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Youth and the Cult of Youth?

KEYWORDS

youth culture, cult of youth, fashion industry, lifestyle, social education

ABSTRACT

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This text deals with one of the neglected topics of contemporary social pedagogy which extends to developmental psychology and sociology. This topic is so-called cult of youth which is often mentioned in the academic literature, but has not been precisely conceptualized. This text was therefore focused on the definition of basic category, i.e. youth, and then discussed the relationship to the cult of youth and the individual elements that helps to form it.

The cult of youth is associated with so called youth culture, which has been spread and produced by global media. The influence of the media has been already evident from the 60's of the 20th century, when we often talk about American cultural hegemony which presents within its production the popular culture and youthful lifestyle, which is then presented in magazines, music media, fashion industry, etc.

For contemporary capitalist society the concept of the cult of youth is a useful concept as only successful, young and efficient individuals can consume new and new products (as well as use the services) typical for this still-rising imaginary phase of human life. Therefore the cult of youth is the domain of successful people who do not want to lose their success. Only socially successful can try to be "forever young".

*Forever young,
I wanna be,
Forever young,
Do you really want to live forever?
Forever,
Forever young.
Alphaville, Forever Young*

Introduction

The topic of youth is among the most discussed in disciplines such as social education, social and developmental psychology, sociology, and social pathology.

Most treatises concerned with youth observe not only the specificities of adolescence, but also the peer groups and various aspects of contemporary youth, including manifestations classified as socially pathological.

Social education often observes the process of socialisation, the specific norms of and roles acted by contemporary youths, and their typical attributes, such as popular music, their image, fashion, slang, gestures, rituals, consumerism, communications, etc. (Kraus 2008; Procházka, 2012).

The cult of youth is often discussed in connection with the positive attributes of youth. However, although regularly referenced in scholarly literature, the cult of youth has not yet been precisely conceptualised. This theoretical paper seeks to do exactly that: first, it focuses on defining youth and then it discusses the phenomenon of the cult of youth and what it consists of.

Youth: attempt at a definition

In social education, the category of youth or youthfulness is indelibly linked with the figure of Jean Jacques Rousseau. Youth is the antithesis of the adult world from which it seeks to distance itself; it views the imagined world of adulthood as corrupt, ruthless and conservative. Youthfulness is then perceived as 'goodness, friendship, nature and love' (see Fischer, 1964: 17).

In this sense, the study of youth is not confined to recent years and decades. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century, authors who in their theory and practice dedicated themselves to youth have included A. S. Makarenko, L. N. Tolstoy, Ch. Bühler, P. F. Lazarsfeld, H. Schelsky, H. Krautz, E. Erikson, S. N. Eisenstadt, M. Montessori, T. Adorno and R. R. Bell. In the Czech lands, there has also been a wealth of educational, sociological and psychological research, theories and findings concerning youth.

In most cases, youth has been studied in connection with the educational process and leisure activities. However, the spotlight has sometimes been on certain attitudes thought to be widely manifest among young people, including rebellion, defiance, and critical attitude, or even attraction to phenomena that are socially pathological, such as drug use, promiscuity, suicidal tendencies, vandalism, aggressiveness, alcoholism and crime (Smolík, 2010; Hartl, Hartlová, 2010). Some authors wrote about antisocial and delinquent behaviour, most often in connection with youth gangs (Hofbauer, 2004; cf. Smolík, 2012).

Although the definitions of youth have been many, they are often considered to be 'a social group made up of people aged about fifteen to twenty-five, who no longer fulfil the role of children, but are not yet conceded the role of adults by society. Youth has its characteristic ways of thinking and behaviour, a distinct system of models, norms and values.' (Průcha, Walterová, Mareš, 2001: 125)

In UNESCO documents the upper age limit for a youth is twenty-six years, in UN materials youths are between fifteen and twenty-four years old (see Kraus, 2009: 361). For Kuchta, Válková et al. (2005), youth ends at eighteen.

It should be noted that 'youth' is a socio-culturally conditioned notion, and that a society's typical pattern of socialisation impinges on its understanding of youth. Who young people are differs significantly from one society to another, from one group to the next; indeed youths were first seen as a collective social phenomenon only several decades ago (Boudon, Bernard, Cherkkaoui, Lécuyer, 2004: 112-113).

To classify youth, a great many alternative perspectives can be applied, which vary according to discipline used to approach the phenomenon. In social psychology, for instance, youth is associated with categories of pubescence and adolescence. Pubescence is usually defined as the age bracket eleven to fifteen years, and adolescence begins at fifteen and ends at twenty or twenty-two. The beginning of adolescence is linked to maturity of the reproductive system, and during adolescence bodily growth is completed. However biological criteria are less important for determining the end of adolescence; here criteria of psychology (the achievement of personal autonomy), sociology (the adult role) and education (the achievement of education and obtaining of professional qualifications) are foregrounded (cf. Macek, 2003).

