

Original Paper

Respect and Responsibility towards Youth

Sandor Kariko¹

¹ Professor of Philosophy, University of Szeged, Hungary

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Abstract

Youth is a grateful topic and has a rich body of scholarly research, particularly in the fields of education, youth sociology, and political science. However, the recognition and appreciation of the philosophical approach is often lacking in research, politics, and public discourse alike. This study aims to draw attention to the importance of the philosophical perspective. It focuses on philosophical ideas found in antiquity, modernity, and postmodernity (from Socrates to Hegel and all the way to Derrida) that remain relevant regardless of historical time or specific societal forms. Drawing philosophical insights is particularly crucial for politics and education. As Derrida believes, no ethics or politics can remain authentic and true if they do not respect the future, that is, the youth. And in this regard, I think we can all agree.

Keywords

youth, generation, society, immaturity, adulthood

Motto: “Don’t allow us to grow old one by one / growing bearded in our souls...”

László Nagy (20th century Hungarian poet)

1. Introduction

It is not difficult to have an observation that we talk a lot about youth (their situation, their role in society, their general perception) today. We debate and often passionate emotions stir up our public life. Everyone has an opinion about youth, and everyone considers themselves an expert on this topic, just like on the state of education and football at any given time. Politics also actively deals with the problems of young people: there is youth legislation, youth policy, separate programs are developed to assist young couples and families, or to tackle juvenile delinquency, violence, and drug abuse. Various academic disciplines are not indifferent either: youth sociology develops, political scientists examine the relationship of young people to politics, psychologists and representatives of sports sciences study the mental parameters of young people, their attitudes towards regular physical activity, and so on. Furthermore, even in scientific thinking, the idea of creating a philosophy for youth has emerged. For

example, researcher Szabolcs Krajnik suggests that “youth philosophy” can be considered a relatively “autonomous field. (...) In English-language literature, the expression “philosophy with youth” occurs analogously to “philosophy with children” in applied philosophy” (Kajnik, 2016, p. 19). However, we are still far from the cultivation of philosophy for youth in Hungary, but such initiatives and endeavors should definitely be welcome and supported because philosophy - in my assumption - can come up with valid insights in the theme of youth as well. I believe it is advisable to invoke what is called applied philosophy (as a relatively new form of philosophy) (Hössle) (Losoncz, 2002, p. 36), which I will not delve into here, as I have attempted it elsewhere.

In the following, I make a brief attempt to outline the fundamental aspects that need to be considered for a future Hungarian philosophy for youth. When we approach the examination of youth issues through the lens of applied philosophy (with its perspective, conceptual framework, and methods), the question that, in my opinion, needs to be primarily asked and researched is *what is the fundamentally defining relationship between society (history) and youth in any given time*. Because every major specific question (and every specific answer to it) can be interpreted in the most convincing way through this general and undoubtedly deepest level of connection. Here, the old truth of the history of science and philosophy also applies, namely that the true place and significance of many concrete facts, empirical data, and phenomena are always indicated by the most general and deepest movement process.

If we raise the question of the relationship between society and youth spanning the great historical epochs (which by no means coincide with the historical phases of individual countries, nor even with the fundamental socio-economic systems!), then - from this perspective - four, but at least three distinct phases can be distinguished. Depending on the worldview, general understanding, and lasting and solid relationship concerning youth in history, significant epochal variations arise. The first historical phase is the world of tribal societies. It is followed by the spread of the so-called generational approach. Then comes the dual (economic and political) dominance of modernity. Finally, the formation of postmodernity emerges. Before delving into the four forms, let me note that the variations can overlap and manifest simultaneously. We know very little about the first form, the tribal world, which is why I exclude it from the analysis and focus only on the other three. The question of youth in tribal societies can ultimately be disregarded because, strictly speaking, youth does not exist. There were undoubtedly young people in tribal society, but they could not become youth as a distinct and cohesive social group. With the successful completion of the so-called initiation trial (which could involve overcoming a lion, for example), a young person was suddenly declared an adult. From this perspective, there was no unique transitional world between childhood and adulthood. We can only state with certainty about this first phase that it can be considered a period lacking in youth.

