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Adolescent identity formation in a disembedded life-coping environment.

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I would like to introduce the subject of my presentation by quoting a few lines of a song by the German band «Blumfeld» entitled «The Youth of Today». Under this titel an exhibition was held in Frankfurt this year. It presented young and less young artists whose works address the subject of youth. Later on I will fade in some of those images.[1]

The way they move along the streets/ so naturally and beautiful/ hang around the place looking cool/ when you see them, you can get envious/ the boys so athletic und masculine/ and the girls too look great/ some think they are perhaps a bit silly/ but those who think this way don't know about being young. (Blumfeld, The Youth of Today, 2003)	Wie sie die Straßen langgehen/ So selbstverständlich und schön/ Cool in der Gegend rumstehen/ Wenn man sie sieht, kann man schon neidisch werden/ Die Jungen so athletisch und männlich/ Und auch die Mädchen sehen phantastisch aus/ Manche meinen, sie seien vielleicht etwas dämlich/ Doch wer so denkt, kennt sich mit Jungsein nicht aus. (Blumfeld, Jugend von heute, 2003)

The title of my presentation indicates that scholarly texts about *adolescent identity formation* in western societies contain insights ranging from the findings of developmental psychology on the one hand to sociological concepts about cultural change and *disembedded life-coping environments* on the other. The specific focus of these two disciplines is different and so are their results.

> *Developmental psychology* concentrates on problems that may or may not emerge during adolescence as well as on risks and dangers that adolescents might encounter in today's living conditions. In this approach the concept of *developmental tasks* is of major importance. Youth as a phase in which young people are granted a *moratorium* – a period of grace that is relatively free of the burden of responsibility – opens up a panoply of possible experiences. In such an environment developmental tasks serve as beacons for orientation. Integrating personal activities of the young person and socialisations offered by agents such as family, school, and job training is seen as a way to enable the young individual to cope with his or her tasks. Hand in hand with this view goes an awareness of the range of possible deviations. This often leads to pointing fingers at child and youth protection institutions demanding they do a better job, to demonising certain youth cultures in public, and to warning about the new media because they allegedly foster violence and impinge on the ability to learn. Recently, a number of neurologists joined this debate by suggesting they might be able to prove that external influences have such an impact on the neurological system. Developmental psychology postulates that the youth phase is structured by a relatively fixed schedule. The discipline seems to know what is good for young people, and what bad. For this reason this approach is frequently criticised as being deterministic and biologistic. Today, a concept of rigidly attributed developmental tasks is no longer considered tenable (Böhnisch 2005: 197).
> The *social sciences* are interested in the question of how economic and cultural change can be clearly identified and its impact be captured empirically. During the last decades and in several phases, traditional ties to milieu, values, and group identities have weakened or dissolved. In the wake of this «liberation», the individual must gradually

assume increased levels of personal responsibility. The social sciences examine the sunny as well as the shady sides of this process of individualisation, but the existence of the process as such is seen as an inevitable aspect of late modern societies. The moratorium of youth and the specific course of youth too, are equally affected: they too are tied to traditional patterns that are gradually being eroded. Today scholars speak of «disembeddings» between youth and adulthood. This thought is not entirely new. In the early 1970s in his publication «Youth and History», the American scholar Gillis interpreted the erosion of delimitations between youth and adulthood as a sign of the impending end of youth (1974: 187). Young people have fought against their exclusion from social and sexual life, and in doing so, drastically changed youth as a life period of social control. They have gained access to life practices which were previously exclusively reserved for adults. At the same time, the ideal of the «forever young» emerged; young people clung to youth, and adults increasingly adopted the lifestyle of young people. Adults became juvenile. Initially, social scientists described the phenomenon as the destructuring of youth, more recently they talk about disembedding.

In order to widen and deepen my research into youth, youth cultures, and identity formation I refer to the insights of *psychoanalysis* – not as a therapeutic approach, but as a scientific method of gaining knowledge (Schröder 1991). I have chosen this approach because psychoanalysis – as the science of the unconscious – examines aspects of the psyche which are not obvious at first sight. It reveals desires and anxieties which tend to act in obscurity because being shrouded in shame or guilt they are taboo. With respect to young people, these desires and anxieties mainly concern the developing sexuality which – even in today's information society – is not easy to master and, due to tremendous physical changes, evokes strong feelings of uncertainty and shame.

This approach leads me to take a critical view of some superficial social science descriptions, such as those delivered by constructivism, because I believe that a human being, and in particular an adolescent, is a lot less autonomous than frequently portrayed. The post-modern formula «anything goes» seems particularly inept at helping us to understand adolescence. The anthropological and psychological approach of psychoanalysis, seeking to examine the hidden or deeper parts of human existence, can also be used for a critical assessment of developmental psychology insofar as they focus on the basic constellations of the human psyche and help distinguish between deeper human desires and their specific cultural forms of expression. In contrast to developmental psychology's detailed developmental tasks – which are doubtlessly geared to specific living conditions of a given society – the psychoanalytic approach can help us identify those adolescent conflict constellations that are common to all cultures even if their specific solutions might vary considerably.

