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Reconceptualising 'mainstream' youth

An examination of young people's consumer lifestyles in the Czech Republic

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WHAT IS MAINSTREAM YOUTH?

QUESTIONING ORTHODOXIES ABOUT 'MAINSTREAM' YOUTH

In June 2007, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports in the Czech Republic approved the *State Youth Policy Conception for the Years 2007–2013*. The *Conception* is a strategic plan for contemporary Czech youth policy covering domains such as education, leisure time, political activity and media consumption. Based on several empirical sociological studies and long time series comparisons,[1] the *Conception* portrays contemporary 'mainstream' youth in the Czech Republic as young people whose value-orientation points to

> hedonism and pragmatism, accompanied by the diminishing importance of global and social values. The mainstream within the young generation is adapted to society and identifies with it. Mainstream media are an important instrument of social conformity (…). The mainstream of the young generation is to a large extent manipulated by the media and accepts the opinions and positions generated by them. (State Youth Policy Conception for the Years 2007–2013, 2007: 5)

The notion of mainstream youth that emerges from the above discourse portrays young people as sheep-like, passive yet egocentric individuals, incapable of reflexive thinking and easily manipulated by marketing and media industries (Pyšňáková and Miles 2010, Pyšňáková 2010). However, a closer examination of the above extract

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[1] The content of the *Conception* draws on several sociological studies which combine theory and empirical research. It is based on Petr Sak's analytical study *Outline of State Policy on Children and Youth until 2007*, Tomáš Houška's study *Participation of Young People in Political and Social Life*, ongoing research and long time series comparisons conducted by the National Children and Youth Institute in the Czech Republic.

evokes the feeling that there is something unsettling about the logic presented in the *Conception*. If young people rebel and refuse to adapt to society, they are labelled as a problematic social group. Even young people's identification with society is articulated in terms of manipulation and passive conformism. In order to understand why this is the case it is necessary to engage with a critical perspective on youth research itself. The above extract from the *Conception* (2007) provides a useful starting point for what this book aims to problematise – a common yet limited understanding of 'mainstream' youth.

British sociologist Alan France (2007) argues that youth research has been traditionally driven by concerns over "youth as a social problem" and this focus prevails, even nowadays. Consequently, youth has arguably been constructed (partly also by youth researchers) as a social group consisting of "passive victims" of "either their biology or their social circumstances" (France 2007: 154). Similarly, British youth researcher Christine Griffin (1993, 2001) points to the ideological dimension of youth research by reproducing and constructing a very narrow and often distorted "academic common sense" about young people (Griffin 1993: 2). Such criticism, along with calls for self-reflexivity among youth researchers, is particularly topical with regard to contemporary youth research in the Czech Republic, in which the 'post-revolutionary' young generation is often portrayed as materialistic, hedonistic, egocentric, apolitical and lacking a moral compass (Sak 2000, Potůček 2002).[2]

In this book, I argue that the academic common sense about mainstream youth encapsulated in the *Conception* is not accidental. The *Conception* does not simply reflect the nature of contemporary mainstream youth. Rather it actively constructs and reproduces a stereotype of young people as a 'problem group' in society through discourses of youth-at-risk and youth-as-risk, which have become pervasive in current research in the Czech Republic (Hráčková Pyšňáková 2012).[3] Challenging an orthodoxy – the unquestioned, taken for granted and

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[2] My aim is not to condemn the whole of contemporary youth research in the Czech Republic. My criticism refers to what Griffin (1993, 2001) terms as a 'mainstream' perspective – a dominant set of debates which justify, produce, reproduce and construct hegemonic discourses around youth at a particular time.

[3] The subtitle of the *Conception* is 'Some Problems Identified in Recent Research Concerned with the Young Generation'.

widely accepted 'truth' about 'mainstream' youth – lies at the heart of this book. What appears to underlie and to a degree preserve the above 'common sense' is what Brubaker (2002) calls "groupism: the tendency to take discrete, sharply differentiated, internally homogenous and externally bounded groups as basic constituents of social life (…), and fundamental units of social analysis" (Brubaker 2002: 164). In line with Brubaker, this book does not perceive 'mainstream' youth in terms of a "substantial group or entity, but in terms of practical categories, discursive frames, cognitive schemas and cultural representations" (Brubaker 2002: 167). In other words, an interpretive approach allows me to frame 'mainstream' as a concept which is socially constructed and negotiated. This approach enables me to challenge the above construction of 'mainstream' youth's adaptation to society as passive conformism. Instead of taking this construction as a given, it allows me to question why the notion of mainstream youth in the above quotation carries with it notions of passivity and sheep-like behaviour. Such questioning provides this book with the space for an alternative interpretation of mainstream youth.

