

12

'YOUTH' IS JUST A WORD

Q. *How does a sociologist approach the problem of young people?*

A. The professional reflex is to point out that the divisions between the ages are arbitrary. It's the paradox identified by Pareto, who said that we don't know when old age begins, just as we don't know where wealth begins. Indeed, the frontier between youth and age is something that is fought over in all societies. For example, a few years ago I was reading an article on relations between young men and their elders in sixteenth-century Florence; it showed how the elders of the city offered its young men the ideology of virility – *virtù* – and violence, which was a way of keeping wisdom – and therefore power – for themselves. In the same way, Georges Duby shows how in the Middle Ages the limits of youth were manipulated by the holders of the patrimony, so as to keep the young nobles, who might otherwise aspire to the succession, in a state of youth, that is, irresponsibility.

Entirely equivalent things would be found in sayings and proverbs, or simply in stereotypes of youth, or again in philosophy, from Plato to Alain, which assigns its specific passion to each age of man – love to adolescence, ambition to maturity. The ideological representation of the division between young and old grants certain things to the youngest, which means that in return they have to leave many things to their elders. This is seen very clearly in the case of sport, in rugby, for example, with the glorification of 'tough young players', docile, good-natured brutes assigned to the rough and tumble of the forward game exalted by managers and commentators ('Just use your strength and keep your mouth shut, don't think'). This structure, which is also found elsewhere (e.g. in relations between the sexes) reminds us that the logical division between young and old is also a question of power, of the division (in the sense of sharing-out) of powers. Classification by age (but also by sex and, of course, class . . .) always means imposing limits and producing an *order* to which each person must keep, keeping himself in his place.

Q. *What do you mean by 'old'? Adults? Those involved in production? Pensioners?*

Interview with Anne-Marie Métaillé in *Les Jeunes et le premier emploi*, Paris: Association des Âges, 1978: 520–30

A. When I say young/old, I am taking the relationship in its most general form. One is always somebody's senior or junior. That is why the divisions, whether into age-groups or into generations, are entirely variable and subject to manipulation. For example, the anthropologist Nancy Munn shows that in some societies in Australia, the rejuvenating magic that old women use to restore their youth is regarded as thoroughly diabolical, because it overturns the boundaries between the ages, so that no one knows any longer who's young and who's old. My point is simply that youth and age are not self-evident data but are socially constructed, in the struggle between the young and the old.

The relationship between social age and biological age is very complex. If one were to compare young people from the different fractions of the dominant class, for example all the students entering the École Normale, the École Nationale d'Administration, Polytechnique, etc., in the same year, one would see that the closer they are to the pole of power, the more these 'young men' take on the attributes of the adult, the old man, the noble, the notable, etc. As one moves from the intellectuals to the managing director, so everything that gives a 'young' look – long hair, jeans, etc. – disappears.

As I have shown in relation to fashion or artistic and literary production, each field has its specific laws of ageing. To understand how the generations are divided, you have to know the specific laws of functioning of the field, the specific prizes that are fought for and the divisions that emerge in the struggle (*nouvelle vague*, *nouveau roman*, *nouveaux philosophes*, 'the new judges', etc.). All that is fairly banal, but it demonstrates that age is a biological datum, socially manipulated and manipulable; and that merely talking about 'the young' as a social unit, a constituted group, with common interests, relating these interests to a biologically defined age, is in itself an obvious manipulation. At the very least one ought to analyse the differences between different categories of 'youth', or, to be brief, at least *two* types of 'youth'. For example, one could systematically compare the conditions of existence, the labour market, the time management, etc., of 'young people' who are already in work, and of adolescents of the same (biological) age who are students. On one side there are the constraints of the real economic universe, barely mitigated by family solidarity; on the other, the artificial universe of dependency, based on subsidies, with low-cost meals and accommodation, reduced prices in theatres and cinemas, and so on. You'd find similar differences in all areas of existence: for example, the scruffy, long-haired kids who take their girlfriends for a ride on a clapped-out scooter are the very same ones who get picked up by the police.