1. Puberty, adolescence and youth

The term *puberty* refers to physical changes that take place when primary and secondary sex characteristics develop in an individual. Puberty is the work of nature; it invokes the biological changes in the human body. Between the age of 9 to 13 years, girls and boys – the first ones earlier, the latter a little later – undergo substantial physical changes, and it will take them several years to cope with that change. They become sexually mature: girls experience their menarche – their first menstruation – and boys their first ejaculation, sometimes called spermarche. The centre of this process is the emerging ability to give birth to or to father a child. This development is initiated and accompanied by a number of physical changes. Physical features change, pimples appear, and sudden growths spurts can cause the body to come apart at the seams. Various body parts grow at different rates so that an individual's gait

2

might become lanky. Lanky movements and the impression of being ugly lead to uncertainty and feelings of shame. During certain phases of puberty youngsters might try to hide and sometimes wish to disappear into the ground. Girls do not only long for their breasts to grow, such growth also makes them feel shy and they shun the looks of others. Boys experience their voice breaking and suddenly find themselves bereft of their familiar loud asserting voice. At the same time they cannot wait for their facial hair to grow.

Specific living conditions seem to have an impact on puberty, which in western societies now begins earlier than in the past. In only 60 years, that is between 1920 and 1980, sexual maturity in girls has advanced from an average age of 15 years to an average age of 13 years (Fend 2000: 107). After 1980, no further acceleration of the onset of puberty was recorded.

Adolescence is the period of life which young people require to adjust psychologically to the changes caused by puberty, to learn how to live within their altered body, and to find their place in society. Whilst the term puberty refers to biological changes, the term adolescence refers to cultural influences. Adolescence is the work of human beings. The course of adolescence is shaped by the cultural propositions which a society offers youths to cope with and work through the changes caused by puberty. We can assume that every society offers its young people such propositions, even if the specific coping strategies were not developed in the framework of youth as a distinct phase of life.

> Both, puberty and adolescence are *gender specific*. The voice breaking has a different developmental meaning for a boy than developing breasts has for a girl. Boys and girls experience sexual maturity in different ways, simply because of the fact that the ability to bear children is exclusively reserved for women. If we think about the «meaning» of sexual characteristics we are never exclusively in the realm of biology but always have to consider the cultural and social implications as well. Why? Because the way men react to the growing breasts of a girl is shaped by culture just as much as physical changes in a growing man receive less public attention than those of a growing girl evoke in men.

> In the context of gender-specific attributes it seems noteworthy to mention that western societies – despite their tendencies towards a more equal attitude towards the sexes – still portray femininity differently than masculinity. This starts in early childhood and is even stronger in puberty when girls tend to be perceived as sexual beings and boys as beings who compete with their mates.
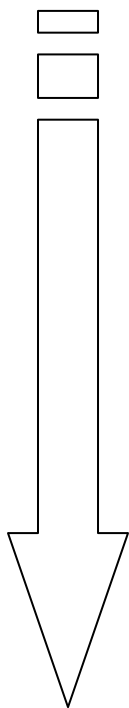
The term *youth phase* is mainly employed by sociological research into youth which dates the «discovery of youth» to the late 19th century. The perception of youth as a distinct phase only emerges when a society ceases to regard the young person «*as a child and does not accord to him full adult status, roles, and functions*» (Hollinghead 1949: 6). This is the case when socially relevant biographical rites of passage such as marriage and first employment, i.e. the sexual and social independence from one's family, no longer coincide with puberty, in other words when there is an interval or a clearly accentuated transition period (Mitterauer 1986: 26).

In my opinion it is important to highlight that all adolescents experience tensions and polarities. These tensions and polarities are mainly caused by the emerging ability to reproduce. This fact has to be considered independent of culture and history «because growing up means taking the parent's place. *It really does.* In the unconscious fantasy, growing up is inherently an aggressive act. And the child is no longer child-size» (Winnicott 1971: 144). However, these reproduction-related

tensions manifest themselves very differently across cultures. In the European culture the conflict between generations is very intensely, whilst other cultures employ social values to harness the conflict potential or to transfer it to different social contexts and fields of activities (Erdheim 2003: 328).

2. The history of youth and the shaping of adolescence

Let us first see how cultures and societies have handled the radical changes of puberty and the related generation conflict, and which coping strategies they have developed.

Shaping adolescence through culture and society		
Cold cultures [down-arrow diagram] Hot Cultures	Childhood *governed by* Adulthood *initiation rites* *or* *tight rules*	Cultural concentration of passage into a very short period of a few days or weeks; stable culture
	Childhood *Transition period* Adulthood	Extension of transition period, mainly for male youth of bourgeois background; entry and exit passages are marked by rites; phenomenon is referred to by the term «status passage»
	Childhood *Distinct* Adulthood *phase of life*	Extension of transition period for all young members of society; youth cultures as socialisation agent; psycho-social moratorium (Erikson); second chance (Erdheim), realm of possibilities (King)
	Childhood *Disembedding* Adulthood *of youth*	Passages become obscure; limitations – particularly of the passage into adulthood – are displaced; social attributions become blurred, challenges of work life

(1) Many cultures employed *puberty or initiation rites* to help pubescent young people cope with physical changes and emotional upheavals and to integrate them into society. Participation in these rites was obligatory. The adult members of society prescribed how adolescents had to take their leave from childhood. They showed them how – during a transition period which was usually spent outside the habitual environment – they had to acquire skills and attitudes required for later life, and how to find their new role in society. In cold cultures allowing little change, this transition period was relatively short. In fact, the time we call adolescence or youth, was limited to a few days or weeks.

