



The Not-Yet-Developed World: Investigating the Parallels between Adolescence and Modernity

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This article takes a different and developmental slant, questioning the use of the word 'developed' applied to modern societies and suggesting that we are in fact in an unstable transitional phase on the way to greater maturity of outlook.

'This is no place to stop – halfway between ape and angel.' Benjamin Disraeli

OUR WORDS COME to shape our world. They become the filters through which we make sense of reality and interpret our experiences. Sometimes it is useful to question our linguistic conventions, for in so doing we may learn to see the world afresh, with a new and better filter. Here I set out to question the word 'developed' as it is applied to the group of nations that have developed a combination of free-market capitalism, liberal democracy, and secular philosophical/scientific enquiry. By attributing this label to certain nations, including our own, we implicitly suggest that for us development is *over* – for the word is in the *past* tense. Conversely we see the 'developing world' as composed of nations who are still developing towards our model of socio-political adulthood, with our beatific hand outstretched via way of NGOs, development agencies and aid, in the same way as a parent helps and guides a child to their fully developed stature. The argument I present is that the current socio-economic model of westernised nations is *not* a developmental endpoint, but rather is an *unstable transitional phase* through which we pass, not where we arrive. I argue that modernity has clear parallels with the phase of adolescence in the individual, and that the last few hundred years of 'modernity' can be construed as a kind of collective adolescence. To equate modernity with adolescence is not to belittle it, for adolescence is a period of extraordinary, albeit unstable, growth and discovery, where adult powers emerge in a blaze of confused glory. Psychologists studying adolescence have highlighted key characteristics of the adolescent period – it arrives with the onset of *autonomous reason* or 'formal operations', is characterised by a growing *self-determination*, a preoccupation with *in-group* peer identity, rapid *growth*, *experimentation* with roles and ideologies, and by an overbearing focus on *self* and appearance. Parallels of all these basic characteristics of adolescence can be found to be characteristic of the modern era in the Western world, and to these parallels I turn now to expose the fallacious notion that the West's development is over.

The Arrival of Reason

For the individual, adolescence heralds the arrival of abstract thinking and the ability to reason hypothetically about a problem before it presents itself. This is referred to by developmental psychologist Jean Piaget as the onset of the *formal operational period*.ⁱ Prior to this period, the child is limited to 'concrete operations', which are thoughts applicable to concrete objects but not abstract ideas. One of the most salient features of the onset of the formal operational period is the way in which a child becomes able to consider the realm of possibility – of what *could* be the case, of what *might* yet still come to pass, while before he is she was anchored to what is, or what is not. The cognitive grasp of possibility brings the ability to have hypotheses and hunches about what might come to pass. The child also develops the capacity to form theories:

'The adolescent is the individual who commits himself to possibilities – although we certainly do not mean to deny that his commitment begins in real-life situations. In other words, the adolescent is the individual who begins to build 'systems' or 'theories,' in the largest sense of the term.'ⁱⁱ

The development of theoretical ability, through which concepts can be fitted together into descriptive and explanatory schemes, distinguishes adolescent thought from childhood thought. The new psychological capacities of the teenager give her the tools for developing into a human being who can individually, without guidance, solve problems and develop their own worldview. Rather than simply accept parental ideas or societal roles without questioning them, the adolescent can, through the exercise of logic, reason, and self-awareness, work out a path for herself, and develop a philosophy of her own, away from the received concepts of her culture and family.

