# 1

# *Introduction: the natural history of a social problem*

"Who has the youth, has the future!" At the turn of the century this shibboleth, sometimes attributed to Luther, became the battle cry of a nascent campaign launched by middle-class reformers to capture the hearts and minds of young urban German workers. Soon male laborers between the ages of fourteen and twenty, or "between primary school and barracks" in the then current phrase, became the cynosure of public debate and policy. The campaign was undertaken to protect them from a host of ostensible moral dangers associated with urban life, to save them from the unpatriotic influence of the Social Democratic party (SPD), and to better their health and upgrade their industrial skills as means of promoting national efficiency, both in the economic and military spheres.

Dating with exactitude the origin of the youth salvation campaign that was to sweep late Imperial Germany is impossible. Like most moral crusades, it germinated slowly before erupting forcefully into public consciousness. Although there was no sense of a generalized problem with young workers in the 1870s, one can certainly discover examples of the concerns and rhetoric adopted by the turn-of-the-century youth salvation campaign. Thus, in 1878 Fritz Kalle, a Saxon factory owner and well-known advocate of popular education, in a speech before the Social Policy Association (Verein für Sozialpolitik), an association of influential government officials and academics opposed to Manchester liberalism and committed to state financed social reform, denounced the spread of youthful wildness (*Verwilderung*) and loss of moral restraint that, he believed, were results of the decline of the artisanal order and the rise of the factory system.[1] Reformers periodically voiced concerns about the physical and moral well-being of young workers, not only those in the Social Policy Association, but

also those in reform organizations like the liberal Society for the Propagation of Popular Education (Gesellschaft für Verbreitung von Volksbildung), the government-supported Central Association for the Welfare of the Working Classes (Centralverein für das Wohl der arbeitenden Klassen), and the Association of Catholic Industrialists and Friends of Labor (Arbeiterwohl).[2] As the historian Jürgen Reulecke has shown, during the 1870s and 1880s such reform associations sporadically pressed for measures like the extension of protective legislation for young factory workers, the institution of factory savings deposits for young workers to encourage thriftiness, and instruction in useful household handicrafts to strengthen ties between youths and their families.

But it was only in the 1890s that the notion that something was amiss with the nation's young laborers, that they were becoming a palpable threat to the social order gained a powerful grip on the imaginations of the educated middle class and officialdom. In 1890 Johannes Corvey of the Central Association for the Welfare of the Working Classes expressed alarm at the radicalization of young workers; their militancy, their hatred of employers, their uprootedness and dissociation from all family bonds.[3] Pamphlets like the one by Ernst Floessel entitled "What Is Wrong with Our Laboring Youth?" began to appear. Public discussion of craft protection highlighted the educational deficiencies of apprentices. Debates in the Reichstag over the family law provisions of the Imperial Civil Code drew attention to neglected and wayward youth. In a speech before the Reichstag in 1899, War Minister von Gossler warned of a dangerous upsurge in juvenile delinquency, claiming that the number of convicted youths had increased 82 percent between 1882 and 1897. The same year, in an attempt to bridle the flight from the land, the Prussian legislature considered a law that would have forbidden youths from migrating to large cities from rural districts without written consent from their parents or guardians. The Prussian House of Lords recommended that the government prohibit youths under seventeen from visiting taverns and that communities set up recreational facilities that would enable young workers to spend their Sundays and holidays enjoying wholesome and ennobling recreations.[4]

By 1900 the belief that young working males constituted a pressing and distressing social problem that demanded remedial welfare measures was becoming widespread among municipal bureaucrats and social reformers. As one urban official proclaimed, "Welfare [*Fürsorge*] for post-school-age youth is a modern problem. It is even in a certain

sense the newest among the social problems that the modern world poses for the activity of private associations and state and communal agencies."[5] Pastor Albert Fritsch, a Protestant minister associated with the Inner Mission in Berlin, was happy to relate that "the conviction of the necessity of such welfare measures has penetrated ever wider circles. . . ."[6] The officially sanctioned Center for Workers' Welfare Institutions, which vetted government social policies and proffered advice on reform, and the Protestant Social Congress, an association of Protestant ministers and laypersons founded in 1890 to formulate a Christian social policy, made young male laborers the central theme of their annual conventions in 1900, and in the case of the Center in 1901 as well. In spring of 1900 the Royal Academy of Useful Knowledge in Erfurt announced a prize essay contest on the question, "What is the best way to educate our male youth for the good of civil society between leaving primary school and entering the army?"[7]

