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PHENOMENON OF SUBCULTURE

People in modern times no longer live in small, homogeneous communities. Those communities have been replaced by large, diverse and complex societies. The societies are composed of multiple smaller groups sharing beliefs, customs and interests that are different from the rest of society. Although such groups are connected with the mainstream by many cultural aspects, they show their own cultural diversity. The groups display boundaries that isolate them from the rest of society. Those groups that share a characteristic set of norms, values and behavior are referred to by sociologists as subcultures. The aim of this article is to look into the mechanisms within a subculture, to analyze different theories of the phenomenon, and to focus on youth and delinquent subculture. Finally it contrasts counterculture with subculture and discusses style and commodification of subculture.

Why are people drawn together into groups?

Culture consists of a huge number of different social groups in which an individual participates. One person may belong to more than one such group. First of all we belong to a parental family, later on to a family of procreation, to an occupational group, which offers smaller inner groups, such as interest groups. Moreover, a person may participate in a group that consists of similar employees from different companies. A person is a member of a particular social class, or we are subjected

to being a member of a certain country by citizenship.¹ In some cases we do not decide on our membership in groups in which we belong, for example in the case of a parental family. There are still many groups in which we participate voluntarily by making a conscious choice. The mechanism behind this is conflict, according to Georg Simmel. He sees conflict as a “sociation”, because it involves interaction between people. “Conflict is admitted to cause or modify interest groups, unifications, organizations”.²

There is a kind of paradox in Simmel’s conflict theory. Although conflict is associated with negative factors such as hate, envy, etc., it creates unity. The conflict the group has is with the dominant culture not within the group. Simmel claims that conflict among different social relations – like love or friendship – is the strongest kind, and it alone can produce or sustain a group because it contains several forms of relationship. Conflict is the factor that centralizes the group. The same behavior in the same situation is required from a group, and in the face of conflict the group is as close as it can be. Furthermore, Simmel claims that conflict is the basis of group formation.³ Not only can it heighten the concentration of an existing group, but it may also bring together people who are total strangers. Simmel emphasizes that though conflict has a unifying power on a group only in wartime, additionally it maintains the unity of this group beyond this period. As we can see, conflict has a long-lasting effect on a group. Not only does it plant the foundations of a group, but it also provides its unity in the long run.

Subcultures

Subculture theory

Since about 1960, the issue of subculture has been highly discussed in American academic circles. There is no one proper definition of subculture, as this phenomenon is very broad, complex, and consists of various factors. Many sociologists would probably agree with Sarah Thornton and Ken Gelder that

subcultures are groups of people that have something in common with each other [...] which distinguishes them in a significant way from the members of other social groups.⁴

The drawback of such a definition, as these authors go on to admit, is that it is too broad and applies not only to subcultures but to other groups such as communities and societies. The issue of subcultures brings to mind different connotations.

¹ G. Simmel, *Conflict: The Web of Group-Affiliations*, New York 1964.

² *Ibidem*, p. 13.

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ *Subcultures Reader*, ed. S. Thornton, K. Gelder, London 1997.

It cannot be discussed without having a closer look at social structure and social interaction, because these are closely related to it.⁵ It also relates to terms such as community, public, masses, culture, society, sub-society, etc. Let us discuss some of these terms.

According to Thornton and Gelder, several sociologists use the term 'community' and 'subculture' interchangeably. The key part of community is family; the term suggests a more permanent population, often connected with a particular neighborhood. In contrast 'subcultures' are rather transient phenomena and are mostly studied separately from families.

Subcultures quite often stand in opposition to the 'public'. This term refers to a group of rational citizens who are responsible and who form their own opinions, often expressing them through democratic institutions. On the other hand subcultures are seen as unofficial. Their activities contrast with those of the 'decent' public.⁶ 'Society' is another important term in the analysis of subcultures. Both terms imply an association of people that are bound together by a common interest. Still, 'societies' have a formal membership process, written rules and instructions, and some official aspects, whereas subcultures are seen as mostly unofficial and informal in their nature.⁷

The last term we should mention is 'culture', and the ambiguity connected with it as it often has contradictory meanings. According to Willis culture is "a particular way of life which expressed certain meanings and values not only in art and learning but also in institutions and ordinary behavior".⁸ Another definition of culture is proposed by Milton Yinger: it is "all those historically created designs for living, explicit and implicit, rational, irrational, and non-rational, that exist at any given time as potential guides for behavior of men".⁹ Culture has a socializing influence on subgroups and also subcultures.¹⁰ The most wide and general definition of culture is that formed after analyzing 160 definitions taken from different social sciences, with the conclusion that "culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit of symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional ideas".¹¹ The attribute of subcultures is that they are distinct from a particular cultural group and the larger culture. The phenomenon of subcultures is often analyzed in opposition to the dominant or parent culture. This issue will be discussed more thoroughly later on.

