
HYBRIDS OF DELAYED 'WESTERNIZATION': YOUTH SUBCULTURE IDENTITY AFTER 1989

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Abstract.

This paper is focused on the subcultural identity of several radical movements of the underground scene (predominantly punk) and their tactical actions of subcultural resistance, which are shaped and provoked by the political, social and economic changes in Bulgaria after 1989. I will explore the transformation of post-transitional subcultures in their social and historical context and also through comparative reading of CCCS subcultural theory (Clarke 1976, Cohen, P. 1972 [1980], Hall, Jefferson 1976, Hebdige 1979) and the post-subcultural critique (Bennet 2002; Muggleton 2000), while stressing the importance of the conjunctural analysis, where "each subculture represents a distinctive moment" and engages with a "particular set of circumstances" (Hebdige 1979: 84). I want to suggest that there is a specific transformation of the "westernized" and "spectacular" subcultures of the 90's into a "hidden" underground post-transitional subculture nowadays, whose participants' identities based on consumption are structured by both material and social conditions of inequality.

Key words: *subcultural identities, post-transitional subcultures, consumption, social inequalities*

Introduction

Subcultures of the so called 'Transition' in the Eastern bloc are actually protagonists of the political change after 1989 and at the same time by-products of the social and economic change that followed. The Bulgarian case represents the same processes of transformation and new social stratification. The subcultures first labelled as "westernized" (including hippies, punks, goths, bikers, etc.) appeared in the country in the late 1980s. A variety of subcultural lifestyles, which were products of quite different social and economic processes in the West, were 'imported'

into Bulgaria all at once within a very short span of time. Transplanted into Bulgaria, these subcultural identities took on rather different meanings for Bulgarian youth (e.g. political activism). During the first years after the fall of communism, punks and other subcultural characters became favourites of the media and thus visible for the first time in large numbers to the public. During the late socialist era the dominant narrative towards them was quite ambivalent. On one hand, they were regarded as an embodiment of the new democratic processes and as an expression of the desired pluralism (Pilkington 1994: 82–3), and on the other hand, they were regarded as social threat. In a 1991 interview with a first generation Bulgarian punk (born around 1970), the following question was posed to the young man: “What do you want to see changed in society?.” He replied:

‘Everyone should feel free. I want to be a part of society. It has not thrown me out; it’s me that has thrown myself out of it. I do not want to look grey, to melt into the crowd, to be put in a mould and wear the label: made in somewhere.’
[Skortcheva, L. 1991. *Punks hate order and drabness (in Bulg.)*. ‘Club 15’ 9: 3]

In the beginning of the Transition people like him were turned into celebrities of the Change. They were actually exploited by the media as examples, though marginal ones, of the desired social and political change. Their voices were heard or at least they were allowed to speak openly. However, after this first subcultural boom in the late 80’s and 90’s, a period of gradual marginalization followed. Slowly but constantly the subcultural participants lost their “spectacularness” and became an invisible and unwanted part of the post-socialist social structure. The media interest towards them lessened and the public attitude towards them changed accordingly. As a result, the outward appearance and behaviour of the subcultural members nowadays are less fashionable and less provocative, while their practices form a protective response of subcultural resistance that denies the mainstream values of the newly-built society (e.g. consumerism, competitiveness, individualism). In short, this is the way how the westernized “spectacular¹” subcultures of the 90’s have gradually transformed into a post-transitional underground scene.

Subcultural identities – individual or collective?

The post-subculture theory registers considerable blurring of the boundaries between the subcultural styles and also the rise of newly formed fluid groups that are rather called “scenes” and “tribes”, as some scholars even question the very existence of the subcultures and their norms and values (Bennet 2002; Hesmondhalgh 2005; Hodkinson 2012). However, I argue that such a denial of the subcultures’

¹ By analogy with the term of Dick Hebdige (1979).

potential is not fully applicable to the model of development of the subcultural styles in Eastern Europe, where the political transition came with and through the active participation of various dissident minded and pro-Western (at the time) subcultural heroes. The generation of transition was actively engaged in various forms of political protest, including subcultural. However, with transition has come transformed meanings.

