

Rembert Unterstell

Lost Illusions

In 1968, at the height of the German student movement, nothing seemed impossible, even in pedagogy. But in education, many of the dreams of liberalisation turned to dust. A conversation with Meike Baader, one of the first to study both sides of the story – a broad arc ranging from early years education in “Kinderläden” to contemporary sex education books and sexual abuse.



Illustration: Holger Ruedel/www.momente-der-natur.de

A historical visual document with symbolic value: the anti-authoritarian principle in practice at a Kinderladen in Kiel in 1970. The adults imposed (almost) no boundaries on the children.

To the “68ers”, the members of the student movement that had a profound effect on West German society, pedagogy was a means by which to change the individual and a compromised patriarchal society. It brought together wide-ranging anti-authoritarian ideas and liberal styles of education, as a result of which pedagogy became a defining element of the 1970s and 1980s.

But a series of public scandals has also revealed the excesses and the failings of this type of education. This in turn has uncovered unanswered questions and dark chapters in the

history of pedagogy, namely sexual abuse. The case of the Odenwaldschule, a private boarding school where there were allegedly numerous cases of sexual abuse, demonstrated that even in “progressive” educational institutions there existed the same inhuman abuse which for a long time was only associated with the repressive educational practice of church-run schools.

The scandal engendered an atmosphere in which asking questions was discouraged. Now, more than ever, answers are needed. It is on this very area that pedagogist Meike Baader,

whose broad area of research encompasses the pedagogical dimension of the ‘68, is trying to shed light. One key area of interest is the “Kinderladen” movement, the emergence of alternative early years education organised by parents, which Baader has examined “as a case study of the anti-authoritarian education movement”. She is currently engaged in studies on the aims and practice “of sexual liberation, liberal education, the paedophile movement, and educational and social sciences from the 1960s to the 1990s”.

Baader and her team use printed historical sources, archive material and interviews with contemporary witnesses. “Combining the analysis of documents, discourses and interviews has proved to be an effective approach,” she explains.

german research: What wouldn't we have today if the '68, as an event and as a symbol of social revolution, had never happened?

Baader: That's a huge question that deserves careful consideration. At the universities, it was the lesson that things can be changed through student protests, and therefore from the bottom – an insight that has entered into collective awareness. The ‘68 still arouses emotions in people even today and is characterised in terms of political camps – with changing definitions of belonging

PROFILE

Professor Dr. Meike Baader is a professor of general educational science at the University of Hildesheim Foundation. Born in 1959, she studied educational science and German literature. After acquiring further professional training she obtained her doctorate from Heidelberg



Illustration: Unterstell

University in 1994 (“The Romantic Idea of the Child and Childhood”). She then spent a number of years as a research assistant at the University of Potsdam. As a DFG research fellow, she completed her habilitation in 2002 with studies on the “Transformation of the Religious” using the example of progressive education. In 2007 she was appointed professor in Hildesheim, where she was involved in the establishment of the Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood in Lower Saxony. In addition to her teaching and research work, Baader is a DFG reviewer and currently the spokesperson for the Research Training Group “Gender and Education”.

and efforts to establish distance. The discipline of educational science was involved in the ‘68 as a movement that sought to introduce a new era in pedagogy. That’s why research in this area began so late.

In the cities and university towns, the “Kinderläden” were part of the changing face of pedagogy. What was the thinking behind them?

These initiatives had a lot to do with coming to terms with the National Socialist past. As a response to this, people wanted to bring up children to think critically, to be able to say no – an “education to maturity”, to use the words of Adorno. Also, preschool education was poorly developed in the 1960s; only 30 percent of children went to kindergarten. So the first “Kinderläden” were set up by parents. The name [literally “child shops”] derives from the fact that most of them were set up in empty shop premises.

So the aim was to replace a repressive education within the nuclear family with an anti-authoritarian one within a children’s collective?

Over time a range of initiatives, some of them very different, came together under the same heading. In Berlin there were over 300 Kinderläden, which described themselves differently (reaches for a diagram): “non-authoritarian”, “anti-authoritarian”, “proletarian”, “socialist”, “liberal” ... There were lots of different ideas, even fundamental disagreements as to the right way to do things. But what they all had in common was parents who took the initiative with respect to their children’s education.

You’ve spent a long time analysing the pedagogical dimension of the ‘68 movement. What new insight from your research has particularly surprised you?

For one thing, the realisation as to how heterogeneous the movement was. From today’s standpoint, it’s surprising how seriously and with what depth of theoretical underpinning people approached pedagogical issues. There were great hopes of pedagogy as a force that could change the face of society. For another thing, there was a lot of everyday mundanity, even in the Kinderläden.

During that period there were youth revolts all over Europe. What was particular about the events in Germany?