Even the phrasing of this question signaled the new way of conceptualizing young workers that was solidifying at the turn of the century. Whereas prior to this, criteria for age categorization had been haphazard and arbitrary, with different definitions of "youth" inscribed in civil law, criminal law, and the Industrial Code, by 1900 standard terms like *schulentlassene Jugend* (youth released from school) or *gewerbsthätige Jugend* (industrially active youth) were acquiring a more univocal sense. Although certainly closely related to puberty (*Entwicklungsalter, Uebergangszeit*), when the young not only completed their physiological development but were also supposedly vulnerable to extreme psychological lability (frequent oscillations in self-esteem, intense shifts in mood and judgment) and to the dangers attendant upon the awakening of sexual impulse and fantasy (masturbation, precocious sexual relations), these terms were not synonymous.[8] Instead, *schulentlassene Jugend* was steadily coming to designate young male workers in the dangerously unconstrained period between entering the labor force at age fourteen and induction into the army at age twenty, the years institutionally bounded by primary school and barracks.

The conferences held in 1900 and 1901 provide evidence of the social and organizational anchorage of the accelerating campaign for youth salvation. Attending the conferences of the Center for Workers' Welfare Institutions were official representatives from the Imperial Naval Office, the Insurance Office, various Prussian ministries, the states of Baden, Württemberg, Saxony, and Bavaria, and most major cities, as well as Catholic and Protestant clergymen, school superin-

tendants, and a few doctors and businessmen. Over half of the 399 participants in the assembly of the Protestant Social Congress in 1900 were pastors, theology students, or church administrators, but civil servants, teachers, and practitioners of various free professions were also represented. The Erfurt essay contest, won by the Munich school superintendant Georg Kerschensteiner, attracted seventy-five entrants, among them nineteen primary school teachers, sixteen municipal school officials, sixteen Protestant ministers, and a handful of writers, businessmen, technicians, army officers, and jurists.[9]

These events faintly heralded the subsequent scope and scale of youth salvation activities as the campaign burgeoned into a nationwide crusade. Over the next eighteen years there was an unsurveyable flood of books, pamphlets, articles, and tracts on youth welfare. City and state governments, the churches, and various reform associations organized countless parleys, meetings, and seminars on young laborers. The Center for Workers' Welfare Institutions and its successor, the Center for Popular Welfare, held three more conferences devoted to this subject. The Society for Social Reform, with an executive board that boasted eminent Wilhelmine reformers, such as the previous Prussian commerce minister, Freiherr von Berlepsch, the National Liberal Party chair, Ernst Bassermann, the National Social leader, Friedrich Naumann, the economist and liberal social theorist, Lujo Brentano, and the chairman of the People's League for Catholic Germany, August Pieper, staged an important conference on young male workers in 1911.[10]

Attendance at such conferences expanded prodigiously during the late Imperial period; by 1912 regional conferences with several thousand participants had become common. Although youth work would partially feminize, especially after 1911, when young working women began to be treated as a social problem in their own right, the social profile of participants remained practically unchanged between 1900 and the war. Most youth savers were part of the *Bildungsbürgertum*, the educated middle classes: municipal administrators, primary and continuation school teachers, clergy, businessmen, and other urban professionals, such as doctors, lawyers and journalists.[11] Thus a regional youth welfare conference in Düsseldorf in October 1913 packed the municipal concert hall with 2,060 youth savers, slightly over half of whom were women. Teachers (1,000) formed the largest single occupational group, followed by contingents of business people (238), clergy (200), and urban officials (163).[12] In general, youth savers obviously belonged to professions that regularly came into contact

