

Rolf Schwendter:

The Theory of Subculture and the Situation of Migrant Workers in Germany

To start with my lecture, I intend to begin with a short recapitulation of my opinion, how the structure within the theory of subculture works. After that I intend to continue with some remarks on the situation of migrant workers in Central Europe, for to end with some further remarks again, concerning the situation of the second (maybe meanwhile even the third) generation, and the idea of multinational hip-hop projects.

The grounding assumption of the theory of subculture is, following for example the outstanding US-American social scientist C. Wright Mills, that there is on the top of each until known postneolithic society a group better, an ensemble of persons and units, which selects the norms, values, institutions and objectivations of this given society. This ensemble I use to call, again following C. Wright Mills, the establishment. The majority of the given society uses, with the exception of a crisis situation, to follow these norms, values and so on, to interiorize them, to acclamate the normative declaration of the establishment. Following a term of the late Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen, I call them the compact majority. The circulation between establishment and compact majority in the nowadays given societies is possible, and mentioned in terms like career, like normative take-over, like descendance. Abstractly speaking subcultures are now the ensembles of persons, which differ in their own norms, values, institutions and objectivations in a distinct manner, in a significant way from the norms, values, institutions and objectivations given by the establishment and followed by the compact majority. There is a huge amount of groups in the society too, which prefer other values and so on, but not in the mentioned significant way - then I use to speak from a partial culture. (We only need to remember groups and units like the stamp collectors, the rabbit breeders, the bungee jumpers to get a vision from this partial cultural multitude).

I have to add, that the societal dynamics would be described in an incomplete

way, without mentioning the pivot persons even the pivot groups. As pivot persons I use to define persons, which are in continuous interaction as well with at least one subculture, as well with parts of the establishment, of the compact majority of the partial culture. The function of the pivot persons or other pivot units lies in the helping intervention against establishment sanctions against the vulneration of ruling values (and so on), in the mediation in the case of conflicts, in supporting subcultural needs if this is necessary (and it uses to be necessary).

I repeated this, in a very abbreviated manner, because I could not assume, that the theory of subculture is part of the common knowledge. Nevertheless I give two additional remarks concerning the case, that somebody was acquainted with the theory of subculture in studying the books of the Birmingham group, the Center of Contemporanean Cultural Studies, to which I see only two differences to my own theory: They are very fond of the concept of “styling”, which is indeed an important category concerning youth subcultures, but in my point of view not so important in the case of psychiatry experienced, drug addicts, homeless persons or migrant workers. The other difference is given in the matter of fact, that the Birmingham group looks at subcultures like branches on the tree of main classes, especially what they are calling the middle class and the working class. It would not make any difficulty for me to agree, that migrant workers are working class subcultures in this case - as a generalization I would prefer a more dynamic class concept, as I have designed it in the terminology of class streamings. To have detailed out, that there are structural connections between class streamings on the one side, subcultures on the other side, is unquestionably an advantage of the Birmingham theory.

Beyond the structural fint thoughts I will add some further details of subcultural differentiation, which seem important for me in analyzing the situation of migrant workers. One the one side there exist subcultures, which try to build their own norms, values, institutions and objectivations out of their intention to held themselves up in hostile society, to better the world - or even for to have more fun. On the other side subcultural life (Oscar Lewis mentioned it broadly in his “Culture of Poverty”)

is to be constituted to overcome in a struggle for survival, as a form of mutual help, to make an unbearable situation more bearable. I call the first the voluntary subcultures, the second the involuntary subcultures. Surely there are situations of transition: an opposite subculture can be easily transformed in an involuntary one, if all their members are jailed. As well works it in the opposite direction, if selfconsciousness in a suppressed group is growing, and the former stigma (as Erving Goffman called it) is to be transformed in a proud statement: we self-organized gays, mad persons, cripples, grey panthers, junkies.

The other differentiation concerns the direction of the deviant behavior, the direction of the non-established norms, values, institutions and objectivations. Ensembles are on the one side, forward oriented, full of intentions of a general embetterment of the global situation, to reduce for example the need achievement principle as much as it is possible according to the given state of economic development. On the other side ensembles are existing full of images of a glorified past and nothing fulfills so much their intention than the return journey to a former state of society. I call them the progressive and the regressive subcultures. Here are, like above, transition situations possible, too.

