YOUTH IN EUROPE
OFFENBURG
TALKS "

#5

IDENTITIES AND BELONGING: WHAT DO YOUTH WORK AND YOUTH POLICY NEED TO KNOW ABOUT YOUNG PEOPLE TODAY?

CONCEPTUAL REFLECTIONS

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In 2022, the series of YOUTH IN EUROPE: OFFENBURG TALKS will focus on the topic **'Identities and belonging: what do youth work and youth policy need to know about young people today?'**. At the workshop, 30 European experts from the field of youth policy, practice and research will discuss which identities and sense of belonging young people (seek to) have today. It will be explored, how these aspects are generated and which transformations they undergo, which influence individualism, solidarity and communities have, which role youth (sub)cultures and youth milieus play in this process and what 'home' in its diverse aspects means to young people today. The findings of the workshop shall inform youth work and youth policy to better support young people in their quest of finding themselves and their 'home' in an increasing challenging and complex world.

Some definitions and reflections….

According to Cambridge Dictionary[1] '**Belonging**' stands for *"to be in the right place or a suitable place"* or *"to feel happy or comfortable in a situation"*. For young people it means to develop best in an environment in which they feel to belong, in homes, schools and communities, in their culture. Belonging can particularly be linked to places: locally, regionally, nationally or European, even globally ('global citizen'); in times of increased mobility, however, places may play a less dominant role in young people's life and transition regimes[2]. Belonging also has cultural, social, political and economic dimensions, since it relates to communities, families, milieus, sub-cultures and social groups or classes. *"Belonging is personal, infused with individual and collective histories as well as interwoven with conceptions of place… How young people negotiate belonging in everyday life and how they come to understand their positions in fragmented societies remain emerging areas…. "* [3].

"Identity is the qualities, beliefs, personality, looks and/or expressions that make a person (self-identity…) or group (collective identity…). One can regard the awareness and the categorizing of identity as positive or as destructive." [4] It is important to withstand a definition of identity in which 'difference' or 'otherness' of an identity is something superior to others (as some do for instance in the 'identitarian movement'[5]), but to see and analyse diverse individual and collective identities from an economic, social, cultural and political perspective which stand in a reciprocal dependency. Social identities (such as those based on ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, disability and religion) are always constructed within particular contexts and influenced by multiple processes of inclusion and exclusion[6]. During the transition from childhood to adulthood, young

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[1]   Cambridge Dictionary: https://dictionary.cambridge.org/de/worterbuch/englisch/belonging

[2]   Wyn, Johanna (2018): A Critical Perspective on Young People and Belonging

[3]   Habib, Sadia and Ward, Michael (ed) (2019): Youth, Place and Theories of Belonging

[4]   Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Identity_(social_science)

[5]   The Identitarian movement or Identitarianism is a pan-European nationalist, far-right political ideology asserting the right of Europeans and peoples of European descent to culture and territories claimed to belong exclusively to them (from Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Identitarian_movement accessed 04.11.2021)

[6]   Hopkins, Peter E.   (2010): Young People, Place and Identity

people make important decisions about who they are and who they hope to be in the future; that is, they form an identity[7]. Identity must be seen as an ever-changing process of positioning and collective (always artificial) identity be accepted as nothing once and for all. *"Cultural identity is …a matter of 'becoming' as well of 'being'… Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories, but like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation."* [8]

As the conceptualisation of young people as a 'homogeneous group' doesn't reflect both, horizontal and vertical differentiations, and inequalities within society, (youth) cultures[9] and milieus[10] express better the diversity of young people and their affiliation to social classes. Besides education, jobs, income, and power as criteria for social belonging, also values, attitudes, mentalities and principles of lifestyles are relevant elements, despite an enhanced differentiation, pluralisation and individualisation in a post-modern world. Categories of class, ethnicity and gender are also important here, as inseparably interconnected, and standing in a mutual dependency. In the debate on youth cultures and milieus it must be acknowledged that they cannot be seen as separate, independent cultures since they develop and exist in more or less close relationship to values and morals of other (adult) cultures.

When exploring the sense of belonging of young people, the concepts of 'home' or 'homeland' are as well relevant, while not without controversy. However, what is meant by 'home' or 'homeland'? Is it more than a place or an attitude and position? 'Home' is often perceived as one of the places where a person feels safest, and as one of the places where one likes being most. A sense of feeling at home can be seen as one of the conditions of group identity (next to difference of others). The derived notion of 'homeland' usually refers to one's region of birth and the (assumed) ethnic/national affiliations and loyalties this entails. Especially for those in exile, 'homeland' plays a crucial role for those excluded by pushing the notion's part linked to the location away and considering homeland as 'non-location': a feeling, a hope, a desire. In this regard it is also to ask, what the term 'homeland' means to migrants and refugees, or more general, to those excluded from their 'homes'.