with young male workers, and their participation in the campaign should be viewed as a rather natural extension of professional concerns. Evidence on political affiliation is available for only a few prominent youth savers, but extrapolations from this small sample suggest that youth savers largely backed the centrist parties: the National Liberal Party, the various left liberal groupings, or the Cologne (middle-class) or Mönchen-Gladbach (populist social Catholic) tendencies of the Catholic Center Party.[13] All were advocates of further welfare legislation that would primarily serve to strengthen the national state, which they accepted uncritically as the preeminent focus of loyalty and identity. They also shared middle-class anxieties over the gathering strength of the Social Democratic party and the supposed disorder of urban life. Both these commitments and these anxieties would be reflected and expressed in their programs. Because of the central place occupied by many youth savers in municipal governments and the churches, they would also be remarkably successful in implementing and embodying their programs in new or revamped institutions like the industrial continuation schools and church-sponsored youth associations. Thus the movement for youth salvation was urban in locus, middle-class professional in composition, and strongly nationalist and social liberal in political orientation. Indeed, the history of the youth salvation campaign is an important part of the history of the *Bildungsbürgertum* in the late Empire and, at least in the case of Protestant youth savers, reveals much about the shift from individualist to social liberalism at the turn of the century.

Positions taken in this campaign became Rorschach tests indicating orientations toward a series of issues central to the self-definition and status aspirations of the Wilhelmine educated middle class: socialism, urbanization, family values, crime, secularization, mass culture, large-scale industry, and Germany's place in the international arena. Such issues overshadowed the putative aims of the youth salvation campaign to such a degree at times that it would be difficult to deny the assertion by Günther Dehn, a Protestant pastor in a working-class district in Berlin, that the contenders in the battle for youth were often more interested in controlling the future than they were in fostering the welfare of young workers.[14]

Because of the political dimensions of the youth salvation campaign, a survey of its development provides a somewhat oblique but nonetheless excellent vantage point from which to approach the historiographical controversies that have swirled around Imperial Germany. Since the youth salvation campaign was in part conceived as a way of

integrating young workers into the Wilhelmine polity and social order, and since antisocialism bound together the disparate strands of this campaign, an examination of the campaign's results can increase our understanding of the degree of national integration.[15] A discussion of the SPD's ambivalent responses to various aspects of the campaign can also help to clarify the position of the party within the political order, and an account of Socialist attitudes toward young workers and the appeals to them by the Socialist youth movement will enable us to map some of the jagged boundaries between the culture of the labor movement and the culture of the working class, a mapping recently proposed by Richard J. Evans. Finally, placing the youth savers amid the political, social, and religious crosscurrents of the Empire and evaluating their achievements and failures, will contribute to an assessment of the capacity of Wilhelmine Germany for substantive reform, a point of dispute between historians extremely critical of the Empire, such as Hans-Ulrich Wehler, and those, such as Thomas Nipperdey, who are more favorably disposed toward the Kaiserreich.[16]

This book, then, examines the campaign to save young workers in late Imperial Germany. It explores the way in which young laborers became stamped as an official social problem and designated objects of social policy. It attempts to answer questions including, Why did young workers become problematic? Who were the youth savers? How did they portray the problem of young workers? What sorts of policies did they recommend? How were these policies implemented and to what effect? What does the youth salvation campaign signify about social relations in Wilhelmine Germany? What does the battle for hegemony over young laborers tell us about the nature of the Wilhelmine polity? Thus, this book reconstructs the "natural history of a social problem." As the sociologists Richard C. Fuller and Richard R. Myers declared in their classic article of that title:

> Social problems do not arise full-blown, commanding community attention and evoking adequate policies and machinery for their solution. On the contrary, we believe that social problems exhibit a temporal course of development in which different phases or stages may be distinguished. Each stage anticipates its successor in time and each succeeding stage contains new elements which mark it off from its predecessor. A social problem thus conceived as always being in a dynamic state of "becoming" passes through the natural history stages of awareness, policy determination and reform.[17]

Although the stages postulated by Fuller and Myers cannot be so neatly and schematically differentiated, the advantage of such a "nat-

ural history" approach is that it denaturalizes the development of "social problems," which themselves are rendered problematic and regarded as contingent outcomes of specific historic conjunctures and political controversies.

