

*How to interpret  
the anger of teenagers*

The bored teenagers who hang around aimlessly at the street corners of dreary suburbs look dangerous; and if you are lost, they may not be the best people from whom to ask the way. They will not talk to you unless you make a real effort, and they have good reason to be suspicious — they are the children who have never won any prizes. For example, a criminal record is the only qualification that Emmanuel has acquired by the age of eighteen. His suspended prison sentence for burglary and car stealing hangs over him like a third-class diploma. The police have several times suspected him of other crimes, but have been unable to pin any more on him. Emmanuel left school at fifteen, on the ground that he was learning nothing useful: he told his parents that they could summon the police to take him to school every day, but otherwise he would not go. His parents, who are utopian, individualist middle-class people, acquiesced. Emmanuel has made a few attempts to work, but not for long. Since he has no skills, he cannot get any work that interests him. His parents are forced to support him, because he warns them that if they do not, he will resort to theft. He has spent the best part of three years wandering around the country, occasionally dabbling in drugs, trying to start rock music groups, but mainly just seeking out the company of others who share his attitude of rebellion. He seems, on first acquaintance, to be a perfect example of a boy who typifies the conflict of generations and the total rejection of the adult world by the young. But it is only to defend himself against strangers that he adopts his distant look, his curt speech, his provocative attire and the menacing suggestion that he is a dangerous and dim lout. When he wants

to, he can talk with a fluency, a lucidity, a sharpness that verge almost on poetry.

There is no rancour in his attitude to his parents. 'My father,' he says, 'is not made to be a father, he does not know what a father should do, which is why he gives me money, to assuage his conscience. I do not blame him.' There is no empty arrogance in his rebellion either: when his father reproaches him for his lack of ambition, for being 'a rat trying to profit from the society he rejects', for wanting money without working, he replies, yes, that's true; and he admits that he has not been able to put forward any real alternative to his father's values. So it is impossible to argue with him, because he does not claim to know better than his elders. He used to have fun with his parents until about the age of fourteen; he enjoyed participating in their adventures and demonstrations as ecologists, but he now thinks that was a superficial happiness, he was merely copying them. The great break came when they went together to protest against nuclear power at Malville: the police threw grenades at the crowd, causing much injury and even death; 'I do not blame my parents for not fighting the police (they are believers in non-violence) but I was disgusted that they simply watched from a distance, instead of going down and putting themselves face to face with the police. I never again believed in their principles, their ecology or their activism.' Emmanuel tells his parents that all their principles and values have got them nowhere, that they have never been able to change anything; they cannot provide a model. He regards his father as being a happy man, who has professionally speaking made a success of his life, but his father cannot give him what he needs most. 'I have never had the approbation of my father because I have always disappointed him. My teachers always said I had potential, unfulfilled potential.' His parents sometimes do praise him, but he cannot accept their praise as being objective. So his life has necessarily involved searching elsewhere.

