Agency and innovative spaces in transitions to work among young people with an “ethnic” minority or migrant background

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Introduction

Many studies have called attention to the difficulties that migrants and their descendents have integrating in their so-called “host” society, considering the European countries that have been receiving migrant labour force in the last years (Machado & Matias, 2005; Vala, Ferreira, Lima & Lopes, 2003). Because of the settlement of these populations in their guest countries, a so-called “second generation” emerged. These are children of migrant people born in the countries where their parents settled to work. Those youngsters, although socialized through their families in practices and values from their ethnic origins, are also influenced by the main culture and create mix cultural forms with all the resources they can access. The older generation does not always keep up with the younger generation and this can cause conflicts between generations. The younger generation learns faster the language and the norms in the guest society and this may cause tensions between generations. The parents may feel their parenting role compromised in some areas, teachers may be seen as representatives of a discriminating institution and this may create difficulties in relationships between parents, teachers and youngsters – a phenomenon called “dissonant acculturation” by Portes and Rumbaut (2001).

In this contribution, we will discuss sub-cultures of young migrants and descendents from an agency perspective in order to see what innovative potentials are hidden in these social spaces which are often only viewed under the angle of reproduction of social inequality. As we argue in the following, this view may well discover sub-cultural arenas as potential resource for agency and learning.

School performances and transitions to work

In all the countries under analysis[1], the research finds that newcomers and descendents often have many problems with the education system, and evince high school failure rates. Some of them have such a weak school performances not just because of poor language skills concerning the guest countries, but also because of future plans and expectations of more

[1] This contribution is based on the work of the EC-funded research project UP2YOUTH and its working group on “Transitions to work of young people from an ethnic minority or migrant background”, consisting of teams from Denmark, Spain, Germany, Finland and Portugal (cf. Mørch et al., 2008)

traditional families. This situation is flagrant in the case of young people from Roma families, namely the Roma girls in Romania and Portugal (Casa-Nova, 2005). But also most Kurdish young people (from Turkey) living in Denmark do not engage in formal education as a way of transition. Their parents came as guest workers and had the idea to invest in Turkey (send their earnings back to the family). Nevertheless this investment did not succeed and during the past 15 years more and more Kurdish people have had their families moved to Denmark. However, they maintain the goal of being in Denmark temporarily, to earn the most money in the shortest time in order to travel back and settle in Turkey. Therefore formal education would be a waste of time, and a large number of young Kurds start early to work in pizza bars, restaurants, grocery shops, kiosks and as taxi drivers.

Also in Portugal, some research figure out that the dominant trajectories or traditional pathways of young people with an immigrant or ethnic African or gypsy background through the education and training system are marked by *massive* and *cumulative failure*, as well as *premature* and *unqualified drop out* (Machado & Matias, 2006). Regarding the variable gender, all studies carried out in Portugal point towards the fact that, in keeping with the pattern that has been consolidating itself in the most developed countries, not only do girls have, on average, a higher level of education than boys, but they also have lower failure rates (especially in terms of multiple repetition), achieving better school results than boys. Marques and Martins (2005), in turn, point out that school, being a space of attraction as much for boys as for girls, is more significant for girls.

In this scenery, many youngsters search positive challengers and identity in other places than school, work or family. They find other particular life worlds where they can *escape* from disciplinary and traditional controls of school and family, find some social protection, recognition and celebration, as well as share a feeling of equality and reciprocity in their social relations. Their distancing towards school, labour market and familiar cultures can be suppressed by another social meaningful dispositive: the youth *subcultures* or *micro-cultures*. These subcultural networks, or the *subcultural capital* (Thornton, 1995) that they can provide, may contextualized the transitions from school to work as an integrative or self-exclusion way. In the case of young migrants or youngsters with an ethnic background, the subcultures that they create are frequently *(re)ethnicised* by themselves (as a way of dealing with discrimination and with the challenges they are confronted with in late modernity) as well as by the *others*, many times in a stigmatic sense.

Subculture contexts and agency

In fact, the transitions of ethnic minority youth some times are supported by marginalised social structures, locally and informally organized, created in the "streets"[2] (MacDonald & Shildrick, 2007) and cultural oriented towards their own social interests and values. Despite being under a strong criticism[3], one can see this kind of structures as *subcultures*, a concept which stresses the power relations between socio-cultural forms. This concept has been seen

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[2] The "street" designation corresponds to a metaphoric place constructed against institutional places as «home» (on the edge of the parents) or the "class room" (on the edge of the professors). When the youngster refers to the "street" usually they mean the exodomiciliary and interstitial contexts where they live in their neighbourhoods or around.

