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Communication Gap

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Dear Mr. Nolte:

During these months of talking with the generation over 30 about student unrest, the old theme of the generation conflict pops up again and again. "The Generation Gap" was practically everybody's first off-the-cuff explanation for the geysers of youthful revolt exploding unexpectedly in most of the world's developed nations since 1964. American sociologist Lewis Feuer calls it the "Oedipal revolt," and blames it on the "de-authorization" of the older generation, which he says is a common phenomenon after a nation has been defeated in war.

It is probably fair to say that the older generation in Germany, with few exceptions, has been "de-authorized" by a Nazi past. "How can we respect and listen to an older generation who fell under the spell of fascism?" a student friend asked me once in almost plaintive tones. Indeed, the leftist students fear that the West German government still is far too prone to pacify rightist tendencies in the older generation; they have not forgiven Chancellor Kurt Georg Kiesinger for his Nazi past, and the serious "radical reformers" (as opposed to "destructive revolutionaries") are shocked and sickened at Kiesinger's labeling leftist students "the real fascists," as he did in a recent speech. ("It takes one to know one," countered a journalist friend in an attempt to comfort an outraged student.)

The Oedipal revolt thesis fails, however, to explain why the fever of rebellion has infected just the students (and certain disciplines more than others--more sociology majors and fewer medical students, for example) and left the non-students--who also have fathers--happily lapping up the pleasures of an industrial or post-industrial society. The generation gap explanation is also too easy--it cheapens the student protests and gives the older generation an excuse for inattention to genuine causes.

Recent studies in the United States indicate that today's critical students, instead of rebelling against the teachings of their fathers, are often carrying the 1930's middle-class liberalism of their parents one step further. And the American parents seem not only to condone but to applaud their offsprings' idealism and activism.

In comparison, Frankfurt sociologist Alexander Mitscherlich has called this nation's youth a "fatherless generation," and has suggested that liberal matriarchal rearing has damaged the younger generation's ability to cope with society's demands (sort of a spoiled brat or Spock brat theory). Many German students have no father to rebel against--in 1967, the German government awarded some $14 million for scholarships to 216,685 war orphans (French-German rebel Daniel Cohn-Bendit was a recipient of one of these scholarships, and the three Wolff brothers in the SDS are also orphans).

The generation conflict in West Germany must be seen in a political context as a serious communications gap. Dr. Helmut Gollwitzer, a Protestant theologian at Berlin's Free University and one of the few among the "over thirty" generation whom leftist students seem willing to trust, prefers to explain the revolt in political terms. He believes the conflict hinges on differing definitions between West Germany's older generation and the critical youth on such subjects as the Federal Republic, socialism, and on the image of America.

The older generation, Dr. Gollwitzer told me some months ago when I visited him in Berlin, is proud of the Federal Republic of Germany. They feel that, since 1945, they have built a new nation, liberal and democratic, a nation that is economically sound and which offers each year more material benefits to those who earlier could not afford a Volkswagen or television set or a summer vacation in Italy. The older generation, who vividly remember the postwar days when ten grams of butter per person per day was barely enough to spread on a breakfast roll, feel personally insulted when leftist students seem to denigate their achievements, and protest that material benefits are not the be-all and end-all of existence. "It's good enough for us," an irate woman in her late forties told me once during a discussion about leftist students at a cocktail party. "We worked hard to get where we are...why isn't it good enough for them?"

Nor does the older generation understand the youthful inclination toward socialism, which they still equate with cold-war communism. In the 1930's many of them turned to National Socialism "to save Germany from communism," and they have seen communism/socialism discredited again in the satellite nations of the Soviet Union. Politically and economically, they have seen capitalism work to their satisfaction, and even the workers, appeased with their industrial co-determination and "establishment" unions, are fully integrated into the middle class. Talk of revolution is anathema to them, and socialism is acceptable only in the reformed capitalistic terms of the Social Democratic party.

The older generation has also been taught to see the United States through rose-colored glasses. A democratic "free society," such as the occupation forces re-educated Germans to emulate, however grudgingly, meant for most the United States. As Dr. Gollwitzer points out, until 1945 most Germans had considered America "a civilized but uncultured nation. Then in 1945 there was a new discovery of America, and it became the model for West German society."

