YOUTH SUBCULTURES AND SUBVERSIVE IDENTITIES

UDC 316.723

Nikola Božilović

University of Niš, Faculty of Philosophy, Serbia
E-mail: bonicult@yahoo.com

Abstract. *The author explores the identities that are formed within youth subcultural groups (rockers, mods, punkers, skinheads, rappers). It links identities with subcultural styles – it interprets the meanings stemming from the value attitudes of the young. The common feature of all the subcultural identities is their subversiveness while it is symbolically represented through image, music and jargon of subcultural actors. The subcultural self of adolescents comprises a certain degree of symbolic aggression which serves to challenge authorities, to oppose regulations and to refute social conventions. That is why it is well-grounded to consider subcultural identities of the young as identities for resistance. The author identifies them most easily in the domain of rock music which is, on the whole, characterized by the rejection of the mainstream cultures and the values it supports. For this purpose, it supports the theoretical assumptions with some results of the identity research carried out in the region of the three Balkan states, namely, Serbia, Macedonia and Bulgaria.*

Key words: *youth subculture, style, identity, subversion, symbolic aggression, resistance, music preferences.*

Contemporary urban societies are mainly multicultural comprising a great number of subcultures. Youth subcultural enclaves are genuine places where a variety of identities are formed. In general, according to the best known classification scale, identities are divided into *personal* referring to individuality ("the self", "ego" or "persona") and *collective ones* referring to similarities (Golubović 1999: 21). The basic kinds of collective identities are: social (group and class), national, professional and cultural. All identities are relational and inter-penetrating. Namely, since identity refers to the meanings which are always the matter of convention and innovation, then, as stated by R. Jenkins, every human identity is a social identity (Jenkins 1997: 4). In an endless chain of social and cultural communication, identities are shaped, integrated or changed. If the personal identity is an idiosyncratic variant of cultural identity, then, maybe, it even more so be-

---

longs to the layer located under the "roof" of general (legitimate, established) culture. In this context it seems indicative to single out the "youngest" form of identity, the one which has been least explored so far, namely, *subcultural identity*. Though it covers a whole array of subcultural groups while referring not only to the youth, it would not be inappropriate to represent it by the slogan of the young: to be one's own at any cost. This identity, considering what it relies on (with respect to the freedom of choice it allows for and the creative foolishness it longs for) represents the base for many other kinds of other identities.

1. SUBCULTURAL DIMENSION OF IDENTITY

The basis for the shaping of a subculture is a common way of life of one social group, not in the terms of simple isolation but cultural diversity. A special way of life is based on a specific cultural pattern – certain value system, ideas, norms and rules of behavior, symbol formation and their use, taste, fun, music, appearance and speech of particular social group. When it opposes the mainstream or dominant cultural model, this way of life gets transformed into a *cultural style*, that is subculture (Božilović 2009: 10−13).

Subcultures are formed within social layers as much as with respect to age, professions, free professions, gender and sexuality. A sociologically important issue lies in the fact that subcultures indicate the disappearance of the idea of wholeness and announce symbolic violation of the social order. This implies the exertion of *resistance* through style, the distancing away from man's other or so-called false nature and the coming to the authentic expressive skill and authentic (underground) style. That is what D. Hebdige writes about having in mind primarily teddy boys, mods, rockers, skinheads and punkers. Their movement causes censorship thus figuring out as the basic carrier of meaning in subculture. The spectacular elements of subculture create a possibility for *subversive* readings and detection of hidden (coded) messages on the shining surfaces of style (Hebdige 1980:28−29). The causes for the emergence of subculture as well as the reasons for joining subculture are not always rational; that is why they should not be uncritically sought for in the sphere of rationality. Their emergence is not preceded by any symposia, programs or memoranda. Subcultures very often come into being with no special planning in advance; they are spontaneously generated while their activities are directed towards the goal which bases its *raison d' être* on the escape from anonymous everydayness imbued with boredom, spiritual emptiness and impersonality.

Subculture crystallizes, materializes and transmits group experience while it gets formed outside the political bearings. Regarding the universal culture, subculture represents a relatively rounded-off, distinct identity whole; it comprises values, rules and norms adopted and practiced, observed and sustained, for a longer period of time, by given group members. Subcultures represent idiosyncrasies of social groups, layers and their positions. Finally, subculture groups are creators and possessors of a variety of styles (Božilović 2004: 53−54). It should be stressed that subculture, as a socio-cultural phenomenon, is most directly correlated to the *meaning of style*. The style represents a connotation of the given culture. If the way of life can be ascribed to a wider social community or social group, then the style marks the contents of life of social layers and, in general, smaller social groups – so-called strategy of "I" by which the actor, through subculture, marks himself and defines his personal affiliation.

