Letters

Youthful Activism: Who Is to be Faulted?

When two giants of anthropology Margaret Mead (11 Apr., p. 135) and Loren Eiseley (11 July, p. 129)] take such widely different views of the youth rebellion the rest of us should take careful note. What does it mean? I would hope it means we have reached bottom, where the only way to go is up.

Mead seems to identify herself with the nihilistic rejection of history, so strongly deplored by Eiseley. At least she says some odd things about us elders being naive and youth having a wisdom beyond our understanding; that youth can foresee a future which their parents cannot; that our past is incommunicable to our children; and that, in effect, we have no descendants.

Then Loren Eiseley reestablishes the solid ladder of history Man has been ascending for eons. I think most of us breathed a sigh of relief and satisfaction. Eiseley sees the rejection of history as destroying the values and tools enabling Man to be a "planning animal." The gulf between Mead and Eiseley makes the "generation gap" seem trivial.

But this may be a good sign. It could mean that we have reached the bottom of the "child worship" era and once again affirmed the concept of maturity. We do have something to teach the young. If we don't teach them, with firmness and tolerance, the young will become increasingly and violently disrespectful of their elders. Eiseley has shown us how to resume the ascent of the ladder. We listen to the young but we insist that they also listen to us, and to history.

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If the activism of many young Americans is to be faulted and their rejection of history blamed for our increasing distress, it seems to me that the preceding generation, namely Eiseley's and mine, is as much at fault and more to be blamed. The activism of our generation is horribly visible, to anyone who has eyes to see the hundred million or more casualties of war in a lifetime of 60 years. A recent issue of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* was devoted entirely to the future effects of Apollo 11. Almost without exception the distinguished savants engaged to illuminate the future effects of Apollo 11 saw a direct parallel between Apollo 11 and the discovery of America by Columbus, and used the apparent parallel as an easy escape from history while persuading the reader that undiscovered riches are to be found in more or less the same direction that led to man's first steps in space.

I am not belittling our efforts to plumb space, but I venture to suggest that a little real digging into history will show that a parallel to Apollo 11 is to be found in the building of Chartres cathedral and the work of Thomas Aquinas. The beauty of Chartres and the Gothic-structured thinking of Aquinas, though essentially explorations of inner space, represented the zenith of the spiritually oriented age that immediately preceded them, just as in my estimation Apollo 11, though obviously an exploration of outer space, represents the zenith of the technological age that has preceded it.

The discovery of America by Columbus, on the other hand, a first step in the exploration of outer as opposed to inner space, was virtually without precedent, and just because and only because it was without precedent (it was not Columbus 11), its effects were as unforeseeable as they were rewarding.

The truly historical parallel to Columbus, I imagine, is now to be found in such unprecedented explorations of inner space as the recent convocation of youth at Woodstock and Bethel. The point is not that Columbus was exploring the material world, youth the immaterial, but that both of them historically exemplify man's outreach into areas where a knowledge of the past is of little immediate value, except only to confirm one's faith in the infinite evolution of man.

Perhaps the generally humanistic activism of youth today is more justified than we care to admit by having the historical precedent of the unprecedented in history, a Christian paradox of which youth is by no means unaware. Perhaps also the technological activism of the elder generation, reaching its zenith in Apollo 11 at a cost dangerously close to total atomic war, has worn out its historical welcome, precisely as Chartres and Aquinas were already shells of a defunct dogma just as soon as Columbus blundered actively on America.

I agree with Eiseley that "a yearning for a life of noble savagery" is nihilistic, and that "in losing faith in the past one is inevitably forsaking all that enables man to be a planning animal." But just who is losing faith in what past? Who so noble that he can disclaim being a savage?

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America's Legacies to Europe

Abelson's editorial "Microcosms in a world apart" (29 Aug., p. 853) aroused my sympathy. But it also suggested to me that some of our "American" vices are not so American as we think. Sometimes we're just the society that gets socked with them first.

Take traffic jams, for instance. The impact of the automobile on Europe and in one Latin American country after another has been worse than it was on us. For America grew up, so to speak, with the automobile; as the congestion developed, we learned how to live with it after a fashion. Our experience should have warned Europe; but Europe was too busy looking down her nose at us. So when the automobile explosion finally arrived, Europe had to learn in one decade what America learned in five. (Frenchmen are dumbfounded at the spectacle of U.S. traffic jams coupled with our surprisingly low casualty rate.)

If we draw from this experience, it seems likely that other problems supposedly peculiar to the United States will eventually spread, and hit much more sharply, in other parts of the world. Our sick cities, for instance; our mass-media explosion, with the profound cultural disturbances that inevitably result; our racial problem, remote though that seems to Europe today; and surely our generation gap.