The distinction between hot and cold cultures goes back to the French cultural anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss. It was introduced into the current academic debate about adolescence by the ethno-psychoanalytic studies of Mario Erdheim (1991). *Cold cultures* are insular and largely succeed in resisting change. The life of grand-children more or less resembles the life of their grandparents. Puberty plays an important role insofar as its inherent energies harbour the potential to cause upheaval, change, and revolt. Members of indigenous societies must have sensed the threats that puberty might bring. This is the only reasonable explanation for the fact that many societies worldwide developed very similar initiation and passage rites (van Gennep 1909) with strong sacral components and employed them systematically to govern the passage from childhood into adulthood.

During the rites, the initiated were introduced to the cultural secrets of the society. They were not only «taught» the norms and values, they experienced them first hand through pain and mythical practices. The rites made sure that acquired attitudes remained unconscious and did not evoke questions. Erdheim (1991) demonstrated how initiation rites help to replace the initiate's relationship with his parents by a relationship with the women and men in the village. In doing so, initiation rites do not cause the individual to disassociate himself from the family, but to transfer the bond from the family to the cultural group.[2] Tension between family ties and cultural ties is not permitted. Under these conditions, youth can not be an experimental phase.

(2) Elements of a socially acknowledged *transition phase* between childhood and adulthood can be traced way back into history. Young men in Greece and in Rome were granted a period of grace and acknowledged transition phases also existed in many following historic epochs. These transition phases took different forms and were mainly reserved for male members of the ruling class. Any readiness of a society to permit adolescents to engage in independent activities within youth groups, that is within social groups where young people are «among themselves» (Mitterauer 1986: 162), inevitably meant to permit change to a certain degree. Cultural change and adolescence are closely linked. Over the course of centuries, particularly in societies engaging in sacral rites, numerous ritual elements continued to define the passage from childhood to adulthood. This applies in particular to societies with scarce economic resources. Hence until the onset of modernity, early western societies too were shaped by a ritualised transfer of norms, beliefs, and life patterns. Using Levi-Strauss' terminology: they were cold cultures encompassing some hot elements. At any rate, it is hard to imagine a culture being exclusively cold, i.e. immune against change, or exclusively hot, i.e. exclusively shaped by change.

In the wake of industrialisation and the onset of modernity, a youth phase of a different character gradually evolved. Now youth no longer served as period to prepare for professional life, but as a chance for education, self-improvement and personal development. In the late 18th and in the 19th century this privilege was reserved for a minority, with industrialisation it became a necessity for much larger groups of society. «In the course of industrialisation, work activities moved from the family context to external production facilities. Work processes became increasingly complex, and the knowledge of parents no longer sufficed to prepare children for paid work which continued to be important to sustain the family» (Reinders 2005:3).

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[2] This process may well be typical for «collectivist» societies, and strong initiation rites are not the only phenomenon pointing to its existence. A tight set of rules (Helmke/Hesse 2002: 443) and a strong control of emotions guarantee that norms and values – that are equally important for the family and the cultural group alike – are strictly adhered to. The western family type, considered to be a largely «independent» social relationship, is generally called «individualist», whilst the Asian family type is referred to as being interdependent or «collectivist» (ditto: 445).

In the course of this development, children had to be released from family duties in order to receive education and training. Obligatory schooling is considered a crucial factor for the emergence of the youth phase as a self-contain phase of life.

(3) The emergence of *youth as a distinct phase of life* opens the way for increased conflicts between the generations. New forms of handling such conflict and new coping strategies have to be found. Such extended adolescence grants young people a period of grace, as Erik H. Erikson explained in his papers in the 1950s years. «The period can be viewed as a *psychosocial moratorium* during which the individual through free role experimentation may find a niche in some section of his society, a niche which is firmly defined and yet seems to be uniquely made for him» (Erikson 1956: 111). Erikson vividly describes how important it is for young people to travel to foreign environments, and he emphasises the need to grant young people a time-out to develop their personal identity.

The subsequent years can be seen as the heydays of youth cultures. Stimulated by generation conflicts and political protest movements in the 1960s and 1970s and by the aesthetic differentiations and cultural movements in the 1980s and 1990s, a range of forms of expression emerged showing how youth as a «second chance» (Erdheim 1988: 207) can help to redress disappointments and harm experienced during childhood.

Individualistic societies offer young people a wider scope to vent internal tension related to adolescence. The youth phase has become more open and long. Until a few decades ago, youth and its experimental character were reserved to male youth from well-to-do families. Today – in its capacity as a *psychosocial moratorium* (Erikson 1956) or *realm of possibilities* (King 2002) – it is available to all youths, albeit to higher or lesser extent. However today, this moratorium, which was an achievement of modern industrial society, is increasingly restricted. These restrictions are assessed differently by various experts.

