SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF YOUTH AND FORMATION OF GENERATIONAL AWARENESS AFTER SOCIALISM

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REVOLUTIONS AND GENERATIONS

One thing common to modern revolutions is the hopes they all invest in generations to come. No matter what ideological direction a historical turn is to take, faith in future generations is a reliable indicator of a revolution. Such faith itself provides a regime change with its proper historical meaning; it makes using the word "revolution" possible and convincing. In other words, without hope in new generations, there can hardly be talk of revolution.

In its modern sense, revolution does not mean simply an exchange of rulers or the enactment of some institutional or legal amendments, however dramatic these may be. Revolution always entails an articulated hope and need for deep social and cultural transformation. Without such a drive to alter basic human conditions, we only have a reform or a *coup d'état*. A revolutionary change requires more than just new slogans and organizational shuffling. It requires new people, as the revolutionary rhetoric implies, who have been socialized in the new environment and who are therefore predisposed to face its challenges appropriately. According to Ralf Dahrendorf, in his reflections on the 1989 *revolutions* in East Central Europe, it takes days, months, and perhaps years for politicians, lawyers, and economists to change the basic institutional coordinates after a political revolution. Yet it takes decades for ordinary citizens, he continues, to carry out the ultimate revolutionary task of changing the character of human relations and of basic experience.

Among the advocates of the 1989 regime change in Czechoslovakia, there was a certain reluctance to use the word "revolution" to describe the old regime's breakdown. One reason for this was the memory of the

revolutionary rhetoric of Bolshevism. After Communists had seized political power in Czechoslovakia in February of 1948, the language of revolution served to legitimize state-organized violence and systematic persecutions from the outset. Avoiding such a brutal approach was a major legitimizing strategy of the 1989 historical turn.

However, physical violence need not be the only sign of a revolution, nor is it a necessary one. Even the Communists of 1948 did not rely solely on the revolutionary class struggle to legitimize their takeover. They also invested much hope in the coming generations as the true carriers of a new society – a society rid of its *bourgeois* heritage. Likewise, the public proponents of November 1989 invested much hope in the coming generations as the true carriers of a society rid, this time, of its Communist heritage. Plainly, these two historical events – dissimilar as they may be in other respects – fall under the same category with respect to the explicit expectations that were loaded on generationally renewed nations. The projected historical role of future generations rendered the 1989 regime change one of revolutionary aspirations.

Fifteen years later, the question is no longer whether there was a revolution in 1989. What is at issue for a sociologist today is the fate of the young revolutionary generation of 1989 and the ways in which the post-1989 youth fulfil the hopes that were invested in them when they were children. Is this the generation of new citizens envisioned in 1989, or must we look to their own children – or even grandchildren? (It is, after all, a basic sociological tenet that it takes at least two successive generations to fully inhabit a new environment, socially and culturally.) How do young people of today differ from their parents, who were socialized by and for the old regime? What is their place and experience in the post-Communist society? What are their hopes, perspectives, fears, and anxieties? Do they already represent the beginnings of a new society, one of re-cultivated values, attitudes, norms of behaviour, relationship to the past, and visions of the future? Do they represent a world for which the label "post-Communist" no longer applies? Or are they still just a transitional generation? Can post-Communist conditions produce a generation which is no longer post-Communist? Which generation will finally break the circle and bring post-Communism to its end?

These are broad and difficult questions indeed, and some of them are rather metaphysical. Yet they should be addressed. These questions deserve a critical sociological reflection, assuming we do not want to end up like those devoted Communists who waited in vain for their own truly new and pure generation – until their historical project finally collapsed. Simply sticking with the idea that subsequent generations will ultimately solve the revolutionary tasks can only lead, as it did after 1948, to an institutionalization of the ideology of youth and the frustration of endless waiting.

YOUTH AND GENERATION FORMATION

The following chapters pursue the subject of post-Communist youth from a particular perspective, albeit still in a rather general fashion. At the core of this perspective is the problem of generation formation in a post-revolutionary period. There are good reasons to frame the subject this way. All periods of profound historical change – wars, economic crises and booms, cultural shifts, religious upheavals, political revolutions and counter-revolutions – tend to instigate a heightened awareness, among those who live through them, of a shared historical fate. Such periods or events thus play a prominent role in the formation of what is called historical generations.[1] They provide powerful formative conditions for historical and political socialization as well as evident points of reference for an articulation of generational consciousness. An age cohort becomes a generation both prospectively and retrospectively: prospectively by cultivating a shared habitus in actual historical experience, retrospectively by relating itself to a common past. In other words, dramatic historical events and periods give rise to generations, and, in turn, an articulate generational consciousness provides these events and periods with a distinct historical status. Thus, *e.g.*, it is the members of the young generation of the 1960s who have been most active in the occasional glorification of that period. And it is the members of the aging war generation who continue to maintain the importance of the war experience. Generations need formative historical periods, both as sources of shared experience and as symbols to which they can relate and from which they can derive their specific generational identities. It is largely through generational consciousness that history acquires its periodical semblance.

