HAS YOUTH DETERIORATED?

THE FORUM ■ JULY 1926 ■ EXCERPTS

The Forum, a magazine of social and political commentary, regularly invited point-counterpoint essays on contemporary issues. For this inquiry, the Forum published essays by two representatives of “modern youth. Each addressed the older generation’s fascination with the younger generation’s fascination with sex.

YES: “Reaping the Whirlwind”

ANNE TEMPLE

... This tremendous interest in the younger generation is nothing more nor less than a preoccupation with the nature of that generation’s sex life. What people really want to know about us, if they are honest enough to admit it, is whether or not we are perverted, whether we are loose, whether we are what they call immoral; and their curiosity has never been completely satisfied. Deny it or not, this concern comprises our primary interest for the general public.

... it is almost impossible to get away from the subject of sex today. It is talked over in polite and impolite salons [gatherings for conversation]. It is discussed in Park Avenue hotels and in Child’s. There are books about it. There are plays about it. There is even a science about it. Ordinarily, one might say that the life of the present generation is the result of constant suggestion and rumor. But not so in this instance. It is the young people themselves who are the students and advocates of the “new morality.” Largely through us, old standards are not being laughed at and called blind; conventions [standards] have been dispensed with; obligations are scoffed at; and “Liberate the Libido” has become our national motto....

... My quarrel with the young people of today concerns quite another matter—the loss of a thing which some call innate refinement. We lack a certain dignity of charm and refinement which, despite their silly conventions and their inhibitions, our fathers and mothers are not without. We young people are like a herd of calves, enclosed in a wide pasture. Leaderless we rush, in an impetuous juvenile stampede, toward the farthest pasture gates, not knowing what lies beyond—more pasture lands, or chasms. We have hurled aside all conventions. Accepted standards are “nil” with us. And now, without precedents, denying all antecedents, we are as bald and as intrinsically uninteresting as a plucked ostrich. We have sowed the wind: we are reaping the whirlwind. True, we have our freedom, our “self expression,” and our inhibition-less theories. Even at that, however, I am wondering if the past generations haven’t something on us.

NO: “The Fabulous Monster”

REGINA MALONE

What is our Youth coming to? It is coming, through mistakes, through the unavoidable extremism of any revolt against authority, to a new conception of life—to a new morality, to new “mores” better adapted to the age than those it has discarded. Beneath our studied superficiality, beneath our cynical nonchalance, our assumed indifference, and apparent ill-breeding, is there not more than a germ of that ageless yearning for improvement which has characterized the youth of every age?...

Which brings us to a more serious phase of the Youth question: our attitude toward sex. We no longer spell the word with a capital letter; and it is as frankly discussed as automobiles or the advantage of cold storage over moth balls. Why should our elders consider our interest in this subject a sign of unnaturalness or perversion?.... I am confident that in the opinion of the majority of members of my generation, it is only when a discussion of the subject of sex exceeds the dictates of good breeding that it becomes shocking or immoral. As for violations of the moral code: it follows logically that the same class of persons who were promiscuous, both in their discussion and in their acts, existed in our parents’, our grandparents’, and our great-grandparents’ day....

All the petty things to which you, a generation or two ahead of us, attach so much importance, are mere symbols of a revolt whose object is Freedom—Freedom, the cry of the ages—and it is only in this light that they should be regarded. Beauty and idealism, the two eternal heritages of Youth, are still alive. It is only the form of expression which they have assumed that has been mistaken for the death knell. Laugh it off, you who are alarmed at this fabulous monster of Youth! Pay less attention to the surface signs of the revolt and more to the good being accomplished by it. Remember how the expression affected you when your parents cried, “O Tempora! O Mores!” “[Oh what times! Oh what customs!” Cicero] And the funny part is that the young insurgent who today inspires your wrath will one day be saying to a group of tolerant youngsters: “Things certainly have changed. Now in my day—”
Niebuhr, one of the most influential American Protestant theologians, pastored a small Detroit congregation in the 1920s, during which he kept a journal on ministering in modern times.

1926: One is hardly tempted to lose confidence in the future after listening to a group of young people discussing the important problems of life. Of course the number who approach the future reflectively and with real appreciation for the issues involved in the readjustment of traditions to new situations is not large. There are not many such groups and even in these the number who really take part in the discussion is small.

Nevertheless their wholesomeness is impressive. I can’t always withhold a sense of pity for them. With traditions crumbling and accepted standards inundated by a sea of moral relativity, they have a desperate task on their hands to construct new standards adequate for their happiness. There is always the temptation to be too rebellious or too traditional, to be scornful of the old standard even when it preserves obvious virtues, or to flee to it for fear of being lost in the confusion of new standards. Yet the best way of avoiding these dangers is to subject them to the scrutiny of a thoughtful group which knows how to discern the limitations of any position, old or new.