In support of my arguments, I wish to remind of the subcultural theories, which can be put in use in the explanation of the examined subcultural identities with local and global meaning. The Birmingham School representatives paid attention exclusively to the collective actions of resistance, common background and the subcultural styles as products of youth's imagination and not of cultural industries (Clarke 1976, Cohen, P. 1972 [1980], Hall, Jefferson 1976, Hebdige 1979, Willis 1981). Griffin (2011: 245) contends that the CCCS theory of subculture is valuable in that it allows young people's cultural practices and their social positions of gender, class, and race to be grasped through a conjunctural analysis of a "particular historical moment", where "each subculture represents a distinctive moment" and engages with a "particular set of circumstances" (Hebdige 1979: 84). The CCCS theory moves beyond deviance and style to address the symbolic politics of subculture, and thus the conjunctural analysis enables the CCCS to describe a complex field of power, deviance, and consent, and look at different levels of expression – political, ideological, cultural, and economic (Blackman 2014: 504).

On contrary, the main post-modern opponents of the Birmingham school – the post-subcultural theorists stress on the individual agency of the subcultural participants, which are organized only temporarily in fluid formations like the so called "neo-tribes" (a term adopted from Maffesoli), and whose identity is not a question of belonging to a particular gang, family, or community, but is defined mainly by the transition between different groups (Maffesoli 1996: 76). The post-subculturalist theory as postmodern and anti-heroic actually doubts the subcultural potential for resistance, which is replaced by the individual consumption of "life-styles" (Bennett 2000; 2004) that are equally competing with one another at the global market of cultural industries, in the absence of a dominant culture and social struggle. The emphasis of the post-subcultural argument based on individual consumer creativity enables individuals to forge their own identity. But the post-subculturalist theorists downplay the collective nature of subcultural practice (Blackman 2014: 505). The postmodern argument is focused on particularity and individualism where post-subculturalists assert that subcultural formation and practice are no longer articulated by the modernist structuring relations of class, gender and race. The post-subculturalists' "preoccupation with liberating notions of consumer capitalism as the casual explanation of subcultural activities" (Blackman 2014: 506) leads to the conclusion about the contemporary subcultures as "characterized by depthlessness, flatness and hyper-reality" (Redhead 1993: 23–4). However, recent research (Blackman 2010: 365; Nayak and Kehily 2008: 13) specifies that youth cultural identities based on consumption are structured by both material and social conditions of inequality.

Following these arguments, I want to suggest one ‘classed’ rather than consumerist explanation of the post-transitional youth subcultural identities.

‘Classed’ youth subculture in the post-socialist present

For our purposes, two periods of subcultural identity construction can be distinguished, representing two generations of young Bulgarians. Members of the first group were socialised under late socialism in the 1980s; members of the second group have no memory of socialism at all. The first period (which lasted into the mid-90s) was dominated by the emulation of Western models, and a general attitude of protest against the socialist system. These visions of the west were framed in a unique era – generally through imaginings and heavily filtered contacts with “the west” itself. In the second period (since the mid-1990s), young people have become increasingly acquainted with the actual western world (in particular through labour migration). This has given rise to new patterns of subcultural identity.