The triad formed by *subculture, style* and *identity* has no unidirectional course but a circular one. It means that the identity expresses itself through subculture as the meaning of style, that the style represents an external manifestation of identity and that, finally, both the factors together form subculture with a set of recognizable features stemming from the cultural patterns of minority groups, namely strategies of thought, worldviews, values, beliefs, norms, rules of behavior, affinities, sensibilities, tastes, symbolic representations, moods, specific sensitivities and linguistic peculiarities (argot, jargon, slang). If we would call all this *inner identity indicators*, then *outer indicators* would comprise the factors of visualization of subcultural identity, namely, physical appearance (way of dressing, ornaments, hair do), visible manifestations of behavior, posture, rebel image, choice of music, skills, rituals and festivities. At the same time, we should not cherish an illusion that, after learning about all these above-listed general traits, the door of subculture would be widely open to you. The apparent clarity of the word "subculture" cannot hide the truth that, as Hebdige would say, it is shrouded in mystery and that it suggests a whole set of obscure notions like masons' oaths and underground (understood in terms of movement or organization whose activities go on outside the established society or culture).

Style is not an unambiguous or fixed but historically relative category; neither do subcultures represent an eternal, monolithic and petrified but variable and relatively diffuse social group. They do not comprise only ethnic or linguistic groups. As very wide in their scope, subcultures, to paraphrase Giddens, can embrace naturalists, Goths, hackers, hippies, Rastafarians, hip hop fans or football fans. Some people, as the British sociologist sees it, can clearly identify themselves with a certain subculture while others may freely move among many different subcultures (Giddens 2003: 27). This is feasible and possible since the values and norms, though deeply rooted, can change in time.

The cultural style represents the basic form through which different identities, most often personal ones, can be shaped. It is through style that individuality comes to surface as well as creativity, uniqueness and sensitivity that, taken together, affirm one single personality. If we come to accept the fact that identity is a metaphor for recognizability, then we are not far from a very well known phrase that style is man himself (Note: man is not born with a style but the style is something learnt and shaped in a given culture). The affinity for one style, orientation or tendency is specified by subculture that an individual tends or belongs to. Subcultural styles represent the best manifestation of cultural diversity.

The social order of the modern times can be best understood through a much widely understood life style pointing to practical differences in everyday living. The difference with respect to the Other comes from, as K. Geertz would say, "voluminous descriptions" of the things representing part of the social status and identity. The notion of the life style can be constituted by means of the expressions such as "identity", "choice" and "self-realization". It is, as a phenomenon, most directly related to the modern society. Life styles are nothing else but habituated ways of combining certain aspects of everyday life, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, of social and symbolic values. In Chaney's view, styles are patterns of actions which differentiate people; he sees them as "ways of playing with identity" (Chaney 2003: 60). Since the understanding of the life style is related to symbolic practice, it is obvious that style should not be looked for in the objective-ness of the material world. Its determinants are primarily coupled with social and symbolic meaning which is woven into multifaceted everyday reality.

Among the issues related to subcultural style, one of the central problems is *that of taste*. Even when taste is an individual matter, when it is the most individual and most intimate, it is, to the greatest possible extent, socially and culturally determined. Taste can be treated in aesthetic discourse, as a universal human feeling for beauty, and in sociological discourse, in which the starting point is the fact that it is socially determined. A famous saying by R. Lynes states that taste is our personal enjoyment, our private dilemma and our public facade while Z. Gluščević, discussing the relationship between taste as aesthetic factor and essence of the subject's being, has come to the conclusion that in this field there is another insufficiently clarified identity relation. In that sense, he presents us with an interesting view that taste as 'a summary of man's aesthetic being" is closely related to "the totality of his existence." All this further supports the thesis that taste is not only an aesthetic category but it blends in itself a way of life of our personality *in toto*. Hence an attack on taste is experienced as an attack on our whole life and our Ego (Gluščević 1990: 323−324). When someone accuses you of lacking any (aesthetic) taste or of your having a poor taste, then you tend to understand it not as an attack on one aspect of your personality (aesthetic) but rather as an attack on your complete personality (identity). The accusation makes you, in the cultural sense, unfit as man and thus affects your pride.

The taste of an individual is formed in the cultural environment; however, it is, as a rule, specified in a certain subcultural milieu (that is why it is not groundless to say about someone that he is a rocker, businessman, sportsman, "with an artist's soul"). None can, with his whole being and with no reserve whatsoever, belong to the culture in its entity since culture is a general thing while interests are always individualized and they move to some subculture, that is, some special offshoot of the cultural matrix. It is only in the subcultural milieu that an individual completes the building-up of his most intimate, personal taste. This is done through the chosen system of values which does not have to be, always and in its totality, opposite to the system of values of the mainstream culture. In that sense, E. Kale emphasizes the fact that even subculture is a culture (though an incomplete cultural entity) as well as that people experience culture truly through their subculture while culturalization is done through subculture – which substantially contributes to its sustenance (Kale 1977:112). In the sphere of subcultures the changes of the ruling priorities are most clearly seen which is the key assumption related to the identity formation and transformation.

The sociologists are primarily interested in *subcultural groups*. They can conceptually be defined through style, values, ideology and meaning. It is clear that there is a correlation between group (that is, social layer) and symbolic form of representation and this in the sense that the cultural forms are already existent while the group simply takes them over. It is upon this hypothesis that M. Brake bases his personal view of subcultures. For him, subcultures are not but systems of meaning, forms of manifesting life styles developed by a group of subordinate structural position as a response to the ruling system of meaning which shows their attempts to solve structural controversies generated in a wider social context (Brake 1985: 8). This definition comprises two structural aspects, namely, the sociological one referring to group affiliation and the culturological and hermeneutic one based on the analysis of the meaning of culture. Subcultural identity belongs to the group of collective identities but, with respect to the freedom of choice (of style) by individuals, it actively participates in the shaping of personal identification.

