

THE RISE OF THE CULTURE OF YOUTH AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATION.

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Part I: 1875-1919

During the twentieth century we have seen the rise of a youth culture which today, in many ways has a dominating position in society. This is reflected in the new spending power of adolescents and the formation of an age group with its own rituals, rights and demands. The last century heralded a re-definition of youth. America is where it all happened. As John Lennon (born in 1940) so aptly put it in an interview in 1966: "America used to be a big youth place in everybody's imagination. America had teenagers and everywhere else had just people." Prior to the First World War society was forced into recognizing that the relationship between childhood and adulthood was obsolete. The idea that adulthood followed childhood was gone forever. "The critical moment" of which Jean-Jacques Rousseau had talked about some hundred years previously with its quick changes of emotions and a perpetual stirring of the mind had found its identity. Rousseau's 'Emile' had recognized the pubescent potential for extremes and concluded that the interval between childhood and adulthood should be prolonged and educated. By 1870 Rousseau's recommendations were being taken seriously. He had proposed a deeper kind of education that would recognize puberty as a vital stage in life. It was dream or nightmare, heaven or hell. "The period where education is usually finished is just the time to begin," he wrote.

This was possible on the background of experiences in the Industrial Revolution with its materialism, consumerism and mass-production where youth was aborted and children bore the brunt of working with dangerous and repetitive tasks as evoked by Henry Mayhew and Charles Dickens.

The question was: what should be done with the youth? How was excess pubescent energy to be channelled? Never mind about developing the soul life of these young people through education what they really need is strong disciplinary activity rather than time to develop their inner life. At the end of the nineteenth century the Romantic movement led by artists and philosophers of the day formed the idea of eternal youth. The other side forwarded sports based schooling and regimentation. The German colonel Baron Colmar von der Goltz formulated a political manifesto that youthful energy should be used in the interests of society as a whole. "The strength of the nation lies in its youth," he proclaimed. "Their love of adventure rouses their eagerness for battle. It is only youth that depart from life without pangs." This led to conscription throughout Europe. Thus at the turn of the century education for youth was concentrating on physical prowess rather than intellectual development. This could only be possible if the youth were formed into groups – a group soul, away from the natural development in that phase of life that entails the individual development of the personality. Therefore loyalty – to one's school and to one's country had to be enforced by a strong discipline and the acceptance of corporal punishment.

In France, Arthur Rimbaud epitomized the real side of youthfulness. As a seventeen-year-old he had long outgrown his family and home town. On May 13th 1871 he wrote to his friend Paul Demeny: "The problem for us youth is to attain the unknown by disorganizing all the senses. The suffering is immense, but you have to be strong, and have to be born a poet." He introduced the well-known phrase "je suis en autre." In Paris he terrorized people by disrupting meetings and attacking people. Others saw in him another side of youthful

exuberance -they saw him as a prodigy to be respected. Leading poets of the day saw that he represented “a diabolical beauty” to be found in all people of his age. At 21 years of age Rimbaud stopped writing and left for Africa as his countryman Flaubert had left for the Orient. “Boredom is no longer my love,” he writes in 'Une saison en enfer', “now it is rage, perversion and madness.” In 'Jeunesse' he called this state “the endless egoism of youth.”

Previously youths had no rights but now, in the 1890's, the powers that be started to take notice of a mission to destroy the old order and to create a new Europe by way of literature and particularly poetry. Poetry is a medium whereby you can phrase both your feelings and your thoughts.

In June 1884, the English author Oscar Wilde visited Paris on his honeymoon. He was to make his mark, mainly through 'The Picture of Dorian Gray' which has the purpose of bringing the Faustian myth of the promise of eternal youth into the modern age. Whilst in Paris Wilde read Huysman's 'A Rebours' and he was deeply impressed. He felt that the book described his whole life before he had lived it. “Live! Live the wonderful life that is in you! Youth! Youth! There is nothing in the world but youth!” Wilde replaced team spirit with rampant individualism. He felt that the task of the twentieth century for the youth of the day was “to realise one's nature perfectly.” “That is what each one of us is here for!” he wrote, “It is absurd to talk about the ignorance of youth, the only people who I listen to are those who are younger than myself!”

He continued: “The old believe everything, the middle aged suspect everything, the young know everything.” He was taken to trial for having a bad influence on youth. It resulted in a two year sentence with hard labour for indecency and homosexuality. Wilde's books were banned.

In the summer of 1893 a huge trade and culture fair was held on the outskirts of Chicago to commemorate the 400th anniversary of Columbus' landing on the North American continent. It comprised of 50,000 exhibitors from 50 countries. For many it was an hallucination but it was the first expression of 'The American Dream'. It appealed to the new youth culture because, on the one hand it showed fertility of commercialism and on the other, that dreams could be created out of thin air. Amongst the 27 million visitors was a 37 year old travelling salesman L. Baum. The fair made such an impression on him that he moved with wife and four children from the wilderness of South Dakota to Chicago “where everyone seemed to be happy, contented and prosperous. There he authored 'The Wonderful Wizard of Oz'. The book was sold out in two weeks. Set in late nineteenth century America it is the story of Dorothy, an orphan who lives with her aunt and uncle. Her dog Toto is her only comfort. She is caught up in a tornado and whisked away from her own country being dropped in the strange land of Oz. It is a fantastic land, full of people bathed in colour and full of magic. But it was no ordinary story. It had psychological depth being published within weeks of Sigmund Freud's 'The Interpretation of Dreams'. The story is full of falling and flying. Psychology, the study of soul development had been born. Baum wrote in the introduction:

“Modern education includes morality, therefore the modern child seeks only entertainment in its wonder tales and gladly dispenses with all disagreeable incident. Having this thought in mind, the story of 'The Wonderful Wizard of Oz' was solely written to pleasure. It aspires to being a modern fairy-tale in which the wonderment and joy are retained and the nightmares left out.” The book was to have a great influence on youth for decades to come and led to the introduction of the term “the generation gap.”

