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## Adolescent Fulfilment and Industrialism

### An Instrumental View of the Adolescent

*On leaving childhood a person is increasingly made aware of his or her role in organized society, not as a person but as a function or as one of its instruments. The period of adolescence, or non-adulthood, is largely defined both as to duration and style by a society's current mechanisms of economics and status allocation, which are never wholly under anyone's control. Grinder reviews the changes over time in work ideology and in the kind of self-concept consequently imposed on those emerging from childhood in North America, deploying the resources of sociology, history, and economics to describe developments from a state of servility through one of exploration to what he calls the "resentful benevolence" of the present. He is able in this way to place in perspective the contemporary expectation on the part of young adults that their roles in society should afford them personal fulfilment, in careers that sound more like leisure than work.*

Every age and society has provided for adolescence — a stage of transition between childhood and adulthood.<sup>1</sup> Its meaning and place in the social order, however, has varied as a function of societal needs and expectations. The workplace in medieval times led the populace to accept young people as adults at puberty, and it gave scant recognition to adolescence as a definitive period in the lifespan. The farmers, artisans, and skilled craftsmen of Colonial America, on the other hand, in seeking labourers to help work the land, indentured servants to do household chores, and apprentices in manufacturing, clearly recognized adolescence as a time of transition. The tempo of industrial progress since then, involving especially the development of a work ideology dominated by images of individual resourcefulness and achievement, mastery over nature, and unlimited social mobility, has heightened fascination in how much youth might accomplish and fulfil during the transition. A panel of mental health experts proposed recently, for example, that adolescence be defined as a "social opportunity" — a time of psychological growth for developing commitments to self, others, and community, and for living zestfully and purposefully.<sup>2</sup>

Adolescent selfhood is indeed an outgrowth of reflexive self-awareness, a uniquely human product of evolution. During adolescence the capacity arises for achieving high levels of personal consciousness. Adolescents, in contrast to children, possess the cognitive resources to attain a principled outlook, to understand justice and equality, and to respect the dignity of others. Adolescence thus is perhaps the most consequential period in the lifespan for attaining the attributes that underlie future personal and social fulfilment. But character emerges from social experience. Whether adolescents, both individually and collectively, have a chance to develop themselves fully and to consider which aspects of society should be reaffirmed and which should be challenged, depends upon the social opportunities their elders present to them. Every age derives a response to adolescents on the basis of their instrumental value to society. Because the political and economic forces underlying industrial progress have engendered it, an anticipation of attainment and opportunity has emerged to characterize contemporary adolescence. As shown in the review below, the rise of this fulfilment ethic clearly coincides with technological advance. The discussion indicates, too, that current economic forces may be conspiring to alter its characteristics.

### **Adolescent fulfilment in the rise of the industrial economy**

The industrial economy rests on the assumption that work is one of the central interests in life. Our forebears evolved a society in which a positive orientation toward work became a major expectation of the adolescent transition to adulthood. But for a very visible proportion of youth — especially the low income, ethnic minority, and unschooled — work has been physical, tedious, mindless, boring, and dead-end. The uninspiring features of the work accessible to adolescents are apparent in the roles that they have fulfilled in the work force. These roles may be divided chronologically into roughly the three following periods —

*Servitude* illustrates a time when youth labour was subsidiary to adult labour. Young people worked as low-paid servants, helpers, or apprentices to older, experienced workers. Work was labour-intensive, and employment in farming, manufacturing, and marketing was readily available. The period extends from the arrival of the Pilgrims on the Mayflower to about 1818, when the Governor of Rhode Island issued the first recorded opposition to forced child labour:

It is a lamentable truth that too many of the living generation, who are obliged to labor in these works of almost unceasing application and industry, are growing up without an opportunity of obtaining that education which is necessary for their personal welfare as well as for the welfare for the whole community.<sup>3</sup>

*Exploitation* signifies a long period of heavy industrial expansion that voraciously consumed child labour from the 1800s to the 1930s. Young people were differentiated from adults on the basis of their contribution to production, and generally they were paid unconscionably low wages.

