Liberal Musings on the Character of the Generational Revolt (October 18, 1968)

Abstract

The paradox that protest would issue forth from affluent children caused older liberals, such as Horst Krüger, to muse about the contradictions in motivation, appearance, and action seen among student radicals.

Source

The Children of Liberalism – Our Extra-parliamentary Opposition (APO) from Personal Observation

First the superficialities, the visuals, the details. I came, I saw, I heard. What struck me was their charm, their well-appointedness, their provocative nonchalance. Aesthetically speaking, they are a pure pleasure; they have style. Never before has youth in Germany been young in such a resolute and yet convincing way. This is an astonishingly beautiful generation of those very Germans still labeled as ugly throughout the world. The girls in their rakish pullovers, the boys with their impressive sideburns, they call to mind the advertising world's most striking models; no designer for Pepsi-Cola could invent anyone more attractive. A bit of Paris, a bit of Greenwich Village, a bit of Swinging London; lively, hip, with a spontaneous sense for the bizarre and grotesque, they are at first glance the new German representatives of that worldwide youth culture that, inspired by America, has taken root in every Western metropolis. An ancient umbrella, rhythmically opened and shut in tune with the professor's figures of speech—I can't altogether resist the grotesque aesthetics of this kind of provocation. It is, for all its spirit of revolt, a strangely joyous generation.

They've been called a luxurious generation; I find the word too ambiguous, too dazzling to capture the phenomenon, but it is certain that their feeling for life, this bizarre mixture of liveliness and aggressiveness, is inconceivable without our affluent society. Although they protest the forms of consumption of a society of abundance, they remain its creatures and creations. Mascots of late-stage capitalism, one might say, to use the type of slogan they call their own. It is certain that our flourishing economy has helped produce them. They are revolutionaries of prosperity.

The second thing that catches the eye is their social background. In conversation, it soon becomes evident that their most articulate representatives are almost always the children of prosperous bourgeois homes. This we know: these are the sons of merchants, lawyers, physicians, industrialists. Working class youth—as might be expected, given the class structure of our universities—is not represented. Children from farming families, the mechanical trades, the broad strata of the underprivileged are missing. From this perspective, their revolutionary claim of wanting to liberate the workers from the constraints of capitalism takes on a romantic and strangely perverse quality.

Viewed in terms of mass psychology, these students are profoundly alone and isolated; they have no social group worth mentioning behind them, if one discounts their sympathizers from intellectual circles. Free-floating intelligentsia.

In the sociological jargon they quickly adopted from Marcuse, Adorno, and Habermas, they speak a language whose rigid, formulaic shorthand recalls the prayer wheels of a new esoteric party lingo. Rather

all too quickly, it becomes stiff and “misappropriated.”

Finally, one notices the signs of a fantastic, childlike self-confidence that can occasionally, with lightning speed, assume the features of terrorism, as is always the case with children. A passionate will to action combines with a sense of entitlement to power that would most definitely arouse amusement if the establishment itself were not so nonplussed and helpless.

One has to grant them the courage of their convictions. No institution is too powerful for them—not prominent writers, major publishers, established statesmen, not to mention the legal system and the police: the more stable the power, the more confident the style of provocation. “You know, Mr. Publishers,” one of them said to our book-capitalists, “that we are going to expropriate you in due time. But for the moment we request your solidarity. Go tomorrow morning […].” Are infantile fantasies of omnipotence inspiring these words? A whiff of adolescent braggadocio certainly runs through their ranks. Their relationship to the masses and to power is emotional, uncritical, but if it were only adolescent, it would hardly trigger crises of this magnitude.

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Source: Horst Krüger, “Die Kinder des Liberalismus – Unsere APO, aus persönlicher Beobachtung,” *Die Zeit*, October 18, 1968. Republished with permission.

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