But how can we speak about a "1960s generation" or a "war generation" at all, including some people and excluding others? Hadn't some radical students of the 1960s already been born when the Second World War was being fought? And didn't many of those whose lives had been strongly affected by the World War live through the 1960s as well? What sense does it make to talk about distinct generations in these and similar cases? At least a tentative response to these questions is necessary to justify our concern with generation formation in the context of the 1989 East European revolutions.

Firstly and obviously, "generation" is not a purely theoretical concept. Sociology makes it an analytical category only by way of double hermeneutics (Giddens 1976). It is social actors alone who first understand and present themselves and others as representatives of certain generations. Sociological reflection comes next. It does not create generations; it simply makes generational consciousness more reflective, relating it systematically

[1] As opposed to, *e.g.*, family generations.

to its experiential sources and identifying the forms of its manifestation. Sociology helps to understand a social actor as belonging to and acting out of a particular social context, much in the same way as it does when it talks about class, religious traditions, or gender. Social context de-individualizes specific inclinations, strategies, habits, and tastes by pointing out that these are representative of a particular age cohort. Theoretical reflection presents certain behaviours as signs of belonging to a particular generation, even though the behaviours may not be perceived as such by the actors themselves. It also generalizes its observations by looking for unseen common grounds and correlations in meaning[2] among disparate generation-related aspects of thinking and behaviour.

At the same time, however, a critical sociological approach will show that some ways of thinking and behaving, considered by certain people to be generation-related, may well be more general and characteristic of a wider community. One instance of this is the temptation to label some behavioural tendencies in the East European post-revolutionary politics and public sphere as "typically communist". The same "straightforward" approach has been readily branded as a sign of the arrogant communist mentality of the older generation, and at the same time has been characterized as a manifestation of the new-style directness of the younger generation. What comes off as arrogance with some appears as sincerity with others – simply as a result of generational associations. This polarized characterization, which has frequently occurred in the post-revolutionary politics and public discourse after 1989, demonstrates clearly that generations are more than just passive, super-structural reflections of some basic (or "material") experience. At some points, generation-based aspects of behaviour and thinking frequently remain unrecognized by the actors themselves. Here we would speak about a *generational unconscious*, to paraphrase Bourdieu's characterization of class (Bourdieu 1984). At other times, however, the social actors deliberately look for and explicitly identify signs of their or others' generational affiliation.

Today, people probably have a more immediate sense of inter-generational distinctions than of class distinctions in their everyday relations, self-perceptions, and self-presentation. What the two sorts of social distinctions have in common, however, is that both social class and generation may, and often do, acquire political meaning and discursive representations. They become a socio-cultural basis for political mobilization and not merely reactive *products* of history and historical experience. As socially effective abstractions or social representations, they are powerful cultural

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[2] Karl Mannheim, in the sociological classic of the theory of collective consciousness and the concept of generation, calls these correlations "morphological affinities" (Mannheim 1964a).

constructs, carrying specific meanings, and as such they may become effective *instruments* of power games. The above example reminds us that generational consciousness is often articulated in the service of a specific purpose. Generations, like social classes or nations, are formed in struggles that involve the strategic creation of meaning.

For a generation to emerge, the shared historical experience of a particular age cohort is needed. It is important to remember that formative historical periods or events affect different categories of people in different ways and with differing intensity. People filter a shared experience through their respective socio-economic classes, gender orientations, geographical locations, *etc.* Most importantly, in our context, events characteristically have a different socializing impact on different age cohorts.

A historical period or event is experienced by all members of a particular community, yet not all of them experience it as a formative experience – *i.e.*, as an experience that determines their generational identification. When we talk about the generation of the 1960s, the war generation, or the (post)revolutionary generation of the 1990s, we specifically mean those whom these events and periods brought to personal maturity, to adulthood. *A generation is formed when a formative historical experience coincides with a formative period of people's lives.*[3]

This dictum is the basic assumption of the following text, and, as has been indicated, it must be complemented by at least two other aspects of historical generation formation. First, generational self-consciousness arises when an age-cohort relates itself to an historical event or period and recognizes it as a symbolic point of self-reference. Second, for the sense of generational distinctiveness to remain strong, specific sorts of challenges must arise from time to time. Such challenges provoke reactions that reveal an affinity among those socialized through a particular shared historical experience: these reactions are different from those typical for other generations. In this sense, generations are functions of relating present behaviour to a past collective experience.

For the generation defined by the revolution of 1989, we do not know what these future challenges will be, although we could perhaps predict them. As sociologists are not in the business of making casual predictions, however, we will focus here upon some structural conditions of post-revolutionary generation formation. Even this is not an entirely easy task. It would be tempting to wait for a while and then enjoy describing the numerous instances of distinct generational behaviour and self-understanding that will have become apparent, as we like to do today with the 1960s generation in the West or the 1970s normalization generation in

[3] An elaboration of this thesis can be found in numerous sociological accounts, including Mannheim (1964b) and Becker (2000).

the Czech Republic. It is definitely safer to analyze phenomena that seem to have completed their formation, phenomena whose historical meaning and significance have been settled and are taken for granted. Still, there are already some indications of a new generation forming within the post-revolutionary conditions, and although we do not know how strong the generational self-consciousness of the post-Communist cohort will be in the future, or what challenges it will face, we can at least attempt to trace some features of its distinctiveness *vis-à-vis* former generations. The scope of this task far exceeds the scope of the following text; this is just part of a much broader investigation in the field.

