

Heinz Kluth, “*Halbstarke* – Legend or Reality?” (1956)

Abstract

In 1950s West Germany, the traditional values of the older generation clashed with the new and different ideas of young people, which found expression in new forms of dress, music, and leisure-time activities. The older generation’s skepticism toward younger Germans was reflected in the label they gave them: *Halbstarke* (“rowdy youth”). In his analysis of the “rowdy youth” problem, sociologist Heinz Kluth spoke out against the blanket verdict issued against them by large parts of the media and the West German public. He emphasized that the “rowdy youth” phenomenon was limited to a small circle of big-city youth and was closely linked to changes in the social environment within modern society. This society denied young people recognition, failed to offer suitable outlets for their natural urge toward action, and forced them into an awkward position between the world of children and that of adults.

Source

The discussion over the ways and wrong ways of youth never dies down completely; from time to time, though, it definitely reaches a certain crescendo. These crescendos are clearly recognizable by the condensation of all confusions, judgments, and prejudices into a single catchword that informs the public’s view of everything these young people do. The frantic questions about “hooligans” prove that we are currently once again in such a situation. It is surely more than a coincidence that these crescendos always seem to occur when society seeks to establish itself upon the supposedly secure field of what has been “achieved.” In such a phase of development, people are especially sensitive to all signs that might portend a threat to the current situation; it is a time when molehills are turned all too easily into mountains. Every behavior that is supposedly or actually different from one’s own already constitutes a threat. Now, every younger generation will develop – to a greater or lesser extent – new forms of behavior that are more appropriate to the structural conditions under which it is growing up than the corresponding behavioral models of adults. Therefore, not everything that deviates from the behavior that is perceived as “normal” at a given time is pathological; however, it is denounced as pathological as soon as it runs counter to the conventional foundations upon which the behavioral security of adults rests.

[...]

A Spectacular Catchword

If the word “hooligans” has any separate meaning at all, then what it refers to must be situated within the insecure field that lies beyond youth criminality. With their crude ascriptions, people overshoot the comparatively tiny segment of this field that one could address as the sphere of “hooligan behavior.” At its core, this behavior is neither criminal nor asocial; however, it is also not social in any relevant sense of the word. It lacks the continuity and purposefulness needed to be either one or the other. What characterizes the “hooligan” is his all but explosive action for the sake of it. The word “hooligan” today, however, does not refer at all to a specific problem; rather, it has become a spectacular catchword in the above-mentioned sense – and this can be demonstrated by the fact that the public discussion not only associates such diverse phenomena as criminality, jazz fans, and gang violence with “hooligans,” but also counts both fourteen and thirty year-olds among them.

“Hooligans” are new in neither word nor substance; the only new thing is that the large metropolitan environment no longer seems equipped to deal with the matter. The word “hooligans” is already about

six decades old. Around the turn of the century, the Hamburg bourgeoisie used it to describe the proletarian youth. Thus, from the beginning, it was a designation for a sphere of life that was foreign and possibly even hostile toward one's own. However, the problem of the "hooligans" has probably already existed for as long as young people have confronted the task of growing into the norms prescribed by society. But the forms in which the youth of any given age could, or can, wrestle with this issue vary a great deal. Thus, the "hooligans" do not represent the youth today, as such, any more than the "Tango youth" or the "Swing-Boy" once did. So far, the "hooligans" have remained limited almost exclusively to the large cities; and in the affected cities, even according to the most pessimistic estimates, only one percent of youth, at most, could be labeled as such.

However, if one counts every criminal youth among the "hooligans," and if one sees in everyone who attends a jazz event or watches a Western, or simply stands around the street looking bored, a potential "hooligan" at the very least – and this perhaps even independent of his age – then the phenomenon does indeed grow to menacing proportions; but in that case any possibility of a reasonable discussion ends. The attempt to bring the question of the "hooligans" back to an appropriate level, at least in some aspects, does not mean that such a discussion is either impossible or simply unnecessary. If even the small group of "hooligans" does not represent today's youth as such, the extreme forms that their reactions take do reveal problems that the larger part of our big-city youth probably has to contend with in some form or another.