But for the generation of Germans born after the war, who took for granted the material benefits, the economic success, the opportunity to travel to Czechoslovakia or Yugoslavia, the political facts of life in the Federal Republic were not all on the asset side of the ledger. Observing the slow machinations of parliament, the citizens' lack of concern on political issues, the concentration of public spending on highways and defense obligations while the universities suffered, the students "discovered the shadow-side of our nation," said Dr. Gollwitzer. Even those young people who did not go so far as to tramp the streets for political or university reform took a dim view of patriotism. I recall how the flag-waving she observed in America surprised my first German friend, a student whom I met in the United States in the early sixties. "You hardly ever see a German flag in our schoolrooms," she said. "And why should you?"

Despite criticism of the Eastern European nations, the younger generation also rediscovered "the actuality of socialism" as Dr. Gollwitzer expressed it. The Johnny-one-note propaganda of the West seemed more laughable than illuminating to them. "For the older generation," said Dr. Gollwitzer, "the red flag of socialism means the flag of slavery; for the youth it is a sign of

emancipation." Although no so-called socialist nation exists after which German socialist students would pattern their utopian state, they feel more acutely the transgressions of capitalism and an achievement/ competition-oriented society. Their argument is that advanced capitalism enslaves by its subtle and entrenched authoritarianism.

Asked to define his defense of socialism to a gathering of Germans and Americans of the "older generation," I recently heard a leftist student give this reply: "Yes, I'm in a dilemma--fighting for socialism at a time when the only socialism the world sees is a kind that I'm against, like that in the Soviet Union."

An American in his fifties, who had been a Communist in his college days, commented: "It was easier for American Communists in the 1930's; we could say we were fighting for the overthrow of a rotten capitalism after the depression, and against poverty."

"And you ask me what I'm for," added the Berlin student, "what my program is. I think it's enough to say what's wrong with this society and with capitalism, and what's wrong with the socialism that is already here...if I can change those wrongs, that's quite a lot to do."

A loss of confidence in their own nation coincided for German youth with disillusion in the American model. The assassination of John F. Kennedy marked a breakwater point for German as well as American youth--in a television program outlining the history of Berlin's Free University, the commentator pointed out that "with his death the picture of a man with whom one could identify was blotted out. Problems that he planned to tackle were pushed under the rug, among them the solution to the questions of Berlin and Germany, the emancipation of the poor nations. In the United States' war in Vietnam many students saw a new, brutal countenance of this society."

The wrongs in the United States became blatantly apparent. Through the war in Vietnam and the civil rights movement in the United States, the picture of America as a model became so clouded with cattle prods, tear gas and napalmed villages that for critical members of the younger generation, "American imperialism seemed the greatest world danger," said Dr. Gollwitzer, "more dangerous even than the threat of communism from the East."

Germany's generations, as Dr. Gollwitzer added, even divide the world differently--the older generation is fixed on East-West terminology, while the leftist youth sees the world in a North-South context, the Have nations of the northern hemisphere and the Have-nots of the Third World.

These opposing attitudes can lead to ridiculous extremes. At the planned world premiere of Hans Werner Henze's oratorio, "The Raft of the Medusa", in Hamburg last November, the appearance of a red flag on the conductor's stand so enraged the Radio Free Berlin chorus that sopranos and contraltos began to cry hysterically and refused to continue with the performance. The red flag, admittedly a controversial symbol, had been placed there by leftist students who previously had tacked up a picture of Che Guevara (to whom Henze had dedicated the oratorio). Neither Che's picture nor the dedication, clearly printed at the top of the musical scores, had disturbed the chorus or orchestra. But the radio-station sponsors of the premiere concert angrily ripped the picture of the bearded revolutionary from Henze's music-stand. When the students replaced the picture with a red flag, Henze, a composer whose sympathies are with the New Left and who sheltered Berlin revolutionary Rudi Dutschke at his villa in Italy during his convalescence from an attempted assassination, then refused to conduct without it. The chorus and orchestra refused to play or sing with it. The North German broadcasting company called in the police, who strong-armed the protesting students (pushing librettist Ernst Schnabel through a glass door) out of the concert hall. The world premiere did not take place.