In the same way as adolescence is the dawn of the rational mind for the adolescent, modernity is considered to be the *advent of autonomous reason on a general collective level* in the Western world, catalysed by the philosophers of the Enlightenment such as Voltaire, Kant, Paine and Rousseau, and scientists such as Newton. Prior to this age, independent

thought and questioning of established doctrines had never been considered to be a *collective* good; it was the domain of the elite philosopher or scientist, not the layman, even in the golden age of Athens. Modernity and the Enlightenment brought with it the first rebellious call for *all* to doubt, for *all* to ask and answer their own questions, to develop their *own* theories. This was new, revolutionary, and subversive. In 1784 Immanuel Kant was asked to define what the Enlightenment was. His answer used an analogy with individual development. He suggests that what he saw happening around him was an emergence from a collective childhood. He said:

'Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another. This immaturity is self-incurred if its cause is not lack of understanding, but lack of resolution and courage to use it without the guidance of another. The motto of enlightenment is therefore: *Sapere Aude!* Have courage to use your own understanding!'ⁱⁱⁱ

Kant considered the philosophy of the Enlightenment as a strike towards a way of being that was free of dogma, of unquestioning orthodoxy and submission to authority. 'Dogmas and formulas,' he wrote 'are the ball and chain of permanent immaturity.'^{iv} Kant wrote further that the Enlightenment was *just the beginning* of social maturity and that an era in which all persons would and could reason effectively and autonomously would be a long way off. Therefore it is clear that while he saw the Enlightenment as a dawning of maturity, he did not see it as the stable form of maturity, but more as the first bold stride toward a form of collective being in which all people could think for themselves without fear of persecution.

Rebellion and the Search for Independence

Rebellion – the active repudiation of orders by those in authority – is a process that is an integral part of a healthy adolescence in order to separate from external control and develop a self-determined life direction and preferences. Similarly, on a socio-political level, the philosophers of modernity trumpeted the importance of non-conformism and of rebellion. J.S. Mill's seminal libertarian text *On Liberty* published in 1859 said: 'In this age, the mere example of non-conformity, the mere refusal to bend the knee to custom, is itself a service.'^v He accused those who merely accord unthinkingly with custom to be employing 'ape-like imitation' and said that human character can only manifest in making one's own reasoned choices, independent of social forces. Mill's argument for liberty is that society should allow individuals to go their own way, to rebel against convention and dogma, to explore their own truth, to experiment with alternative ways of being if the activity in question does not directly hurt or harm another. Such an approach is inherently insubordinate to those in authority. Other writers such as Elizabeth Chapman spoke of a 'general revolt against authority in all departments of life which is the note of an unsettled, transitional, above all democratic age.'^{vi} This was a dramatic moral shift from the religious philosophies prior to the Enlightenment such as Calvinism or Catholicism, which emphasised the importance of strict obedience to the authority of the Church as the basis for morality.

The modern era saw a severing of the bonds between religious orthodoxy and philosophy, allowing the rebellious messages of Kant, Paine, Mill and others to come to prominence without censure. The publication of *The Origin of Species* by Darwin in the same year as Mill's *On Liberty*, was

one of a variety of theories and discoveries that showed science to be a source of knowledge in which *all* could potentially participate, for Darwin was just a curious observer of the world, without ecclesiastical rank or university position. It showed that long-established doctrines were far from absolute. Pre-modern art was almost exclusively devoted to religious iconography, while modern art was freed to aesthetically explore whatever subject it liked. John Ruskin exemplified the new non-conformist, free spirit of art in the post-enlightenment world, saying that there are neither rules nor models for great art, and that artistic genius must 'shake itself free of what has come before'.^{vii}

The rebellious thrust of modernity had a further similarity to adolescence, for in both cases a *paternal* and *maternal* source of authority are rebelled against, and separated from. The paternal authority that is the focus of modernity's rebellion is embodied by theistic Judeo-Christian religion. Monotheistic religions of the West are patriarchal to the core. In these traditions, a male God, the 'Father', presides over an all-male church, with mostly male priests (also called 'Father') who are the Father's representatives on earth. The paternal control of the Church in the modern era was widely questioned and rebelled against in all areas of life as

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modernity progressed. Secularisation of state, science, art and philosophy was a necessary corollary of the search for independence away from the paternal hand of the Church.