If the "hooligan-violence" of the past had not partly escaped broader journalistic coverage, had not partly been viewed through a different lens owing to special circumstances, then mere recourse to the experiences of the interwar period could show that, in many cases, the specific forms of expression, but certainly not the problem itself, are connected to the particular conditions of our time. For example, one must not overlook the fact that a portion of the young people who were involved in violent political clashes in the 1920s were certainly not involved in a deeper political sense. These clashes, however, provided nearly unrestrained possibilities of expression for a largely undifferentiated urge to take action. Therefore, it is surely no coincidence that this pseudo-political portion of the youth increasingly drifted to the radical, that is, more "action-filled," wings of political life. After 1933, this pressure toward action was then forcibly channeled and released only to the extent that it was in keeping with the goals of the rulers (persecution of the Jews, for example, and war). In the present, by contrast, the preconditions for such "political engagement" have largely vanished. Our misunderstanding begins when we judge and evaluate the same kind of behavior differently merely because it no longer manifests itself as seemingly politically motivated, but is undisguised, as it were, without motivation. The reason why "hooligans" exist today is therefore incorrectly formulated, since "hooligans" are not new to our day. The more correct question would be why there are no longer any "hooligans" cloaked in the nobler garb of "higher" motives.

One crucial root of the "hooligan problem," which takes the entire question beyond the obtrusive immediacy that some would like to endow it with, lies in the developmentally-determined intersection of a heightened urge to do something and be someone, on the one hand, and emotional-mental and social frailty, on the other, which characterizes the period of transition from childhood to adulthood. This constellation contains from the outset the possibility of a conflict with the environment. And so the really surprising fact is not that "hooligans" exist, but rather that there are relatively few of them. The fact that, up to now, the hooligan "problem" has been largely – though not exclusively – limited to the large cities shows that the constraints that have preserved the fragile balance of the transition period (the so-called youth, that is) from being overturned, have been loosened only in the large cities.

Clogged Valves

People in the large cities have evidently forgotten that the diffuse urge to do something cannot be wholly channeled into "socially useful" activities, indeed, that the urge for action purely for the sake of it grows

to the degree to which people are squeezed into a pattern of rigid behavioral norms. Now, there is no denying that the traditional regulatory forms vis-à-vis the youth have been largely dismantled – to such a degree, in fact, that there is a growing chorus of voices that want to attribute all youthful excesses to education that has become too lax, too soft. Except that, here, one overlooks the fact that the strictness has shifted onto other areas, and that people are trying to maintain it there with the utmost consistency. To pick out just one example, the working day of a young person has generally become, in external terms, not only shorter, but also easier. However, crucial to our question is the fact that the demands for behavioral discipline at work have grown at least to the same degree. Already the apprentice and the young worker are being subjected to the high factual constraints of rationalized work and training.

Added to this is that the world of grownups, for all its “softness,” uncertainty, and lack of clarity vis-à-vis the youth, seems to agree on one point: at least in the larger cities there is something akin to an unwritten law that the youth must be urged to be quiet – if need be, with the help of the state’s coercive power. [...] And so every possibility that this youth has to let off steam in a “meaningless” way is severely curtailed wherever possible. That is to say, the youth of the large city is deprived of something that was, and still is, a matter of course for the youth of the countryside and the small city: the legitimate possibility of breaking out of the written and unwritten behavioral constraints of society.

People are trying to close all the valves through which “pointless” and “disruptive” energies could escape and are then surprised when these energies seek their own way out and in the process puncture the entire structure of regulated proper behavior. The hooligan racket is in essence nothing other than the “silly pranks” of our fathers or the rough ending to a village fair. But silly pranks and fairground fights were outlets that had their unquestioned place within the social fabric. People were aware of their function as outlets, of the necessity and limited nature of their existence, and so they were not only tolerated within these boundaries, but even promoted, though they were just as rigorously curtailed as soon as these boundaries were crossed. By contrast, in the current social structure of a large city, in which cohabitation – at least ideally – is supposed to and is able to run only within tracks that arise from demonstrable contexts, the young person who “merely” wants to let off steam must turn increasingly into a foreign body.

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That which is embodied by the “hooligan” does indeed go profoundly against the big city’s ideas of order. Therefore, people do not even try to take seriously the “concerns” brought forth by the “hooligans,” in the sense that one seeks the legitimate chance of their realization. What remains is the effort to counter them with moral appeals, condemnation, police power, or preventive youth services. However, successes are unlikely by these routes, since the root of the problem, the excessive curtailment of spontaneous, “pointless” action, is not only not eliminated in this way, but also virtually reinforced. The frantic discussion about the “hooligans” will soon be over again; however, the problem, only the outer layers of which have become visible in the process, will remain unsolved as long as one fails to see that “pointless” action must be given its due, the more one wants and perhaps has to integrate young people into a close-knit web of “meaningful” and task-oriented ways of behaving. A norm that wishes to be respected must include within itself, virtually from the outset, the opportunity to break that norm. Here lies the problem: big city-industrial society has lost the security-conferring confidence in its own stability and elasticity that is necessary to judge a silly prank meant to be “serious” as a silly prank nonetheless, that is, to be able to simultaneously endure it and contain it within its boundaries.