SPECIFYING THE CONCEPT OF 'MAINSTREAM' YOUTH

'Mainstream' is a term frequently used by laypeople, sociologists, marketing researchers, journalists and youth policy makers. In general, it refers to what is common or popular, what is widely accepted, commercial or dominant. The notion of mainstream is sometimes associated with passive conformity, absence of reflexivity, crowd or sheep-like behaviour and uniformity. As 'mainstream' youth is a part of both lay and academic discourses, it is necessarily to specify my own treatment of this concept. In this article, I draw on a debate which frames 'mainstream' young people as *a largely neglected element in youth research*. In this body of research, the notion of 'mainstream' youth refers to *more ordinary* in terms of *not spectacular,* in other words not *subcultural, problematic or disadvantaged youth*. What lies at the heart of this debate is a criticism of the long-established tendency in youth research to neglect ordinariness and normality in favour of overemphasising more extreme and melodramatic experiences of youth (e.g. Willis 1990; Miles 2000; Shildrick 2006; Roberts 2011).

Such criticism has been already raised, for example, in the early 1990s by MacDonald and Coffield (1991). However, since researching ordinary young people continues to represent a relatively marginal field of interest, it remains topical. Some researchers use the metaphors of the "missing middle" (Roberts 2011) or the "invisible majority" (Brown 1987, MacDonald and Coffield 1991, Roberts 2011) to highlight the deficit of studies on ordinary young people in youth research. France argues that the metaphor of a missing middle sits easily with reference to youth studies, because there is still relatively little known about 'ordinary' youth (France 2007: 57).

The crucial point with regard to this book is that ordinary youth, or the missing middle, can be understood not only as a particular category or group of young people, but also as a conceptual challenge to the orthodoxies, stories and dichotomies which dominated youth research at a particular time.[4] Brown's (1987), Jenkins' (1983), Willis' (1990) and Miles' (2000) studies of 'ordinary' youth challenge the subcultural studies of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS)[5] and the dichotomy of what is passive and what is active by arguing that only a minority of young people is actually involved in youth subcultures. Based on empirical evidence, these authors dem-

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[4] It is important to mention that what the above authors coin the 'missing middle' should be understood contextually. These works were written primarily in the framework of the British sociology of youth, and they tackle theories and problems which are in many ways particularly relevant to the British context. This frame of reference must be acknowledged, as the Czech sociology of youth has its own particular discourses. However, the examples from British youth studies I am using in this book are in many ways particularly relevant to the prevailing representation of 'mainstream' youth in contemporary Czech youth research. I am drawing especially on a debate in the British sociology of youth that criticises a tendency in British research to focus on spectacular and 'melodramatic expressions of youth' rather than 'ordinary' young people. Here, I see the relevance of applying the debate from British sociology of youth to the Czech context. In this book, I am using the notions of 'ordinary youth' and the 'missing middle' as conceptual challenges to current discourses in the Czech Republic, rather than as particular empirical category of youth (for example, middle-class students, or consumers of popular culture).

[5] The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies was a research centre at the University of Birmingham, England that promoted an interdisciplinary approach to cultural studies and was heavily influenced by Marxist, neo-Marxist and Frankfurt School theory and poststructuralist thinking (see Chapter Two).

onstrate that belonging to the mainstream does not imply passive conformism, but rather negotiation with structural conditions. Similarly, Pilkington (2004) and Shildrick (2006) challenge club cultural and post-subcultural studies in arguing that such approaches tend to neglect the cultural diversity and expression of the majority of young people (ordinary and normal youth) who do not fit into post-subcultural frames. In his more structurally framed study of club cultures, Hollands (2002) talks about neglecting ordinary youth in favour of a focus on service workers, further and higher education students, professional workers and middle-class youth. MacDonald and Coffield (1991) use the notion of the invisible majority and Roberts (2011) uses the notion of the missing middle as criticisms of the transitional approach[6], pointing to its tendency to focus on disadvantaged and problematic youth groups and youth at/as risk while neglecting those who do not fit into these categories.

I take this debate as a starting point and apply it to the context of contemporary youth research in the Czech Republic. I am doing so in order to reconceptualise the notion of 'mainstream' youth and to challenge the assumption of *homogeneity* that is implicit in the *traditional* notion of 'mainstream'. I also address the *deficit of agency* in contemporary youth research in the Czech Republic, which prioritises the concepts of risky or vulnerable youth (Hráčková Pyšňáková 2012).