Finally a differentiation could be made between rationalist subcultures, which are eager to plan their alternative values and institutions in a very cognitive way, and form open strategies how to survive as subcultures in the best possible manner - and emotionalist subcultures, which use to live their as deviant perceived lifes out of their bellies, without deeper reflections and with subtle, often unconscious strategies for survival.

One of the outstanding values of established life since the rising of national states is the language, as a matter of pity, and not as a necessary one: we remember, that in the middle ages language did not have such a dominating function, and the migrating and travelling persons, used to communicate in some strange variations of that, what the church somehow liked to understand as Latin. Maybe, in some decades this aspect will be modified, because all persons speak a somewhat universal Pidgin English but this is not the case in the

contemporary migrant workers situation. The other language, or even if the native language is spoken the other pronunciation of this language (the Viennese cabarets are full of demonstrations of the “migrant worker German”) uses to be regarded as the first deviance, but surely not as the last.

The historical and economic rise of migrant workership occurred mostly in the sixties, as the factory owners decided, that there are too few workers at the labour market, and the countries opened offices in the main capitals of poorer countries to convince their populations to come and take work in the metropolitan states. The rest is well known: they came, and, after some years and legislative ameliorations, they brought their families. They have been convinced in the first years, that they will come for a few years, earn money and become rich people, they will go back again. So did the factory owners, the national administrations, the compact majorities. As we know it turned out otherwise: More and more the greater part of migrant workership lost the connection to their homelands, became old, the family members, friends acquaintants in the homeland forgot them or even died. The second generation, grown-up in the meantime, strangers in a strange land, neither connected with the homeland (besides the remembrances of some visits), nor really connected to the country where they have been forced to live because of parental labour situation resulted.

Firstly, as I have remarked above, I can come back to the Birmingham class assumption. Migrant workers are workers, are surely part of the working class if there is still one in function. But one has to reflect on the fact, that nowadays working class seems to have somewhat seventy or eighty class streamings, beginning with the managers, which are not owners themselves, ending with the life-long unemployed, who are unable to live out of own energy, only through a differing multitude of subsidies survivable. Migrant workers, if they are deviating by the lack of language knowledge, use to fall from the first moments into the deeper working class streamings: often as unskilled mass workers, as unprivileged service workers, in worse situation as part-time workers or black marked workers. The social security uses to be worse than for the native workers, the trade unions use to neglect them. The situation is sharpened, if, like in Germany since 1973, and in Austria since somewhat 1982, mass

unemployment rises. The factory owners and national administrations, who fetched them into the land, are trying to get rid of them. The native workers, even the ones located in higher proletarian class streamings, see them as competitors. Native workers in the mass worker rankings are afraid, concerning them as competitors, and follow at a rate of somehow high significance right wing movements suggesting the out-throwing (and sometimes even the extermination) of migrant workers (structurally comparable to the “poor white” in the US - American southern states). If migrant workers themselves are poor, unemployed, blessed with too many children, and the legal situation even allows it to give them subsidies, the social administrations, supported by the mass media and right wing populist movements, will try to disturb this.

Concerning to these, necessarily few facts, which express the norms, values and institutions of a given establishment, a given compact majority, and given opposite subcultures, one could say, at first glimpse, migrant workers would be an unvoluntary subculture. But things seem to be more difficult.

Surely, at home, if they would be in employment there (this is not sure, sometimes not even probable - the unemployment rates in their homelands use to be still higher than in Central Europe), the probability is high that they would be members of the compact majority. As an example from another field of interest can be mentioned, that psychiatry-experienced men, if asked, would like to have as well an own family house, car, wife, two children, maybe a dog, like an average member of the compact majority men. Because of the marginalization this will probably stay a private utopia for most of them, but surely nobody is forbidden to have private utopias, and they will have effects to the mind and to the self-consciousness of the persons. This position to the homeland compact majority is still to be sharpened, if we take into account, how the effects of the money differentiation uses to work. In the most of the homelands the earned money of the metropolitan countries is much more worth than in the latter ones. One badly earning migrant worker is able to subsidize nevertheless a huge homeland family, is even able, during some years, to buy some tiny homeland-house somewhere in Anatolia or in the Italian landscape (In Germany this fact was threatening, as before some month a Kurd Strategy was becoming known to send some persons as refugees to Germany, where those could get social subsidies to send them partially to Kurdistan. As several studies pointed out, the German social subsidies use to be at a starvation level).