2. Generational Characteristics and Conflicts

A radical change occurs in ancient Greek and Roman culture. To understand the change, I refer to two philosophers.

First, let us consider the following famous (or infamous) quote:

“Today’s youth love luxury, have bad manners, contempt for authority. They contradict their parents, gobble their food, and tyrannize their teachers” ([Reference to Youth by Unknown Antique Philosopher, possibly Socrates], n.d.). Reading these lines, at first glance, one might think that it is a spectacular outburst of a modern embittered elderly person. However, once we learn that this complaint is attributed to *Socrates* and was uttered over 2400 years ago, we can only marvel and wonder. How is this possible? Were there already problems with young people back then? And why does it seem as if the issues of that time were remarkably similar to today’s? Do the characteristic traits of young people simply repeat themselves? If so, what social implications arise for the evaluation of young people living today? For example, does the fact that adult societies throughout history have always had conflicts with young people mean that youth possesses unchanging, eternal traits? And if this is true, then let us not dramatize the problems of today! Let us not be dismayed by the actions and peculiarities of today’s young people! The youth of our time only poses as much concern for society as it had at any other time.

I argue that in antiquity, a transitional existence with unique characteristics emerges between the world of childhood and adulthood: this will be *youth* itself as a relatively independent and distinct large group, a *generation*. It is a generation that is no longer children but not yet adult. Generational characteristics emerge on a societal scale: young people always want something different from their fathers and grandfathers. They do not want to conform to their parents’ understanding, customs, and value systems. They articulate new goals, desires, paths, and aspirations that are often fundamentally different from those represented by the adult and elderly generations. Young people have always rebelled against existing norms, entrenched ways of life, and work schedules. If that is the case, then generational tension, i.e., generational conflicts, and their continuous reproduction are inevitable.

In antiquity, its own youth as a distinct generation is discovered, with which society must deal separately. It recognizes that a generation separates among the citizens, which is different in many ways from the world of adults, and this entails a series of conflicts that require some form of social-level response. The solution to generational problems, or at least their management, is envisioned on *moral and pedagogical* grounds. If this generation is different, let us educate young people to be like the adult and elderly generations. According to the prevailing understanding, *the youth is essentially a “miniature” adult*, who through continuous shaping and education can become a fully developed adult. Generational conflicts and the pedagogical tasks and struggles associated with them have accompanied the entire history. Basically, such processes and challenges still do not cease nowadays.

Descriptions and moral judgments of generational problems are made in a series of philosophical, ethical, pedagogical, and other scholarly discussions from Socrates to Helvetius through Margaret

Mead and Karl Mannheim to John Dewey. As a specific reference from the history of philosophy, I highlight *Hegel*, as I believe that he still captures the essence of conflicts arising from generational differences at the deepest level.

It is advisable to quote his statement at length this time, partly because of its profound thoughts and partly because it is less known. In relation to Hegel, academics in philosophy focus on other parts of his body of work, and at most tangentially and rarely refers to his thoughts on youth. It has remained virtually unknown to the field of pedagogical science, a professional blind spot that must be remedied as the entire field of education cannot afford to neglect it.

Hegel's brilliant discovery is that, as we will see, he writes about the generational characteristics of youth by comparing them to the preceding and succeeding generations in time. In this way, he distinguishes three major age groups: the world of childhood, the existence of youth, and the state of adulthood. Let us look at the specific quote!

The youth generally turns to the substantial general. His ideal, unlike a boy's does no longer appear in the person of a man, but he interprets it as a generality independent of such uniqueness, (...) and it lives within him as the ideal of love, friendship or a general state of the world. (...) The content of the ideal evokes the feeling of energy in the youth: thus he feels predestined to and capable of transforming the world, or at least to restore the world that seems unsettled to him. (...) That is how the youth breaches the peace in which the child lives with the world. (...) The youth, who so far has dealt only with general objects and worked for himself, (upon) becoming a man and stepping into practical life, will be forced to pursue activities for others and deal with the details, (...) for a man, to start dealing with details, can get very difficult... (Hegel 1968, pp. 84-85).

