

“The Great Head-wagging about Young People” (1956)

Abstract

In the 1950s, the question of how to deal with young people became an important topic of social policy in West Germany. The so-called *Halbstarke* (“rowdy youth”), a term used partly in irony and partly in outrage, were enthusiastic about American popular culture and clashed with the conservative zeitgeist of the Adenauer period. Against this backdrop, the critic Walter Abendroth painted a gloomy picture of West German society in the weekly *Die Zeit* in 1956. For Abendroth, the excessive enthusiasm for movie and music idols and the fanaticism of the “fans” was the expression of a perversion of religious forms, which in the secularized and self-centered postwar society were no longer tied to genuine ideals but rather served forms of superstition.

Source

The Great Head-wagging about Young People

The modern superstition of the movie and jazz fans

Let me begin with three news items:

In *Norwalk*, California, three boys, ages seven, nine, and ten, killed their father because he had grounded them for stealing (rifle cartridges). Instead of any signs of remorse, they expressed to the police merely their regret that the simultaneous attempt to kill their mother had failed. The chief motive was: the boys wanted to *lead a life in keeping with their own taste* . . .

In *Manchester* and *London*, the jazz film “Rock around the clock” threw young people into a tumultuous dance mania, which reached the point of the vilest excesses . . .

In *Munich* (and elsewhere) there are *fan clubs* that were formed by girls who are crazy about movies, girls who, upon joining, pledge “to see every film in which their idol has a part and to defend their star against all attacks.” The “International Maria Schell Club,” for example, complained about a press photo that showed Maria Schell together with Romy Schneider (supposedly an improper juxtaposition); while the “Romy Schneider Club” declared itself “deeply offended in its most sacred feelings” because Romy was spoofed by a cabaret comedian. . .

So much for the facts. People will say: the second, or even more the third, of these reports does not belong in the company of the first. After all, movie fan silliness and jazz fan orgies are not crimes. That is true, of course. And yet there is a “common denominator” to which these symptoms, which seem so varied, can be reduced; to which they in fact *must* be reduced, if the “youth problem” so widely discussed today is to be understood in its innermost nature. It cannot be stated emphatically enough and it cannot be repeated often enough that there would be no youth problem *if adults did not create a problematic world for the youth!*

Fanaticism – the Basic Evil of our Time

As terrible as the first report may sound, as profound as the horror it triggers may be: it, too, reveals merely the gruesome consequence of a mental attitude that is familiar to the normal person of our times (notabene: the *mental attitude* – not yet the *consequence* unburdened from all restraints). What modern person would not find it self-evident to arrange life “in keeping with one’s taste” by using all more-or-less

permissible means?

However, as far as the *permissibility* of the means is concerned, that term is entirely changeable; and it is only a short mental path from the – widely held – notion that whatever is not explicitly forbidden is allowed, to the belief that prohibitions are put in place solely by the despotism of those in power. In other words: even the average adult of today is impeded in the radical pursuit of his interests not by the inhibitions of an unshakable moral consciousness, but solely by the laws of the state, and under the best of circumstances also by the unwritten moral code of his social class. But the person who, in the first case, is most horrified by the fact that children could have and could express such an utter lack of feelings *toward their own parents*, should consider the not exactly rare instances where the situation is reversed: the horrible abuses and torments committed by parents against their own children. These parents, too, are among the “elders,” among the adults who create the atmosphere of all possibilities into which the children then grow and where they make their way according to *their* proclivities. One must not imagine this process in such simple terms that it invariably occurs like pressure and counterpressure between equal partners, in the sense, that is, that inhuman parents have inhuman children in their wake, as a “response,” so to speak. Rather, historical logic (if one may speak of it here) functions “blindly,” as it were; it does not ask about the partners, not about *personal* responsibility; instead, the *responsibility of the times* unfolds its effect and gives birth to new guilt in the direction taken or in a natural countermovement.