On the whole the discussion of our young people at the church seem to be more wholesome than those in which I participate in the colleges. Most of these young folks have assumed responsibilities and are therefore not as inclined to be morbidly critical and skeptical as the college group. The cases cited from their own experience help to give vitality to their discussion, and they are not enervated by that extreme sophistication which imperils the college youth and tempts him to end every discussion and discount every discovery with the reflection, “This also is vanity.” [vainy: meaningless; Ecclesiastes 4, King James Bible]

I really wonder how we are going to build a civilization sufficiently intelligent to overcome dangerous prejudices and to emancipate itself from the inadequacies of conventional morality without creating the kind of sophistication which destroys all values by its skepticism and dampens every enthusiasm by its cynicism. In America that possibility is particularly dangerous because our intellectualism is of the sophomoric type. There is no generation, or only one generation, between the pioneers who conquered the prairies and these youngsters who are trying to absorb the whole of modern culture in four years. The traditions against which they react are less adequate, less modified by experience and culture, than those which inform the peoples of Europe.

And the teachers who guide them into the world of new knowledge are frequently themselves so recently emancipated that they try to obscure their cultural, religious and moral heritages by extreme iconoclasm [rejection of traditional beliefs]. It is difficult to be patient with one of these smart-aleck Ph.Ds. on a western campus who imagines that he can impress the world with his learning by being scornful of everything that was thought or done before this century.

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"How Wild Is Wild Youth?"

The New Republic, May 5, 1926

It seems to be an accepted axiom nowadays that our young people are going to the devil. Press, pulpit, and publicist are agreed that youth is wild and getting wilder. The college boy and his flapper friend, it is charged, drink, pet, and are disrespectful to their elders, while the neighborhood gangster, aided by his youthful sweetie and stimulated by the false courage of heroin or cocaine, robs and murders with casual calmness long before he is out of his teens.

Most of this lamentation, of course, is based on theory and not on fact. Those who indulge in it have read in the papers of a few sensational cases like the Leopold-Loeb affair, or have witnessed some of the post-Prohibition drinking parties in which youth, imitating the practice of its elders, indulges. The reasoning is almost always from the particular to the general, a type of argument which is as dangerous in this case as usual.

Recognizing that this is true, the Children's Bureau of the United States Bureau of Labor recently undertook to throw a little light, of a really scientific character, on this question. If youth is as wild as is represented, and the wildness extends through all classes, the results certainly ought to be reflected in the records of the juvenile courts and the institutions in which delinquents are detained. Accordingly, a careful study was made of the statistics dealing with the subject. The figures investigated included delinquency rates in fourteen of the leading cities of the United States.

In nearly all these fourteen cities, the delinquency rates per 1,000 children of “delinquency age” were decidedly lower in 1924 or 1925 than in 1915. There was a not very surprising increase during the war period, 1917 to and including 1919, but in most cities the downward trend thereafter was marked.

These statistics, the reliability of which is beyond question, do not of course show that all the ululations of the alarmed editorial writers and preachers are unjustified. Youth may really be wild, in a fashion which does not get itself reflected in the delinquency and prison statistics. In so far, however, as the complaint has been made of youthful criminals as a new phenomenon, it is clearly without foundation. And certainly whatever wildness of youth exists, if it be not serious enough to draw the attention of the law, cannot be worth as much excitement, as many millions of words of frenzied exhortation, as it has been receiving.

“Life Lines”

HUMOR COLUMN, Life

SHOPPER: I want to get a fashionable skirt.
SALESLADY: Yes, madam. Will you have it too tight or too short?

—Life, October 7, 1920

HE: Well, well; now we can talk about politics intelligently to you ladies, can’t we?
SHE: That remains to be seen.

—Life, October 28, 1920

Marshall Field has refused to give employment to girls who bob their hair, use rouge or powder, wear short skirts, or roll their stockings. They would have saved lots of time by limiting the announcement to the words “No Girls Wanted.”

—Life, October 6, 1921

A statistician tells us it takes 333 silkworms to make a pair of flappers’ hose [stockings]. Well, they can’t complain that their work doesn’t show.

“Tom Masson Says,” humor column, Collier’s, April 30, 1927

She doesn’t drink, she doesn’t pet, she hasn’t been to college yet.

First Poppa: Do you think your son will soon forget all he learned at college?

Tennessee Mugwump

Second Poppa: I hope so; he can’t make a living necking.

Columbia Jester

(With Apologies to Kipling)

V. L. Shepherd, Harper’s, September 1926

If you can keep your hair when all about you
Are shearing theirs and wanting you to, too,
If you can hold your tongue when others mock you,
But make allowance for their mocking, too;

If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
To keep your hair long, after theirs is gone,
And hold on to it when there’s nothing in you
Except the will which says to you, “Hold On!”

If you can talk with crowds and keep your looks too,
Or walk with “Sheiks”—nor lose your common sense;
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,
If women dub you “Freak” in self-defense;

If you can smile with not a hat to fit you,
If you can sigh, but never shed a tear,
Yours is the Earth and everything that’s in it,
And—which is more—You’ll be a lady, dear.