And one more important - logically conclusive - addition, which we can read in another one of his works: "It is the fashion of youth to dash about in abstractions: but the man who has learnt to know life steers clear of the abstract 'either-or,' and keeps to the concrete" (Hegel, 1950, p. 135).

Before I respond to the above text, let me immediately refer to the idea of the social psychologist Erikson in relation to the Hegel quote mentioned earlier (about a century and a half later): the young person ultimately struggles between "humble conformity or extreme deviance, complete dedication (rededication) or rebellion" (Erikson, 1968, p. 248). In this context, the conformity and/or nonconformity of youth is an intriguing question, but it could be the subject of another investigation.

From the longer Hegelian passage, it becomes evident that the child lives in peace with the world, characterized by harmony in their relationship with the environment. Playing and light playful activities largely fill their everyday life. The ideal is always connected to a specific person (most often the mother, father, and later the caregiver and teacher). Thus, in the early stages of life, the child actually perceives, senses, and judges everything and everyone filtered through a specific subject. In this regard, young existence brings about a radical change: the young person no longer clings so much to the subjective formation of a specific person but is rather attracted to a substantial universal principle,

some abstract entity or worldview. Examples include freedom, equality, patriotism, idealized love, and so on. They feel a sacred dedication and strength within themselves to restore the disrupted world. However, as Hegel writes, a member of the third generation, the adult (or as Hegel puts it, the man), learns and experiences that it is not enough to engage with general beautiful principles and world-changing matters and programs. It is undesirable and unrealistic to fight against the world. The solution lies in joining the world, making progress through small steps and details. We can only advance by finding companions, allies, and working together with others to push forward the world's carriage. The adult learns that they must take responsibility for themselves and others (such as their partner, spouse, children, elderly parents, etc.) in order to care for them. In contrast, the youth, in their feverish and spectacular world-changing mood and aspiration, usually remains a captive of "abstract vagueness." They see and perceive things and processes in black and white. Their ability and capacity to perceive differentiations, nuanced transitions, and emerging contradictions have not fully developed. Although well-intentioned, they can only think and act in extremes.

Hegel's aforementioned generational description, in a sense, is valid independently of specific social space and time. The generational characteristics reflect a general truth that has persisted and is still evident nowadays. Therefore, the view that the issues of generational conflicts have been left behind or can be left behind in today's public life is not at all valid. Moreover, new connections emerge in our time alongside generational tensions. It will be necessary to take these into account (I will make a brief attempt to do so below), just as it is desirable to accept the continuation of generational conflicts.

3. The Spread of Modernity and Youth in Social Space

While the necessity of a generational approach remains unchanged, economic, political, and intellectual changes have occurred in recent centuries that create a new level, a new stage in the relationship between society and youth. We are talking about a new era in history, which sparked extensive professional debates (historical, economic, political, sociological, etc.) regarding its starting point and naming, which I cannot and do not want to delve into here. Nevertheless, I use the term "modernity" to refer to the period that extends from the 18th-19th century to the 20th century (with its aftermath still evident today).

"The birth of modernity was accompanied by the industrial revolution, the intellectual currents of the Enlightenment (freely following Kant): when the citizen dares and is able to rely on their own intellect and thinking, thereby escaping the state of immaturity, as well as the development of large-scale machine industry, the political emergence of the masses, etc. Modernity practically influences every aspect of society, including its relationship with youth.

If we only examine the changes from this perspective, at least three distinct effects can be highlighted: specific economic, political, and intellectual consequences.

