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Subcultural Protest in Times of the Pop-Entrepreneur

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In the last 20 years the terminus "subculture" has degenerated to a "convenient catch all-term for any aspect of social life in which young people, styles and music intersect" (*Bennett*, 1999), used by all kinds of media who helplessly try to comprise the heterogeneous substreams that traditional youth cultures have branched out under this emptied-out label. In this complex situation with a hybrid mainstream formation which can hardly be demarcated from subcultural scenes this paper poses the following questions

· Can we identify new micro-formations that use subculture-derived strategies, life styles and sign systems?
· How is the relationship between cultural industries and post-subcultural formations? On the one hand the dance/rave has strongly influenced the shaping and contouring, the energising and the entrepreneurial 'nous' of the new culture industries (McRobbie, 2000), on the other hand cultural industries do shape the new post-subcultural formations with their pressure for flexible producers with loose "network sociality"
· What is the political potential of these new formations, especially concerning a further deconstruction of patriarchal structures?

The question concerning the existence of such new formations has a precondition: The attempt to say goodbye to the terminus "subculture (at least to the terminus "subculture" without a "post"-prefix). Since the golden age of subcultures research in the late seventies the assumption of how subcultures are constituted has shifted a lot: Contemporary youth cultures are characterized by far more complex stratifications and mobilities than a simple dichotomy mainstream - subcultures (for which mainstream is the yardstick against which subversion through style is measured): Todays youth cultures are made up of a highly diverse mixture of strategies of self-expression. The class dependence of cultural resistance seems to vanish with the thinning of subcultural class identities and ties.

The subculture-analyses of the *CCCS* can still be read as scientific pioneer work but in some points they do not longer hold up to social reality:

· Contemporary youth cultures are characterized by far more complex stratifications and mobilities than a simple dichotomy mainstream - subcultures (for which mainstream is the yardstick against which subversion through style is measured) [1] - youth culture is made up of a highly diverse mixture of substream networks.
· The *CCCS* positions youthful consumer choices mainly as proto-artistic and/or proto-political acts, ultimately explaining the logic of their cultural consumption in terms of its "opposition" to vague social bodies variously called the parent culture and the mainstream - the Birminham tradition has over-politicized youthful leisure [2] : It has an one-dimensional view of "resistance" and "incorporation" (especially in *Hebdige*'s work). The social reality of the last few years heavily contrasted to the assumptions of the *CCCS*: It was characterized by "osmotic" processes of interactions between subcultures and mass cultural forms. The emphasis on resistance led to a down-playing of subcultural participation in economic processes and commerce [3] - some subcultures like surfers, bikers and snowboarders have been living out consumerist ambitions since their beginnings, others work as subcultural entrepreneurs and buy and sell in the marketplace (see *McRobbie*'s works on ragmarkets).
· The refusal of the *CCCS*-researchers to engage more concretely with subcultures as distinctive arrangements of everyday life - their refusal to look at what they actually do (with the exception of *Paul Willis* who had an ethnographic research approach instead of a semiotic approach) [4] and to the inner stratification of the subcultural formations.

Today the majority of subculture reasearchers works with ethnographic methods again and there is some kind of consensus that subcultures have above all been generated by media but also by pop theorists: So they have been constituted from the outside as communities of myth consumers. The single most important element of constitution is "moral panic" that was generated by mainstream media around subcultures. This medial panic delivers the most important identity offer for the potential consumer rebel: If her/ his subcultural articulation is that intensively opposed by the establishment she or he has already achieved the main target of hers or his attempts of differentiation against the parent culture.

If we follow the (plausible) assumption that waves of "moral panic" (that seem unimaginable today) played a or the central role in the process of subcultural identity generation then a fast goodbye from the terminus "subculture" seems to be necessary. For the US *Lawrence Grossberg* states such a disappearance of subculturally-encoded formations. According to him the neoliberal establisment leads a war against its own youth with the result that no normative mainstream-formation can team up against which subcultural groupings can define themselves via differentiation. Today "moral panic" that has been focused on subcultures in the 60s, 70s and 80s is now mobilized against the whole youth in the US.

In Great Britain the situation is a bit different: The cultural world itself has switched into new (neo-liberal) gear and is forcing its now vastly expanded creative workforce to adjust accordingly. The "Kreativwirtschaft" that *Franz Morak* is steadily hallucinating about in his desperate fight for an odeur of modernity is already playing a macroeconomic key role in Britain. This process comprises a future identity problem for subculture-related groupings: Many of the new producers of the "creative industries" come from subcultural origins - "creative industries" on the other hand follow a strictly neoliberal logic that is based on individualism, entrepreneur-spirit and sponsoring. Self-reliance is total and the state steps back as the 'entrepreneur of the self' takes over as the new archetype in the arts and cultural field. In one breath important labour rights are abolished and replaced by precarious forms of work. In this 'creative' and 'created' economy, older features of working life including the career pathway, the ladder of promotion, the role of bureaucracy, the 'narrative sociality' of a life spent in a stratified but secure workplace have been rapidly swept away to be replaced by 'network sociality' (Lash 2000).

The new pop-entrepreneurs also confront the neoliberal entertainment-complex with a dilemma: On the one hand they are needed as avantgarde of the flexibilisation of society and as creative cells by the mainstream, on the other hand they are suspiciously observed and partly repressed. As a result of this integration process the claim for cultural innovation that has been monopolized by subcultures for many years has shifted from subcultural myth consumers to subculture-related producers who work for the "creative industries" organized in loose networks. The "historical" subcultures (mods, punks, gothics, teds, skinheads) are still existing in translocal formations, all over the world, but more active in rural regions and without any claim for innovation.

