

The Morons At Generation Gap

by R. Emmett Tyrrell, Jr.

One of the leading questions addling America the Shaky seems to be that of environmental pollution. It is one of those baffling American problems eliciting a platitude from us all and a confession of guilt from no one. Nevertheless as we continue to wring our hands about pollution I fear someone will have to do something. Which probably means Mr. Nixon will eventually raise feculence to cabinet rank, appropriations will be made for the new department and universities will con more money from their legislatures for the study of rubbish. Environmental pollution will become a bit costlier, but that will be that and we shall all rest easier knowing someone is doing something.

So it is that my colleagues and I, ever the young visionaries, are looking beyond pollution of the land, the air and the sea to the pollution of different environs—that is, to pollution of the mind. Under stifling clouds of foolishness America's intellectual environs are strewn with such a clutter of canards and myths, enlightened conservationists hardly know where to commence the cleanup. But as one simply has to start somewhere, and as I have always regarded the myth as a critical pollutant of sound thought, let us begin by ridding the landscape of one of America's most popular and inelegant myths: to wit, the "generation gap."

That it has become such an obsession is disturbing though hardly surprising. After all this is the nation which amended its constitution to eliminate demon rum and is even now hunting down something called institutionalized violence. Yet, though America has long been a haven for mind-polluting mythology, reflective persons are always awed at the speed in which the most absurd myths spread from sea to shining sea. In the past, organizations like the Women's Christian Temperance Union popularized American myth. Today myths are still popularized by daffy organizations, for instance Americans for Democratic Action, but our chief agent of intellectual pollution is more subtle for it is none other than our communications media itself. Every day the windiest nonsense and most arrant lies emit from radio, television and newspapers to foul and corrode the American intellect.

In the case of the mythological generation gap I expect that once upon a time some neurotic from the New York Times, upon being rebuffed at a sock hop, decided teenagers different - if not odd - and ipso facto worthy of a feature article. Now we all know from reading our newspapers and watching televised reportage that reporters consider anyone different from themselves shocking -- possibly even dangerous. The whole media pounced on the young like buzzards on a

juicy carcass. Yet because they are so terribly naive and unsure of themselves, the moguls of the media: a) became obsessed about youth's "alienation," b) inflated it into one of their sempiternal crises and c) collapsed into suggesting that all adult Americans "learn something from the rising generation."

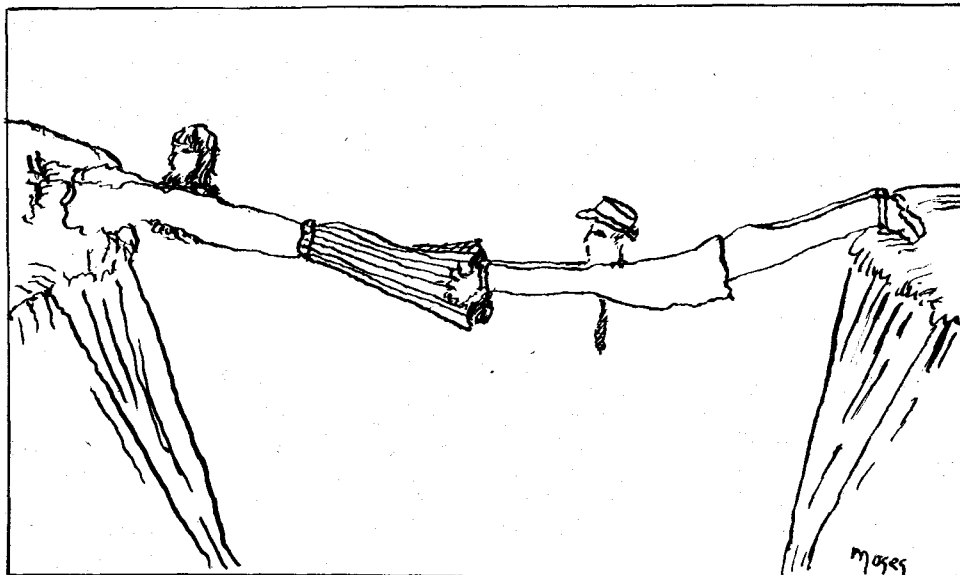
Thinking persons recognize such exhortatory assertions as the dizziest twaddle. The young are not strangely foreign; they are just young. Culturally they ascribe to about the same mores as their parents. Further, as the Urban Affairs Council has noted, the median age in America has risen from twenty-four in 1910 to about twenty-seven years and eight months today. By 1985 the median American age will actually be six months higher. The population as a whole is not getting younger. Although the young population has gotten larger, the adult population has gotten larger still. Thus if the pundits are correct in judging American youth as another one of our little crises, it is at least a receding crisis, and one that should reaffirm all our faith in The Pill. Finally if there is some wondrous enlightenment emanating from youth then America's elaborate educational system is either unnecessary or directed by persons of the wrong age. Are the pundits suggesting that university professors trade places with their pupils? There is a touch of genius here, but as genius is not a characteristic of the pundits, I imagine they are once again simply wrong. Nevertheless being wrong has never daunted the communications media in the past and today they are stridently insisting that the young are so foreign, they are separated from aging America by a widening chasm, and adult America must soon bridge this gap if it is not to forever suffer isolation on the wrong side of paradise. Bosh. The whole myth is just one of those monstrosities which spring from a seed of truth to seduce the gullible and