In other words, it's an enormous abuse of language to use the same concept to subsume under the same term social universes that have practically nothing in common. In one case, you have a universe of adolescence, in the true sense, in other words, one of provisional

irresponsibility: these 'young people' are in a kind of social no man's land, they are adults for some things and children for others, they have it both ways. That's why many bourgeois adolescents dream of prolonging their adolescence indefinitely: it's the complex of Frédéric in Flaubert's *Éducation sentimentale*, who eternally extends his adolescence. Having said that, the 'two youths' are simply two opposing poles, the two extremes of a space of possibilities offered to 'young people'. One of the interesting things that emerge from Laurent Thévenot's work is that it shows that between these extreme positions – the bourgeois student at one end and, at the other, the young worker who does not even have an adolescence – one finds nowadays all the intermediate positions.

Q. *Isn't it the transformation of the educational system that has produced this kind of continuity, where previously there was a more clear-cut difference between the classes?*

A. One of the factors in this blurring of the oppositions between young people in the different classes is the fact that in all classes a higher proportion pass through secondary education, so that a proportion of (biologically) young people whose parents did not experience adolescence have discovered this temporary status, the half-way house between childhood and adulthood. I think that's a very important social fact. Even in the milieux apparently most remote from the student condition of the nineteenth century, that's to say in small villages, where the children of peasants and craftsmen now go to the local secondary school even in that case, adolescents are placed, for a relatively long period, at an age when previously they would have been working, in those positions almost outside the social universe which define the adolescent condition. It seems that one of the most powerful effects of the situation of adolescents derives from this kind of separate existence, which puts them *socially out of play*. The 'schools of power', and especially the *grandes écoles*, place young people in enclosures separated from the world, quasi-monastic spaces where they live a life apart, a retreat, withdrawn from the world and entirely taken up with preparing for the most 'senior positions'. They do perfectly gratuitous things there, the sorts of things one does at school, exercises with blank ammunition. For some years now, all young people have had access to a version of this experience, more or less fully developed and, above all, more or less long. However brief and superficial it may have been, this experience is decisive, because it is sufficient to produce to some degree a break with self-evidences. There's the classic case of the miner's son who wants to go down the mine as soon as possible, because that's his route into the world of adults.

Even today, one reason why working-class adolescents want to leave school and start work very early is the desire to attain adult status, and the associated economic capacities, as soon as possible. It's very important for a boy to earn money so he can keep up with his peers, go out with his mates

and with girls, be seen, and see himself, as a 'man'. That's one of the factors behind working-class children's resistance to the raising of the school leaving age.

All the same, the fact of being placed in the 'student' situation induces all sorts of things which are constitutive of the scholastic situation. They have their bundle of books tied up with a string, they sit on scooters and chat up girls, they associate with others of their own age, of both sexes, outside of work, and at home they are absolved from material tasks on the grounds that they are studying (and it's an important factor that the working classes go along with this tacit contract which leads students to be set 'out of play').

I think that this symbolic setting-aside has a certain importance, especially since it is accompanied by one of the fundamental effects of the educational system, which is the manipulation of aspirations. People always forget that school is not just a place where you learn things, where you acquire knowledge and skills: it's also an institution which awards qualifications – and therefore entitlements – and so confers aspirations. The old school system produced less confusion than the present system with its complicated tracks which lead people to have aspirations that are ill-adjusted to their real chances. The tracks used to be fairly clear: if you went beyond the primary school certificate, you went to a *cours complémentaire*, or a 'higher primary school', or a *collège*, or a *lycée*; there was a clear hierarchy among these routes, and no one was in any doubt. Now, there is a host of routes through the system that are difficult to tell apart and you have to be very alert in order to avoid running into a siding or a dead-end, and also to avoid devalued courses and qualifications. That helps to encourage a degree of disconnection of people's aspirations from their real chances. The previous state of the system meant that limits were very strongly internalized; it led people to accept failure or limits as just or inevitable . . . For example, primary school teachers were people who were selected and trained, consciously or unconsciously, so that they would be cut off from peasants and workers, while at the same time being completely separate from secondary teachers. Now that the system gives the status of *lycéen*, albeit devalued, to children from social classes for whom secondary education was formerly quite inaccessible, it encourages these children and their families to expect what the system provided for *lycée* pupils at a time when those schools were closed to them. To enter secondary education is to enter into the aspirations that were inscribed in entering secondary education in an earlier stage of the system; going to *lycée* means putting on, like a pair of boots, the aspiration to become a *lycée* teacher, or a doctor, a lawyer or a notary, all positions that were opened up by the *lycée* in the inter-war period. Now, at the time when working-class children were not in the system, the system was not the same. Consequently, there's been devaluation as a simple effect of inflation, and also as a result of the change in the 'social quality' of the qualification holders. The effects of educational inflation are more complicated than people generally imply: because a