*Resentful Benevolence* arose in the 1930s when the Great Depression threw millions of workers into the streets. Youth became the target of unprecedented resentment as it competed with adults for scarce jobs. The resentment literally has become institutionalized as government work priorities have been higher for heads of households than for youth, employers traditionally have favoured adults over youth even for unskilled jobs, and the private sector has long avoided responsibility for providing and subsidizing entry-level career opportunities. Societal benevolence has issued from a series of governmental Acts, which were initiated on youth's behalf to counter the pervasive resentment, to increase the availability of jobs, and to enhance the significance of work. Each of the programs in the United States since the 1930s, for example, has constituted primarily an economic stimulus package; each has stressed subsidizing jobs for youth that will produce income flow, but each has also acknowledged the importance of socializing adolescence for adult responsibilities. Still, as one manpower official said in the 1960s, "Put a few bucks in a guy's pocket and a lot of these psychological and social problems disappear."<sup>4</sup>

A distinct work ideology may be distinguished for each of the three periods. Religious dogma dominated work ideology during the period of *Servitude*, when youth were subsidiary to adults. Youth policies were deduced largely from religious premises. Secular dogma prevailed during the period of *Exploitation*. Policies were based on laissez-faire economic practices. An amalgam of the two earlier periods provides the work ideology for the period of *Resentful Benevolence*. For over a half century it has reflected the pious worship of work characteristic of colonial times and the idolization of industriousness characteristic of the nineteenth century. It seemingly is a product of folklore, an expression of the Horatio Alger dream.

### **Work ideology during the period of servitude**

A religiously-inspired distaste for idleness coincided in colonial times with a high rate of infant mortality and an absence of welfare programs to produce a work ideology associated with servitude. First, Puritan virtue made the employment of children and youth a righteous undertaking. The colonists vigorously insisted on industry as a matter of conscience. Religious orthodoxy recognized an irrevocable conflict between a desire to obey church dicta and a desire to enjoy worldly pleasures. Since innate sinfulness surely would lead to indulgence and depravity unless obedience were developed, steps were taken to ensure that work prevented idleness and inculcated discipline. Second, about one-half of the children died before they reached age 20, and parents had to struggle to bear enough offspring to ensure that heirs would be on hand to care for them when they became too old to work.<sup>5</sup> During the early years of marriage, therefore, a family would hire adolescents as servants. But as soon as children were physically able, they were put to work, and their labour was substituted for that of the servants until they, too, became surplus. Younger children forced out the older, who then became servants in households, helpers and apprentices, or perhaps

boarding students. Third, welfare programs were limited in colonial times, and income produced by adolescent servitude helped in many instances to keep a family off public relief. The city of Boston thus notified parents in 1672 to “dispose of their several children . . . for servants, to serve by Indentures according to their ages and capacities;” and should parents fail to obey, “the selectmen will take their said children from them and place them with such masters as they shalt provide accordinge as the law directs.”<sup>6</sup>

### **During the period of exploitation**

The colonial policy of promoting self-discipline was skilfully manipulated by early entrepreneurs who saw in youth labour a useful complement of economic expansion. The introduction of machinery opened up new possibilities for manufacturing, and the unskilled labour of children and adolescents became an increasingly profitable component of business. Since most girls were “too young or too delicate for agriculture,” industrialists saw the rise of manufacturing as an opportunity for their employment between the ages of 10 and 16.<sup>7</sup> A petition on behalf of an early cotton factory stated that “it will afford employment to a great number of women and children, many of whom will be otherwise useless, if not burdensome to society.”<sup>8</sup> As the industrial era swept across the United States, for example, appetite for adolescent labour grew rapaciously. It began in the factories, canneries, and mills of New England, spread to the mines of New York, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia, and by the late Nineteenth Century had stretched to the cotton mills of the South. About half of the workforce in the mills and factories around 1870 was comprised of young men and women between the ages of 16 and 20; at the beginning of the Twentieth Century approximately 20,000 children under the age of twelve worked twelve to fourteen hours per day in the southern cotton factories.<sup>9</sup> As modern cities became centres of trade, transportation, and communication, young people became the mainstay of the street trades — messenger and delivery services, newspaper peddling, and boot-blackening. Others worked in tenement sweatshops, cutting cloth, sewing leather, or bunching flowers.

Adolescents who could afford a prolonged education were able to qualify for more desirable jobs. But working-class youth were impeded in reaching for career mobility. The only jobs available to them required little or no preliminary preparation. The mechanization of industry had demolished the need for apprentices, and employers derived few economic benefits from investing money and time in training youth.<sup>10</sup> Young people who once might have worked as low-paid assistants to master craftsmen became simply machine tenderers and unskilled labourers. The jobs youth performed were indispensable, yet they were so simple that employers paid them at sub-adult wages. And when the youth grew older and looked for higher wages, they were cast aside because they were unprepared for the more highly skilled work. The demise of apprenticeships also kept working-class young people at home consuming family resources, and

parents thus required them to contribute their weekly wages for family support. Working-class families seldom were able to withstand the loss of youth's wages while they attended school, which put prolonged education and opportunity for attractive jobs beyond their reach.<sup>11</sup>

