (p. 92). The implication is that humans can challenge dominant practices, create alternative practices, and potentially create social change through cultural practices.

One of the main criticisms of resistance theorists is that they have a tendency to romanticize the revolutionary aspects of oppositional behavior, but many resistance theorists explicitly note that such behavior does not automatically produce social change. They argue that both challenges and accommodations occur in oppositional behaviors, and that contradictory behavior does not undermine their significance for human agency in social change:
Certainly many "resistances" fall short of challenging basic social structures—but to ask for their success is to ask for an epochal shift every Sunday afternoon! We’ve been exploring the possibility of a middle course which avoids saying just because resistances do not overthrow a dominant system, then they are related only to its support. Resistance may be deeply implicated in accommodation, but not in a way which is inevitable, planned and wholly programmed as a pre-existing function of dominant institutions and ideology. . . . Here is a scope for change, for politics, for becoming,—not for utopianism or despair. (Willis, 1983, pp. 136-137)

Even though the social impact of skateboarding is not transformative for most people, the significance lies in the fact that these participants were empowered to act in their best interests; they created and experienced alternative types of relations that met their needs. The ability of skaters to use a physical activity in this manner suggests that other activities can be created to reclaim power. The knowledge of creating alternatives can serve as a blueprint for future interaction or social actions and cultural products, and it can also inspire and give credence to the idea that there are social choices and that groups of people have the ability to create alternatives.

References


**Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank George Sage and Peter Donnelly for their insightful suggestions. I would also like to acknowledge James Beal and the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments. I appreciate the support of the Department of Physical Education at Northern Illinois University during the writing of this manuscript.

**Author Note**

At the time of publication, the National Skateboard Association was defunct.