



# YOUTH: TRANSFORMING FORCE OF HISTORY

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Over a century ago, a 19 year old boy, Gavrilo Princip, Serbian nationalist, murdered the heir to the Crown of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, unleashing with this the underground rivers that led to First World War; a conflagration that would change the contemporary world forever. One hundred years after, a Pakistani teenage girl - Malala Yousafzai – is attacked by the Taliban for fighting so that women can go to school. Within a century, young people have been the main characters, as Leo Tolstoy said, between war and peace.

The concern about the youth's being and doing is quite recent. It does not encompass more than two generations. For us, who are in charge of education and worried about reality, young people are vital. But for those who believe in war and neoliberalism; young people are the main cannon fodder. Between Gravilo and Mala a fascinating story is woven about a social sector which is practically everything: hinge between the status quo and revolution, conformism and rebelliousness, voracious consumption and ecologic consumption. Or, as Lipovetsky said: between selfish individualism and responsible individualism.

Youth have marked our era and continue tattooing it. They have been a substantial part of the armies that have made war during the last one hundred years; from the most professional to the soldier children in Africa. From the young men who were sent to fight in the name of their political elites to the hundreds and thousands of Islamic young people who have been seduced by Al Qaeda or the Islamic state to sacrifice or kill with religious arguments.

Our youth signify and resignify our culture. Their disruptions, from the Beatles to Mark Zuckerberg, have radically changed our daily life. They created roc, pop, punk, and protest songs, hip hop, and reggaeton; social networks such as Facebook, twitter and WhatsApp. Their transformative potential has a lengthy trail. Their traces are evident. However, we are not satisfied. The youth of May of 68, of the manifestations against the Vietnam War, those who made the Cultural Revolution in China and those who became part of the Latin American guerillas against the cruel dictatorships soon grew older and, maybe, that is the reason why John Lennon wrapped up: *the dream is over*.

But maybe our concern for youth and what it represents has sharpened over the last years due to the inexorable progress of post-modernity; that kind of late modernity as Habermas called it, in which the young will end up adoring nihilism, deifying the present, escaping commitment and finally constructing the basis of the *era of twilight of duty*. In sum, some of us tear up our rags because they have dared to annihilate Kant.

And how are we, who love the classroom and the encounter with new generations; not supposed to be alarmed. Anyone who started teaching before the mobile era cannot remain indifferent before the challenges it implies to have individuals between 3 and 22 who *are* as long as they are “connected” with new technologies. Their uninhibited contempt of authority,

starting with their parents and continuing with their teachers, the unisonous universal attention to all things and their being but not being; have horrified us.

However, all that has been a gift from God. It has been a favorable opportunity to test our education, our convictions but also our pedagogies. There is no education without a link to reality. And, among other manifestations of the same; this is our reality and we have to dialogue with it with passion and creativity, with firmness and innovation.

Let us look at our youth reality. Today, half of the 7 thousand million people in the planet have less than 25 years of age. Around 3 thousand million has reached or is about to reach the reproductive stage. Almost a quarter of this has to survive with an average income of less than one dollar each day. Form approximately 6 thousand new HIV infections that take place daily in the world, half affects youth and particularly women.

Demographic conditions are rapidly changing. For the first time ever Japan and other western European countries have more people over 60 years than less than 20 years. However, in other latitudes such as Latin America, Young people represent one third or even less than half of their populations. And, in some countries, such as Mexico, we have not been able to find out what to do with them. For example, of the 22 million young Mexicans between 15 and 24 years, about 7 million do not study or work.

Today, we can state that young people build their identity from six essential relationships: family, school, work, friends, internet and drugs. I am speaking about the youth majorities, inescapably touched by these realities that force them to decide what role they want to play in said relationship. Other youth sectors continue being sensitive to religion or politics, but in our times they are the least.

Transformation of families throughout the world has naturally modified the role of young people in them. Current economic conditions have forced parents or single mothers or fathers to provide; while the kids have been forced to start a journey for the meanings of their lives; but the majority of them alone or from the other relationships that we have mentioned above. Both the family and the school represent today the crisis of what has been called “host structures”, this is, the providers of existential meaning, capable of modeling a gradual but consistent answer to the question: Who am I?

Today, young people interact in their families with their new families. For some, this is chaos; for others, testing their adaptive capacity. It is clear that, in our time, we are no longer discussing what the perfect family model is regarding its composition; but rather regarding the quality of the relationships within it. Many families around the world are the origin of migrant children, teenagers and young people. They cannot support them and send them alone in the middle of danger to pursue the dream of a better land and life.

Other families are the origin of one of the most intense relationships of the contemporary youth: their addiction to alcohol, drugs and, in certain countries as the US and Mexico, to soda. For many of them drinking or using drugs is reinforcing themselves. We live the era of the predominance and expansion of drugs as a constituent part of our culture. And young people are the ones who have given them a leading place in their lives.

