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### No Such Thing as Opting Out:<sup>1</sup> The Quest for Autonomy and the Use of Media amongst Young People in Austria

When children turn into adolescents, they sometimes become almost unrecognizable even to their nearest and dearest. As well as undergoing profound physical changes as puberty sets in, boys and girls seem, more or less of their own volition, to engage in a radical overhaul of their views, personal characteristics, habits, interests, and aversions – in short, of their whole personality. Psychoanalytical theory began<sup>2</sup> to focus on these phenomena at a very early stage. Anna Freud (1936, 113) described the onset of sexual maturity and the actualization of infantile conflicts associated with it as disrupting a hard-won psychological equilibrium and causing young people to focus their whole existence in a single direction – namely, preoccupation with their own, now profoundly uncertain, personality. As part of this preoccupation, young people, in a process of interchange with others, tackle the central theme of sexual and social identity (see the concept of identity in Erikson 1959).

The search for, and struggle to achieve, an 'adult' form of identity never takes place in an entirely smooth, or even rational, way; as a rule, it is accompanied by a host of internal and external conflicts. These conflicts are triggered, amongst other things, by a hugely powerful, sometimes grotesque, need on the part of young people to assert their independence, otherness, and autonomy. Very frequently, they come into violent conflict with parental and educational authorities. Blos (1962, 239) attributes considerable significance to what he describes as the 'escape into an extra-familial subculture': 'This distancing from the noxious parental stimulus, and the fact of being exposed to an environment that offers a positive identificatory potential, often re-triggers a progressive development that has almost come

<sup>1</sup> 'I too know that withdrawal from society is an impossibility': Ingeborg Bachmann, speech on the occasion of the presentation of the Association of War-Blind Prize for the Best Radio-Play, 1959.

to a standstill.' From a psychoanalytical point of view, the creation of subcultures and youth scenes, and also 'immersion' in these, thus fulfils a specific structuring function – to which we shall devote particular attention in the following pages.<sup>2</sup>

One much-utilized and highly diversified domain within youth-specific subcultures is that of media products. Peer groups define themselves to a not-insignificant degree by the music their members like, the videos and films they watch, and the style of dress which most of them favour. In the second part of this paper, we shall present current statistics on the use of various media-products by young people in Austria, and comment on these against the background of psychoanalytical concepts relating to adolescence.

#### Enforced Autonomy and Voluntary Dependence: The Contradictions of Adolescence

For some time now, reflection on, research into, and literature about, 'puberty' and 'adolescence' have been undergoing a noticeable 'revamp'. The conviction that development into a particular personality takes place within an increasingly intelligible social reality, which Erikson still unequivocally placed at the heart of his concept of identity (1959, 107), has quite clearly given way to cautious, 'pros-and-cons' or multi-viewpoint reflections and formulations. This phenomenon has to be viewed to some extent (admittedly a minor one) against the background of a theoretical refinement and further development of psychoanalytical concepts.<sup>3</sup> However, the far greater share of responsibility for the changed picture of adolescence conveyed in scholarly publications must in all probability be attributed to a reaction to radically changed social conditions. Recent publications thus take on board

<sup>2</sup> We owe the inspiration for a number of the ideas expressed here to Ms V. Gartner and Ms N. Feldsmann.

<sup>3</sup> The concept of 'identity' in particular has come in for controversial debate (mainly as part of a move to establish a critical distance with Erikson) and has here and there been replaced by concepts based on 'patchwork identities'. (On discussions of this kind, on criticism of, and objections to, these kinds of concepts, see Darmstädter and Mey 1998.)

the notion – long since part and parcel of everyday consciousness – that growing-up ‘isn’t what it used to be’.<sup>4</sup> The more recent findings of modern sociology also confirm the everyday impression that it is not just *individual* aspects of socio-cultural conditions that have changed, but that all the framework conditions of society are subject to the dictate of permanent changefulness, and that individuals may therefore have new requirements made of them at any time (see the interpretation of ‘new capitalism’ in Sennett 1998). The reality of increasingly heterogeneous life-histories and the less and less transparent nature of affiliation to social groups are also reflected in specialist psychoanalytical/educational literature: a striking feature of recent publications on developmental theory, for example, is their marked reluctance to assume the existence of *clearly defined*, concrete trends and tasks in development. Instead, there is greater emphasis on the importance of the way in which multifarious psycho-social contradictions and cultural antagonisms are shaped (Bohleber 1996).

