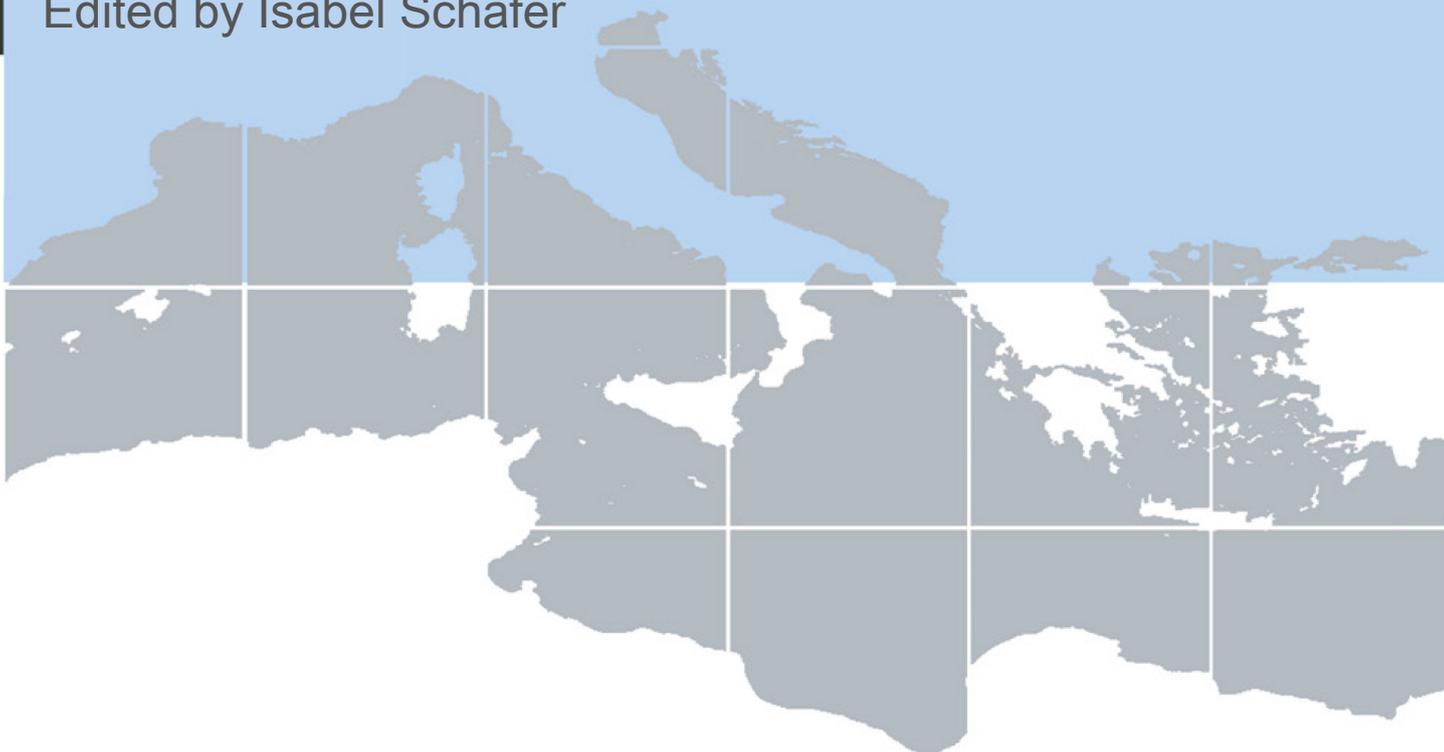


Youth, Revolt, Recognition

The Young Generation during and after the “Arab Spring”

Edited by Isabel Schäfer



On the Concept of Youth – Some Reflections on Theory

by Valeska Henze

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Part I – Theoretical Perspectives

On the Concept of Youth – Some Reflections on Theory

Valeska Henze

Introduction

Youth, in a very general definition, is a period of life in-between childhood and adulthood. It is described as a time of experimenting with roles and identities, still void of the burden of social norms and obligations, yet slowly preparing the youngsters for their lives as full members of the social collective. During this process of social integration young people find themselves in a complex social system, composed of such elements as tradition, history, social demands, hopes, and individual future prospects, all of which they have to incorporate into a coherent picture in order to build a proper foundation for their personal life. Step by step they have to obtain new social roles and extend their range of social performances. This passage into society is guided by various socially defined norms and demands that serve the reproductional functions of society while conditions of economic and social integration set the framework for the political socialisation of the future citizens.