Subculture is not characterized by the energy possessed by counterculture. It demonstrates a certain style and in this way it shows the symbolic community an individual belongs

to in addition to the sensibility habits he supports as well as those he suppresses and punishes. The emotional structure makes the basis of microstructure of subcultural youth style and it is, as written by R. Marić, characterized by "powerful outbursts of affinities" and "an outstanding energy of repulsion". In any case, subculture members have special interests; they commit themselves to a chosen domain, develop their common history and form similar emotional habits. In this way they build their own symbolical worlds of special affinities and identify themselves with the chosen contents more powerfully than with the generally accepted values of their community. The subcultural style is spread like a *field of symbolic action* while it is made up of the following basic elements, a) *image*, that is outlook, b) *music* enjoyed by subculture actors, c) *appearance* as posture, gestures and expressions, and d) *jargon*, that is, special kind of dictionary, pronunciation and hidden meaning transmitting a message thus protecting a mysterious world (Marić 1998b: 178). Differentiating styles with respect to the above-mentioned features, we are actually identifying their belonging to particular subcultures: namely, to beatniks, teddy boys, mods, rockers, skinheads, punkers, metals, ravers. To this we should also add the subcultures with other interests and engagements such as theosophists, occultists, homosexuals and transvestites, yogi practitioners and vegetarians, drug-addicts and other hobbyists. Searching for their identity, many of them join non-formal groups, communities, sects and other colorful groups that we call subcultures.

2. Symbolic Aggression: Mocking Authorities

The notion of identity is not easy to define regarding its multidimensional nature. It may only appear to be clear because it implies very different things. Many sciences and disciplines enter its orbit. Yet, there are some things in it which are not debatable. In the sociological sense, identity represents the process of an individual's identification with the values of a certain social group or layer (starting from family, through local community and region to mankind). Anthropologically speaking, identity can be defined as the sameness by which a being is identical to itself, that is specific in certain beliefs, values and expectations. Identity is at the same time both *state* and *process* while it is determined by affiliation to some way and style of living. The most important characteristic of identity is the sense of belonging understood as man's feeling of safety. That is why we should not exclude, from any single kind of identity, the meaning of one's own Self which comprises connotation of selfhood or personal identity. In searching for identity there is always an act of finding what is personal within collective while the collective dimension is related to gender, national, professional, generational and religious affiliation. Each search for identity is nothing else but a way of finding oneself while this way is, as a rule, long, demanding and extremely uncertain. Even when it appears that identity becomes an exclusive property and matter of an individual, a result of personal aspiration, affinity and choice, the decisive role in the last instance is that of the factors of cultural milieu and social structure. At the very base of culture there are concepts and ideas, no less than senses and emotions. To paraphrase Harding, people are liable to conceptualize the process of emotional experience in interaction with cultural practice and social relations (Harding 1999: 412).

Especially characteristic is the case of gender identity which can be understood as part of subcultural identity. It is rather the matter of *choosing* identity while it in itself refers to personal perception and it has an important role in the socialization process. Unlike sex which is a biological category, gender represents a social construct of "masculinity" and

"femininity". If sex is identified by visible genitals of human being and reproductive functions, gender is a construct of particular society in concrete time. Gender differences have their roots in culture, not in nature. That is why gender identity is defined as part of personal identity referring to personal and social perception of the individual concerning his belonging or not belonging to his own biological sex. It, in a way, "breaks" the fate of the personal and subcultural identity since it is classified as belonging to minority groups (sexual minorities) fighting for recognition of their right to their own peculiarity in society. The fate and status of gender identity, however, are not decided upon by individuals; they are, however, decisively affected by economic, political, cultural, racial, sexual and, finally, subcultural circumstances (possibilities for realizing stylistic idiosyncrasies, differences, otherness). Today we speak about a wide scope of gender identities. It is implied by the formula LGBTIQ which is a generic name for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersexual and queer persons. All the determinants represent a matter of personal or, in the culturological context, subcultural choice. In addition to the engagement of anthropologists and other activists in the domain of academic community, this problem is, at the practical level, at least within its own range, somewhat resolved by the hippie movement.[1]

Science has to take into account the fact that the matters of identity are open while the responses to them are, to say the least, ambivalent. The question of the choice of identity, as considered by the rock musician David Bowie, has nothing to do with your "I". It means that the answers to the questions of identity do not lie in our "I". Further considerations of this intricate issue lead us to Foucault's belief, which is also partly Bowie's, that we should be taking care about our own I instead of knowing it. In other words, it means that the matter is not in the fact who I am (since I can be anything) but *how I should live*. Starting from his own experience, the popular pop icon encourages us to explore the dangers as well as the possibility of "selfhood". Since "I" is always a cultural invention, we should steer clear of the straightforward answers to the questions of identity or of difficult yet fast rules that inhibit the finding of one's own "self" (Stevenson 2007: 7).