So the migrant worker identity is split: as a citizen of his homeland he uses to be the member of the compact majority of this homeland. As an inhabitant of the metropolitan country where he uses to exercise wage labour, he uses to be a member of an involuntary subculture - living in one room with ten other persons with beds put on each other unto the ceiling, watched by the police, cooking the simplest meals on somewhat gas boiler, included.

Surely the situation could be described in this way, if the migrant persons would have occurred as single persons, even then, as the next step, as single families (the betterment of the situation looks somehow like this, that 5 or 6 persons live in a flat with two rooms, maybe the wife earns this flat in working as waitress, as “concierge”, of this house). Because of the immigration of thousands, hundred thousands, in the big countries millions of persons, the cultural levels multiply themselves. And concerning a multitude of populations they multiply themselves in different directions.

So these involuntary subcultures form at the same time voluntary subcultures: cultural associations, political discussion groups (sometimes even political action groups, which activities use to be dangerous for the members, for giving the federal forces an opportunity to throw them out of the metropolitan countries), religious associations, sporting units. The experience of the until now last century shows, that this building-up of voluntary subcultures causes at least two effects: a primary lack of integration because of the subcultural character of the activity - and opposite to this, a chance for networking with native institutions at the same field. One of the central dynamics between subcultures on the one side, compact majorities on the other side, is to be said the integration, the assimilation. This uses to take place, but probably in the second, if not the third generation of the migrant workership. Similar again to the situation of black Americans, arts, culture (including gastronomy) and sports, maybe science too, are rising the chances to integration - usually integration in the first generation does not really occur, and what is used to be called integration, seems to be in the reality a living-beneath of the different values, institutions and objectivations, at least beyond hostility. Not even the connubium, the cross-marriage, guarantees really integration. (As a child of a native Austrian son and a Hungarian migrant worker's daughter I remember quite well, that there was almost no contact between the two families. As I, as a without any questions privileged Austrian migrant worker married in Germany, it was quite the same).

Now all the categories, pointed out in the introduction, start to blossom: there are

voluntary progressive rationalist subcultures, as the democratic cultural associations. As well voluntary progressive emotionalist subcultures, as certain sport associations use to belong to the partial cultures - and because of the split in members of the compact majority home and of involuntary subcultures abroad raises the paradox, that they are somehow partial cultures without integration. There are, very seldom, -progressive subcultures with multicultural values and institutions. There are, in raising number during the until now last decade voluntary regressive rationalist or emotionalist subcultures, best known the fundamentalist communities of certain Islamic factions (I don't think there would be in this audience any necessity to make more than a foot-mark on the subject, that the Islamic multitude is as affluent as for example the Christian multitude, and detailed empirical studies about the deviant values of each group would be preferable in opposite to the given prejudice, that each Islamic community would be somehow fundamentalist).

The Islamic subcultures are, in my opinion, a good example to show how the subcultural dialectics can work. At home surely a hegemonial bunch of thoughts between establishment and compact majority (surely connected with even bloody contradictions to the hegemonial industrial norms and values, like in Turkey or in Algeria), they raise necessarily under the metropolitan hegemonial and established strange mixture between traditional Christianity and in praise of costs-benefits-capitalism reduced enlightenment to a voluntary (and in case of fundamentalism: regressive) subculture. Because of the severe situation of migrant workers as forced involuntary subcultures the role of Islamic subcultures is strengthened: for the lot of male migrant workers out of islamicly grounded homelands the latter gives an utopia, a vision of a better life beyond the tiny flats - and if not here, than later on, in paradise. The process continues: Again because of the outstanding normative deviations of Islamic thinking (for example concerning the situation of women, or Islamic law) a lot of subcultures express opposite attitudes - the feminist, the criminal abolitionist, the left wing Christian. These again tend to legitimize the prejudices of the compact majority out of the labour competition, the building of involuntary subcultures - and the circle, as mentioned, can continue.