No Supportive Environment

Usually, this spontaneous urge to act, directed against any integration, still does not lead to an open conflict with the social environment. If a “riot” does occur, a number of intensifying or triggering factors were involved. From what we have observed so far, two of those seem to carry particular weight: the

craving for recognition and the lack of a supportive environment. The adolescent seeks the recognition of his “full validity,” an affirmation of his “equality” by the environment. We all too readily underestimate the importance of this issue, because we continue to cling to the belief that the adolescent lives in his own social world largely separated from that of the adults. That may be true for some of the young people, but by far the greater part takes its orientation from the yardsticks of the adult world. Being a young person does not mean creating a separate world, but becoming an adult, getting out of the role of “not being taken seriously.” A young person therefore reacts with extreme sensitivity if recognition is permanently denied to him.

Now, the anonymous and objectified structures of the large cities and the working world of large companies have always offered inherently fewer and fewer possibilities for finding an environment that can provide recognition. If anywhere at all, the thesis of the “loneliness” of youth today has its cause here. A “human encounter” that takes place in a socially irrelevant situation may temporarily gloss over the problem, but despite all Romantic transfiguration, it does not solve it. The encounter with someone does not break through the “loneliness,” if this person who takes the young person “seriously” does not appear to him as the representative of a socially relevant world. However, added to this is the fact that the adult world itself, toward which the young person tries to orient himself in his striving for equality, no longer has any forms of obligatory norms to offer. After all, the adults themselves have blundered into the deeply unsettling randomness of their social roles. Out of this insecurity, they are becoming increasingly incapable of dealing directly with the youth; “talking to” increasingly takes the place of “setting a living example.”

[...]

The Contradictory Role

In the encounter with the adult world, the fragility of the young person is thus intensified rather than alleviated. It then leads almost invariably to open conflict if the supportive, integrative power of the immediate environment, especially the family, is also destroyed to the point where it is incapable of either preventing or cushioning a breakdown of the fragile condition. Thus, young people from poor family circumstances have very clearly become crucial bearers and participants in the “hooligan riots.” Here, we must not overlook the fact that we have maneuvered young people between the ages of 16 and 21, especially, into the strange dual position of being already and not yet grown, which allows a young person, in cases of conflict, to invoke the role that carries greater rights, namely that of the adult, while at the same time justifying himself to himself by adopting the role that imposes the least responsibility on him, namely that of the youth or even the child.

The role of the youth in our society is, after all, the only one that is already inherently contradictory. Today, a young person is supposed to be a child at home, an adolescent within the scope of certain laws and the demands of recreation, and for the most part an adult in the world of work and professional life. In the final analysis, however, that is an unresolvable and deeply conflict-ridden task. The working youth is subject to this dilemma to a special extent, because under the pressure of the working world, which is central to its existence, it is relatively quick to develop habits that conform to adulthood. However, if the working youth fails to find clear access to the adult world beyond work, then short-circuited action is surely not the correct response, but it is at least an understandable one. “We want to be acknowledged!” No matter how facile this statement from “instigators” during “hooligan” riots was been intended to be, it does touch on one of the elements that make up the so-called “hooligan problem.”

Evidently, it was also precisely this element that has responded to the unfortunate media coverage of the “hooligans” in the last few months. As absurd as it would be to claim that the media created the “hooligans” in the first place, one cannot overlook the fact that breathless reporting provided the triggering element in a number of cases. That the overall situation was by no means so fragile that it had

to turn into an open conflict will become evident, probably in the near future, by the fact that a large portion of the “hooligans” will disappear as suddenly as they appeared when the publicity dies down. Evidently, such phenomena occurred whenever the police supposedly solved the “hooligan problem” by “ignoring” the “hooligans.” This patent solution should therefore prove quite ineffective vis-à-vis the “real hooligans,” that is to say, where the situation itself provides no stabilizing elements.

Source: Heinz Kluth, “Die ‘Halbstarken’ – Legende oder Wirklichkeit?“, *deutsche jugend*, vol. 4 (January-February 1956), pp. 495–502.

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Recommended Citation: Heinz Kluth, “Halbstarke – Legend or Reality?” (1956), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/occupation-and-the-emergence-of-two-states-1945-1961/ghdi:document-4574>> [May 13, 2024].