As minority groups, subcultures exhibit the resistance that may take on different forms. Most often it is a kind of passive resistance though active, aggressive forms of resistance are not excluded. From contempt, defiance, ridicule, irony, parody, sarcasm or, simply, grinning at, resistance can take on even violent forms (rejection, obstructions, resistance, demonstration, diversion, physical outbursts of rage at people or things). In the case of more radical extremism, subcultures turn into countercultures. Yet, resistance is first related to subcultural differences which tend to start firstly in the intimacy of family life. It is the matter of *alternative identity* of young members of subculture who are trying to find a meaning between their parents' culture and the ruling ideology. The subcultural

---

[1] Hippies grew out of the subculture of beatniks while they represented a movement with exceptional countercultural power. Their rebellion and resistance refer to all that could be considered as establishment. This movement was impressive, first of all, considering their way of fighting – the hippies were followers of the doctrine of *resistance without violence*. They introduced a genuine revolution of behavior; they protested with "free love" and "Eros without borders" as stated by the Serbian theatrologist Jovan Ćirilov who is famous for the aesthetic transfer of the famous Broadway musical "Hair" and its more than successful production on the stage of Belgrade theater Atelier 212 forty years ago. By the way, in early 2010, on the same stage, remake of the same musical is produced, speaking about *subversive identity* of the young generation today. Only this time the sharp edge of counterculture has undergone changes and it is re-directed to the burning issue of the contemporary world – insatiability of man in the post-capitalist system and the formation of negative identity in the virtual world through advertising messages produced by media.

identity has a subversive character. It is from it that the style springs from which is identi-fied by status and importance of revolt, open Rejection or even elevation of crime to art. In the styles made up of secular objects, their double meaning gets formed, namely, on the one hand, the "proper" world warns of their malicious presence (as "the presence of dif-ference") while for those who turn them into icons, these objects become the marks of forbidden identity, sources of value (Hebdige 1980: 14).

Impressive is the way in which R. Marić explains the activities of the young in shaping up images of their own culture in the present times. The contents of the subcultural activi-ties of young men and girls are taking place in a scope between *choice* and *resistance*. The activities are directed to resistance while the carriers of subculture choose subversive signs, opt for the "challenge of independent production" and preservation of their sym-bolic world. The subcultural *self* comprises a certain degree of "symbolic aggression" which is directed at shaping up a peculiar taste of the youth. All this is "seasoned" with "impudent games" that ridicule authority or proclaim disobedience or shock opponents of the given style. The state bureaucracy, embodied in the institutions that can control the impudence of the youth, is measuring differences, sanctioning violence, strengthening the hierarchies of influence and adjusting the laws of action to the interests of its loyal sup-porters. In the subversive styles of the youth subculture there are two phases: one is *chal-lenging of authority of* strict watchdogs, *opposition of regulations* of boring contexts, ne-gation of repulsive rules and *ignoring* of "outdated contents" while the other one com-prises the experience of *satisfaction,* self-acceptance and relaxation in one's "own world", among like-minded persons. It is important that at the same time the actors shape the rit-ual of approaching distinguished persons, respect the chosen values, create an acceptable world and appreciate the ideal and the meaningful model of behavior in a subcultural community (Marić 2002: 206−209).

The shaping of a subculture style begins when the subculture actors start revealing the skill of authentic expression and when they manage to conspicuously transform the differ-ences into an experience of self-acceptance. When they succeed in "persisting in difference", when they learn how to defend the right to their own attitude and when they master the skills of shaping the meanings, they can count on their independent existence in culture. It means that they have won for themselves an independent position in style and achieved identity, that is, they have become "somebody" on the subcultural scene (Marić 1998a: 12). The sub-cultural worlds of the youth have much in common with carnival pleasures: they are charac-terized by laughter, excessiveness, bad taste and offensiveness till final degradation. The life in carnival is subdued only to the laws of its own freedom while the function of the carnival is implied in liberation from the dominant population of the world, clichés, conventions and established truths, from all that is tedious and universally accepted. The carnival atmosphere tends to allow for creative playful freedom while the carnival degradation represents the lowering of all to the equality of bodily principle (Fisk 2001: 97−99).

All the circumstances and troubles with respect to identity and identification have their own line of development and can be historically viewed. In the *traditional* society, in which the center of the entire life is a kinship system, the place of an individual in the group is of no particular importance. *Modernity* is significantly marked by the formation of the otherness and the existence of different possibilities. *Postmodernism* discards the identity of "I" in the name of establishing the *relations* ("I completely disappears in rela-tions") while, with postmodernism, what emerges is ambivalence, heterogeneity, multi-

plicity, difference and openness of perspectives (Golubović 1999: 8). Subcultural identities in the contemporary circumstances become the crucial domains in the process of shaping the consciousness of individuals and groups. They are incorporated in both the basic poles identification, namely, in the personal identity as a "subjective" aspect and in the collective identity as an "objective" aspect of the identification process. It is known that the choice of a subcultural style is, on principle, free, led by emotions and deeply personal; however, the very personal character of identification is based on the objective factors of the socio-cultural environment. While the collective identities, on the whole, represent an objective base of personal identities and self-identities, the subcultural identities, as special, play a role of some middle balancing member. They represent a connective tissue integrating the social and the personal sides of the identification process.