[3] For a discussion about the heuristic validity and productivity of the subculture concept in contemporary society, see Redhead, 1997; Bennett, 1999; Muggleton, 2002 (2000); Muggleton & Weinzierl, 2003; Bennet & Kahn-Harris, 2004; Blackman, 2005; Hesmondhalgh, 2005.

by sociological tradition as minority and subaltern social affiliations (which might be based on age or generation) considering the hegemonic cultural model (which might be based on class or adulthood, for instance).

They correspond to underground youth networks, produced in a voluntary and informal way, more flexible and convivialist than the formal associative structures, without any kind of institutional frame or unidirectional ideological orientation. Their participants share a set of aesthetic and ethical affinities and affectivities, representative of interests more expressive than instrumental. And they frequently present themselves as an alternative and dissident way of living youth life, considering the dominant patterns of youth life styles, more institutionalised and massif in the occidental consumer culture (Mørch & Andersen, 2006).

Within those micro-social structures cultural forms of reaction to the problems that their members are facing in their everyday life are projected and elaborated, often as the result of structural tensions between minorities and hegemonic cultural forms. Considering the analytic tradition developed by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies of Birmingham University, for instance, the youth subcultures emerging after the Second World War were seen as *functional* answers towards transformations and difficulties lived by youngsters with working class background in these period.[4] In this way, one can present these reactions as forms of *subcultural agency*, i.e., as a means of expressive and subversive action, characterised by a transforming intention and reflexivity, but socially localized far from the spheres of political decision making, intending to continue to reproduce this cultural and politically marginal localization.

Despite their importance, there are more variables in action on the basis of the social production of youth subcultures besides traditional *social class* and *age* or *generation*. The subcultures start to be mainly male cultures, considering the relative marginality that traditionally girls have had inside these social networks (Frones, 2001; McRobbie & Garber, 1976). However, some recent studies have noticed the increasing girl's presence in subcultural spaces, sometimes even creating particular gender forms of feminine subcultures.[5] Young migrant women and comparable indigenous women use parallel forms of coping with the passage from school to vocational training. Even if traditional life concepts are becoming less and less significant, gender specific classifications persist and lead to institutional and gender discrimination. Due to the restricted access to occupational training, young women uses strategies of social creativity by taking any status position in order to avoid an exclusion from the educational and employment sector. The lack of choice according to education and work make them act out of distress not by using their preferred orientation or their available knowledge.

With regard to the young women with migration background the significance of family is important in this transition. The strived status position in the employment sector shows social variations in the intergenerational relation leading to the fact that the young migrant women experience social mobility inside the family. Due to these obstacles and restrictions of the

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[4] See Hall & Jefferson, 1976; Mungham & Pearson, 1976; Cohen & Taylor, 1978; Hebdige, 1986 (1979).

[5] As it happens with the movement of RIOT GRRRLS – Revolution Girl Style Now. About this movement see Gottleib & Wald, 1994. The Latin King for instance, has girl as leader (Melody Jaramillo) since it acquired the status of legal cultural association, in Barcelona. And they also have the Latin Queens, a segment just for girls inside the movement (Feixa & Muñoz, 2004). The hip hop culture, namely among the rappers, have today plenty of girls as members in Portugal as well (Cf. Simões, Nunes & Campos, 2005).

dominant culture, a double challenge of these young migrant women forces them to tickle with these ascriptions by developing an alternative draft (cf. Schittenhelm, 2005).

The boys' situation is a little bit different, concerning the family constraints on their social agency. Living in a gendered familiar space, they learn how to defend themselves and how to evaluate their own experiences and views in a subordinate position but also as independent actors. The autonomous young man is constructed in the thresholds of adulthood. Somali boys in Finland, for instance, create an alternative form of masculinity *(cf.* Hautaniemi, 2004).

At the same time, since their emergence, there has always been youth networks and cultural forms produced on the basis of *ethnic background*. These networks are mainly constituted by young newcomers or descendents, who were mainly born in the settlement countries of their parents. Even not knowing their parents' home countries, descendents can find in their ethnic roots relevant *resources* (symbolic, material and pragmatic) for the construction and expression of a positive sense of social and personal identity, as well as a sense of social agency and autonomy as young citizens. It is the case of resources as music, dance, gastronomy, clothes, or even language or slang.