FORMATION OF YOUTH IN POST-SOCIALIST CONDITIONS

In their provocative sociological account of contemporary youth, Claire Wallace and Sijka Kovatcheva (1998) describe, among other things, the changing conditions for the formation of the social category of youth in transition from Communist to post-Communist societies of Eastern Europe. Although they draw many of their examples specifically from Bulgaria, they include other countries of the region, and they present their own argument as applicable to Communist and post-Communist societies in general. The authors provide a complex and instructive picture of those changing conditions, discussing the topic in various contexts, such as education, work, family, youth subcultures, political values, and political participation.

As they approach a more general level of comparison between Communist and post-Communist conditions, however, they tend to focus primarily on the disappearance of the institutional basis of Communist-era socialist youth organizations and youth-oriented policies of the state. They then take Ulrich Beck's thesis of individualization under the late modern or post-modern conditions and apply it to the context of the regime changes of the late 1980s and early 1990s. The rupture in young people's experience has been made all the more dramatic (because politically accelerated) by the circumstances of regime change. For them, "the collapse of the official youth organizations is indicative of the disappearance of youth as a category for official intervention in the new post-Communist reality. At present there is mainly a vacuum which is being filled by commercial youth culture (no longer condemned) or economic activities. The highly ordered and controlled progression through age-status and transitions which the Communist Youth organizations supervised has been replaced by a diversity of different groups and in many places by nothing at all. [...] The mass modern concept of youth is replaced by privatized and fragmented alternatives" (Wallace and Kovatcheva 1998:76).

The authors do not endorse the Communist youth organizations and policies on any ideological ground. They repeatedly point out the disciplining and oppressive effects these programs had on the subjects for whom they were designed. The problem with statements such as the one quoted above is analytical, not political, in nature. Such assertions seem to imply that, with the disappearance of centralized or unifying political structures – organizations and policies – young people lose the opportunity to develop a sense of representing a distinct social category. It is as if the young people of today wander alone and aimlessly across a chaotic post-Communist and post-modern landscape, deprived of the solid indicators that once unerringly led their predecessors to a sense of belonging: the institutions that nurtured in them the sense of being no longer a child and not yet an adult. It is as if today's young people are destined to use some drug-like institutional substitutes in order to experience a semblance of what their predecessors enjoyed or rather suffered through in reality.

But youth as a social category is not formed within such official frameworks only. It is dubious, from a sociological point of view, to present diverse and fragmented subcultures or consumer cultures as mere substitutes, as things that fill a *void* left behind by the disappearance of *real* institutions in which youth were represented in a political or semi-political and rather uniform way. The new consumer styles and alternative cultures may not make young people any happier than the attempts – largely futile – of Communist functionaries to impose a rigid normative grid upon their lives. But certainly the former are no less real than the latter. They are equally real, at least, in the sense that they constitute a basis for the identity formation of young people as a distinct social category. To argue otherwise would amount to a kind of social substantialism which does not seem to correspond to the experience of today's young people in post-socialist conditions. They still take on and solidify their sense of being young, their sense of holding a distinct social and cultural status within society, in plenty of powerful contexts.

The growing number of alternative and often loosely institutionalized subcultures represents one example of these contexts. The eagerness with which many teenagers seek their own subcultural niche (often through a specific consumption style) testifies not only to the modern cultural understanding of youth as a period of experimentation but also to young people's urge to find new and different forms of self-representation. The "newness" of these subcultural styles may well be illusory, yet that matters little to those who identify with them. The important difference here, compared to young people's passive participation in socialist youth organizations, is that participation in these subcultures involves more intensive feelings and has the markings of an autonomous decision. Testing one's personal autonomy is one of the most important constitutive elements of youth.

It has been suggested by a number of authors that experimenting with new or unconventional lifestyles has, in the past few decades, ceased to be the prerogative of young people. This thesis points to the social decomposition of adulthood, rather than youth, in late modern societies.[4] However, even in this view, the commonly shared notion of adulthood does not disappear altogether from a late modern culture. If we idealize youthfulness – to stay young, to look young, *etc.* – then that implies that we retain an image of adulthood if only to maintain the distinction between young and not young. We still have a working concept of what it is to be an adult, but it seems to be losing popularity as a behavioural option. Therefore, even if we accept as fact that experimentation with lifestyles has come to be considered less of a deviation for people in their forties and fifties, this does not amount to erasing the distinction between youth and adulthood from late modern cultural sensitivity. This development only blurs the biological definition of the social category of youth, making it more difficult to identify the cultural transition from youth to adulthood as a function of age. (See, *e.g.*, Melucci 1996:119)