From this relation, one of the most powerful globalizations of history has been constructed: organized crime. Mafias throughout the world are now a part not only of our day-to-day; not only in economy, but in politics and aspirational culture. But youth are the main characters in

this globalization, whether as consumers of drugs or as voluntary and involuntary actors in the hierarchy of the cartels disputing – by the inch – territories and populations.

This phenomenon is global. A few days ago, suffering parents from England decided to share with the international community the video made by their sons before they killed themselves while driving under the influence of drugs. At the same time a 14 year old boy in Tijuana, Mexico, was arrested for murdering a man for 1800 USD. It is one of the thousands of young hit men hired by the cartels as their operational team. In Mexico, there are over 5 thousand minor children in jail. The profile of the convict children is similar: more than half of them abandoned home due to violence or abuse, and the majority worked in the streets as mason or street vendor before falling in the network of organized crime.

The effects of neoliberalism have been devastating, particularly for young people. Organized crime has been the one to better exploit the market-god. They have made out of migrants, girls and young women; the most valuable merchandise. Whether human or organ trafficking, or prostitution; young people are in the line of fire.

Regarding education; youth are running away from school as one runs away from leprosy. All around the world school has paralyzed in front of the dilemma of being stricter and more disciplinary (Sparta) or more situated and significant (Athens).

Many schools have turned into “day care” from kindergarten to university. There is no learning, but they indeed are at a relatively safe place while their parents do their thing. Others have decided to face the challenge with pedagogies that move the “core” of kids and turn them into mobilizing subjects with competences and values. In some, going to school is going to war. In others, it means experiencing the joy of learning and socializing.

In Mexico, 650 thousand boys and girls in public middle schools and high schools abandon school each year. Educational authority has barely done it right by creating preventive policies before school dropout, but has no idea how to get back those who left. But also in our country, schools or colleges of several religious congregations have bet for Situated Learning as a daily strategy for making out of reality an educational input that returns to daily life with applied knowledge.

Our job from the schools and universities can be articulated so that families and our educational spaces are once more “host structures”; givers of personal and professional structure that transform the reality in which they live. Parents are now also our subjects to train.

However; and regarding this matter, let me dedicate a few lines to young people who study in our educational centers of Catholic inspiration. “Students at these centers are slightly open to the responsibilities of the humanistic ideal of social generosity of the educational institutes they have chosen, and orient their studies to obtaining degrees and professional competence”. These are the conclusions of the report “The cultures of youth in catholic universities. A world-wide study,” *Federación Internacional de Universidades Católicas (FIUC)*. (*International Federation of Catholic Universities*)

Many of our students chose our schools and universities not because of their academic quality, but because of social relations they expect to find there. In our educational centers they build a perception of themselves that has been named by a journalist in Mexico the “mirreynato” (Explanation: “Mirreyrule”: The word, “Mirrey” – “My king” – began as a

greeting in the Lebanese community, but came to describe young men of privilege prone to partying, wearing their shirts unbuttoned and showing off status).

The “My Kings” are upper-middle or upper class youth who perceive themselves as superior “by nature”, for their status of material possessions and privileges, who marry “nice people”, not worried about where the money came from, what matters to them is their purchasing power; they are the Juniors of politics who abuse their power; they are regularly ignorant but ostentatious in their power to discriminate. They are also our youth and many of them are in our classrooms.

Experts in new technologies, young people of this era also change the world. Only in the last lustrum, youth in the US, Chile, Spain, Brazil, Venezuela, Israel, Italy, Greece and many other countries, have gone out to the streets to demand and propose, to reconfigure their territories and put pressure on their governments, to reinforce themselves in their world and to shape it in their own way.

Since the movement of North American youth “Occupy Wall Street” asking in their banners “Bankers to jail”, “politicians go home” and “citizens to the agora to build a new democracy”, going through the outraged Spaniards who have been the basis for change of their political parties and to the movement of Chilean university students for changing their university system and the movement #Yosoy132 initiated by young Mexicans to democratize the communication media and challenge the old dinosaur political party, the PRI, that returned to power, not forgetting the youth that made possible the Arab spring, it is worth noting that they are also among us to take over their world.

And the most interesting thing about it is that they have made the revolution, or should I say, their revolutions; through social networks. And this is going to change the ways in which our countries fight for power, how political campaigns are managed and, in general, how to govern. Many young people around the world are environmental activists; the most famous being the members of Greenpeace; but there are thousands of organizations

that do not receive so much media coverage, which defend water wells in their communities before the presence of extraction transnational corporations; others work courageously for human rights; from Amnesty International to local committees; many others, such as Pussy Riott – punk Russian girls – have challenged the tyranny of Vladimir Putin while a group of dreamers in the US is working so that Donald Trump does not win the presidency. Yes, youth in the *era of twilight of duty* also get involved in their world and inspire us to change it.

