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Patron:

Journal Title: German studies review.

Volume: 15 **Issue:** Winter

Month/Year: 1992**Pages:** 55-eoa

Article Author: Western Association for German
Studies; German Studies Association Taylor, Tom

Article Title: Images of Youth and the Family in
Wilhelmine Germany: Toward a Reconsideration of
the German Sonderweg

Imprint: [Tempe, Az.], German Studies
Association

ILL Number: 128461708



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Images of Youth and the Family in Wilhelmine Germany: Toward a Reconsideration of the German *Sonderweg*

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In her recent contribution to the series, *A History of Private Life*, Ingeborg Weber-Kellermann discusses the relationship between the nature of the German family and modern German political development. Central to her discussion is the correlation between the rise and persistence of patriarchy within the family and its influence on the authoritarian structure of German political life. For Weber-Kellermann the roots of the patriarchal household can be traced far back to the patterns of the *Hausvater* who dominated domestic affairs and served as the legal and political foundation of the state in the early modern period. Despite changes in the economic function of the household in the nineteenth century patriarchy remained strong, particularly within the middle-class household where wives and children remained under the all-powerful thumb of the *Übervater*. Ultimately, she argues, it is this persistence of patriarchy in the pre-World War I period which helps account for the subservience of the German voting public to Nazism in the 1930s. Here Weber-Kellermann cites and concurs with the work of Max Horkheimer, Erich Fromm, Theodor Adorno, and leading scholars of the emigrée Frankfurt School in linking the authoritarian German family to the rise of fascism.

[These] views argued that the political system of authoritarian rule [in the Nazi regime] had a basis in the early childhood experiences in the family, and particularly in the strict patriarchal family of German tradition. This group of social psychologists succeeded in illustrating the interdependence between authoritarian family socialization and Fascism.¹

Weber-Kellermann's views of the German family have long resonated through the historical literature on the family and of youth. In fact the theme of the persistence of patriarchy in the modern era has been one of the central explanations for Germany's stunted or aborted path of modernization the *Sonderweg* paradigm. The illiberal and reactionary tendencies of the middle class have figured in attempts to explain everything in German history from the failure of the revolutions of 1848, through the colonial policies of Bismarck, the outbreak of World War I, and the rise of Hitler. According to this paradigm, the middle class' abandonment of their expected role as the defender of constitutionalism and liberalism after the failure of the 1848 revolution facilitated the survival of the feudal-militaristic-bureaucratic state of the Second Empire. The bourgeoisie "allowed itself to become subordinated to the pre-industrial elite, failed to achieve basic reforms in the state, and permitted its own assimilation to the existing 'aristocratic' and 'authoritarian' value system. Under the *Kaiserreich* this 'feudalization' or 'refeudalization' was heavily institutionalized."² Thus the middle-class family in the Imperial period is both a symbol of the authoritarianism writ large in the politics of the *Kaiserreich* and also more importantly, as Fromm and others have argued, a notable source of these values. Hans Ulrich-Wehler, for example, insists that the paternalism and authoritarianism of the Wilhelmine family "amplified" the predominant authoritarian models of Imperial politics. And likewise Ralf Dahrendorf notes that the authoritarian nature of the German Wilhelmine father, while somewhat caricaturish, along with the school system, was an illustration "of the perverted attitude to social conflict that permeate[d] German society and prevent[ed] the spread of democratic principle in it."³ The end result was Germany's *Griff Nach der Weltmacht* in World War I and the rise of Nazism in the 1930s.

Beginning in the mid-1970s and especially after the appearance of Geoff Eley and David Blackbourn's *The Peculiarities of German History: Bourgeois Society and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Germany* in 1984, traditional notions concerning of the role of the middle class in German political history have been questioned. Eley and Blackbourn dispute the notion that the weakness of *Reichstag* reform legislation demonstrates that the middle class abrogated all involvement in social reform. They argue that within a variety of government agencies, social reform movements, and the like there was an "authentic domain of bourgeoisie political achievements" during the Wilhelmine period. Both also provide a number of cautions to blanket assessments of the middle class' or even the educated elites mood and mentality. Discussing the pervasive literature on cultural pessimism amongst these groups Blackbourn notes that while it is clear that cultural pessimism was a powerful current in the *Bildungsbürgertum* ... [i]t is not the case [however] that between the middle and the late nineteenth century cultural optimism simply gave way to cultural

pessimism, that belief in progress yielded to despair. The reality was a complete juxtaposition of the two.⁴ Thomas Nipperdey, in a series of articles which continued this reevaluation of the *Sonderweg*, noted that the *Bildungsbürgertum* “was in reality an overlapping of tradition, present and future,” and that “the overwhelming tendency of Wilhelmine society was the growing potential of a coming democracy.”⁵

Along similar veins some historians have questioned the characterization of the paternalistic, authoritarian family in the modern era. Ralf Dahrendorf in the conclusion to *Society and Democracy*, for example, argues “that if it [this image of the family] ever was real, [it] probably never held for the whole of German society and possibly no longer described a living reality in the later years of the Weimar Republic. To this picture belong the father of Erikson’s ‘caricature’ (a word he uses himself since, like Adorno and Fromm, he is not deadly serious about his analysis).”⁶ Even Wehler, who strongly supports the model of authoritarianism and patriarchy in Imperial society, speculates on the possibility of potentially revolutionary changes within some middle-class households as the century drew to a close:

[I]t is also true that a relaxation of these norms [patriarchal dominance] occurred in certain strata, particularly after the 1890s. It appears that there also existed a connection between liberality and a generous upbringing on the one hand, and a rising level of education and material security on the other. Here is a wide field of study for the social historian of education. Emanating from those social strata whose children passed through the new youth movement (*Jugendbewegung*), new ideas and practices of child-rearing percolated through to other social groups.⁷