Hence this book treats the campaign surrounding young laborers, rather than being intended primarily as a social history of these youths, although, obviously, both histories are inextricably intertwined. Although this book makes no attempt to recreate the life worlds of young laborers, I certainly hope that readers committed to *Alltagsgeschichte* will find much that intersects with their interests in the following pages.[18] To the degree that this work does deal with "youth and history," it differs from some of the major works in this field in several key respects, some conceptual, some substantive.

Probably the most striking conceptual difference is the minimal place assigned to "generation" either as a descriptive or analytical category.[19] Given that Karl Mannheim and other sociologists fashioned the concept of "generation" and its closely related correlate, "generational conflict," into social scientific instruments during the 1920s, immediately after the period covered in this book, this absence requires an explanation. Certainly Mannheim's notion of "generational location," a notion derived by analogy from social class location, could be applied to young urban laborers in late Imperial Germany. Their social backgrounds, educational levels, and position in the labor force certainly limited these youths "to a specific range of potential experience, predisposing them for a certain characteristic mode of thought and experience and a characteristic type of historically relevant action." In short, "generational location" is equated with an age- and class-specific structure of opportunity. One could possibly even extend Mannheim's concept of "actual generation" to young laborers in Germany between 1900 and 1918 since they "were exposed to the same social and intellectual symptoms of dynamic destabilization." Young workers had to adjust to rapid economic change, the sensory bombardment of the large city, new forms of mass culture, such as films and sports, the bombastic patriotism that accompanied Germany's growing international power, and debates over socialism. They would also confront a new institutional nexus that included continuation schools and adult-sponsored youth associations. They would generally be subject to the same labor protection laws and moral policing. To some degree, they would all experience the disillusion and deprivation resulting from Germany's failures during the Great War. In part it was clearly this common generational location of young

manual laborers that enabled middle-class reformers to define them as a social problem and to construct a new institutional framework to encompass them.

Youth savers were quite aware, however, of significant distinctions within this social stratum. Moreover, it can be plausibly argued that insofar as young laborers composed a generation, to the degree they did have "an experience of generational affiliation and conflict," it was the institutions created by the youth savers that inadvertently supplied much of the basis of this commonality. Although I certainly do not wish to reject the notion of generation entirely or to eschew all generalizations about laborers between the ages of fourteen and twenty, I doubt that Mannheim's web of conceptual distinctions really captures anything very fundamental about young laborers at the turn of the century. Like their adult counterparts, young laborers were divided by skill level, trade, religion, political orientation, and gender. Even among young laborers there were a variety of "generational units," as Mannheim called broad groups that reconstructed their common experience in different specific ways and an even greater variety of formal and informal organizations, or "concrete" groups, in Mannheimian terminology, which crystallized these generational units, for example, the Workers' Youth Movement, Catholic youth sodalities, the Young Germany League. Generational tools have been most applicable and effective when analyzing formal organizations or well-defined, if informal, coteries with extensive networks of social communication, rather than birth cohorts.

What then of generational conflict? Certainly, as in all societies, one can easily marshal numerous examples of antagonism between old and young in Imperial Germany. Age-related hostilities were evident, whether in the villas of Berlin's tony West End or in the rent barracks of proletarian Wedding, albeit with different tonalities. The revolt of middle-class sons against authoritarian fathers and repressive schools had even become a modish theme for critical German authors at the turn of the century. Recent historians have echoed such themes by portraying the middle-class youth movement as an important catalyst hastening the autumn of the patriarch.[20] But to the degree that this study can be said to treat generational conflict, it is largely concerned with generational conflict conditioned by the class fissures of Wilhelmine society. Or as the political economist Wilhelm Troeltsch described this sort of conflict to the Protestant Social Congress in 1900, it was antagonism suffused by the strong prejudices that arise "when one social stratum [*Schicht*] judges the younger generation of another

and vice versa."[21] Above all, the battle for young laborers would assume the form of a political class struggle waged in the future tense, a battle by professional groups within the propertied and educated middle class, each one wanting to shape the future in accordance with its own vision by securing hegemony over young laborers.

