BACK TO NEW VALUES

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"I've been talking really fast," says Sonja Levsen and laughs. In just half an hour the researcher has presented the habilitation project (post-doctoral thesis) on which she will be working during the coming year. She wants to break new historical ground with her topic, "Authority and democracy. Educating youth in France and Germany, ca. 1945-1970".
Levsen's reasoning for her choice of research subject is as follows: "Although education was the subject of very heated discussions in all European societies, particularly during the post-war period, until now historians have performed surprisingly little research into the topic." And she is not the only one who finds this subject fascinating. The habilitation project is supported by the VolkswagenStiftung through the Dilthey-Fellowship, a grant for early-stage academics in the field of humanities who dare to venture close to the boudaries of their discipline with complex projects.

The scholar wants "to provide a broad overview" of her subject. She is examining two western European post-war societies, which were both confronted with dictatorships and experiences of war, and had to move away from authoritarian thinking patterns and ideals. "I am interested in how this background shaped discussions on education in the 1950s and 1960s." In doing so, Sonja Levsen has chosen a project in which the comparative approach is particularly extensive and time-consuming. This is because the source materials illustrating debates surrounding education in France and Germany are, as Levsen explains, so widely varied. She must therefore analyse and evaluate extremely different source materials of very diverse natures.

After the end of the war and the collapse of both the National Socialist government and the Vichy regime, an intensive debate surrounding education began in the post-war years. "At the time it was deemed that a chaotic state of values prevailed as a consequence of the upheaval of war. The young generation was unstable and confused, and parents didn't know which set of standards they should use to raise them," explains Levsen. The concept of authority had to be redefined; one of the core questions in the debate concerned how much freedom young people should be given.

In Germany there were three groups in particular which tried to reshape society and create new ideals for education. While the church set an agenda which focussed on returning to conservative, Christian values, the allies and politically-motivated teaching staff from the school system devised new ideas to guarantee democratic education and re-education after the catastrophe of the Second World War. In France, former members of the resistance also promoted a fundamental change of direction in education. Levsen's analysis centres on post-war teenagers who were involved in institutions where education was the subject of public discussion. As a result, she particularly focuses on the youth work of associations and schools, which attempted to influence the adolescents who were disconcerted by the shock of the war, and tried to teach them to be "new citizens".

The German people frequently resisted the reforms, which were perceived or portrayed as being forced upon them. "They were reluctant to allow themselves be dictated to, which is why many allied attempts at reform failed," states Levsen. In the 1950s, the historian continues, there was an evident rift between increasingly progressive debates and continued insistence on traditional values in everyday life. "Many new ideas were proposed, but they were rarely put into practice." Levsen gives the example of discussions regarding sexual education in French schools. "The issue was already being discussed, even in governmental circles, immediately after the end of the war, but sex education classes were not actually introduced until the 1970s."

One of the major questions that the scholar is attempting to answer through her research is how the proportion of change and continuity in educational paradigms appeared in the 1950s and 1960s. Historical science has seen many interpretations which put forward the theory that German society was only able to assimilate with the European West in the 1960s, through a process of increasing liberalisation. Levsen wants to know how alien the German people actually were to their western neighbours after the end of the Second World War. "This process of increasing liberalisation is often judged as moving away from National Socialism, although the authoritarian attitude which had been prevalent was not a specific tradition of National Socialism, but rather a relic of a more or less common European tradition from the 19th century," states Levsen. For this reason, she is investigating which developments happened in a similar manner in West Germany and in France, to be able to demonstrate which remnants of National Socialism actually existed in Germany. As well as the question regarding concrete change in educational practice in Germany and France during the 1950s and 1960s, the historian is also looking at the 1968 movement, which ultimately demanded revolutionary changes in educational concepts.

The sources upon which the research is based are mainly contemporary newspapers, which were partly aimed at specialist academic audiences, but were often designed for a wider readership.

The following claim was made in 1965 in one of the newspapers examined, and shows that some things in debates on education and authority ultimately never change: "Things cannot continue the way they are with the youth of today!"