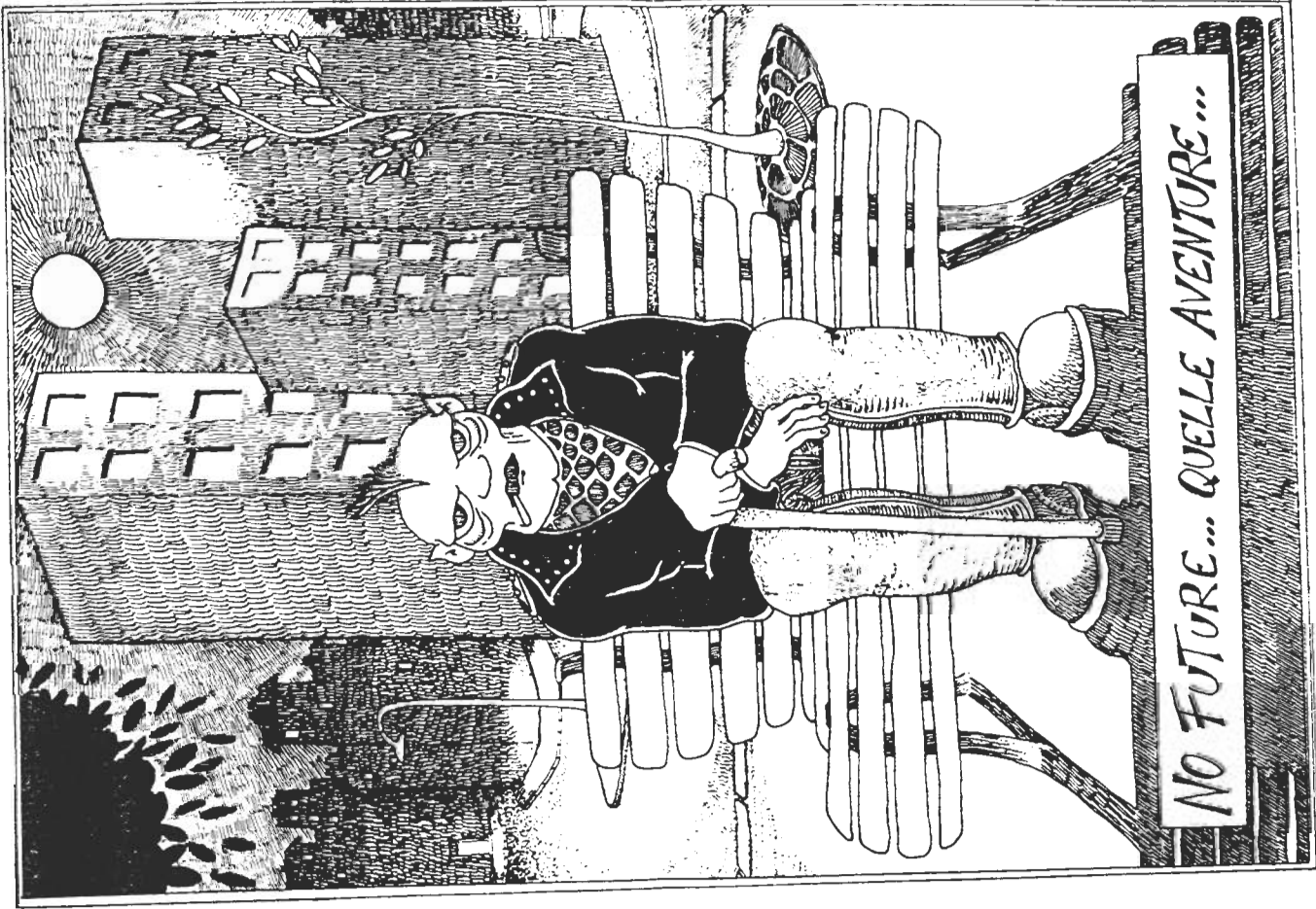
First he has tried to win approval that he can really believe in. 'I need others to prove that I exist, to enable me to be proud of myself; I need encouragement from others.' He once drew a series of comic strips 'which really came from the very depths of myself, they were a sort of song which I put in pictures, trying

