

Renate Müller, Marc Calmbach, Stefanie Rhein

Pleasure and Politics – Making Youth-Cultural Commitment Visible¹

Abstract

Youth and politics as well as pleasure and politics are often seen as bad matches. Accordingly, today's youth is diagnosed as generally indifferent towards politics. We suggest, that politics in youth cultures can only be made visible by looking at it from a different angle: from the perspective of reconcilability between work, politics and pleasure. This article provides and discusses a theoretical framework for the analysis of the connections between them in youth cultural contexts. Increasing medialisation and globalisation make cultural symbols accessible to almost everyone. This results in a "devaluation" of style as a marker of distinction and self-positioning. We argue that this devaluation of style causes a shift of focus onto ostensibly non-stylistic aspects in youth cultures – i.e. onto commitment, work or politics. Youth cultures can therefore be viewed as contexts in which self-professionalisation, self-education and self-socialisation take place. Even though within the field of youth culture research, youth-cultural activities are therefore no longer considered to be merely recreational activities or pastimes, youth cultural participation still means the pleasure of sharing certain cultural activities and, beyond this, the pleasure of resistance. We suggest that understanding the – in some ways unexpected and partly still unexplored – connections young people establish between work, politics and pleasure provides insight into new forms of their political commitment.

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Keywords

Youth culture, individualisation, distinction, style, youth cultural participation, work, politics, resistance, pleasure, new political commitment, self-professionalisation, self-education, self-socialisation

1. On the Incompatibility of Work and Politics with Youth-Cultural Pleasure

Youth and politics seem to be a bad match – but pleasure and politics appear to be an even worse one. Even though the following quote refers specifically to the field of sociology, it seems to apply to many scientific communities – and maybe even to grown-ups in general: They seem to have a strange relationship towards the idea of pleasure:

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„Either the pleasure of life is considered superficial – which in sociology may be enough to fling a phenomenon out of the world of real things –, or the pleasure is seen as ‚ideological‘. Therefore it may be accepted as a part of sociological reality; but still only as a fictional corpus delicti, behind which the merciless interpreters would capture the ‚true‘ meanings. The more fiercely the individuals affirm it to be their motive of action, the more its authenticity is doubted by sociology – but could this pleasure not have an actual influence on everyday aesthetics“ (Schulze 1997, 96)² ?

Furthermore, does not the pleasure of life codetermine the entire everyday life – the working everyday life as well as the political everyday life? Therefore, our thesis is the following: To challenge the contradictoriness of pleasure and politics is the only way to get an unobstructed view on the different forms of young people’s political commitment.

The individualized society is characterized by reflexivity, dislimitation and subjectivation of identity (Keupp et al. 2002), of work (Baethge et al. 1988; Baethge 1994; Pongratz, Voß 2003, 2004), of politics (Albert et al. 2004) and of religion (Beck, Beck-Gernsheim 1994). It thus offers individuals freedom of choice and a wider range of options – and imposes on them the constraints and risks of both. This is where pleasure comes into play – as a decision criterion and as an attempt to orientate oneself in the pain of decision. This may – but does not have to – mean aesthetisation (“I wanna be hip”), lack of orientation towards the future (“I know what I want and I want it now”) or superficiality in the processes of identity construction, career choice and political acting. “If the wearing down of routines brings up hardship, effort and annoyance, if this life brings up the mere endless labour of having to decide about everything – why shouldn’t I at least pick out things that provide me pleasure?” The fact that an individual asks oneself this question must neither necessarily be considered an indicator of a loss of reality nor an indicator of superficiality. And, last but not least, it does not necessarily always ease essential decision processes for the individual.

Obviously, in youth cultures, young persons naturally combine elements that seem to be contradicting at first sight: pleasure and work, pleasure and politics. At the same time, young people link the pleasure of youth-cultural experiences to the attribution of pleasure, the expectations and hopes in terms of pleasure regarding their professional life and their political acting. The degree of (traditional) political involvement and acting obviously may vary between different youth cultures; some current youth cultures may be more political (e.g. Antifa, Hardcore, Punk, Skinheads, Hip-Hop, Vegans) than others (e.g. LAN-Gaming, Sport Climbing, Skateboarding)³. But regardless of those differences, it can be found that from the young people’s point of view, pleasure and responsibility do not conflict, whereas, according to some – obsolete – convictions in everyday life theory, work, politics and pleasure do not match at all: at some point in life, it’s getting serious – “kidding is over”. Work and politics belong to the serious things in life – youth cultures do not, they rank among the amusements.