interest the jaded. It will pass from the nation's cocktail chatter as soon as it is talked to death. But though we know how this myth came to be scattered about, we still do not know from where it evolved.

As with all myths its origins have been lost in the misty paths from antiquity. However as we approach our own time more distinct features begin to appear. Certainly two significant elements contributing to the mythological gap have been America's growing educational industry and American affluence. As Bruno Bettelheim has incisively noted young Americans before 1900 were by the age of fourteen or fifteen responsibly employed. Today young persons of this age are chained to educational factories.

Assuredly widely disseminated knowledge is of paramount importance in our technetronic age, but this does not mean we must banish our young people to four years or more of delusive confinement, utterly bereft of responsibility, burdened with psychological strains, electrified with frustrations and virtually enthralled in "arrested adolescence." Yet for over half a century, this has been the increasingly normative situation. This autumn more than fourteen million students enrolled in high school (over twice as many as in 1950) and more than seven million enrolled in college. In high school the student is generally inflicted with second-rate instruction from third-rate minds while the college student undergoes what can only be called acute cultural shock. There just has to be a better way to cultivate our geniuses!

Now in the world's wealthiest and most generous nation I do not mean to imply that our student serfs have it all that bad. American students do not read Plato in chilly cells by candlelight. Lamentably they rarely read Plato at all (irrelevant you know), but what they do read they read in the most comfortable quarters imaginable. Through their parents' extravagant solicitude and a spate of generous student loan programs American students compose the most uniformly affluent class in the world. Perhaps it is because of their wealth and leisure that adults consider youth foreign, but this does not make youth a new breed of man. Some day they too will be reduced to adulthood. The behavioral styles of youth generally follow the cues of the adult generation and



things could hardly be otherwise.

In the middle fifties businessmen came across masses of bored young persons with bulging pockets and decided to relieve them of their monetary tumescence. Resorting to all their prodigious marketing skills and employing all of Madison Avenue's cunning, business created a specialized youth market segregating the young from the rest of society and motivating it to buy products fit just for them. This technique is not new; for years it has been used to foist on society several kinds of deoderant or beer when just one would suffice. A single company will make deoderant for the man, deoderant for the woman, deoderant that perfumes, deoderant that clogs. The marketeers continually create new markets delineated by one characteristic or another, and the profits roll in. When they found a group of potential buyers delineated by age, possessed of unlimited funds and with unlimited time to spend those funds, they struck a mother lode. First they picked the "teenager" clean. Then as the "teenager" was dragged toward adulthood they dreamed up the "young adult" and began catering to all his special needs. Much of the apparent disparity between the young and the old is a matter of fashion. If there exists a dangerous generation gap merely because a young student spends his money differently than a middle-aged television commentator, then I submit that there are all sorts of dangerous gaps dividing our nation, for I have noticed that men dress differently than women, judges live differently than construction workers, ministers spend their money differently than politicians and college professors (usually) entertain themselves differently than chorus girls. Obviously such differences are neither cause for alarm nor reform. I imagine for every college aged clothes designer reputedly expressing the accumulative aspirations of exactly this generation, there are fifty middle-aged entrepreneurs who show him how to design his trash. Recent authoritative polls have indicated that those young aliens lurking about our campuses ultimately aspire to about the same cultural goals as their parents. Most students are still interested in money and security, as Christopher Jenks has repeatedly demonstrated. And the increasing period of time they spend on campus merely shows that they too are concerned with leisure. If they dress, talk or amuse themselves differently it is because they are following the choreography of enterprising adults, not because they ran off and held a national synod and concocted some exotic culture. In our other-directed society persons generally follow the fashion of their peer group. The difference with the young, a difference vitiating the idea of a generation gap, is that their peer group has its fashion fixed by adults. Admittedly from the great homogenized mass of young Americans there are some aberrant life-styles, but even youths in these groups follow their adult gurus.