Their poor socio-economical conditions, in association with their visible *ex-optic* phenotype and particular visuals, responsible for social "labels" that usually are used as stigmas, lead to cultural, social and institutional discrimination (Pais & Blass, 2004). Some studies show that when they perceive themselves and their group as being discriminated, some of them tend to invest in *(re)ethnicisation strategies*. This was the strategy used by groups as the Turkish Power Boys, in Germany (Tertilt, 1996), as well as the Latin Kings in Spain (Feixa & Muños, 2004), or the Hip Hop "black" movement in Portugal to react and to cope with the situation of deprivation and feelings of marginality in reference to the dominant group. If these subcultures emerged and developed in restricted territories (the first in Germany, and the last ones in USA), they are now displaced and spread all over the world, acquiring specificities in each social context.[6] Despite its contemporary hybridism, their participants share a strong feeling of deprivation.

(Re)ethnicisation constitutes a strategy to emphasize or rather differentiate in-group specific – opposite to out-group specific – cultural, social or economic group properties and resources to (re)gain social recognition or their valued group distinctiveness, i.e. (re)gain a positive social identity in comparison with the out-group discriminated against. The construction of ethnic identity can be considered as a special form of social identity and allows a more or less clear differentiation between various groups, constituting a basis for a comparison between groups. Furthermore, the subjective significance of ethnic identity for an individual appears within the scope of his evaluation of such an identity. The (re)ethnicisation strategy affects both social and personal identity (closer to the group of origin) and sociabilities (the group boundaries are less permeable to others outside the ethnic group). Further, data from many studies suggests that the tendency towards (re)ethnicisation should not be interpreted as merely a lack of willingness to integrate (Skrobanek, 2007).

The resources that they claim from their supposed origins, however, are not mobilised in their "purity" or "authenticity". Ethnicity is not just passed from one generation to another; it is reinvented and rediscovered by each generation, in its own context of production and reproduction. It is the case of rap culture in Portugal, for instance (Contador & Ferreira, 1997; Contador, 2001; Fradique 2003). Despite being an expressive form imported from the Bronx

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[6] These specificities occur from confront between a triple cultural memberships: parental cultural background, dominant culture of host society and global youth cultures.

(United States), reproducing many of its rhythmic and linguistic mannerisms of origin, the fact that most of the rap produced in the streets of the degraded neighbourhoods of Lisbon is sang in Creole creates a specific social bond between their protagonists: it culturally localizes them in Portugal and gives them a strong power of social identification ("it motivates more because it connects much more, it feels like it's done by us and for us"). At the same time, it provides them with a sense of separation regarding the white Portuguese population: "I don't have to sing in Portuguese, they also didn't give me Portuguese nationality, although I was born in Portugal", says one of the protagonists (Raposo, 2006). They try to define themselves as historical references in rap and in Portuguese history, similarly to what happened with American rap figures. It brings together young black people (and some are not black, but residents of the neighbourhoods) with several ethnic backgrounds (Angolans, Cape Verdeans, Guineans, etc.) under the umbrella of "blackness", "all blacks together".

Subcultures as arena of negotiating social positioning

Subculture networks create some solidarity among young people living in marginal neighbourhoods, often ending with hostile rivalries between neighbourhoods. Even after compulsory re-housing, where long standing socially structured bonds between residents are destroyed, rap, for instance, is able to reunite what was dispersed, not allowing "people's conscience to become divided". It gives their members a feeling of *(ontological and social) comfort and security* towards the risks that they confront daily due to their public visibility: on one hand, it provides them with a feeling of shared identity; on the other hand, the "group" can function as *defensive community* (McDonald, 1999:203), in a context where the need of protection started to be real, considering the subcultural tension between some "neo tribes" (as *rappers* and *skins*, or Latin Kings and Ñetas y Maras, for instance) or even between groups of youngsters from different neighbourhoods.

At the same time, the subcultural memberships provide to their participants a sense of pride and respect about their own *difference*: being together, they can find a basis of positive social support, a structure for a mutual legitimation and recognition for their complex identities as minorities. In these social places, the youngsters with ethnic background can construct and share positively their sense of "otherness" towards the dominant youth models and life styles. As Bouchet (1999) refers for the Arabic or Palestinian youth in Denmark, they see themselves as unbalanced, proud, aggressive and reckless.

