

The drawback of the ›adventure society‹

by

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Preface

We were familiarized with the diagnosis that we live in a dramatic societal situation of upheaval. From the macro-sociological point of view, the classical descriptions of modern societies lose of persuasiveness. For a long time we have stopped to put the old labels of the working or class society on them. Even the modern social state seems to be a model that is discontinued. Instead, terms like ›two-thirds-society‹, ›risk society‹ (Beck 1986), recently even ›adventure society‹ (Schulze 1992) lay claim to core positions in the changing scenarios.

Also the micro-sociology seems to be irritated. The small-scale social behaviour of people becomes indistinct. Relationships in the social proximity, intergenerative orientations, the relations between the sexes alter. Even the classical social patterns of living together are braking up (cf. Beck 1983; Mooser 1984). The ordinary life course – just discovered as to be an institution (Kohli 1985, 1987, 1989) – ›becomes frayed‹ und loses its profile (cf. Alheit 1993a). Without doubt we are well acquainted with this kind of diagnostic provocation. It is almost part of the tools of the publishing sociologist. Who wants to gain attention today has to predict dramatic changes. And as utopias are not popular any more, the charm of risk seems to be in demand – theoretical ›bungee jumping‹ so to speak.

However, reality offers a clue for that: For the past fifty years we have had enough reasons to speak of epoch-making upheavals. The disappearance of the big political factions that represented – as we suspect today – at the same time astonishing social ›ligatures‹ (Dahrendorf 1991), begins to worry us. What is set off there, has not much to do with the hope for civilisation and democracy (cf. Alheit 1994a). Ethno-mafios organizations wage brutal representative wars and make confused ciphers of us. Everyday ecological scandals and terrible scenarios take turns. Corrupt politicians without a definite line, of every shade, hardly conceal their helplessness. Populistic are only yesterday's dangerous fascistic ideologies. In a partly artificially generated atmosphere of xenophobia and racism, people give vent to vague fears of outclassing by alarming acts of violence. But even the people's protest has no profile. Classical social-democratic electors vote for radical right-wing parties but at the same time distance themselves from their decision – a very confusing situation, reason enough for fin-du-siècle sarcasms.

However, the really irritating thing is: Our biographical perspectives are not made as uncertain as the general disaster leads one to assume. We live our own, individual life relatively unimpressed by the dramatic time signals. When we join for once - in small public circles, in front of the TV, in the group of regulars or at family birthdays - in the bewailing of the crisis, when we express our fury about the politicians or even our fears of the abominations of the war in Bosnia, the ecological threat to our world, the dramatic climate catastrophes, we put ourselves in emotionally exceptional situations.

Initially, psychologists have offered plausible explanations for that conduct. Nobody would be able to bear fully consciously the multiple major risks of our time. The, not absurd at all, idea that we could be hit by a nuclear, chemical or genetic MCA at any time, requires an unprecedented routinely repression. We would not be in a position any more to digest the over-complexity of continuous threat. Our individual powers of imagination would be overtaxed.

However, one can »de-psychologize« these findings and even intensify them sociologically: A considerable part of the knowledge that we need for a normal social career consists of – like the phenomenologists say – the »putting in brackets« of particles of knowledge of global range. That is not at all a new discovery. But it goes for the modern risk societies too. We know particularly what we need for calculable social survival. And this small knowledge about everyday life and life-world has not at all conformed to the dramatic diagnosis of the time yet. It seems to be more resistant and robust than the sociological trends. And from time to time that is a good thing.

When, in the following, we want to talk for all that of changes of these resources of knowledge – especially where they refer to biographical constructions – we attach importance to a certain restraint and distance ourselves strongly from far-reaching, dramatizing predictions. Nearly two decades of our own biographical researches made us sceptical with regard to always new scenarios of crisis on a macro-sociological level. However, they sensitized us for peripheral changes, which consequences really touch the basic structures of modern biographies.

The study on hand looks into a new discovery, the increasing structural marginalization of social actors in their young adulthood, that seems to have produced an enigmatic syndrome of forms of digestion between hedonism and violence. The obvious »neutralization of educational and employment system« (Alheit 1994) made the status passage between education and labour market for an increasing group of young people become a precarious biographical risk situation. One could almost – like Beck and Berger (1990) – talk of a »temporariness of social disparity«. The empirical symptoms surrounding that syndrome still seem to be very complex, theoretical explanations are still ambiguous and not at all on an adequate level of plausibility. Nevertheless there are indicated a whole lot of findings the re-interpretation of which should be interesting.

First, we want to examine these findings with an exploratory survey, partly regroup them in secondary analyses and formulate then a well substantiated hypothesis. A certain legitimation for that action gives us the pre-study carried out for that purpose, which allows a differentiated access to the biographical internal view of the social actors concerned and the essential results of which we present in the volume on hand. The first part of the following considerations will first attend to a conceptional summary. The second part contains a critical examination of the central thesis of Gerhard Schulze's prominent study about the so-called »adventure society«. The third part concentrates on the results of the latest background and mentality studies. Part 4 contains important quantitative secondary analysis on the basis of accessible data of modernized life-styles. Connected with these analysis is the intention to contribute to the construction of a new instrument for the registration of lifestyle-types. The fifth part contains the result of the qualitative pre-study, the attempt to present biographical portraits in post-adolescent risk situations of the German society after the reunification. The end (part 6) constitutes a short summary.

The present version is already the second, slightly reworked version of the first edition of the study, which was out of print soon. We have completed it by an appendix which includes results of a pretest with the »lifestyle indicators« developed by Michael Zwick. In addition, the second edition contains an index of persons and topics.

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