⁵ D. O. Arnold et al., *The Sociology of Subcultures*, California 1970.

⁶ *Subcultures Reader...*

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ M. Brake, *Comparative Youth Culture: The Sociology of Youth Subcultures in America, Britain and Canada*, London 1990, p. 1.

⁹ M. Yinger, *Countercultures*, New York 1982, p. 39.

¹⁰ M. Brake, *Comparative Youth Culture...*

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 2.

After this brief introduction to key terms in introducing the concept of subcultures, it is time for an analysis of different theories of subculture. As was mentioned earlier, there are many different approaches to the phenomenon of subcultures.

One approach is that of Milton Gordon, who claims that the concept of subculture refers to the subdivision of a national culture that is composed of social situations.¹² Situations such as class status, ethnicity, regional residence or urban residence and religion form a unity that has an impact on a participant. Socialization of a child seems to be crucial in Gordon's definition of subculture. He claims that the fact that a child grows up within a particular subculture has a great influence on him or her, so the research should include environmental background and its effect on a child. What is more, identical factors in different subcultures are not interchangeable. Gordon emphasizes the distinction between separate subcultures and units of the same subcultures. He also claims that subculture also refers to both sexes, all ages, and family groups. For culture of a group that is restricted by age, sex, etc., he suggests the term 'group-culture'. To conclude, Gordon introduces the theory of subculture based on ethnic background, religion, class status and regional differences.¹³

A different theory is based on the assumption that all action we conduct is based on problem-solving. Problems are not only shapes which produce psychological disorders in people's minds, but also situations that produce tension which can be eliminated only by solving the problem. Albert Cohen talks especially about such problems that have no ready-made solutions. The sources of a problem can be our own frame of reference or the 'situation' we are in. According to Cohen a situation is the actual physical setting in which we operate – everything that is around us. A problem may occur because our action is limited by a certain situation.¹⁴

Cohen compares 'frame of reference' to a glass through which one perceives the world: "The glass consists of the interests, preconceptions, stereotypes and values we bring to the situation".¹⁵ We contemplate the solutions through our frame of reference, and that is why effective solutions involve some change in our frame of reference, says Cohen.

Another factor that builds up this theory of subcultures is that certain problems are specific to certain social groups. We also have to account for differences in dealing with similar or the same problems by different individuals. New cultural forms emerge effectively when a number of people share similar problems of adjustment. An individual is more prone to changing the frame of reference with the support of others. Then a cultural model is enforced and able to persist, when more than one person follows it. Although most people conform to certain rules, and tend to choose the path which is chosen by significant others (a group of people

¹² M. Gordon, *The Concept of the Sub-culture and its Application*, [in:] *Subcultures Reader...*

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ A. Cohen, *A General Theory of Subcultures*, [in:] *Subcultures Reader...*

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 45.

whose opinions matter most in a certain period of time), some people decide to stick out from the masses. They establish their own solution but still seek backup of even a small number of other people in order not to be totally alienated from society. They need approval of a new direction. "The acceptability of an idea to oneself depends upon its acceptability to others".¹⁶ If a certain idea wins support from others it can then easily be incorporated into the life of an individual. What are the chances that people with the same problems of adjustment will find each other and communicate in that matter? Actually it is not that easy, as it seems, according to Cohen, that the existence of the problem of adjustment is not sufficient to ensure the emergence of a subcultural solution.¹⁷

When analyzing subcultures it is essential to take into consideration the young age of those who form them. For young people 'significant others' are the most important. They learn from their peers and reject the values of their parents. The level of group conformity is also higher then. Adolescents can be characterized as other-directed¹⁸ types, as opposed to the inner-directed type of personality propagated by Franklin. Other-directed people copy the patterns of behavior of their age group, and inner-directed types follow their own individual patterns of behavior.