This view of the matter is not in sharp contrast to the general argument made by Wallace and Kovatcheva, since they repeatedly speak about the dissolution of "youth as an *age* group". However, I object to the idea that there is an institutional and cultural vacuum where formerly the unitary and state-sponsored organizations and policies effectively shaped youths' identity and self-understanding. As I have said, older individuals' parasitic consumption of the cultural insignia of youth – subcultures, fashion styles, language or slang, artistic taste, new sports, *etc.* – does not make these markers less socially real or effective. They are socially productive in three ways. First, they define the world of youth as culturally distinct from that of adults. Second, they provide a space, a means, and an idiom through which people can re-present themselves in everyday interactions as young or youthful. Third, people can identify with youth culture in relatively autonomous and individualized ways. Therefore, the argument made by Wallace and Kovatcheva should not be read as suggesting that the youth as a social category is disappearing altogether under what they call post-modern conditions, or in their specific post-Communist variation. What has changed are the conditions and means by which young adolescents leave the stage of childhood and take on the identity of teens.

Other examples of a reconstituted cultural market of "youth identifications" might follow, with the same general conclusions as those

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[4] An increasing number of authors have coined this thesis and explore it in various contexts, from Christopher Lasch (1979) to Alberto Melucci (1996). A focused and consistent account of the process of disappearing adulthood as a cultural representation (*i.e.*, the weakening attractiveness of this representation for expressing one's identity) in late modern societies is provided by James E. Coté in his *Arrested Adulthood* (2000).

drawn from the above case. The more civic-minded young people have had the opportunity to cultivate their own identities, their sense of being different from their older counterparts, in various *peer* projects organized by NGOs and schools. In these projects, involving of course only a small segment of the respective age-cohort, the young participants develop their own perspectives on, understanding of, and approaches to their own problems and issues. They are incited by the very arrangement of a peer group to do things in their own distinct way. Others may opt for going to some of the many new clubs and entertainment venues which cater specifically to youth and thus are expanding the market of cultural expressions for youth to identify with. Programs targeting youth have not disappeared from available TV channels. The difference is that they are now more diverse in style (particularly those oriented to music or culture in general), less openly ideological, and they often are made by young people themselves.

There are still magazines for young people, apparently in greater variety than before 1989. Their plurality is no longer the result of definite segmentation into precise age categories of supposed readers. Instead, the imperatives of the market economy, replacing to an extent the agenda of ideological and moral education, are driving publishers' efforts to provide youth with content that genuinely interests them, at least in the publisher's view. In this way, magazines play a role in the formation of youths' cultural habits, creating needs which the magazines can satisfy. They supply appealing material for young people to identify with, and they often do so in clear opposition to the older generations' cultural and moral tastes.

One of the clearest examples of this is the explicit sexual content of so many of the youth-oriented magazines that appeared in the 1990s. Before 1989, youth magazines were practically free of such content. Afterwards, many people (especially the parents of adolescents) started to feel that they were overloaded with it. Detailed descriptions of sexual practices, experiences, seduction strategies, *etc.* could be found in magazines advertised as being appropriate for fourteen-year-olds. This marketing strategy has various social and cultural effects. The emotional impoverishment of intimate relationships is perhaps the most frequent conclusion to be found within the moral and theoretical discourses. Yet such an effect is not necessarily the most important simply because it seems obvious. It is in such sexual forums as these that adolescents may suspect they have an anonymous ally within the "official" public sphere: an ally that is beyond parental and pedagogic influence, that in a sense normalizes their private transgressions and thus helps legitimize for the adolescents a space of youthful independence and irresponsibility. To put it in another way: the youth magazines help establish for youth a sexual discourse that carries an intrinsic feeling of differing from parental influence by redefining, among other things, the sense of

responsibility (towards oneself) and irresponsibility (*vis-à-vis* dominant adult culture).[5]

After all, there are a growing number of periodicals outside the mainstream that are made not just for, but also *by*, young people. Many of them do not meet conventional standards of professionalism, but this may well contribute to their "youthful identity" and thus to their appeal. Publications on the Internet are an example of this.

THE AMBIVALENT STATUS OF YOUTH IN STATE SOCIALISM

The social and cultural conditions for the construction of youth as a distinct social category therefore do not disappear with the dissolution of the unified structure of youth organizations and the state policies and ideology oriented towards the Communist youth. A preoccupation with the official side of the youth organizations and policies would prevent us from seeing that, in the state socialist regimes, the sense of being young often formed precisely in opposition to official images and wishes. There was a strong, though rather implicit, understanding of youth as a period in which, on the one hand, one still enjoyed relative immunity from consequences for his or her political behaviour, yet, on the other hand, one was already expected to demonstrate his or her own political stance. Here, ultimately, this meant establishing one's relationship with the Communist regime: participating in May Day parades and other rituals, speaking correctly about the regime representatives, adopting a politically correct view of historical events, such as the view that the 1968 military invasion was "the 1968 brotherly international assistance".