Even the interpretation of the German society as a pleasure seeking society seems to virtually forbid any link between youth culture and the world of work and politics – unless we are talking about an alleged liaison, unless on the one hand everything is fun and does not degenerate into seriousness, unless on the other hand the Berlin Love Parade, for example, can be declared and registered as a political event. For those who think that juvenility as a principal way of life and as a mentality of self-declared relief of duty has become a cultural alternative opposed to the world of adulthood (Hitzler, Pfadenhauer 2004, 47 f), work and politics as well as the assuming of responsibilities certainly do not match with youth cultures. However, the fact that there are both young persons and persons having outgrown their youth who likewise pursue “juvenility as a principal way of life” does neither exclude that young people are assuming responsibilities in work and politics, nor that they are taking pleasure in this. In a classical Cultural Studies perspective, the match between politics and

² All quotations translated by the authors.

³ <http://www.jugendszenen.com/> provides profiles of current youth scenes in Germany, the page is updated on a regular basis. Ferchhoff (2007) gives a – necessarily incomplete – overview of 21st century youth-cultural scenes and styles.

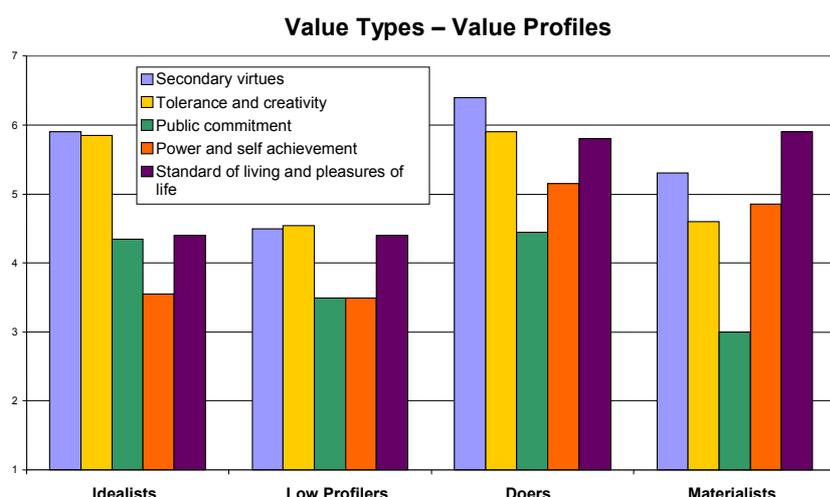
youth cultures is only to be made in light of the aesthetised forms of political action: even though stylisation and aesthetisation are merely “as-if” actions, they are still considered a symbolic revolution and therefore political (Clarke et al. 1979). However from a post-subcultural point of view, in post modern society, even symbolic resistance loses its recalcitrance. *The Meaning of Style* (Hebdige 1983) degenerates into *Style Means Nothing*. Due to its incorporation (by the media) which comes along with an increasing general availability of subcultural symbols, stylistic recalcitrance is considered to be hardly possible anymore (Davis 1992, 187; Evans 1997, 174 f; Wilson 1990, 233). Only a few years after the publication of *Subculture*, Hebdige relativised his former comments on the potential of subcultural stylistic resistance by quoting that nowadays pictures of punks, mods and skinheads do not even scandalise school book editors anymore. (Hebdige 1985, 188). In short: “The success of provocation has induced its wearout” (Bianchi 1996, 61). Furthermore, due to the complexity and diversity of the available symbols, it can hardly be assumed that symbols, i.e. clothes or music, are definitely and reliably assignable to ideological contents or socio-cultural positions:

„Individuals obtaining ideas about what to wear may neither be aware of, nor necessarily care about the ideology to which styles have originally referred. Hence PLO headscarves become trendy on the streets of New York City, skulls and crossbones become insignia on children’s clothing, and Rastafarian dreadlocks are preempted by runaway fashion models and rock (not necessarily reggae) musicians” (Kaiser, Nagasawa, Hutton 1991, 176).