It was Bulgarian intellectuals that played a decisive role in the emergence of subcultures in the late 1980s. The young people who comprised these groups were predominantly the children of well-educated families with high degrees of cultural and social capital providing them with access (albeit limited) to Western (sub)culture. They emerged from the circles of the elite language and art schools of Sofia and other larger Bulgarian cities. These youth were privileged, being the first to enjoy some degree of freedom to expression (Dziegiel 1998). Consequently, we may speak here of the first westernised subculture emerging from the middle class. In this sense, the subcultural pioneers in Bulgaria differ greatly from their successors whose lives have proved undoubtedly harder. The basic characteristics that determined subcultural identity in the previous period have all changed along with the changing political and economic context in Bulgaria. The resulting changes in contemporary subcultural group identity should be understood as a protective response to these new conditions. The old structure built from dissidents, the socialist elite, and workers no longer fits. The new economic conditions have led to a greater importance of class differentiation among the younger subcultural generation. Within the new subcultural scene there are mobile students rubbing shoulders with workers and the unemployed. These groups are differentiated according to their respective access to the West (and western commodities), a factor that is central in shaping their identities. Nowadays the “spectacular” subcultural challenge through the appropriation of Western cultural tropes in opposition to the socialist system has been replaced with another form of reaction, by the emergence of far left and far right ideologies that deny much of the neo-liberal characteristics of the post-socialist society of which many young people feel excluded and disadvantaged.

As subcultural insider, who is personally and socially engaged with the youth subcultures, I argue that there are two main trends in the contemporary subcultural development – on the one hand, it is the post-subcultural loss of music and stylistic

definiteness, but with an emphasis on the ideological commitment (e.g. increasing political activism among subcultures), and on the other hand, it is the „secretion” of the subcultural signs by replacing them with new „secret” codes (in a conscious attempt to remain separate from the mainstream and to minimize consumption). These two opposing trends are responsible for the rise of the contemporary “un-spectacular” subcultures (in contrast to Hebdige’s “spectacular” ones), who are in fact difficult for direct observation. Nowadays the subcultural boundaries might be blurred and their styles – not homological, but they are not simply by-products of the cultural industries and they still reflect social divisions and inequalities. This is one of the reasons for me to choose the unifying term “underground scene”, as it describes both the fluidity and subcultural transgression of the researched groups. The underground is a field, where different subcultures live together and mix with one another, although not in a random “stylistic game” (Muggleton 2000: 47), but under strict rules. Moreover, this field includes a particular kind of space (real and imagined) that is occupied by the subcultural participants. The “underground” space is under the surface of the “hyper-reality” and beyond the competitions for upward social mobility. It is somehow “free of class” but not yet classless.

The subcultural participants

This research is the result of a long-term project that started in 2007 and includes several fieldwork sites in Bulgaria as well as several groups of subcultural youth (based on age, gender and class). The methodology include participant observation and biographical and auto-biographical research. The participants actually come from different subcultural styles and different generations, but are interdependent through their personal informal relations. Every unit of research has its core and periphery. The core members of the subcultural groups are usually 10-20 people, who share stronger beliefs and deeper knowledge about the origins, music, style, and ideology of their subculture. Boys slightly prevail in numbers, but girls’ presence is not only peripheral. The main identity tag – the group affiliation – includes two major subcategories – *punk and hardcore*, but among the subcultural participants there are also goths, skinheads, metalheads, ravers, neo-hippies and rastafarians that are interconnected through the participants’ actual relations as well as their physical presence in one and the same spatiality. Each tag constitutes a distinct subculture, with its own history and discernible practices, but at the same time all the participants take part in the larger underground group of the “folk devils” set up in opposition to mainstream. Many of them self-identify as working-class and deviant, although a significant part of the participants attends different courses at the university. The claim for working-classness goes together with the “claim for illiteracy”, as defined by Hebdige (1979: 19) in his analysis of punk, in attempt to symbolically express the existing social exclusion of subcultural youth.