What do these implications of growing up mean for the young and for society? The following contribution surveys shortly different conceptualisations of youth and how they relate to requirements of society and its future. Theoretical considerations on the notion of youth shall help to understand why youth is rebellious, unsatisfied etc., as their acting always is a response to their own experiences with social realities and to expectations society imposes on their young generations.¹

Youth as we speak of today is a product of modernity. It developed as a middle class project during industrialisation, hence at a time when social orders were shaken by fast and confusing transitions.² Youth since has become an object of pedagogical and psychological expertise. Youth is conceptualised in two ways: as a stage model of individual development on the one hand, and as an element of social integration processes on the other hand. One usually can detect aspects of one and the other to varying extent in different concepts of youth. Thus the modern image of youth integrates elements of a pedagogic view of youth as a shapeable object, with the demand for an unproblematic integration into adult society. Pedagogy and education shall direct the individual through a process of cultural and civic maturation, which complements the biological development of a human being, as it were a natural way of growing up with culturally given implications and objectives that will result in a valuable, civilised person. This implicates a clear normative understanding of the way youth should develop. To the contrary the mainstream sociological views set out from the goal of social stability, to which youth, as all social groups, has to contribute. In this perspective youth is a functional item of the social structure.

¹ For a detailed elaboration please see Henze, Valeska (2014): *Improving Future(s). Youth Imagery as Representations of the Political Cultures in Sweden and Poland*. Berlin: Berliner Wissenschafts-Verlag (Nordeuropäische Studien 25).

² An often quoted statement by Frank Musgrove parallels the invention of the steam engine in 1765 with the 'discovery' of youth by Jean Jacques Rousseau in 1762 with the publication of *Émile*, in: Musgrove, Frank (1998): *Youth and the social order*. London: Routledge (The international library of sociology, 12), p. 33.

Modern youth adopts an own status and captures an own social room with claims, such as to live their newly acclaimed energies and possibilities, and test different social roles without immediately being confronted with the heavy weight of adult life and regulations. Although these new evolving demands and hopes are connected to the ideas of general freedom and renewal, which still contain plenty references to the ideals of a romanticised youth as for instance in Rousseau's works on education³, the overall goal of youthful freedom remains directed by existing social structures. The family as centre of one's life conduct and its guiding patriarchal principles have been replaced by a juvenile principle, which was articulated through the idolisation of assumed youthful attributes.⁴ The juvenile principle corresponded perfectly to the dynamics of modernisation and could be applied to the societal development goals of modernity. Youth, hence, ended up in the middle of a highly ambivalent process oscillating between conservative claims of preservation and moderation and the radical demands of (leftist) revolutionist ideas: The youthful power of renewal was either needed in a fight against society or for the protection of society as well as for expansive plans of imperialistic states. In contrast to the romanticist world of a Rousseauian youth the centre of attention switched from the beauty of a youthful and innocent mind to the physical strength that will advance into a new and accelerated time. In doing so youth and its attributions, its expectable, shapeable and projectable prefixes for the future of society more and more became objectified by scientific methods.

Societal standardisation of youth

By the beginning of the 20th century the youth age had evolved as a general societal norm which was dominated by the bourgeois ideals of juvenility, to which other social classes had to adapt to. Nonetheless the fundamentals of conceptualising youth never could abandon its romanticist roots entirely. The norm was set by psychological and pedagogical efforts to define stages of personal development, assign age cohorts to social groups⁵ and ascribe so called tasks of development.⁶ Tasks of development structure individual biographies along socially defined transitions and determine temporary, sequenced life-stages. This grouping of personal and social lives shall for instance assure social stability at the critical point of generational transition. The complete range of developmental tasks thus structure the whole life. Yet, the concept intermingles descriptive and normative elements, so that the process is more or less designated and its results can be 'anticipated' or even demanded. During the years developmental tasks, especially those for adolescence, have been adjusted to the furthermore changing social structures by shifting or expanding the stages on a time

³ Rousseau, Jean-Jacques (1993): *Emile oder über die Erziehung*. Paderborn: Schöningh.

⁴ Such as rejuvenation, renewal, energy, creativity, enthusiasm, to some extent also rebellious attitudes. Cf. Gillis, John R. (1974): *Youth and History. Tradition and Change in European Age Relations 1770 - Present*. New York, London: Academic Press. pp. 113, who comprehensively develops the concept of youth from a socio-historical point of view. He describes a complex process, in which he explicitly accounts for the role of more or less organised youth groups as well as he recognises the implications of social class. Nonetheless the dominating modern view of youth stems from mainly bourgeois circles.

⁵ See especially Erikson, Erik H. (1989): *Identität und Lebenszyklus. Drei Aufsätze*. 11. Aufl. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp (Suhrkamp-Taschenbuch Wissenschaft, 16) and G. Stanely Hall (1904): *Adolescence; its psychology and its relations to physiology, anthropology, sociology, sex, crime, religion and education*. New York: D. Appleton and Company.

