

Eva Feldmann-Wojtachnia M.A.
Research Group Youth and Europe
Centre for Applied Policy Research C·A·P
Munich

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The Phenomenon of the Culture of Leisure

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**“Europe's next generation:
Youth culture, leisure and beyond”**

Conference Paper

Ladies and Gentlemen,

first I would like to thank the City of Wroclaw as organizer of this conference for giving me the opportunity to talk about a topic that is very important to me: Europe's next generation and its future perspectives. One of the most emerging trends is the fact, that leisure and work have become more and more similar, enormous change in World economics call no longer for a bipolar concept, but a multidimensional approach where “free” time and the question of defining identity in modernity play a core role.

In my position as a social scientist at the Research Group “Youth of Europe” at the Centre of Applied Policy Research I will look at the topic through the question of active citizenship and youth participation. Therefore, I would like to focus on the relationships between politics, society and the young generation. Where else would be a better place to talk about “Youth culture and leisure”, than in a flexible, dynamic and developing city like Wroclaw? I will later point out, that these attributes are to be considered the starting point of promoting youth involvement in society. But that calls for a new and wider definition of youth culture and leisure, too.

Therefore, please allow me three introductory remarks to show the relevance of leisure time for young people in Europe.

Introductory remarks

1. On the 12th of October 2006, the EU Commission presented a press release, in which the enormous demographic gap in Europe, thus the rapid increase in the percentage of old people in the society was classified as one of the social and political challenges of prime importance. A task, which we "have to take up – in fact now" – these are the words of the EU Commissioner for Labour, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, Vladimir Spidla. He even speaks of a "demographic time bomb". In my mind, the next generation is a kind of key factor for the defusion of this bomb: youth is the social capital for Europe, even if the future expectations of the society are generally focused on more profitable sectors such as digital information or biotechnology.

2. The Dow Jones for the stock market could be classified as equivalent to the Shell youth study in Germany for social scientists. Experts expect not only innovative trends and new insights about the social and political life, but also a kind of a national self-assessment: How do things look for the next generation, who are the young future decision-makers and in which direction society is shaping? The current, almost 15th youth study is published by now and portrays scientifically the youth in Germany, its views, hopes and values. The leading motif of this year's study is – how else could it be? – "Young and Old". The study picks the generation question and the demographic change out as a central topic. Later on, I would like to present some actual data, which are based on this survey.

3. A young person applying for a job these days is confronted with terms like "soft skills" which are required beyond his gained formal qualifications, such as: teamworking, networking, capabilities in communication and dialogue, flexibility, mobility and openness. It should not wonder that especially a concern like Shell has great interest in the analysis regarding this as an important aspect of the social responsibility of an enterprise. As attractive as these terms may sound, as important these capabilities may be, at the end it is very difficult to measure them fairly and exactly. The European Union has recognized this problem recently and tried to introduce a standardized Curriculum Vitae as an application portfolio. In the future, special agencies shall help young people to fill in the forms. In addition, they should support them with the self-assessment of their personal capabilities and with their job orientation. But this is the very centre of the problem today: To an increasing degree aspects of the personality development of young people, which are acquired informally above all in

the leisure area, get a public - or more precise: a social relevance. If these "soft skills" are really distinct, than they can be offensively used for economic advantage. But: if a young person does not dispose of such "advantages", this turns out to a real "deficit", which has consequences on the economic and social integration – a problem not only for the individual, but for the society at the whole.

Introductory thesis

This leads me to the introductory thesis for my further exposition, which is the following: Leisure time has obviously turned out to be deadly serious for the young generation in Europe. A leisure time concept based on regeneration and recreation in strict delimitation from the working world, is not longer interesting for today's youth. In the nineties of the last century the young generation has faced the problem already, but tried to meet this with hedonism and to set against a young fun culture. But the actual survey with the latest data show, that today's youth disposes of a high degree of consciousness for social themes. They are aware of the aging of the population, the problems on the labour market and their own future perspectives: the youth faces the challenges. Whatever they have to cope with – problems and difficulties – they try to solve them and are not discouraged. This is also the assessment of the Shell youth study of 2006, which interviewed more than 2,500 young persons in the age of 12 up to 25 years according to their situation of living, their belief and moral concepts, their organization of their leisure time and their attitude to politics.

Germany as an example

First I would like to throw now a view at the general results of the survey and afterwards I will go into more details about the behaviour during the leisure time and in questions of social activities of young people. I will give you some main ideas and emerging trends, having in mind that it is difficult to speak about "the youth" in general.

In spite of difficult perspectives the maxim "career and development instead of opting out" remains for young people. They look for individual ways and create structures, in which they make progress and participate in social life. Education is decisive for the future and young people of socially better off families have an advantage appropriate to their school education. Remarkable are gender issues: Girls and young women have overtaken boys and young men,

they strive for higher educational degrees. Young women are sensibly aware of the difficult balancing act to get on in their job and to start a family.

Which are the stability anchors, young people see today?

