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“Kids These Days: Rebellion, Newness, and Growth in Pop Culture”

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I was in elementary school in 1989 when *The Simpsons* premiered on the new Fox television network. It was like nothing any of my classmates and I had seen before: a cartoon in primetime that used a lot of risqué humor I'm sure we didn't get at the time. I was the same age as its protagonist, Bart Simpson, and, in many ways, he was the complete antithesis of me: whereas I was smart, hard-working, and dutiful, Bart was a slacker, dim-witted, and rebellious, and he hated school and defied parental authority. So, as you can imagine, Bart instantly became an icon to a bunch of easily-influenced preteens.

Many adults weren't quite sure what to think. Weren't cartoons supposed to be for kids? Indeed, *The Simpsons* had more in common with Fox's live-action dysfunctional family sitcom, *Married...with Children* than it did with primetime cartoons of the previous generation such as *The Flintstones*. I very vividly remember there being a huge debate about whether kids should be allowed to watch *The Simpsons*, and things came to a head when Bart Simpson t-shirts featuring one of his sayings with an obscenity in it hit the markets in children's sizes. My school banned kids from wearing the shirts altogether, although bootleggers soon fulfilled demand by producing shirts without the obscenity.

My own father did not want me to watch *The Simpsons*. He was convinced that, were I allowed to, I would turn out to be like Bart. He had no hard evidence for this assertion; it was merely his gut feeling that, this cartoon, which showed rebellion in a way it had never been

featured before, was dangerous, and it had the potential to turn his child into a monster. He was convinced I was on a one-way ticket to Failuresville if I were allowed to indulge in this show.

In retrospect, my father's fears about *The Simpsons* seem quite comical, especially since a number of adult-themed cartoons have appeared since the late-nineties that make it look rather tame and boring by comparison. I don't think I turned out to be anything like Bart; if anything, I'm more akin to his geeky best friend, Millhouse. My father's fears about new pop culture were nothing new, though. Every generation of children in the information age faces disapproving parents who want to suppress new innovations in art and entertainment. It's a cycle that continues, with each generation not getting the television of the new.

Try as I might, I was never going to convince my father to like *The Simpsons*. It was more than a mere aesthetic difference in taste: he couldn't see the value in it.

Indeed, I wonder if your parents approved of the pop culture of your generation? I remember my mother telling me about how she and her sisters used to sneak downstairs to listen to the top forty on the radio or watch *Star Trek* or the old Adam West version of *Batman*. Their father did not approve of such pop culture dabblings, believing rock music to be of the devil and science fiction shows to be just plain stupid. He had no interest in indulging his children, especially his daughters, in such useless pursuits as, really, how would watching *Star Trek* or listening to The Beatles positively affect them and lead them to become productive members of society?

Looking down on the youth's generation is not something new, invented in the twentieth century in response to changes in society.

The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle declared, "[Young People] have exalted notions, because they have not been humbled by life or learned its necessary limitations; moreover, their

hopeful disposition makes them think themselves equal to great things -- and that means having exalted notions.”

The ancient Greek poet Hesiod wrote, “I see no hope for the future of our people if they are dependent on frivolous youth of today, for certainly all youth are reckless beyond words”

Christian priest Peter the Great, preaching in 1274, declared, “The world is passing through troublous times. The young people of today think of nothing but themselves.”

And British author G.K. Chesterton wrote, “I believe what really happens in history is this: the old man is always wrong; and the young people are always wrong about what is wrong with him. The practical form it takes is this: that, while the old man may stand by some stupid custom, the young man always attacks it with some theory that turns out to be equally stupid.”

To paraphrase *Atlantic* writer Elspeth Reeve, every generation becomes the “me, me, me” generation to the ones proceeding it.

What is it about it that leads each new generation to look down upon the previous one, despite the fact that they were looked down upon by the previous one as well. People whose parents looked down upon Buddy Holly, Elvis Presley, and The Beatles as rebellious rascallions who produce noise proceed to look down upon the hip hop, heavy metal, and modern rock of the present. I hear lamentations all the time about how movies and television shows just aren't as good as they used to be. Even comic books get in on the action as hard-core fans get really, really angry that stories and characters have evolved from the ones they grew up with.

One reason is our natural fear of change. It's a natural human tendency to want things to stay the same despite the fact we know the world is constantly in flux, so it can be hard to see the world radically transform from the one we knew as younger people. The pop culture we grew up

with was so meaningful to us that we want to cling to it, and any innovation and change over what we knew as kids is dismissed as being inferior or unnecessary, even bad or wrong. After all, new trends in pop culture often force us to rethink our values and worldview if we take them seriously.

The writer of Ecclesiastes in today's reading correctly points to the idea that change is natural, even necessary, in the natural order of things. Yet people cling to what has come before because it's familiar, even comforting.

For those who grew up in the 1950s and '60s, it can be nice to watch episodes of *Leave it to Beaver* and imagine a golden age that was much better than the world we currently find ourselves in. Shows like this were normalizing forces within pop culture, leading people to believe that the heterosexual nuclear family model was normal and desired, and any deviation from it scary.