The idea of seeing adolescence as a process determined by a shifting balance of contradictory intentions, feelings, and actions, is not something that has come up for discussion only in the last twenty years. Blos (1962, 129) remarked that ‘the inclination to preserve the privileges of childhood but at the same time lay claim to adult prerogatives’ should be viewed almost as ‘a synonym for adolescence itself’. In the literature, this ‘condition’ is associated with the following psycho-dynamic features. During adolescence, the person growing up experiences a shift away (both emotionally and in real terms) from the family. The relinquishing of primary objects of affection goes hand in hand with a weakening of childish identifications and super-ego structures, resulting in the paradox described above. On the one hand, the parents, their attitudes, and their authority are criticized, denigrated, and attacked, and in this sense, the young person claims ‘adult rights’ to ‘an opinion of his or her own’. On the other hand, a developmental step of this kind entails a high degree of personal uncertainty, which is reflected – particularly in early adolescence – in what are sometimes very regressive

<sup>4</sup> This nostalgic and essentially pessimistic undertone is perpetuated above all in ‘popular science’ texts.

tendencies. Young people's readiness to conform within their peer groups is one of these tendencies, promising as it does support and safety. In this sense, the difficult life-situation in which (early) adolescents find themselves may be seen as a complex kind of 'stalemate'. The emphatic severance from dependencies and conventions already bears within it, *in nuce*, the tendency to subjection to the next set of rules, styles, and rituals. In general, however, it is ultimately the progressive parts, geared to separation and independence, that predominate: young people do, after all, eventually turn into adults.

Simply on the strength of these few remarks, which themselves are based on classical positions, it would be unjustified and precipitate to assume that authors such as Anna Freud, Erikson, or Blos failed to give an adequate description of the way in which adult autonomy evolves. On the contrary: they gave what are acknowledged to be fully elaborated theoretical accounts, based on instinct-theory and ego-psychology, of the imbalance between, on the one hand, phantasized omnipotence and independence, and, on the other, continuing dependence. That said, 'autonomy' does not always mean the same thing. 'The psychologically operative supply-and-demand structure of a society thus also largely determines the course of adolescence in a given society. If it changes, the use-value and exchange-value of particular attitudes also change' (Gottschalch 1992, 93). In the context of diminishing social predictability, certain individual characteristics decline in importance, whilst others acquire vital significance for adolescents. These latter include: independence, individuality, relative freedom from ties, and flexibility. What is distinctive about the present uncertainty, as Sennett says, is the fact that it is not linked to an imminent historical catastrophe, but is bound up with the everyday practices of a flourishing capitalism. Instability, he says, is normal (Sennett 1998, 38).

It seems obvious that growing up in the socio-cultural conditions described will render the contrast between the 'private' world of the family of origin and the 'public' domain of culture even more acute. 'During adolescence, the individual has to complete the transition from family to culture, and it is also in this phase that one sees the emergence of the antagonistic configuration between family and culture that is as important for the structuring

of the psyche as the Oedipal conflict is in childhood' (Erdheim 1992, 24). Linking in with late Freudian theories of culture, Erdheim sees the family as the locus of growth, safekeeping, and intimacy, whereas culture fulfils functions such as innovation, revolution, and rationality. Erdheim repeatedly stresses that antagonism between family and culture represents a constructive and indispensable clash: 'The antagonism between these two orders takes the ambivalence a step further. Whilst ambivalence is necessary for consolidating our autonomy, because it prevents fixations, antagonism forces us to keep our minds alive. Antagonism creates the objective and subjective, the external and internal space in which adolescence can fulfil itself' (Erdheim 1992, 26).

However, there are indications that enduring this antagonism, indeed allowing it to unfold, is not becoming any easier. Extended education and training are delaying actual separation from the parental home for longer and longer. At the same time, the boundaries between the generations – which three decades ago essentially represented insurmountable cultural barriers – are becoming ever more blurred. Parents and teachers are sporting the symbols of a demonstrative 'youthfulness' (until well into old age) (Finger-Trescher 1997, 214); at the same time, the parental generation is not providing the same degree of guidance and (practical) authority. In times of constant change, parents too have continually to learn new things – not infrequently from their own children (Krebs 1997, 127). The efforts to secure autonomy typical of adolescence not only appear logical against this social background; they are actually strongly encouraged by it. Of course, this does not of itself prove to what extent such forms of autonomy are always sought after by young people, or how far they express a reaction to demands which young people feel they have been left to cope with alone. Proliferation of life-styles is thus a two-edged sword: 'Individualization is not only a freedom; it also represents a demand on the individual. Developing individuality is a requirement imposed by society on its individual members' (Wirth 1998, 54).

