

Youth in the modern world

One of the features of English social life in the post-war years has been the ascendancy of the adolescent age groups. Not only have entire new branches of the entertainments industries sprung from the enthusiasms and the spending-power of the young; a popular press exists for them as it has always done for the so-called middle class, and a small popular culture has grown round their emotions and their "rights". At the same time, the spread of juvenile crime and hooliganism has alarmed the police and a good many other people. What *has* happened to the younger generation?

Before the war a school-leaver was lucky if he was paid fifteen shillings a week, and luckier still if he had any of it for himself. He was fettered on the one hand by the lowness of wages—especially his—and on the other by his new status in the home, bringing in money when it was usually urgently needed. More often than not he handed in all his pay; clothes and fares were bought from the family exchequer as in his schooldays, and he might have a shilling to blue on Saturday night.

It was largely on this little-to-spend dependence that the serious, character-training organizations for adolescents thrived then: Scouts, Guides, Boys' Brigades and the like. They offered companionship, horseplay and games for next to nothing, and cheap camping holidays *ad lib*. Nowadays their membership above the school age is fractional and their influence on youth insignificant; the difference can well be seen in the fact that the pre-war Rover Scout movement for young men has had to be disbanded in recent times.

The changed circumstances of today hardly need pointing out. They are not universal, of course; plenty of adolescents can never grasp the well-known present-day educational opportunities because they are needed as wage-earners in the home. Nevertheless, it has been part of the economic conditions of the full-employment era that employers have had in general to woo the younger generation. There have had to be rewards and attractions to recruit typists and comptometer hands for the post-war volume of commerce and trainees for the new armies of engineers—and, correspondingly, greater inducements for the less-favoured jobs as well.

The adolescent has become, in fact, emancipated financially. He (as a matter of course, this includes she) has some money in his pocket, can buy his own clothes, purchase his own amusements. Two additional factors set the seal—within its limits—on this emancipation. First, older generations, mindful of their hard times and unyouthful youth, tend to gain compensation and pleasure from seeing their children "not going short". And second, in a great many cases the adolescent himself knows that he is never likely to have so much money to spend again. The boy of eighteen earning a man's wage may be fortunate; by definition, however, it is as much as he will ever earn when he has to keep a family.

But the shackle-breaking has not been just a question of income. That is one side of it. The other is the severance from tradition that changes in society's superstructure had forced. In earlier times, and even for the working people within the last sixty years or so, one generation's experience was closely like that of another. In work, education

and domestic detail, a son's life was unlikely to differ much from that of his father; the traditions and ideals of the older generation were guides for the young one.

What has happened in more recent times is that the development of new industrial techniques, greater specialization and division of labour, and with them changes in the education of the young, have led to the breakdown of these patterns. The adolescent of today does not have to learn his way of life from previous generations. He has emancipated from tradition, too.

There are innumerable reflections of this relative freedom, most of them reflecting also that American youth had it first. The absence of long-standing traditions in America, and the twentieth-century surge there of technical development, produced effects which were quickly communicated to this country by the cinema: the Andy Hardy films of the 'thirties gave clear glimpses of what was happening to adolescence. There have been the songs—"Too Young", "Teenage Love", etc.—laying down the claim to earlier marriage; the TV programmes and picture-strip mags. for the under-twenties, often with the same slightly defiant don't-you-find-fault-with-youth overtone; the films concerned sentimentally with the adolescent's emotions, or noisily with his fun.

Is this a good thing? From the mass of newspaper, magazine and broadcast stuff about "modern youth", some evaluation ought to be possible. The fact is, however, that the commentaries are made from severely limited viewpoints, almost never from the social one. When they are not Christian pronouncements (or, occasionally, psychiatric ones: the *Sunday Pictorial* recently advocated cuddly toys as therapy for mixed-up adolescence), they are heavily loaded either sentimentally or culturally—either assuming that youth is necessarily admirable, or arguing from antipathy to rock 'n' roll. Nor is the sympathy disinterested: the emancipated adolescent is a source of income to all kinds of people.

And this leads to the real point. Has youth really gained in freedom? The modern teenager has, for a probably maximum of five years, some financial independence, and he is no longer bound by former conventions. On the other hand, he is delivered whole to the greedy commercial class to dress up in, swallow, read and recreate himself with their gaudy mass-produced rubbish. The sad thing about such a phenomenon as rock 'n' roll is that the adolescents who jig and bound to its metronome rhythm think they are letting their hair down, whereas in fact it is being held down firmly in a fixed position by the film and record companies and other interested parties.

The belief that modern youth has generated for itself a separate culture is at bottom a mistaken one. True, there are all its appearances. Basically, however, adolescent behaviour is only the juvenile (and therefore cruder-looking) version of the culture-pattern of the grown-up world of modern capitalism. Adolescents are given to showy display of dress and possessions: but this is the world in which conspicuous consumption is equated with "higher living standards". They make and follow heroes of brash, hollow and ephemeral figures: are these different from the heroes of the world at large?

Indeed, the typical teenage here is the teenager's own reflection, a little larger and louder, and this complies fully with the requirement for political leadership remarked over forty years ago by Trotter in *Instincts of the Herd in Peace and War*:-

"He must remain, in fact, recognizable as one of the flock, magnified, no doubt, louder, coarser, above all, with more urgent wants and ways of expression than the common sheep, but in essence to their feeling of the same flesh with them."

The place of violence and greed in the present-day world should be mentioned, too. It is fairly obvious that youth wanting to claim grown-up privileges will see physical and sexual prowess as the things to show; and equally obvious that so far as unscrupulousness, brutality, and general disregard for human personality go the grown-up world provides precedents and examples in plenty. One does not have to think only of the Bomb. There are the well-known facts of *How to Get On in the World*—the ruthless treatment of other people and the morality that ends can justify all means. It used to be pretended to the young that honesty was the best policy; now nobody tells them anything so patently at variance with the facts of life.

For all the attention demanded and given to him, the adolescent has not gained much. Release from one set of circumstances and conventions has led only to others which seem hardly more desirable; the "mixed-up" young person is a creature of this time. And the truth is that there can be no emancipation for anyone, in the real sense of the word, in the society in which we live. The emancipation of women, of slaves, of empire-trodden peoples, has meant in actuality only freeing them from one kind of bondage to secure them in another. What is the matter is not the young people or the old people, but the organization of society: the only freedom which *can* mean anything is freedom deriving from common ownership of the means of life.

It is worth saying also that only in Socialist society will it be possible for the first time for young people to develop freely towards satisfying and full lives. In the capitalist world they are viewed not as people at all but as future wage-workers, soldiers, consumers, and adherents to this and that. Not long ago the *Daily Mirror*, in an article called "The Beanstalk Generation" claimed that the facts of physical maturity were changing in the emancipated-adolescent age. It goes to show how little is really known about youth, and how little can be known until the entire social environment is changed.

It is not the kids, but the world that is mixed-up and crazy.

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