Yet to the extent to which subcultural style found its way into the mainstream and therefore became available to „everybody“, non-stylistic criteria like work in (or for) a scene and political scene activities yield new youth-cultural distinction potential.

Facing the outlined and discussed theses about the incompatibility of work, politics and (youth-cultural) pleasure, we argue:

- Taking part in youth cultures means more than pleasure.
- Taking part in youth cultures means more than stylisation and aesthetisation – youth culture means more than style.
- Youth-cultural elements that go beyond stylisation and aesthetisation – i.e. work and political commitment – provide pleasure.
- Inversely, young people’s professional and political commitment taking place within or outside youth cultures fulfils youth-cultural and quasi-youth-cultural functions, it holds distinction potential and is being used as a means of stylisation.



Diagr.1

According to the latest Shell study (N=2532, 12- to 25-year-olds), adolescents combine pleasure with commitment in their value orientations (Gensicke 2006, 186 ff): This value combination is characteristic for the so-called *Self-confident ‘Doers’* in the sample (27%). Moreover, compared to the other value types *Pragmatic Idealists* (26%), *Robust Materialists*

(22%) and *Hesitant Low Profilers* (25%), the *Self-confident 'Doers'* are the ones who clearly stand out due to their public commitment (i.e. helping disadvantaged persons or getting politically involved). They pursue a high standard of living and the enjoyment of the pleasures of life; they feature positive attitudes towards tolerance and developing one's own imaginativeness and creativity. Finally, they show a distinctively positive approach to the so-called secondary virtues (i.e. respect of law and order, pursuit of security, being hard-working and ambitious) (see Diagram 1).

In the following, we will provide and discuss a theoretical framework for the analysis of the connections between work, politics and pleasure that are being established by adolescents in youth cultures. Hereby, we will focus on the German society and on current youth-cultural developments in Germany. Nevertheless, the general ideas of the theoretical framework may probably be applied to any individualized society. Especially since they are partly based on Anglo-American youth culture theory and research they apply to Great Britain and the USA. Taking the individualisation thesis and its application on youth-cultural manifestations as a basis, we will highlight the distinction-related „devaluation“ of style. We argue that this devaluation of style leads to an emphasis on ostensibly non-stylistic aspects in youth cultures – i.e. on work or politics (chapter 2.1). In chapter 2.2, we will expose how youth-cultural commitment or work is linked to pleasure and politics: pleasure in a youth-cultural context still means the pleasure of sharing certain cultural activities and, beyond this, the pleasure of resistance. In order to explore how work and politics are dealt with in youth cultures, we will also draw on the dislimitations of work and politics arising from individualisation in modern societies (chapter 2.3). Finally, we will summarize our theoretical considerations (chapter 2.4).

2. Theoretical Perspectives on Work, Politics and Pleasure in Youth Cultures

2.1 Individualisation and Distinction in Youth Cultures

One possible explanation for the linkage of work, politics and pleasure practiced in youth cultures is that adolescents are experiencing an increasing pressure of distinction. At the same time, the distinction potential of lifestyles and symbols is declining. This decline is caused by the general availability of symbols: if a means of distinction is generally available to everyone, it can at the most be a signal of community; but it does not seem to be a promising means to signalize differences between oneself and the others one does not want to belong to.

The individualisation thesis and its application to youth-cultural manifestations provide the theoretical background for this argumentation. The destandardisation of biographies, the further differentiation of lifestyles and ways of life result in profound experiences of change. At the same time, globalisation and medialisation promote experiences of cultural difference. These developments involve new forms of socialisation – i.e. new forms of collectivisation such as youth scenes as well as new forms of identity construction. Identities have become reflexive, which means they have lost their implicitness: “[...] [N]ational and ethnic identity, gender and body identity have lost their ‘quasi-natural’ function as identity warrants” (Keupp et al. 2002, 87). They are to be understood as social constructions and as something that can be formed by the individual (ibid., 89). More than ever, identity work – i.e. the personal contribution of individuals to their self-development and social integration – is required. In the context of identity construction, socialisation and educational processes, music and media and respectively the corresponding youth and media cultures play an important role. Identities are offered on cultural and medial market spaces and have to be chosen and appropriated; thus youth cultures and media cultures are to be understood as self-chosen socialisation contexts.