For young people pulled, on the one hand, towards regressive sealing-off in imagined family safekeeping and, on the other, individuality, up to and including isolation and overstrain, the peer group acquires ever-greater

importance. It offers space in which to try out separation from the family of origin. As we shall see, the choice and use of all kinds of media-products play an important role here.

### Designer-label Jeans, Soap Operas, and Videos: On the Travails and Perils of the 'Fun Generation'

Once Kevin Arnold has his first half-day at his new school behind him, he knows that 'What you are doesn't depend on who you are, but on what group you belong to.' There must be few media-products that depict the transition from childhood to adolescence in so charming and yet – overall – so serious a fashion as the American television series *Wonder Years*. The continuing commercial success of the series is probably also an indication of the extent to which the authors and producers have managed to strike the right chords with their world-wide audience. Adolescents depend on peer groups for support and guidance. Although the range of groups, scenes, and cliques from which a young person can choose has grown continually over the last few decades, peer-group significance is not an 'achievement' of our own age. What a glance (even a cursory one) at current Austrian studies such as that by Integral (1997) or Parschalk (1998) does show, however, is that, as compared with earlier years, peer-group affinity amongst young people is coming to be determined less and less by environment of origin and more and more by consumer-related and market-related conditions. 'What shapes present-day youth cultures and scenes is no longer the ties between young people's life-styles and the "parent culture" specific to their origin, but fashion-related, eclectic collages of styles to which all have access as postmodern, identity-determining reference-points. Ties to milieu have been replaced by ties to the market' (Vogelgesang 1997, 272 ff.). The term 'style' in this context means a 'specific form of self-projection and group-projection' (ibid.). On this view, groups of young people very often – probably almost always – evolve externally perceptible, aestheticized and ritualized forms through which to demarcate themselves not only from other groups, but also, and above all, from adults and their institutions.

The statistics collected on young people in Austria confirm this picture. Children (11- to 14-year-olds) are very keen to acquire articles that are an expression of their particular life-style (and that of their peer group) – and they are financially increasingly in a position to do this. In the study by Parschalk (1998), which is based on, amongst other things, interviews with Austrian children, stress is laid on the fact that youth fashion (as a means of cultural demarcation) is not confined to the acquisition of clothes and other accessories, but is closely bound up with preferences in music, linguistic idiosyncracies, leisure activities, choice of idols and stars, and even special eating habits (Parschalk 1998, 37). This claim is even more plausible when one considers just how intermeshed the form and content of the various types of media and sectors of the market have become today. The song used in a television advertisement may, for example, appear in the hit parade; the video of the hit-song shows the lead singer in clothes made by a clothing company whose own television advertisement, broadcast all over the country, features a catchy tune, and so on.

This cameo from the present-day situation of young people is enough to show how difficult it is to give a clear-cut picture of the antagonism between family and culture described by Erdheim: peer groups, whose psycho-social function consists in, amongst other things, experimenting with separation from the parental generation, form around, and identify themselves through, specific usages of consumer goods and media-products. To this extent, media are not just 'component parts' of peer groups; they help initiate and shape them. Thus, there are peer groups in which the current series of a particular television programme is the link that binds all the members – a fact also reflected in the talk that goes on between the young people. To this extent, the television series is the cause of, and trigger to, the young people's coming together and interacting. Contrary to many doom-and-gloom prognoses by worried media educationists, the young people concerned (mainly girls) are by no means 'vulnerable to the ideological manipulations of the all-assimilating media-world'; on the contrary, they are, to a very great extent, able to maintain a reflective and critical distance from the formal modes in which media-products are delivered (Hepp 1997; Parschalk 1998, 39). However, for all the independence shown in dealing with these products cognit-

ively and emotionally, one thing cannot be denied: these products are produced and promoted *by adults*; and they are ultimately sold to young people *by adults*.

A similar tendency is observable in the 15- to 19-year-old age-group. Parschalk (1998) stresses that affiliation to groups is important for young people's sense of involvement in life; but she also points to adolescents' considerable capacity for moving on, and the informal nature of their groups. 'The proprietary articles that already play a major role for the children are vitally important vehicles of identification and communication within and between the various groups. As is already the case for the children, the adolescents find themselves torn between the quest to individualize and the quest to belong. This is evidenced in the host of different clothes, musical trends, and "in" sports. Anything mainstream is "out", so the shared characteristics of the generation as a whole are hard to make out' (Parschalk 1998, 47). Groups based on personal ties or on commitment suffer a massive decline in attractiveness compared with those oriented to particular triggers or activities. One characteristic which the many different youth-cultures of today do have in common is their endeavour to have as little contact as possible with adults.