(4) Reputed youth researchers are of the opinion that the social purpose of the youth phase is changing. At the root of this change they see the recently diagnosed dramatic processes of *disembedding*. The historical evolvement of the moratorium of youth served to enhance the education and training of young people. Institutionalised education and training provided them with possibilities of individual development. During the moratorium, young people were granted the freedom to spend time in a selected social environment before they went on to integrate into working life. «Integration through separation» was the motto. In the current environment of dwindling job opportunities and consistent structural unemployment, the formerly guaranteed passage from youth to adulthood no longer exists. In its place appears the vision of a citizen who is individually responsible for his personal destiny. The theoretical background for this vision is provided by the «human capital theory» which proclaims that in the job market every individual is an independent actor. In this way, the realm of work gains a novel influence on the youth phase. «Whilst in the 20th century the situation of young people was characterised by the liberation from work-related duties and demands linked to the promise of later social integration, we now witness – as a result of the human capital approach – work-related demands encroaching upon the way young people live» (Schröer 2004: 51). Today's youths are no longer protected by the moratorium of youth, they are subjected to the rules of the job market, their socialisation is disembedded.

At this point we need to remember that the purpose of the youth phase is defined by two central learning experiences: *work and love*. The current processes of disembedding might well disintegrate youth, but it will not completely erode it.

3. Identities in late modernity

> Secularisation, detraditionalisation, and the related individualisation in western societies lead to a lack of collective patterns for identity development. Under such circumstances, the question of how the need for an identity that transcends the individual subject may be fulfilled is of major concern to the human sciences. As early as 1974, the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas asked the question «Can complex societies develop a rational identity?». In his essay under the same title he endeavoured to determine identities beyond those formed by the ties of religion, nations and states. Such collective identity has to be based on a universal moral validity which the world community as a whole accepts as being rational and which acknowledges the liberty of the individual; it can only be achieved through discourse and experimental practice (Habermas 1975: 121). This broad statement has obviously not sufficed to clarify the issue of identity in modernity, particularly in view of the fact that current conditions for identity development continue to cause ever-increasing difficulties, mainly for adolescents.

The key reference in the theoretical debate about identity in the youth phase remains the American Erik H. Erikson who in the 1950s developed a normative *psychosocial developmental theory* encompassing all life phases from early childhood to late adulthood. He defined developmental goals for infancy, early childhood, childhood, school age, adolescence, and later life stages, and described the potential failure to achieve these goals. For the central phase of his development model – adolescence – he mentions the development objective «Identity» and as the respective crisis «Identity confusion». Havighurst, among others, further differentiated Erikson's model of developmental stages by defining detailed developmental tasks for adolescence. A closer look at his work reveals that his explicit and implicit norms of identity development reflect the modern North-American middle class family's way of life. For this reason his concept is criticised for propagating an ideal-typical «standard-format youth» (Mey 1999: 56). Furthermore, living conditions have changed substantially since the 1950s and 1960s. Today, even in the middle class, unerringly straight biographies are rather rare, and numerous disruptions and flexibilities have to be expected. Uncertainties that go along with the increasing disruptions of biographies were highlighted by Marcia. He set out to provide empirical proof of Erikson's theory and revealed that the state of «identity confusion» had significantly risen: whilst in the 1960s some 20 percent of young people manifested identity confusion, 20 years later this percentage had doubled. «In the meantime, this result was confirmed by other studies as well. It implies that a growing number of young people are no longer committed to stable, reliable, and binding – and hence identity-forming – relationships, orientations, and values» (Kraus/Mitzscherlich 1997: 160).

Bohleber (1999) points out that the process of social liberation and the related growing freedom of the individual to shape his life   require us to redefine the psychological integration processes that Erikson described. The belief in a stable identity to be achieved after a phase of identity confusion is a thing of the past. Yet, the physical existence of an individual compels him to develop a coherent self (in the sense of a totality of psychological processes and agents). In this respect, the constructivist ideas espoused by more recent schools of social science have to be viewed with a certain degree of scepticism. They presume that several unlinked partial identities exist side by side forming a patchwork-identity. The image suggests that, due to their experience in disparate life worlds, individuals are compelled to construct their identity piece by piece like a patchwork blanket. At the same time they have to assume that the result is only provisional (Keupp et.al. 1999: 74). Form a perspective that supposes unity of body and soul such a concept of identity development is not tenable. «In every change there is a solid nucleus. It is formed by the embedding of the psychological into

the physical existence of man» (Bohleber, 1999: 526). That is why even after severe crises, upheavals, or strokes of fate we are still sure to be the same person. We cannot grasp the nucleus of our self, we can only feel it and know that it is there (ditto: 513). Yet, recent psychoanalytic concepts increasingly suppose that we need «to pass through the other» to develop self-awareness. The perception of our self evolves through the reflection which the other provides.

> Hence, the idea which we try to develop of our self is always relational, i.e. it emerges and develops in contact with others. In the same way, the new structuring of an adolescent's inner life is initiated by the new objects that he meets in his contact with the surroundings. «This detour via the external object … is necessary because the adolescent cannot achieve change only through internal insight. He has to act, experience himself and be accepted by others» (ditto: 523). The change of the self is initiated by inter-subjective experiences; the individual experiences limitations in the other and is only able to prove himself as an independent person if he gradually develops, accepts and integrates new aspects of his self.