Yet despite these criticisms and cautionary notes the persistence of the image, as evidenced by Weber-Kellermann’s piece, remains. Dahrendorf, while cautioning against this caricature for later periods and some families, nonetheless admits it probably does fit middle-class families in the Wilhelmine era.⁸ Other historians looking into the experience of middle-class youth generally have accepted that there was a rising tide of suicide, sexual frustration, and generational conflict in Imperial Germany amongst this group precipitated by the patriarchal household and the authoritarian teacher. In what has become the classical statement of this position the German sociologist Hans Munchow maintains that, frustrated by changes in schooling and work practices and state functions which robbed him of certain patriarchal functions, the middle-class father “out of habit held onto [his] role, however, and thus pressed down on the nuclear family as a superfather [*Übervater*], especially on the growing children, who from nursery onwards were subject to every impulse of their parental

master.⁹ The result of such treatment could be seen in the dispirited, alienated, and ultimately suicidal lives of characters in the plays and novels of Heinrich and Thomas Mann, Frank Wedekind, Robert Musil, and others; it was also demonstrated in the seemingly rebellious cry of “youth for itself” shouted by the early *Wandervogel*.

By way of comparison this crisis of youth in Wilhelmine Germany has stood in contrast to the more open, integrative treatment of turn-of-the-century youth in England, France and the United States where democracy and progressivism dominated politics. As Joseph Kett argues in his history of American adolescents:

To grasp this [differences in experience of youth in Germany and other countries] one has to only compare the primitivism and alienation of the German *Wandervogel* movement, young people in all-out revolt against the stifling constraints of Wilhelmine middle-class family life and the fierce intellectual pressures of the gymnasium, with the conformist nationalism and boyish cheerfulness of the British Boy Scouts or with the coeducational sociability of the American high school.¹⁰

Despite cautions against stereotyping the paternalistic, authoritarian middle-class Wilhelmine family, then, the caricature persists and remains both an important metaphor and causal explanation of modern Germany's peculiar path of historical evolution *Sonderweg*. In this paper I would like to challenge this image. I shall do so primarily through examining the experience of male youth in three areas long associated with the problems of patriarchy and authoritarianism in the middle-class household and school system — sexual suppression and frustration, suicide and generational tensions, particularly as seen in the rebellious activities of the *Wandervogel* members. I would like to suggest that if we look at the myriad of government reports, health studies, school investigations, and other materials that sought to investigate the experiences of young Germans in this period a less stereotypical view of middle-class youth, their family life, and their world than the one sketched above will begin to appear. Reports of sexual activity amongst secondary and university students varied from repressive restraint to orgiastic activity. Studies on suicide amongst Germany youth also paint a rather contradictory picture of the problem, some suggesting that suicide amongst students may have actually been on the decline in this area of supposedly deepening pessimism and repression. Finally, parental antipathy and generational conflict, a frequent theme of adolescent literature, seems less universal than previously assumed. In reevaluating the image of youth in Wilhelmine society I would also hope to question some of the assumptions about the “backwardness and retardation of

middle-class society in Wilhelmine Germany” which are central to many of the arguments about Germany’s different path of development, and to suggest some alternative interpretations of family identity and its relation to political evolution in modern Germany.

Sexuality

In his influential work on the history of youth John Gillis echoes the theme of Wilhelmine adolescent sexual isolation and repression.

Deprived of youth’s traditional agency of sexual education, the peer group, German middle-class boys and girls found their stage of dependency an extraordinarily lonely, disturbing experience. By 1900 this social experience was translating itself into literary expression, with the novels of Thomas Mann, Hermann Hesse and Robert Musil exploring the inner turmoil of adolescence. Similar concerns were reflected in the work of German and Austrian psychological schools, including, of course, Freud and his followers.¹¹

Freud and his compatriots wrote voluminously regarding the high rates of neuroses and nervous maladies that resulted from excessive sexual restraint amongst young Germans.

But if we look at a variety of studies undertaken by German physicians around the turn of the century to assess the sexual practices of secondary and university students sexual abstinence and social isolation did not seem to be the problem. In a series of alarming and sensational reports published in the early 1900s doctors concluded that pupils and students were indeed sexually active and contracting syphilis and gonorrhoea in shocking numbers. A young doctor in Cologne, E. Mierowsky, told the story of a sixteen-year-old *Gymnasium* student who came to his office with his mother. Having recently graduated from medical school where he had become associated with the German Society for the Prevention of Venereal Disease, the doctor decided to inform the lad of the dangers that awaited him as he entered the relatively ungoverned life of a university student. He took the pupil aside and began to lecture him about sex and venereal disease when the youth interrupted, “I know all about it. There is in my class already a few classmates who have contracted gonorrhoea because of their frequenting of bordellos.” The young doctor was stupefied. “But,” the pupil assured him, “that won’t happen to me. I have a ‘relationship’ [*Verhältnis*] with a young salesgirl. Don’t tell my mother though, she’d be upset.”¹²

The story of the young boy and his amorous activities, Doctor Mierowsky realized, may not have been atypical. Compelled by this conversation he began to distribute questionnaires to university students who frequented his

Poliklinik in Breslau. His survey, which asked questions about all manners of things, masturbation, first sexual experience, and venereal disease elicited 170 responses. The results of this survey confirmed his suspicions. He found that better than 85 percent of those that responded had had sexual intercourse. Of this number 70 percent or 44 percent of the total population lost their virginity while still completing their secondary studies.¹³

As part of the questionnaire Mierowsky asked the respondents to describe not only their personal experiences but also those of their fellow pupils. Comments such as the following were typical. "Beginning at the *Untersekunda* (approximately age sixteen) level pupils began to have sex. Even *Tertianer* (approximately age fourteen) had relations although that may be because many tended to be older. Half of the upper classes had been involved sexually." Said another, "I believe that about 40% of those in my secondary school class had sex before graduation; 10-20% did so on a regular basis." Some of the secondary pupils interviewed by Mierowsky indicated that it was not uncommon for them to have a room in the city, a so-called *Absteigequartiere*, where they could be with their current girl friends, and away from parental supervision.¹⁴ Some blamed the increase in promiscuity on the autonomy and anonymity afforded pupils in the big city; still others contended that adolescents were much more active in small towns and rural environments where servant girls and open fields allowed for less supervision. In either case many studies agreed that modern youth had great opportunity and freedom to explore their awakening sexual desires.