Sociology respects the internal differentiation of youth, viewing it as a socio-historical phenomenon. Thus, youth can be defined as referring to any age group bridging the period between childhood and adulthood, during which physical, but more importantly psychosocial development is achieved, including professional training (Buriánek, 1996; cf. Macek, 2003).

It is somewhat difficult to succinctly characterise contemporary youth. According to the lay public, 'everyone is as young as they feel'. Here the cult of youth undoubtedly plays a role, being responsible for the fact that individuals are counted as 'youths', who a few decades earlier would certainly not have belonged to that category. Ondrejkovič (1997) described such postponing of adulthood as the 'pluralisation of the young age'; thus, youth is sometimes thought to end at

thirty-two. In Poland, the term 'youthaholism' has been coined to describe obsession with youth, and can be considered coterminous with the cult of youth (see Grotek, 2009).

Cult of youth and its constituent elements

For Hobsbawm (1998), the actor James Dean symbolised the cult of youth, because he was a typical hero whose life ended in his youth. In Western society, a youth culture (and potentially the cult of youth) began to appear in the 1950s, when it had the following crucial characteristics:

- Youth ceased to be the preparatory stage for adulthood, and became instead the final stage of human development.
- Youth is associated with mature market economies, in which youth culture represents enormous purchase power; moreover, each new generation of adults socialises itself into a self-aware youth culture and adopts its practices.
- Youth is international, and this fact is linked to some of the aspects already mentioned (globalised contemporary music, fashion styles, etc.) (for more detail see Hobsbawm, 1998: 334-337).

As a phenomenon, the cult of youth was increasingly seen in the 1960s and beyond, and was not limited to the young generation itself. In Czechoslovakia and later in the Czech Republic, it was manifest only in the early 1990s. The cult of youth is also connected with what has been called the culture of youth, and is produced and spread by the media, which are now often global (cf. Scruton, 2002). The influence of the media has been increasingly noticeable since the 1960s, when the concept of US cultural hegemony was first discussed. This hegemony proposed a popular culture and a youthful life style, which was then disseminated further in magazines, musical records, etc. (cf. Hobsbawm, 1998).

The culture of youth takes pride in its ability to accommodate everything and everyone. In other words, it breaks down the walls that prevent people from achieving a sense of belonging, eroding all barriers, such as education, specialism, scholarly outlook, doctrine, and moral authority (Scruton, 2002: 146).

The cult of youth involves excessive veneration of youth and youthfulness. It is a cliché of our times that a young (or youthful) person is always flexible, open, and ready to undertake new tasks (see Eriksen, 2009: 133). This cult is linked to popular culture, with what is 'trendy', such as up-to-date styles and fashion.

Conversely, it negates all that is past and antiquated, criticising religion, morality, etc. (cf. Scruton, 2002).

Contemporary culture shows youth to be a goal representing fulfilment, not as a transient period that must be left behind once the obligations of adulthood lay claim to the individual (see Scruton, 2002: 143).

The cult of youth is also associated with sex appeal and sexual performance; lasting relationships are criticised as too limiting. Sexual performance can even be supported by various pharmacological drugs sold in various forms as gels, tablets or even chewing gum, under well-known brand names as Viagra, ArginMax, Clavin etc. Natural aphrodisiacs are also used. The emphasis is on pleasure and enjoyment. Rebellion, lack of grounding and relativising of values are typical of the cult of youth. Other trends also become associated with this cult, such as the postponing of parenthood.

A subset of the cult of youth is the cult of the body, which is manifest in the pursuit of an ideal appearance, the obsession with fashion, but also in plastic surgery and excessive fitness regimes, which in turn require the constant purchase of supplements or a fixation on healthy food. Companies selling beauty products are also intimately involved with the cult of the body, and endeavour to present their wares in line with the 'philosophy' of the cult of youth, alluding copiously to it in their advertisements.

The cult of the body is represented by slimness, tan (produced in tanning shops), dieting, surgical and cosmetic treatments (face lifting, skin resurfacing) and other attributes of imagined perfection. In an individual who feels imperfect and inferior, inner doubts and uncertainties converge into a single point: the perception of one's own body (see Giddens, 1999: 141). Needless to say, imperfection is incompatible with the cult of youth.

The obsession to be constantly online can also create feelings of imperfection, if one feels overwhelmed by the switched-on world. With the development of smartphones, it is easy to be constantly available and enjoy the benefits of the Internet; however, such behaviour can become compulsive, prompting proposals to introduce diagnoses, such as 'Internet addiction disorder' or 'netomania' (see Mühlpachr, 2009). A dynamic communication is in any case another attribute of the cult of youth.