The female face of authority against which modernity rebelled is Mother Nature. The realm of the biological and the earthly is traditionally conceived of in most cultures as female; as the feminine face of the Divine,^{viii} the nurturing mother from which food and shelter is received. Her power over human society is manifest in the innumerable ways that nature can cause enormous damage and destruction on the development of human civilisations, by way of natural disaster or disease. Modernity not only set out to liberate human collectives from the Father of patriarchal theocracy, but also to liberate society from the threats of Mother Nature through the development of medicine and of innumerable technologies to buffer human society against her forces. And in order to fully reverse the power dynamic with nature, modern societies systematically went about exerting their new-found power over Mother Nature, climaxing in the ultimate expression of power over the Female, in the achievement of splitting the atom, as described by Rollo May:

'And here the mother symbol enters; we speak of *mother* nature. It is not a far cry from experiencing the achievement of splitting the atom as gaining power over the 'eternal feminine.' The atom bomb sets us into conflict with the symbolic mother. This is why the construction of the bomb carries such a personal symbolic power for almost everyone.'^{ix}

In the same way as the adolescent separates from the mother, modernity has separated human societies from Mother Nature, by way of urbanisation, industrialisation and protective technology. We have in the Western world developed the now unquestioned assumption that human species is *not* part of nature, having laboriously separated ourselves from Her over the last three centuries. Thus 'nature' programmes include anything but us.

Experimentation and Revolution

Adolescents attempt to solve the problem of integrating their personal desires with the pressures of society by way of experiments. These involve trial-and-error strategies of trying on roles, in-groups, personas, ideologies, fashions and activities, in order to build a frame of identity reference. Psychologists refer to the non-committal period of identity experimentation as a *psychosocial moratorium*.^x

The modern era can be considered a similar moratorium of exploration and experiment on a collective level. Mill described modernity as a time for certain more developed societies to attempt alternative modes of being, to allow many different truths to compete in a liberal epistemology, and to actively promote eccentricity and non-normative behaviour:

'As it is useful that while mankind are imperfect there should be different opinions, so it is that there should be different experiments of living; that free scope should be given to varieties of character, short of injury to others.'^{xi}

He suggested this experimental age would not be permanent, but would last 'until mankind are much more capable than at present of recognising all sides of the truth.'^{xii} And how human beings have made use of their moratorium! In a few hundred years, the industrial revolution, political revolutions, seismic religious revolutions, scientific revolutions, technological revolutions; political experiments of every kind; religious experiments galore, ephemeral fashions and fads, leading to a cacophony of plurality.

Growth

Only by way of constant growth can the body keep up with the successive revolutions within and without during adolescence, as the adult form attempts to break out of the child's shell. Modernity has a not dissimilar preoccupation with growth, particularly in the economic realm, to the point where the importance of economic growth is an unquestioned assumption. Success and economic health of corporations and nations is indexed exclusively by parameters that assess growth. National economies *must* grow to demonstrate health, and publically limited corporations *must* grow incessantly to retain share price. At the same time, the human population has been growing at extraordinary rates. In the early seventeenth century there were just four million living in the UK. In the middle of the eighteenth century, there were less than one billion people on the planet, now there are over six billion. The obsession

with economic growth, and the exponential growth of the physical mass of humanity is a parallel with the growth spurts of adolescence and the groans of the biosphere under the strain attest to these growing pains. Yet in the words of environmentalist Edward Abbey, 'Growth for growth's sake is the ideology of the cancer cell', for to grow incessantly without stabilising, without concern for the host upon which you grow, is indeed the nature of cancer. Infinite growth on a finite system such as our World is not possible. Our economic parameters of success will *have to* change from growth-based ones, it is just a question of when, and the global population *has to* reach a stable level. Economists are encouragingly moving away from growth indices towards indicators that assess success otherwise, such as indexes of collective happiness, or quality of life indexes for nations. In the last election, when the Green party suggested a zero growth economy, they were given short shrift, but they were in fact just ahead of their time. But not by much. When we reach a post-growth age, this will be a sure sign that our collective adolescence is over.