Youth subcultures

The emergence of youth subcultures is closely related to social strata, as "subculture was a political battleground between the classes".¹⁹ In the post-war years working-class male adolescent city-dwellers saw subcultures, often delinquent forms, as a solution to structurally imposed problems. They faced many generational conflicts in their life on various levels, such as the ideological one. The opposite values of traditional working-class Puritanism and emerging consumerism proved confusing for young people. The function of subcultures was to fight the contradictions that were unresolved in the parent culture.²⁰

It is important to stress the fact that subcultures operate within the culture of the class from which they emerged. The behavior of members of a certain subculture may differ from that of their parents; however, they belong to the institutions of the same class (schools, families, etc.).²¹

Youth subcultures should be analyzed in connection with the parent culture and dominant culture. Most sociologists use these terms interchangeably. John Clarke, however, claims that they vary. The parent culture is the culture of working

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 49.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ D. Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*, Yale 2001.

¹⁹ S. Cohen, *Symbols of Trouble*, [in:] *Subcultures Reader...*, p. 150.

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

²¹ J. Clarke et al., *Subcultures, Cultures and Class*, [in:] *Subcultures Reader...*

classes, and is subordinate to the hegemonic dominant culture. “Working-class culture has consistently ‘won space’ from the dominant culture”.²² The youth share similar problems with other members of the parent class culture, and subcultures are a response to them. There is a difference, though, because young people experience similar problems differently. Clarke calls this phenomenon “generational specificity”, which can be seen in three areas of life, leisure, education and work. Education is present in teenagers’ lives and has a strong influence on them. Parents do not go to school any more, and only encounter it through their memories. As far as the area of work is concerned the young are more vulnerable to unemployment. They also have to face the transition from school to work. Furthermore there are many differences in working-class leisure and how adults and youngsters perceive it. These differences were strengthened in the 1950s and 1960s with the growth of consumerism and reorganization of consumption.²³ All the above aspects, and the fact that youth is often a time of rebelliousness, have a great impact on the emergence of youth subcultures. Subcultures emerge because they provide a particular function for the young. First of all, as Phil Cohen argues, they offer a solution to certain structural problems. It is worth mentioning that very often these solutions are only at the magical, imaginary level.²⁴ Next they offer a culture and elements included in it such as style, norms, values and ideologies. That is why they can offer their members a meaningful way of life. Finally they propose the individuals solutions to existential problems, according to Michael Brake. The success of subcultural solutions among young people lies in their in-born rebelliousness and rejection of parental norms.²⁵

Subculture and Style

It has been argued that structural contradictions, experienced as class problems, are a basic generating force for subcultures. Cultural traditions, when interacting with neighborhood traditions and historic circumstances, shape the cultural form of a subculture. One such form common in a subculture is its style and its symbolic usage. Style expresses a degree of commitment to the subculture. Brake defines style as consisting of three main elements: ‘image’ – appearance composed of specific clothing, artifacts, haircut, etc.; ‘demeanor’, which is connected with posture and expression; and ‘argot’, which is language consisting of a special vocabulary and the way in which it is delivered. Stanley Cohen distinguishes two dominant themes within a subcultural style. For him, style is, first of all, a type of resistance to subordination; secondly the form taken is symbolic or magical. This symbolism

²² *Ibidem*, p. 103.

²³ *Ibidem*.

²⁴ P. Cohen, *Subcultural Conflict and Working-Class Community*, [in:] *Subcultures Reader*...

²⁵ M. Brake, *Comparative Youth Culture*...

appears in Brake's concepts. Another important aspect of style is that the solution chosen by a subculture is very often magical and brings no major changes in the situation of that group or its members, and it has no political response because of the lack of organization. "Relations with the state are conducted at an imaginary level".²⁶ The final aspect of symbolism is that style signifies something that goes beyond the surface appearance. This is coded statements about relationships, about the past and present, etc.

In this research there should also be space for analysis of what subcultural style communicates. Dick Hebdige concentrates on the meaning of style, trying to answer the following questions: How does subculture make sense to its members? How is it made to signify disorder? What distinguishes spectacular subcultures from the surrounding culture is the use of intentional communication. Their style is fabricated, and by this style they display their own codes or demonstrate that codes of the society can be abused. Their intention is to react against the mainstream culture. Objects and artifacts used by a subculture have been reordered and placed in new contexts so as to communicate a new meaning.²⁷ Clarke calls it 're-signification' and Hebdige refers to it as 'bricolage' ('a reassembling of styles into a new subcultural style', a concept associated with the anthropologist Lévi-Strauss). An object from mainstream culture may be incorporated into subcultural artifacts, its meaning being totally different from what it was (e.g. Teddy Boy modifications of Edwardian dress). There is also, as Willis²⁸ suggests, a fit, or 'homology' between objects, their meaning and behavior. Willis claims that any subculture is characterized by orderliness. Each part and aspect of subculture is closely related to the other, and through this the subcultural member makes sense of the world.²⁹ Willis argues that there is a homology between activism, physicality and early rock music in such groups as bikers.