⁶ A concept elaborated by Robert Havighurst, who defines developmental tasks as "tasks which if fulfilled during an individual stage of life will lead to happiness and success with upcoming tasks, while if failed will make the individual unhappy and cause social disapproval and difficulties with the upcoming tasks." Havighurst quoted in: Abels, Heinz (1993): *Jugend vor der Moderne. Soziologische und psychologische Theorien des 20. Jahrhunderts*. Opladen: Leske + Budrich, p. 259. Developmental tasks were thus not specifically related to the youth age. Yet, the developmental tasks of youth have been in the centre of attention more than any other tasks.

scale, which resulted in the prolongation of the period of youth. Nonetheless their substantial claims – leaving the parents, choosing a profession, developing a gender role and living in a relationship with a partner – remained the same, together with the overall goal: securing social stability through a smooth integration into society. The completion of the adolescent development tasks designates a clear break in both the individual and the social life, as social status becomes the main structural feature for people and society, while age had been the primary criterion during childhood and adolescence.⁷ Youth has thus become a subject of social responsibility and protection. It had to be taken care of, advised against the dangers of youthful freedom while at the same time its valuable and idolised qualities have to be fostered. The endeavours of the academic world resulted in a standard of youth who allowed for progress as well as for the preservation of traditions, with more emphasis on one or the other depending on the ideological background. Concepts of youth that among others were reproduced in ideas of education and socialisation therefore developed as structures of social control.⁸

The romanticised youth as a bodily creature, that once was instinctively acting, displaying soulful attitudes and carrying the morals of innocence and purity has been turned into an object of measurable personal and social qualities, which could be optimised by the right treatment, i.e. education. Although all this is put into a rhetoric of youthful freedom – own spaces, moratorium and the like – the clearly set goals of development broke down life into certain, ex-ante scientifically defined stages which imply an adjustment to the ruling habits, attitudes, modes of action and traditions. Thus the clear order of life-stages structured the social processes of hierarchisation and generational transition as well as they replaced the traditional rites of passage and forms of transferring authority.⁹ Contradictions and ambivalences of modernisation are to be overcome by standardising and objectifying the social category age, by turning youth into a social status and a set of social roles.

Adopting roles in present time

Social roles link a personal development directly to social institutions which take over tasks of socialisation and influence the shaping of adult roles. Assigned roles are the functional playground on which society and individual intersect, as they attach modes of action to corresponding (sub-) systems, i.e. social spaces and times.¹⁰ Moreover roles are ordering elements of the social structure, for they are generally expressing certain normative expectations of society. These expectations in turn are derived from their desired functional contribution to the social system. Hence, social

⁷ The social definition of a person in childhood is e.g. “8-year old pupil” and for an adult “full-time worker at the car factory”.

⁸ “The invention of the developmental and ‘spatial moratorium’ of youth implies the invention of a structure of social control for socialisation processes, in which relief and freedom are paid back with a continuous and effective social control. This social control is organised of professional supervisors and mirrors the structure of social inequality, as it is focused on middle class perspectives. It aims at learning and maintaining individual self-control mechanisms within the framework, that is given by the dominant, bureaucratic-rational organisation of society.” Trotha, Trutz von (1982): Zur Entstehung von Jugend. In: Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie (KZfSS) 34 (3), p. 269, who asserts a turn in the social organisation of age during the 19th century which distinguished itself from the time before through among others the fact that dependence now was shaped by pedagogic and psychological concepts, youth got excluded from the social realm of work, the introduction of age limits for certain stages of development and education.

⁹ Cf. Erdheim, Mario (1982): Die gesellschaftliche Produktion von Unbewußtheit. Eine Einführung in den ethnopschoanalytischen Prozess. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp; cf especially chapter 4, pp.284-295.

¹⁰ Both, time and space have got rid of their ‘natural’ or biological measures since the enlightenment. Koselleck speaks of a “denaturalisation” of geographical rooms and biological time courses, cf. Koselleck, Reinhart (2003): Zeitschichten. Studien zur Historik. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp (Suhrkamp-Taschenbuch Wissenschaft, 1656), pp. 78.

relations and social interaction become part of normative role models, which define rules of social selection and hierarchy and become necessary conditions for social stability. The role-model concept fits perfectly well to the structural functionalist approach,¹¹ which for a long time dominated the sociological perspective on youth and their integration into society. Samuel Eisenstadt has been one of the structural functionalist sociologists who introduced age as a functional category of the social system and assigned youth a specific position within the social order, by linking age to role expectations and by that to specific social tasks. Age thus has become one necessary feature to hold together the differentiated social systems and to assure the structural continuation of the system, i.e. society.

Eisenstadt views youth as a necessary component within in the social system. He focuses on the emergence of distinct youth groups which take over parts of the socialisation process from the traditional institutions family and school – the peer-groups. Yet, also Eisenstadt defines age culturally by ascribing specific expectations:

[The biological process] serves as basis for the specification of the people, for the development of their mutual relations and activities and for the differentiation along social roles. Although the meaning of age as well as the span of years, that form a relative consistent category or stage of age, vary in each society, we do not know of any society that does not at all differentiate between distinct 'life-ages' and defines them according to norms and values of their cultural tradition. In each society a number of cultural definitions that ascribe certain fundamental characteristics to each age group – or more technically said life-stage – are modelled after basic and general biological facts.¹²