4. Peers and youth cultures – finding a sense of belonging during adolescence

What applies to the modern individual who is left to his own devices, applies even more to the young person growing up. The adolescent is searching for an image of himself and constantly needs the others in order to do so. Identity development does not happen in isolation, it happens within a social context. Identity development during youth is preceded by close relationships with parents and others to whom the child feels close. Childhood development passes through imitation and *identification*. It is a cognitive and emotional process during which the relationship with those to whom the child feels close is of utmost importance. On the onset of puberty, however, these vital relationships are disrupted and changed. Now the young person has to turn away from the parents and move towards others in a new way. Whilst traditional societies provided for a passage of relationships to people outside the family or initiated ties with the marriage partner to cope with this change, individualised societies open a space for new, yet undefined relationships and *group identities*. As early as 1962, the American adolescence researcher Peter Blos poignantly described the distress caused by this situation: «The vacuum of uninstitutionalized adolescence in Western society thus allows, on the one hand, a high degree of personality differentation and individualization, since there are no obligatory models, but on the other hand, the discontinuities in social patterning and the burden of self-determination facilitate deviate and pathological developement» (1962: 204).

In the early 20th century, a vacuum emerged at the link between family and society. This vacuum was filled by juvenile *peer groups*, cliques and youth cultures of a wider range of importance (Schröder/Leonhardt 1998). Already during the time of the German Wandervogelbewegung, which is considered to have been the first independent youth movement, these social groups were of high emotional importance for young people. In the past, as today, albeit in different ways and with different means, young people develop a strong sense of themselves as a group. This feeling of mutual agreement and correspondence is more easily achieved during youth than at any other time in life.

> Young people do not only share the same desire for love, sexuality, and independence, they also share their anxieties in view of their new situation. They share the feelings of shame and profound insecurity. They identify themselves with each other. They feel better understood by those, who experience similar energy and distress. During the early years of adolescence, this understanding often happens without words. Young people engage in the

same activities, but do not reflect about the process. They might use the media to reflect their feelings, often together with others. During this life phase we witness a strong urge to communicate with peers, an urge which young people themselves are unable to explain because it is based in the emotional upheaval of adolescence and develops unconsciously. As I have demonstrated above, individuals in late modernity and digitalised capitalism are left to their own devices. I now want to come back to the *sense of belonging* which the self needs to be able to develop self-esteem and identity in such an environment. Peer groups and youth cultures are the central agents here. They are the milieu, they offer the social relationships in which most identity development beyond the family takes place. This certainly does not mean that youth scenes and their cultural life patterns could   or do replace traditional forms of belonging, even if numerous symbols, rites, and styles of youth cultures resemble such traditional forms of belonging. In western societies we witness young people frequently changing scenes and portraying attitudes which seek to pick out elements that might support their personal identity development. This observation led to the emergence of the term patchwork identities. However, the concept of patchwork identities fails to fully grasp how a young individual links biographical and new experiences not only on the cognitive but also on the emotional level.

One prominent phenomenon in industrialised societies is the *renewed consciousness of the body.* It is a clear reminder of symbols and acts which served different functions in traditional societies.[3] In this context, tattooing and piercing ought to be mentioned. They are widely spread among young people, and to a certain extent they are at the root of new opposition to the parents. The main purpose of both phenomena seems to be an intervention and alteration of the body. «Tattooing and piercing are not a decoration of the skin but a penetration into the flesh. Piercing is a quick intervention which requires several weeks of aftercare whilst the wound is healing. Tattooing on the other hand is a long and painful process followed by a period of transformation during which the wounds heal and the body emerges in its new form» (Stirn 2001: 303) A critical review of both interventions brings forth two aspects: the aspect of *pain* and the aspect of *identity*.

In the initiation processes practiced in early cultures – for example in the indigenous societies of cold cultures – physical injuries and the endurance of pain played an important role. As a result of the liberation from traditions and society's opening up to grant young people time to experiment, psycho-emotional representations have gained ground vis-à-vis physical representations. Hirsch points out that tattooing and piercing transfer emotional pain back to physical pain. He suggests that they constitute a form of substitute (Hirsch 2004: 373).

An additional facet of both phenomena becomes apparent when we look at their social function with respect to acceptance and identity. In view of community milieus eroding, new forms of unifying elements are required. In this respect, youth cultures play a key role. They create new forms and styles that help develop the feeling of belonging. Piercing and tattoos are distinct marks of passage into a social group. Individuals who choose to mark their bodies with tattoos consider the pain and their endurance as signs of unification with the group (Stirn 2001: 303). Unlike T-shirts advertising a distinct type of music, or similar attributes of youth scenes, these «entry tickets» are not easily changed or replaced. They are carved into the body.

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[3] Observers and researches of the youth-cultural development in Germany working with the «Archive of youth cultures» increasingly use ethnological terms such as tribe or tribal culture. In recent years, more and more «artificial tribes» emerged. They try to fill the orientation gaps which eroded socialisation agents left behind by introducing new artificial delimitations such as distinctive outfit, language, rituals, reservations, and – most of all – distinctive music (Farin/Meyer-Guckel 2001: 7). Some scholars speak of a tribalisation of society (Hartwig 2006). However, one important difference between these artificial tribes and traditional tribal cultures needs to be highlighted: members of traditional societies had no choice of joining or leaving the tribe, they were born into the tribe and their affiliation was obligatory.

5. Love and work – two central challenges of adolescence – in cultural change

Love and work: these are the central challenges that young people face on the threshold to adulthood. In order to overcome their dependency on parents, to develop a certain level of independence, and to acquire the skills to survive, young people have to acquire the ability to love, to have sex, to work and to materially reproduce. These challenges are universal, even if cultural patterns of how to deal with the challenges of sexual and social life differ substantially from culture to culture.