The last aspect of style is differentiation of work and leisure. Traditionally, as Thomson³⁰ points out, work and leisure were separated. Leisure was seen as an attack on work discipline, because the values of leisure present a counter-thesis to work. Mass production and mass consumption created a popular elite that was promoted by the media and advertising. The elite imitated the style that stood outside traditional class definitions. The working class invested its money in certain leisure activities (clubs etc.) to make statements about self-image.³¹ The imitation of style is connected with the commodification of subcultures.

²⁶ S. Cohen, *Symbols of Trouble...*, p. 155.

²⁷ D. Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, London 1979.

²⁸ M. Brake, *Comparative Youth Culture...*

²⁹ D. Hebdige, *Subculture...*

³⁰ M. Brake, *Comparative Youth Culture...*

³¹ *Ibidem*.

Commodification of subcultures

Working-class subcultures could not have existed without an economic background. In the 1950s and 1960s, incomes for teenagers grew very fast in comparison to those for adults, and most of this was 'disposable income' spent on leisure activities.³² The growth of a consumer market that was directed toward the youth also played an important role in the process of commodification. Industries provided goods that were used by the groups "in the construction of distinctive style".³³ Clarke describes punk style in terms of commodification, when punk clothes and insignia could be bought by mail order or seen in the latest collections of famous designers. Moreover the shops of the hippy era were easily changed into punk boutiques. Hebdige defines commodification as "the conversion of subcultural things (clothes, music etc.) into mass-produced objects".³⁴ He says that there is an ambiguity in the relationship between the spectacular subculture and the industries that exploit it. The main objective of such a subculture, then, becomes consumption. One may assume that subcultures change their preliminary purpose. The artifacts that signified a subculture became commodities available for everyone. Their subcultural meanings were deciphered and became comprehensible. Moreover artifacts of a subculture changed into highly profitable products. As commodification advanced, problems arose. The subculture was converted into a part of mass culture. It became standardized and passively consumed, according to Leavis. A kind of paradox can be noticed here. At its beginning the subculture was a statement against the mainstream or dominant culture, but over the years it became a productive branch of it. Leavis concludes that as a subculture needs commerciality, it surely cannot be authentic at all. Such a culture creates false needs due to the fact that it has to attract many consumers.

However, not all the authors agree with such a radical statement. For example, teenage culture was interpreted by Hall and Whannel as "a contradictory mixture of the authentic and the manufactured – an area of self expression for the young and lush grazing ground for the commercial providers".³⁵ According to this approach, commodification of subculture does not exclude its authenticity. One may agree with this statement, as the subculture usually preceded commodification.

Another problem connected with the commercialization of youth culture, according to some researchers, is that it robs young people of "any sense that their lives could be different".³⁶ It is connected with leisure, clothes, music, etc. Although at the beginning one group of people follows one pattern of behavior or listens

³² J. Clarke et al., *Subcultures, Cultures and Class...*

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 104.

³⁴ D. Hebdige, *Subculture...*, p. 131.

³⁵ M. Brake, *Comparative Youth Culture...*, p. 185.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 187.

to a kind of music, sooner or later it will be followed by other young people, which means that this particular group will lose its difference and identity.

Subculture and counterculture

Many sociologists see a vast amount of ambiguity in differentiating between subculture and counterculture. Some use the terms interchangeably and claim that both phenomena have the same characteristics. However, Yinger, among others, suggest that subculture and 'contraculture' demonstrate diversity in several aspects. According to Yinger counterculture is "a set of norms and values of a group that sharply contradict the dominant norms and values of the society of which that group is a part".³⁷ We may assume that the words 'sharply contradict' are the key words in this definition, as they emphasize the contradictory aspect of counterculture. One may conclude that this is the main difference between subculture and counterculture. Furthermore, Yinger claims that countercultures often arise where there are conflicts of standards or values between subculture groups and the larger society. This proves that a subculture group may turn into a countercultural one if the conflict occurs.³⁸

An alternative definition of counterculture, formed by Westhues, refers to ideology, behavior and social structure. He argues that a counterculture is a set of beliefs and values that reject the dominant culture of a society and give alternative norms. This definition works on an ideological level. Another level of reference is a behavioral one. From this point of view a counterculture is a group of people who behave in nonconformist ways according to their values and beliefs, and who are rejected by the rest of the society. As we can see, these definitions also contribute to our analysis. Based on them, one may assume that subculture groups differ from those of a counterculture due to the fact that they are not based on rejection by the society. Subcultures, especially youth ones, take their values from the dominant or parent culture, and what is more, they function in this culture. Members of subcultures are not totally rejected by the rest of the society. Let us take occupational subcultures as an example. They are fully accepted by the society, although they form a subcultural group. All the above proves that subculture and counterculture are distinct phenomena.