In-group Bias and Nationalism

While busy separating themselves from authority, adolescents are busy building inclusion with their peers by way of involvement in peer groups, dyadic friendships and romantic relationships. This requires the adoption of the modal dress conventions, linguistic conventions and typical activities of the 'in-group' with which the adolescent seeks to be merged. Those not in the chosen peer group, members of 'out-groups', can be the focus of hostility, intolerance and prejudice. Such hostile intolerance is considered to be a divisive but necessary identity-building strategy for the adolescent, who is taking tentative steps to build a more socially embedded self.^{xiii}

This process of in-group bias and out-group hostility is also paralleled in the developed world, for with the Enlightenment and the birth of capitalism came the nation state. The geopolitical map before the modern era was a hodge-podge of city states, principalities, kingdoms and empires. The nation state as an idea was arguably the brainchild of Cardinal Richelieu in eighteenth century France, whose philosophy of *raison d'état* proposed that a state is obliged to do anything serve its own needs and to maintain its independence. France was threatening to be submerged under the Catholic Holy Roman Empire, and religious affiliations suggested that France, a Catholic country, should side with the Empire. Instead, Richelieu put his nation above his faith, and so went to war with the Empire. It was a manifesto of national self-determination that was arguably necessary, but certainly not sustainable. Nationalism has arguably led to social cohesion within nations, but it has simultaneously led to xenophobia and a lack of international co-operation, for nations, in order to feed the self-esteem of their inhabitants, espouse their superior qualities and disparage others as alien and inferior. Einstein called nationalism an infantile disease. It is in fact a macrocosmic parallel to the social identity process that the adolescent manifests so intensively. The nationalist mentality divisively separates the world into *us* and *them*, and while it may seem to our limited minds that the nation-state, with its monopoly on legitimised violence,^{xiv} is the natural way of organising social units, it may be just a passing phase. Ian J. Hackett, in his little book *The Spring of Civilisation*, suggests exactly that:

'Patriotism is no more than an immature emotive force, succeeding tribalism and imperialism in the evolution of our civilisation, a force which cannot feature in a

completely civilised world. Nations, like the city states and empires that preceded them, are not the end-product but only a passing phase in the development of world civilisation.^{xv}

The trans-national organisations that have existed since the Second World War to deal with issues that transcend national interest, such as the UN and the EU, and frameworks of international law, are evidence of the first steps towards a less adolescent basis for international relations, but their wishes often run contrary to individual nations, whose primary concern is still their own gain. This is highly reminiscent of the challenges for the individual in early adulthood; to retain one's hard-won adolescent freedoms while making concessions and buying into collective values to social aid integration and cohesion.

Progress or Regress?

The modern age, bringing with it extraordinary changes, upheavals and social experiments, has had its evangelical exponents and its trenchant critics. Freedom is the prize we have garnered from modern society – freedom of thought, freedom to travel the world, freedom of character, freedom to vote, freedom to marry who we will, freedom to get the job that we want. However in the words of psychologist Gail Sheehy, 'autonomy equals aloneness',^{xvi} and indeed while we are have been freed from the collective yoke to forge our own lives, we are at the same time cast adrift from a collective in order to work out the problems of existence for ourselves. The byword of modernity is 'independence', which is dialectically opposed to 'togetherness'; more of one means less of the other. Modernity has led to a progressive alienation of the individual. This sense of solitude and alienation has led to the habitual reliance on drugs, alcohol and media escapism to periodically release people from a sense of purposeless and solipsism. We have lost wisdom, if wisdom is defined as the philosopher Will Durant did, as seeing things in view of the whole.^{xvii} We see the world in pieces and competition – this worldview is reinforced through Darwin and Dawkins, through

market economics, and the language of rights divorced from responsibilities. It is understandable that critiques of modernity have emerged in response to this fragmenting vision, and these critiques have suggested regressive or progressive solutions to the psychological, political and ecological problems with the modern way of life.

