

Conference: "Blackbox Youth. New Perspectives on East-European Youth Cultures"

(Berlin, 02.-03. November 2012)

Please submit an abstract of no more than 300 words together with a short CV before February 15, 2012, for consideration to Heike Winkel (hwinkel@zedat.fu-berlin.de) or Matthias Schwartz (schwartz@zedat.fu-berlin.de).

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Call for Papers

Organization: Heike Winkel (Freie Universität Berlin, Peter Szondi Institute of Comparative Literature) and Matthias Schwartz (Freie Universität Berlin, Institute for East-European Studies)

The youth are in great demand, for they symbolize the future of society, and that future is constantly up for debate. The political potential of young people became apparent once again during the revolutions in the Arab world, all of which were greatly shaped by young activists. As a result, we are witnessing a repeat of the scenario familiar from the uprisings that occurred throughout Eastern Europe during the last decade. The "Orange Revolution" in Ukraine awakened hopes both in its Eastern European neighbors and in the West of a political turning point initiated by the young generation in the country. This event led to a debate about the social-political role of young people. The relevance of this debate to the present-day is confirmed by the events in the Arab world and the latest protests in Russia. The trajectory of the discussion reveals both a social need to project collective wishes onto a society's young people and societies' obvious helplessness when it comes to critically reflecting on the disappointment stemming from the exaggerated expectations.

We see this as a sign of a far-reaching epistemological problem. It seems that the established concept of "the youth", as it crystallized at the end of the 19th century, is no longer suited to adequately describing the role of young people in the current post-industrial and globalized society. The planned conference therefore asks whether the study of literature, and other academic disciplines, have too long maintained an anachronistic definition of the youth and have failed to re-examine the category's premise. We aim to initiate an open-ended and unbiased discussion of quintessential developments, results and discourses that are central to the youth cultures in Eastern European countries, in order to examine the expectations that are linked with the idea of young people. The discussion could lead to a fundamental revision of the concept of the youth or, conversely, demonstrate that the concept is no longer viable. It may turn out to be possible to use the example of Eastern Europe to show that adolescence is a specific socially, politically and culturally defined phase of a person's life that is beginning to disappear in the globalized world of the 21st century.

If we take a look at the perception of the youth in Eastern Europe that has so far been prevalent in the media and academia, we can see that this concept proves to be extremely inconsistent. After the

collapse of the socialist societies in the region, many hoped that the young people would complete the political transformation into a better world for which their parents had fought. When this “generational transformation” failed to happen, various stereotypes emerged. On the one hand, there existed the cliché of the completely disillusioned youth, frozen in apathy, like the proverbial Polish “Generation Nothing” of those who grew up after the fall of Communism. On the other hand, there existed the fear, expressed with an attitude of cultural criticism, that the young people might become politically radicalized due to the lack of socio-political opportunities and be caught up in ideologically easily manipulated movements, such as the youth organization “Our Own” (Svoi) controlled by the Kremlin in Russia or the right-wing extremist “Garde” in Hungary.

When attempting to describe the lack of illusions about politics, on the one hand, and ideological delusion on the other, both journalism and academia often work with supposedly well-established knowledge about the youth as a descriptive category. In particular, the term “generation” functions as a sign that is very popular among the media while simultaneously scientifically highly problematic, as it tends to interpret unique phenomena as symptomatic expressions of an entire age cohort, in order to be able to construct an unambiguous social and cultural identity based on historical experiences and events. Within the context of Eastern European transformation societies, with their rapid changes in values and experiences, this operation leads to the construction of ever newer youth generations whose believed sequence is meant to illustrate social change or, on the contrary, leads to all Eastern European youth cultures since 1989 being subsumed under the general umbrella of one political concept of generation. Yet it is precisely such uniform generational experiences as the foundation of youth identity that are being called into question in post-socialist globalized societies. A historicizing of the concept of generation, which could lead out of the terminological crisis, has so far never advanced beyond a few initial attempts.

Calling the entire generation model into question also results in problematizing the category of “youth”. It is noticeable that many behavior and action patterns of young people in Eastern Europe can no longer be described as specifically youthful, such as in terms of rebellion against one’s parents or as an escape from a state-sanctioned establishment. Instead, Eastern European young people appear to be seamlessly adopting the cultural value concepts and the social habitus of the adults who were disappointed by the transformation. In academic research, scholars even speak of a historic inversion of the roles in this context. The youth thereby become equivalent to a conceptual black box whose output does not seem to correspond to any of the aspirations assigned by cultural theory and social science to them or any of the anthropological characteristics developed for them.

