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6.4.1 Generations and Lifecycles in Early Modern History (ca. 1500–1800)

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Introduction

In the early modern period, life stages—the age ranges into which a human life is divided—were approached as natural rather than social phenomena, which determined the qualities and behaviour that could be expected from people of different ages. A particular interest in the life stages of childhood and youth developed from the sixteenth century onwards. How were young people and their progression from infancy to adulthood imagined, and what behaviour was expected of them? What did these expectations have to do with existing power relations in early modern society? In addition to answering these questions, this chapter also suggests that older (particularly male and upper-class) youths possessed some space to make their own subculture—which sometimes caused generational conflicts with people at different stages of life.

The 'Ladder of Life'

In 1658, the Moravian educator Johann Amos Comenius (1592–1670) published his work *Orbis Sensualium Pictus* (*Visible World in Pictures*). This popular schoolbook—first issued in Latin and German, and widely translated into many European languages—innovatively incorporated visual images in language education. One of the images in the book was a staircase representing the seven ages of men and women, accompanied by the following words:

> A man is first an Infant, then a Boy, then a Youth, then a Young-man, then a Man, after that, an Elderly-man and at last, a decrepid old Man, So also in the other Sex, there are, a Girle, A Damosel, A Maid, A Woman, an Elderly Woman, and a decrepid old Woman. (Jan Amos Comenius, *Orbis sensualium pictus; Omnium fundamentalium in mundo rerum & in*

vita actionum, pictura & nomenclatura; Picture and nomenclature of all the chief things that are in the world; Visible world, London: J. Kirton, 1659, p. 77)

In the middle of the seventeenth century, it was not a new idea to depict life as a staircase: many versions of the 'ladder of life' circulated in the early modern period, based on life-stage theories that were rooted in the ancient period (e.g., in the work by Ptolemaeus and Hippocrates), and were frequently repeated and further developed afterwards (by, for example, Augustinus, Dante, or Lemnius). Many of these life-stage theories were collected in reference books such as *Silva de varia lección* (1542) by the Spanish humanist Pedro Mexia (1497–1551) and the *Iconologia* (1593) by the Italian iconographer Cesare Ripa (1560–1622), published in Spanish and Italian respectively, but translated into several languages throughout Europe. As the collections of Maxia and Ripa demonstrate, life-stage theories differed in the particular number of stages that they delineated (between three and twelve—but often seven) and the length of each stage (which was sometimes fixed, but was in other cases represented as rather fluid), among other distinguishing factors.

What these theories share, however, was the idea that the stages of life are and should be distinguishable from each other, as they all have their own typical characteristics. Moreover, the theorists all started from the assumption that age differentiation had a natural (as opposed to social) basis. They often took their inspiration from the theory of the four humours, developed by the physicians Hippocrates (460–370 BC) and Galenus (129–199), and which experienced huge popularity throughout the medieval and early modern periods, especially as a medical theory. The general idea was that the human body consists of four humours—blood, yellow bile, black bile, and phlegm—that directly correspond to the four elements with their own qualities: air (hot and moist), fire (hot and dry), earth (cold and dry), water (cold and moist). The mixture of the four humours within the human body influenced an individual's health (disease was considered to signify an imbalance between the four humours), as well as their temperament: for example, someone with too much black bile in the body had a melancholic temperament. However, the desired balance between the humours varied according to changing circumstances, including age. The dominance of cold and dryness was characteristic for older people, who were thus allowed to be slightly melancholic. A young person's temperament, on the other hand, was naturally dominated by heat and moisture, and could therefore be characterised as sanguine.

This system of thought shaped views of age differentiation as a natural phenomenon: it was considered a natural, even physical, process that compelled elderly people to display different behaviour than the young, and which granted the aged qualities that youths were still unable to possess (and

vice versa). Thus the idea of a fixed life cycle functioned as a disciplinary instrument: it assigned people ineluctable qualities, and demanded that they show the behaviour and talents appropriate to their age.