3. IDENTITIES FOR RESISTANCE

The identity of youth subcultures could be determined through the activities of alternative music and art as well as intellectual, dissident, drug-addict and delinquent social groups. Since all these groups got formed by the principle of difference or otherness (alternatives) instead of similarities (with respect to the values of the official culture), the public has always looked down upon them with suspicion, disbelief, mistrust and moral contempt. All the youth subcultures, the original ones – beatniks, mods, rockers, punkers, skinheads as well as later ones such as diesel, crime, ravers, rappers – are distinguished by their own identities. It could well be said: as many subcultures, that many identities.

J. Hormigos and A. M. Cabello state, to paraphrase, how subculture and traditional counterculture have built an identity in opposition or at least with respect to the dominant culture. Music has been a weapon in this struggle for identity. This fact, however, does not mean music activity, either complete opposition or complete integration in the society. The sound builds a sub-identity together with other elements but the struggle with the dominant culture does not have to take place. An interesting comparison is made by these authors schematically; it refers to the relationship between youth subculture and popular music trends, that is, bands with particular music characteristics. (See Hormigos/Cabello 2004: 267).

Youth subculture	Music bands with their characteristics
Teddy Boys	Elvis Presley, Billy Holliday
Mods	The Who
Skin-Heads	Madness
Punkies	Sex Pistols, The Clash, The Ramones
Heavies	Iron Maiden, Judas Priest, Black Sabbath
Goths	The Sisters of Mercy, The Cure
New Romantics	Duran Duran, A-Ha, Spandau Ballet
Rappers – B-Boys	Public Enemy
Rastafarians – Rude Boys	Bob Marley and the Wailers
Hippies	Janis Joplin, Jimmy Hendrix
Grunge	Nirvana, Pearl Jam
Techno	Different DJs

Just like other kinds of identity, neither are identities in subculture absolute, unchangeable and uniform. For instance, in the domain of gender subculture preference it is possible to find many kinds of sexual identity: transexual, intersexual, homosexual, heterosexual. Or, in the rock identity which is formed in terms of music taste, there are many possible varieties that gather together fans of pop, hard rock, heavy metal, soul, rhythm and blues, reggae, punk, hip hop. Something similar can be said about some other affinities which move in a wide circle, from generational through drug-addiction and religious-sectarian to culinary identities.[2] As for youth identities based on taste in music, there are certain "standards" in this domain which tell about rivalry between the two worlds, on the one hand, "cultural urban guerilla" and, on the other hand, sterile and dulling "pink" culture. Sociological research confirms the rule that music preferences of the young tells a lot about their overall (sub)cultural preferences, that is, identification (Lazar and others 2002: 7−8). As befits the saying: Tell me what kind of music you're listening to and I will tell you who you are.

The formation of subcultural identities starts from the moment when the subculture actors make their difference visible. On their way they will face resistance, firstly in their own family and then in a wider social environment. All this is due to their subversive and resistant strategy or their refusal to subdue themselves to the ruling procedures in the culture of subordination. The contemporary culture of domination must acknowledge the fact that it will have, as its opponents, subculture(s) of resistance. Anyway, subcultures do emerge as resistance to the ruling cultural values, namely, the resistance expressed through rituals. They undermine the regime and undermine the existing institutional dynamics.

Without finding a place for themselves in the mainstream reality, subcultural actors tend to get affirmation in an alternative reality. For this purpose, they shape their own independent style and take on *alternative identity* which opens up the space for all kinds of pleasure. Depending on their affiliation to the style, they are different not only from the members of the mainstream culture but also from those of other subcultures. Young members of a subculture get together because of their similar music affinities while they figure out with their clothes, hairdo, language idiom and slang, dances, a variety of ornaments, badges and other trinkets. Accordingly, the subculture actors announce their mission by proclaiming their disagreement and disobedience; they complete it in a campaign against *symbols*. Once they achieve identity in a subculture, the young affirm individuality of their gestures and provide for "reserve status" with respect to the social and personal identity. No matter how different they are, these identities have something in common: namely, they come into being by *activities* and *understanding* in the social and cultural context. Both these contexts "produce meanings, induce different kinds of behavior, permeate the world of individuals and groups and disturb the shaping of special, incomprehensible identities. By singling out desirable objects, by offering chosen symbols and by transforming the existing meanings, a new or subcultural context is being shaped" (Marić 1998b: 167). It is important to stress the following: subcultural engagement of the young

---

[2] Each conception of identity which is other than fatalist in its approach does not exclude the possibility that one personality can include many subculture-identity sub-kinds. For instance, along with his professional identity (that of a physician, miner, engineer, navy officer), one can also have the identity of a passionate numismatist or alpinist that his passionate or, simply, hobby leads him to. This is not the matter of hypocrisy but, simply, of double or plural identity.

is not a product of some nihilistic project; the actors of subculture are not only saying what they reject but they also say what they want, what they commit themselves to; they are not rebels without a cause; neither are they indolent as usually thought of by the majority of adults; instead, they clearly define the domains of their activities; they are creative, exceptional and unique; their activities carry messages with meanings; they experience work as creativity through playfulness instead of mere repetition of the same things; finally, they are absolutely and in *everything* different. It is not accidental that Hebdige writes about "subversive implications of style". He knows quite well that elements of resistance, rejection and subversion are characteristic for almost all youth subcultures and that they play a decisive role in shaping subcultural identities. That is why the identities of the youth subcultures are, taken as a whole, known as *subversive identities.*

Young people are actively involved in giving a shape to the image of the contemporary culture. For this purpose they exhibit a certain degree of symbolic aggression – they play "impudent games" of ridiculing authorities; they decline obedience and shock opponents to their style. By standing up against the regulations of the state bureaucracy, the actors of subcultures form the rituals of allotting significance to their chosen values and persons; they select an acceptable goal; they estimate their ideals and meaningful forms of behavior. The subcultural resistance is not senseless; it is, as a rule, always related to some choice and all this for the sake of preserving subcultural self and symbolic world (Marić 2002: 206−208).