Those characteristics define role expectations which again only can be understood if they are set in relation to other existing age groups. This means that the social structure here essentially is built upon a constructed age hierarchy, which has vital functions for the persistence of the social system.¹³ In addition Eisenstadt observes that peer-group socialisation more and more takes over the transitional functions of dissolving family-bonds and diminishing ties between families and social institutions respectively. Furthermore the transition to adult status is perceived as the most critical and essential moment for social stability which attracts special attention to youth and youth groups and clearly emphasises the problematic youth that does not comply with measurable performance goals (i.e. developmental tasks). The perception of youth as a problem thus is inherent to the structural-functional perspective for it binds compliance with the existing structure to certain social functions and the overall social stability which turns a specific alertness to all non-functional elements. Consequently, the mal-functioning of youth automatically is related to the system. Youth usually turns into a systemic problem in structural-functionalist concepts.¹⁴ Yet it is missed that the

¹¹ Structural-functionalist theory has been the dominating sociological theory for conceptualising society, its constituents, their relations and its overall operation focussing on the functional aspect and aiming at social stability. Its main representatives with broad influences on youth studies and political science respectively were Talcott Parsons, David Easton and Samuel Eisenstadt.

¹² Eisenstadt, Samuel Noah (1966): *Von Generation zu Generation. Altersgruppen und Sozialstruktur*. [From *Generation to Generation - Age Groups and Social Structure*.]. München: Juventa, p. 14.

¹³ "The roles each individual adopts throughout his life, have to be defined in such a way, that they clearly specify his relations to the fellow members of society, who find themselves at their specific, different stage of individual development – in his role of carrier or recipient of the cultural and social heritage. The position of the individual in this continuity is decisive for the definition of his own roles, his behaviour and his expectations towards the others." Eisenstadt, Samuel Noah (1966): *Von Generation zu Generation. Altersgruppen und Sozialstruktur*. München: Juventa, p. 17

¹⁴ One example for such a perception provides Hornstein, Walter (1999): *Jugendforschung und Jugendpolitik. Entwicklungen und*

problematic youth often mirrors the perceived and assumed social problems which intrinsically belong to the general social structure or rather the system itself – for which youth in return, for better or for worse, has to stand in.¹⁵ Youth becomes either problem or chance, while the problem discourse is the dominant one. Thus youth becomes a publically well-observed and commented object of research and media on both prevailing and prospective problems. It is a social factor that not yet is a problem but inherits the potential to become one.¹⁶

Youth without past

The less fixed social status makes youth a proper field for testing, as it not yet has a social past and thus is unloaded – at least that is assumed – which makes it an optimal playground for reloading, i.e. reinterpretation of meanings. This is the reason why the assumption of an axiomatic educability and a specific need for education has despite various theoretical reconceptualisations remained the primary basis of any existing youth image. Its core still is stuck in structural-functionalist thinking and developmental approaches of socialisation and integration, as the forming of the people according to functional role requirements can generate social stability. Furthermore the continuous evocation of youth as problem is a guarantee for the future existence of the system as the ‘problem’ calls for social mechanisms of disciplining and control.¹⁷

Hence any attempt to define youth has to struggle with the growing complexity of social structures and its conceptualisations. The ideas of the youth age, its length, character, course and forms, have been adapted to the transformations of an industrialised working society towards a post-modern and globalised service society, so that also theories on youth got split into countless short-living “ad-hoc theories”¹⁸ and attempts to generally reconceptualise social biographies. The idea of a clear-cut life stage youth does not fit any longer to our times. Social biographies more and more got blurred and permeable which above all seem to affect the youth period: their position appears most fragile in between the dependent, to be cared of child and the working, responsible adult so that the transition to the adult world becomes more and more insecure, unpredictable, while the time of education stretches to enormous length and the sphere of labour becomes confusingly diversified.

Strukturen in der zweiten Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts. Weinheim: Juventa-Verl. (Materialien zur historischen Jugendforschung), p. 158: “There is much evidence, that youth similar to environment, peace, the Third World itself is a systemic problem, that does not any longer appear as solvable with the usual instruments of political governance due to the conditions of late capitalism – not least because the state is no longer able to really relate to the situation of youth. This would only be possible by way of the social institutions, yet that would require that youth accepts those institutions as ‘theirs’ – in other words: if the institutions are able to response to the needs, problems and interests of the young. Yet, this is barely experienced by the young generations, so that the institutions are not really able to generate the identification and inner loyalty and commitment that are needed as basis for any form of ‘reasonable’, i.e. argument based, discourse.”

¹⁵ Cf. the repeatedly occurring moral panics, which most often are attributed to a dangerous youth but actually stand for a general anxiety due to severe changes, experiences of crisis and the like. See for instance. Springhall, John (1998): *Youth, Popular Culture and Moral Panics*. Penny Gaffs to Gangsta-Rap, 1830-1996. London: Macmillan.