Many literary texts and images circulating in the early modern period reflected these ideas of natural age differentiation and helped to popularise these theories. The Dutch author Jacob Cats (1577–1660), whose literary works reached a huge amount of literate people in the Dutch Republic, organised his book of emblems *Zinne- en minnebeelden* (*Sense and Love Images*, 1627) according to the ages of different reader groups: he suggested that young readers should pursue each other romantically, according to their natural temperaments, while offering older readers more reflexive and serious texts with recurrent themes such as religion and death. In another of his books, *Houwelick* (*Marriage*, 1625), Cats represented women's life as a development in seven stages, each having their specific qualities and tasks. Moreover, Cats contributed to the popular *Schat der gesondtheyt* (Treasure of Health, 1636), a medical handbook written by the Dutch physician Johan van Beverwijck (1595–1647), in which people were urged to adapt their behaviour and diet to their age. Old people were advised to consume hot and moist food, such as chicken, honey, and well-risen bread, because—according to Cats' accompanying poem:

> The human body is cold and dry during his old days,
> That's why it cannot lack hot and moist things.

> *De mensch is kout en droog ontrent den ouden dagh,*
> *Soo dat hy heet en vocht niet meer ontbeeren magh.*
> (Johan van Beverwijck, *Schat der gesontheyt, from: Alle de wercken*, Amsterdam: Ian Iacobsz Schipper, 1660, p. 199)

As the earlier example of Comenius' *Orbis Sensualim Pictus* illustrates, the idea of age differentiation was also explicitly transmitted to children. Following the widespread traditional image of life as a staircase, Comenius invited young people to approach their future life as a succession of distinct, identifiable stages. Through the image of the stairs, these pupils learnt to understand their own life as a process of ascending and descending, of progression and decline. This process involved a hierarchy between people at different life stages: adults were at the top, children were at the bottom. The naturalised division between ages was thus, at the same time, a social system of power relations.

The Discovery of Children?

Given the fact that children were situated as 'lower' people at the bottom of the social hierarchy, it is worth considering the extent to which they were considered fully as 'people'. How were they valued in society? Several

historians have raised this question and provided different answers to it. In his groundbreaking *L'Enfant et la Vie Familiale sous l'Ancien Régime* (1960)—known in English as *Centuries of Childhood* (1962)—Philippe Ariès argued that Europe had long viewed children as incomplete adults, and had 'discovered' the child only in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when painters started to express the emerging emotional relationship between adults and children. Although several historians traced the discovery of childhood back to the Middle Ages or the ancient world, and many historians rightly questioned the idea of a sudden birth of childhood, the early modern period did witness several pivotal events that spurred the interest in children and child education. Among these events were the rise of print, humanism, and the Reformation.

The German theologian Martin Luther (1483–1546) was one of the people who explicitly argued that religious and social change depended on the education of new generations. His view of children was, however, not very optimistic: he assumed that children had a natural propensity for doing the wrong thing. But by firmly drumming the right ideas and knowledge into children from their first years onwards, people were able to suppress negative tendencies and to develop positive alternatives. What they learned during their childhood, Luther argued, determined the way they were able to act, behave, and believe as grown-up adults.

This trust in child education was a driving force behind the rise of schools and home education, as well as print materials that supported the educational practice. A genre that also emerged during this period was the household manual, including instructions and (heavily gendered) guidance for parents. The *Domostroy* (*Domestic Order*), that came to be circulated and read widely in Muscovite Russia in the 1550s, is a curious example of such a manual. It presents the upper-class Muscovite family as a harmonious miniature kingdom, led by a good-natured patriarch and his supportive wife. The latter was certainly imagined as an awe-inspiring authority: "The wife should […] teach her servants and children in goodly and valiant fashion," it told its readers. "If someone fails to heed her scoldings, she must strike him." On the whole, though, the book reflected the values of Muscovite merchants and clergy, rather than those of warriors (who otherwise played a dominant role in society under Ivan IV, 1547–1584). In matters of child-rearing, for example, it emphasised the role of both mothers and fathers very strongly, which was less pronounced in some Western European contexts at the time:

> If God sends anyone children, be they sons or daughters, then it is up to the father and mother to care for, to protect their children, to raise them to be learned in the good. The parents must teach them to fear God, must instruct them in wisdom and all forms of piety. According to the child's abilities and age and to the time available, the mother should teach her daughters female crafts and the father should teach his sons whatever trade they can

> learn. (Carolyn Johnston Pouncy (ed.), *"The Domostroi": Rules for Russian Households in the Time of Ivan the Terrible*, Ithaca, N.Y., 1994, p. 93)

Compared to the age of Reformation, the Enlightenment developed a more positive view of childhood. In his book *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693), the English philosopher John Locke (1632–1704) viewed the child as a *tabula rasa*, which should be inscribed with empirical and physical experiences, and guided by strict but tender educators. In a more radical way, the Genevese writer Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) in his É*mile ou De l'éducation* (1762) prompted the ideal of natural education, grounded in the child's own exploration of their rural environment. What these Enlightenment voices share is a plea for an educational style that encouraged children to learn on the basis of their own observations and curiosity. This plea should be viewed against the backdrop of the optimistic, Enlightened conviction that society could be 'engineered', and that mankind as such would improve when new generations were granted a pathway to intellectual and moral progress. In the second half of the eighteenth century, teachers, authors, and publishers helped to realise this Enlightenment programme by developing new types of schools and innovative children's books that stimulated young readers to interact with their surroundings. The rapidly expanding children's book market was defined by its transnational character: for instance, bestselling children's books written by German philanthropists like Joachim Heinrich Campe (1746–1818) and Christian Felix Weisse (1726–1804) were widely translated throughout western and northern Europe. The commercial character of the market is similarly striking: the *Little Pretty Pocket-Book* (1744) by the English publisher John Newbery (1713–1767), for example, came with a ball for boys and a pincushion for girls, to attract young consumers. This example clearly illustrates that children—as well as their parents—were being taken seriously as a commercial group with its own desires and needs. The creation of child-targeted books and toys demonstrates that children were increasingly granted their own life and a distinctive 'children's culture', characterised by cheerfulness and a carefree atmosphere. While they were thus taken more and more seriously as a social group with its own identity, however, they also became even more excluded from the real world. In short, they experienced a process of both emancipation and exclusion during the early modern period.

Youth Cultures

Although adolescence has long been perceived as a modern invention, historians nowadays assume that early modern people also gradually developed into adults by means of moral and social transformations, and as such went through a period of youth that was expected to end at the

moment of their marriage. In early modern societies with relatively low life expectancy, this period of youth took up a huge portion of people's lives. This was especially the case in more prosperous and urban parts of Europe, where people married at relatively old ages.

Historical research from the late twentieth century onwards has been partly dedicated to the adult construction of 'youth', a life stage which adults increasingly associated with the need for control and guidance from young elites while keeping (potentially 'dangerous') lower-class youth in check. Scholars also pointed at young people's potential to shape their own identity, for instance by means of peer group interaction. Although 'youth culture' is a contested phenomenon for early modern Europe, it is known that groups of youths were able to set their own subcultures, at least in an informal way.

This phenomenon of informal group and identity formation has been studied with regard to upper-class male youths in the early seventeenth-century Dutch Republic, which is known for its rapid artistic, intellectual, and economic flourishing. Profiting from the prosperity of their families, young men created a shared identity by means of distinct clothing (silk and metallic embellishments, bright colours) as well as long hair and moustaches, and found a shared pastime in the consumption of luxurious illustrated songbooks, widely published on the commercialising book market of the Dutch Republic. The collective activity of singing and drinking helped them to define what it meant to be a growing man. Historian Benjamin Roberts (2012) has compared these adolescents to young people in the 1960s, provocatively defining their lives as ones of "sex and drugs before rock 'n' roll".