When working-class adolescents became wage earners, with a market value of their own, the commercial opportunities to take advantage of them led to wholesale exploitation.<sup>12</sup> Conditions of work were unregulated, and youth frequently were subjected to fatiguing toil, unsanitary working conditions, and brutal taskmasters. A glass blower, for example, would be assisted by two or three boys, perhaps fourteen years of age. As the blower poured liquid glass into the moulds, one boy closed them, a second picked out the bottles, placed them on a long stick in front of a small furnace where their necks were finished, and the third boy carried the bottles to the cooling furnaces.<sup>13</sup> The glass blowers were absolutely dependent on their helpers, and they might work in a poorly ventilated, hot, stifling atmosphere fourteen hours per day, from 6 a.m. to 8 p.m., with breaks of fifteen minutes for lunch and twenty minutes for supper.

Efforts in the United States to enact legislation, both to reduce the hours young people might work and to restrict their employment in the street trades and dangerous occupations, attained coordination with the founding in 1904 of the National Child Labor Committee. Several state laws were passed, and even Congress tried in 1922 to regulate child labour, but the Supreme Court claimed that it did not possess the authority. Congress subsequently passed the 20th Amendment to the Constitution in 1924, whereby it proposed to give itself the power "to limit, regulate, and prohibit the labour of persons under eighteen years of age."<sup>14</sup> Opposition to the Amendment rose swiftly. Opponents asserted that it was a radical, communist-inspired plot to subvert the institution of the American family. It would, they said, undermine states' rights, signal an ominous increase in federal power, and give the Federal Government the right to prohibit the work of children at home and on the family farm. As one state legislator, the father of five, put it, "They have taken our women away from us by constitutional amendment; they have taken our liquor away from us; now they want to take our children."<sup>15</sup> The National Association of Manufacturers argued that it "takes entirely from the parents the right to have their children, sons or daughters, do any work of any kind, so long as they are under 18 years of age . . . under that bill the mother would have no right to teach her daughter to do any housework whatsoever, whether it be the sweeping of floors or the washing of dishes."<sup>16</sup>

The spurious arguments were not attacked as vigorously as they might have been because need for the Amendment seemed less imperative in the 1920s. More efficient patterns of production, labour-saving machinery, improved industrial techniques, and greatly increased output per working-hour diminished the dependence of industry on inefficient, unskilled labour, and adolescent workers became increasingly unattractive to employers.<sup>17</sup> But in the depths of the Great Depression of the 1930s, pressure to hold costs down led

some employers to hire young boys and girls who would work for lower wages and longer hours than experienced adults, and once again, the employment of youth under unregulated, dangerous sweatshop conditions became widespread. Partly to impede child labour and partly to protect adult workers from the competition of juvenile workers, Congress in 1938 passed the Fair Labor Standards Act, which banned young people under 16 years of age from employment during school hours in industries producing goods for interstate commerce.<sup>18</sup> On February 3rd, 1941, the Supreme Court unanimously upheld the legality of the Act. The constitutionality of a national youth employment policy had been established, and the curtain fell on the 20th Amendment, a prolonged era of youth employment exploitation, and a work ideology based largely on laissez-faire economic policy.

### **During the period of resentful benevolence**

The deepening Depression brought the older and younger generations into conflict over scarce jobs. Adults resented the competition, and adolescents found themselves squeezed out of even menial, poorly-paid jobs. Youth became the discarded generation when millions of experienced, jobless adults pressed for work. The economic distress was so great that starvation occurred in many places, and neither city, county, nor state governments could cope with it. Hence, at the depth of the Depression in the early 1930s, the U.S. Government entered the field of public welfare. The early youth employment programs were essentially an expression of social benevolence, born out of grave concern for national welfare. Discussion centered, on the one hand, on questions of emergency relief, and on the other, on equality of education and economic opportunity — issues of social reconstruction that presumably would lead youth to develop a positive orientation toward work. The two objectives were complementary in respect to national priorities, but, in the short-run allocation of resources, they were structurally incompatible. To address emergency relief meant selecting training projects and allocating resources to those adolescents most severely in need of income. To focus upon equality of education and economic opportunity meant designing programs to support young people until they achieved personally satisfying employment.