3.1 Economic Constraints

Vast volumes of economic literature have been accumulated for the examination of 19th and

20th-century economic processes. Without delving into the important economic publications, I briefly summarize (in my own words) the significant economic-based impact that affects the youth in a new way. It is clear to everyone that as the economy develops further through modernization, its integration with the sciences becomes tighter and more organic. In the previous three or four centuries, the practical needs of industry provided reference points for the sciences: ‘You, scientist, solve this and that problem raised by practice!’ However, in the past two centuries, especially in the 20th century (and even more so in present times), the relationship has visibly reversed: science leads industrial practice. Decisively and unstoppably. In the advanced stage of modernization, companies, workplaces, enterprises can only stay afloat in the (global) market if they transform their profile, product structure, and services multiple times within a ‘generation’ period (generally meaning thirty years). It is impossible to consistently present the same goods, technology, work forms, and methods in the economy. Hoping for success, at least in a sustained manner, with such an approach is not realistic. Previously, it was characteristic that if a young man entered the world of work, he would live off his initial knowledge and work experience until retirement, with only brief training. However, continuous modernization requires all workers involved in production to adapt to the dynamic development of science, technology, and manufacturing operations. It is necessary to keep pace with rapidly changing market demands, and all of this demands new preparedness, creative and innovative skills, mindset, and capability. A new labor challenge emerges in the economy, which not everyone may recognize or find pleasant: it becomes increasingly important to consider to what extent the workplace or business wants and can employ young workers. The owner, workplace leader, and management do their job well if they strive to employ as many young people as possible. Employing young labor is both a sound economic interest and a scientific quality. In connection with this, György Lukács has a sharp but not widely known observation. I cannot engage here in a philosophical examination and evaluation of his so-called Ontology Experiment written in the last fifteen years of his life, but I highlight the following insight from the three-volume work, which is relevant to our topic and worth considering. As can be seen, Lukács continues the Hegelian experiment, employing the method of generational comparison, but he compares youth with the elderly generation:

The elderly - he writes - owe their authority to the accumulated experience of a long life, and since these experiences are based on social life, primarily in the broadest sense of work, (...) a long life is nothing more than the biological basis for the accumulation of socially important life experiences (This monopoly position of old age is increasingly lost to the extent that socially decisive experiences are no longer merely empirically accumulated and retained in memory but *are derived through generalizations*) (Lukács, 1976, p. 141) (emphasis added - K. S.).

To me, it is obvious that the more advanced the economic and scientific potential of a society, the relatively less significant the role of empirical experiences becomes. And vice versa: the importance of intellectual preparedness, the proportion of cognitive abilities derived through generalizations, becomes stronger and more defining in the world of work and production. We can be certain that in processes of

modernization, the demand for high-level knowledge acquisition and application, and the supremacy of reason, are revalued.

Starting from this point, it is logical to ask: how does the above process relate to the issue of youth? I believe we can draw a definite and courageous logical conclusion! In the mature stage of modernization, a new economic order emerges: the employment of highly skilled labor gradually replaces simple, routine tasks. Generally, the youth can adapt more easily, quickly, and with less human energy mobilization to the dynamic development of the economy and science, and the formation of innovative and creative skills and abilities, compared to adult and older generations. A 40-50 year-old worker (not to mention an even older generation) can only adapt to flexibly changing job requirements and higher intellectual challenges if they overcome the already learned and deeply rooted knowledge, technology, work types, and methods within themselves, if they transcend their ingrained system of habits, worldview, and lifestyle. And such a transition, indeed, does not occur without intellectual and emotional upheaval, without overcoming burdens. In contrast, the youth does not face such a profound human problem because this dynamic world will be their first and natural environment to which they must adapt. From this perspective, it can be stated that the process of modernization, due to its economic and scientific nature and requirements, increases the role and significance of youth in society.

3.2 Youth in the Political Landscape

A modernization process brings about changes not only in the economic sphere but also in the world of politics, which have an impact on the situation of youth. We can trace this back to the mid-19th century. From this time onwards, it becomes clear that youth becomes a political factor. Society raises the perspective of youth not only out of economic interests but also out of political and power considerations: young people appear with a new voice, independent identity, desires, and aspirations. They now participate in shaping society. The great historical debut of youth is born. Think, for example, of the “Young Italy” and “Young Germany” movements, or the emergence of our “March youths.” Undoubtedly, the student movement of 1968 stands out from the 20th century, with uprisings occurring in nearly 50 countries. All these are political changes that society cannot ignore. It is necessary to somehow respond to the political involvement of young people. First and foremost, it is desirable to listen to them, recognize their interests, and then involve their strength and values in the collaborative work of building a youth phase that contributes to society. Politics, and indeed society as a whole, must view and assess youth differently than ever before. It is prudent to recognize the significant social power in the political voice and struggle of young people.