The emphasis on the concepts of generation and generational conflict, especially when coupled with the proposition that "youth makes its own history," although unexceptionable in and of itself, has not merely served as a heuristic device, but has had the effect of channeling research on youth in Imperial Germany into quite specific directions. It has led to an inordinate amount of research being devoted to the middle-class *Wandervogel* movement, which has been marmorealized as the first movement by and for youth themselves.[22] Whether its members have been celebrated and romanticized as prototypes of adolescent rebels with a cause, champions of nature against the stony urban deserts, camaraderie and charismatic leadership against bureaucratic hierarchies, simplicity against the dessicated conventions, stuffy routines, and meaningless rituals of bourgeois life, or whether, instead, on the basis of their *völkisch*-tinged nationalist metapolitics and their organizational forms, they have been criticized and condemned as somewhat naive and inadvertent progenitors of Nazism, their paramount importance has been accepted as incontrovertible.

But the nature of this supposed importance has never been spelled out very clearly. Walter Laqueur, in *Young Germany,* advanced three claims for the importance of the *Wandervogel,* all of which have been repeated by later authors, such as Peter Stachura, covering the same terrain, but none of which is especially compelling or convincing. The first two are to be found in the assertion that

> . . . the youth movement in its way was a microcosm of modern Germany. Few are the political leaders, and even fewer the intellectual leaders among the generations born between 1890 and 1920, who were not at one time or another members of the youth movement, or influenced by it in their most impressionable years. And even perhaps more important than this personal element is the fact that all the great issues of the time are reflected in the history of the movement. At the outset it was non-political in character, or rather it wished to be so, yet it was gradually drawn into a confrontation with the dominant issues of the age.[23]

Although the passage certainly contains a number of ambiguities, Laqueur's two major claims are clear enough. The first is that the *Wandervogel* influenced Germany's intellectual and political leaders

born within a thirty-year period. Yet few major figures are actually cited, and the nature of this ostensible influence is left unexplored. Second, Laqueur claims that the movement was a reflection of its age or, as implied later in the book and argued more explicitly by George Mosse or Hermann Giesecke, that it made manifest the dilemmas and weaknesses of Germany's Protestant middle class.[24] The same sort of claim, couched in slightly different terms, is advanced by John Gillis in his pioneering survey of European age relations, *Youth and History*. There, Gillis avows that "the ultimate importance of the *Wandervogel* lay not in its myriad organizational forms, but in the historical social reality that it reflected," a historical social reality that soon turns out to be congruent with German middle-class concerns.[25] But even if one concedes that the *Wandervögeln* did reflect uncertainty about personal, sexual, political, and social identity common among the educated middle class, this claim is fundamentally weak. After all, it has never been asserted that the *Wandervögeln* were somehow uniquely representative of their age or that an analysis of these student groups yields pregnant insights about Wilhelmine society not apparent from studying other middle-class life reform movements.

The third claim is that

> The vast majority of German boys and girls were enrolled in confessional organizations, not in the autonomous youth movement. And yet in some respects the impact of the youth movement on the mass organizations inside Germany, and even outside her borders, was decisive. The youth movement introduced new ingredients and a new style which, by the late nineteen twenties, had spread widely among the younger generation in Germany and other European countries. Both the Hitler youth and, later on, the Free German Youth of East Germany adopted many of its outward trappings.[26]

But even assuming we accept that the *Wandervogel* exerted this decisive influence, this passage still begs the question of significance. Why are we to attribute such importance to the widespread adoption of outer trappings and superficial stylistic imitation? Gillis's analogous, if more carefully supported, claim is this:

> Not so much in terms of numbers but in the way it shaped the approach to adolesence in Germany, it remained the most influential of the youth movements, leaving its mark on the civil as well as the social status of youth for several decades to come.[27]

In the end, according to Gillis:

> Ironically, the most notable contribution of the *Wandervogel*, a social-historical movement associated with rebelliousness, was a new kind of conformity which