The youth organizations are relevant to our discussion to the extent that they were among the institutional contexts where conflicting disciplinary practices were employed. It was in contexts such as this that the youth tended to polarize into two groups. On one side there stood those more mature individuals who adopted a "realistic" view of an imperfect world, acknowledged the limits for its improvement, and strategically adjusted their behaviour to optimize their own chances. On the other side were those immature individuals who still enjoyed provoking authorities and legitimized their political incorrectness partly by demonstrated naiveté and partly by moral purism.[6] Their politically incorrect or irresponsible

[5] Corsten (1999:260-266) writes further on the relation between discursive practices and generation formation.

[6] In his early work, Richard Sennett (1970) used these terms to distinguish between an adolescent mentality and an adult mentality.

behaviour thus also had a strategic aspect, but it was strategic in a different sense. The latter attitude was "unrealistic" in that it was designed to *avoid personal consequences* altogether, claiming a consequence-free zone[7] for expressing dissension with the regime. It is primarily in this sense that political irresponsibility and rebelliousness were associated with youthful experimentation. To appropriate Sennett's argument, I would say that the claim for a consequence-free zone is "a logical use of the powers developed in adolescence to avoid pain" (Sennett 1970:35). Therefore, opting for dissent as a real life strategy – a very rare choice at any rate – should not be equated with prolonging youth, since severe personal consequences were a result of excercising such an option.

It was when young people entered real life, most often starting a family and a career, that they were confronted with the disconcerting choice between contradicting moral responsibilities: that of the moral purism and legitimate resistance associated with youth, and that of the smooth social integration and the secure family associated with adult life. However chastening the educational system may have been, there still was some space for "irresponsible" behaviour. It could still be excused as an expression of personal immaturity and youthful experimentation, and personal consequences were not so imminent. What Pierre Bourdieu says about the strategic construction of youth in general applies to the pre-1989 "socialist" youth, too,: "The 'young' […] allow themselves to be kept in the state of 'youth', that is, irresponsibility, enjoying the freedom of irresponsible behaviour in return for renouncing responsibility" (Bourdieu 1984:477-478).

However, youthful irresponsibility may lead to a new form of responsibility on those occasions when young people start to see themselves as citizens. "In situations of specific crisis," Bourdieu continues, "when the order of succession is threatened, 'young people', refusing to remain consigned to 'youth', tend to consign the 'old' to 'old age'. Wanting to take the responsibilities which define adults (in the sense of socially complete person), they must push the holders of responsibilities into that form of irresponsibility which defines old age, or rather retirement" (Bourdieu 1984: 478). The generational aspect of the tension that grew within Czechoslovak society in the late 1980s represents a case in point. If there were some traces of a generational revolt in the turmoil of the late 1980s, the revolt was not strictly political in nature. Frustrated and outspoken young people knew well that their parents by and large did not support the oppressive regime with any enthusiasm. They played the game in order to avoid difficulties

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[7] The metaphor of a "consequence-free zone" should confirm the widespread and analytically fruitful sociological strategy of dealing with the social category of youth via replanting the issue from a temporal to a spatial image.

with the regime, and they had developed a rich arsenal of rationalizations for such an attitude. Youthful irresponsibility predisposed young people to stop accepting excuses about family responsibility, in which they sensed quite clearly what sociologists would call "amoral familism". "The wisdom and prudence claimed by the elders then collapse into conservatism, archaism or, quite simply, senile irresponsibility" (Bourdieu 1984:478).

BECOMING YOUNG THROUGH PERSONAL AUTONOMY AND PLURALISM OF CHOICES

In focusing upon inter-generational conflict and its metamorphoses, we tend to focus on the political dimension of the process of social construction of the cultural category of youth. Therefore, I have not paid much attention to the other bookend of youth: childhood. So far, I have mainly dealt with the distinction between the world of youth and the adult world, although earlier I did mention the obvious fact that youth is a period of transition not only *before* adulthood, but also *after* childhood. Youth is a relational category in a similar sense to Bourdieu's understanding of social class: it is a product of the process of making distinctions in everyday life, experience, and self-understanding. The social and psychological separation from the "no longer" of childhood is just as important and indispensable to this process as keeping distance from the "not yet" of adulthood.

The point is that the newly predominant, although more loosely institutionalized, symbols of the world of youth seem to make the transition from childhood at least as definitive as did the formalized institutions of state-controlled youth organizations and policies. The transition at age fifteen from "young pioneers" to "socialist youth" was an externally regulated and *automatic* move in one's life-course, with little symbolic importance for the individual. It was prescribed by the institutional setting itself, and therefore imposed from outside. In contrast, the experiences of "going out" and "partying", reading magazines with sexual content, experimenting with one's sexuality, joining a peer project or a particular subculture, deciding one's own style of dress and artistic taste, all provide young people with a much stronger sense of *autonomy*. These experiences signify for them the transition from childhood to youth with much more intensity, even though they are less "political" in nature. After all, while the disinterest of contemporary youth in conventional politics may be from one viewpoint alarming and lamentable, it is, from our analytical perspective, a sign of intensified boundaries between the youth world and the adult world and therefore a sign of a stronger sense of distinction among those who identify themselves with the general cultural representation of youth.