In the late nineteenth century youths in the cities of Western Europe and Europe for the first time, left to fend for themselves. This saw the start of the gang mentality in Manhattan –something later to be associated with

youths in the western world. In the period 1880-1910 the urban population in the USA tripled from 14 to 42 millions due to immigration from Europe. The problems of juvenile delinquency followed. One-third of the youth were living in extreme poverty. Schools addressed the issue and the children underwent religious instruction, compulsory physical drilling and sport and high levels of corporal punishment. In the major cities of Western Europe attendance was only 60 percent. "Larking about" became a term for the first time and referred to gangs of youths on street corners doing nothing. This led to petty crime and vandalism as a group experience. For the first time these youths dressed in a special way and there was an explicit link between dress and delinquency. In Germany, France and Great Britain one tried to overcome this by an even greater accentuation on cadets and semi-military groups in uniform. Youths in New York and later in Europe started to identify themselves with the wild, roaming Red Indians of the North American prairies. Youngsters could buy the 'Boy's Own Paper' (first published in 1879) with a high level of illustration and little text. The stories were seen by parents to be shocking, full of violence and protest. Hair was chopped as closely as possible to the scalp with the exception of a small patch at the crown of the head in true Apache style. America had become a young country and Western Europe quickly followed. The American Red Indian became an icon for boys. They were wild and free wide open spaces as well as grace under pressure. The girls lived in another world, that of the diary where one's innermost feelings and thoughts could be expressed in solitude, away from the streets, away from the gang, in the intimacy of one's bedroom. Never before or later were the masculine and feminine aspects of youth so far apart. In Germany, a seventeen year old schoolgirl, Karen Horney typifies the status of the female teenager. Prevented by a male teacher from attending a dissection class she decided to run home and dissect herself instead. The news spread throughout Europe of a young martyr.

The intensity of youth was now elevated to a national level. A determination to utterly destroy society now existed. Some forward thinking artists saw the challenges of the new century very clearly, not least the Swedish sociologist and writer Ellen Key who, in 1908 published her radical book 'The Century of the Child'. In that it was written by a woman was of prime importance at the time. They were asking what would be an education for our time and if and how youths should be educated. Rudolf Steiner received the first question about a new for of education in tune with the needs of the coming century for young people from 7 to 19 years in 1908. However, the will to destroy was to be channelled into a mass conflict between nations that was to kill off the boys. Germany and France were well-prepared, they had each 3.6 million regimented youths, Britain 250,000. Millions of adolescents would surrender their youth, if not their lives.

When the first Waldorf School was founded in Stuttgart in 1919 adolescents stood on the threshold of a uncertain world. There was upheaval in Europe. Strikes by workers in essential industries were widespread, there were riots in city centres, food shortages were common and there was a political polarization as never before. In other words Europe had never seen such an extreme instability. The scars were both physical and psychological. Some young people were back but they were not the same. They were subject to sudden changes of mood and queer bouts of temper, fits of depression alternating with a new restless desire for pleasure. They had gone directly from school to the battlefield without any form of life experience. Everyone wished to be born anew. The age war was declared and the young men who had survived and who had had no youth as such wanted to recapture their lost youth. There was an insistent demand for gratification. But this youthful desire was very suitable for the accelerating demands of mass- production. A boy of nineteen with only a few weeks of experience on a machine could turn out a greater production than his father of 45. Workplaces became more standardized but youth were not willing to forfeit their individuality. They saw that the new machine age standardized human life.

When in 1919 the Waldorf School was established it was in a long-term perspective. When addressing the first parents, who themselves were workers in standardized tasks in the Waldorf-Astoria Cigarette Company, Steiner emphasized the fact that the methodology of the school could first be confirmed in the first half of the twenty-first century when the challenges of the individual's personal development would be even more crucial. Much was to change in the development of the youth and society later in the twentieth century.

If we were able to move a person with a swish of a magic wand from 1900 to 1950 he would be totally confused. Around him he would see new wonders of technology. There would be traffic everywhere, underground railways, skyscrapers, typewriter, telephones and televisions. Socially little would have changed. Married to the same person throughout life, tight family bonds, and a steady job from sixteen to retirement. With another swish of the wand we could move a person from 1950 to 2000. The world will be pretty similar. The cars and railways would be faster and more streamlined. The telephones would be without wires the typewriter would have grown into a computer. But generally the things would be recognizable but more advanced. It would be in the social sphere he would see the changes. No code of dress at work where you could choose your own hours and working abroad in your fifth job. The children left at 21 for a new life in Australia. The grandparents ply a youthful existence in Spain in the winter months. In other words: an era of endless possibilities. The future was teenage. The future was to be in their hands.