We can clearly perceive this process and one of its consequences in the remarkable advancement of youth sociology as a specialized field. Wyn, an Australian youth researcher, already summarizes the results of his research by stating that “Youth sociology can provide a new way of thinking about the social significance of age” (Wyn, 2011, p. 3) (emphasis added - K. S.). Afterwards, this “social significance” is concretized in numerous international and domestic works of youth sociology. To illustrate the societal importance of the political emergence of youth, I would refer to the late

Hungarian youth researcher Gábor Kármán. According to him, by the end of the 20th century, there is practically a generational transition of youth:

young people become independent at an increasingly early age (...) while integrating into society later and later. (...) The youth phase becomes increasingly important and extends over a longer period of time for the development of individual and group autonomy and identities. (...) Youth is objectified as culture and becomes a ‘social category.’ (...) The relationship between young people and adults transforms from a one-way street to a two-way street, and youth shifts from being followers to setting examples, (...) leading to their separation from the adult society, (...) which is expressed in youth-centrism, (...) youth-centric approaches (Kármán, 2012, p. 11, pp. 15-16, p. 21, p. 33, p. 119).

Based on the above passage, we can become convinced that it is not enough to examine and evaluate young people solely based on their generation; we need to complement it from a new perspective: approaching them as a social category. Youth is not just a generation (though it certainly has its generational characteristics); it is much more than that. Today, youth is a social category of societal significance. The political emergence of youth ultimately means that society enters an era of youth centrism. The significance of the development of youth sociology should not be diminished, particularly because this field of study recognizes most prominently the need to move beyond a generational approach and assessment. However, it is also not justified to overestimate the political role and significance of youth, as it sometimes appears in certain works of political science and youth sociology. Following the rebellion of 1968, we cannot imagine that young people will save the so-called “sick society” and attempt to overthrow the system (Leary, 1970, p. 212; Feuer, 1969, p. 2).

3.3 The Mental State of Adulthood

Earlier, I have touched upon Kant’s brilliant idea that, through enlightenment, we can transition from immaturity to adulthood. Now it is worth delving specifically into the excerpt. Modernity, at least in the intellectual sphere, in the functioning of consciousness, undoubtedly begins with enlightenment. According to Kant, “enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one’s understanding without guidance from another... Dare to know! Have the courage to use your own understanding!” This is the motto of enlightenment. An enlightened person is one who has “the predisposition and calling for free thinking” (Kant, 1980, p. 77, p. 85).

I believe Kant’s formulation hits the mark, and we can hardly define the essence more precisely and concisely. And what is equally important is that its truth has not changed in our present days. Indeed, the principle of freedom of thought still lives on, and nowadays, many are fascinated by the idea of the soaring of free thought, although we can observe that its practical implementation often encounters considerable difficulties.

Free thought, unrestricted thinking as a spiritual imprint, is fundamentally linked to the historically weighty and significant achievement of modernization. It is connected to the grand and high-degree societal development in which an individual’s success is primarily determined by their own abilities,

intellectual and physical condition, diligence, and decision-making capacity, rather than their origin, wealth, national affiliation, occupation, language, or religious denomination. In other words, their own strengths and values. They can shape themselves into what they can become. To do so, they must liberate their consciousness and their own thinking. Independent thinking, as we know, does not occur automatically and quickly; it can only be achieved through serious learning, firm determination and systematic preparation.

4. Contribution to Hungarian Postmodernity

The third major period is the history of the past few decades, which is unfolding before our eyes. Instead of delving into various theoretical details, I want to highlight only one aspect related to the current state of Hungarian youth. Pessimistic and gloomy views emerge in the results of political science and youth sociology studies, and I would like to emphasize two significant positions.