The subversive discourse of subcultures is centered around the chosen zones. The rhetoric of resistance directly stems from the subcultural self built on the opposition to the "respected society". As elements of the assembly of rejected world, the actors conceive of the rhetoric of resistance, combining expressions and creating meanings by which they strive to cause some reaction of the *straight* society and shake its rooted habits. The loose behavior and "weird" appearances of the young are planned to induce uneasiness and confusion; they are interpreted as a threat to the symbolic stability of the existing order. The members of subcultures do all they possibly can to draw attention, symbolically, to their presence in a world built on the distorted values. They show how the community has failed to anticipate a place for them. In this way they want to render senseless the "correct" society, to expose it to mockery and ridicule and to represent it as hideous. In addition to simple rejection and obstruction, they do not restrain from occasional physical outbursts of rage against people or things. The meaning of the "rebel image" assumes the manifestation of the presence of difference which in the minority groups creates an identity for resistance.

Though the study of identity today is the matter of multidisciplinary study, there are still numerous ambiguities regarding the very issue of identity. Yet, there is something common to all of them, something clear and unambiguous. Identity is not inherited; it is not a bio-genetic category and it is not acquired by birth. Identity is not obtained as a gift; it is acquired, adopted and fought for. This is considerably more difficult for young people who live in the countries with short and not-deeply-rooted democratic tradition such as Serbia. There evolves powerful resistance to all that is new including the people who want to be free, unconventional and anti-traditional. Serbia is a Balkan country and one of the postcommunist countries in which the processes of re-traditionalism, strong nationalism and religious (Orthodox) fanaticism are prominent. In such a cultural milieu, it is most difficult for the young people to get out of the nationalist cage and express their

preferences for something which is, at this very moment, undesirable by the majority such as, for instance, rock music (pop, rhythm and blues, underground) which is also rooted in their culture. Most recently music has been quite a reliable indicator of the other value attitudes of the young as well as of their worldview. Nowadays, in the Balkan region, it seems to have been pushed to the background thus leaving the space for other affiliations such as ethnic, political, religious. This has also been pointed out by the research project carried out in three Balkan states, namely Serbia, Macedonia and Bulgaria.[3] To the question asking "how important is it for you that other people know what music you are listening to?" the answer stating "it is irrelevant" is given by 52,2% of the examinees in Serbia, by 45,1% in Macedonia, and 41,8% in Bulgaria. The answer stating "it matters" is given by only 26,1% of the examinees in Serbia, 17,9% in Macedonia and 20,6% in Bulgaria. The first association that emerges in Serbia when the word "identity" is mentioned is the affiliation to nation and Orthodox Christianity. The universal values such as freedom, peace, love or human rights are still here understood as distant, imaginary, utopian-like demanding and pro-West! Therefore, when it comes to the issue of identity, it is always the matter of meanings while they are, in themselves, the matter of culture.

The subcultural identity is based on the styles from which certain messages with meanings are reflected. Hebdige understands style as one form of Rejection which is built upon the meaning of revolt and the stressing of status. By the styles made up of worldly matters (safety pins, sharpened shoe, Vaseline tube), the young send a signal to the "correct world" of the presence of differences. They do not restrain themselves from representing the objects which are meant to depict the forbidden identity as the sources of values. That is why they attract to themselves suspicions, uneasy laughter or bitter rage. The sum total of constructs and meanings of style in subculture point to Rejection whose significance is recognized by Hebdige: gestures, smiles and sneering express some subversive value. It is through Rejection that the power of de-mystification is expressed; thereby the attention is drawn to the essential problems of the youth – in the society which is obsessed with acquisition of material values (Hebdige 1980: 13−15). Though resistance and subversion represent the very backbone of the youth subcultural identity, it does not mean that they are retrograde, that they are inclined to simple destruction and denial of all the values. The subversive activities can be compared to the postmodern re-questioning of the meaning in everyday life and to the restoration of dignity to the underground, alternative, marginal and peripheral discourse (subcultures of graffiti, street theater, happening, performance). In the very marrow of this resistance there is one active dimension, recognizable in the original, non-conformist and creative experience of the world. It is in these things that the young people see something worthwhile and desirable.