Wallace and Kovatcheva are right when they point to the diversity of institutions representing the world of youth in post-Communist countries. Yet they stop short of considering this diversity conducive, rather than obstructive, to the young people's sense of belonging to a distinct social category. It is both the less strictly institutionalized character of the transition and the diversity of available youthful expressions that intensify the psychological process of coming to identify with youth. Such diversity does not weaken the sense of being young. Quite to the contrary, it validates the social and cultural distinctiveness of the world of youth.

A parallel can be drawn here to the image of religiosity. The sense of religiosity, of being religious, can only be abstractly imagined when religiosity is no longer tied to a particular church or denomination. That is, people can imagine religion without having a particular god or dogma in mind, or any god or dogma for that matter, only when they experience a diversity of religious beliefs and communities, all of them being "equally" religious, even if there are still disputes among them about their respective values. We can only think about people being religious or irreligious in general when we acknowledge and imagine that they can be religious in infinitely different ways. Similarly, the sense of being young, of inhabiting the world of youth, is psychologically strengthened when young people perceive a difference not only between their parents' world and their own but also among themselves, in the form of mutual differences, tensions, and conflicts. The world of youth is defined by internal conflicts as much as it is defined by distinctions between the worlds of childhood and adulthood.[8]

The diversity of competing styles of music, fashion, associations – in one word, subcultures – with which young people identify makes them relate to each other within the same general category of "youth". It is the relatively autonomous sphere of conflicts among youth subcultures that makes those involved feel a sense of commonality within this category. It does not matter that these frays are sometimes implicit, hidden; and sometimes explicit, overt. They are sometimes funny and sometimes violent, sometimes fought by proxy for young people by the media and culture industries, and frequently involve other conflicts at the same time, such as those related to class, gender, ethnicity, religiosity, power interests, *etc.* Whatever form their conflicts take, youth subcultures always assume a common stake that pertains to the world of youth and that simultaneously defines this world.

[8] The same applies to the process of social construction of generational consciousness, since it is difficult, indeed impossible to imagine a generation as a friction free or homogeneous (in terms of political views, life styles, artistic tastes, religious attitudes, *etc.*) group. Mannheim (1964b) and Corsten (1999) have written on the role of internal conflicts in the process of social construction of generations.

It is difficult to identify one general or dominant stake, but assignations of what is "cool", fresh, incorrupt, authentic, truly moral, *etc.*, serve as examples.

There is a strong cognitive element involved in the social construction of youth as well. The capacity to discern subtle distinctions – between house music and techno music, a freestyle bike and a BMX bike, *etc.* – is an expert knowledge of sorts. Yet this is an expert knowledge that matters to contemporary youth, especially, and to those who want to keep track of what's going on – and thereby perhaps remain youthful regardless of chronological age. Such distinctions are tailored to young people, though not always embraced by all of them. When social importance begins to be attached to such distinctions by young people themselves, and they start to stake out their identities according to these allegiances, it is a defining moment within a youth culture. Conflicts among different subcultures thus amount to struggles over the definition of a common world: a world whose existence is presupposed and thus rendered a social reality. If it were not, there would be no point to the struggle.

In this context, a plurality of options and a sense of autonomy are structural prerequisites of the sense that one is no longer a child. They form part of a distinct experience of the need, necessity, and privilege of making one's own choices. In itself, however, such privilege does not suffice to define the condition of youth. There is one more aspect involved that distinguishes it from the adult world: the previously discussed notion of a consequence-free zone for making decisions. This is what makes youth an experimental period of life, and what ultimately defines the world of youth. It is a claim that adults can no longer make, and can be expressed as *the right to make mistakes*. However implicitly, this right is present beneath the fervour and determination with which young people tend to make their decisions. The point is astutely made by Alberto Melucci in his *Challenging Codes*. "Youth culture", says Melucci, "demands that what should be relevant and meaningful is the here and now, and it claims for itself the right to provisionality, to the reversibility of choices, to the plurality and polycentrism of individual lives and collective values. For this reason it inevitably enters into conflict with the requirements of a system centred around the need for predictability, reduction of uncertainty, and standardization" (Melucci 1996:122).

ACCELERATED GENERATION FORMATION: FROM PERSONALISM TO MERITOCRACY

Let us now return, by way of a conclusion, to the issue of generation formation in a post-socialist environment. For it is through these internal controversies, across different branches and levels of youth subcultures, that

young people, at certain critical points, start to sort themselves out along a generational line, and the precocious among them begin to pressure others to participate in the world of adults. Or these others, of their own accord, start to recognize that they have less and less personal stake in the world of the youth. The stakes at the centre of subcultural clashes are less compelling to them, and other priorities take their place. They may experience a state of alienation, and start to dissociate from the young generation. This is of course an ideal-typical depiction of the transitional process, which is difficult to pinpoint, not only from a theoretical point of view but also for the social actors themselves. It is hard to say when this transition is complete. Some people seem to get stuck in this phase: an endless struggle for personal maturity. Yet, what is important for the individual's self-understanding is that scattered signs of one's leaving the life stage of youth are nevertheless perceptible, as personal dilemmas, to those who undergo such transition, and sometimes dramatically. It is the personal experience of such transition that nurtures in individuals the sense of a generational divide, and at such biographical points individuals tend to reflect upon their generational affiliations.