My research may run the risk, ironically, of labelling a generation of young people in a prescribed fashion. In other words, it could be suggested that by presenting a case for the analysis of mainstream youth my research has articulated a category of youth that has a firmly established belief system. Indeed, I am conscious of the fact that the term 'mainstream' is used in two main ways, both as both a piece of everyday language by lay people and conceptually (although not necessarily analytically) by youth researchers. My intention is not, however, to label young people. I use the term to refer to all those young people who cannot be defined as 'extreme' and who share the distinction of not being labelled as such. I am not suggesting that this

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[6] The study of youth transitions focuses on the way in which institutions structure process of growing up. The transitional approach conceptualises youth as the process of "becoming adult" (Wyn and White 1997:95). I will discuss this approach in detail in Chapter Two.

group is in any way homogeneous, even if, as my research suggests, they share some traits. My research recognises that many young people in the Czech Republic themselves use the term 'mainstream' to, effectively, label each other: this is part of their vocabulary. In this sense, an acknowledgment of the validity of the notion of mainstream is useful in two key ways: 1) in helping us to understand how much young people's mainstream lifestyles play a role in their self-construction, and 2) in helping us to understand how young people relate to other young people through consumer lifestyles.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY:
YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

Today's Czech teens and twenty-somethings were born or spent most of their lives in a post-communist society. Some of them briefly remember the reality of living before 1989 but most did not experience it at all. It is history, mediated by their parents, teachers, books or the Internet. This post-revolutionary young generation may not have experienced the constraints of living under a communist regime, but they face new and different kinds of challenges, constraints and opportunities. What these young people do experience is the everyday reality of living in a world that has been radically changed not only by the consequences of the political breakdown after 1989, but also by the conditions of late modern consumer society.

Some youth researchers argue that the experience of living in a late modern consumer culture implies that there are no longer considerable differences separating Western youth from young people in former European communist countries (Leccardi and Feixa 2012). This growing convergence of course does not imply that there are no differences at all. But the notions of 'Millennials', the 'Digital generation', or the 'Connected generation' used in a study of young consumers in the Czech Republic provide good examples of some prominent parallel characteristics of the current Czech young generation and its counterparts from the West (OMD Czech 2011). And without a doubt, the processes of globalisation and technological change buttress the formation of global characteristics of contemporary youth culture. Young people are more able than ever to construct their own lifestyles

and share them with others via the global market (Reimer, 1995). However, it is important to keep in mind that these commonalities are not simply about young people's appropriation of consumer values or mastery of information culture. As Leccardi and Feixa point out, the shared experience of today's youth lies in the "complicated relationship that young people have with an open yet uncertain future" (Leccardi and Feixa 2012: 5).

Several recent research studies demonstrate that what late modern youth, both from the West and from post-communist countries, share is a belief in continuity and stability as much as in gradual change, and this contradiction appears to them as simply normal (Leccardi et al. 2012, Euro RSCG, 2011). This book examines how this contradiction is experienced by the post-revolutionary young generation in the Czech Republic. The primary focus is on how young people under circumstances of late modernity negotiate their sense of normality and ordinariness, what being 'ordinary' and 'normal' means to them and what role their consumer lifestyles play in these negotiations. A similar theme has been raised in a recent study on youth in former Yugoslavia by Ule (2012). In her research on the changing values of young people in Slovenia, Ule (2012) makes some points that are particularly relevant to the concept of late modern 'mainstream' youth. She observed that the paradoxical conditions of late modernity caused an increase in the importance of "socially conformist" values (Ule 2012: 37). This is not to say that the young Slovenians do not enjoy autonomy of action and independence, but it seems that what these young people desire above all is an ordinary, normal and stable life. According to Ule, the paradox is that in late modernity, when all that is normal and ordinary has been turned around, the definition of what is normal and ordinary life is no longer clear. Thus, for many young people (from post-communist countries in particular), the negotiation of 'ordinariness' has become one of the new conditions of late modern society. It is in this context I aim to contribute to debates about 'mainstream' youth through a qualitative research study about the meaning of consumption in the lives of young people in post-revolutionary Czech Republic.

My research has come to focus upon the active consumption of visible symbols of 'paid for' social status, for example, the consumption of branded goods, something that would appear to represent the

ultimate acceptance of the status quo and an uncritical conformity to it. How did such a focus come about, and what is its value? As highlighted by Giddens (1991) and Beck (1992, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002), late modern society involves the loss of first-order modern securities previously experienced through forms of belonging, such as class, family, location and community / friendship networks, as well as forms of security built upon paid employment and state entitlements. Risk society is defined by the emergence of less secure work, family, state and community relations, and consequently, a greater sense of individual responsibility for one's life outcomes.