to show the boredom of life; it had no words, no beginning and no end; it was sad, lugubrious; no one understood.' His father could not see what it was about. His mother said it was good, 'but that was not enough. I know it was good, that it was not empty. I was very disappointed. I feel alone in my ideas, in my way of seeing life.' Emmanuel has, therefore, secondly, devoted himself to finding soul mates. He deliberately sought out *voyous* (layabouts) in his travels, 'perhaps from romanticism', young people on the fringes of society (*marginaux*) who were trying to construct their lives independently and who were protesting in a different way from their parents. He became a punk. For a time he found in the nihilism and anger of punk music the expression of his own despair, 'I thought we would become a new class, I thought I had found brothers, because I need to feel I belong to a group or class. But I realized punk was not getting me anywhere. All my friends are still punks, but their heads are empty, they simply plug their emptiness with punk, it simply stops them thinking about themselves and their situation; they do not think. I imagined the punks were like me, but they were not. We pretended we were in the shit, but we were not. I was living like a poor boy, but I was really a petty bourgeois supported by my father. We smashed things up because the English punks did, but we were not English.' He enjoyed the fancy clothes, but that was not enough: he thought there was a philosophy behind them. The punks replaced the laws they detested by laws of their own which turned out to be even worse, 'fascist, useless, cheapening violence: that helped me live, but only for a time, not in the long run. I discovered I was still alone.' Punk music now annoys him, because it got him nowhere, and because he was disappointed to discover that he was 'just an imitation of the 1960 rockers, stupid and nasty'. He would very much have liked to have become a good musician, but he decided he did not have enough talent.

'I feel confused,' he keeps on saying. Nevertheless, he can fathom what he is seeking when he tries. Friendship matters a great deal to him. 'I feel happy when I have satisfying relationships with people: to be a friend means to exist for someone else, who exists for you, but going beyond mere mutual aid.' But that is not easy to find: he lives now with a pretty punk-looking

girl, formerly a member of the Communist Youth, who laments that he remains deeply pessimistic. However, he has yielded to his parents' pressure and started attending a course in drama. He quite likes it, but 'it does not come from the heart': he is not going to commit himself easily. Acting may prove a way of earning money without too much effort; perhaps, he adds, it may make him happy - which is why he is willing to try it. (He does want to be happy.) The fact that it is unlikely to offer a regular job does not worry him, because he claims he does not want security - he has always had that from his parents. Acting might be something he could do well, it might not be too boring: 'I feel I could do it', and he certainly has that combination of cocky good looks and sultry contempt that are so often popular. He drew a picture about modern youth at my request; it is the terrifying portrait of anger and despair on page 420. It was clear he could become an artist too, if he wanted. Provided he could find his self-esteem, rather than the esteem of his elders. His is not a story about rebellion, but about an independent effort to find his own individuality. Emmanuel is a true descendant of the several generations who have sought to make the individual think for himself. And the moral of his story is not in his view that his parents ought to have been more strict with him: if they had been, he says, he would have left them, and 'I would have become a real layabout.'

The conflict of generations may appear to represent the most dangerous and powerful form of modern anger, which has most chance of translating itself into change, since the young will sooner or later, inevitably, assume power. The conflict of generations is, however, largely a myth, and that helps to explain why change is so slow and superficial. Adults undoubtedly believe that there is a conflict of generations. They believe, for example, that most young people are left-wing, rebellious or revolutionary. That actually is false. A decade ago, only one-quarter of young people (aged sixteen to twenty-three) were unambiguously left-wing; today, the majority vote left-wing, but so do the majority of the middle aged. However, when asked what the political leanings of their own children are, parents answer either that they mainly have no political



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opinions, or that they share their parents' opinions. In talking about their own children, they are right. But youth in general is a bogey and they wrongly imagine that it is a threat to them, like some invading horde of barbarians. It seems to be so, because, following the baby boom after the war, youth appeared to be more numerous than ever; and indeed almost half of French people (45%) are now under twenty-five. Will that tilt the balance of power in their favour? But in the past, youth was even more numerous, because the old died off more quickly; in fact there is a smaller proportion of young people today than in the Old Regime. The young seem more numerous partly because the other change of the post-war era has been that they have been kept on at school; their segregation today contrasts with their former rapid absorption into jobs and factories in their early teens or even before; King Louis XIII was told that he was an adult when he celebrated his fifth birthday. The rebellion of youth, in so far as it exists, is directed as much against the school and the constraints imposed upon the young, as against the adult worker. All the more so since today children are being given far longer scholastic sentences than ever before: 80% are already attending kindergarten at the age of three, and 50% of boys and 58% of girls are still at school at eighteen; even after all that training they are not certain of a job, of being able to exist independently. They on the whole accept this because they are less iconoclastic, and more timid, more concerned with security, than their reputation suggests. They absorb more of their parents' values than the parents themselves realize. Only one-third of young people say that their parents live in a mental world so different that there is no point in having discussions with them. One-third sometimes think this, but rarely. The rest consider themselves to be on the same wavelength. It is the same with religious beliefs: 54% of children have the same degree of religiosity as their parents, 14% are more religious and 33% less. So more than half of young people are definitely not at loggerheads with their parents.