Limited resources would have to be used to offset the factors that prevent persons remedying situations by their own efforts — bad health, insufficient education, and lack of technical and vocational preparation. Consequently, to funnel finite appropriations directly to youth for economic recovery choked off funds for ancillary services; to support the services diverted the flow of dollars from the pockets of destitute youth. The conflict was resolved in favour of economic recovery, on the assumption that by supplying income to youth through work, their health and morale would be strengthened and, in turn, they would make an effort to make the most of themselves in industry and society.

World War II led to a temporary respite in youth unemployment. The military services drew millions of young people out of the labour market. But the

1950s and the early 1960s saw the emergence of new problems. Work opportunities in the service industries (trade, transportation, finance, government) expanded rapidly, whereas those in goods-producing industries (agriculture, manufacturing, mining, and construction) declined; but the new jobs required higher levels of education and training. The post-war baby boom created a tremendous increase in the number of youth competing for jobs, and minority youth — who had been given only marginal consideration in the policies of the 1930s — were beginning to seek equal access to the declining youth job market. Finally, a growing concentration of unemployed, unskilled youth in inner city areas was creating a climate in which delinquency and crime were accelerating.<sup>19</sup>

The major programs of the 1960s were conceptualized as action programs aimed at problems of unemployment, education, community services, and rehabilitation, but political pressures to increase income flow and to reduce delinquency dominated policy implementation. Training programs often emphasized short-range work skills at the expense of personality development. Occasionally, skills developed in training had little relevance to the actual job market and, in some instances, the marketability of certain skills was overestimated, thus contributing inadvertently to a saturation of job candidates in some areas.

### **A new expression of the fulfilment ethic**

Youth employment policies have traditionally been implemented on the assumption that by appropriate training, youth will become rugged competitors in the marketplace, contribute to the gross national product, and conform to the ideals of democratic capitalism. But the economic world that gave birth to rugged individualism has changed; the pathways to personal satisfaction once obtained through self-sacrifice and work have been obliterated by the growth of industrial empires and technological refinements. Achievement of economic goals, as a consequence, grows ever less dependent on human labour. The impact of these changes appears to be affecting the attitudes that contemporary youth are acquiring toward work. The 1960s Project Talent Survey of the interests of more than 400,000 students and its 1970 follow-up, for example, drawn from a random sample of all secondary schools in the United States, revealed that the most important factor influencing adolescent choice was “work which seems important to me.”<sup>20</sup> These findings are corroborated by responses made to questions about job meaningfulness asked of members of a national sample of the high school class of 1972, where young people insisted that they wanted jobs that contribute to others or to society, are challenging, and offer the opportunity to learn and grow.<sup>21</sup> Torsten Husen, Director of the Institute for the Study of International Problems in Education at the University of Stockholm, has observed that young people are refusing to be trained solely as a function of employers’ needs; they are rejecting the notion of a successful career as a continuous climb from one point of selection to another, where the able and ambitious succeed

and the others fail, and they are attaching more importance "to personal fulfillment, security, and a chance to devote time to rewarding leisure activities." He says, too, that this shift in work ideology is occurring among both the privileged, articulate classes, and the poor, less-educated groups of society.<sup>22</sup>

Although the search for meaningfulness in work now appears to be legitimated, a great deal of work will, in fact, never be very meaningful, and adolescents moving into the 1980s know it. Production technology in the advanced industrialized countries has so reduced the need for skilled craftsmen that the bulk of work has become highly mechanized and routinized, requiring low skills and limited judgment. Most organizations, therefore, will continue to be moderately routine in terms of the tasks of the salaried and hourly workforce.<sup>23</sup> The importance of work *per se* to many young workers growing up today has been so forcefully diminished that they are joining TGIF ("Thank God it's Friday") clubs in droves. The 1960s catch phrase of "do your own thing" may be transformed in the 1980s to "doing it as a leisure activity" in sports, arts, and hobbies. Leisure is no longer simply a recreational by-product of hard work. Concepts like killing time and loafing are inapplicable for persons who, when asked "What do you do?" are most likely to say that they are water skiers, hikers, hang-glide pilots, beer-can collectors, model train enthusiasts, and so forth.

The new leisure ethic opposes perfectly the work ideologies of servitude and exploitation. It is a new expression of the fulfilment ethic. The TGIF syndrome is forging among youth new forms of lifestyle, made possible by industrial forces that have created a labour-extensive society. Drudgery has always been an inherent feature of work, but today it is less a matter to be overcome than to be subordinated to the pleasures, status, and sense of worth one obtains in leisure activities.

Work ideology thus appears to be shifting dramatically to a wholly new perspective, and youth's orientation to life is shifting with it, as a massive satellite follows its source of gravity.



## NOTES AND REFERENCES

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