> In Western societies and during the last decades, these challenges have changed dramatically. They have changed to such extent that today youth appears in a different light. Due to wide-spread sex education and the modern media, today's young people are no longer kept in the dark about the secrets of *love and sexuality*. Hence, the challenges of love and sexuality seem to have move into the background. The challenges of *work and material reproduction* however, seem to grow in importance. This applies mainly to rich and super-rich societies because here large proportions of the population no longer have access to an average way of leading their lives. For these reasons I would like to propose a closer look at these two challenges.

The link between sexual needs and love

In my own youth in the 1950s and 1960s, parents generally tried to hide any information relating to the love life of adults. Scarce books on the subject were tucked away, and a look at photographs or pictures depicting naked body parts was shamed. If we compare the possibilities that my generation had to learn anything about adult love life with those available to modern young people, we notice a rather radical change. As a result, the majority of today's adults are convinced that today's youths have free access to *sex education*, that they are able to obtain any relevant information from television and youth magazines, and that their cliques and peer groups provide ample opportunity to learn everything worth knowing in the field. There ought to be no problem to communicate extensively and effectively about sexuality (Winter/Neubauer 1998: 358).

However, the belief «that young people have access to pretty much anything» might well be a fatal deception. It might well be a deception about the shame, uncertainties, and anxieties that young people nevertheless experience during puberty, because despite sex education, sex remains an *emotional mystery* for them. With the passage into puberty, human beings acquire the ability to create life. First of all, this is a biological fact. But this fact unleashes its full potential when young people get involved in an intimate relationship with the other sex. The prospect of genital sexuality and the possibility of fathering or bearing a child confer upon sexual intimacy a completely new dimension. It challenges the young person to link his love-experiences of childhood with his newly gained sexual possibilities.

A recent empirical study in Germany threw light on sexual learning processes during youth, the importance of the f*irst encounter*, and the negotiation processes between young men and women. Although the interviewees felt relatively well prepared for their first encounter, they described it as an important threshold in their life. Particularly girls reported that their first sexual intercourse brought them hardly any sexual pleasure and that physical feelings were insignificant or even painful. Many of them acquired the taste – as they put it – only during later encounters with a partner.

> Most of the boys on the other hand, remember their first sexual intercourse as a very beautiful or at least pleasurable event (Stich 2003: 105). Yet, some of them mentioned erection problems and the fear of hurting the girl. Those who considered their first encounter to be a failure had a hard time: they felt their self-confidence threatened. Most young people require several years and a number of relationships before they find pleasing sexual relationships they can practice without fear. During this time, the relationships with their peers is of crucial importance for success. «Nearly all young people with major long-term problems in their social and sexual development – in our sample one out of five boys and one out of five girls – have few friends or are not very successful in gaining acceptance among their peers» (ditto 112).

The study about *negotiations in gender relations* reveals not only that sexuality remains a secret to be discovered but also that the secret can not be discovered in one night. The first sexual encounter remains a central event, an event which opens a door to a realm that, far from being designed, is a realm that requires many further encounters to acquire features that satisfy.

Ability to work and to lead an independent way of life

In a capitalist market economy, the ability to sell one's labour is a basic requirement for an independent way of life. Relying on being provided for by the family or extended family is an exception, and only in rare cases can individuals receive governmental support to cover their living.[4] Hence the adult status depends on the individual's ability to acquire marketable education levels, competencies, and personal characteristics during their youth. In the last few years, overall unemployment in Germany has surpassed the 10 percent limit, and with an average rate of some 15 percent, young people and young adults are particularly affected.[5] Those who do not succeed in securing a training place or a job are prevented from making the passage from youth into independent adulthood. For many youngsters and young adults, the path to adulthood is cumbersome and full of detours. For some 40 percent of school leavers the transition no longer follows the traditional sequence of school, training and paid work. They are obliged to accept intermediate steps, take part in public support measures, and start several attempts to reach their goal (Braun 2004: 45).

High unemployment and an uncertain future affect the various age and social groups in different ways. Numerous recent studies reveal that young people are well aware of this problem. They react to the impending risk either by engaging in work experience schemes and early contact with potential employers well before leaving school or by manifesting their resignation by being tired of or disinterested in school. Young people «consider uncertainty, insecurity, and ambivalence as normal aspects of their self-concept and actions. Their socialisation is more instable, and they react in accordance with the demands of their time, i.e. more flexible» Winkler 2005: 17).

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[4] Countries with much lower pro capita incomes might find this surprising, and immigrant workers from poor regions within Europe too, demonstrate how the salary of one breadwinner in Germany suffices to feed entire families abroad. Yet, many foreign workers make sacrifices and refrain from spending money for goods and services that are not necessary for economic survival, but are nevertheless considered «normal» in the German context such as dining out in a restaurant or buying furniture or modern appliances. However, in order to assess the possibilities of a young adult with respect to his participation in society we have to consider the average way of life as the standard to go by.

[5] This rate reflecting the second quarter of 2006 is provided by the Federal Statistical Office. It applies to people between 15 and 24 years of age. Due to different calculation methods, this figure can only partly be compared to the figures provided by the Bundesagentur für Arbeit (Source: Frankfurter Rundschau, 11.8.2006).