Yet, the cultural industry has brought along the changes that have not been expected or at least desired. It is on its wings that a new culture is born, with the music that has had, at the onset, the character of rebellion before evolving into a democratic mass culture. The original pop culture has risen beyond authority. Its audience is differentiated with respect to gender, age and hobbies instead of the traditional standards of education and

---

[3] The project in question, entitled "The Culture of Peace, Identities and Interethnic Relations in Serbia and in the Balkans in the Process of Eurointegration" was carried out by the Center for Sociology of the Faculty of Philosophy in Niš in the period 2006-2010.

family background. Thus, the elements of its identification turn out to be ways of dressing, music, magazines, TV series, drugs, oriental mysticism as well as alienation. The cultural industry leads to *fragmentation of personal identities:* at the top of the value scale there are no longer social classes, extended nuclear family, local affiliation, neighborhood, religion and nationality. Even more, consumerism has become very crucial for individualization since in this way *modern identity* is created: TV, rock-and-roll and film are universal language (Janković 2009:29-3). All this speaks in favor of the thesis that identities are neither biological nor metaphysical but, rather, a socio-cultural category and that they will be, in future, in accordance with the spirit of the times, more and more exposed to changes.

All in all, subcultural identities are likely to move, in future, from the margin to the center of social grouping. In the world of postmodern culture, in which there are visible attempts to avoid the formulation of the universal principles, there is no longer polarization according to either moral or ideological criteria; neither is there Manichean division into "good" and "bad" guys. The choices are now made with respect to the values in the everyday life and in the local surroundings; rarely do they have a universal dimension. There lies perspective of subcultural choices and identities. It sounds paradoxical but globalization of culture (through diffusion and mingling of cultures, media-linkage of the world at large and the likes) creates many benefits when it comes to the affirmation of cultural peculiarities. Giddens speaks about promotion of local identities through globalization whose effects aim towards the creation an ever increasing cultural diversity instead of homogeneity (Giddens 2005:18).

Finally, there is an obvious correlation between the youth's music preferences and subcultural identification. Symbolic images and activities mark off the scene at which the young cultures create their identities by means of rock music. For the post-war youth, rock had the meaning similar to that that bop had for its fans in the forties: it was a challenge, a badge of recognition, a costume; it represented a vital blood stream of the whole generation (Gojković 1976:119). The young expressed themselves (their dreams and imaginings) through their music while, at the same time, identifying themselves with the messages it emitted. And what is the most important: in this case, there was no "coercive identity-taking" as has most often happened in some other forms of identity, ethnic or religious. Neither did the fans of rock subculture, understood in its widest meaning, allow any outsider to force them into an identity other than that they picked up for themselves. Their choice (we are referring to the grey and sad nineties here, in Serbia) was, on the one hand, such that the rockers of Serbia regarded themselves as defenders of an urban culture (relying on the identity defined through their opposition to the domination of rural and anti-urban cultural forms) and, on the other hand, they expressed an international identity, narrowly founded in the culture of urban minority. Symbolically, this can be felt as a temporary triumph of urban culture, visible at the moments of fusion of city crowd and noise into a unique experience of commonality. As audience of rock and roll music, this subcultural group of the young was made to feel powerless and isolated. Music has become an even more powerful source of identity built on the resistance to regime (Gordi 2001:175).

Coupled with music, there is also the use of slang, posture, way of dressing and, in general, overall image. It is primarily related to urban subcultures and the identity that has been achieved in the music context (pop and rock music) which has been dominant since the mid-twentieth century. The mainstream culture of that time has had the same social

foundation, that is, context, but here it is the matter of normative difference in the value system and the attitude-formation. While the mainstream is supported by media and through market manipulations (machinations), the subcultures are formed as a reaction (with elements of milder or more violent resistance) to this state. Many sociological research projects such as the one carried out by Frith in Great Britain, have shown that music with the young people is an ideal milieu for identity choice and formation. Music inspires teenagers in their choice of clothing including details for decoration; it sets their idols and suggests the ways of passing their spare time. Their music and value preferences are inseparable as put in a nutshell by Frith, that music is understood as opting for a scale of values (Frith 1987: 91).

However, the correlation between music and identity choice is not at all smooth and straight as it may seem at first glance. Frith stresses one of the paradoxes of his research that the group that has put the greatest emphasis on individual music choice has also stressed the importance of the role of common music taste in the formation of friendships. Namely, music serves as a "badge of individuality" on the basis of which friendships are made. A special irony Frith has seen in the fact that the groups that have most stressed individualism are most excited when their music heroes changes their style for music is understood as a symbol of a set of mutually related values. Adolescents have understood music (or better, experienced) as a means by which the group defines itself; it has been the basis for group affiliation and the way of founding identity that would be different from the old one. A group of the examined students have been aware of itself as a group and it has clearly distanced off itself from the culture of their parents. Yet, Frith especially stresses that in the lives of its members the dominant feeling is that of *open possibilities.* All of them have prepared themselves to proceed further on – to universities and colleges, to new cities, to new experiences; they are aware that the group itself is transitory and temporary and that the individuals belonging to it have to preserve their individuality. It is in music that they seek support and relaxation; yet, they have a developed self-consciousness. From the tensions that are stemming from their social environment, from politics and studies, they have come out with an occasional cry, "F.. the whole world!" and then they have come to the conclusion that music is irreplaceable to them – as a context for dancing, relaxation, hugging, falling in love (Frith 1987: 53−55). The most important message from all this lies in the fact that subcultures and subcultural identities do not annihilate personal identities. In subcultures you do not give up your personality for the sake of group affiliation; you are a voluntary active participant in the subcultural life, ready to express your individuality at any moment. Moreover, subcultures do even rely on self-awareness and individuality of their actors that are always expected to launch new initiatives – original and extraordinary. It is the only way in which they can count on survival in the world dominated by uniformity and monotony of the same and alike recurring on end.