Although the Dutch Republic seems to have been a particularly fruitful breeding ground for a flourishing youth culture that was clearly inflected by gender and class difference, such youth culture was not a typically Dutch phenomenon. Thanks to the growth of universities, (male) student cultures, revolving around singing, drinking, and socialising outside the house, proliferated throughout Europe. In fifteenth-century Florence, young males also used clothing—particularly the materials of which it was made—as a mark of youthfulness (and class). Young women, in turn, were far less visible and audible, especially the daughters of the elite. In early modern Russia, high-ranking young women wore veils outside their residences, sat behind screens in church, and moved around Moscow in closed carriages or sledges. The idea was that they should avoid being seen by men who were not family members. It was only from around 1660 that the seclusion of elite women in Russia began to be questioned, partly thanks to the awareness that Western women were freer to move about.

Generational Conflicts?

Peer group manifestations as discussed above regularly resulted in conflicts between youths and adults, who for instance disapproved of the adolescents' practices of growing their hair or drinking extensively. Such tensions can hardly be interpreted as conflicts between 'generations' as defined by the sociologist Karl Mannheim in *Das Problem der Generationen* (1928)—as cohorts of people of similar ages who share common experiences of socio-historical events. Rather than suggesting conflicts between age cohorts, early modern sources reflect generational conflicts between people at different life stages. In a song from the Dutch songbook *Uytertse hylickmaeckers* ("Utrecht Marriage Makers", after 1677), a mother reprimands her daughter, whose dress is too revealing. "Mother, this is the new age", the daughter explains, "it is the new trend" (Anonymous, "Een t'Samen-spraeck, tusschen Moeder en Dochter", in *Uytertse Hylickmaeckers*, Amsterdam: Cloppenburg, n.d., p. 11).

Such "new trends" were sometimes introduced by young monarchs. Inspired by his 'Grand Embassy'—that is, his extensive incognito tour of Europe in 1697–1698—Peter I of Russia, for example, launched many ambitious reforms, some of which caused horror among the older generation. From 1698, he gradually introduced new grooming and fashion styles. He began to wear only plain, Western suits, rather than heavy robes. His hair was kept short and his face clean-shaven, and he ordered his nobles and bureaucracy to follow his example (enforced by bans and taxes). At social events, women were encouraged to dress more revealingly than ever. Partly inspired by his own unhappy marriage, which had been arranged by his mother (and which he ultimately broke off), his decree of 1702 then confirmed the right of parents to choose partners for their children, but gave children a right of refusal. Parents were now legally prohibited from forcing a marriage to occur if either party was unhappy. His reforms thus reflected both generational conflicts and the increasing agency of youths.

Conclusion

Although the idea of an early modern 'discovery' of childhood or youth has been rightly contested, the interest in children, youth, and education did indeed grow during this period. It did so against the backdrop of larger cultural transformations, such as the Reformation and the Enlightenment.

The evolving views of children displayed several key tensions. First, whereas children were at the lowest rung of the ladder of life and portrayed as imperfect and incomplete, they also represented a mouldable promise for the future. Second, children were seen and expected to behave as humble and

modest, but also as autonomous and independent. Thus they came to be seen as an object of discipline as much as an agent. The degree of agency youths experienced in practice, however, largely depended on the young people's gender, class, and geographical location: privileged male adolescents from the Dutch Republic had far more possibilities to set their own youth culture than female youth, and prior to Russia's opening up to the outside world from around 1700, young people in Eastern Europe tended to be more restricted in their cultural practices.

Discussion questions

1. What do ideas about life stages have to do with early modern power politics?

2. Which tensions or paradoxes can be traced in the developing images of children and youth?

3. To what degree did the rise of print, humanism and the Reformation spur the interest in children and child education?

4. What was the role of generational conflict during the early modern period?

5. Was there an early modern youth culture?

Suggested reading

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