Since such elementary expressions as "socialism" or "a parliamentary system of government" or "America" conjure up opposite images within the minds of the critical youth and the older generation, communication between the two groups becomes increasingly difficult. Both the revolutionary student minority (some members of it) and the conservative adult majority make the communication gap even wider by refusing to listen to the other. Chancellor Kiesinger, for example, in a generally blah-blah "State of the Nation" address on June 17, the Day of German Unity, declaimed: "The revolutionary minorities in our universities have, as they openly admit, used the reforms which are wanted by the majority of the students as a pretext to put themselves at the peak of the turmoil. Admittedly and in truth they want no university reform, but the destruction of the university as well as of society. There's no point in talking to them; they are not to be convinced. One

should not underestimate the danger which stems from them."

It may well be impossible for Kiesinger to convince the radical left, but I find it ill-advised for the adult establishment to arbitrarily cut the lines of communication to its critical youth, to recognize the leftist movement only in its criminal elements. How much different the comments expressed by the newly-elected Federal President, Gustav Heinemann, in a question and answer interview with Der Spiegel shortly after Kiesinger's speech:

> Der Spiegel: A short time ago in television there was discussion about whether you would go to the universities and speak to student assemblies. We suspect that it would be unprofitable as long as it would mean a more or less tumultuous discussion.
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> Heinemann: Yes, you are right; certain conditions must be met. Therefore I will try first of all to have individual conversations with some restless youth.
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> Der Spiegel: Also with members of the SDS?
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> Heinemann: Yes, certainly; I will invite them to visit me in the Federal President's office, or representatives of the VDS (the national student council organization that, since its last meeting, is SDS-controlled). I have already (when he was West Germany's minister of justice) had such conversations before I was selected for my new position. Why should that change when I become Federal President?
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> Der Spiegel: The circumstances that isolated persons or groups of whom we now speak do not support the basic constitution...and that they strive for a system of soviets...is that a reason for you to avoid discussions with them?
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> Heinemann: It would interest me greatly to hear from these people just what their conception is of the changes they're talking about. It may be a childish optimism to build on such conversations, because some of these persons have, in the meantime, developed an unimaginable intransigence and a frightful intolerance. But that doesn't frighten me away.

The intolerance of which Heinemann speaks on the left is shortsighted and despicable. The most flagrant examples in recent weeks have been the joint SDS-El Fatah disruptions of several speeches by Israel's ambassador to Germany, Ben Nathan...although even this was not correctly reported in the German press. But I think the

older generation must constantly remind itself that tolerance and compassion are learned virtues...as any Peanuts reader familiar with the vicious whimsies of Lucy can testify, or as anyone who was himself once subject to the cruelty of children will remember. The more conservative among us will argue that the students cannot have their cake and eat it too, that they can't expect to be treated as adults and have their arguments taken seriously, yet not have to face adult standards. But the consequences of this stricter, more logical approach could be more heinous.

Dr. Gollwitzer, for example, warns that the older generation's insistence on establishing law and order at all costs can simply mean terror against terror...and the eventual loss to society of those students who should become its imaginative leaders. "The turmoil is certainly not comfortable, but when one moves against the unrest with repressive measures, the students become fearful--many will integrate and become apolitical, and a small part will take a totally negative attitude toward society and become professional revolutionaries. When I'm honest, I must say that all my best students belong to the New Left...and a nation cannot allow itself to make the best students either enemies or apolitical."

"We of the older generation," wrote Dr. Gollwitzer some months ago in the Berlin Tagesspiegel, "have stricter demands to make on ourselves than on youth. From us, not from them, we have to demand first understanding and untiring patience; we must consider them partners of equal rights, and at the same time unexperienced youth... they know the world of today partly worse, partly better than we."

A communications gap exists, however, not only between the older and younger generations, but between the radical leftists and the well-integrated "busy majority" (as Ralph M. Goldman called them at San Francisco State College) at the universities, and the busily-consuming younger generation who have already entered the business world. A member of the Free University's "busy majority," Gabi Starke, told me during the winter semester strike that she considers most of what the leftist students say "sozialistischer Schwaetzer" (socialist drivel). "I used to go to the assemblies, but it got boring after a while, the same old talk over and over. Sure, I think university reform is important...but I have my own work to do. They waste a lot of time in talking."

After I talked with Gabi that day in Berlin, I watched an East Berlin television news show with a leftist student, and

laughed along with him at the Communist jargon used by the commentator. When the program was over, I said, "But you use the same words, the same jargon that shocks and turns other students against your goals because you don't explain to them what you're really saying, and they don't try to find out. You scorn the East Berlin commentator, but you're no different."