Subcultural use of space

The place where subculture ‘lives’ is crucial for its actions and disposition in society to be explained. It does matter whether that place is the center of the city, the quarter, or some other marginal space. The visibility of some and disappearance of other sub-groups from certain town areas may be used to illustrate changes of youth attitudes and social changes in general. Actually I argue that subculture relies more on the particular location, to be spread, than on fashion itself. Place of residence was one of the conditions to incline to one or another sub-style and to gain the subcultural knowledge, but it was also a sign of social status and kind of social hierarchy. I suppose the appearance of subcultural provocation in the city center was an attempt to challenge this hierarchy, on one hand, and was due to the social status of the youths’ families, on the other. Punk subculture had a common meeting place – the café bar “Kravai” near the National Palace of Culture (NDK). This was the place where the first Bulgarian punk bands had seen their births and the street gangs had started from. Numerous small yards around Graf Ignatiev street – one of the main shopping streets in Sofia, became their shelter too.

Later on the situation changed and led to gradual marginalization of the subcultural space. The underground space under exploration is approached as a social sub-product of new social relations. It is seen as subject to the post-socialist reconstruction of urban public space. As stated by Lefebvre (1991: 26), “the space thus produced also serves as a tool of thought and of action, in addition to being a means of production it is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power”. In this sense, the space left at subcultures’ disposal is the space that is of no value for the mainstream society. In the beginning of post-socialism the available spaces of no value and consequently no surveillance were the memorials of the communist past. These can be the former Chinese embassy (used as a squatting house until 2005–6) or an abandoned factory. Other gathering places have included the former mausoleum of Bulgaria’s first communist leader Georgi Dimitrov and the garden around the monument of the Soviet Army. However, the cultural centre of the past has been slowly turning into the commercial centre of today, with its own new rules. Thus, the subcultural participants of the post-transitional period, once visible in the city centre, were no longer able to dwell in it and were gradually pushed out to non-commercialised parts of the city. The backyards of houses in the centre that were favourite places for subcultural gatherings can no longer be used because their new owners have put up fences and cameras, and locked doors. Therefore, the sub-groups have begun searching for new places to gather in relatively independent locations, where they could reside freely and unwatched. Unofficial small clubs in the basements or remote playgrounds somewhere among the tower-blocks came to replace the old gathering places that were located in the main public urban spaces. This post-transitional trend is yet another reason to call the new subcultures “hidden” and “underground”. I also see them as “dispossessed inheritors” (as in Clarke 1976) of the urban space they once inhabited, and subjects to spatial segregation. On the

other hand, the underground space has its advantages that are in contradiction to the commercial mainstream values, since as socially constructed, it is also able to shape spatial practices, based on values and the social production of meanings (Lefebvre 1991). The gradual spatial movement of subcultures to the periphery provides for several subcultural actions of resistance: they avoid surveillance, they minimize consumption, and they create their own ground that affirms their feeling of belonging and solidarity.

Subcultural practices

During the 1980s and the early 1990s, both subcultural clothing and music were sold on the black market. Commodities imported from the West were scarce. The socialist shortage economy (Kornai 1980) was accompanied by a shortage of information as well. The images of “the West” (that fictive, unitary ideal) that were prominent in Bulgarian subculture was necessarily fragmentary. Members of the subculture emulating the West engaged in semi-illegal activities like listening to foreign radio broadcasts and importing and trading western goods (including magazines, LPs, tapes, and jeans). They also constructed western looking commodities from materials that were at hand. The emulation of the West was done through social networks and comprised a part of the second economy that was disrupting the system. Consequently the consumption of western goods themselves was understood to be authentic and insufficient. They were self-conscious adoptions of external models that carried within themselves the sense of artificiality. Most importantly, the subcultural members’ self-identification was a manifestation of their desire to take on certain aspects of the Western lifestyle.

