

“The Generational Conflict and Electoral Vacuum in Weimar Middle Class”

This paper argues that the bourgeois youth movement enlarged the middle class generational cleavage, which in combination with features of the Weimar electoral system generated the electoral vacuum in middle-class politics. The established bourgeois parties attempted to create party affiliated youth organizations, yet overestimated their abilities to connect with the generation of the “Weimar youth” (Kohut 2012) Hence with young voters’ political attitudes shifting from political alienation towards political radicalization, the middle class voting pool was left with an electoral vacuum.

This paper will provide a synthesis of interdisciplinary views, by utilizing Kohut, Groening, and Wolschke’s psychohistorical analysis to argue for the repressive and imaginative nature of the bourgeois youth movement and the sensitive, fragile, idealistic youth coming out of it. Psychohistory, as a branch of history of the everyday life, studies the many instead of the mass, seeks to account for society’s self-defense in face of political and economic turbulences. “It is time to lay at rest the idea that psychoanalytic explanations are necessarily uncausal or that they are inherently incompatible with quantitative data.”(Loewenberg 1971) Especially in discussion of the German Youth Movements, from the prototypical and pre-war *Wandervögel* to the radicalized and post-war circle of *White Knight*, it is important to underline their nature as imagined communities. Further in the paper the readers will see that the German Youth Movements were complex entities with internal ideological and structural divisions, yet held together by shared experience. Political or economic theories render futile in the case of German Youth Movements, which could only be approached as an embedded societal organization.

Hence this paper introduces Mannheim's concept of "generation units", which classifies the many not by economic or political groupings, but by "participation in the common destiny of the historical and social unit" (Mannheim 1952)

"Youth experiencing the same concrete historical problems may be said to be part of the same actual generation while those groups within the same actual generation which work up the material of their common experiences in different specific ways, constitute generation units ... These are characterized by the fact that they do not merely involve a loose participation by a number of individuals in a pattern of events shared by all alike though interpreted by the different individuals differently, but an identity of responses, a certain affinity in the way in which all move with and are formed by their common experiences." (Mannheim 1952)

This paper will move on to argue that the Weimar Youth generation coming out of the youth movements sought alternative way of self-assertion, by presenting statistics on suicide rates and discussions on Weimar youth suicide notes by Föllmer. Following the societal and aspect of this paper is political discussion on the nature of parliamentary democracy and specific features of the Weimar electoral system, which provided the Weimar youth with more electoral weights. Finally, this essay will present the generational conflict in play with electoral vacuum of bourgeois parties, as observed by Berman, Jones and Retallack.

The political attitude of the German middle class in the nineteen-twenties was essentially constant endeavour to answer the question: How exactly was Germany to be saved? Besides isolated "islands" of democracy, "in their majority the middle classes were opposed to the

Weimar Republic..... when the National Socialists were still only a small splinter party in the Reichstag they already topped the poll in many universities, and in some they had an absolute majority.” (Laqueur 1984) Under the anti-democratic political culture, the bourgeois youth movements also repressed the proper processing of the disorientation and disillusionment due to “the loss of parents as admirable figures” (Kohut 2012). In his book, Kohut takes Mannheim’s generational model and focuses on the “Weimar-youth generation”, born between 1900 and 1915, whose entire adolescence was defined by Germany’s defeat in the war, the unbearable financial and emotional burden of the Versailles Treaty, and the disorder and disillusionment of Weimar Republic, all of which in stark contrast to their childhood spent on homefront. In analyzing his interview of 85 Weimar-youths, Kohut argues that although memory processing oftentimes involves an idealization of the childhood and youth, yet in the case of his interviewees, “the idealization seemed extreme.” (Kohut 2012) The impact of idealization can best be explained by the following quote from Leslie Paul.