This “responsibility of the times” also becomes visible in the two other examples of what is, relatively speaking, still a harmless “youth fanaticism.” The emphasis here is on *fanaticism* and on the danger inherent in it. We have already experienced a wanton misalignment between parents and children as the side effect of a fanatical *political* conviction: during the Hitler period, when “loyalty to the state” could demand a deadly betrayal of one’s own flesh and blood – and did produce such betrayal. Who knows to what confusion and recklessness such mass intoxication – like the orgies of the jazz fans – might lead to if only the relevant motives are inserted at the critical moment? (However, I certainly do not wish to deny the values of vitality and the aesthetic values inherent in real jazz). For even the enthusiasm of the movie fans that is so easy to smile at is by no means harmless. For here, too, is manifest the old phenomenon of what is essentially “mass” enthusiasm, whose intensity and fanatical “readiness for action” (yes, this all too well-known Nazi phrase is once again appropriate here!) seem grotesque, measured against the occasions.

Both the *jazz* mania and the movie *mania* of our youth have their preconditions in corresponding attitudes of the adults. After all, many parents participate internally in the cults that come out of jazz and movies. Here, too, the “responsibility of the times” is evident. And its essential core lies without a doubt in the *dismantling of the religious*.

The *religious* is an elemental force that human beings can never cast off, whether they wish to or not. It asserts itself, even if all its accustomed signs wither, all its original objects are covered up. It then diverts into unsuspected directions – but secretly it remains alive, even if in a completely perverted form.

Our time, broadly speaking, is on the road to transforming itself from an a-religious into an *anti-religious* one. One should therefore expect that the suppressed religious impulses will make themselves felt in other ways. If we look at the *contemporary phenomena* I have been talking about here under this aspect, we come up with surprising insights.

Psychoanalysis Replaces Confession

It has long been known that the loss of real faith produces *superstition* to the same degree; and today this is once again confirmed everywhere. The mania of jazz fans (cases like the one reported have occurred more frequently, after all) is clearly reminiscent of the medieval religious *flagellants* and the gyrations of

the *St. Vitus dancers*; the symptoms are nearly identical. And the mentality of the movie fans with their star worship must certainly be described as a perversion of *saint worship*. The *manifestations* of religious self-exaggeration have thus persisted. But their *content* has declined to the level of utter primitiveness. One is inclined to say: the manifestations have become nearly *stripped of preconditions* – and that is all the more menacing, since they can easily become ignited again by far more dangerous occasions.

I shall mention only as an aside the more obvious correspondence of a fashionable mindset with an originally religious exercise, which is flourishing especially in the US and in Switzerland. The faith in the blessings of confession, in the sacrament of penance, has turned into the mass superstitious belief in the panacea of psychoanalysis (this statement is by no means intended to deny the limited therapeutic value of this method). This superstition is taking on increasingly delusional forms also among us; more and more, the rush to psychoanalysts and psychotherapists is growing into a true sport for the excessively carefree . . .

If we add the fact that not only the religious instincts have been today largely perverted, but that the other, former element of stability – general humanistic education – has dissolved into an entirely unserious class word, as evidenced by the ‘higher’ star cults of the modern worship of musicians, the obligatory social game of festivaltravelsport, and the indiscriminate hunt for autographs, it must be abundantly clear what sort of world the elders are preparing for our youths, and whose impulses the latter are absorbing with the redoubled energy of their growing years – and reducing *ad absurdum*.

It is as pointless as it is unfair to want to find the explanation for all possible, seemingly incomprehensible excesses of youth in young people themselves. Looked at in the light of day, there is nothing incomprehensible or difficult to explain about it. One only has to look for the causes in the right place!

Source: Walter Abendroth, “Das große Kopfschütteln über die Jugend Der moderne Aberglaube der Film- und Jazzfans,” *Die Zeit*, no. 39, September 27, 1956, p. 15.

Translation: Thomas Dunlap

Recommended Citation: “The Great Head-wagging about Young People” (1956), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/occupation-and-the-emergence-of-two-states-1945-1961/ghdi:document-4446>> [April 29, 2024].