In times of instability the family offers above all sureness for young people, social stability and emotional support. Young people want fairness and justice between the generations. Religion is not very important for the young generation, only 30 p.c. believe in God and 65 p.c. think, that the church has no answer to concerns of young people.

The system of values of young people show a positive and stable orientation. Family, friendship and personal responsibility are assessed positively but also the striving for personal independency. They classify creativity as important as personal safety, law and order and security policy. Therewith young people combine traditional and modern values.

The interest in politics is very low like in preceding years, although slightly rising. For the majority of young people politics are no longer of significance, they want to orientate to. This does not imply, that young people do not have any interests and they do not want to realize them. The majority attaches a lot of importance to democracy. Freedom of speech and free elections are undisputable for them. In spite of their low political interest young people are socially active in their sphere of life. 33 p.c. of the young people say that they are often active in social life and further 42 p.c. are occasionally active. In this context one has to underline, however, the higher the level of education and the social level, the higher the social engagement. To the fore are less ideological concepts or utopias than pragmatic approaches and the personal fulfilment.

For 60 p.c. of the young people Europe is "in". The general approval, though, has given way to a more unemotional judgement in comparison to the previous years. Young people criticize above all the waste of money and the bureaucracy in the European Union. Only 19 p.c. declare themselves in favour of Turkey to become a member of the European Union, 61 p.c. are against it.

Young people hold to an increasing extent critical views on the process of globalization. 48 p.c. see advantages as well as disadvantages. Advantages like free movement and cultural variety are important for 18 p.c. and 27 p.c. feel crime or unemployment as disadvantages. As far as the influence on the process of globalization is concerned, young people trust in the European Union and the United Nations.

On this background, what are the leisure activities of young people then?

In their leisure time young people go as far as they can - concerning sporting or other activities - trying out themselves and different lifestyles. But leisure activities are also a social training area for a lifestyle, for which they have to take responsibility and which seems to become increasingly confusing.

About twenty fields of leisure activities can be made out for young people, the following at the head:

- Listening to music (63 p.c.)
- Watching television (58 p.c.)
- Meeting other young people (57 p.c.)
- Surfing through the internet (38 p.c.)
- Going to discos, parties etc. (31 p.c.)

Less popular (around 20 p.c. each) are reading, computer games, activities with the family, shopping and hanging around. Only 6 p.c. are engaged in a social project or in a youth centre.

Which identity concept do young people follow?

Principally young people can be divided into four groups concerning their leisure activities:

The biggest group with 32 p.c. of the young people can be described as "technology freaks"; they are mostly male and rather strive for a lower level of education.

A similar big group with 25 p.c. can be described as "inclined-to-buy- family-persons". Shopping and family rather apply to girls.

18 p.c. can be described as "social young people". In this group the gender is of no special importance, as well as in the last group which makes up a so-called "creative leisure elite".

Here, the use of modern media (including the music sector) in everyday life unites all young people, this is taken for granted nowadays. According to the results of the Shell study 82 p.c. of the young people have access to the World Wide Web and use it actively. In comparison to the previous study this has changed rapidly. Four years ago the number of internet users was about 20 p.c. less. One can even say, that modern media have become a mighty socialization authority and a medium for self-presentation. It is interesting to see, that this media presence can be either beneficial to or negative for the personal development of a young person. Family, schools and individual circles of friends are of great importance as a guiding aid.

Final statements

1. It has become clear, that youth culture and their leisure activities are part of a wider social context, which makes it a task to be tackled across a broad spectrum of topics. The difficult labour market situation at present is making fear of the future foremost, which has a paralysing effect on the general willingness to get involved. Political involvement is judged as being unimportant by most young people. The term “politics” provokes negative association among Europe’s next generation. The clear decrease in political interest in the younger generation, currently at 34 p.c., as well as the decrease in voluntary involvement in political parties, organisations and societies brings the danger that democracy is losing its foundation. How important it is to support and involve the younger generation as much as possible in political debate and social processes is often underestimated. Therefore, leisure activities in the context of a dynamic youth culture can bridge this gap – young people can get here first experiences in overtaking responsibility the pre-social and pre-political fields.

2. The key question is to be considered, what society and education can do to encourage the involvement of young people – a tremendous source of innovation, if it goes above generation barriers and if it grounds solidarity between generations. Here are structures and monitoring needed, which go beyond youth culture, family matters and leisure. Europe’s next generation needs to be motivated to bring their own interests into official processes. Young people need to be supported in getting involved, so that youth participations goes beyond being symbolic and substituting serious approach to political renewal. Expo 2012 seems to be here an excellent platform.

3. With regard to the preliminary remarks one can conclude, that young persons indeed dispose of a great number of resources and sleeping talents. However, it is the society's responsibility to foster them und to integrate them into social-political decisions. In accordance to the Lisbon strategy of the European Union one can surely speak of the knowledge location "youth". Perhaps the Expo in 2012 may succeed in sensitizing for a worldwide consciousness for the living conditions, wishes and future competences of young people – and thereby and at even best give the impetus to an innovative "Wroclaw process" in the European Union.