¹⁶ Cf. Mansel, Jürgen; Griese, Hartmut M.; Scherr, Albert (Eds.) (2003): *Theoriedefizite der Jugendforschung. Standortbestimmung und Perspektiven*. Weinheim: Juventa-Verl. (Jugendforschung), p. 22: “Society represented by politics, media and interest groups by way of a permanent ‘youth discourse’ tries to assure its present situation and future. That means discourses of youth research are used as ‘early warning system’, mirror and seismograph of social problems. Theoretical debates on youth therefore often tend to adopt a substitute function. Youth research replaces or rather steps in as social research on problematic topics and the future, for youth on the one hand always points to future (‘youth as anticipatory activity’) and on the other hand is constructed ‘as social problem’.”

¹⁷ Foucault, Michel (1977): *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison*. London: Allen Lane Penguin Books Ltd.

¹⁸ Griese, Hartmut M. (1982): *Sozialwissenschaftliche Jugendtheorien. Eine Einführung*. Weinheim/Basel: Beltz. who tries to grasp the phenomenon of the 1970s/80s youth research, which was keen to grasp every ‘new’ form of youthful articulation as a new social movement, reality and the like – but was outlived rather shortly by the next youth phenomena. Those youth cultures were clearly responses to social developments but could not provide for long lasting reconceptualisations.

The dissolution of class society and binding age structures has unfolded of a variety of life-options and possible biographies which opened up various, individualised ways to become an adult.¹⁹

Individualisation here means that the biographies of the people are dissolved from given fixations and handed over as an individual task to decide openly and independently. The share of those life-options that in principle are not open for an own decision diminishes while the share of the openly decided and self-produced biographies increases. That means individualisation of biography here stands for the transformation of socially given biographies into biographies that are and have to be self-made, so that the single individual becomes the 'creator of his life' and by that also has to take the blame for his failures.²⁰

Yet, although the expansion of when and how to fulfil developmental tasks and go further in life has resulted in an enormous variety of possible life-courses, the fundamental requirements of developmental tasks remained stable and moreover became complemented by the demand to not only construct one's own biography but also to constantly reassure and renew it. All life-goals and tasks, however, in some way remain to be bound to the conditions of the labour market, which still are the dominant parameters of the temporal structure of both society and the individual life. And even if the variety of options has dispersed the socially given roles with the result of hardly recognisable role models, for which age seem to have lost its structuring function; it still is failure and success of accomplishing a role and the respective developmental tasks that determine the individual life courses.²¹ This in the end promotes the capitalisation of life-courses, whose values and assets (education, qualifications) then are broken down to social resources, one of which being youth. The romanticised youthful attributes such as power, creativity and freedom have finally turned into capitalised social assets.

Thus youth has in some way lost its significant meaning as a special condition of growing up while at the same time age still has the same structuring and regulating functions with regard to the systems of education and socialisation.²² The diffusion of social roles as it is represented in segmented images of modern, post-modern, globalised etc. youths, has been turned into an instrument of diagnosing social prospects and testing strategies to cope with changes. This advances the probability of perceiving youth as a potential problem (problems usually stir more easily societal debates than the

¹⁹ Social science speaks of a destructuring of the youth period. A further characteristic of a destructuralisation of the youth age are diversified life-courses: youth is not bound to the fact of going to school any longer, age norms have lost their ordering power, generational relations have become a matter of negotiation and are no longer determined by elder authority. "Young people do not claim a moratorium nor certain age-related rights, but define themselves by a social status ... It is not of importance, whether they feel as adult or adolescent, nor if the adults award them with a specific status. With regard to their social self they are adult and adolescent at the same time." In: Abels, Heinz (1993): *Jugend vor der Moderne. Soziologische und psychologische Theorien des 20. Jahrhunderts*. Opladen: Leske + Budrich, p. 518.

²⁰ Ulrich Beck quoted in Tillmann, Klaus-Jürgen (2000): *Sozialisationstheorien. Eine Einführung in den Zusammenhang von Gesellschaft, Institution und Subjektwerdung*. [Reinbek: Rowohlt (Rowohlt's Enzyklopädie)], p. 265.

²¹ Even if age on the surface has no longer the importance of positioning someone in society, all social institutions are still structured along age-spans, e.g. schooling regulations, pension requirements etc.

²² "One cannot miss the fact, that youth in social theory only has exemplary meaning: From the viewpoint of a macro-sociological reflection of processes of socialisation and differentiation youth becomes a subsystem, in which age no longer is a condition of socialisation but has turned into an institutional control mechanism." Abels, Heinz (1993): *Jugend vor der Moderne. Soziologische und psychologische Theorien des 20. Jahrhunderts*. Opladen: Leske + Budrich, p. 339. Though one could also say that the meaning of youth also has gained attraction with regard to the idolisation of youth in commercial media. The tendency to transfer juvenility further into adult life is another phenomenon of destructuralisation, cf. the notion of "Puerilisierung" in: Trotha, Trutz von (1982): *Zur Entstehung von Jugend*. In: *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie (KZfSS)* 34 (3), pp. 254–277, pp. 258.

positive correspondent). And since youth is related to future, or rather ideas of future its education and socialisation becomes a means to control the future. Psychological and sociological (i.e. structural-functionalist) conceptualisations of youth thus construct youth images as a social ideology within a functionalist theory.