While university students were always granted greater autonomy for sexual experimentation in Germany, particularly with prostitutes, the issue of free sex amongst university students became more openly discussed and, if we are to believe certain reports, more openly practiced during the early twentieth century. According to a study of students and sex by Dr. Max Marcuse it was becoming more commonplace for a student to take up residence with his "*Verhältniss*." Landlords who had frowned upon such practices in the past, it was noted, also began to take a more tolerant view of premarital cohabitation.¹⁵ Courts in Berlin, Kassel, and other cities began to pave the way for such practices when they ruled that cohabitation involving unmarried couples was not illegal.¹⁶

Many of these studies rather than demonstrating a suppressed and repressed adolescent sexuality indicated that Wilhelmine male youth had a great deal of autonomy and latitude in their social affairs and that there was a significant amount of contact with girls and freedom to explore relationships. Certainly the evidence, much of it anecdotal, does not allow for a definitive portrait of adolescent and youth sexuality in the Wilhelmine period; the growing debate does, however, necessitate that the traditional caricature of isolated,

lonely, and frustrated youth be questioned. At a minimum the proliferation of such studies and debates may well indicate a society more willing to openly discuss and analyze former taboo issues such as adolescent sexuality.

Suicide

Beginning in the 1890s and crescendoing with sickening frequency after the turn of the century, newspapers reported in often clinical yet shocking detail the story of another young boy or girl's tragic end — "In Danzig a twelve-year-old girl poisoned herself because she was punished for stealing an armband"; "a thirteen-year-old boy from Plauen, fearful of punishment, jumped in front of a train"; "the nineteen-year-old son of a good family was found lying on the pavement below his third story window this morning at approximately 8:30 AM. His skull was shattered. Efforts by a doctor to save him failed."¹⁷

Popular culture fueled the growing anxiety over the crisis of youth suicide. Theater and literature introduced whole new genres (*Schulschauspiel* and *Schulroman*) dealing with the problem; in many of these works the climactic scene was that of a young boy or girl devoid of hope or joy committing a grizzly act of self-destruction. Banned as shocking in the 1890s, these works, notably Frank Wedekind's play *Spring's Awakening*, drew large audiences and readership after the turn of the century.¹⁸

Psychologists, social scientists, and pedagogues produced numerous tracts dissecting the incidents of youthful suicide and motivation behind them. Between 1890 and 1910 the number of studies in this regard increased dramatically and continued to rise.

Table 1: Articles Dealing with
Youth and Student Suicide in Germany

	School <u>Suicide</u>	Youth or Child <u>Suicide</u>	Total
Pre-1890	2	3	5
1890-1899	4	3	7
1900-1909	35	11	46
1910-1914	38	14	52

Source: Hans Rost, *Bibliographie des Selbstmords mit textlichen einführungen zu jedem Kapitel* (Augsburg: Hans and Grabbner, 1927), 85-96.¹⁹

In the vast majority of these studies two themes resonated loudly and frequently. The first was that youth suicide was really not a problem of all German youth but rather of middle-class pupils and students. The second theme was that the problem of adolescent suicide was a particularly German phenomenon.

Studies of suicide in the Imperial period indicated a sharp increase in suicide amongst boys in the 15-20-year-old category (See Table 2). Such findings led most to identify the problem of youth suicide with school suicide for, after all, it was at this age that boys were in secondary school. As a conference on the problem of youth suicide noted, “[there are] eight times as many suicides in the 15-20-year-old category as there are in the younger years. In this age group, students are still in secondary school, so that ‘student suicides’ are in fact suicides in secondary schools.”²⁰ Moreover as Ludwig Gurlitt, a gymnasium teacher and educational reformer, attempted to argue, the majority of the so-called “youth suicides” were indeed suicide by “children from good families,” school boys, not “proletarian children who suffer from hunger or parental abuse.”²¹ The chief characters in the plays of Wedekind and Dreyer, in the novels of Otto Bierbaum or Emil Strauss, all works addressing the theme of suicide, were secondary-school pupils also.

Table 2: Rates of Suicide Amongst Prussian Youth and Secondary-School Students for Select Years, 1899-1914 (per 100,000)

	1899	1903	1906	1910	1912	1914
MALES						
10-15	2.9	3.1	3.2	3.3	4.3	2.4
15-20	15.2	19.6	17.8	20.6	24.9	21.9
Students	15.3	7.7	4.8	7	11.8	5.3

Source: D. Gerhard Füllkrug, *Der Selbstmord in der Kriegs- und Nachkriegszeit* (Schwerin in Mecklenburg: Verlag Frederich Bahn, 1927), 45-47; Dr. D. Gerhardt, “Über den Selbstmord von Schülern höherer Lehranstalten,” *Blätter für höheres Schulwesen* (1915), 717-19.