Another important characteristic of counterculture is that it is not connected with any native culture, because all the native patterns and traditions are not results of conflict with the society but are part of socialization. Yinger claims that both subculture and counterculture have a set of norms that separates them from the dominant culture; however subculture is not a variety of counterculture. Countercultures are not connected with traditional patterns; they are separate from ethnic background and other subcultures. The term 'counterculture' should be used "whe-

³⁷ M. Yinger, *Countercultures...*, p. 3.

³⁸ *Ibidem*.

never the normative system of a group contains, as a primary element, a theme of conflict with the values of the total society, where personality variables are directly involved in the development and maintenance of the group's values, and wherever its norms can be understood only by reference to the relationships of the group to a surrounding dominant culture".³⁹

These criteria show that counterculture and subculture have no clear boundaries. Although the values of subcultures can be in conflict with the larger culture to some extent, in a counterculture conflict is central. A group may display subcultural behavior in one situation but in the other it may turn out that the same group falls into the category of counterculture. Empirically, both influences may be mixed.

There is also a difference in the approach to analyzing these phenomena. Yinger forms the hypothesis that subcultural behaviors should be studied from the point of view of general theory of culture. On the other hand, hypotheses concerning countercultures could be derived from social psychological theory, as countercultural norms occur under conditions of deprivation, confusion or frustration.

Delinquent subculture

To deal with delinquent aspects of subculture it is necessary to refer to cultural deviance theory, which suggests that "delinquent behavior is a reflection of life in unique cultural and subcultural settings".⁴⁰ This theory also states that delinquent acts are caused by learned behaviors, not by innate impulses. Delinquent behavior is connected with low income, problems of racial and ethnic segregation, and lower classes.

Shaw and McKay's⁴¹ lower-class cultural theory says that delinquent culture exists in slum areas and is connected with adolescent groups. Living in poor conditions in slum communities produces social disorganization. Young people in these conditions lack adult control, and delinquent behavior occurs.

Another theory concentrates on the middle class, suggesting that delinquency is a subcultural variety of it. Adolescents find no patterns of authority and are expected to follow rules that seem contradictory to them (they develop intellects at school but cannot undermine parents' opinions etc.) As a result the generation gap widens, and middle-class youth organizes itself into subcultures. In such groups they are more prone to behave in a delinquent way.⁴²

Let us now discuss the emergence of the delinquent subculture. Cohen argues that people adjust to different situations by joining with others to seek a solution.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 126–127.

⁴⁰ T. LaMar Empey, M. Strafford, *American Delinquency: It's Meaning and Construction*, California 1991, p. 178.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*.

⁴² *Ibidem*.

The notion of significant others is important here. He differentiates three models of adjustments: the corner boy, the college boy and the delinquent boy.⁴³ We will focus on the third model, as it concerns delinquency. Cohen claims that delinquent subculture is highly malicious, as it follows the delinquent behavior just for the fun of it. Delinquent subculture provides a member with things or feelings he could not meet in society, such as the support of the group or the certain status of being a member of the group. It becomes a substitute for a person who has failed in a middle-class dominated society.

To conclude, subcultures are responses to social problems such as difficulty of adjustment or rebellion against certain values – problems that have no ready-made solutions. The unifying force that brings people together and centralizes the group is conflict. Individuals in the face of conflict tend to look for backup and search for others that share the same or at least similar difficulties. They need support for the change in their frame of reference which can bring solutions mostly at an imaginary level. The members of subcultures are generally young people. Adolescence is a crucial point in time when transition from childhood to adulthood brings certain ambiguities, and in-born rebelliousness as well as rejection of societal norms and values do not help, which is why in many cases delinquent behavior occurs. Members of subcultures create their own style and meaning and manifest them in a specific type of clothing, jargon or artifacts. They want to be distinct from the decent public. However, they have to face another problem: commercialization and media exploitation. In a way they become the products for sale, and their sub-cultural meaning can be consumed by the dominant culture.

⁴³ *Ibidem.*