One condensed example of the process of generational differentiation was occasioned by the Slovak TV2 channel on June 2, 2004, in a program called *Under the Lamp*. In this discussion program, young people were invited to reflect upon their experience of the post-revolutionary times. All involved in the discussion looked youthful, although their ages ranged from 20 to 40. During the extended discussion, a significant division emerged between the older participants and their younger counterparts. Yet, age *per se* was not the most important determinant of their stances. What mattered most was the way they experienced, in personal terms, the events of the 1989 regime change and the ensuing political developments. In a face-to-face confrontation, and in a setting stimulating generational self-reflection, the participants illustrated a general trend in generation formation in post-revolutionary times, a trend that can be observed far beyond discussions of that kind.

The shift in cultural tastes was one of the points brought up during the discussion, as was the growing diversity of styles and subcultures. For the older participants, especially, this diversity contrasted with the situation before 1989, when there was a much higher degree of uniformity in both the official and the underground cultures. There were other more important differences, as well, between the generational cohorts.[9] The discussion

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[9] One of the older participants perceptively labeled these generational cohorts as an "ORF generation" of yesterday vs. an "MTV generation" of today, referring in the first case to the Austrian state TV as the paradigmatic, because almost exclusive (and quite unsatisfactory from today's perspective) window to the world young people once sought.

specifically focused on the role of young people in the 1989 revolution and on their abilities and opportunities to take advantage of the political changes they had helped to initiate and realize. The differing responses to this question highlight the difference between the two age-cohorts in a way that is highly relevant for my present argument, because they articulate two distinct generational sensitivities after the regime change of 1989. Two age-cohorts present themselves to us as differing in their perceptions of history, in the kinds of frustrations they experience, and in their understanding of and relation to authorities. For convenience's sake, let us call the older age-cohort the revolutionary generation and the younger one the post-revolutionary generation.

Generally speaking, the revolutionary generation harbours a continuing obsession with the successes and, even more so, the failures of the revolutionary project. This generation is simply attached to the revolution of 1989 in a much more intimate way than the younger one; indeed, it is defined by it. It is only they, for example, who *can* legitimately use the popular catchphrase "stolen revolution" to express their own generational experience, although many of them refuse to adopt such a pessimistic view. For them, personal and professional opportunities are more directly tied to the revolution, and lost opportunities are tied to the revolution's failures. For the post-revolutionary generation, opportunities are already present or absent in the system they live in, and they tend to take the system as a given. In dealing with members of older generations, the revolutionary generation tend to pay more attention to personal history than the post-revolutionary generation, who are more sensitive to present behaviour and performance instead.

These prototypical generational attitudes reflect changes in the general social milieu within which the two age-cohorts were socialized. The formative experience of 1989 made the older generation's characteristic sensitivity past-oriented, and their experience of socialization caused them to adopt a more personal attitude towards the adult world. Those who were already in their early twenties by 1989 had experienced a historically specific period of transition into the world of adults compared to those growing up in the 1990s. It was a part of the formers' general experience – as a reaction to the disciplining pressures and the complementary claim for respect within the "consequence-free zone" of experimental political transgressions – that the world of adults was largely perceived through the personal criteria of moral integrity. The institutional rules could not provide such a "zone"; however, individuals holding respected positions (in schools, workplace, local administration, *etc.*) could.

This environment generally accentuated the personal qualities of the inhabitants of the adult world for the youth, which had an important impact on the character of inter-generational relations formed in their

mutual interaction. The revolutionary encounters of late 1989 at schools, universities, or places of work then represented a condensed and intensified expression of this divide. While young people's negative perception of the world of adults may have been present in somewhat implicit terms before 1989, the revolutionary upheaval caused it to be articulated in its full strength. On a general level, the adult world was perceived (not only by young people) as morally corrupt, paralyzed by past compromises and animosities, and therefore functionally ineffective in bringing about the expected and hoped for social change. In practical politics of the revolutionary time, young people in schools and places of work may not have played a decisive role in bringing the local Communist power down. All the same, they were incited by the supportive climate to take part, and when they did they often adopted a moral-personal view of adults. One of the major tasks of the time was to sort those in higher positions who could still be trusted from those who were too much compromised by their active support of the oppressive regime. This attitude towards the adults combined *moralization*, as the young people disassociated themselves from the morally corrupt generation of their parents, and *personification*, as this generation still had a direct experience with people's behaviour in pre-1989 institutions.