qualification is always worth what its holders are worth, a qualification that becomes more widespread is *ipso facto* devalued, but it loses still more of its value because it becomes accessible to people 'without social value'.

Q. *What are the consequences of this inflation?*

A. The phenomena that I've just described mean that the aspirations objectively inscribed in the system as it was in its earlier state are disappointed. The mismatch between the aspirations that the school system encourages through the set of effects that I have alluded to is the principle of the collective disappointment and collective refusal that contrast with the collective adherence of the former period (I mentioned the example of the miner's son) and the submission in advance to the objective chances which was one of the tacit conditions of the functioning of the economy. It is a kind of breaking of the vicious circle whereby the miner's son wanted to go down the pit, without even wondering whether he had any choice. Of course, what I have described is not valid for all young people: there are still masses of adolescents, especially bourgeois adolescents, who are still in the circle, as before – who see things as they used to be seen, who want to get into a *grande école*, MIT, or Harvard Business School, who want to sit for every exam you could imagine, just as before.

Q. *And working-class kids end up as misfits in the world of work?*

A. One can be sufficiently at home in the school system to be cut off from the world of work, but not enough to succeed in finding work with the aid of qualifications. (That was already a theme in the conservative literature of the 1880s, which was already talking about unemployed *bacheliers* and worrying about the effects of breaking the circle of opportunities and aspirations and the associated self-evidences.) One can be very unhappy in the educational system, feel completely out of place there, but still participate in the student subculture, the gang of *lycéens* who hang around dance halls, who cultivate a student style and are sufficiently integrated into that lifestyle to be alienated from their families (whom they no longer understand and who no longer understand their children – 'With all the advantages they've had!') – and at the same time have a feeling of disarray, despair, towards work. In fact, as well as this effect of the breaking of a circle, there is also, despite everything, the confused realization of what the educational system offers some people – the confused realization, even through failure, that the system helps to reproduce privileges.

I think – and I wrote it ten years ago – that in order for the working class to be able to discover that the educational system functions as an instrument of social reproduction, they had to pass through the system. So long as they had nothing to do with the system, except at primary school, they might well accept the old Republican ideology of 'schooling as a liberatory force', or indeed, whatever the spokesmen say, have no opinion about it all. Now, in the working class, both among adults and among

adolescents, the discovery is taking place, even if it has not yet found a language to express itself, that the educational system is a vehicle for privileges.

Q. *But then how do you explain the apparently much greater depoliticization that we've seen over the last three or four years?*

A. The confused revolt – the questioning of work, school, and so on – is a comprehensive one; it challenges the educational system as a whole and is absolutely different from the experience of failure in the earlier state of the system (though that hasn't entirely disappeared, of course – you only have to listen to interviews: 'I was no good at French, I didn't get on at school, etc.'). What is going on through the more or less anomic and anarchic forms of revolt is not what is normally understood as politicization, that is, something that the political apparatuses are prepared to register and reinforce. It's a broader, vaguer questioning, a kind of unease at work, something that is not political in the established sense, but which could be; something that strongly resembles certain forms of political consciousness that are obscure to themselves, because they have not found their own voice, and yet of an extraordinary revolutionary force, capable of overwhelming the political apparatuses, that one also finds in sub-proletarians or in first-generation industrial workers of peasant origin. To explain their own failure, to make it bearable, these people have to question the whole system, the educational system, and also the family, with which it is bound up, and all institutions, identifying the school with the barracks and the barracks with the factory. There's a kind of spontaneous ultra-leftism which reminds one of the language of sub-proletarians in more ways than one.