On the one hand, youth-cultural and media cultural landscapes obviously become increasingly differentiated on account of the rising medialisation and globalisation. On the other hand, further specialisations and differentiations – partly even “radicalisations” – are also

taking place within the scenes. These developments are initiated and accelerated by youth-cultural styles being spread and appropriated by media and fashion. In particular, subversive or alternative cultures find themselves deprived of their distinction potential and respectively of the distinction potential of their stylistic surface.

These scenes' hard cores often react to this imminent risk of the scenes' "hostile take-over" by further differentiation of the scene-specific toolkit of symbols, by a more articulate and more rigorous demarcation between "fakes" or "copycats" and the "real ones", and by an increasing specialisation (Winter, Eckert 1990; Eckert, Reis, Wetzstein 2000). Given the perceived loss of style as an authenticity criterion and as a means of distinction, youth cultures often seem to turn their focus towards direct action. One example is the do-it-yourself culture (DIY) which can be found within the Punk scene and particularly within the Hardcore culture. For "real Punks" or "real Hardcores", cultural difference and authenticity are exemplified by the concrete (material) cultural practice and by the ways of cultural production, and no longer (only) by a certain musical preference and the corresponding style. Being authentic means, above all, acting authentically, not looking authentic (Müller et al. 2007, 142). Given the often proclaimed "death" of youth cultures – caused by their (alleged) appropriation by the mainstream and the culture industry – concrete productive and political action not only stands as an authenticity criterion and a means of distinction: it virtually becomes a survival strategy of youth-cultural movements. Postmodernists have pointed out that the term "authenticity" has become irrelevant in post modern vocabulary (Muggleton 1997; Polhemus 1997). Nevertheless, according to a series of empirical analyses, authenticity is still the primary affiliation and identification criterion in youth cultures. Authenticity is not all about the looks – as a distinction criterion between "real fans" and "posers", authenticity now seems to be mainly defined by "commitment" (Hodkinson 2002, 2004; Fox 1987; Andes 1998; Sardiello 1998), that is by the fan's or member's degree of involvement like it is embodied in scene-related work.

The increasing specialisation of youth cultures comes along with the specialisation of the competencies that are required to participate in the particular culture and to develop scene-related authenticity. Thus, to assure social affiliation and to achieve and obtain approval and prestige within youth cultures, adolescents have to spend a growing amount of time and effort to become familiarised with increasingly specific symbolic worlds, cultural codes and practices.

2.2 Work, Pleasure and Resistance in Youth Cultures

The benefits of the scene members' commitment and cultural productivity pay off in terms of pleasure and approval within a community sharing the same preferences (Fiske 1997, 57). Acquainting oneself with the scene's world is an important premise for experiencing oneself as a member of this social alliance formed by like-minded individuals, and for being able to appreciate and enjoy scene-related pleasures in a scene-specific way.

The pleasures of popular culture are mainly being focused on by Cultural Studies. From their perspective, popular pleasures always develop "in opposition to power, be it societally, morally, aesthetically or textually defined" (Winter 1999, 41). The pleasure arising from dealing with media and popular culture thus always contains the delight of avoiding the assignments of identity and normality promoted by a dominant culture, to escape from those assignments or to put them into question in a symbolic way (Fiske 1997; Winter 1999). For example, this is done by fans watching TV shows rejecting the supposed message and frame of reference (the so-called "preferred reading") and bringing to bear an alternative one ("oppositional reading") – think of the integration of the Teletubbies into the symbolic world of the techno scene. Another example is adolescents turning to "bad music" (Mikos 2003, 226): Establishing preferences for music styles and musical practices known to be considered "bad" by certain circles (i.e. parents, girls or "geeks" in school) – because these practices come along with the breaking of taboos – is often particularly attractive to adolescents and provides them pleasure (Mikos 2003, 242).