Besides the “westernized” lifestyle, there were certain subcultural practices that were determined by the local peculiarities. Punk behavior rejected all norms; it was aimed to provoke public opinion directly and pressingly, from the first glance. Punks were gaudy, fearful, provoking, though they were not aggressive towards the others. During the first subcultural period punks practiced begging of money from passers-by in the central shopping streets as a way to shock and provoke them. This practice is no longer applied, though, as the subculture moved to the non-commercialized urban periphery. The consumption of various drugs also was regarded as common subcultural practice and was performed quite openly. They sniffed glue and took all kinds of psychotropic drugs, including hard drugs. Here I will offer an explanation why young people from “Kravai” turned to drugs by that time:

“Some of the crew do it in order to look interesting, others – because they are in despair from everything. Not only from the simple life we’re living everyday. You go out in the evening and spend 2 hours with friends in some public house which is so familiar that you can get sick and tired of it.” [V.P., punk-new wave, born 1975, Sofia]

Dread from the “simple life”, dullness and boredom is another aspect that united young people in the first years of the post-socialist period. They gathered in abandoned houses and basements where one could do anything without being disturbed by anybody (for instance the old building of the City Library which now is the second building of Grand Hotel Sofia in the city center; and the system of underground conduits named BRONX by the subculture – all of its inlets are already blocked now). This was an early stage of the illegal accommodation – “squatting”, later imported from the West as a meaning and practice. Good or not, these practices were important as part of the subcultural resistance and political protest towards the old social order of control and restriction. These practices were totally forbidden during the socialist regime and victimized by the militia. There were no beggars, hobos, homeless and drug-addicts in the socialist Sofia streets. To be such was regarded as another kind of political protest. In the early 80s there was only one tramp in the city center. And he was officially recognized as dissident. Since poverty amongst “socialist plenty” was a provocation in itself.

Later on, the disappointment among youth that the desired *swift* replacement of the socialist system is not still complete has brought about some negative results. Thus, desire for European, westernised identity failed at the end of 90s (Mitev and Riordan 1996:16–18). The new punk sub-groups not only do not inhabit the same territories as their predecessors, they also do not engage in the same kinds of actions. For example, punks no longer linger in the central streets, begging for money and provoking passers-by. This may be because they no longer live in this area. But I would argue a deeper reason is the fact that acting as ‘poor’ is no longer provocative in an already pauperized society. Up to the middle of the 1990s, begging was uncommon in the central streets of Sofia, and members of the subculture found it to be stylish and provoking; nowadays, begging is no longer a subcultural activity. In fact, begging has become a sign of extreme marginalisation, a ‘trademark’ of Roma people and of some drug addicts. The countercultural action (Yinger 1960: 625–635), called “*squatting*” (i.e. illegal occupying property) has been gradually constrained as well. For example, 8 years ago the last subcultural fortress was the abandoned former Chinese Embassy, which is near the Bulgarian Parliament. Police closed down this site after a reporter made a movie about it. Entrances to the so-called BRONX in the city centre were sealed off long ago. The old city library is now an expensive hotel. Squatting has also become a ‘trademark’ of the Roma population in the city. The marginalisation of these practices has restrained punks from performing them and they started searching for alternative spaces where to perform their subcultural practices. In other words, punks and other subcultural characters have lost their spectacular nature and their potential for resistance and became an invisible and unwanted part of the social structure. The public attitude towards them changed radically, in terms of the “moral panic”.

The number of drug-users among the subcultural participants has also decreased. Drugs have passed from the backyards where the subculture used to congregate into the clubs and discos, where they became a part of the lifestyle of relatively

rich young people. The time of low-priced hard drugs has passed irrevocably. Drug dealers have already found their new market and raised the prices. As a result, the subcultural group examined can hardly afford the hard drugs. On the other hand, the state pursues a strange policy towards drug use – users suffer heavy sanctions while dealers remain in the shadows. Hence, state policy and the activities of dealers have restricted access to drugs for punks, who are not rich enough to afford high prices, fines, and/or bail.

Chatterton and Hollands (2003: 175) state that increased polarization exists within the nighttime economy of youth: “In the shadows of the bright neon of youthful gentrified nightlife consumption, there exists the ‘residue’ of near forgotten groups, community/public spaces and traditional drinking establishments marginalized by new urban brandscapes and the commercial mainstream”. The authors claim that nightscapes for the affluent and self-indulgence sit uncomfortably alongside less desirable spaces of the street and the park. They state that in such areas excluded young people are clinging “on to the vestiges of non-commercialized public space” (2003: 175), and point to film such as ‘Trainspotting’ as a representation of how youth groups are displaced and disaffected. The same pattern of segregation was observed in the field, in which the subcultural groups were gradually pushed to the periphery of the urban commercialized landscape. Consequently, the nighttime economy of these places is of different kind.