Because of the background of the fascist past, there was a very strong focus on education. On the theoretical side, it was important that the Frankfurt School with Adorno reconstructed the “authoritarian character” and identified it as “fascistoid”.

In a Freudian sense, the “authoritarian character” is associated with repressed drives. How did people regard the infantile sexuality first described by Freud?

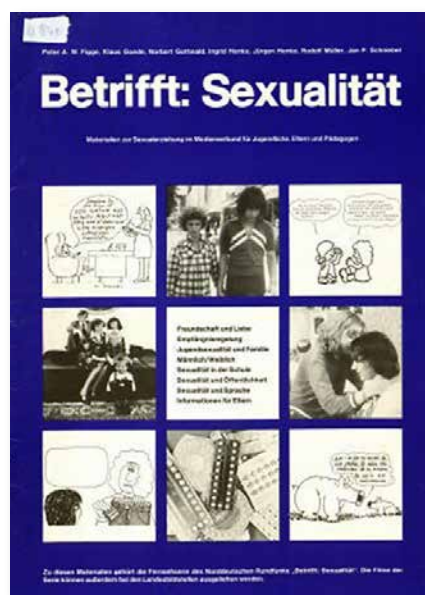
The tabooing of sexuality and prudish sex education were criticised. The first sex education lessons were introduced in 1968 by the KMK [assembly of the ministers of education of the German states] under health minister Käthe Strobel. Ideas about sexual liberation also extended into the Kinderläden. The liberation of infantile sexuality became a topic of discussion. In the Kinderläden, children were allowed to run around naked and even childish games of “doctor” were accepted. The book *Show Me!*, a sex education book intended specifically for children with photographs and text by Will McBride (1974), much praised at the time but now notorious, also circulated in the Kinderläden; today the book has been taken off the market.

Your team studies discourses of childhood and sexuality against the

background of educational and sexual liberation. What attitudes to paedosexuality existed at the time?

These have been reconstructed by Franz Walter in terms of the party and political history of the Greens [*Die Grünen und die Pädosexualität*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015]. This is a scholarly answer to the debate that emerged in 2013 surrounding Green politician Daniel Cohn-Bendit, who was confronted with quotations from his book *Der große Basar* (1975) and the conjecture that he condoned sex between adults and children and therefore supported paedophile positions of the time.

In our material on the Kinderladen movement we have not found any evidence of physical assaults, but we have come across positions that called for the age of consent between adults and children – which in 1973 was set at 18 for homosexual contacts and at 14 for heterosexual contact – to be abolished. It is striking that often no distinction was made between child and adult sexuality, or that the boundary was consciously or unconsciously blurred.



Once famous, now infamous: the sex education book “Show Me!”, first published in 1974, of which there were several editions until 1995. Below: “Betrifft: Sexualität” – contemporary materials for a new approach to sexual education and pedagogy.

Were such attitudes widespread?

It’s still difficult to assess that. The question is: was there such a thing as a paedophile movement in Germany and were there organised networks of individuals who attempted in a planned process to enter pedagogical institutions or undermine child protection? There is some evidence that this was indeed the case.

There have been cases of sexual abuse in both Christian children’s homes and progressive boarding schools. To what extent have the necessary questions been answered?

There is enormous public attention to this issue. We need further research into sexual abuse in pedagogical contexts, for example in peer groups. There are certainly methodological problems here. This issue must be part of training in youth work and education in a non-school context and in the training of teachers and volunteers. Pedagogical institutions should be expected to develop their own child protection concepts. Awareness of the issue must be maintained inside organisations.

If there are blind spots in the retrospective view of liberal education, then in contemporary language, must pedagogy contribute to the process of remembering and grieving?

Most certainly yes: pedagogical institutions must work through their past and take responsibility for it.

What were the long-term consequences of demands for liberal education?

The Kinderladen movement called for rights and codetermina-



tion for children and demanded children’s rights. At the time, this was a new idea. In 1973 corporal punishment in pedagogical institutions was banned. In the 1980s, the concept of “parental authority” in German family law was replaced with “parental care”. In 2000 the right to a violence-free upbringing was introduced.

Slides from the ‘68 era show the “new human” – the flower dreams have faded. Did this generation fail because of an illusionary image of humanity? To borrow the words of Kant, man is a creature “made of warped wood”.

Yes, to some extent that is certainly true. There was an entirely exaggerated, very romantic picture of childhood, which nonetheless did not protect children from being used as instruments for the new society. There was also a very truncated understanding of socialisation, optimistic ideas about what could be achieved through pedagogical work in an institution.

What can we learn from the ‘68?

There is one lesson we can certainly learn: scepticism regarding exaggerated or idealised expectations of pedagogy; that is always advisable.

Interview: Dr. Rembert Unterstell,
Publishing Executive Editor of *german research*.