

Adolf Busemann, “Barbarization and Brutalization” (1956)

Abstract

Adolf Busemann decries the alarming rise in youth crime in West Germany in the 1950s. As he explains, youths were committing both more and more serious criminal acts. For Busemann, the rise in recorded criminality was only the tip of a much broader – and even more troubling – trend toward behavior leading in the direction of criminality. He attributed the rise in youth criminality to the earlier onset of puberty, but also to the dismantling of social and moral inhibitions. He called for vigorous socio-political and socio-pedagogical activity to put an end to barbarization and brutalization among youths, in schools, and in society as whole.

Source

All Western countries, including the USA, which leads the pact, unanimously report a shocking rise in youth crime. *In 1954, 560,000 young people (=up to age eighteen) stood before a judge in the Federal Republic.* For the first half of 1955, *a 17% rise over the same period in the previous year has already been registered.* Of these 560,000 youths, more than a third were younger than 14. In the state of North Rhine-Westphalia (1954), alone, 10,893 children ranging in age from 12.0 to 13.11 were recorded as the perpetrators of criminal acts. While overall crime in Bavaria rose by 3.5% in 1954, the number of youths between the ages of 18 and 20 who became delinquent rose by 13%, the number of children (age 14 and younger) by no less than 17%. Additionally, the statistics reveal that the portion of youths involved in overall crime in large cities is substantially higher than in rural districts, and that in 80% of the cases, the perpetrator grew up in a detrimental family situation (illegitimacy, orphanhood, marital discord, divorce, etc.), situations that are represented today in abundance in all prosperous and educated strata. An assessment of the number 560,000 requires the following commentary. Criminology teaches us that always and everywhere, more criminal acts are committed than reported, let alone punished. No one can tell us by what factor we need to multiply the number 560,000 in order to arrive at the approximate number of criminal acts actually committed by youthful perpetrators. It may be that we have to double that number!

The following is even more significant. From a moral, and thus also from a psychological perspective, a criminal act is only the tip of much broader and more frequent type of behavior that heads in the same direction. Below and behind those 560,000 cases there is thus not only a presumably equally large number of committed but unrecorded crimes, but also – and this matters more here – an immeasurably broad layer of behaviors among probably several million youths that lead in the direction of those crimes, of illegal acts, of conflicts with the moral and legal order of human coexistence. Finally, one must not forget that this rise in recorded criminality among young people between the ages of 12 and 18, along with the background and foundation of a much broader violation of the communal order, did not appear overnight, but emerged slowly over decades, from about 1920 on, though most recently with catastrophic acceleration.

Examples

Statistics sometimes trigger in laymen a mistrust born of bad experiences. In this case, however, the facts stand before us unequivocally. Their closer examination reveals that youth crime has increased not only in frequency, but also in seriousness. In the space of a few months, the press has published dozens of

reports about crimes of cruelty: “Three year-old playmate tortured to death” [...]; “Fourteen year-old murders seven year-old” [...]; “Eight year-old boy tied to the tracks by two twelve year-olds so that he would be run over” [...]; “Thirteen year-old murders an elderly woman” [...]; “School boys stone an old man nearly to death on the village road” [...]; “Fourteen year-old drowns sexually abused girl” [...]; “Fourteen year-old girl attempts robbery” [...]; “Sixteen year-old robs and murders an elderly woman” [...]; “Fifteen year-old strangles his ten year-old playmate,” “Five year-old girls beats three year-old playmate to death with a picket,” “Fourteen year-old beats sleeping friend unconscious and sets the house on fire to conceal the murder.” Or: “School boy snags a squirrel and beats it to death to the applause of . . . the father.” “A school boy, in the presence of his parents, chases a squirrel in the city park, beats it to death.” “Youths chase a Mufflon lamb until it dies.” Murder, robbery, and cruelty to animals join rapes and so on. In 1938, sexual offenses accounted for 4% of the overall criminal acts committed by young people in North Rhine Westphalia; in 1954, they accounted for 16.5% of the same. Thus, it is not just that more trivial transgressions are being recorded today than in the past, and that this has caused crime numbers to rise. The opposite is true! The overabundance of serious transgressions and serious crimes is forcing one to overlook more venial violations.