Leisure practices are essential part of the subcultural experience. They provide enjoyment and identity, but also fulfill the need for consumption. However, engagement in leisure practices can also involve resistance and transgression. Leisure, resistance and transgression intertwine in the field of drug consumption. And in this case drug taking acts as symbol of subcultural difference. The subject of recreational intoxication by deviant subcultures is a useful example discussed by Hebdige (1975, 1979) and Willis (1978), back in the times of the Birmingham School, where drug consumption within subcultures is pursued on the basis of leisure and pleasure interpreted as a counter-hegemonic practice against the dominant youth culture. On the other hand, other subcultures, for example the straight edge movements (that include part of the contemporary hardcore punk scene I have explored), abstain from drug consumption because they believe such behaviors are promoted among the adherents of the mainstream (Haenfler 2006; Williams 2006). In both cases the subcultural consumption or non-consumption of drugs has an ideological dimension. It shapes the subcultural identity of a particular group, according to its particular desires and constraints.

The ideological potential of a subculture could be also traced through its political engagement. Although Bulgarian punk scene self-identified as anarchist from the very beginning, its ideological dimension wasn't fully developed in the first period. To speak of a “left”- and of a “right”-wing would have been an odd partition for the Bulgarian punk subculture in its earlier stage of development. A few years ago one of the subcultural participants confessed to me:

'After the reunification of West and East Germany my East German friends who were punks as I am became members of the Communist Party. I tried to convince them that they could not be punks if they were party members. I would never do such things myself' [V.V., punk, born 1974, Sofia].

Political indifference was something inherent for the first subcultural period, but current reality changed the situation. Anarchism and other left-wing ideologies appear consequently as acts of response. Some punks even step across the boundaries of anarchism and become members of the Bulgarian Socialist Party or alternative left wing movements. The initiatives of FAB (Federation of Anarchists in Bulgaria) are fairly eloquent in its purposes: for example, at the beginning of the summer of 2006 FAB organized a protest against the high prices of the tickets for the urban transport. 10 000 stickers with the slogan "FREE TRANSPORT" were printed and flooded Sofia. The transport company claimed this action "criminal". Members decided to respect their position so they started printing tickets saying instead "ticket for one use only" – "free ticket for the urban transport". Such initiatives were embraced by many of the second generation punks and were perceived as subcultural practices as well. This is another example of the marginalization, and even 'criminalization' of the subcultural in the second period under examination. Certainly, I have to note that none of the political movements regardless of the presence or lack of a youth organization in it can identify itself with the subculture. However there is no doubt about the fact that the "political" and the "class" have entered the consciousness, the narratives and the practices of the punk subculture.

Conclusions

Subcultural concept is a valuable tool for understanding deviance as part of a collective social project rather than an individualistic attitude that originates from the style supermarket. For "subcultures both regulate conduct and promote experimentation within a framework of social order" (Blackman 2014: 503). Not every subculture is politically engaged, but through their specific leisure practices and their symbolic occupation of the public urban space, subcultures align themselves with different projects of social, political, economical and environmental change. Finally, I would suggest that the transitional subcultural identity presents a good example (though quite a marginal one) of the post-socialist paradox in which old ideals are lost while the new reality is also denied. At the present time, the emulation of the Western forms of subculture has been replaced by a more complex process of hybridization and subcultural participation in different ethical and activist projects of resistance. Today, the outward appearance and behaviour of the subcultural members are less fashionable and less provocative, while their practices form a tactical action of resistance that denies both the socialist and post-socialist versions of the "good life".

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