Youth and societal future

To conceptualise youth as an active part in societal processes also requires going beyond the one-dimensional socialisation into given role-models. It calls for an intentionally presuming and ahead looking individual actor that is continuously reinterpreting and reshaping social life and thus reconstructing social reality. The adoption of social roles is a reciprocal process, in which society is conceived of as a reality that is formed by interpretations, the allocation of meaning and the objectivation of experience, and eventually results in an institutionalisation of social structure and roles, order and orientation, which then are represented in socialisation processes.²³

Roles, as for instance understood by Berger/Luckmann, stand for institutionalised standardisations of behaviour which both represent social reality and communicate social knowledge. Social reality can only be experienced through the representation of roles and by experiencing and recognising other roles. Yet this process is subject to the course of time and hence change. Future then becomes a common point of reference which has to be guaranteed within the scope of individual social actions (in the present time)²⁴ as the generational transmission of institutions would only be possible with this guarantee of an existing social reality. This in turn implies that social action has to be predictable, conceivable and reasonably distributed to social roles.

The identification of youth with the future of its society is the representation of such a reciprocal process of constructing social reality. Youth does not only represent and guarantee the future existence of society but has the duty to actively contribute to this future, to upgrade social conditions yet without shaking its fundamentals too heavy. Youth embodies future, not only in a metaphorical sense, but also as an actor who is bound to attributes such as hope, the possibility to redo decisions or to start better off. Those ascribed attributes thus are linked to certain values and even assignments or missions that would provide the young generation with a meaning, e.g. that of transforming or advancing society. The integration of the image and its social or rather national mission into a social and chronological order defines social power relations, creates societal values and sets hierarchies as if given by laws of natural growth. Youth becomes a matter of social power, as its image is at the adult's command to legitimise their power. Yet this naturalisation of power collapses when confronted with the actual conditions of unpredictability. Hence the scientific and social occupation with youth has become an instrument of assurance for the adult society. The ambivalence of youth which is the result of the tension between ascribed images and experienced reality (of both actual and former young generations) opens up for several distinctive meanings and

²³ Cf. Berger, Peter; Luckmann, Thomas (1999): *Die gesellschaftliche Konstruktion der Wirklichkeit. Eine Theorie der Wissenssoziologie.* Frankfurt/M. See also Weymann, Ansgar (1998): *Sozialer Wandel. Theorien zur Dynamik der modernen Gesellschaft.* Weinheim, München: Juventa (Grundlagentexte Soziologie), p. 58: "The internalisation of an objective reality as subjective reality of a person during the life-long socialisation process assures the understanding and the acquisition of the existing world anew, results in recognised and legitimated participation in society and counteracts alienation and individualisation."

²⁴ Cf. Berger, Peter; Luckmann, Thomas (1999): *Die gesellschaftliche Konstruktion der Wirklichkeit. Eine Theorie der Wissenssoziologie.* Frankfurt/M., pp. 110.

it is an ambivalence that is well experienced by the young themselves. The real young people, the age group with own needs and wishes, are not yet to be taken seriously, while the constructed image, the generation, carries the acknowledged and awaited signature of future – conspicuously described in an article in a journal of the German Jugendbewegung in the first half of the 19th century:

“The position of youth in the nation is basically determined by its twofold and even ambivalent constitution. So that youth and everything young always will be ambivalent: Youth is age group and generation. To make the difference clear one could stretch and simplify as follows: Youth as age group always is wrong, youth as generation always is right. They are wrong because the young age is a preliminary stage for the following, because the young still have to become men. As generation though, youth always is right, because it is foreshadowing and pre-shaping what is to come to reality. [...] Generation is the entity of those, who act during one period of time. Still a generation does not build a common project, it does not act according to a plan nor does it follow one will. As historical entity it is only conceivable when looking back. Still, also the current generation lives with a consciousness of being a generation of fate, like workers at a construction site that was assigned to them. And all humans that belong to one generation will recognise each other due to a secret language that only they would intuitively understand.”²⁵

In that retrospective generational legitimation youth appears as the awaited creator of history. However, although the image is retrospectively constructed it is applied to the present youth, which means that historical experience is objectified and generalised, exempt the conditions of the current time and circumstances. In such constructions and images, youth gets in touch with Promethean abilities, while societies are sequenced into an engine of progress. The idea of progress then more and more turns into a condition for the existence and stability of society and finally represents an ideal of social harmony.

The social group youth thus is captured within an itself replicating circle of an ambivalent existence between wished and glorified attributes and assumed deficits and defects. Within that circle the glorification or even mythologisation of youth is confronted with a likewise exaggerated assumption of a critical condition of the current civilisation that has to be contained by rigid control and socialisation. This means each image is clearly related to a certain generation, to its conditions of living, learning and working as well as to its wishes, hopes and fears, so that one can observe waves of alerts about a threatening young generation and worships of the promising avant-garde, that take regular turns.²⁶

²⁵ Quote from *Deutscher Freischar*, 1928/29; quoted in Hafenecker, Benno (1995): *Jugendbilder. Zwischen Hoffnung, Kontrolle, Erziehung und Dialog*. Opladen: Leske und Budrich, p. 25.