So on the one hand, being involved in a scene provides pleasure resulting from the mentioned differential-aesthetic experiences – here, to withdraw oneself from the social

regiment of an apparently dominant culture is perceived as a pleasure. On the other hand, the pleasure of concerning oneself with cultural objects that constitute the focal point of a particular scene emerges from a feeling of affiliation and community experienced by taking part in and being part of the scene life. This applies to the pleasure of dancing, singing along and listening to music together with other adepts at concerts as well as to the pleasure of playing music together in a band.

Like political and professional commitment, religious commitment is also linked to youth-cultural pleasure. Accordingly, not only professional or political decisions, but also religious decisions are interconnected with pleasure expectations, and religious acting is also being used as a means of youth-cultural distinction (Müller et al. 2007; Hunold, Engelfried-Rave 2007; Pfadenhauer 2007; Eulenbach 2007). One explanation of the establishment of these interconnections is that adolescents' identity constructions are marked by dislimitations of identity, work, politics and religion.

2.3 (Youth-Cultural) Dislimitation of Work and Politics

2.3.1 Work

Given the amount of lifetime spent on youth-cultural involvement, within the field of youth culture research youth-cultural activities are no longer considered to be merely recreational activities or pastimes. In fact, youth cultures and scenes are more and more viewed as contexts in which professionalisation, self-education and self-socialisation take place. According to recent youth culture studies (Eckert, Reis, Wetzstein 2000; Klein, Friedrich 2003; Hitzler, Pfadenhauer 2005), taking part in youth scenes is a question of manifold self-organised acquisition processes aiming to gain scene specific knowledge, competencies and skills. These competencies and qualifications can be professionally relevant and favourable to a career entry (Hitzler, Pfadenhauer 2005): The scene members learn how to play an instrument, how to record music, how to work together with others to organize a concert, an event, festival or demonstration. Mostly by learning-by-doing but also by peer-teaching, they develop a wide range of skills in order to take part and involve themselves in the scene and to gain social acceptance among the other members (see Calmbach/ Rhein 2007 for the Hardcore scene). This clearly puts into question the assumption that only legitimate cultural capital is apt to be transformed into economic capital. Entertainment has become an increasingly important business sector, while at the same time the means available to adolescents are becoming more "professional", be it new technical means like audio recording software or new career profiles (e.g. event management). This results in both – in an increasing importance of the competencies acquired within a cultural scene and in the fact that now these competencies pay off much better even outside the scene. The generally growing amount of alternatives, the youth-cultural shift of focus on commitment rather than on style and their increasing specialisation make youth-cultural activities more and more fit to satisfy professional requirements. Consequently, these activities become professionalisation mediums for careers both within and outside the respective cultural context. Even though it is – from a superficial point of view – considered impossible it is actually happening: youth-cultural commitment leads to social integration – not because life's serious side starts once the scene is left, but because it develops within the scene.

"I want to enjoy my work" – this quote exemplifies an important aspect of the subjectification of work, of anchoring work in the individual identity construction (Baethge 1994, 247). Another subject-related expectation the individual pins on work is to gain a feeling of independence by the skills and competences that have been acquired within his or her (pre-) professional socialisation and that are yet to be enhanced (Baethge 1994). At the same time, the dislimitation of work – as expressed in the concept of the *labour power-entrepreneur* (Pongratz, Voß 2003, 2004) – becomes evident here: the *labour power-entrepreneur* is characterised by self-control of his own professional activity and by self-economisation, that is, by developing and merchandising his own competencies on the job market and within the

company. Furthermore, the *labour power-entrepreneur* is characterised by self-rationalisation – in other words, by a “corporisation of his personal lifestyle”, to the point of exploiting himself or willingly letting himself be exploited, for example by working as an unsalaried trainee in the music industry.

2.3.2 Politics

Contrary to the perception that pop culture means “dictatorship of the conformists” (Behrens 2003), youth-cultural recalcitrance as a potential of political orientation is once more getting into the focus of youth culture research investigating how young people construct authenticity.