The association of youth suicide with student suicide confirmed for many that the cause of the rising tide of suicide resulted from excessive pressures placed on and brutal treatment of students by parents and teachers. One complaint levelled against schools and their role in student suicide were exam pressures. Spring, observed Privy Council Adolf Matthias, the time of hope and new life, was also the time of anxiety over exams and a dramatic increase in student suicide: “Suicides increase at alarming rates exactly at the time of promotion.” Notes, he proclaimed, such as the one found under the tree with the young boy hanging from the limb, “Because I didn’t pass my exam I had no other choice,” typified the excessive, destructive pressure put on the tender psyches of youth.²² The results of these pressures were, Matthias concluded, youth like Melchoir in Wedekind’s play *Spring’s Awakening*, who

after finding out that he had failed his promotional exam, put a bullet through his head. After such an incident, noted Gurlitt, the parents pick up the paper, read the story about another “unbelievable” student suicide, and wonder why.²³

Clearly for most who focused on the issue of student suicide, parents were equally as guilty as teachers in pressuring students too much, understanding them too little and circumscribing the joys of adolescence far too often. Parents, more so than teachers, argued Dr. Goldschmidt, put excessive pressure on students to pass and those that did not were treated as “idiots.” Marginal students, who did not have the talent to pass these exams, rather than being encouraged to pursue other inclinations, were subjected to further admonitions to study. Such pressures resulted in students giving up other relaxations further compounding the problem.²⁴ Examining the impact of parents and the household atmosphere on youth suicide yet another analyst concluded that parental ignorance and indifference to their children was “criminal.” The father excuses himself with his work. The mother finds time for everything but the mental development of her children and both parents are happy when their children are shunted off to school. And despite this neglect parental pressure for success in school persisted, turning the school into a “pain center [*Qualanstalt*]” in which suicide became an escape.²⁵

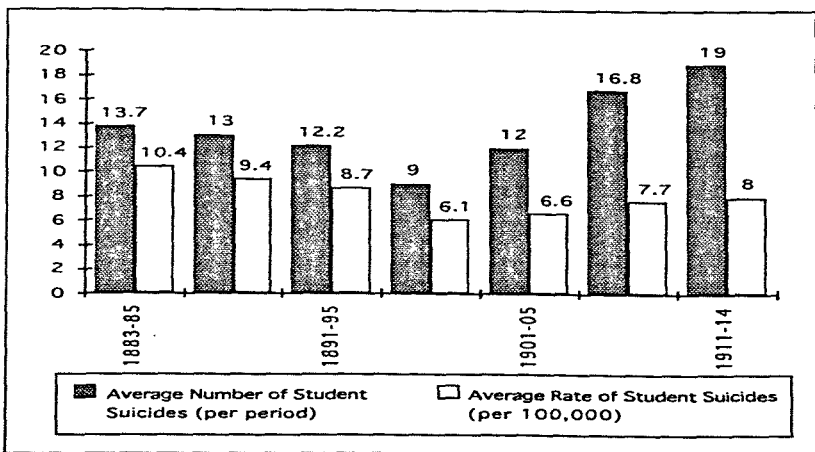
Some even extended their criticisms of middle-class parents and teachers beyond either neglect or tedium to outright mental and physical abuse. In a study of *Schülerselbstmorde* [student suicide] culled from state education reports, Dr. Albert Eulenburg, a public health officer in Berlin, concluded that while corporal punishment accounted for a small percentage of school suicides fear of such punishment was one of the leading causes accounting for better than one third of all the cases. Moreover, it was likely that such abuse and fear of abuse were probably grossly underreported as causes of student suicide.²⁶ Eulenburg himself cautioned against making too much of these “immediate causes” of student suicide arguing that often the immediate justification for the act had little to do with deeper instabilities or problems in the child’s life. But despite these cautions for many the message was clear: Germany was, as Aurel Ende would later call it, “a child-thrashing nation” and that “the high suicide rates for German children were the result of sadistic treatment in home and school.”²⁷

For many criers of doom student suicide was also a particularly German phenomenon. Ludwig Gurlitt frequently argued that school-age suicide was unheard of in England and Denmark. Citing anecdotal evidence he reiterated a conversation with a fellow English teacher who, when asked about this problem, shook his head and responded “it doesn’t exist [in England].” Gurlitt then asked a long-time German resident in England what he had heard about it. The German resident simply noted that “if it [student suicide] was a problem in England every one would know about it,” but that he had heard

nothing about it.²⁸ Seeming to confirm Gurlitt's findings Ferdinand Tönnies, at an international symposium on school reform held in London in 1908, reported that rates of suicide for secondary school pupils in Germany were much greater than elsewhere. "In 1883 sixty-four male students out of 32,000, and mostly in the Prussian gymnasia, committed suicide. In other European countries the proportion was only four in 100,000."²⁹

But not all Germans accepted these assessments of the problem of German student suicide or the implications of it for German schools and family life. Examining the phenomenon of student suicide in Prussia over the course of much of the Second Empire, Dr. D. Gerhardt determined that while there was an overall increase in youth suicide the reality for students was, "that there is no evidence for an annual increase in student suicide." Using evidence gleaned from Prussian school and police records he went on to point out that in 1881, 1884, 1903, 1905, and 1914 there were thirteen so-called student suicides in Prussia each year. Figuring an annual growth rate of between 3-5,000 students he further calculated that in those benchmark years the rate of suicides per 100,000 pupils fell from 10.2 in 1881 to 7.7 by 1903 and only 5.3 in 1914. While Gerhardt chose his years to put schools in the best possible light there was indeed a moderate decline in the rate of student suicides in Prussia in the Wilhelmine period (See Graph 1). Moreover these rates of student suicide fell dramatically below those of the 15-20-year-old boys as a whole in the early twentieth century.³⁰(See Table 2.)

Graph 1: Secondary-School Student Suicides in Prussia (1883-1914)



Source: Dr. D. Gerhardt, "Über den Selbstmord von Schülern höherer Lehranstalten," *Blätter für höheres Schulwesen* (1915), 717-19.

