

Summary of the PhD thesis:

„Student and democracy.

The political potential of German students mirrored in historical developments and recent political interpretative patterns“

Schenke, Julian: Student und Demokratie. Das politische Potenzial deutscher Studierender in Geschichte und Gegenwart. Transcript Verlag, Bielefeld 2020.

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The present PhD thesis examines the question whether German students show a group-specific political potential. Starting with the assessed culturally downhanded stereotype of politically active students, the thesis goes on a search for hints to particular resources for political activity among students in past and present. Thus, the course of examination follows an interdisciplinary research design which not only includes history and political science, but also tries to establish a conceptual innovation for qualitative social research in the field of political culture in general by outlining a revised notion of „Deutungsmuster“ (interpretative patterns).

The first main section contains a longitudinal historical analysis of relevant aspects and is divided in three sections: It examines the social history of studying, followed by an account of German student opposition movements together with their historical backgrounds from 1800 until today, and eventually leading to an in-depth investigation into the results of empirical studies concerning the political consciousness and political potential of German students since the 1950s including relevant trend issues. As the interim findings of this section suggest, the former sociostructural as

well as socio-moral characteristics of German students became largely grinded down by the dynamics of educational expansion in the 19th and 20th century, especially with regard to aspects of class consciousness and collectiveness. As a consequence, the students' degree of (not only political) organization and association declined drastically, which is why prospective persistent student opposition movements are highly unlikely. Nonetheless, in principal, a certain – yet volatile – protest potential which may be activated in phases of virulent education policy issues continues to exist.

The second main section contains the analysis of student focus groups which were conducted in 2018. This empirical inquiry draws from discussions with students coming from Göttingen and Frankfurt am Main, but its interpretational key patterns refer to the first main sections as well to previous research conducted by the author. It captures data concerning political views and opinions concerning several issues derived from the preceding longitudinal aspect analysis (motivation to study, perception of studying, concepts of „Bildung“ [education principles], political problem perception, concepts of democracy). As a result, these views and opinions boil down to three pivotal „Deutungsmustern“ (interpretative patterns) that act as latent structures of meaning. Despite the stated longitudinal loss of elements of collective consciousness among students, there remains indeed a political „compass“ – an important finding, especially when compared to recent survey studies in this field which mainly point out effects of ideological fragmentation and dissolution.

Altogether, the PhD thesis confirms the astonishing significance of Humboldtian concepts of education and social order for protest potential among students. This tradition may serve as the deciding (yet volatile) political fuel in the future, even though there may no capacity for broader mobilizing protest networks left among the individualistic students of today. In its concluding remarks, the PhD thesis furthermore raises the question, whether possible future protests, since students obviously abandoned concepts of collectively remodelling the structures of society, may be entirely fixated on defending education privileges for themselves – even if dressed up in anti-discrimination rhetorics.