²⁶ “The response to that challenge primarily is education, which also is understood as prevention, in order to avoid the ‘general evil’, the ‘revival of the evil’. The ‘black pedagogy’ is full of projections of fear onto children and young people. The allegation and description of an ‘essentially bad nature’ of man and of a seductive civilisation and the necessary domestication of youth (among others through strong public authorities, instruments of punishment and education) backs up two hypotheses: one about the alleged natural state of youth and society (as naturalisation, essential and eternal feature of being young, mythologisation), the other about the critical (threatened) condition of culture and civilisation.” Hafenecker, Benno (1995): *Jugendbilder. Zwischen Hoffnung, Kontrolle, Erziehung und Dialog*. Opladen: Leske und Budrich, p. 87.

Generation or hero

Two conceptualisations of youth centre around the creation of change: the concept of generation and the building of hero systems in nation-building processes.

With the concept of generation age-related groups are grouped together into a common *Zeitheimat*.²⁷ Hence the forming of generations goes along with the chronological structuration of social relations. “Belonging” to a social structure is determined by the belonging to a certain social time and its experiences. Generations have become particularly interesting as a structural construct since the acceleration of social time led to increasingly diverging realms of experience and horizons of expectation²⁸ – generations have become some kind of measuring instrument for societal progress and modernisation and thus for social transformation.

The concept of generation helps to collectively perceive historical transformations within a biographically limited period of time and to connect it to the generational renewal of society. Individual lifetime, generational time and historical time are since mutually related categories of historical experience, which are fundamental for the understanding and structuring of history. This also implies that there exist ‘specific experiential terms and thresholds for each generation, which – once institutionalised or passed – can bring about a common history’. Generations are not only a social fact because people view themselves as members of a generation, but because the concept of generation is used to interpret and order the experiences of social transformations in modern society. Generation is a basic historical concept, because it provides a collective category of finitude.²⁹

Thus concepts of generation³⁰ are meant to grasp social transformation as phenomenon of temporal acceleration. Furthermore these concepts altogether speak of the young generation without naming it.³¹ Hence, youth represents the dynamics of change and embodies a horizon of expectation, i.e. future or the starting off into another future, while at the same time a generation has the task of cultural accumulation and cultural creation which also comprises the gathering of experiences of former generations.³² It is anchoring these experiences in the present time and at the same time framing the unknown horizon of expectations. The young generations appear as agents of future, while their respective social images also have to incorporate the experiences of former generations.

²⁷ The term was used by the German author W.G. Sebald and was taken over by social science as an expression of a generational affiliation and sense, cf. Jureit, Ulrike (2006): *Generationenforschung*. [Research on Generations]. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht [u.a.] (Grundkurs neue Geschichte, 2856), p.7.

²⁸ “The idea of progress which has got to the heart by saying – if shortened – that old and new clash in the science, the arts, between countries and between status and classes, has become an everyday experience since the French Revolution. The generations lived in a common realm of experience, yet this was split open depending on the different perspectives of political generations and social positions. People knew since and still know they live in a period of transition, which scales experiences and expectations temporarily.” Koselleck, Reinhart (2003): *Vergangene Zukunft*. Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp (Suhrkamp-Taschenbuch Wissenschaft, 757), p. 367.

²⁹ Jureit, Ulrike (2006): *Generationenforschung*. [Research on Generations]. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht [u.a.] (Grundkurs neue Geschichte, 2856), p. 9.

³⁰ Above all I refer to the concept of generation by Karl Mannheim: *The Problem of Generations*. In Karl Mannheim (Ed.): *Essays on the sociology of knowledge*. With assistance of ed. by Paul Kecskemeti. Second impr. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul (International Library of sociology and social reconstruction), pp. 276–320.

³¹ Cf. for instance Niethammer, Lutz (2003): *Sind Generationen identisch?* In Jürgen Reulecke (Ed.): *Generationalität und Lebensgeschichte im 20. Jahrhundert*. With assistance of Elisabeth Müller-Luckner. München: Oldenbourg (58), pp. 1–16.

³² Mannheim, Karl (1959): *The Problem of Generations*. In Karl Mannheim (Ed.): *Essays on the sociology of knowledge*. With assistance of ed. by Paul Kecskemeti. Second impr. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul (International Library of sociology and social reconstruction), pp. 276–320, see esp. pp. 292.