Beside the statistical comparisons of student and youth suicide another common defense of the school system iterated at the Viennese Symposium on Student Suicide in 1910 and by Gerhardt, Eulenburg, and others was that even amongst secondary students many of the suicides had little to do with school per se. Again based on Prussian school records Gerhardt surmised that of the 220 student suicides reported in Prussia only 109 had anything to do with school; the rest resulted from other factors. The high rate of student suicide (and youth suicide in general) in 1912, he noted, had more to do with the profusion of publicity surrounding the one-hundredth anniversary of the suicide of the famed *Sturm und Drang* playwright Heinrich von Kleist than school problems. Sixty-seven newspaper and journals, according to his estimates, eulogized the fallen artist and extolled his death during the year. In these pieces one could read that Kleist, "in a jubilant flight of soul fled the unbearable prison of his earthly existence" or "that his violent end should be prized as the most sensual [Wollustigste] of all deaths." One secondary student hearing Kleist's suicide praised by a colleague in such a manner immediately went home and killed himself exactly like the troubled artist. Small wonder, concluded Gerhardt, that the number of student and youth suicides jumped dramatically from 1911 to 1912.

Other defenders of the school system and the middle-class family took a different tack. If anything, asserted Dr. Goldschmidt, the fault of parents and schools was not in being too rigid, too dictatorial in their treatment of their children but too giving and too lax. Echoing themes heard again and again in Wilhelmine Germany he contended that parental and teacher indulgence had made the youth of the present generation much weaker physically and psychologically than those of previous ones. "In the homes all efforts are made to spare the children of any unpleasanties, avoid any confrontation with them and indulge their every wish. In the schools things are made as comfortable as possible for them."³¹ Ironically, while acknowledging that punishment or fear of punishment was often an immediate triggering mechanism for youthful suicide, Dr. Albert Eulenburg argued that lack of proper discipline made children prone to suicide when they were finally challenged by their elders.³² Reporting on the suicide of a twelve-year-old girl as a result of melancholy he observed that while indulging her would not have prevented her death he also noted that the "kommando-like, authoritarian principle of discipline which often ruled home life" was not the answer either.³³

Other apologists for the education system and the German family focused on the cause of suicide in the psycho-sexual crisis of youth. Meeting in 1910 to counter the preoccupation with "student suicide" the Viennese Psychanalytic Society centered on this theme. While Freud gave only cursory remarks, the influence of his ideas on sexual neuroses were strongly supported by the members of the panel. For psychoanalysts Josef Friedjung, Rudolf

Reitler, and Wilhelm Stekel, the primary motivation of youthful suicide was anxiety in relation to sex and love. School and teachers became the primary object through which students could vent their anxieties and frustrations. For these men it was puberty and particularly the sexual-psychological pressures of puberty that triggered this neurosis and became the period, in which most students took their lives. "I want to stress that fear of punishment, unkind treatment on the part of a teacher, or unsatisfactory progress at school are assuredly not the sole cause of suicide."³⁴ The spread and publication of sexual literature, pornography, picture postcards, and the emergence of cinema fed the sexual crisis of youth and contributed to the increase in youthful suicide argued Professor Felix Asnaurow.³⁵

Sources of youthful malaise and the cause of youthful suicide, some suggested, extended much deeper into the very structure of modern, industrial and, especially, urbanized society. In his seminal work on the sociology of suicide, Durkheim argued that the rapid transformation of society, industrialization and urbanization, led to *anomie* and ultimately to an increase in suicide rates. Many Germans concurred. Gustav Siegert proclaimed that one of the leading reasons behind the surge of youthful suicide was the alienation of the big city and its lack of community. "Child suicide is much less common in the countryside than in the city. There is less pressure on children and more communal support in the countryside than in the city."³⁶ Statistics seem to bear this out. Suicide rates amongst provincial youth age 11-20 (5.9/100,000) were almost half of those who lived in the city (10.2/100,000).³⁷

Modernism, the general decadence and pessimism of *fin de siècle* Europe, and the decline in religious values, especially in Protestant Germany, were additional reasons cited for the rise in youthful suicide. Writing in 1908, Eichhoff proclaimed that rates of suicide were much higher in Protestant Germany than they were in southern Catholic states where the stringent teachings of Catholics on the sin of self-destruction deterred it. Pastors and teachers in the north were not making this point and the result was, he concluded, that suicide was seen as less damning an act.³⁸

While the observations of Tönnies and Gurlitt on the particularly German nature of the youth suicide crisis were often cited, a number of other works made the Europeanwide nature of the crisis a central theme. Hans Rost cited reports from France that indicated that youthful suicide was reaching epidemic proportions there as well. In 1881, he noted, there were 61 and 303 child and youth suicides respectively in France. By 1895 both these figures had risen about 50 percent (90 and 450 respectively)! Even in England, which according to Gurlitt was immune from this dread social malady, statistical studies by government agencies concluded "there has been a substantial increase in child suicide especially amongst those between the ages of 5 and

10." Reports out of Warsaw, St. Petersburg, and Moscow raised the cry of the youth suicide crisis as well. In Kursk there was even a suicide club formed in a Gymnasium which had claimed fifteen victims in a very short time.³⁹

Even the language used by some of these reports was quite similar to that used by commentators in Germany. In France, for example, troubled leaders responding to concerns about student suicide asked, "Is our race degenerating?" and "Is the progress of our civilization being destroyed by the overburdening of our youth's brains?" Reports out of St. Petersburg talked about an "epidemic increase in suicide within all age groups of the younger generation."⁴⁰ The crisis of youth suicide it seems, despite the assertions of Gurlitt and Tönnies, was not unique to German society but a problem that beset all of *fin de siècle* Europe.