The regressive solution is typified by fundamentalist religion – a twentieth century phenomenon that came about as a direct reaction to the problems of modernity^{xviii}. Fundamentalists perceive the liberal values and materialist emphasis of modernity to be malevolent and corrosive to the social fabric. They are critical of the attempt to consign religion to the periphery, and so withdraw from society into an enclave of pure faith. This reaction is a regression to a prior phase of religious certainty, of literality of scripture and unquestioning orthodoxy. Following the developmental analogy, fundamentalism is like a parent attempting to re-assert rigid parental control in the face of an experimental, confused adolescent. Rather than allow the child their experimentation and rebellion in order to emerge into equilibrated adulthood afterward, the parent attempts to regain control over the child's life, demanding continual obedience to authority.

The preferable parental response to an adolescent is a generosity to accept the mistakes that occur in the face of tumultuous change, in the knowledge that the transition will come to an end,^{xix} and a progressive way of being will be found. The same can be said when seeking a cure for modernity's ills – the regressive solution may be reasserting rigid control of individuals, but its oppressive and controlling nature will lead to frustration and misplaced anger amongst its converts. A progressive direction is more complicated as it is a *new* solution – a way beyond what has yet been achieved or thought up. A progressive solution would what is best in modernity, while remedying its shortcomings, rather than rejecting it in favour of a prior developmental phase.

The opportunity presents itself in this argument to infer what a progressive solution to modernity might look like, by exploring analogies with what comes after adolescence for the

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individual. A key characteristic of the post-adolescent adult is the demonstration of what is called *generativity*. Generativity is a lived concern with establishing a positive legacy for the next generation. On a collective level there has been a callous disregard for our legacy on future generations – our economic model is quite patently unsustainable for multiple generations or even for the whole world. There are growing calls from many corners of society – economics, business and management, agriculture, foreign and domestic policy – for a sustainable vision and a form of human development that can be sustained for generations to come, rather than one which is destined to fizzle out in an ever-increasing frenzy of growth and waste. Clive Hamilton, in his book ‘Growth Fetish’ reflects that the dawn of a post-growth society will perhaps be the time when we realise our human adulthood:

‘The transition to a post-growth society will be just as far-reaching as the transition from feudalism to industrial capitalism or from industrial capitalism to global consumer capitalism. It will fundamentally transform power relationships, social institutions, our relationships with others, our ethical rules, our attitudes to the natural environment and, ultimately, our consciousness.’^{xx}

Beyond adolescence, a young adult is more likely than the adolescent to develop a relationship with authority that is based on a healthy, open, respectful interaction. Equally for human society as a whole, our impending adulthood could see the development of a harmonious and mutually enhancing relationship with the paternal and maternal archetypes of the cosmos. The theology of Buber^{xxi} and the transpersonal theory of Ferrer^{xxii} point towards the *mutual* relationship of God and *homo sapiens*, by placing us as co-creators in the cosmic game, rather than passive recipients of Divine orders. Meanwhile, we have for the first time managed to separate from Mother Earth by way of space travel and manned space stations. In a recent documentary about the International Space Station, the Canadian astronaut Chris Hadfield gives a wonderful description of the permanent crew on the space station, that emphasises their new-found autonomy from Mother Earth:

‘What struck me most about the crew that’s living there was to see them view Earth as a separate place, Earth is something completely separate from *them*. Its an interesting step, I think, for humans to get to the point where you are now separated from your Mother and starting to view yourself as more of a single and separate entity.’^{xxiii}

It could be that the genuine separation from Mother Earth prompts the start of a relationship of mutual respect as opposed to an antagonistic one, much as the adolescent leaving home often prompts a more harmonious relationship with parents. Russell Schweickart, an astronaut, talked of realising a profound sense of interconnectedness in space. He realised when doing a space walk that he was merely a ‘sensing element for man’, and that he was ‘a piece of that total life’.^{xxiv} The experience of being in space, separate from Mother Earth, seems to give astronauts an insight into a new and wiser way of seeing. Perhaps they had a preview of what one day all people will consider common sense. Our children’s children may look back with a bemused amazement at the narcissism, change and confusion that ripped through the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and be thankful that it was just a passing phase, that *homo sapiens* was just growing up.

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