And at the same time, they mostly want to gain "respect" and social positive recognition. Therefore the strategies of the "Arabic youth" seem to be formed as a mixture of attack at the outer world and a special form of self-defence or self protection, which create an antagonistic identity. Also among the Turkish Power Boys, a German youth gang founded by Turkish youngsters of the Mainkur-Comprehensive school (Tertilt, 1996), the principle of friendship, the Turkish concept of honour, and the cultivation of the "Turkish slang" are the main strategies to enhance a negative social identity.

In this perspective, youth subcultures may function to these youngsters as a *civic arena*, where they can find not only a large frame of aesthetical and expressive references, but also a large frame of ethical and intervention resources of action and reaction, of critic and reflexivity, in order to be a protagonist in their guest societies. These scenes project their participants in a symbolic and social scenario where they find themselves as active subjects of their own lives and trajectories, providing them the opportunity of (re)inventing their own social and personal identity in a positive way, in subjective conditions of freedom, pride, respect and dignity. In these subcultural contexts, the youngsters with ethnic background

living in poor living conditions can find themselves more as *citizens* than as *victims*, more as *subjects* than as *objects* of their own biographies, because they find stimulus and recognition for their own creative initiatives, for their action, for their *agency* as actors of social change.

Through their expression, these young people feel that they hold in their hands a civic responsibility, that they have some power over themselves, not letting others decide their own destiny (namely through voting, although many can not vote, not only because they are not old enough, but also because that they do not have Portuguese nationality or are illegal in the country). Rap is a form of musical and literary expression characterised by a transforming reflexivity, to the extent that its purpose is to "denounce" (give visibility) and "vindicate" to bring about "change", to "make revolution".

But on the other hand, these ethnicized social networks can end up, in fact, working as social networks relatively isolated from the world outside the degraded neighbourhoods, stigmatising and classifying its residents and their networks. The neighbourhood protects, provides its young people with a feeling of trust that is not found outside (the territory that rap Portuguese young people call "Babylon""), but at the same time might enclosed its respective life world, since these are neighbourhoods that offer little employment, education and leisure opportunities.

Subcultures and skills

In a more pragmatic way, these social structures also might give to the youngsters some skills or even some opportunities for their transition to labour market. Being underground networks, where the deviation is the norm, their protagonists found some space to create inventive and original ways of deal with the cultural resources and the aesthetical affinities that they share. Some authors present these social contexts as real *creative experimental laboratories* (Feixa, Costa, Pallarés, 2001:298), or *cultural laboratories* (Melucci, 1989), where young people can experience new visuals, new music forms, new other kind of performative and communicative expressions.

The initiation of the younger ones in the music and lyrical forms of rap, for instance, takes place from a very young age, an *inclusive socialisation* (Drilling & Gautschin, 2001:313) carried out through osmosis, with the purpose of "transmitting the power of words" and, simultaneously, bring to rap "new ways of thinking" formulated by the new generations of descendants. In some neighbourhoods, youth associations and community rehearsal rooms are organised, bringing together MCs from several neighbourhoods, and making them follow rules regarding work organisation, behaviour, schedules, and, at the same time, providing them with the opportunity to come into contact with an assemblage of technology and knowledge that, otherwise, would be very difficult for them to have access to. Rap, as all the others expressions of hip hop culture (graffiti, break dance, DJing, MCing, basket, etc) can, therefore, be a way of integration that does not follow the traditional forms of parents' labour reproduction (carpentry, construction and other low-qualified manual work).

Some local and national organizations (for instance, Programa Escolhas, [Choices Programme] in Portugal[7]) started trying to explore hip hop expressions as a way of intercultural communication, giving to the young people better conditions of production, development and diffusion of their products and (informal) skills. At the same time, some try

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[7] See http://www.programaescolhas.pt/

to catch their leaders or protagonists as cultural mediators, as a means of establishing contact between the formal world of institutions (school, migrant associations, unions, local and national powers, etc.) and the "street world" of informal groups of young people. This was also one of the main aims for the institutionalization of Latin Kings and Queens in Barcelona as legal cultural association: to give positive visibility to Latin population and their culture expressions in that city, to have young interlocutors represented in decision processes taken by the local authorities concerning Latin population living in Barcelona; and, at the same time, to have a formal platform close to this population, providing help and support (legal, counselling in school or work affairs, competencies recognition or learning, etc.) to migrants (Feixa & Muñoz, 2004).