Generational Conflict

Intimately tied to the rising tide of suicide and sexual crisis amongst Wilhelmine youth was a growing sense of antipathy between the generations as the new century unfolded. The emergence of the *Wandervogel*, a youth hiking society with its antiestablishment clothing and "youth for themselves" message, symbolized what many saw as intensifying conflicts between fathers and sons. Hans Blüher, an early member of the original *Wandervogel* group and its first historian, observed that a "not insignificant number of young members feel nothing but hatred and disdain for their parents. . . . Where father and son lived together comfortably, where the father permitted his son to develop his character without opposition and expressed pride in his offspring, there was no foundation for the *Wandervogel*."⁴¹ Unfortunately, Blüher concluded, this was not the case in the middle-class enclave of Steglitz on the outskirts of Berlin. Nor, intoned the teacher Ludwig Gurlitt, was it the case throughout much of the country. "Never has the distance between the generations been wider," he wrote, "but never has the force of the old authoritarians been greater."⁴² The essays of Julius Langbehn and Müller van den Bruck, the plays of Frank Wedekind, and the novels of Heinrich Mann, Robert Musil, Hermann Hesse, Emil Strauß, and others echoed the themes of generational alienation and conflict.⁴³ Yet while Blüher asserted that parental enmity was the guiding drive of the early *Wandervogel* members Karl Fischer, the first leader of the organization painted a very different picture. "The early *Wandervogel*," he noted, "had many family gatherings." "All year long parents pulled the children's wagons from Zehlendorf to old Mochow — father, mother, sister and brother — and renewed by coffee, music and sunshine the bond of friendship between young and old."⁴⁴ In the literature of the groups, in their monthly fliers, the participation of adults both physically and financially was constantly and actively sought. *Eufkrat* or parents auxiliaries were actively encouraged by members. Without parental consent

and financial support none of the group activities would have been possible. Unsupervised trips by members lasting up to several weeks further attest to a significant amount of freedom and latitude granted the young people by their elders.

Research on the early *Wandervogel* membership by German sociologists Ulrich Aufmuth, Otto Neuloh and Wilhelm Zilius has begun to provide concrete data by which to begin further study of this generational conflict in the early *Wandervogel*. Using oral interviews and surveys of first-generation members this work has begun to confirm Wehler's hypothesis — namely that the *Wandervogel* was born, not of generational antipathy, but rather, close parental cooperation with their children.⁴⁵ As part of their questionnaire they asked if these former members met with any parental or school opposition when they joined; the overwhelming response was "no." Of the 142 respondents, 102 said there was no opposition whatsoever. Only in 11 cases did parents state objections to their child's participation.⁴⁶ If we look beyond the *Wandervogel* for insights into parent-child relations in the Wilhelmine period there is certainly plenty of evidence for strain. As mentioned above, much of the *Schulromanen* school literature of Wedekind, Mann, Musil, and others rallied against either neglectful or abusive parents and teachers. The letters and autobiographies of Max Weber, Oswald Spengler, and Max Horkheimer bitterly recalled life in their parent's homes; for each the animosity of and alienation from their parents would lay the personal foundation for their castigation of Imperial life and politics.⁴⁷

If we examine the reasons for these conflicts, however, a new perspective on the history of youth and the family in Wilhelmine period come to light. In many cases conflicts with parents and crises of youth were manifest, not by teenagers but by young men in their twenties or even early thirties, who because of constraints on employment and economic independence remained at home (living with and subservient to their parents) long after they had psychologically left the nest. Renowned sociologist Max Weber's own conflicts with his parents, for example, were inflamed by his enforced residency at home after the completion of his university studies. For seven years, from age twenty-three to age thirty, when he finally married, Weber lived with his parents in Berlin while he trained as a *Referendar*. During these long years his painful dependency on and subservience to his parents poured out in his letters to his fiancée, Marianne:

You know, it is a strange feeling to gradually outgrow your student shoes but still have to wait a long time before being your own master, at least for me, and I must nonetheless swallow the idea almost daily. I am also incapable of convincing myself that the feeling is unjustified,

because one's own bread, for the man, is the foundation of happiness, the lifelong goal of the majority of great men. It was for centuries the point around which the history of the world turned.⁴⁸

Weber's sense of stricture in these years was shared by Horkheimer. At age twenty-one he broke with his father over his desire to marry his father's secretary. As his biographer Zoltan Tar reports. "His parents opposed their marriage vehemently. A 10-year strained relationship and confrontation between father and son and a struggle for emancipation followed."⁴⁹

The desire of middle-class university students and graduates for independence, or at least some freedom from adult supervision and control, also lay behind much of the ideology of the early *Wandervogel*. The *Bund der Akademischer Freischar* and the *Freideutsche Jugend*, two factions which dominated the early debates of this movement were composed of university students, graduates, and young teachers. The credo of "youth" defined at Hohe-Meissner in October 1913, which became the symbol of parent-child antagonisms, was largely a doctrine of these older members.⁵⁰

These anecdotes are not untypical of the experience of many young males coming of age in Wilhelmine Germany. Throughout much of the period a tremendous influx of university students flooded professional job markets and, consequently lengthened the period which they remained out of the work force dependent on their parents. Like Weber, many found themselves living at home, living on their parents income, long after their university days were past; youth as a stage of dependency seemed to extend to an interminable end. As youth as a stage of the life course was extended, the potential for problems associated with youth — sexual tension, generational conflict, social dysfunction — increased. By darkening and clouding future employment prospects it increased anxiety both on the part of young middle-class males and their parents. It heightened a sense of control by parents and intensified school pressures to succeed in a tightening job market. In some cases it muddled or destroyed relationships.⁵¹ Shortening the length of secondary school, Gurlitt hypothesized, would significantly reduce the incidence of student suicide.⁵²

Obviously not all middle-class youth faced these problems and tensions and not all conflicts between parents and adults can be explained by this extended period of dependency. But for many of the youth the employment crisis of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and its consequent extended dependency and postponed independence added to the storm and stress of youth. Their frustrations would become, in significant part, the cries of youth protest in Wilhelmine society. Longer periods of habitation in the parental household certainly deserve consideration in accounting for a growing sense of generational tension in this period. Uncertain futures may explain the purported pessimism of German youth. Overbearing parents or abusive teachers

no longer need to be invoked to explain the rising tide of rhetoric concerning youth problems. They may have been part, but only a part of the crisis of youth in Wilhelmine Germany.