In Austria new pop-socialized forms of subcultured-related collectivity have developed that engage politically, mostly because of the historical shame of the empowerment of the ÖVP/FPÖ-goverment. New forms of politics developed in opposition to the threatening hegemony of the nationalist-racist, forms that I would designate as post-subcultural strategies in a broader sense. In 2000 new political activist networks like *volkstanz.net* or *gettoattack* nearly succeeded in developing from micropolitical protest to a macropolitically effective resistance movement. *Oliver Marchart* names three preconditions for this transition step from micro-protest to macro-resistance: 1. antagonization (the Austrian oppositional activists succeeded in this point: The political enemy was clearly defined) 2. universalization (partly successful: Some activists made at least attempts to develop an emancipatory programme) 3. organization (failed: It did not work to build up a broad platform of non-parlamentarian opposition groups).

The Austrian example shows that at least under extraordinary historical conditions post-subcultural networks can articulate their political position a lot more effective than the "historical" subcultures despite their stronger integration into culture industries. Contrary to the interpretation of the *CCCS* it has become clear that "historical" subcultures were not only structurally sexist, racist (see the ignorance versus soul or the extremely hesitating reception of hiphop) and often homophob (see the total opposition of the white underground in the first days versus disco which then became the dominant matrix on the way to the dancefloor-paradigm), but also totally politically ineffective: The politicization of these subcultures (via sound, via democratic conditions of production or via style) was not more than self-suggestion. Between shallow pathetic and masculine myth they constantly reproduced relations of domination whereas the dancefloor-revolution of the 90s at least softened the fixed gender relations (or made them even dance?).

The blurring of the terminus "subculture" also results in the wrestling for a new terminus to catch these post-subcultural formations described above. *Armadeep Singh* apostrophizes these groupings as channels or sub-channels, *Andy Bennett* draws on the Frech sociologist *Maffesoli* and calls them neo-tribes, I refer to them as temporary substream-networks. The sociologists *Ronald Hitzler* and *Michaela Pfadenhauer* describe the new formations as post-traditional forms of community: Postmodern conceptions of individuality and community are connected to a loose, only temporarily binding structure. Fundamental critics of the linking of conceptions of postmodernity with (post-)subcultural studies emphasize that it does no longer hold true to talk about "formations" but only strategies or practices.

In the following I try to describe in what points these new the new subculture-related networks differ from the historic youth subcultures as described by the *CCCS*:

· A substream is not strictly related to a specific class (e.g. working class).
· A substream has no fixed group identity but only multiple and fluid part-time identities. The individualism of the participants is rated much higher than within the historic youth subcultures.
· The styles articulated within a substream are far more pluralistic than those of the historic youth subcultures as described by the CCCS - substream-participants may be described as style surfers (Ted Polhemus, 1996).
· Substreams are not as sharply delimitated from the mainstream as the historic youth subcultures (as punks or mods) used to be - they do not try to position themselves permanently outside of society like punks did and accept some of the offers of the new eclectic mainstream.
· It is possible to participate in the activities of two or more substream networks at the same time.
· Symbols & language are not used exclusively within substreams (like in historic youth subcultures).
· A substream is not necessarily locally based - virtual substreams are teaming up which operate internationally without strong local ties that used to be so important for subcultural formations.
· Substreams are ethnically more mixed than the historic youth subcultures.
· Many members of substreams are as well producers as consumers within the pop business and make their living in pop industry (as DJs, label owners, publishers, musicians, club hosts...) whereas members of the historic youth subcultures were mostly only consumers.
· Substreams try to combine political commitment with fun. They are not apolitical but engage in selforganized political organizations focused on issues, outside of the traditional political institutions.

Within all this wrestling for patterns of description and new termini the question stays unclear if the new post-subcultural formations do have political impact: *Diedrich Diederichsen* emphasizes that subculture-related formations are political just inasmuch as they still are in close touch with the most progressive edges of the hybrid mainstream. The only issue with such close touch right now is the complex human rights-antirassism-minority rights according to *Diederichsen*. He assumes that the connection between political left and pop-left has not totally eroded but can be re-made only in certain points and questions. I think that the political reality in Austria in the beginning of the year 2000 delivers a nice example to Diederichsen how such temporary alliances can indeed materialize, how traditional leftist protest groups and segments of youth

culture can build up temporary coalitions if elementary civil rights are endangered. If we look at anti-globalisation-groupings like Ya Basta! and their Tute Bianche-concept we see a lot of usage of strategies of popular culture (using the body as weapon to gain freedom, the white clothing-style...) combined with traditional Marxist ideology. I cannot distil more than this small glimmer of hope for attractive emanzipatory politics from the analysis of todays global and translocal youth culture formations.

[1] S. Thornton "Club Cultures", p. 93.

[2] S. Thornton "The social logic of subcultural capital" in K. Gelder / S. Thornton "The Subcultures Reader", p. 201.

[3] K. Gelder "Introduction to part 3" in K. Gelder / S. Thornton "The Subcultures Reader", p. 146.

[4] K. Gelder "Introduction to part 3" in K. Gelder / S. Thornton "The Subcultures Reader", p. 145.