

The roots of youth dissent in Switzerland

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The roots of youth dissent in Switzerland

FOR most of 1980, there was hardly a weekend without some youth disturbance in Zurich. Heavy fighting broke out along the Limat one weekend in June.

Shop windows were smashed, millions of francs worth of damage was caused to property. Coach loads of white helmeted policemen descended on the centre of the city and the smell of tear gas hung over the Niederdorf.

These incidents – triggered by the decision to spend Sfr. 60 millions on the Opera, symbol of elite and bourgeois culture, and none on the Independent Youth Centre demanded by the demonstrators – were followed during the whole summer by similar disturbances, not only in Zurich but in some other major cities as well.

Although the incidents involved only a fraction of the youth population, they were sufficiently disturbing and jarring to the Swiss sense of order and security to prompt the govern-

ment to set up a Federal Commission to examine the problem.

Officialdom, the Federal State, was taking an interest in young people.

Twenty-two distinguished members of society sat down to think about the grievances of young people and to try to find the answers. The fruit of its

deliberations were presented in a document called "Theses" on the youth disturbances in Switzerland.

The main points of this widely circulated report were that our society was at fault and was to blame for imposing on youth more constraints than ever before.

Young people had had to go through the decline from the boom years to the present recessions and were suffering from the

consequences of this change.

Pressures of all sorts – large, inhuman living estates, boring jobs, the hidden violence of our societies and its many strictures against the full life – were to blame for the frustrations and despair of our youth.

Moreover, the apathy of the silent majority offended the

where they would be free to set up activities and a lifestyle of their own.

Such a centre has existed and been subsequently closed in Zurich where it has been at the centre of much controversy because of the illegal activities, such as drug taking, which were going on there.

Professor Jeanne Hersch, an eminent Swiss thinker and holder of the chair of philosophy at the University of Geneva for 21 years, didn't agree at all with the analysis of the Federal Commission. She thought that the wide circulation of the "Theses" could be positively harmful, so she prepared her own "Anti-theses" to the commission's findings and had them published in Geneva at the end of 1981.

In her pamphlet, she accused the commission of repeating the well-worn clichés everybody had been repeating about the young since 1968.

She took the commission to task for harking back on poor,

By Pierre-Michel Béguin

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Flashback to 1980: violence in the streets of Zurich

misunderstood youth and talking like “old adolescents” fashionably siding with youth dissenters and taking a bash at the society which afforded them a comfortable existence.

She also attacked the media and those responsible for cultural programmes because they tended to spread a sinister picture of society in which youth were the victims and the establishment the villains.

Jeanne Hersch came to present her ideas to a packed meeting of the New Helvetic Society at the Swiss Embassy earlier this year. The first point she made was that the commission had failed to understand the real significance of the demands voiced by the demonstrators.

In fact, the demands as expressed and the declared grievances against society were just symptoms which were not to be confused with a proper diagnosis of the situation, she said.

In other words, the claims by the demonstrators for an Independent Youth Centre didn't mean that this was what they

really wanted and what was good for them. It was just an expression of their wanting something undefined and of their discontent and disorientation – a symptom of a deeper malaise.

The commission, said Jeanne Hersch, and all those who claimed to understand the young and tell society to be more tolerant towards them, had taken the articulated demands of the young as the final word, whereas these were to a great extent a reflection of what fashionable liberals were already saying in defence of youth dissent and opposition to established society.

Jeanne Hersch had no trouble refuting a number of the main assertions of the commission. There were not fewer, but *more* possibilities for young people than ever before. They could travel, fulfil their potential, practise a variety of sports and carry out a host of pursuits of all kinds. They couldn't do all this in the past.

Today they have more freedom of expression than in the old days, when children could not talk until they were spoken to.

Commenting on the commission's statements concerning the conflict between the essence of modern society and the aspirations of the young, and the problems of young in terms of finding their feet in life, Jeanne Hersch pointed out that these problems belonged to every period of history.

They were part of the human condition. The commission had failed to clearly distinguish between those problems which always accompanied youth, in every land and epoch, and those that were specific to our time and our society.

She noted that the explosion of technology was the most notable feature of our present way of life. But technology as such didn't explain the feelings of that small number of young people who took to the streets of Zurich every weekend.

However, technology contributed to what the speaker defined as the central problem, that our society is fast losing all structure and, in particular, cultural structure.

She said that societies of

history have always lived with “mores”, that is, with definite conventions organising behaviour and human relationships.

Today we have entered for the first time an era deprived of such standard-setting mores, with no points of reference, where there is nothing to pass on to the young, no heritage and where the young have nothing to learn.

Very forcefully, and with a description of the various consequences of this disappearance of structure, which had even spread to the family, Jeanne Hersch identified the problem of the dissenting fraction as one of nihilism – emptiness or absence of sense of purpose.

This was not, she said, the thought-out nihilism of the philosopher but a nihilism stemming from the climate and environment in which the dissenters evolve. The specific demands of the dissenters were only a manifestation of their vacuum and lostness.