Conclusion

Hundreds of reports, commentaries, and articles beyond these included here attest to the conflicting views of the crisis of middle-class adolescents in late Imperial Germany. More complicated issues such as the issues of how gender and class shaped the definition of youth problems, the role of politics and social policy in shaping this dialogue, and a better understanding of the nature of the youth experience itself must be dealt with in a larger context than this essay can provide. But even given these constraints I do think that these complicated and often contradictory images of youth do provide a cautionary context by which to begin to explore our understanding of Wilhelmine society.

The stories of Dr. Mierowsky raise questions about the image of social isolation projected in youth literature and reasserted in the works of Weber-Kellermann, Munchow, and Gillis. In her study of politics and the family, for example, Weber-Kellermann observes that it has only been since the sixties that there has been a more growing acceptance of "wild marriages" cohabitation in Germany. Such trends suggest to her a growing democratization of society and a decline in patriarchal control.⁵³ Might not the debate about student sexuality and rights of cohabitation reflect a similar challenge in the Wilhelmine period?

The divergent trends and conflicting conclusions about youth and student suicide in Wilhelmine Germany should dampen arguments that youth problems were either particularly manifest among middle and upper-class students or a result of an increasingly tyrannical treatment of these children by parents and teachers. The rhetoric of the crisis of child and youth suicide voiced in England, France, and Russia should also caution the notion that somehow Germany was unique in this regard. It seems hardly appropriate to think of, as Aurel Ende has, "Germany around 1900 as a child-thrashing nation."⁵⁴

And finally the motivations and actions of the *Wandervögeln* indicate that not all youth were locked in bitter battle with their elders. Certainly the activities of the members had a fair amount of freedom and latitude in their daily lives. The conflicts between Weber and Horkheimer with their parents also suggest that generational tensions need to be understood within the context of the life course experiences of youth. It may well be that what tensions between generations existed around the turn of the century had much to do with frustrated professional and marital expectations as with "patriarchal authority" per se.

In their work on the notion of the *Sonderweg* Blackbourn and Eley state that they hope that their work would "suggest, in rather different ways, a less abject bourgeois role in modern German history."⁵⁵ I would hope that

understanding the complexities of the middle-class male youth experience in Wilhelmine Germany would do the same. The explosion of literature and public debate on adolescent issues itself represents a dynamically changing society, one which openly challenged social, educational, and family policy. Change may have not been coming fast enough for some and too fast for others, but youth was on the move and so was German society.

The crisis of youth in Wilhelmine Germany has become a central historical metaphor for shaping the identity of the modern German family and its relationship to the authoritarian political structure of the modern period. It is an image that needs to be revised. As we redraw the picture of family life in Imperial Germany it will become necessary to rethink the identity of German authoritarianism and its role in the evolution of the modern state.

¹Ingeborg Weber-Kellermann, "The German Family Between Private Life and Politics," Mary Jo Maynes and Michelle Mouton trans., in Antoine Prost and Gerard Vincent, eds., *Riddles of Identity in Modern Times* vol 5. in Philippe Aries and Georges Duby, gen. eds., *A History of Private Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 523-24.

²David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History: Bourgeois Society and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 43. It should be noted, as will be discussed in greater detail shortly, that both Eley and Blackbourn argue against this image of the bourgeois in Wilhelmine society.

³Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *The German Empire, 1871-1918*, Kim Traynor, trans. (Leamington Spa.: Berg, 1985), 119; Ralf Dahrendorf, *Society and Democracy in Germany* (N. Y.: Norton, 1967), 133.

⁴Blackbourn and Eley, 148, 224, 213.

⁵Cited in Reinhard Alter, "Heinrich Manns *Untertan* — Prüfstein für die 'Kaiserreich-Debatte'?" *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 17 (1991), 372.

⁶Dahrendorf, 358.

⁷Wehler, 119.

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹Cited in Gillis, *Youth and History: Tradition and Change in European Age Relations, 1770-Present*, Expanded Student Edition (New York: Academic Press, 1981), 101.

¹⁰Joseph Kett, *Rites of Passage: Adolescence in America 1790 to Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 216.

¹¹Gillis, 150-51.

¹²Dr. E. Mierowsky, *Geschlechtsleben, Schule und Elternhaus* (Leipzig, 1911), 3-4.

¹³*Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁵Max Marcuse, "Das Liebesleben des deutschen Studenten," *Sexual-Probleme* 4 (November 1908), 694. See also Konrad Jarausch in "Students, Sex and Politics in Imperial Germany," *Journal of Contemporary History* 17 (1982), 285-303.

¹⁶"Darf die Polizei eine wilde Ehe trennen?" *Sexual-Probleme* 6: 10 (June 1914), 422-23; "Ist das Leben in 'wilder Ehe' strafbar?" *Sexual-Probleme* 9: 8 (September 1912), 655-56.

