

German youth report finds increasing social polarization

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The 16th Shell Youth Study, published in mid-September, notes that upper and lower class social layers in Germany are drifting ever further apart. The pressure for performance in schools, universities, training and workplaces has increased due to the economic crisis. At the same time the report registers a growth in opposition by young people to capitalism and its representatives in government, big business and the banks.

In a press release for the report, headed “Youth defy the financial and economic crisis”, the authors stressed that most youth today remain confident about their prospects in Germany. The media pounced on this point, although a careful study of the 400-page report reveals a much more differentiated picture.

The study was written by two sociology professors and an expert team from the Munich-based research institute TNS Infratest Social Research. Over 2,600 young people between the ages of 12 to 25 years were questioned in January and February this year.

The summary of the report begins by dealing with the results of the study regarding the prospects of young people, which indicates that 59 percent of all young people view their future with confidence. This represents an increase compared to the results of the last study undertaken four years earlier.

However, when it comes to young people from socially disadvantaged families the report comes to very different conclusions. In this group just one third express their confidence about the future and the gap has widened in this respect between upper and lower class social layers since the last study. The same social gulf is revealed in response to a question about satisfaction with the quality of life. Nearly three-quarters of all those questioned declared they were content with their quality of life (upper class layers 84 percent), while only 40 percent of young people from underprivileged conditions responded positively.

Certain limitations in the report based on the premises laid down by the authors, which in turn reflect specific political

and social criteria, must be taken into account when interpreting the data.

The authors acknowledge, for example, that their study tends to under-represent socially disadvantaged layers of youth. The report estimates that between 10-15 percent of all youth are socially disadvantaged. Other studies based on purely financial criteria, however, estimate that a quarter of all youth under 18 years grow up in poverty. The poverty line is based on the international criterion of less than 60 percent of the median income of the respective country.

A somewhat uncritical attitude to empirical and statistic data is also reflected in the report's treatment of unemployment. One of the most frequently recorded fears on the part of the young person is the fear of losing her or his job, or being unable to find work or an apprenticeship in the first place. The authors of the report play down this fear and conclude that the “material threat of being affected by youth unemployment is far less than the widespread concern among all youth”.

Other studies indicate that the fears of unemployment on the part of youth are very real. A recent study by the German Youth Institute reveals that four years after leaving school, one quarter of all youth remain without an apprenticeship or training place.

Age is also a consideration that has to be taken into account with 12-year-olds, who still have at least four years schooling before them, expressing much more confidence in their future prospects than unemployed 25-year-olds. Here again the report reveals that age and social status play an important role. Among high school students, 86 percent express a positive attitude towards their prospects, but this figure sinks to one-third for unemployed youth.

The authors of the report describe school education as a key to success and conclude based on their survey data: “Education thus continues to be socially inherited in Germany”. The pressure on young people is increasing. Over half of all secondary school pupils aim for a higher qualification as the main graduation diploma. A third of junior high school students seek a graduation that will allow

them to go on to university. The study also confirms that pressure to succeed is also increasing among youth from better situated families and backgrounds.

The study goes on to comment that socially deprived young persons, whose numbers are set to increase in the future, tend to be “left behind”, but for more privileged upper social layers a school certificate or graduation is also insufficient in today’s society to ensure a satisfactory job and career. The study declares, “The notion that it will be possible to find something without an appropriate plan is foreign to young people today. As time passes nothing will be found—this is the conclusion drawn by youth”.

Political and social interests

The report notes a slight increase in the number of those expressing political interests, to 37 percent; in 2002 the rate was reported at 30 percent, and in 2006 stood at 35 percent. Most youth declare they are interested in leftist or center-type politics with interest increasing with age, education and social status. Two-thirds of all university students describe themselves as politically interested. This figure has remained constant. The increase in political interest during the past eight years is to be found amongst 12- to 14-year-olds, where the rate has nearly doubled. For the 15 to 17 age category it increased from 20 percent to 33 percent.

The study makes clear that there is growing rejection of official institutions on the part of youth. When asked about their confidence in a range of public institutions youth allotted their lowest evaluations to the government, the churches, large enterprises, political parties and the banks.

The authors quote the 21-year-old Nhung, who is undertaking training in Berlin: “We were always told that capitalism is good. But now we notice suddenly that somehow everything is breaking down”. Nhung is convinced that “at some time the system will simply collapse” under conditions where war, social injustice and discrimination prevail everywhere one looks.

It is evident that many young people think the same. The 12- to 25-year-olds questioned expressed their social and political interest, in particular for the needs of young people, the socially deprived, their concern for more harmonious relations with immigrant workers and their families and declared their solidarity for those living in poorer countries.

In conclusion, the authors write that the ruling elite is being observed critically by young people from all social layers. “What you do and what you do not do is being judged just as skeptically by those in the upper class as in

the lower social layers”. The report notes that youth are willing to become politically active: “Three-quarters of all young people from lower social layers declared ‘they wanted to do something about what is wrongly taking place in society and in the sphere of employment’”.

Unlike some years ago, globalization is no longer regarded predominantly to be a negative development. Eighty-four percent of youth connect it with the ability to travel, study or work anywhere in the world. Attitudes to globalization are relatively independent of the degree of education. The minority who continue to oppose globalization associate it with environmental damage, unemployment, poverty and underdevelopment.

One topic of particular concern for young people is climate change, with three-quarters of those questioned declaring it to be a considerable or even very large problem. Two-thirds of young people regard climate change as a threat to the continued existence of mankind.

There is also increasing opposition amongst youth to the international missions conducted by the German army, in particular its deployment in Afghanistan. Eight years ago, 46 percent expressed their support for foreign deployments by the German army, with 29 percent against. Now this relation has been reversed. Only 37 percent favor such operations with 53 percent opposed.

All in all the study provides important information about the views held by young people in today’s society. Social polarization is increasing and is matched by a growing interest and commitment in social and political affairs. At the same time a majority of young people hold an increasingly negative view of the government and established parties. New, fierce social and political confrontations are inevitable.



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