The “Gang”

To wrap up these examples, here is one case of gang activity that is currently occupying the German press:

“Essen, 18 Jan. (dpa). Essen police have shown that a total of 81 break-ins (some of which were aggravated) at food and sports stores, as well as taverns, were the doing of a gang of fourteen school boys ranging in age from nine to fourteen, who, for a six month-period up to the beginning of January, made downtown Essen and the Essen-East area unsafe. The boys were largely after cash in their break-ins. They got about 1,000 DM and also took away boxes of chocolate and cigarettes for their “own use.” However, during their crimes they caused well over 10,000 DM in damage, since they wrought havoc at the places they broke into. [...]

The leader of the gang explained to the police that he had gotten the idea of forming a gang from reading Westerns, and from bandit and crime novels. *Nearly all the boys came from respectable Essen families.* The parents had no clue what their offspring were up to. Most gang members will get off without punishment, since they were not yet fourteen at the time of their last crime. The parents must pay for the damage that was caused.”

Can children be like this?

But are children really capable of such misdeeds? Please! As a result of the acceleration of physical development, young people between twelve and fourteen today are no longer children. At thirteen-and-a-half, on average, they have attained full sexual and reproductive maturity (about 2 years earlier than around 1900). Today, childhood usually ends, psychologically and physiologically, at age ten to eleven, and the term “schoolchild” is today nearly synonymous with the phrase “elementary school student.” The teacher in the higher grades of the *Volksschule*, and this is even truer of the teacher in the lower grades of the *Gymnasium*, is not dealing with children, but rather with young people who are in puberty or are already fully mature (though, so far, school authorities have hardly taken note of this). In 1953, one large city in southern Germany had no fewer than 23 fifteen year-old wives and even one fourteen year-old wife. Another large German city allowed school-age mothers to bring their children to school, where the children – in substantial numbers – were looked after by a nanny in an appropriately set-up room while the young mothers were in class. Of course, these cases are “rays of light” compared to what had to be reported above, but they illustrate perfectly that we are not dealing with children in the upper grades of the *Volksschule*.

Another thing needs to be taken into consideration: crimes of cruelty, murder, manslaughter, aggravated assault, and rape have become relatively more frequent among adults as well. Of special interest to us in this journal is the increase in child abuse by parents, and here once again the most serious cases. In particular, the beating death of one's own child is unfortunately often punished quite leniently, especially if one compares it to the punishment that a teacher faces if he dares to inflict a few blows with the cane on the backside of a student guilty of the cruel torture of animals! Here is just one gruesome case: strange sounds emanate from a garbage can that is standing by the road ready for pickup. The can is opened. A living child is lying under ash and garbage. Its mother disposed of it in this way. The child was saved. This happened in Marburg-L, Germany.

This cursory overview is no doubt sufficient to justify the claim that (since about 1920) the inhibitions against acts of violence within our people have become alarmingly weaker, and there is no need to recall those acts in which tens of thousands participated without even being aware that they were committing outrageous crimes; not to mention the political murders in the narrower sense since 1918. It also hardly needs to be pointed out that the reckless driving on public roads is, psychologically speaking, very close to an act of cruelty and often openly assumes the character thereof. *A dismantling is under way of the very inhibition that once allowed for the establishment of human civilized behavior*; and without this inhibition, the peaceful coexistence of people is impossible, since respect for life and health, the fifth commandment in the catechism: "Thou shalt not kill!" is the very first prerequisite of all human culture.

This, then, is where we stand, and the surge in youth crime is essentially merely a partial manifestation of this cultural decay and is probably also caused by the same factors behind that more comprehensive process. Whether the process in the end has biological causes or can be directly traced back to the technologization of life or whether we are dealing with the very decay of mental systems, the exhaustion of mental energy – we can leave this question open, because an immediate, urgent task lies ahead of us.

Barbarization in school

It is clear *a priori* that such a broad and longstanding process of barbarization extends its influence into school life as well. In fact, in many places very deplorable conditions have developed, for which teachers must by no means be blamed. They are partly rooted in particularly unfavorable local conditions. If no guiding force among the parents, the youth groups, and so on, sets the necessary boundaries for a dissipated village youth, then the teacher alone is not able to get through either. It seems that not everyone everywhere has an adequate sense of the difficulty of the teacher's task, for otherwise it would be impossible to understand that the use of the cane is outlawed under all circumstances. This is not about the right of "corporal punishment" in the sense of a legal act aimed at deterrence, betterment, and atonement, but about the preservation of a peaceful coexistence of the students with one another and with the teacher, something that precedes any education. One cannot accuse a teacher who secures peace in the classroom by "brute force" of pedagogical backwardness or a lack of child-rearing power. It is not the school that has produced the conditions from which it is suffering today!