In a theoretical (re-)interpretation perspective, the analysis seem to show that some ethnic minority youths are fighting a de-structural life situation by clinging to their peers. However sometimes their peer networks do not support their social integration, namely when they put in action some illegitimate forms of intervention. They develop some sort of de-integrative strategies to obtain social integration inside their own group, but reacting in a disintegrative way considering the guest society. Most of the adolescent members of Turkish Power Boys, for instance, became criminalized and did not manage the transition from school to training and, afterwards, to work (Tertilt, 1996). The same kind of phenomena is found in other ethnicized subcultures, as Latin Kings or in Rap cultures: if inside these contexts we would find pacific reactions in the form of *crew*, we could also find some more violent reactions in the form of *gang*, which have much more public visibility through media.

In this point of view, subcultural capital is not valued positively with reference to the dominant social capital, leading to a negative social identity in the public sphere, namely when media explore and diffuse this kind of phenomena, producing some moral and social panic. Subcultures are seen as a factor of disturbance of the public order, and this kind of behaviour is generalized to all youngsters recognized as members of the ethnic group. Under the mask of the stigma, we can find the creation of a stereotype.

Conclusions

Considering the scenario draw, the more informal subcultural sociabilities reveal an extensive power of attraction and implication among young people – namely among young people with a migrant or ethnic background –, being lived as social spaces of social participation and socialization on citizenship practices.

Both academic and political institutions that deal with youth have been given a minor importance to the social role of these spaces on the margin of the established channels for political involvement and commitment, as well as, consequently, in adapting to proposals of social participation "from the ground", from the day-to-day dimension of life

Both the sociological reflection on the action of young people in "public life", and the institutional political instances that outline and regulate this action, have been ignoring or demonising some of the real contexts of social participation and citizenship practice of young people, thwarting the potential of social intervention that frequently misaligned and subterranean arenas provide them with.

"Youth subcultures", "youth tribes" or "youth scenes", whatever the theoretical paradigm under these concepts function as social support structure for those who feel alone or not "adapted" in mainstream social world – as "newcomers" or "outsiders" –, who do not have

much more positive social references to construct their own identity and self-esteem, and/or are daily confronted with more and more social risks, insecurity and hostility.

The social image of these contexts is usually marked by stigma, much more under domination of criminological and moralistic stereotypes produced, reproduced and generalized by media from specific situations, than by interpretative and systematic ground knowledge. The fact is that false believes can produce real effects, many times perverse effects, as discrimination, racism, xenophobia, and even physical violence. But if youth subcultures may sometimes be the stage for some cases of violence and criminality, they much frequently function as a defensive structure for those who feel insecurity and frightened, and where some youngsters can find emotional ties, friendship, commitment, positive identity, recognition, liberty, autonomy, creativity, a sense of being a protagonist in social world. In one word, subcultures may be social contexts where young people can find sources and resources to exercise their own agency as actors of social change.

Despite being micro-spaces, subcultures correspond to a global phenomenon, mainly urban, that usually emerges in social contexts defined by different forms of social exclusion (from school, work, citizenship, etc) and discrimination (class, ethnicity, culture, "race", etc), which they signal and reveal. The cultural practices and resources mobilised by the youngsters in their scenes express a form of re-action on the part of those who early in life experience hostility and constraint from the broader society, and its formal structures. Through their social participation in subcultures, some young people can feel a subjective way of exercising social power and trying to change their own living conditions.

It is in daily life, particularly in interstitial social spaces where leisure and cultural production happens, that youth citizenship is often exercised, reinvented in its senses, objectives and traditional modes of action. Actually, in nowadays the institutional and organisational scale of youth citizenship cedes ever more to a micro scale, structured in microcultural networks, from which it emerges mainly as an expressive form of construction, exploration, recognition and social preservation of personal and collective identities, namely (re-)ethnicised identities.

In many of these informal interaction networks, there arise effectively implicated cultural conflicts and claims, based on the sharing of specific distinct and distinctive forms of identity, providing their protagonists not only with a strong sense of inclusion and demarcation, but also of existence and intervention. These are social spaces where many disadvantage young people feel to be *someone*, *subjects* and *agents* of their own biography.

However, the education systems in all countries of our study do not recognise these spaces and keep them to a kind of "outside world". A fact that is especially problematic for boys and young men. The practice examples show how non-formal education could be used to at the same time give some value to the life-worlds of ethnic minority youngsters and over-come the boundedness of subcultural social positioning.

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