References

1. Božilović, Nikola (2004) *Rok kultura* (*Rock Culture*). Niš: Studentski kulturni centar.
2. Božilović, Nikola (2009) *Izvan glavnoga toka: Sociologija muzičkih potkultura* (*Out of the Mainstream: The Sociology of Musical Subcultures*). Niš: Niški kulturni centar.
3. Brake, Michael (1985) *Comparative Youth Culture*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
4. Čejni, Dejvid (2003) *Životni stilovi* (*Lifestyles*). Beograd: Clio.

5. Fisk, Džon (2001) *Popularna kultura* (*Understanding Popular Culture*). Beograd: Clio.
6. Frith, Simon (1987) *Sociologija roka* (*The Sociology of Rock*). Beograd: IIC i CIDID.
7. Giddens, Anthony, (2003) *Sociologija* (*Sociology*). Beograd: Ekonomski fakultet u Beogradu.
8. Gidens, Entoni (2005) Odbegli svet (*Runaway World*). Beograd: Stubovi kulture.
9. Gluščević, Zoran (1990) *Život u ružičastom: Antologija svakidašnjeg kiča* (*Life in the Pink: Anthology of Everyday Kitsch)*. Beograd: Prosveta.
10. Gojković, Jasminka (1976) "Muzika kao socijalna istorija, bluz i džez" ("Music as a Social History, Blues and Jazz"). Beograd: *Ideje*, 1−2 (VII).
11. Golubović, Zagorka (1999) *Ja i drugi: Antropološka istraživanja individualnog i kolektivnog identiteta.* (*Me and Others: Anthropological Research of Individual and Collective Identity*). Beograd: Republika.
12. Gordi, Erik (2001) *Kultura vlasti u Srbiji: Nacionalizam i razaranje alternativa* (*The Culture of Power in Serbia: Nationalism and the Destruction of Alternatives*). Beograd: Samizdat B92.
13. Harding, Jennifer (1999) *The Power of Feeling: Locating Emotions in Culture*. London: Guildhall University.
14. Hebdidž, Dik (1980) *Potkultura: značenje stila* (*Subculture: The Meaning of Style*). Beograd: Rad.
15. Hormigos, J. y Cabello, A. M. (2004) "La construcción de la identidad juvenil a través de la música". Madrid: *Saberes*, vol. 4.
16. Janković, Aleksandar S. (2009) *Dug i krivudav put: Bitlsi kao kulturni artefakt* (*The Long and Winding Road: The Beatles as a Cultural Artefact*). Beograd: Red Box.
17. Jenkins, Richard (1997) *Rethkinking Ethnicity. Arguments and Explorations*. London: SAGE.
18. Kale, Eduard (1977) *Uvod u znanost o kulturi* (*Introduction to the Science of Culture*). Zagreb: Školska knjiga.
19. Lazar, Žolt i drugi (2002) *Omladinske potkulture i publika EXIT-a* (*Youth Subcultures and EXIT Public*). Novi Sad: EXIT udruženje.
20. Marić, Ratka (1998a) "Potkulturne zone stila" ("Subcultural Zone of Style"). Beograd: *Kultura*, 96.
21. Marić, Ratka (1998b) "Potkulturni stil kao polje simboličke akcije" ("Subcultural Style as a Field of Symbolical Action"). Beograd: *Sociologija*, 2, vol. XL.
22. Marić, Ratka (2002) "Govor potkulturnih stilova" ("Discourse of Subcultural Styles"). Beograd: *Iskustva*, 11−12 (IV).
23. Stivenson, Nik (2007) *Dejvid Bouvi. Slava, zvuk i vizija* (*David Bowie. Fame, sound and vision*). Beograd: Clio.

OMLADINSKE POTKULTURE I SUBVERZIVNI IDENTITETI

Nikola Božilović

Autor se bavi ispitivanjem identiteta koji se oblikuju u okviru omladinskih potkulturnih grupa (rokeri, modovi, pankeri, skinhedi, reperi). On povezuje identitete sa potkulturnim stilovima − tumači njihova značenja koja proizilaze iz vrednosnih opredeljenja mladih. Zajednička osobina svih potkulturnih identiteta jeste njihova subverzivnost, a ona se simbolički predstavlja kroz imidž, muziku i žargon potkulturnih aktera. Potkulturni self adolescenata sadrži određen stepen simboličke agresije, koja (agresija) služi za izazivanje autoriteta, protivljenje propisima i odbijanje društvenih konvencija. Zato ima smisla potkulturne identitete mladih nazvati identitetima za otpor. Autor ih najlakše identifikuje na planu rok muzike, koju u celosti odlikuje odbijanje mejnstrim kulture i vrednosti koje ona podržava. U tu svrhu, on svoje teorijske premise argumentuje nekim rezultatima istraživanja identiteta koje je obavljeno na području tri balkanske države – Srbije, Makedonije i Bugarske.

Ključne reči: omladinska potkultura, stil, identitet, subverzija, simbolička agresija, otpor, muzičke preferencije