Now this is not to say that the claims for a generation gap rest solely on the evidence of dress, for allegedly the young think purer, more lustrous thoughts than those on the grayer side of the generation gap. At least that is what the pundits

would have us believe and it is nonsense; neither side thinks very often, and those few young who do think generally ponder the antique thoughts of their aged gurus.

Intellectually and physically the new left is really rather old. Though David Dellinger insisted that to convict him in the Chicago 7 Trial would be to hurl a gauntlet to all America's young, he is a tottering 54 and everyone of his colleagues is over 25. These truly are Bettelheim's obsolete youth, and is there not a tragic aura about grown men fussing through America stomping their feet at authority, and expecting government officials to babysit for them while they await the Great Revolution? These men and their liegemen now waging a kind of dream world guerrilla warfare on the campus are the casualties of Liberalism, men who drank too deeply of its ambiguities and contradictions and now must inhabit a delusive world of ghastly abstractions and superstition, forever doomed to eccentricity and sterility.

Their much talked about ideas, though daring in their absurdity, are not very new. As a matter of fact vague thoughts about communal living, collectivism and international pacifism are quite old and increasingly out of cadence with the thought of coming intellectuals like Milton Friedman. Their hedonism, astrology, sensitivity training and so forth was new at about the time humans first experimented with fire. And I doubt any younger generation in the Western world ever failed to consider its parents hypocritical, though I doubt any preceding younger generation was ever itself so phony.

So the ideas supposedly held by youth are not new. They are at best cheap and disfigured replicas of the zanier ideas of men like John Dewey and the intellectuals of the second New Deal whose disciples now dominate our university faculties.

Here is perhaps the most forceful argument against a generation gap, for the young are merely the innocent repositories of their older mentors' balmy notions. I have never seen one poll to refute this assertion. A prominent national magazine is about to release a poll of thirteen of the nation's most characteristic universities reaffirming a poll it ran eight years ago which concluded that seniors become overwhelmingly more "Liberal" after four years of college. This should encourage all those despairing educators who have come to feel the incidence of campus barbarism proof that American education has failed. It has not. Liberals are successfully indoctrinating their students with Liberalism. There is no generation gap between ADA liberals of the Galbraith-Schlesinger variety and the idealistic young children who journeyed to Chicago's Democratic Convention to rouse the nation's conscience. The failure is not so much with American education as it is with American Liberalism.

But not only do Liberal educators discredit the theory of a generation gap, Liberal parents show an attitudinal similarity with their children that, though manifested less vigorously, casts doubt on the generation gap. Studying radical students Kenneth Kenniston finds that they generally adhere to the values of their parents. The parents of young leftists are generally old leftists and any difference is merely one of degree, not of essence. Further there is not one young radical intellectual of any significance. As with the peculiarity of youthful dress, the freaky peculiarity of reputedly youthful thought is choreographed by adults. If Herbert Marcuse lives much longer the National Academy of Science will authorize a special commission to study him. Paul Goodman was an artifact years

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Battle Hymn on the New Republic

by Una Bersal

Gotta change the order of things--man
They've been long in the doing but I think we can

Old rules of order are stuffy and smug
So let's grab the reins by pulling the rug

The old man can give with the ways and the means
Our sure live generation will take over the scenes

We'll chop down the old with a socialized axe
Give the world a new way without burden of tax

It may not last long on just flower power
But we'll make a record as the boys of the hour

We won't ask a guy--now who is your father?
To be a descendant is a whole lot of bother.

And when it comes time to provide the feedin'
We'll just shake the apples in our garden of eden.

Man--