In the German context, the particular term 'Heimat'[11] reflects the ideas of home and homeland as *"a spatial and social unit of medium range, wherein the individual is able to experience safety and the reliability of its existence, as well as a place of a deeper trust"*[12], or in brief, one's so-called 'natural habitat'. However, both in historical and contemporary Europe, notions like 'homeland' and 'identity' and 'heimat' have been used in conserva-

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[7]   Berry, J.W. et al. (2006): *Immigrant youth in cultural transition. Acculturation, Identity, and adaption across national contexts*, p.8

[8]   Hall, Stuart (1994): *'Cultural identity and diaspora'*; *Hall (1932–2014) was a Jamaican-born British sociologist, cultural theorist, and political activist. He was one of the founding figures of the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies https://en.wikipedia. org/wiki/Stuart_Hall_(cultural_theorist)*

[9]   *"Youth culture refers to the societal norms of children, adolescents, and young adults" Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ Youth_culture*

[10]   *Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung - Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte (APUZ 44-45/2006): Soziale Milieus https://www.bpb. de/shop/zeitschriften/apuz/29425/soziale-milieus*

[11]   *"Heimat is a German word translating to 'home' or 'homeland'…. and has no exact English equivalent". Wikipedia: https:// en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heimat*

[12]   *Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heimat*

tive, or even right-wing political discourses primarily. A question therefore is if the desire for 'home' or 'homeland' or even 'identity' is necessarily conservative, unprogressive, negative, nostalgic, and reactive, or can it as well be something that provides space for belonging, collective identities and solidarity? To put it in the words of Stefan Strumbel, famous contemporary artist from Offenburg[13]: 'What the fuck is Heimat?' and which role does it play for identity and belonging?

Stefan Strumbel, Offenburg - Silkscreen on 300g paper, taken from https://www.diekunstagentin.de/produkt/stefan-strumbel-what-the-fuck-is-heimat-2/

WHAT IS THE ISSUE TO BE DISCUSSED IN YOUTH IN EUROPE: OFFENBURG TALKS EDITION #5?

As mentioned before, young people (as individuals in general) are subject to different economic, social, cultural, and political conditions and thus create and share diverse cultures, milieus, and identities. In particular identities of young people develop between individualism and group belonging in diverse (sub-)cultures and milieus. Recent studies show that many young people suffer the negative impact of individualisation[14] and the Covid-19 pandemic additionally reveals the fragile status of mental health. Young people

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[13] *The city of Offenburg, where the YOUTH IN EUROPE: OFFENBURG TALKS are hosted, will celebrate in the year 2022 under the motto "Heimat – Freiheit – Europa" (homeland – liberty – Europe) the "Heimattage" (days of habitat of the 'land' Baden Württemberg celebrated each year in another community of the region). Various activities of different nature are planned, such as carnival celebrations, costume processions, hike and bike tours, fairs as well as cultural events.*

[14] *Calmbach, Marc; Flaig, Berthold Bodo; Schleer, Christoph; Edwards, James; Möller-Slawinski, Heide (2020): Sinus Jugendstudie 2020 – Lebenswelten von Jugendlichen im Alter von 14 bis 17 Jahren in Deutschland https://www.sinusinstitutde/media-center/studien/wie-ticken-jugendliche-2020*

feel an "each-to-their-own"-mentality, are scared of (experienced) polarisation, hate and aggression in society and miss social cohesion. Studies also show that for a majority decent living conditions are more important than social status, economic success, and professional career; instead, mutual support, solidarity, fairness, justice, democracy, and freedom are the dominating values. However, 'young people' are by far not a homogeneous but a very diverse group, with many nuances.

In positive terms, youth work aims at countering negative impacts and to contribute to better living conditions for young people, by "supporting spaces for young people's voice and autonomy and building bridges for the next steps in young people's lives"[15]. In this regard the debate will be grouped around the questions how youth work contributes to young people's sense of belonging (in milieus as well as in neighbourhoods and local, regional, national communities) and how it constitutes a safe space for exploring and building (positive forms of) young people's identities, including the emergence of new youth cultures and affiliations.

From a perspective of 'equal opportunities' it will be of utmost relevance to ask how to make youth work inclusive to young people with non-mainstream identities, what it takes to make them feel safe and 'at home'. This also requires looking at phenomena of 'intersectionality' as 'the way in which different types of discrimination are linked to and affect each other' to understand unfair treatment because of a person's sex, ethnicity, etc. (see Cambridge Dictionary)[16]. Further it needs to be discussed in how far young people's identity development needs are reflected in (European) youth policy frameworks.

The key questions of 5th edition of the YOUTH IN EUROPE: OFFENBURG TALKS in 2022 on **'Identities and belonging: what do youth work and youth policy need to know about young people today?'** will be:

- Who are young people today? What do they think and feel and need?
- Which (diverse) identities do they have (or for which they are looking for)?
- Which youth (sub)cultures and milieus are relevant with regard to identity building and belonging?
- What does 'home' in its diverse and contradictory aspects mean to the different groups of young people?

Informed by this closer look at young people, the core of discussions will focus on the role of youth work in supporting young people, centred in the question

- How do different forms of youth work (e.g. European or local youth work, open and detached youth work, outreach work with youth and

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[15]   *3rd European Youth Work Convention (2020): Signposts for the Future - Final Declaration. https://www.eywc2020.eu/downloads/doctrine/WebforumVeranstaltungenWebsiteBundle:Media-file-99/201021%20EYWC2020_Factsheet_Final%20Declaration_V09_mit%20Grafik.pdf; see also: Williamson, Howard (2017): Winning space, building bridges - What youth work is all about; in: Schild, Hanjo; Connolly, Nuala; Labadie, Francine; Vanhee, Jan; Williamson, Howard (2017): Thinking seriously about youth work: And how to prepare people to do it*

[16]   *Cambridge Dictionary: https://dictionary.cambridge.org/de/worterbuch/englisch/intersectionality*

youth social work, youth councils, youth-led movements….) affect and address the development of youth identities and the sense of belonging of young people?

As in earlier editions of the YOUTH IN EUROPE: OFFENBURG TALKS the discussions on the given topics will aim to look deeper into the described questions and phenomena, to analyse the situation more in-depth, differentiate the picture and talk also and particularly about the position and role of youth work (and policy). Participants will be experts, researchers, policy-makers, youth work practitioners inspired by short inputs and reflections of different kind.