“... In the orderly sort of world in which this could happen, parental wisdom, the authority of the experienced, and the established air of things were inevitably accepted by the rising generation ... Recapitulation of the experience of the previous generation provides no handle to the usurping generation to grasp the world they have to live in, and there comes the inevitable cry for freedom, for the right of youth to its own experiences and values. Mixed with much romanticism and delight in purely physical experience this forms the basis upon which the Youth Movement was built.” (Paul 1951)

Moreover, Peukert considers that a cultural crisis emerged in relation to the financial and political crisis that Weimar Germany faced after 1918. “It seemed to Germans that there was no sure path leading out of this all-embracing crisis.” The psychological state of the Weimar Youth can be best described by the statue, “Sitzender Jüngling” by Wilhelm Lehmbruck. As a response, the bourgeois youth movements averted attention to construct an idealized community, attempting to reconstruct the experience of a stable and strong authority, inside its elitist circle. Similar to the *Wandervögel* youth movement, which originated before the first World War, the *Bünde* youth movements in the nineteen-twenties were also critical towards the performance of the older generation and eager to define their own experiences. However, the former provides more individualistic freedom in the form of physical activities because the *Wandervögel* never raised up the bandwagon to change the world, partially because both the radical left (*Frei Deutsche*) and the radical right (*Junge Deutsche Bund*) of the German youth movement couldn't properly function inside existing political agenda of the Communists and the German People's Party. Group activities such as singing, hiking, and political discussions were used in pre-first World War youth movements as devices to build an idealized community and above all, to rebuild sense of belonging, security and guidance under an authority. Hiking specifically, argues Groening and Wolschke, possesses a religious attitude towards Nature, which was viewed as a sphere “free from politics” (Groening and Wolschke, 1985)

After the first world war, both the structure and aspiration of youth movement changed. The *Bünde* youth movements were no longer satisfied with the physical release from hiking out of reality, they wanted to change the status quo. In order to do that, the Bund created by Voelkel put more stress onto the collective as opposed to the individual, stricter disciplines replaced loose

structure, and most importantly, “it was envisaged as an all-embracing bond making total demands upon the individual for the rest of his life.” (Laqueur 1984) In other words, the Bünde are authoritarian with division into smaller age groups: *Jungenschaft* (up to about 17 years), *Jungmannschaft* (between 17 to 25 years old), the *Mannschaft* (for members above 25). Most noteworthy is the *Jungmannschaft*, which combined youth movement activities with active citizenship education, supplemented by voluntary labor camps, which was later taken by National Socialists as a model crucial to the building of the Volksgemeinschaft.

The idealization of authority within the youth movement also takes in the form of high expectation from the Weimar Youth Generation, towards themselves. As Föllmer declares, the bourgeois youth have “internalized the Social Darwinist view of life” (Föllmer 2009). However, they are “sensitive, weak, and idealistic” outside the youth movement community. They experienced difficulties of cooperating the “pure” elements of Youth movements with humanly desires and searched for expression of the inner conflicts. Sometimes in radical forms, such expression come in the form of suicide notes. Wilhelm Hagemann, a seventeen-year old bourgeois Youth writes in his death note: “Certainly, it may continue like this for a while but then, disappointments would come; I would be unable to maintain myself in the struggle of life and all hopes and expectations were void.” (Föllmer 2009) The disappointment towards oneself, as revealed in such suicide notes, often developed into guilt and shame towards an imagined, idealized and nationalistic public authority. “I am becoming weak and I must not! I have to be strong and now draw the consequences!” (Föllmer 2009)

The other side of high expectation towards the youth's self is the demand of strong public institutions. The Youth generation, however, was deeply disappointed by the powerlessness of Weimar democracy in post-war negotiations and the following hyperinflation in 1918 to 1924. The Youth generation associated systematic failure with the older generation and loathed upon it. "So we ridiculed democracy, because we were used to something different from our parents, because our parents were used to something different -- to discipline, not a free-for-all in the Reichstag." The youth was also dissatisfied towards the lack of a strong governmental presence in their life, as one of the interviewees of Kohut specifically mentioned that the Weimar republic's flag never flew above his primary school. The cleavage between youth's identity, based on an idealized strong public authority, and the youth's loath towards the older generation leads to the political alienation of the Weimar parliamentary democracy. Such political alienation can best be seen in the silent film "Menschen am Sonntag", produced in 1930, in which the male protagonist habitually read the gossip news first, while ignoring the political news on front page. Eugene and James described the youth's negligence towards politics as "fundamental incompatibility between Bunds and the party".(Jones Eugene and Retallack James 1992) Indeed, party-affiliated youth organizations boomed in the late 1920s, yet their failures in promoting party agenda and attracting younger voters were not the only reason of a shift of electoral behavior between the Weimar Youth and the Wilhelmian Youth. It was not the poor design of party-affiliated youth groups that disconnected themselves and party membership. Rather, the existing generational cleavage within the middle class, as argued before, was already too big to be fixed.