This is because pop culture is an effective transmitter of cultural values. Magazines like *The Saturday Evening Post*, shows like *Leave it to Beaver*, musicians such as Pat Boone, and movies like *It's a Wonderful Life* were able, intentionally or unintentionally, to communicate that the American dream consisted of working hard, living a good Christian life, marrying someone of the same race and opposite binary gender and growing old together, and raising children in a safe, suburban atmosphere. This isn't to say this pop culture is necessarily *bad* (though I make no excuses here for the music of Pat Boone); it's simply to recognize that the conservative values presented were being normalized, and that these mediums were assuring people that such lives were to be desired and grasped after.

And it's understandable; with the Cold War in full swing and nuclear destruction a real possibility, Americans were looking to traditional values for hope.

The other side of pop culture, though, is that it can be a force for change through rebellion. At the same time *Leave it to Beaver* was airing, a new brand of pop culture was emerging, questioning the dream so many Americans were grasping for with the *Leave it to Beaver* family. New kinds of pop culture icons, influenced by African-American and Eastern cultures as well as a sense of rebelliousness, were emerging. Musicians such as Buddy Holly and Elvis Presley, writers such as Jack Kerouac, and actors such as James Dean were leading many young Americans to question the values they'd been spoon-fed their entire lives.

This was seen as shocking to conservative white America. In the usual condemnation of youth, it was argued that modern pop culture was leading to the breakdown of society, just as my father believed *The Simpsons* would lead me down a dark path. Typical of condemnations was that of Baptist minister Carl Elgena, when he told his Des Moines, Iowa, congregation regarding Elvis Presley that "Elvis Presley is morally insane" and "by his actions he's leading other young people to the same end."

In a way, Elgena was right: pop culture was breaking down long clinged to values, proving the words of the writer of Ecclesiastes to be true, indeed, to every thing, to every idea, there is a season. Struggle as we might, condemn the attitudes as sinful, but it would not prevent youth from embracing them.

Perhaps the rebellious pop culture of the 1950s paved the way for what was to come next, as Black folks, women, and LGBTQ+ people started demanding their rights in the following decade. Rock music questioned more conservative values. And my grandfather's least favorite show, *Star Trek*, dared to portray both men and women of different races working together in a Utopian future of what might be.

[Play Historic Kiss - The True Story: Star Trek]

This isn't to argue that *Star Trek* showing an interracial kiss changed attitudes overnight. It's also not to say that it's solely responsible for the relaxing of attitudes against racial minorities in our country. It is to say that pop culture can play a role in normalizing progressive values for a new generation, one which will grow up to question the values left for them by their parents.

We need pop culture precisely because of the pop part of its name: because it's popular, it will reach more people than academic discourses ever will, and we need pop culture artists who dare to push limits. Today, pop culture continues to push the limits of conservative worldviews. More viewers who see a same gender kiss on *The Fosters* or *The Walking Dead* than will ever read a queer theory text. More people will hear Jennifer Lopez refer to her relative using a gender-neutral pronoun than will dare to crack a book on the subject. More people will see the positive portrayal of women of color in shows like the *One Day at a Time* reboot than will ever dare to attend a Latino/a studies course.

Pop cultural, when used as a positive force, has the potential to change the world, one person at a time.

This isn't to say we don't need to more conservative iterations of pop culture: *It's a Wonderful Life* is one of my favorite movies precisely because it is conservative in the timeless values it transmits: that each life has inherent worth. Not every value needs to be questioned all the time. But we need pop culture that dares to push boundaries, dares to question society, and, yes, makes the older generation wonder what's wrong with kids these days. We need pop culture that rebels against the norm because, when used in this way, it can push us further towards realizing our dream of Beloved Community. We are better people for having an interracial kiss on *Star Trek*, a successful and independent working woman on *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, an out lesbian on *The Ellen DeGeneres*

Show, and the gangsta rap and grunge rock of the nineties and aughts questioning the justness and purpose of modern society.

The pop culture scares of the past can teach us a very valuable lesson: not to think too highly of our generation, but to remember that today's counterculture might be tomorrow's norm. My assignment to you is modified from one a college professor once gave: find a piece of pop culture you hate, and watch, read, or listen to it, preferably one not from your generation. Try to figure out why you hate it and what others might see in it. Dare to, like the character in our story for all ages, start with a dot and see where it takes you. You might just become an unlikely fan, as my professor did with hip hop music afterwards.

Despite what my father believed, I'm a better person for having been a fan of *The Simpsons*. Despite what my father believed, the intelligent, witty humor of *The Simpsons* influenced me to critically examine the modern family and find my own way in society. Through its many irreverent but intelligent stories, I was encouraged early on to think critically about important issues. In the end, isn't this how we grow as people: through self-reflection that doesn't shy away from deep introspection?

May it be so.