The goal of the planned conference is to overcome this methodological and conceptual “black box”. In order to do so, we would like to conduct a discussion in four interdisciplinary sections on parameters that are generally constitutive for the concept of the youth and that have – according to our thesis – changed considerably over the last twenty years. This discussion may enable us to question the explanatory potential of established models and to actively find constructivist approaches to defining the concept of the youth.

Section 1: The Redefinition of the Political. In the past, the political potential of young people was usually perceived in their uncompromising idealism. Young people seemed to represent clear, usually “progressive” ideological positions and joined clearly defined political factions. Today, however, young people realize their social engagement far outside of the established structures and ideological programs of their parents. For this section, we are looking for contributions that deal with the new politicization patterns of young people without immediately paternalistically infantilizing these as naive

or backwards. Which designs for political ways of existing can be found, for example, in the literary works of young authors and in alternative youth cultures today? Which locally and transnationally shaped realms of experience serve as the foundation for this socio-political engagement among young people? How are social structures and strategies interpreted as alternative forms of expression of the political, or can these structures and strategies even still be called “political”? We are especially interested in seemingly contradictory, irritating behavior patterns and actions of young activists, for example, the appropriation of both soviet as well as national socialist symbolism by the Russian “National Bolsheviks” or the global linking and professionalization of the Serbian activist group “Otpor” as an advisory institution for social transformations.

Section 2: The Revision of the Social. A redefinition of the political also requires revising the definition of the social. The finding that supposedly apolitical lethargy, passivity and stark consumption exist among the majority of young people rests on a conservative understanding of the *societas*, which fails to recognize new forms of social organization, social belonging and societal participation. In this regard, we are particularly interested in contributions that deal with every-day culture and social engagement as seen from cultural theoretical, ethnological and everyday historical perspectives. How do new networks, such as online via Facebook, Live-Journal and Twitter, shape social communication? How do new forms of emotional communality emerge and are these really basically different from the adolescent subcultures of the 1960s, '70s and '80s? Are today's micro-collectives less demanding than their rebellious predecessors? Or does social-critical potential coexist with the consumption-oriented lifestyle?

Section 3: The Transformation of the Imaginary. Closely linked to the question on the social conditions of young people's engagement is the question regarding the functioning of the imaginary. The ability commonly ascribed to young people to believe in the realization of utopias, to develop visions of the future and to project new lifestyles, seems to have made way for a sober pragmatism or has been ideologically corrupted. But what does the disappearance of the utopian mean for the concept of “the youth”? In this section, we are looking for contributions that explore the functions and transformations of the imaginary, especially from the perspectives of cultural and literary theory. What happens to the collective imaginary when young people access global pop cultures, fashions and trends through their communication-based social networks and adapt them to their own everyday lives? Do these adaptations exist only through the passive, non-critical consumption of predefined image worlds, or are new complex systems of symbolic recognition created from them? If young people no longer claim a universal validity for their political, cultural and artistic practice, does that mean that their goals, wishes and expectations focus purely on the private? Or can an imaginary be identified that exists outside of the traditional idealistic ideas but nonetheless serves to shape the future?

Section 4: The Concept of the Youth. This section brings together contributions that examine to what extent the reassessment of the youth as a cultural ideal, social factor and political force leads to new opportunities for the conceptual renewal of the concept of “the youth”. Do the established categories suffice to make adolescence describable, or do we need new parameters? This epistemological problem provides opportunities for the discussion of future possibilities for young people's engagement as cultural practice in a globalized world: How is the role of “the youth” shaped – in Eastern Europe as well as in other regions – not only in phases of social transformation or crisis-based change, but particularly in periods of relative continuity and stability? What type of self-image do young people form in relation to their age, what social expectations are projected onto them, and how do these interact?

Proposals for papers are invited from those working in Literature, Cultural Studies, Area Studies Eastern Europe, Everyday History, Ethnology, the Social Sciences and Political Science. All papers will be circulated before the conference to leave ample room for discussion among its 20-25 participants. The conference will be held in Berlin from 2.-3. November 2012. Depending on conference funding, we may be able to cover costs for travel and accommodation. The conference language will be English. A publication of the papers is planned. Please submit an abstract of no more than 300 words together with a short CV before February 15, 2012, for consideration to Heike Winkel (hwinkel@zedat.fu-berlin.de) or Matthias Schwartz (schwartz@zedat.fu-berlin.de).

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