It is true that from time to time the young appear to rebel in ways that make adults feel completely alien and rejected. The classic way of doing this is to adopt clothing, hairstyles, slang and music that adults find abominable. It is a classic way,

because generation after generation has done it, only to forget just how outrageous they once were. *Ephater le bourgeois* (to shock the respectable) is an old French tradition. Before punk, successive generations have distinguished themselves with provocative names: the fashionable young were les Incroyables in the Revolution of 1789, Les Jeunes France under Louis XVIII, the Cocodès under Napoleon III, les Toufous, les Zutistes, les Hirsutes in the Third Republic, les Zazous under the occupation, then les J3 at the liberation, les YéYé in the early 1960s. The cancan, the polka, the waltz were all condemned as immoral by archbishops, only to be followed by the equally disgraceful shimmy, charleston, rock and roll, etc.; all appeared additionally disgusting because they were foreign importations. The revolt of 1968 may seem to be a much more serious attack on adult values. It certainly shook the country's complacency and did force a limited reformation of manners and ideals. But it was not a battle of the young against the old. The young were as divided as the old. Their crime, indeed, was that they momentarily tore off the veil of hypocrisy that enabled adult society to survive; they showed up its guilt, its contradictions and absurdities. But by stimulating the pruning of the old tree, they have enabled it to take on new life. After all this commotion, one-half of unmarried people aged over twenty-six still live with their parents. That does not prove that harmony exists between the generations, but shows that the choice between adventure and security is not a foregone conclusion for the young. The generations take increasing care not to offend each other. Half of young married adults say they abstain from discussing certain subjects with their parents. The subject on which they disagree most, of course, is how to bring up the children. Should adults teach the young what is right and what is wrong? Eighty percent of grandparents say yes; 55% of parents say yes. This does not represent a total breach between generations. The young rebels of 1968, who are now in their thirties and forties, have for the most part followed much the same path as their parents: they have got married, bought a house, and worry about making ends meet. Adults try to dress 'younger'; they pay lip service to the merits of youth. What has youth left to rebel against?

First of all, the difficulty of becoming an adult, of obtaining a job so that they can be like everybody else. They have not revolted against the idea of work: only 5% dislike the thought of working, as repeated polls continue to reveal. It is unemployment that frightens and angers them. Those who hold jobs justify their good fortune on the ground that they have qualifications and experience and refuse to share their privilege with the young, who cannot help having no experience. What is worse is that when the young do obtain qualifications, that does not guarantee them a job. There is now no qualification, even graduation from the top *grandes écoles*, that automatically opens the door to employment. University degrees, the *baccalauréat*, the certificates for skilled tradesmen, no longer count for much in themselves, since more and more people have them. A mechanical engineer graduating from the National Institute of Applied Sciences in Lyon, for example, has spent almost a year looking for a job, and he is becoming desperate, because he knows that his chances will diminish when the next year's lot of graduates comes on to the market. He is rejected because he has no experience, or because employers prefer someone with fewer pretensions from a less prestigious college (like a technical university, IUT), or else for no obvious reason at all: much more humiliating than a simple rejection by return of post is an interview followed by a slip of paper giving no indication of why he failed to please. The young are caught in a vicious circle. Since there are no jobs, they go on studying to make themselves more qualified, but there are even fewer of the specialist jobs they prepare themselves for. As they receive more education, the number of labouring jobs increases; the demand for unskilled workers has increased by between 7 and 10% since 1965, and is expected to increase by 1% per annum for the next decade. The result is that the proportion of young people under twenty who get jobs as unskilled workers has risen from 22% to 35%.