Q. *And does that have an influence on the conflicts between the generations?*

A. One very simple thing, which people don't think of, is that the aspirations of successive generations, parents and children, are formed in relation to different states of the distribution of goods and of the chances of obtaining the different goods. What for the parents was an extraordinary privilege (for example, when they were twenty, only one person in a thousand of their age and their milieu owned a car) has become statistically banal. And many clashes between generations are clashes between systems of aspirations formed in different periods. Something that for generation one was the conquest of a lifetime is given at birth to generation two. The discrepancy is particularly great in the case of classes in decline, who don't even have what they had at the age of twenty – at a time when all the privileges of those days (skiing, seaside holidays, etc.) have become *common*. It's no accident that anti-youth racism (which is very visible in the statistics, although unfortunately we don't have analyses by class fraction) is characteristic of declining classes (such as craftsmen or small

shopkeepers), or individuals in decline and the old in general. Not all old people are anti-youth, of course, but old age is also a social decline, a loss of social power, and in that way the old share in the relation to the young that is also characteristic of the declining classes. Naturally, the old people of the declining classes, that's to say old craftsmen, old shopkeepers and so on, combine all these symptoms in an extreme form: they are against young people but also against artists, against intellectuals, against protest, against everything that changes and stirs things up, precisely because their future lies behind them, because they have no future, whereas young people are defined as having a future, as those who will define the future.

Q. But isn't the educational system the source of conflicts between the generations in so far as it can bring together, in the same social positions, people who have been trained in different states of the school system?

A. We can start from a concrete case: at present, in many middle-ranking positions in the civil service that one can reach by learning on the job, you find, side by side, in the same office, young holders of the baccalaureate, or even a *licence* [university degree], taken on straight from the educational system, and people in their fifties who started out thirty years earlier with the primary *certificat d'études*, at a stage in the development of the educational system when that certificate was still a relatively rare qualification, and who, through self-teaching and seniority, have reached managerial positions that are now only open to *bacheliers*. The opposition here is not between young and old, but virtually between two states of the educational system, two states of the differential rarity of qualifications; and this opposition takes the form of conflicts over classifications. Because the old cannot say that they are in charge because they are old, they will invoke the experience associated with seniority, whereas the young will invoke the competence guaranteed by qualifications. The same opposition can also be found in the field of trade unionism (for example, within the union Force Ouvrière in the Post Office), in the form of tension between young bearded Trotskyists and old activists whose sympathies lie with the old-style Socialist Party, the SFIO. You also find, side by side, in the same office, in the same jobs, engineers some of whom come from Arts et Métiers¹ and others from Polytechnique. The apparent identity of status conceals the fact that one group has, as the phrase goes, a future before it and is only passing through a position which for the others is a point of arrival. In this case, the conflicts may well take other forms, because the 'old-young' ('old' because *finished*) are likely to have internalized a respect for academic qualifications as markers of differences in nature.

That's why, in many cases, conflicts that are experienced as conflicts of generations are in fact acted out through persons or age-groups based on different relations to the educational system. One of the unifying principles of a generation is (nowadays) to be found in a common relationship to a

particular state of the school system, and in the specific interests, which are different from those of the generation defined by its relationship to a different state of the system. What is common to all young people, or at least all those who benefited to any extent from the school system, who have derived at least some basic qualification from it, is that, overall, that generation is more qualified in a given job than the previous generation. (Incidentally, it may be noted that women, who, through a kind of discrimination, arrive in jobs through a kind of hyper-selection, are constantly in this situation, i.e. they are almost always more qualified than men in equivalent positions.)