This paper now turns to broader background that connected generational cleavage and an electoral vacuum within the middle class. The drop in legal voting age from twenty-five to twenty years old provided the Weimar youth more electoral weights and by 1930, a half of the electorate is comprised of the Weimar youth generation. As written by Jones and Retallack. “The generation shaped by democracy dug the grave of democracy.” (Jones Eugene and Retallack James 1992) The political alienation of Weimar Youth formed an electorate base, that the established bourgeois parties found hard to connect with. Along the same line, the attempt to introduce a bourgeois youth generation, whose entire adolescent experience was shaped by youth movements in Nature and a constructed community, and more importantly, who yearned for the presence of a strong authority, into the already trembling bourgeoisie established parties’ electoral base proved to maximize the conflicts between two generations.

What’s more, the sudden emergence of special-interest parties campaigning merely for seats instead of dominance in the new parliament caught the established parties in surprise. Already in the mid 1920s, a broader collapse of a German national electorate emerged, as argued by Jones and Retallack. Yet the bourgeois parties were slow to adjust to the change of role in power dynamics inside Parliament. Still lamenting for being sidelined to political periphery by the Social Democrats, they overlooked the development of the Weimar Youth and the adversity the new generation gained towards the old system. Berman argues, that “as the bourgeois parties stumbled, their natural constituencies were left unorganized, and many of their natural activists found themselves adrift and in search of alternative ways to become involved in public affairs.”(Berman 1997) The younger left the electoral affiliation of their parents behind and shifted to political polarization.

The generational cleavage found its outlet in the Weimar system of proportional representation. In simple terms, every vote counted, in comparison to the Imperial system of elections in which roundups were possible and party-lists were not introduced. Moreover, the proportional representation system “meant that votes and voters were further removed from those for whom they were voting” and that “voting became an expression of concern, protest, interest, or anger rather than careful calculations as to who actually might be elected to represent a particular district.” (Jones Eugene and Retallack James 1992) Anti-establishment votes appeared, at the same time as the electoral shift that broke the hope of a “Volkspartei” that could “replace the “divisive” and “unrepresentative” parties of the Wilhelmine era”(Berman 1997) and of capability to unite the country’s bourgeois class. The dream of a united bourgeois electoral front was on the one hand shattered by the increasing political apathy and polarization of the youth, on the other hand was hindered by the inefficacy of bourgeois party affiliated youth groups, which found themselves competing with already active youth groups such as “Wandervögel”. By 1930 virtually all party affiliated youth groups, especially in the bourgeois political realm, died down, as argued by Jones and Retallack. The Reichstag of 1928 proved 10% of bourgeois electorates casting empty ballots. The situation deteriorated in 1930, with the youth generation polarizing to vote for NSDAP, leaving an electoral vacuum in the Bourgeois established parties, unable to battle with the upsurge of the radical national socialism.

In conclusion, this paper has provided a different approach from the “top-down” analysis of the President cabinets’ policies to destruct Weimar-Democracy, by arguing that the electoral vacuum of the middle class electorates is caused by the development of the Youth movements and the youth coming out of it. Moreover, the generational conflict came into play especially

from 1928 to 1930, in which the Weimar Youth Generation came into age to vote. In combination with changes and new rules of the Weimar electoral system, the generational gap evolved into the electoral vacuum of middle class, once the hope of a unified political power against the radical left and right.(Berman 1997).

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