The young see themselves as the most underprivileged in the matter of security. Those in employment are divided into two categories, those who are privileged to have jobs from which they cannot be sacked, most notably civil servants, and those who are at the mercy of their boss. The young are not sacked

quite as often as immigrants, but they do change jobs frequently, partly because they too are paid low wages; they are on the look out for more money, and for more congenial work; they resign more easily, unthinkingly, though they are doing this less now. Since they have to go off for their military service at eighteen, employers do not want to commit themselves to them, and the young often do not see much point in trying to get a permanent job until they have fulfilled that obligation. Unemployment is looked on in much the same way as military service: it is a *corvée*, a compulsory inconvenience that they have to undergo. All this is less intolerable than it might be because the young and employers have made the best of it. Employers, anxious to escape the controls imposed on them by legislation and trade unions, have increasingly made use of temporary labour, which can be sacked without compensation, and which suits small businesses paying low wages and having a seasonal demand. Over 3000 agencies providing temporary workers have mushroomed in the last few years, and France now stands second only to the United States in its use of this kind of labour. A small town like Valenciennes, with a population of 43,000, has seventy such agencies. Temporary workers are of course often exploited both by agencies and employers; they cannot strike, they are the first to be sacked in a crisis; they cannot think about marrying and getting a mortgage. But the young accept that status when they see work as filling in gaps between the accomplishment of other ambitions, like foreign travel or study, or when they are keen to avoid committing themselves to a particular trade. Temporary work also fits in well with the rapidly expanding Black Economy. Unemployment is less of a threat when one has learnt how to find jobs on the side, which attract no tax, and which give one more scope for using one's initiative and individual skills. That is the kind of job many would like to go on doing.

The anger of the young manifests itself less against unemployment as a general phenomenon, which is often accepted fatalistically as being a world-wide curse, than against the individual employer who discriminates against them by not giving them a chance, by offering them lower wages, by picking on them when he cuts his labour force — even though they do

their job as well as older people — by treating them like dirt: 'If you are not satisfied, there's the door.' What they want is more respect. Each has his tale of humiliations and frustrations. Even when they reduce their pretensions and agree to be domestic servants, they find five others applying for the same job. This increasing willingness to limit their ambitions shows that even their pride is eroded. Girls dreaming of being models, air hostesses and ethnologists, end up glad to be taken on as clerks, second-class, in the civil service; after a year on a course in pottery or hand-weaving, they resignedly end up working for a bank. The social prestige of jobs counts far less now; prospects of promotion interest only 5% of girls and 10% of boys. What they have turned their hopes to is to leading a better life, despite their job, and if they are lucky enough to be able to choose between jobs, they prefer the one that has the most satisfying social atmosphere.

This has been taken as yet another sign of fundamental youthful rebellion. To be unconcerned by hierarchy and prestige, to lose interest in the problems of the class struggle, in the distribution of wealth and power, and in politics as a whole, implies a greater rejection of adult values than to be left-wing:



Grandville

School

at least those students who are left-wing are willing to play the adults at their own game. Now the young are more concerned by the quality of their lives, that is to say with improving their personal relations, their friendships, marriages, their enjoyment of nature, their serenity. Their goals are more cultural, in the widest sense, than economic or political; they are more individualist, and therefore it is less easy to negotiate with them collectively or even, as some put it, 'rationally'. What they want cannot readily be provided for by state planning. Fewer of them are willing to compete in the rat race. The most dangerous rejection of all seems to be their disillusionment with schooling. Youth, says the sociologist Rouselet, is *malade du savoir*, tired of learning, because the learning that the schools attempt to pass on to them very often does not help them to get on in life, to find a job, to solve the problems they care about; half of children say that the schools' vocational guidance fails to satisfy their tastes. The end result of all the money spent on education is that over half the population is officially condemned as being inadequately educated, for having failed examinations or not even getting a chance to take them.