"The difference," retorted the Berlin student, "is that the East Berlin commentator uses these words to explain the official political conditions in a strongly controlled media. We use this language in our student assemblies and in the student newspapers. Of course we shock some, but we also prove that what we say is true. Even that is not enough. We can't make other students understand until they experience the repressive authority of the professor, or until the police are called into their own seminar. After they've had this experience, they'll understand our language. Those who don't understand are of no use to us at the moment anyway."

I heard this same explanation of "you have to experience it before you can understand what is happening" months later from a mathematics professor visiting in Bonn who had experienced the People's Park war in Berkeley, California. Evidently the same distrust for outsiders, for those who give only lip service to the movement, exists in the United States as well as here.

Radical students have as much trouble understanding the older generation as the older generation has understanding them. They've lost the most confidence in liberals, those progressive souls who are the stalwarts of the Old Left yet who have made their partial peace with society. Were it not for the compromise of politics, these intellectuals and professors and politicians would be on the side of the radical students. "Why do you pick on liberals?" I asked once, "why don't you practice the tolerance you preach?" The reply came back, "When someone says, 'Yes, that's bad, but what can one do?' for years and years and years, then you slowly get fed up."

This impatience and the no-compromise, non-negotiable attitude of the New Left certainly exasperates the older generation of liberals. On the other hand, the lack of imagination shown by supposedly progressive members of the older generation should be an equal cause for concern. Why are the authorities unable to show strength in flexibility? Why lock the barn door after the horses have been stolen? When protesting students occupied the Institute

for Social Research in Frankfurt, directed by sociologists Juergen Habermas and Theodor W. Adorno who are regarded as spiritual fathers of Germany's rebellious youth, why not allow them to stay and engage them in a political dialogue? In the People's Park incident at Berkeley, why didn't Chancellor Roger W. Heyns persuade the regents to add a few stories to buildings elsewhere if he planned to use the park area for university expansion...and praise the hippies for their community concern? Calling in the police in both instances merely stiffened resistance, and amounted to disastrous confirmation of Murray Kempton's truism that "politics is property."

A tragic circumstance in world politics now is that there seem to be no leaders who capture the imagination and loyalty of youth--on either a national or international scale. When President Nixon visited Berlin on his European tour this spring, leftist students planned a welcoming protest (which fizzled out when 13,000 regular police plus 4,000 reserves were called out to maintain order). At the time, I asked several Free University students what their reception would have been for Bobby Kennedy. One student summed up the general response: "He would have handled things differently--Bobby Kennedy would have come out to the Free University and met us on our own ground. Sure, we would have carried placards about American imperialism and such...but we would have listened to what he had to say. We wouldn't have listened to Nixon."

In communication between the generations, it all comes down to what you say...and if you do what you say. In West Germany Chancellor Kiesinger has spoken ominously of "civil war-like conditions" in the nation as a result of the student demonstrations, and former Munich political science professor Eric Voegelin (now at Stanford) does not close out the possibility, "for the young radicals will not give up...they have no reason to. From the right to the middle no alternatives are offered, and the substance is lacking which could support such alternatives."

Professor Habermas, who is one of the sternest West German critics of the violent tactics used by a minority of Germany's New Left, prophesies in his newest book, "Protest Movement and University Reform," that the youth movement will increase. "When this potential does not self-destructively stand in its own way and we elders do not react totally without understanding, it (the youth movement) can perhaps become the propulsive power for a long-term transformation process, which hinders the foreseeable

catastrophes internationally and makes possible a step toward inward emancipation."

Reform in the traditional liberal sense, continues Habermas, is no longer viable, for it merely seeks to maintain tomorrow's status quo. He contends that "revolution" and "reform" can no longer be separated. "The only way I see to conscious structural change of an authoritarian society system organized as a welfare state is radical reform. What Marx called critical-revolutionary activity must follow this road today. That means: we must pursue reforms for the sake of clear and openly discussed goals, also--even especially then--when the byproducts of such goals are incompatible with the production character of the present system." In other words, if the radical reforms conflict with some sacred features of our capitalist society, then the reforms should have the first priority.

If our society has the technical capabilities to send man to the moon, it's time we put our sociological capabilities to work here on earth. Radical youth is saying--and I believe it behooves us to listen and respond with radical reforms--that the younger generation is no longer willing to take "no" or "we'll think about it tomorrow" for an answer.

Sincerely,

Barbara Bright

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