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BOOK REVIEW: YOUTH SUBCULTURES AND THEIR VARIETY

Martin Kovanič*

SMOLÍK, J. 2017. *Subkultury mládeže: sociologické, psychologické a pedagogické aspekty*. Brno: Mendelova univerzita v Brně, 2017. 277p. ISBN 978-80-7509-498-8.

Youth subcultures are a phenomenon that had become visible in Czechoslovakia mainly after the fall of the communist regime. The variety of subcultures that developed in the Czech and Slovak societies have risen to the interest of the wider public in the recent years, when Czech public television aired a short series on subcultures called *Kmeny* (Tribes), based on the books of the same name. This topic was also developed into an exhibition in the Moravian gallery in 2017 and a theatre play of the same name, which is being played in the National theatre in Brno. Youth subcultures, in their various forms, were able to enter the public discussion to some extent.

Academics have been interested in the phenomenon of youth subcultures since the first half of the twentieth century, starting with the so-called Chicago school. Focus of the academics from the Czech and Slovak environment on these issues started only after the fall of the communist regime. The 2017 book *Subkultury mládeže: sociologické, psychologické a pedagogické aspekty* (*Youth subcultures: sociological, psychological and pedagogic aspects*) by **Josef Smolík** is an attempt to provide a comprehensive overview of the research done in the field of youth subcultures, with focus on the development of several major subcultures, as well as their inception and growth in Czech republic and former communist Czechoslovakia.

Smolík is a Czech academic, currently at the Mendel University in Brno, who focuses on the research of security, far right and subcultures. He published

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several academic articles on football hooliganism, white-power movement, skinhead subculture and pagan movement. In 2008, he published a book *Fotbalové chuligánství (Football Hooliganism)* and in 2010 another book *Subkultura mládeže. Uvedení do problematiky (Youth subcultures. Introduction to their study)*. The 2017 book, which is a subject of this review, therefore builds upon his long-term research in numerous youth subcultures and their broader societal and political context.

The book consists of the broad parts, which are divided into 10 chapters. The first part is theoretical and methodological discussion of subcultures and their research. It defines the main concepts such as youth, culture and subculture. **Smolík** accepts the variety of definitions of the subculture phenomenon. In his work, he operates with the definition of subculture as a “sum of particular cultural features typical for small and distinct groups,” which features diverge from the mainstream or hegemonic culture. The author also stresses that the term subculture “provokes feelings of otherness, peculiarity and revolt but also evokes the feeling of inattentiveness of such behaviour and conduct in the majority” (Smolík 2017, p. 27).

Nonetheless, subcultures have been an object of appropriation by the mainstream and market in the recent years. **Smolík** briefly discusses the contemporary post-modern approach to subcultures, in which they are considered to be life-styles and esthetical codes (Smolík 2017, p. 83) and devotes a short chapter 7 to the relationship between subcultures and market. The process of the appropriation of countercultural and subculture movements, and the way these movements conversely fuel capitalism was interestingly analysed in the book *Rebel Sell* by Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter, which could be a relevant source for the continuation of the subcultures – market discussion sketched in **Smolík’s** book.

Similarly to chapter 7, there are short chapters that deal with the relationships of subcultures and media (chapter 6), subcultures and women (chapter 4) and subcultures and politics (chapter 8). All these chapters focus on important elements of subcultures and their wider relationship with our societies – representation of women, power of the mass media and ideological leanings of individuals. However, these discussions are rather brief (chapter 4 is only two pages) and could have used more development to fulfil their whole potential. On the other hand, the publication contains chapter 2 focused on the ways how subcultures can be studied, which only presents basic overview of various qualitative and quantitative research methods and which is relatively redundant for the purposes of the book.

The most interesting and innovative are empirical chapters, which focus on the overview of the development and contemporary situation of various subcultures – the author decided to focus on hippies, skinheads, football hooligans, punk, graffiti, metal, Goths and dance subculture. These individual subchapters first focus on the global development of individual subcultures. Then they focus on the birth in Czech Republic (or communist Czechoslovakia), their development and current situation, including regional specifics. The subchapters are mostly based on secondary literature, but also some primary sources – including interviews with individuals from particular subcultures, and study of material such as fanzines.

Most of the youth subcultures existed already during the communist Czechoslovakia. The dynamics between the regime and its security forces and members of the subculture were interesting. Within the subculture, there were secret collaborators of the State Security whose occupation was to monitor and spy on the involved individuals. The security forces were interested in these movements and prepared detailed reports, which is best illustrated on the punk subculture (Smolík 2017, p. 179). Punk was a protest against the establishment – which was true for both capitalist western countries and communist regimes. The western punk was first portrayed as a “manifestation of the disillusionment of the youth with capitalism” (ibid). When punk entered Czechoslovakia, it protested against the communist regime and came into the interest of security forces. One of the employed tactics by the regime was to criminalise punk (Smolík 2017, p. 180). Similarly, metalheads (individuals involved in the metal subculture) were portrayed as parasites, anti-socials and fascist sympathizers.

The strongest subchapters are the ones focusing on the skinhead and football hooligan movements. Their important contribution is that they aim at busting several myths that round around these subcultures – that all their members are political extremists (fascists or Nazis). The skinhead subculture, which developed in the late 1960s, is politically very varied – from racist/Nazi skinheads, to traditionalist (apolitical), and anti-racist ones – such as SHARP skins (skinheads against racial prejudice), the so-called red skins (with leftist ideology) and RASH skins (red and anarchists skinheads). This variety can be also seen in the Czech Republic, where there is about 5000 members of this subculture and majority of them belong to the apolitical tradition, with the Nazi (NS) skinheads coming second (Smolík 2017, p. 144). The medial representation in this country however still uses the skinheads equates fascists simplification.

Similar reputation is attributed to football hooligans. Although this subculture has close ties to the skinhead subculture, football hooligans are not tied to one distinct music style – which is often the case with other subcultures. Hooligans differ from the group of football fans, which primarily identified with particular football club. Primary loyalty of hooligans is to their group, whose association with the particular football team is secondary (Smolík 2017, p. 151). Hooligan groups have their own symbolism, presented at the group flags, clothing and scarves, which “facilitate creating a feeling of identification and belonging” (Smolík 2017, p. 152) and which also distinguish the group from one another. Hooligan groups fulfil the criteria of small social group; they have hierarchy, stability, homogeneity, shared values and common goals. In the Czech Republic, the peak activity of football hooligans was in 1990s and at the turn of millennium.

The last chapter of the books discusses subcultures in the context of social pedagogic and pedagogic psychology. The deviation of subcultures from the mainstream norm leads to refusal of their norms, values and social conduct. Therefore, from the point of view of social pedagogy and pedagogic psychology, because belonging to a certain subculture can have “final personality of the developing individual, they may co-create particular personality traits, choice of lifestyle and life priorities, as well as form the individuals relationship towards herself and the wider society” (Smolík 2017, p. 235). This means that pedagogues, pedagogic psychologists and social workers should possess some basic knowledge of the variety of subcultures.

This leads to the main aim of the book, which is summarised by the author himself in the conclusion: “The main aim for writing this text was primarily the need formulated by pedagogues, social workers, preventive service workers, psychiatrists and parents, who often needlessly search hard for basic information on individual subcultures or other youth styles” (Smolík 2017, p. 239). Therefore, the book presents a comprehensive, but to some extent basic overview of particular youth subcultures and their development. However, the book might also be of interest to students of social sciences, as well as academics – particularly the discussions about the developments in Czech Republic and communist Czechoslovakia. One of the advantages of the book is the fact that it is easily readable and well structured.