But to be bored by politics and education is not so revolutionary. Politics was never something that preoccupied the masses, except in occasional periods of crisis; it was most of the time the business of a ruling class. Education likewise was thrust on the masses, made compulsory against considerable resistance, and always seemed to promise more benefits than it delivered. What is new is that scepticism is now more open. Politics, participation and mass education were the new social medicines introduced by the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Now that the twentieth century is drawing to its close, they have ceased to be modern medicines, and are being accused of being old wives' tales. People have always been ambivalent towards these cure-alls; today they are less hypocritical.

The quality of life is the slogan of the new generation, but it is far from being a monopoly of the young. It indicates more self-consciousness in the search for happiness, but many young people end up following conformist paths; they momentarily have more choices open to them, but in practice they overwhelmingly reject experimental forms of living for themselves.

The more genuine innovators are the adults who throw up their well-paid careers to seek a more satisfying life in humble but freer avenues. Youth has become the symbol of rebellion, even though it is not all that rebellious. Angry young men end up swallowing their anger, even forgetting it. Youth, in fact, is a state of mind, which all young people do not necessarily have.

That is why there are pop singers, whose task it is to express anger that most of the young cannot do much about, or feel only from time to time; they serve as incomprehensible devils for adults to hate. The majority of French singers, of course, are mild, traditional in their music and their lyrics, and no threat to anyone. But even those who are seen as dangerous and violent are not revolutionaries. Bernard Lavilliers, for example, likes provoking and challenging. He is the son of a factory worker and he started as one also. He grew up, as he says, in the ghetto of St Etienne. He became a gang leader, a *blousson noir*, forming an army of 300 or 400 youths, who entertained themselves going to fight the gangs of Lyon. He learnt to hate the police. He enjoyed provoking them with his uniform of a black leather jacket, which was enough for them to stop and question him, just as today he provokes the bourgeoisie by wearing an earring and weird clothes. 'I detest them and they can feel it.' He tries to express his hate of the country's political institutions and morality in his songs, as well as in his refusal to fight against them, because he despises the Left also. 'Since my adolescence I have fought against the old world. Today, I am trying to think up something different. I am fed up with repeating that the old leftist systems are totally derisory, that politicians are sick and infectious as soon as they get power. This is all so obvious that I want to speak another language, try out new experiences. When he gave a concert in Toulouse, ten thousand came to hear him, while only two thousand went to listen to Mitterrand, who was holding a public meeting at the same time. 'We both have the same trade,' but 'the old stories the politicians tell interest nobody.' Lavilliers' concerts attracted the young because they were celebrations, 'a fête', an expression of sensuality, fellow feeling: 'the more humble people are, the higher is their sensitivity at the level of vibrations: in the middle classes music becomes intellectual . . . In the ghetto it is *feeling*' (he uses the

English word). His music enables people to 'vibrate', to have 'epidemics, sensual, sexual communication'. The words of his songs convey the misery of life and its violence. But though he needs to express his own violence, he does so only through song, and through his hobby of physical training. His new world moreover is one in which love takes on new meaning: he is fascinated by the women's movement and believes that new relationships with women hold the key to a better future. He lives with a liberated woman, whose hobby is weightlifting. They see themselves as being made dangerous by their physical strength. He likes the idea of being both 'cool' and dangerous, like an animal; he likes relations that are sometimes friendly, but also suddenly violent. Security bores him. That is what he means by saying that he is still a *voyou* at thirty-three. But a layabout who sings, takes exercise and drives a Pontiac has found a way of life.