This 'individualisation' is most intensely experienced by young people, who are first in line for the new forms of insecurity and who have built up the least security within older regimes of entitlement and belonging (Macháček 2004, Furlong and Cartmel 2007, Roberts 2009, Leccardi et al. 2012, Ule 2012). More tenuous links to work, location, family and community, brought about by the breakdown of full-employment, state housing policy, church/state marriage and family regimes, while common across the whole of Europe and beyond, are felt even more acutely in Eastern Europe, where former 'socialist' regimes have given way to 'capitalist' ones, making the transition from collective security to individual choice even more marked (Macháček 2004, Roberts 2009). People become the agents of their own identity making, but not by choice; it is an indispensable condition of social integration in late modernity. Empirically oriented research on youth transitions has thus focused on how processes of individualisation are reflected in the transformation from socialism to capitalism, and the extent to which such a transition has redefined the way in which young people grow up in the Czech Republic. Macháček (2004) argues that in comparison to their parents, young people in the Czech Republic now live in a society where individual performance, as well as the diversification and individualisation of lifestyles, gains importance. This shift means that for contemporary Czech youth there is a much greater range of options to choose from, in the context of education, work or lifestyle, for example. This increased level of choice in turn creates a situation in which the risks associated with such choice fall upon their shoulders.

Although many of the key characteristics of late modernity identified by Beck (1992, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002) and Giddens

(1991) are centred on consumption and lifestyle, young people's experience with consumption in the Czech Republic as a response to social, cultural and structural transformation has not been given sufficient attention. It tends to be confined to the domains of media representation and marketing (Pyšňáková 2010, 2012).

When I began this project, researching young people's consumption was not only a marginal theme in the Czech sociology of youth, but it was also limited either to risky behaviour, such as binge drinking and drug abuse (Sak and Saková 2003, Vanžurová 2006, Truhlářová and Smutek et al. 2006), or it was framed as a form of escapism from reality (Sak 2000, Sak and Saková 2004). Any conception of a 'consumer generation' I found in the available sociological literature reflected a deep scepticism and frustration that young people's exposure to consumer lifestyles would somehow cause moral corruption, alienation, hedonistic orientation and vulnerability to engage in risky behaviour. In this book, I argue that the tendency to interpret youth consumption as a 'problem' echoes the general character of youth research in the Czech Republic, reflected, for example, in the inclination to overemphasise structural influences on young people's lives and to neglect the ways in which young people negotiate and actively deal with such conditions.

I am not suggesting that consumption is the only space of young people's identity construction. I recognise that consumption affords but one locus for identity and engagement. Nor am I suggesting that consumption and consumer-oriented lifestyles are new phenomena that magically emerged in the Czech Republic after the breakdown of the communist regime two decades ago. Consumption is deep-seated in all societies and cultures, and it was a part of people's lives even before 1989. What differentiates today's youth from their parents' generation is living (and consuming) in a different context created not only by political and historical shifts but also by changing social and cultural conditions of late modernity. Thus, increasingly relevant to the analysis of contemporary young consumers are macro- and micro-level social and economic reorganisations, leading to renewed emphases on culture and consumption in market-based societies. In these societies, the contemporary Czech Republic included, categories of identification based on work, race, gender or nation are attenuated by, or refracted in, the contemplation and the act of consuming.

As such, consumption (including 'ordinary consumption') might provide young people a supplementary space for cultural life and the day-to-day bypassing of and dealing with late modern conditions. My interest lies in exploring youth consumption in such a fashion – as a social arena within which young people not only experience but also deal with cultural, structural and social constraints and risks, along with new opportunities that appear to be a natural part of living in the context of late modernity (Giddens 1991, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002).

My sample, with all its diversity, manifested a keen awareness of all these conditions, as experienced in their part-time, temporary and insecure employment, their attempts to build portfolios of formal and informal learning and skills, their mobility, their social networks and their relationships. All the young people in my research sought to construct their own lives and gain skills, qualifications, connections, money, fulfilment, happiness, experience, friendships and emotional relationships. They did so under the conditions they found themselves in by means of the resources and opportunities they were able to draw upon and develop. They were all people with multiple roles in complex lives, but at the same time, they sought to build, live and express themselves through a particular, unique and chosen 'identity'. What became apparent were the ways in which my participants actively engaged in identity/lifestyle-constructing consumer actions as means of establishing and affirming themselves within the array of the otherwise fluid conditions that made up their lives. I became increasingly interested in how particular forms of consumption appeared to be important in the process of identity formation and how important such formation was in the management of everyday life under increasingly complex, uncertain and risky conditions. Work, family, study and relationships were all significant aspects of their lives, but my research came to focus on the part consumption played in the management of complex lives and identities.

In my research, I followed an interpretive approach and utilised diverse qualitative research methods, such as focus groups and semi-structured interviews in very small groups, as well as narrative essays. I collected data in the Czech city of Brno, from 2006 to 2008, and my sample consisted of 95 young people, 59 women and 36 men, aged between 15 – 27 years. The sample included metropolitan youth,