Ákos Szilágyi, an aesthete, expresses an extremely bleak opinion about the opportunities and feelings of Hungarian youth after 1968 in his two-part study. He refers to the “Great Generation” of ‘68 as the “Last Generation,” which still leaves its mark and is worth discussing. It is undeniable that it was a glorious manifestation of youth’s voice, expression, and culture. But what comes after? The so-called “abandoned” remnants. Of course, there are young people after ‘68, but their presence no longer forms a “whole.” After the ‘68 final generation, nothing and no one remains.

Only the shadow of the last generation comes (... young people do not achieve) independence, their own identity, habits, goals, and programs. (...) as a generation, they do not have autonomous existence, validity, or meaningfulness. The concept of the generation becomes an empty shell without comprehensive, world-creating ideas, cultural, ideological, or political oppositions. (...) What remains is the never-quite-adult, (...) increasingly playful young man, even a child-like person in the comprehensive, sole social role (Szilágyi, 1998, I. p. 20, pp. 17-18, II. p. 24, p. 26).

From the above excerpt, it is clear that while in the past (in modernity), youth appeared as a new structuring factor in the world, in postmodernity, it seems to disappear, become insignificant, and weightless. The pessimistic tone is also present in other works. Let me quote from a jointly published youth sociological study that continues Szilágyi Ákos’s observations:

After the change of regime, Hungary did not move towards the promised and hoped-for modernity, but rather, in the opposite direction, towards a premodern (...) society. (...) The young people (...) are left alone, masses of ‘non-believing’ voters have lost their political orientation, they are uncertain and helpless, drifting along with the waves of power games in the country (Laki, 2014, pp. 17-18).

The authors’ standpoint is startling: they no longer refer to the current period as postmodernity but rather reclassify it into the state of quiet vegetating before modernity.

The list of specific contributions can go on, but from the two references above, certain conclusions can be drawn. We do not have to agree with the many depressing and pessimistic views regarding the

current state of Hungarian youth, but when a series of social scientific studies point to alarming phenomena related to knowledge, this fact cannot be dismissed as random and arbitrary. Society (ranging from politics and educational policies to sciences, culture, journalism, the modernization of the workplace, the sensationalization of the entertainment industry, or even the deeper psychological grounding of sports coaching) cannot remain indifferent. The question must be asked: Is it true that in postmodernity, Hungarian youth no longer strive for profound knowledge and continuous thinking? (Tall ár, 2012, pp. 5-6). Philosophically speaking, can we say that (following Kant's idea) today's young people have transitioned from the state of immaturity to adulthood? Or should we reconcile ourselves with the not-so-cheerful situation that some of our young people, in complete lethargy, adapt to the existing power system with servility and humility, while others, voting with their feet, emigrate abroad in search of prosperity?

I believe that finding the answer cannot be spared in any way. Every institution and sphere of society must provide some kind of response to this new dilemma. And everyone who is in any way involved in the lives of young people has a responsibility towards them.

4. Instead of a Summary

The aforementioned social challenge is self-evident, yet it doesn't seem as simple as it appears at first glance. Undoubtedly, we have to think, debate, and make considerable effort to find well-founded answers. I am certain that everyone who is involved in youth affairs at any level can consider the warning of Jacques Derrida, the recently deceased French philosopher: "No ethics and (...) no politics seem (...) true if they do not respect in advance those others who are (...) not yet there. (...) We must think of the future, we must be vigilant for the future." (Derrida 1995, pp. 8-9) And the future - obviously - can be nothing else but youth itself.

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The German-language reference: "Die Jugend von heute liebt den Luxus, hat schlechte Manieren und verachtet die Autorität. Sie widersprechen ihren Eltern, legen die Beine übereinander und tyrannisieren ihre Lehrer." http://www.gutzitiert.de/zitat_autor_sokrates. Or: <http://gutezitate.com/zitat/257628>. Unfortunately, I have not been able to track down the ancient author to whom the above ominous sentence is attributed. As it is well known, Socrates himself did not write anything.

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Tallár, Ferenc: *Be in the Soup?* *Liget*, 2012/9, pp. 5-29. The notorious statement: “The new generation is astonishingly ignorant, but even more astonishing is how much they do not strive for knowledge, how much they shy away from persistent and profound work, and even from thinking itself,” pp. 5-6.

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