The mass media have played a crucial role in establishing and sustaining the cult of youth, which is presented not only in TV ads and spots, but also in regular programming. This is also noticeable in communication style, which often

adopts catchwords and adolescent slang. Sometimes a complete style (or a multitude of styles) is copied and adopted by the mass media, including gestures, facial expressions, the image, sexual promiscuity (often redefined as erotic experimentation), irresponsibility, etc. (cf. Macek, 2003; Vágnerová, 2008).

Chaotic consequences

In sum, the cult of youth references the ideal state, which young, successful, healthy individuals focused on the self are required to embody. Such individuals also identify with other attributes of youth. Typically, they need to be up-to-date in fashion, music, choice of (preferably important) friends, and above all, in consumerism.

Heath and Potter (2012) have noted that non-conformism presented in advertisements is particularly effective in driving consumer spending, because the identity of a brand can then be established by the process of differentiating these products from those of others. For that reason most brands seek to become associated with the cult of youth.

Seven year olds are served a strongly sexualised popular culture, and find themselves under the same pressures from the fashion industry as teenagers. Those in their forties, meanwhile, hear from all sides that they should extend their youth, are admonished to 'improve' their appearance by procedures such as lifting, hair transplants and cosmetic surgery, and are advised not to become fixed in their ways (Eriksen, 2009: 133).

Youth culture introduces chaos into established categories, within and without families. If both the daughter of eight and the father of forty-two feel young, it is very difficult indeed to find a functional division of roles (Eriksen, 2009: 134). One consequence of the adoption of the cult of youth may be that the roles of parents, adults and children become confused.

There are two basic strategies adopted by consumers in order to 'remain young'. The first strategy involves sustaining a lifestyle produced by identifying with the period when one really was young. Such a person then adheres to the consumption style of his adolescence, as manifest in listening to particular musical styles, a fashion sense dating to one's youth that is conservative with respect to present fashions, and seeking partners in certain time-tested environments: concerts where particular musical styles prevails, author readings of favourite writers, or lectures on preferred literary genres, etc.

A second strategy for attaining a youthful life style involves constant adaptation to the most recent fashions. Such individuals need to closely observe emerging trends, be it in fashion, music, technology (the iPods, smartphones, tablets), cosmetics or fitness.

Conclusion

In all cultures, adult life is connected with responsibility, permanence and the performance of duties. When an individual comes of age, his personality is stable and fully formed (see Eriksen, 2009: 133). Youth culture declares itself as radical, unsettling, intolerable, confused and standing against the law (Scruton, 2002). The cult of youth and its various elements not only create a perspective on youthfulness; to a certain degree, they also distort the view of other developmental phases, for example, childhood and old age.

In the case of contemporary capitalism, the cult of youth is an advantageous concept, because only successful, young and well performing people are in the position to consume the endless array of new products and services available in this ever-lengthening imaginary phase of human life. This is one of the reasons why the cult of youth falls into the domain of the successful, who do not wish to cease being achievers. Only an individual perceived by society as thriving can attempt to be 'forever young'. This paper has presented two basic strategies regarding 'how to be young'. The first is a conservative, or rather conserving, strategy; the second is based on following new trends.

In conclusion, it should be noted that in most cases the cult of youth is not connected with 'real' young people, but rather with abstract and socially constructed attributes linked to youthfulness by the media, and the beauty, fashion, music and pharmaceutical industries. The cult of youth certainly deserves the attention not only of social educationists, but also of sociologists and, in worst cases, psychiatrists.

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Młodość i kult młodości

Streszczenie

Niniejszy tekst zajmuje się tematem często pomijanym przez współczesną pedagogikę społeczną. Chodzi o tak zwany kult młodości, o którym wspomina się w literaturze przedmiotu, lecz nigdzie nie jest dokładnie zdefiniowany. W niniejszym tekście koncentruję się na definicji podstawowej kategorii, czyli pojęciu młodości, a dalej omawiam stosunek do kultu młodości i poszczególnych jego elementów.

Z pojęciem młodości czy młodzięczości w pedagogice społecznej kojarzą się często poglądy Jana Jakuba Rousseau. Młodość/młodzięczość stawiał on w opozycji do świata dorosłych, który był według niego zepsuty, bezwzględny i konserwatywny. Młodość była i jest podmiotem domniemych lub rzeczywistych przejawów buntu, oporu, krytyki, ewentualnie także zjawisk uznawanych za dewiacje społeczne (np. narkomania, rozwiązłość seksualna, samobójstwa, agresja,

alkoholizm czy przestępczość). Należy także zwrócić uwagę na to, że określenie „młodzież“ warunkowane jest kontekstem społecznym i kulturowym oraz że istotną rolę w jego pojmowaniu odgrywa również socjalizacja. Mimo tego dokładne określenie, czym jest młodzież współczesna, jest zadaniem trudnym. Z punktu widzenia laików „każdy jest młody, o ile się młodym czuje”. Rolę niemniej istotną odgrywa również tak zwany kult młodości, który ma wpływ na fakt, że do kategorii młodzieży wlicza się także te osoby, których jeszcze parę dziesiątków lat temu nie można by było do niej zaliczyć. Typowym bohaterem kultu młodości był James Dean, którego życie skończyło się wraz z jego młodością.

