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The Generation Gap

The young people who are rebelling all around the world, rebelling against whatever form the governmental and educational systems take, are like the first generation born in a new country listening to their parents' tales of the old country and watching their parents grapple, often clumsily, often unsuccessfully, with the new conditions. They have no firsthand knowledge of the way their parents lived far across the seas, of how differently wood responded to tools, or land to the hoe. They see the tasks which their unaccustomed elders are performing as poorly done; they feel that there must be a better way, and that they must find it.

For now, nowhere in the whole world are there any elders who know what the children know, no matter how remote and simple the societies in which the children live. In the past there were always some elders who knew more—in terms of experience, of having grown up within a system—than any children. Today there are none. It is not only that parents are no longer a guide, but that there are no guides, in the older sense of the term, whether one seeks them in one's own country, or in China, or in India. There are no elders who know what those who have been reared in the last 20 years know about what the next 20 years will be.

All of us who grew up before the war are immigrants in time, immigrants from an earlier world, living in an age essentially different from anything we knew before. We still hold the seats of power and command the resources and the skills which have been used in the past to keep order and organize large societies. We control the educational systems, the apprenticeship systems, the career ladders up which the young are required to climb, step by step.

The elders are separated from the young by the fact that they too are a strangely isolated generation. No generation has ever known, experienced, and incorporated such rapid changes, watched the sources of power, the means of communication, the definition of humanity, the limits of their explorable universe, the certainties of a known and limited world, the fundamental imperatives of life and death—all change before their eyes. They know more about change than any generation has ever known and so stand, over, against, and vastly alienated from the young, who, by the very nature of their position, have had to reject their elders' past. Just as the early Americans had to teach themselves not to daydream of the past but to concentrate on the present, and so in turn taught their children not to daydream but to act, so today's elders have treated their own pasts as incommunicable, and teach their children, even in the midst of lamenting that it is so, not to ask, because they can never understand. We have to realize that no other generation will ever experience what we have experienced. In this sense we have no descendants. At this breaking point between two radically different and closely related groups, both are inevitably very lonely, as we face each other knowing that they will never experience what we have experienced and that we can never experience what they have experienced.

As long as any adult thinks that he, like the parents and teachers of old, can become introspective, invoke his own youth to understand the youth before him, he is lost. But once the fact of a deep, new, unprecedented, worldwide generation gap is firmly established, in the minds of both the young and the old, communication can be established again.

—MARGARET MEAD

Adapted from lecture III, "Culture and Commitment," of the American Museum of Natural History's "Man and Nature Lectures, Series V."