Thus a generation carries both conditions of a temporary passage, the actual continuation as long as there is human reproduction and the infinity of a horizon, that moves even farther into the distance the more one tries to reach it, as well as a cyclical movement.³³ The former represents the finitude of youth as a period of transition, thus its own, imminent end, while the latter stands for the infinite repetition of the same in present time, where realm of experience and horizon of expectation converge without really colliding, so that the generational narrative runs the risk of ever repeating itself – youth is trapped within social times, as long as the agents are not able to crash the existing scope of experience, for a new horizon emerges only if that scope of experiences bursts.³⁴

Heroes generally are young and can only serve their duty while they are of young age. Mostly heroes die while they execute their duties and deeds. The hero, like youth, has to pass tests, an odyssey-like period of probation and the hero often is linked to a notion of sacrifice for a certain matter. So the hero as well as youth is connected to a certain place – a society – yet his agency is projected into another future of that place, which places him outside society. The hero is an outsider yet linked to the community through an ascribed function that will guarantee the continuity of that community. The core is a trip beyond the present condition towards a future 'somewhere else' led by a certain idea that is embodied by the hero or youth.³⁵

Conclusion

After reviewing different approaches to conceptualise youth and its conditions of entering adult society one has to state that the integration process is subject to rather strict restrictions of existing structures and institutions. Political participation of the young generation is thus – even stronger than for adult cohorts – determined by, for example, experiences of dissatisfaction, injustice, or exclusion, and by people's everyday routines and their social interdependencies. The relationship between youth and society becomes particularly sensible in times of social conflict and transformation, since the decision about which symbols, structures and institutions of the collective will be taken over to the new configuration of social and political life can result in strong generational conflicts. In such times, the youngsters are confronted with a situation in which they both carry the burden of embodying the future of society and have the chance to participate actively in the process

³³ Cf. Bilstein, Johannes (1996): Zur Metaphorik des Generationenverhältnisses. In: Eckart Liebau, Christoph Wulf (Eds.): *Generation. Versuche über eine pädagogisch-anthropologische Grundbedingung*. Weinheim: Dt. Studien-Verl. (Pädagogische Anthropologie, 3), pp. 157–189, on the metaphor of generation, who states that generation as a concept comprises three perspectives side by side: relationality, continuity and cyclicity – i.e. defining membership, structuring social time and the cycle of death-rebirth. Hence, generation is time and structure.

³⁴ Cf. Koselleck, Reinhart (2003): *Vergangene Zukunft. Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp (Suhrkamp-Taschenbuch Wissenschaft, 757), pp. 354. "An unsatisfied prophecy always had been repeatable. Even more so the error, that the non-compliance of such an expectation unmasked, turned into an evidence that the apocalyptic prophecy will come true the next time, with even greater probability. The iterative structure of apocalyptic expectations induced that contrasting experiences were immunised on the ground of this world. They attested ex post the opposite of what they at first seemed to have approved of. They were expectations that could not be outrun by obstructing experiences, because they reached beyond the world. ... From one unsatisfied expectation to the next passed generations, thus a revival of the apocalyptic prophecy was embedded into the natural cycle of the generations. Therefore the long-term earthly experiences of everyday life never clashed with those expectations that were related to the end of the world. The opposition of Christian expectations and earthly experiences were related to each other, yet could not refute each other. The eschatology hence was reproducible to that extent and as long as the realm of experience in this world did not fundamentally transformed." (p. 361)

³⁵ Lenzen, Dieter (1985): *Mythologie der Kindheit. Die Verewigung des Kindlichen in der Erwachsenenkultur; versteckte Bilder und vergessene Geschichten*. Reinbek: Rowohlt (Rowohlt's Enzyklopädie, 421), p. 300. He lists certain characteristics of an heroic story, that could be transferred to the stages of psychological development and characteristics of adolescence: e.g. apotheosis of the parents, being exposed to special threats, a specific power – omnipotence, the essential task to fight a 'monster' (= being an adult), which is coped with in several stages, one of which is symbolising some sort of 'rebirth' (e.g. as new member of society).

of shaping the new structures, still they have to make their way against the powers of persistence of the old.

With the development of a standard of youth, specific characteristics have been ascribed to the youth period, one of which being the ability to generate social change within the framework of progressive improvement. These standardisations set clear limits to the scope of action and development of the young generations, for they are at the same time viewed as carriers of a cultural heritage, which the members of a generation shall accumulate and transfer to the subsequent generations. A generational change, which naturally is underway, hence is understood as necessary feature of the continuation of society and consequently is a category of a social order, as it structures individual as well as social experiences and determines social membership. Generations, and as a rule young generations, are conceptualised as category of social action, particularly as initiators of renewal.

A new beginning is a critical point for any social structure, which primarily is wishing for stability and continuation beyond the present generation. Yet, every social structure inherently exists with a specific expectation towards its future. "Youth is the future of our society" is an articulation of such a, yet completely unspecified, expectation. It is open for any projection between the two poles 'danger for society' and 'chance of society'. Youth here is no longer a causal, functional concept but turns into a semantic conceptualisation within a system of meanings which structure a social system and provides it with sense, that legitimises the order and binds its members. One essential element of legitimation and membership commitment is the assurance of a predictable future existence for society. Still, future is not completely predictable or statistically deducible. In a temporal order of society future by nature is the unknown and not assignable. Hence, social structures produce an imagery that will repress the uncertainties the course of time indispensably implies, either through rituals, myths as in traditional societies or through mechanisms of controlling, such as images of modern youth.

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