It must therefore be stated with all seriousness and clarity: *The duty of the teacher to instruct and – as part of this – raise his students, contains by its nature the right to protect the children entrusted to him, most of whom mean well, from the acts of a small number of youthful perpetrators of violence, who sabotage his work not only accidentally and unintentionally, but also consciously and often in a planned fashion, at times even in organized gangs, during the process of which physical attacks by one or more students on the teacher himself take place, not to mention exclamations in the style of Götz von Berlichingen!*

That is the situation. Among the 350,000 students leaving school in North Rhine-Westphalia [this year] are about 10,000 who were already before a judge on account of their criminal acts – this makes one criminal for every 70 students. However, behind this one criminal, as we have shown above, stand far

more age-mates of the very same emotional constitution. The teacher of our day must unfortunately expect that representatives of this type are found in his class. Towards them he is not only authorized, but as an educator and teacher of the community of the classroom, obligated to proceed, if necessary, with the same means with which these students, if they are not in school but on the street, are apprehended by the police if the occasion warrants, namely with “brute force.” And since the teacher is prohibited from banishing the evil-doer from the school arena or removing him by force, he has no other choice but to inflict blows to the backside in order to subject the one who disturbs the life of the community to the order of the school.

This has nothing to do with pedagogy based on corporeal punishment. The quarrel over Hundshammer’s well-known decree, which is hardly impeachable factually, and which by no means introduces “corporeal punishment” but instead strongly limits its application, is a gloomy chapter in German journalism. It was born of the mentality of the postwar period, in reaction to the outrageous abuse of force in the years of the dictatorship, and under the influence of lectures about the American pedagogical system, according to which the schools in that country achieve excellent student discipline without harsh punishments. But what is the real story of the pedagogical successes in the U.S.? The weekly magazine *Time* (NY) reported on March 15, 1954: “But . . . veteran Manhattan teachers . . . have become increasingly accustomed to what the New York Daily News has called the new three Rs – ‘rowdyism, riot, and revolt.’” After listing a few characteristic incidents, *Time* continues: “Said one teacher, on being asked why too few delinquents are reported or punished: ‘The teachers are afraid of the principals. The principals are afraid of their superintendents. The superintendents are afraid of the board [of education], and the board is afraid of the truth. Everybody is afraid but the kids – and they seem to be afraid of nobody.’” Quoted from “Infantilism” [“Infantilism”], issue 16 of *Psychologische Praxis* [*Psychological Practice*], edited by K. Heymann, Basel, 1955, 29.

We need not remind ourselves that the U.S. is still (?) far ahead of us on the issue of youth crime and probably holds the record as such. As for the rest, one only has to say:

tout comme chez nous. That our teachers also prefer to keep quiet as long as possible is understandable: according to the current decrees, they themselves are responsible for such incidents, and their possibly forceful measures make them culpable. And so they hide what can be hidden.

[...]

Brutalization

There is a well-known, effective remedy against the dangers of dissipation in the phases of arousal (crisis years), though it is difficult to come by: supervision. What is gratifying about the report about the Wild West gang in Essen is that the parents have to pay several tens of thousands of DM in damages. From this, they will learn about the sorts of obligations that fathers and mothers of energetic boys have. What worries us more is what can be done about brutalization. What is brutalization?

While the term “barbarization” [*Verwilderung*] can be defined only by enlisting the concept of human community and its order in morality and law (compare, for example, “the wild animal” and the tame “domestic animal”), the term “brutalness” concerns the behavior towards other life (physical or emotional) and can be circumscribed as a lack of respect for the latter. [...]

What is to be done now? Only far-reaching, political measures should be considered. Criticism of the inhumanity of the Eastern dictatorship is vain hypocrisy and worse, namely lies and self-deceit, if we do not employ vigorous socio-political and socio-pedagogical activity to put an end to the process of barbarization and brutalization that springs from the abuse of democratic freedom. If this is not done, one day the freedom to become barbaric and brutalized will turn into harsh discipline, which, in

abolishing these freedoms, also abolishes the freedom of thought and faith.

Source: Adolf Busemann, “Verwilderung und Verrohung” [“Barbarization and Brutalization”], *Unsere Jugend* (April 1956), pp. 159–68.

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Recommended Citation: Adolf Busemann, “Barbarization and Brutalization” (1956), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/occupation-and-the-emergence-of-two-states-1945-1961/ghdi:document-4575>> [April 28, 2024].