A recent international comparative study looked into young people's *competencies to cope* and investigated their reactions to stress in school and at home (Seiffge-Krenke 2006). Academics are of the opinion that future prospects and job prospects for western youths have drastically deteriorated. Even extended periods of education and training, and higher performance requirements are unable to change this outlook. Such new uncertainties are seen as the reason «why young people in western cultures who are globally considered to enjoy better living conditions than many young people in developing countries» (ditto 161) manifest relatively high stress levels. The study differentiates between active and internal stress coping strategies and confirms that the young people of the 18 nationalities researched have high levels of competency in dealing with stress. Data for German youths show above-average competencies and particularly high levels of active coping competency. Whilst young people from certain countries, e.g. Hong Kong, who achieved much better results in international school performance studies such as the so-called PISA-study, tend to react to stress with withdrawal, German youths cope relatively offensively and actively.

People without the support provided by education and employment will react differently to open-ended situations than people who are embedded and secure. The term *life coping* was introduced to capture this difference. *Life-coping* «refers to the individual's endeavour to maintain or develop the *ability to act* in open-ended life-situations» (Böhnisch 2002: 125). The term life-coping applies to a social environment in which individuals are no longer guided by reliable orientation patterns and structures but are compelled to navigate under conditions that are hard to calculate. *Life-coping* is a description of action. It emphasises that even under difficult circumstances individuals are obliged to find some way of keeping a balance.

People whose personal and social resources are limited might react with strong emotional responses such as anxiety and anger. The psycho-social equilibrium is threatened, particularly when the individual is out of work. In extreme stress situations, human beings try to regain their homoeostatic equilibrium at all cost. Striving for a psychological equilibrium is a process of momentum. It is not governed by cognitive processes but brought about by compulsive impulses and other emotions (Böhnisch/Schröer 2004: 472). In a firmly established society of work – with its patterns of acceptance and marginalisation – unemployment or the prospect of unemployment during the youth phase cause a marked discrepancy between the internal and the external, between the individual's expectation to play a part in society and society's refusal to accept him.

Today's young people are confronted with complex conflict constellations and increasing stress levels. The above-mentioned study by Seiffge-Krenke suggests that they react to this situation with enhanced competencies for active coping.

In western societies, the passage from youth to adulthood is riddled with hurdles. Young people have to identify their specific individual form of passage. Status symbols such as a training contract, A-levels, or a university degree, which paved the way to professional status in the past, have lost their reliability as entry tickets to society. Transition into adulthood might stretch out over a long period of time and is repeatedly threatened (Arnett 2004, Winkler 2005).

X. Disintegration and juvenile violence
Juvenile violence is a significant problem in western industrial societies. Some data suggest that it is on the rise. Entire population groups have limited or no access to training opportunities and jobs, and are thus denied social integration and participation in civil society. Most socio-psychological studies on unemployment reveal that those affected suffer loss of self-esteem, passivity, feel ashamed, and refrain from becoming active in public (Wacker 2005). Young people, however, tend to break out of this dilemma from time to time, and air their feelings of humiliation and rage. The civil unrest in France in

autumn 2005 when the suburban ghettos were the main stage for the torching of cars night after night for numerous weeks present an example of such an outbreak. The revolt revealed untargeted rage, and the actors did not express any particular objectives. Yet a few months later, a further battle united French young people and young adults: the battle against the government's «First Employment Contract». The First Employment Contract, available solely to employees under 26, would have enabled employers to fire employees at any time within a two-year trial period without providing reasons for dismissal. The French government proposed the contract as a means to increase employers' willingness to hire young people and to promote the creation of new jobs. Such contract would have made the transition from the moratorium of youth to work life and responsibility much more difficult. The government's proposal was very unpopular, and after two months of massive protest, large demonstrations, and a wave of solidarity it had to be withdrawn. The violence in the suburbs in autumn 2005 and the targeted protests in spring 2006 might well have been linked, even if the autumn protest was mainly carried by marginalised immigrant communities and the latter by college and university students. In the first revolt, violence played an important role, in the second civil forms of protest dominated.

In recent years, violent forms of youth protest were relatively rare, unlike during the heydays of youth revolt in the1960s to 1980s. Yet, current forms of juvenile delinquency such as rivalling youth gangs, aggressions against teachers, vandalism, and individuals running amok attract considerable media attention. Such incidences are largely portrayed as individual acts and their social causes are rarely highlighted. Structural causes of such acts of violence are poverty, unemployment, social marginalisation, and permissive education practices. The situation of relatively impoverished young people in affluent societies with the overabundance of goods on offer can truly be called a *Tantalus situation*. This image refers to Siegfried Bernfeld's recollection of the Greek myth in which the dispirited Tantalus surrounded by water is unable to drink, the luscious fruit above his head receding as he tries to pick it. «In the midst of tantalising abundance, he could nothing but helplessly renounce» (1931: 340).

Most public debates about juvenile delinquency – particularly those following dramatic violent acts on the part of an individual – blame the young people's lack of norms and values, and at best acknowledge that the media might have a bad influence on juvenile behaviour. Consequently, violence prevention programmes are being designed and particularly deviant youths are excluded from society. In the US, the strategy of exclusion is particularly popular, the high number of people in jail and recent trends towards re-education camps – so-called boot camps – being proof of it. Europe favours prevention measures focusing on aspects of education and guidance. However, such prevention measures also include certain forms of surveillance, and they stir up public fear of young people as a disruptive factor and a security risk (Schröder/Merkle 2006). Overall we witness a shift in perspective from the social context to the individuals acting within it: Public conscience does not concentrate on the relatively unchangeable structural and economic conditions as the cause of violent actions but on individuals who act violently, i.e. the young people. Responsibility for acts of violence is thereby attributed to the individual rather than to society.