For the revolutionary generation, personified moral principles thus represented a platform on which it constituted its relationship towards the world of adults – *i.e.*, towards the older generations – in a stronger sense than for the post-revolutionary generation. They could hardly base their claims for positions in the world of work and politics on meritocratic principles, since neither their education nor their political experience qualified them for it. They may have not known exactly what to do, but they did know things had to be done differently. Therefore, it was they who should be trusted to pursue a new political course sincerely. Sincerity and trust were their rebuttal to criticisms from the other side that they were too inexperienced. With this argument they could legitimize their claims for positions in political institutions, as understood in a broad sense: not only positions in state administration and political parties but also in university senates and other boards, in NGOs, *etc.* I say they *could*, since of course not every young person did so (though many actually took such positions immediately after 1989). Such an argument, drawing on the general revolutionary hopes invested in young generations, served as a cultural opportunity structure for them. They were enabled to use it as a powerful legitimization of their active involvement in revolutionary changes and post-revolutionary developments.

As the previously mentioned TV discussion showed (and there are many other examples of such self-reflection of the revolutionary generation), what worked for the revolutionary generation as a legitimizing tool in

relation to the older, "normalized" generation has proven to be a handicap in their relations with the younger, post-revolutionary generation. The fact that young people growing up during the 1990s, especially the late 1990s, have enjoyed what is in many ways a better education – including English, computer training, classes less sullied by ideology, new subjects and approaches, travel opportunities, *etc.* – has been particularly stressed by the generation of their immediate predecessors from the late 1980s. The older generations of adults, when asked about the youngsters, generally prefer to focus on their moral impoverishment and other such judgments: "we were not like them". The revolutionary generation distinguishes itself from the post-revolutionary one by instead stressing the advantageous situation of their successors, emphasizing that they have been socialized in a society more open than they themselves could have imagined at that age. It is also through such competing perceptions of their different socialization experiences that the revolutionary and post-revolutionary age cohorts distinguish themselves from each other and form distinct generations.

In differing conditions of growing up, the prevailing sense of authority is different as well. The previously discussed stereotyping of adults by the revolutionary generation did not amount to categorical alienation from them, at least at the early stage of adolescence. It rather led to an increased sensitivity to the personal qualities of specific adults. In this atmosphere, the prevailing stance towards adults was to distinguish the good ones from the bad ones on moral grounds. This attitude, again, found its tangible expression immediately after the regime change in 1989. Contemporary youth seem different. They individualize less in judging about the adult world, which is indicative of their less moralistic, more competitive relationship with the world of adults in general. They dream not about replacing the morally degenerate but about overtaking the professionally less competent. They see an advantage in sticking to meritocratic principles and clear rules of the game rather than invoking moral principles and issues of personal trust in an unsettled environment.[10]

It may be said that I have focused only on one segment of the young population, the better educated one, and that I have neglected working class youth in my argument. This is true, and should be noted. Yet, if we

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[10] Petr Macek, a Czech psychologist, has observed a complementary shift in trends of identity formation, comparing adolescents of the early 1990s and adolescents of the late 1990s. He stresses that the later adolescent cohort is not less normatively oriented than the former one in how young people perceive themselves. The point is, however, that the norm is not set by parents or authorities but by a more general idea of justice. Contemporary adolescents do not want to be like someone else, they would prefer to be excellent according to general criteria. Macek concludes: "The self-representations [according to parents and according to authorities] were [even] more important for the post-totalitarian generation than they were for contemporary adolescents" (Macek 2002:9).

speak about a generation in terms of the whole age-cohort, we can hardly avoid the question of who is culturally dominant within this age-cohort and thus in a position to define the generation in general, despite of the internal clashes or conflicts. On the one hand, we would find signs of similar generational distinctions among the working class youth as well, such as a somehow more creative adaptation to the uncertainties of the labour market (psychological coping with unemployment, willingness to travel for work abroad or change their qualification, *etc.*) by the 'younger youth' than by their older counterparts. Also, it has been generally observed in westernized societies for decades that the working class, while maintaining certain cultural tendencies of its own, tends nevertheless to adopt the strategies and perceptions articulated within the better educated classes. On the other hand, it would not be a great surprise if we realized that the sense of generational distinctions is after all less pronounced among the working class than among other strata of the same society. These remarks certainly are not intended to do away with the question of class differences within one age-cohort, but they at least partly justify the approach employed here.

There is still another important feature of the post-1989 generation formation to be found when we focus upon the better educated youth. The exponentially growing rate of university attendance in the past fifteen years has had a significant impact on how young people position themselves along generational lines. On the one side, the sense of superiority has weakened for students and fresh graduates. There are simply too many of them already, and so what may be a source of pride for their parents, relatives and older neighbours, often is not so for them, especially the more they sense that a better education will not automatically lead to a job, much less a better one. On the other hand, they feel increasingly more competent when comparing themselves to the older generation settled in the labour market. While for the older revolutionary generation moral integrity is a component of professional competence, for the younger, post-revolutionary generation professional competence is a component of morality.

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