W społeczeństwach Zachodu już od lat pięćdziesiątych XX wieku pojawia się zjawisko kultu młodości, które można opisać poprzez trzy aspekty: 1) młodość przestaje być uważana za przygotowanie do dorosłości, lecz staje się w pewnym sensie ostatnim etapem pełnego rozwoju jednostki; 2) młodość łączy się z „rozwinętymi gospodarkami rynkowymi”, dlatego że kultura młodzieżowa koncentruje w sobie i reprezentuje olbrzymią siłę nabywczą, a także dlatego, że każde nowe pokolenie dorosłych świadomie w trakcie socjalizacji przyjmuje kulturę młodzieżową i jej doświadczenie; 3) młodość wiąże się z takimi jej elementami, jak globalna muzyka, styl ubierania się, wybór określonych kosmetyków itp.

Kult młodości łączy się z tak zwaną kulturą młodzieżową, której producentem i dystrybutorem są media globalne. Wpływ mediów jest zauważalny już od lat sześćdziesiątych XX wieku, od kiedy zaczęto mówić o amerykańskiej kulturowej hegemonii, która prezentuje kulturę popularną i młodzieżowy styl życia, rozpowszechniany następnie w czasopiśmie, muzyce, w filmach itp. W kulcie młodości chodzi o przesadne czczenie młodości, młodzięczości. Jeżeli byśmy chcieli użyć słownika współczesnych stereotypów, znaczyłyby to, że młody człowiek jest zawsze elastyczny, otwarty, przygotowany do podejmowania nowych wyzwań. Kult młodości wiąże się także z atrakcyjnością fizyczną i sprawnością seksualną; krytyce poddawane są stałe związki partnerskie, które uważa się za ograniczające. Sprawność seksualna (np. w formie wzrostu erekcji czy, ogólnie, potencji seksualnej) jest wspierana poprzez najrozmaitsze środki farmakologiczne w formie tabletek czy żelów. Akcent kładzie się na osiągnięcie rozkoszy i przyjemności.

Dla kultu młodości charakterystyczne są przejawy buntu, braku stabilizacji i relatywizacja wartości. Z tym łączą się poszczególne trendy odnoszące się do tego specyficznego kultu, np. odrzucenie rodzicielstwa.

Do podzbiorów kultu młodości należy także kult ciała w postaci przywiązania do wizerunku i przestrzegania trendów modowych, ale także operacje plastyczne czy częste wizyty w centrach fitness, stosowanie suplementów diety i przywiązanie do zdrowego odżywiania się.

Bardzo ważną rolę odgrywają media, współtworzące kult młodości, który następnie prezentowany jest w telewizyjnych spotach i reklamach oraz w innych produkcjach telewizyjnych. Znajduje to odzwierciedlenie między innymi w komunikacji między ludźmi, kiedy slogany czy wyrazy slangu młodzieżowego przenikają do języka osób dorosłych. Dorośli wręcz kopiuje młodzieżowy styl życia (czy poszczególne style), np. poprzez przejście gestykulacji, mimiki, wizerunków, seksualnej rozwiązłości (która definiowana jest jako eksperymenty erotyczne), brak odpowiedzialności itp.

Ogólnie, kult młodości jest konceptem, który odsyła do idealnego i wymaganego stanu młodych, zdrowych, osiągających sukces i indywidualistycznie nastawionych jednostek. Typową charakterystyką kultu młodości jest bycie „in” – bycie na bieżąco – w modzie, muzyce, wybieraniu (znaczących) przyjaciół i przede wszystkim w konsumpcji.

Można wskazać dwie strategie konsumenckie dotyczące zjawiska „pozostawania młodym”. Pierwsza z nich polega na identyfikacji z atrybutami własnej młodości, np. z określonym rodzajem muzyki, sposobem ubierania się (stylem mody właściwym dla czasów własnej młodości) itp. Drugą strategią jest z kolei nieustające dostosowywanie się do nowych trendów – charakterystycznych dla prawdziwie „młodych” – w ubieraniu się, wyborze muzyki, korzystaniu z nowych technologicznych gadżetów (iPody, smartphony, tablety), stosowaniu kosmetyki, *wellness* itp.