Paradoxically, the constitution of these kinds of informal peer-groups via usage of a variety of media-products is, in its turn, only partly 'successful'. Young people, it is true, appear to be able, largely autonomously, to create their own domains for relaxation and entertainment, zones of self-reassurance and emotional support to which adults have little or no access – because they have often not developed the media skills needed for this;<sup>5</sup> but the price of this independence is considerable.

*For one thing*, the informal nature of the youth scene implies the ability to choose, relatively freely, from a wide range of options. It is increasingly rare for groups to be exclusive; the image of some kind of exclusive 'sworn

<sup>5</sup> The research conducted by the Trier-based Arbeitsgemeinschaft sozialwissenschaftliche Forschung und Weiterbildung (Study Group on Social-Science Research and Training) is particularly revealing on this point. A concise summary of major research-findings on media-based youth-cultures – video cliques, Grufties, Black Metal fans, cyberpunks – can be found in Vogelsang 1997.



brotherhood' is largely a thing of the past. This circumstance makes it possible for young people to join a series of different groupings – some of which may even be ideologically very divergent – within a relatively short space of time. The garish punk who is mad about Underground music may very well also be an occasional visitor to a church-based youth group; and he may turn up a few months later, with short hair and a jacket, as an avid clubber.<sup>6</sup> Because the links between the group-members are not very close, and are only envisaged as temporary, serious conflicts are rare. You go a bit of the way with each other, then at the end of the evening, or when the first serious difference arises, you go your separate ways. But the casualness and non-binding nature of the youth-scène implies not only freedom, but also uncertainty, since it means that young people are constantly having to renew their effort to get into a peer group, and this may entail the regular risk of setbacks to ego-libido. Against this background, the tendency of young people to escapism, to an idyllic view of family life or of (future) coupledness, can probably be interpreted as a regressive reaction to the 'burden of freedom'.

*Secondly*, youth cultures that are shaped by the market and the media demand of young people that they keep up to date, that they be ready for the next trend, or even, if possible, anticipate it. Seen from this angle, the widespread rejection of the 'mainstream' – standing for the styles and tastes of the parental generation – helps speed up and multiply youth cultures. Since the current trend is clearly towards the rapid assimilation of almost every subcultural habit into the motley fund of tastes that constitute mass entertainment,<sup>7</sup> when it comes to the developmental quest for autonomy, young people are virtually forced, stage by stage, to create ever-new, ever more striking or extreme forms of self-projection and group-projection. A not-

<sup>6</sup> What the studies describe as applying to the 30% of Austrian youth living in the conurbations also applies to young people in the rural areas, except that clubbing and raves are replaced by discos.

<sup>7</sup> The breakneck pace at which erstwhile subcultural currents are assimilated into the non-committal blandness of mainstream tastes, should, of course, be seen as a further symptom of 'youthification' – along the lines of 'The skateboard you young people race in the streets today will be our mode of travel to the office tomorrow.'

able parallel might be mentioned here: in a way, the leisure cultures of the young are an only slightly distorted reflection of 'adult' economic and labour processes; the modern-day worker too is independent, moves from one project to another, and is usable in a flexible, mobile, and multi-faceted way.

*Thirdly* and finally, the partial illusoriness of young people's independence will immediately become clear (if it has not done so before this) when one remembers that both the 'physical matter' and content of the subcultures through which young people strive for demarcation are the product not only of a world-wide market, but also, and most importantly, of a market that is shaped by adults. The fact that group-specific human exchange – not only amongst young people, but in general – has acquiesced to media conditions, and that people are beings that depend on media, or which only become visible through them, has recently become a subject of serious debate from an anthropological perspective (Wiegerling 1998, 35 ff.). The attachment of young peer-group members to media in the broadest sense of the term<sup>8</sup> – be these designer-label jeans, a television series, or video games – probably functions in many cases as a tangible, visible compensation for the deep personal uncertainty felt by young people. But true detachment or complete demarcation from the world of adults is not possible in this way. Clearly, one of the things which growing up implies is cherishing the notion that it is possible to opt out of a world pre-shaped by adults (*inter alia* through the media), even though this 'opting-out' turns out, on closer inspection, to be an illusion. This, at any rate, is probably the case for Austrian youth – and presumably also for very many young people living in central and western European countries. But perhaps a lot of young people experience the antagonism between youth culture and the adult world in a more realistic and hard-hitting way if they grow up in a country or at a time marked by heightened economic and social tensions and in which youth rebellions and youth protests therefore assume a broader dimension.

<sup>8</sup> Ultimately, any form of expression that carries meaning, imparts information, or points to what is absent should be understood as a medium.

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