It is certain that, beyond all class differences, young people have collective, generational interests, because, quite apart from the effect of 'anti-young' discrimination, the mere fact that they have encountered different states of the educational system means that they will always get less out of their qualifications than the previous generation would have got. There's a structural deskilling of the generation. That's probably important in trying to understand the kind of disenchantment that is relatively common to the whole generation. Even in the bourgeoisie some of the current conflicts are probably explained by this, by the fact that the time-lag for succession is lengthening, the fact that, as Le Bras has clearly shown in an article in *Population*, the age at which inheritances or positions are handed on is getting later and later and the juniors of the dominant class are champing at the bit. That is probably not unrelated to the contestation to be seen in the professions (among the architects, the lawyers, the doctors, and so on) and in the universities. Just as the old have an interest in pushing young people back down into youth, so the young have an interest in pushing the old into old age.

There are periods when the pursuit of the 'new', through which the 'newcomers' (who are usually also biologically youngest) push the incumbents into the social death of 'has-beens', intensifies and when, by the same token, the struggles between the generations take on greater intensity. They are times when the trajectories of the youngest and the oldest overlap and the young aspire to the succession 'too soon'. These conflicts are avoided so long as the old are able to adjust the tempo of the rise of the young, to channel their careers and apply the brake to those who cannot hold themselves back, the 'high-flyers' who jostle and hustle for advancement. In fact, most of the time, the old do not need to apply the brakes because the 'young' - who may be fifty-something - have internalized the limits, the modal ages, that is, the age at which one can 'reasonably aspire' to a position, and would not even think of claiming it earlier, before 'their time has come'. When the 'sense of the limits' is lost, then conflicts arise about age limits and limits between the ages, in which what is at stake is the transmission of power and privileges between the generations.

Note

- 1 The Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers, providing vocational training for 'mature' students (in contrast to the École Polytechnique) [translator].

13

MUSIC LOVERS: ORIGIN AND EVOLUTION OF THE SPECIES

Q. *You seem to have a kind of reluctance to talk about music. Why is that?*

A. First, discourse about music is one of the most sought-after occasions for intellectual window-dressing. Talking about music is the opportunity *par excellence* for flaunting the range and universality of one's culture. I'm thinking for example of the radio programme *Le Concert égoïste*. The list of works chosen, the remarks made to justify the choice, the tone of intimate and inspired confidence, are so many strategies for self-presentation, intended to give the most flattering image of oneself, the one closest to the legitimate definition of the 'cultivated man', that is, a person who is 'original' within the limits of conformity. Nothing gives more opportunities than music for exhibiting one's 'class', and there's nothing by which one is more inevitably classified.

But the display of musical culture is not a cultural display like others. Music is the most spiritualistic of the arts and the love of music is a guarantee of 'spirituality'. You only have to think of the extraordinary value that is nowadays placed on the vocabulary of 'listening' by the secularized versions of religious language (psychoanalysis, for example); or to consider the concentrated, meditative poses and postures that listeners feel called upon to adopt at public performances of music. Music is hand-in-glove with the soul: there are innumerable variations on the soul of music and the music of the soul ('inner music'). Every concert is a sacred concert . . . To be 'indifferent to music' is a particularly shameful form of barbarism: the 'élite' and the 'mass', the soul and the body . . .

But that's not all. Music is the 'pure art' *par excellence*. Placing itself beyond words, music says nothing and has *nothing to say*; having no expressive function, it is diametrically opposed to theatre, which, even in its most rarefied forms, remains the bearer of a social message and can only be 'put over' on the basis of an immediate, deep agreement with the values and expectations of the audience. The theatre divides and is divided: the opposition between (in Paris) right-bank theatre and left-bank theatre,¹ between bourgeois 'boulevard' theatre and avant-garde theatre, is inseparably aesthetic and political. There is nothing quite like that in music