Adolescents are frequently diagnosed with disenchantment with traditional forms of organised politics (parties, citizen committees, labour unions) (Gille, Krüger 2000; Gaiser, de Rijke 2000; Deutsche Shell 2004). The discourse on young people’s apparent political indifference should not be examined without also considering the discourse on the dislimitation of politics, on the limits of what is regarded as political in today’s society:

“A part of today’s youth is not only not indifferent towards politics – on the contrary, they are broadly interested and involved. The point is, young people are not involved or interested in the forms of politics that get into sight when the focus lies only on parties, alliances or ‘classical’ forms of political participation” (Hurrelmann et al. 2004, 51).

Besides the institutionalised and formal means of participation, young people’s activism especially occurs in alternative organisational forms that do not require a binding or durable membership. Social activity of young people depends, among other things, on their affiliation to a certain clique (Albert et al. 2004, 216). Accordingly, the initial points of alternative forms of organisation related to political or social commitment are often to be found in youth cultures. Many youth cultures, i.e. the cultures of Anarcho-Punk (Gosling 2004; Thompson 2004; Clark 2004), Riot Grrrls (Piano 2004; Kearney 1997; Leonard 1997), Hardcore (Büsser 2000) or Hip-Hop (Berry 1990; 1994; Fiske 1994) have well-defined political agendas (e.g. feminism, anarchism, self-empowerment), which are not, or only marginally being discussed in actual day-to-day politics.

In view of the findings suggesting that being political in a traditional sense is ‘out’ among adolescents (Schneekloth 2004, 119), and considering the fact that accordingly, a majority of the 15-25-year-olds classify themselves as being barely or not at all political (Schneekloth 2006, 105), politically interested young people and politically oriented youth cultures are facing different ways of distinction: *intra-generational* (“Unlike most other young people, we are political”), *inter-youth-cultural* (“We Punks are more political than you Ravers”) and *intra-youth-cultural* (“I’m more political than you, that’s why I’m more Punk”). However, even if young people’s actions are initiated by self-interest and the will of self-development, this self-interest can definitely be profitable for the public (Hurrelmann et al. 2004, 44 f). For example, young people actively stand up for issues that affect them directly and appeal to them personally (Schneekloth 2004, 119): demonstrating against the closing of their youth centre, organising a day of action for the cleanup and makeover of their schoolyard etc. In this respect, politics – and not only fashion and music – is quite of importance for their self-positioning in the youth-cultural world. Thus, contrary to the presumptions about an increasing disenchantment with politics among adolescents, politics is still playing a role and fulfils important functions related to youth culture, socialisation and identity. But, along with the social developments, the conditions under which young people are getting involved with politics and the forms of their political involvement have changed.

2.4 Consequences for the Subtle Differences

The dislimitations of identity, work and politics we have outlined here, enforce, on the one hand, the necessity for the individual to distinguish him- or herself and to show his or her

individuality. On the other hand, these dislimitations generate an often even desperate search for some remnants of sociability, sense and integration. At the same time, due to an inflationary use, aesthetical means are becoming less and less effective as means of distinction. The subtle differences must therefore be defined on other levels than on the levels of style and aesthetics. As a result, new possibilities of distinction are being discovered, or, alternatively, traditional ones are being rediscovered and redefined if necessary.

Considering this background, it seems essential and reasonable to pay attention to the increasing distinctive potential of actions and attitudes defined and applied to the contexts of work and politics by adolescents. For those diagnosing young people's general indifference to politics, politics in youth cultures can only be made visible by looking at it from a different perspective: from the perspective of reconcilability between work and pleasure. This may provide insight into new forms of young people's political commitment and reveal the urge of adolescents to define the subtle differences between themselves and others; it may also bring to light young people's creative ways of incorporating political commitment into the processes of socialisation and identity construction. For further research, it will be necessary to focus on the internet and especially on the so-called web 2.0 as a – rather new – platform for youth cultural and social activities in general (f.i. youtube, myvideo, mspace, schueler-vz, knuddels or blogging) and for possible new forms of web-based political activities in particular.

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