Jeanne Hersch claimed that our modern ways of thinking –

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THE first time that Belfast-born author Bernard MacLavery met his reading public, the reception was not quite what he'd bargained for.

Seated behind a desk just inside a Belfast store and ready to sign copies of his first collection of short stories, he was approached by two women who promptly opened their shopping bags. They thought he was a security guard.

Despite that minor setback, MacLavery, 41, has risen quite remarkably in the literary world since 1978. To date he's had five books published, including two best-selling novels – "Lamb" and "Cal".

The subject of a BBC documentary, MacLavery is now completing the screenplay for a TV film of "Cal", to be produced by Channel Four. It's a love story enmeshed in the troubled situation of Northern Ireland.

MacLavery has been promoting his work in Switzerland this summer. Apart from being the first guest of the newly-created Society for the Advancement of English Literature in Switzerland (SAELS), he also signed copies of his books at the Francke book shop in Berne.

Before he became a full-time writer, MacLavery had worked for 10 years as a medical laboratory technician at Belfast's Queen's University. Tired of that,

Author makes his mark in Switzerland

By Robert Brookes

he studied English at the same university.

After three years of teaching at an Edinburgh comprehensive school, he took up a teaching post on the Scottish "whisky island" of Islay where he now lives with his wife, Madeline, and their four children.

MacLavery recalls that his early attempts at writing were pretty bad.

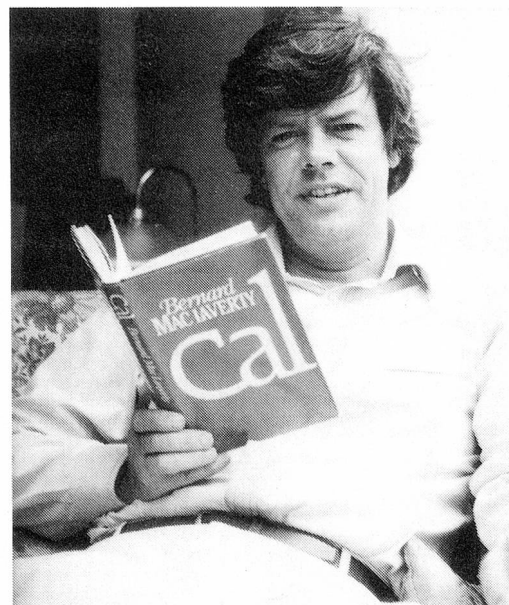
"I remember about a year after leaving school I wrote some dreadful stories and continued to do so for the next 10 years.

"And then I decided perhaps I ought to write about my own life. Until then I'd been trying to copy other writers like Kafka and D.H. Lawrence", he said.

He remembers collecting rejection slips from every good magazine in the world, a collection he still keeps in a drawer.

MacLavery feels his childhood in Northern Ireland has had a total influence on his writing.

"I think most writers will have to admit that their childhood is probably the richest part of their lives. Before you're 12, you go



Bernard MacLavery

around with all your antennae out.

"You're sensitive, you're aware, but the one thing you're not aware of is being aware. It's only in later life that you realise this", he said.

Although MacLavery is now a successful author, he's very much a realist when it comes to the future.

"No matter what you've done in the past, the next time you sit down to write you're always faced with failure. It's like tightrope walking", he said.

However pessimistic or realistic that might sound, Bernard MacLavery is right now walking on that literary tightrope with great confidence.

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seeing life as essentially easy, not believing in emulation anywhere outside of sports, considering everybody as de facto equal – had instilled, in a fraction of particularly vulnerable young people, very wrong ideas about life in general. With such ideas, they could not expect to integrate in life normally.

Miss Hersch agreed that the youth who demonstrated formed only a small minority and that, perhaps, they had been deprived as children of the security that is essential for the normal growth into adulthood.

In this context she noted that

the commission had virtually overlooked the role of the mother in the formation of attitudes to life.

One of the specific developments of our times, which is likely to have a bearing on youth, is that mothers now go to work.

They do not devote their children rearing years to their children alone, but entrust them to minders and later place them in nursery schools and only see them back from work.

Miss Hersch's main suggestion was to encourage, by somehow modifying the present economic and cultural trend to the

contrary, mothers to stay at home at least for the first years of their children's lives.

Jeanne Hersch certainly didn't believe that giving young people a centre where they could do exactly what they chose and flout the law would be of any use. It would only confirm the disorientation of those concerned by offering them an institution with even less structure and purpose than present day society as diagnosed by Miss Hersch.

On the other hand, centres which already exist, enabling youth to fulfil their artistic and

creative potential, would be quite another matter. Miss Hersch stressed the importance of returning to the defence of eternal values in education at home, at school and by the media.

If one attempted to describe Jeanne Hersch's approach in a nutshell, one would say that it was a call to the return of traditional values that have proved themselves while at the same time remaining aware of the need to adapt them to the times.

Above all, it was an approach based on realism and on an appreciation of what life is all about.