- ¹⁷First two headlines from Gustav Siegert, *Das Problem der Kinderselbstmorde* (Leipzig: R. Voigtländers Verlag, 1893), 8, 14. Newspaper report cited in Max Marcuse, "Rundschau," *Sexual Probleme* 5: 6 (May 1910), 385.
- ¹⁸Sterling Fishman, "Sex, Suicide and the Discovery of the German Adolescent," *History of Education Quarterly* 10: 2 (Summer 1970), 170-88.
- ¹⁹I have used Rost's division of school and youth suicide to compile this table. Articles which specifically referred to *schule* or *studenten* were put in the first category. Those dealing with *kinder-* or *Jugendselbstmorde* were put in the second.
- ²⁰D. E. Oppenheim, cited in Paul Friedman, ed., *On Suicide: With Particular Reference to Suicide Among Young Students: Discussions of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society* (New York: International Press, 1967), 36.
- ²¹Ludwig Gurlitt, *Schülerselbstmorde* (Berlin: Concordia Deutsche Verlag, 1908), 5.
- ²²Adolf Matthias, "Schülerselbstmorde," *Diskussion* 6 (1913), 32. For a discussion of the debates over the relationship between school pressures and suicide in Wilhemine Germany see James Albisetti, *Secondary School Reform in Imperial Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).
- ²³Ludwig Gurlitt, "Gründe und Abhilfe" *Diskussion* 6 (1913), 9.
- ²⁴M. Goldschmidt, "Schuld der Schule?" *Diskussion* 6 (1913), 27-31.
- ²⁵Felix Asnaraurow, "Der Selbstmord auf sexueller Basis," *Sexual-Probleme* 9: 8 (September 1912), 623.
- ²⁶Albert Eulenburg, "Schülerselbstmorde," *Zeitschrift für pädagogische Psychologie, Pathologie und Hygiene* 9: 1/2 (April 1907), 10.
- ²⁷Aurel Ende, "Battering and Neglect: German Childhood in Germany, 1860-1978," *The Journal of Psychohistory: A Quarterly Journal of Childhood and Psychohistory* 7: 3 (Winter 1979-80), 258.
- ²⁸Gurlitt, *Schülerselbstmorde*, 8.
- ²⁹Ferdinand Tönnies, "Suicide Among Students," *Record of the Proceedings of the International Moral Education Congress* (London, 25-29 September 1908), 73.
- ³⁰D. Gerhardt, "Über den Selbstmord von Schülern höherer Lehranstalten," *Blätter für höheres Schulwesen* (1915), 717-19. Gerhardt's numbers vary slightly from those cited by Albert Eulenburg in his study of student suicide published in 1907. In 1883, for example, Eulenburg lists nineteen cases while Gerhardt lists only seventeen. The difference in these numbers, according to Gerhardt, is that he does not include cases which were obviously accidents rather than suicides.
- ³¹Goldschmidt, 17.
- ³²Eulenburg, "Kinder- und Jugendselfmorde," 8.
- ³³Eulenburg's article appeared in the *Berline Lokalanzeiger* and was reported on in "Über Kinderselbstmorde," *Sexualreform* 1: 8 (May 1906), 314-15.
- ³⁴Wilhelm Stekel, cited in Paul Friedman, ed., *On Suicide: With Particular Reference to Suicide Among Young Students: Discussions of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society* (New York: International Press, 1967), 87.
- ³⁵Asnaraurow, 629.
- ³⁶Siegert, 64. Siegert bases his analysis on child suicide on newspaper reports, so his sample may well reflect the bias of urban centers having more newspapers. His opinion, however, that the problems of young Germans were particularly acute in urban areas, echoed through much of the literature on youth.

³⁷Hans Rost, "Der Selbstmord im Lichte der Statistik," *Zeitschrift für die sozialen Fragen der Gegenwart* 4 (1904), 264.

³⁸Eichhoff, "Die Zunahme der Schülerselbstmorde an den höheren Schulen," *Zeitschrift für den evangelische Religionsunterricht an höheren Lehranstalten* 20 (1908-09), 205.

³⁹Hans Rost, "Der Selbstmord im Lichte der Statistik," 265.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Hans Blüher, *Wandervogel: Geschichte eine Jugendbewegung*, vol. 1: *Heimat und Aufgang* (Berlin-Tempelhof: Verlag Bernhardt Weise, 1912), 85, 92.

⁴²Gurlitt, "Gründe und Abhilfe," 10.

⁴³Gillis, 117-18.

⁴⁴Hans Breuer, "Karl Fischer: ein Erinnerungsblatt," *Wandervogel: Monatsschrift des "Wandervogels"* *Deutsches Bundes für Jugendwanderungen* 4/5:4 (April-May 1910), 48-50.

⁴⁵Wehler, op. cit.

⁴⁶Ulrich Aufmuth, *Die deutsche Wandervogelbewegung unter soziologischen Aspekten* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1979); Otto Neuloh and Wilhelm Zilius, *Die Wandervögel: eine empirisch-soziologische Untersuchung der frühen deutschen Jugendbewegung* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982), 197. It should be pointed out that the survey was conducted of former members. It is likely that in many cases where parents opposed this movement the young boy never did join. Nonetheless the image of conflict portrayed by Blüher does not seem to hold up.

⁴⁷In his brilliant biography of Weber, Arthur Mitzman relates Weber's own visions of societal constraints to his tortured relationship with his father. Arthur Mitzman, *The Iron Cage: An Historical Interpretation of Max Weber* (New York: Knopf, 1970). For a discussion of Horkheimer's relationship with his father and its influence on his work in critical theory see Zoltan Tar, *The Frankfurt School: The Critical Theories of Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno* (New York, 1985), 17-21. For Spengler see Jürgen Naehrer, *Oswald Spengler* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1984), 15-40.

⁴⁸Max Weber, *Jugendbreife*, 281, cited in Mitzman, 64.

⁴⁹Tar, 19.

⁵⁰The complete leadership of the Steglitz *Wandervogel* group, the first one, was composed of university students. Only later did secondary pupils begin to play a greater role in the group. Sigrid Bias-Engels, *Jugendbewegung an deutschen Universitäten, 1896-1920* (Ph.D. dissertation, Universität Bonn, 1985), 14. The meeting of the *Wandervogel* members at Hohe-Meissner represented the high point of the movement. It was here that the motto "youth for themselves" *jugend für sich selbst* was first articulated.

⁵¹For an overview of the lengthy transition to adulthood in Wilhelmine Germany see Tom Taylor, "The Transition to Adulthood in Comparative Perspective: Professional Males in Germany and the United States at the Turn of the Century," *Journal of Social History* 21: 4 (Summer 1988), 635-58.

⁵²Gurlitt, "Grunde und Abhilfe," 12.

⁵³Weber-Kellerman, 529.

⁵⁴Ende, op. cit.

⁵⁵Blackbourn and Eley, 11.