

Jürgen Bartsch and Society (1968)

By Ulrike Meinhof

During the trial of Jürgen Bartsch¹, everything you could possibly think of was done to keep the most important issue out of the trial, out of public view, and discussion. It was kept out of the sentence, out of the deliberations around the sentence, and out of the justification for the sentence. But in actual fact, the whole event revolved around this one issue: the story of Jürgen Bartsch. In fact, as the trial piled up the sordid details of this sad individual's life, it not only exposed his suffering but also the suffering of the society in which this person has lived and murdered—suffering on a scale that is hard to imagine and that we heard about in the most brutal detail. The court did everything humanly possible to ensure that the conditions of life that underlay Jürgen Bartsch's development were not addressed in the trial; the court did everything it could to exclude the possibility that the young man might better himself, stop killing, change, and it thereby rendered the other possibility impossible—the possibility that this trial would reveal the need for change, and the opportunity for change. In his closing words, the judge said, "May God help you control your criminal urges." May God help us close our eyes to the enormous need for change faced by our society.

It started with adoption. The Bartsch family had to wait seven years before they could adopt him. This was because of the "risky family tree," because his father was a laborer and poor, and a man who already had a family, and his mother had lived without a man for years, and was sick and poor. A Nazi blur of eugenics was swilling around in the minds of the welfare and youth agencies. The fact that the child had already spent a year in an institution should have caused concern and should have led to a decision to quickly arrange for adoption, quickly establish a clear situation, a secure nest. But the judge himself provided an example of this Nazi biologism when he told the mother that, after all, the boy was not "her own flesh and blood," and the father also subscribes to such ideas when he says he would have treated his own child differently. No one ever told him that genetics are unimportant, that the environment is what counts, that only nurture, and nothing else, determines a child's future. The adoption process dragged on for seven years; for seven years the child was kept in a state of uncertainty, as though adoption were a disgrace for a child instead of its good fortune and an honor for the parents.

Then they put the child in a home because the mother had to help in a shop, because the competition is tough for a small-time butcher, because a person who sells food has to struggle to survive. And the only solution they could come up with was a home, because this society is still set up in such a way that the ten million women who work outside their own homes, of whom well over a million are mothers with children under fourteen, all have to struggle to find more or less suitable care for their kids, and are left alone to handle the strain of both employment and family responsibilities, even though they are a necessary part of the work force. But there's hardly any room in the kindergartens, all-day school is a utopia, and part-time work is hardly possible.

¹ Jürgen Bartsch killed four boys between 1962 and 1966. After a long court case he was sentenced to life in prison. On the slim chance of being set free, he had himself castrated in April 1976. He died as a result of the operation.

Then he was sent to a different home, because he had grown too old for the first one, because homes for children are organized according to age groups: there are different homes for infants, for small children, for school-age children, and for apprentices. Children growing up in institutions, who already live in fear and insecurity because of their backgrounds and futures, are further tormented by being moved from place to place, which means they lose their friends, their counselors, and the environment they know. Pedagogically this is absolute madness. Everybody knows it, yet nobody does anything about it. It's not that we don't understand; it's that there's no money or commitment to change.

He arrived in a Catholic-Prussian institution, with fifty kids in the sleeping hall, corporal punishment as a training method, kids marching in step when they went out for a walk, close supervision in the evenings, and religious studies. And no youth agency came in to close the place down and cancel the counselors' right to counsel these kids.

So he ran away, then had to go back, and ran away again. He ended up at a police station; the police became his educational institution, which goes well with the commando voice of the father, believing that beatings don't do any harm, and after all he needs to be prepared for life. This boy was prepared for military barracks, not for life, and he thinks barracks are life. Our family policies teach parents nothing about raising children, nothing at all.

Then he fell in love with a boy. He loved that boy, and quickly learned that homosexuality is "disgusting," and that he's not allowed to love. So feelings of love make him feel guilty, because an anachronistic morality of reproduction declares that love, the best thing in him, the best thing there is, is "disgusting." He sees his best quality as "disgusting," so he has to do it secretly, finally buy it, which is why he is now being punished for "prostitution" by a society that has turned love into something disgusting, that can only be bought.

Then he wanted to talk to someone, but the main preoccupation of the Catholic institution was silence. His father listened to the radio on the half-hour drive to the slaughterhouse, and Saturday evenings he watched TV. The chaplain he finally got to talk to—by then one child was already dead—handed him over to God, in silence, refusing the only possible human response—that someone finally take an interest in this boy, even if it is only the public prosecutor; that someone finally care for him, realize that this is a human being like the rest of us, who cannot live without communication.

Then he became an apprentice butcher, and his father cursed the law against underage employment that prohibits children working sixty hours a week. He took him to work in his own shop, and made him work sixty hours a week, and again the youth employment agency did not take action, or check up, or forbid this abuse. The inspectors are poorly paid, there aren't enough of them, and infringements of the law are not discovered. So Jürgen Bartsch worked sixty hours a week and had no friends, no private life. He led a double life, because he refused to be destroyed. He's tough, hasn't given up yet although he's been given up on, at least by the youth employment agency that ignores the youth employment law as a document it doesn't enforce.

But the mother made an excellent impression on the judge, because she is "clean" and "neat," and always made sure he ate his soup and only wore his watch on Sundays and learned to be punctual and wash every day. She inflicted the father's military barracks expectations on the child, a training method that is in line with the punch-clock requirements of industry rather than the needs of the child, a method that demands all and gives little in return, at the very moment in life when it is the child's right to demand everything and only give little in return if it is to grow and develop. An

uninformed woman and a very common method of raising children produced unimaginable suffering for this child.

But the court did not see the institutional solution as a catastrophe. The court did not think corporal punishment was something the trial should address. The court felt a sixty-hour week was just the right thing to stop him from getting into trouble. The court was left with an excellent impression of the mother and her militaristic training methods. And when the expert witness Paul Bresser was asked for a statement, he took this request as one to limit himself to what the court wanted to hear. The expert witness Hans Ludwig Lauber viewed the letters Bartsch scratched into the wall of his cell as nothing more than attempts to garner sympathy, although they were signs, precise and legitimate signs about his unfulfilled needs—scratched into the wall too late, it's true, hideously too late. The defending lawyer said the wishes of the accused are what counts, not the wishes of the man who has no counsel, whose life was damaged. The defending lawyer did not understand that he wasn't only defending Jürgen Bartsch but hundreds of thousands of children, adopted children, institutionalized children, homosexual children, battered children, exploited children. He remained silent.

The judge remained silent too when the spectators in the courtroom applauded and shouted "Bravo" as the life sentence was read out, where normally and for good reason expressions of applause or disapproval are reprehensible. The judge was silent when society cleansed its conscience through its hatred for a child murderer, the conscience it requires in order to remain silent when children are murdered in Vietnam and barbarically abused in its own country, within its own families. No newspaper rapped the judge over the knuckles when he told journalists he used intuition to decide on the case, and that he was helped in this decision by his love of music and by playing the piano. They were dealing with an appalling social disgrace in Wuppertal, and the judge sought illumination at the piano.

Jürgen Bartsch's life is in ruins. But the criminality that was the actual subject of the Wuppertal court case goes on; the conditions remain the same. They are the conditions that nurture child murderers and piano-playing judges. The Bartsch case is rightly called the case of the century. The court and the press did everything for this to be otherwise. The criminality goes on.