I like to think about youth in a prospective sense. For 2030, when they are adults or enter the zone of strategic decisions, the world will have more people but there will be less water and less food. The world will be more hostile because resources, in general, will be scarce. How are we preparing them for this? What role are we playing in preparing them for a world filled with uncertainty and, at the same time, many potentialities? Are we certain that we do not need to educate the best in the world, but the best for the world?

It is evident that the youth will continue being the target of the voracious consumerism that makes many think: “I buy, thus I exist”. That they will continue being the means and purpose of organized crime. That they will still have trouble to relate with their peers, but that they will have one million friends in Facebook. That their parents will continue “depositing them” at school at the same time they exile from home education. That they will be among those 214 million people who are moving today from south to north running from the war, gangs,

the devastating effects of climate change. That in some latitudes suicide will be their alternative in front of the little tolerance they have towards frustration.

That they will want to have the higher grades and the most pompous objects with the minimum possible effort. That they will, in school, harass others of their same; maybe as a reflection of their low self-esteem. That, in some other places, teenage pregnancy will appear before their eyes as a way out in front of the ignominy they already live in their short lives. But all this is only an appropriate moment to intervene there; while events are taking place, to make out of formal and informal education, a transforming force of reality.

Thus, it will be essential for us to understand and keep making efforts in order to be empathetic with the new youth identities; those tribes, groups, circles, spaces and interactions in which they discover themselves and discover their world. And these new youth self-defining forms illustrate that the means may have changed, but the purposes remain the same. Our youth continue being social and political subjects. They continue being potential agents of change.

One of my former university students, Gisela Hernández, is currently in Bagdad, Iraq; defying the fear to Islamic State. Before, she was in Afghanistan, Lebanon, Algeria, and Colombia. She decided to dedicate her life to working with refugees and displaced persons due to armed conflicts. When we shared the classroom, she told me that she wanted to work with the deprived people. This is certainly a home run for five; one of those we always have in our classrooms. But it also illustrates a spirit of our times: our youth have not ceased being transformers of history.

I am convinced that the primary subject of today is education in global citizenship. Many other educational and university centers give it. We educate. And the first education is to know how to be and live in reality. I like to think, and it inspires my educational practice, us visualizing a field of praxis for educating global citizens to face global organized crime and to design new alternatives for the issue of drugs in the world; to face migrations and their collateral effects; and to prepare new multicultural societies; to face the corrupting power of transnational companies and not allow corruption to be tolerated as a sign of our times and revitalize honesty as a way of proceeding, both publicly and privately.

A global citizenship that can originate leaderships, that will empower an ethical way of making social, economic and political decisions. Every time and every generation has had its “mustard seed”, small but invigorating. We have never lacked someone to light our times with some social awareness and humanism in the middle of inhumanity. Let us make of our students this light and inspiration our times need.

My educational praxis sees in my students future fighters for the defense and care of human rights; potential developers of sustainable and maintainable projects in the post-oil world; creators of more experiences of social and solidary economy in which we demonstrate there are alternatives for the predator capitalism; potential scientist who investigate where and how to generate well-being and equality before the inequality that has imposed as the trademark of the XXI century and which, paradoxically has made us get closer to the beginning of the XIX century.

I believe in our youth and their transforming force. I also see them analyzing and suggesting better conditions to plan a city, given the fact that most people already live in cities, but many of them are chaotic and excluding; I also appreciate that many of them want to live and work

for the countryside and the rural world; there where our tomorrow food is cooked today. I identify them working to shorten the digital gap, promoting universal internet and the intelligent and ecological use of new information and communication technologies.

I see our educational centers as a light in the neighborhood where we settle. A place in which reality is educational input. Reality visits us in the classrooms and from the classrooms depart mobilized learnings that return to human kind to humanize it and to make it more fair and fraternal. I think that our schools and universities can strengthen education for democracy and fight against the various types of authoritarianism installed in our countries; educate for citizenship and not to reinforce cronyism and patrimonialism; educate for gender equity and not for sexism; educate in the critical thought and alienate the repetition of contents; educate for peace and delimit violence; educate in addition, so that our youth become good people and good professionals.

I like very much the image of Sophie Barat as a “child of fire”. If, when she was born her environment set on fire, today many fires hunt us; immobilize us from fear. But also, our environment can make the inner flame grow, an inner flame that will passionately intervene in reality. Let us make our educational centers set the hearts of the youth on fire, and the youth to take this fire to their daily live, to their families; to their gangs self-referencing groups; to shopping centers, to the place where drug is trafficked and used;

there, where every decision forges their lives and, at the same time, the lives of those surrounding them. May that fire, as the fire of Sophie Barat; impregnate our times and may we fill proud of having been at the level of our century.

I have nothing else to wish for but murmur of the Spirit so that the Lord continues walking in our history and that; illuminated by our situated and transforming education, youth who have had the fortune of being linked to ourselves or our schools, one day give thanks to God the Father for having grown among us and for having discovered the beauty of its existence in the experience with others.

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