6. Young people in Consumer Modernity

Dwindling social embedding and orientation, and rising expectations with respect to individuality and self-regulation cause consumer goods markets and the media[6] to grow in

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[6] For reasons of space this article does not discuss the para-social character of the media and its role in consumer society. This «attribute *para-social* was introduced in the sociological debate about the media. It implies that the media are capable of transcending social reality and exceeding its limits whilst remaining part of it. The inverse

importance. This connection can also be expressed the other way round: Market society requires individualised people so it can ignite their desires to buy and secure growing profits. Desires and fantasies play a special role in adolescence as increased physical abilities together with increased social liberties open up new realms and relationships which need to be explored. Whilst traditional societies taught adolescents to react to desires with asceticism, meditation, and religious practices, modern society has made the «explosion of desires the motor of development» (Erdheim 2003: 330).

In his field studies in the early 1990s, the American anthropologist Mark Liechty looked into the question of how the offers of modern culture are received by Nepalese youths and how this affects their identity development. He enquired how young people react to growing-up in an environment that is radically different from the world of their parents. He visited Kathmandu to interview young people from a middleclass background and accompanied them during their attempts to open a window to globalised western modernity. For this purpose the youths were introduced to a youth magazine called «Teens» which advertises various consumer goods marketed as desirable articles for young people. Reading the magazine, the young Nepalese acquired a sense of what adolescents ought to wear, how they ought to take care of their bodies, which fashion is «in», and which goods and accessories promise social acceptance. In this way modernity was constructed as a discourse which transforms the material to become real, and equates human beings with objects, and pleasure and emotions with material conditions (Liechty 1995: 175). According to Liechty, this leads to a *consumer modernity* which is propagated by mass media and transnational processes and removed from local contexts. In this environment, identity is not linked to place, it ignores local experiences, and harbours the risk that young people – as the Nepalese youths declared in their interviews – lack «a place to stand», i.e. that they live and feel in some kind of no-man's-land. This study highlights how complex and risky identity development might be for young people who block out their origins and locality, launch themselves into an utterly unknown world, and adopt the illusion of finding meaning in life by consuming. The risk is particularly strong if the young person is left on his own to navigate between these polarities, that is if there is no mediation or bridging between traditional cultural life patterns on the one hand and the individualised life patterns of so-called modernity[7] on the other.

7. Final theses and perspectives

1. Puberty and the related physical changes and developments are the work of nature. They are largely immovable and challenge the culture into coming up with suitable reactions.
2. The passage between childhood and adulthood did not always take place in a distinct youth phase or adolescence; numerous cultures knew different forms of transitions.
3. Cultural change and adolescence are linked: an acknowledged distinct youth phase promotes change, and change encourages the development of a distinct youth phase.
4. Late modern western societies have limited ways of harnessing increased individualisation. Under these circumstances the youth phase is subjected to further differentiation and disembedding.

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tension of concretely experienced social reality and the imaginary world of the media determines their sociological and pedagogical characteristics» (Böhnisch 1996).

[7] What we called modernity is by no means purely modern but steeped in tradition. The later becomes all too apparent when we look at current tendencies to revert to archaic life patterns and ways of giving meaning employed in piercing and tattooing, and in esoteric and religious movements.

5. Increased differentiation and disembedding create higher risks for identity development during youth. Identity development increasingly depends on peer groups and youth cultures, and resorts to nationalism and idolisation (in music and sport) which in turn induce an augmented risk for society.
6. The family and its supportive functions are equally affected by erosion. This tendency causes a revived consciousness of educational values and communal social life patterns and orientations.
7. Renewed consciousness of the body in western societies – mainly amongst young people – is evidence of a desire to belong.
8. The discovery of love and sexuality remains a vital aspect of youth, even if sexuality has lost its intimacy and everything seems obtainable and accessible in the media.
9. The western working society replaces the family safety net by an individualised battle for survival. Under these circumstances, the status of adulthood is closely linked to employment. Unemployment and uncertainty extend the youth phase and slow down the passage into adulthood.

   Fragile identity development and social exclusion increase the risk that conflicts are handled using violence and they call for new strategies to gain satisfaction. The market and the media continuously offer new promises.

10. «Collectivist cultures» which are inevitably drawn into consumer modernity need to find specific ways of linking and mediating between polarities.
11. Youth workers in western countries such as Germany have acquired an understanding of the need to accompany and support young people and to engage them in communal activities. Youth work wants to help fulfil the need for security in today's individualised modernity by providing access to adult company to which young people can relate as well as to meeting places, and cultural activities.
12. Institutionalised youth work in western countries, which is mainly active in the field of leisure, can hardly be a model for countries such as Sri Lanka. Yet, experiences gained in dealing with young people in late modernity might be equally instructive for institutions that focus on educational and job-related measures to overcome poverty and discrimination.
13. Certain societies with collectivist traditions have to a certain extent succeeded in holding their own ground against the global trend caused by unbridled market forces. They bear a potential for future economic and social developments – mainly for their children and young people – that should not be underestimated.

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