Maybe, to fulfill the last generalizable task, this is one of the reasons, that

empirically (maybe with the exemption of some few fundamentalist Catholics) almost no pivot person or pivot group in interaction with Islamic subcultures is to be found. Concerning migrant workers in general, there are surely lots of pivot person and pivot institutions, mediating between them and the compact majority. To start with a very mighty and established one: tactically the Catholic Church functions in Central Europe as a pivot institution for catholic migrant workers. Generally there are more or less alternative institutions, mostly founded by rationalist-subculturally inspired persons or groups, who use to function as pivots: cultural centers, citizens initiatives, multicultural investigations, organizers of networking fiestas. Concerning persons, the group is very similar to pivot persons in interaction with other involuntary subcultures: lawyers, social workers, teachers, writers.

The hip-hop-project, with which I close my lecture, would not have come into existence without aid of such pivot persons out of cultural centers. Surely, hip-hop has not started as a cultural workers activity. It began as one of the multitudes of subcultural activities at the US-American east-coast, probably in New York, probably in the late seventies/early eighties. Hip-hoppers used to engage themselves in 3 activities: in singing Rap-songs (a fast, loud, rhymed, critical form of song, with long lines, accompanied mostly with a technically beaten rhythm), in dancing Breakdance (an acrobatically performed expressive single dance) and in painting Graffitis (a mode of wall-painting, often performed in illegal situations, for example on bridges or railway cars). In the US this raised as a subcultural activity mostly of the young persons, belonging to the ghetto population - as expression against the frustration caused by the circumstances of their everyday life. For almost a decade seen as a specific US-American expression, it was overtaken in the early nineties in Germany, especially in poor areas, where the ghetto situation of the oppressed youth was comparable, like in the Ruhr area or in Berlin. For our subject two facts are important: it was a specific mode of expression of the migrant worker youth, and here especially of the second (or sometimes third) generation of migrant workers - and it was a multicultural activity. It has been no fortune, that I spoke until

now almost exclusively from national or regional foreign migrant workers' subcultures: with the rare exemptions of networking gatherings (where each national subculture cook its own traditional dishes, plays music and so on) and of generalizing political demonstrations multinational cooperation among migrant worker subcultures is not really usual. In the small hip-hop movement the borders of national origins broke down. A group could have been consisting, for example, of Turks, former Yugoslavs, Greeks or Italians, Algerians – and sometimes even Germans. The discontentment, concerning housing situations, unemployment, poverty, miseries in the sexual relationships (or because of the lack of those), solitude out of the border situation between two cultures, and none of them both apt to juvenile self-actualization, was more important than national origin. And the language deviance has been overcome in the second generation. (Just for completement it is to mention that the East-coast trinity mostly eroded - other subcultures use to paint Graffiti, others exercise breakdance; the Rap songs almost became synonym to Hip-hop)

In the youth center Nordstaat, located in Kassel, like in several other towns, some hip-hop projects have been founded, on a very small scale supported by Kassels township, under the title of broad participation of the population concerning cultural matters (classical music and rock music included). Turk social worker started with the project, as the young people mentioned this wish; in the meantime some hip-hop formations have been developed, partially with speaking names like "Different cultures" and "Kanaken der 2. Generation" ("Kanake" is one of the most used ugly words for migrant workers). Participating are nowadays 20-25 boys and girls (since 1996 two exclusive girl groups exist), between 13 and 20 years old in the majority Turks, but persons from German, Maroc, Italian, Spain and Eritrean origin use also to participate. Most of the youth come out from poor families. The support consists of the musical equipment and contents two works: group experts who work twice a week with the young musicians. They are supported in writing of own rap-poems, in producing of lyric numbers, finally in making a life-

performance with public. The experience has been, that the young people started with simple poems and ended with elaborated songs, containing subjects like hostility against foreign persons. 1997 different music groups out of the hip-hop project made common cassettes and a CD - again with the presentation to the public inclusive. It is said (and written), that the participants had learned and experienced a lot - for example to formulate an opinion in their own words, to communicate with peer-groups out of different national and cultural circles, to influence the opinion of other persons (grown-ups included), to mediate their social problems to the public. Maybe, if they are in some time grown-ups themselves, they will be able to be pivot persons to help to better the situation of migrant workers in Central Europe.