

THE BOOM OF YOUTH

THOSE novels about the Young Idea versus Crabbed Old Age, those films about Our Dancing Daughters, those Boy-Scout Jamborees, that Hiking Movement, that Slimming Campaign, that 'Beaver' Ramp, those foolish letters to the papers from alleged old colonels about the spinelessness and cocktails of the younger generation, those nostrums for preserving the School-girl Complexion, that glorification of Charlie Chaplin and Jackie Coogan, those prodigies of Jehudi Menuhin, those babblings of Gertrude Stein, that smile of Mr. Drage, that shortening of skirts and bobbing of hair, those Nazis and Fascists and Bright Young People—perhaps you did not even see a connexion between these things? And, so far as the newspaper stunts were concerned, perhaps you did not take them seriously at all? Or are you one of the *crétins* who swallow the whole thing?

Now Mr. Wyndham Lewis takes it all very seriously indeed. He has written a book¹ about it which claims to be a 'research, as "scientific" as any branch whatever of biology or chemistry.' He has made a valuable collection of this nonsense from the press, but he does not regard it as nonsense. He sees a Sinister Purpose behind it all. The gigantic 'Youth-racket' of these post-war years is a put-up job. It is a machination of Big Business in its bid for power. It is baby-snatching on a large scale for the enslavement of Western Man.

The mind of Mr. Lewis displays an uncommon mixture of subtlety and naïveté. Astonishing is his in-

¹ *Doom of Youth*. By Wyndham Lewis. (Chatto and Windus, 1932.)

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genuity when he interprets his press-cuttings to support his thesis. And yet he will jump to the most paradoxical assumptions. For instance, he assumes—and his argument rests on the assumption—that ‘it is Press and Cinema hypnotism that rules England and America.’ He really does take the newspapers at their own valuation; he has a simple faith in the ‘Power of the Press’; the Lion of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer is as terrible to him as its metallic roar. Already, in his eyes, the offices of Fleet Street and the studios of Hollywood are the Emotional Engineering Works which hypnopaedically indoctrinate the Brave New World in the interests of Capitalist economics. Some people indeed suppose that the Press, so far from leading the public, is ruled *by* the public, and that the policies of newspaper and film companies is dictated almost solely by the exigencies of net-sale returns and box-office receipts. They assert that newspaper influence has seldom shown itself very powerful, whether in its efforts to return a particular form of government, or to introduce a new shape in hats or a peculiar kind of bread. This view, even if only partially true, would be very damaging to Mr. Lewis’s argument. But he does not stop to consider it. The *crétin* public laps up uncritically whatever the Press and Film magnates give it, and *they*, in their turn, are the conscious and willing tools of the impersonal force of Big Finance. This further assumption is so evident to Mr. Lewis that he expressly declines to argue about it. He magnanimously ‘prefers that the reader should arrive at his own conclusions . . . rather than allow himself to be influenced by me.’

Now what on earth, you may ingenuously ask, has Big Business to gain out of the Youth Campaign?

In the first place, replies Mr. Lewis, there is the old slave-drivers’ principle voiced by Cato—*Divide et impera*. A house divided against itself cannot stand.

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If the Servile State is to run smoothly and efficiently the slaves must be set to squabble among themselves. So Press and Film are hard at work fomenting trouble among the public. *Any* sort of squabble will do. So they run class-wars, sex wars, religious wars, age wars.

But this age-war, this Young-versus-Old squabble, this Youth-boom, this instilling of *Younger-generation-consciousness*, has a particular political-economic function of its own. It was, apparently, from the Jesuits that Big Business got the idea. 'The Catholic Church has at all times directed its energies to baby-snatching The Jesuits were obsessed with the idea of "the Young."' These priests turned themselves into nannies, schoolmasters, mothersome and father-some bodies, professional uncles and good-natured aunts, nurses and big-hearted big brothers. The Christian world became a nursery and a schoolroom.'

The Bolsheviks caught on to the idea, and Trotsky pronounced: 'The education of the young is for us a question of life and death.' Mussolini followed up, and 'in Italy the Roman Papa and Duce squabble from morning to night over boy scouts and girl guides.' And now 'Youth-politics' has become the all-absorbing obsession of all our rulers and would-be rulers. The Bolshevik, Fascist, Papist, but especially the Capitalist, are alike out to capture and exploit youth in their several interests. Their method is flattery: the Boom of Youth.

A 'revolt of youth' is perhaps nothing very novel; but Mr. Lewis detects, in these latter days, besides a gigantic intensification of the warfare, a new element. It is the outcome of this flattery-campaign; it is a new conception, a new valuation of *Youth-as-such*. In quite recent times, if we are to believe Mr. Lewis, a youth was merely a man *in fieri*. He was interesting, not for what he was, but for what he was going to be. It was adulthood and maturity that was, from the point

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of view of value, the apex of human life. In ancient times, indeed, the age-value graph seems to have been a steady incline from cradle to death-bed, and only a few years ago grey beards were still insignia of honour rather than butts for ribaldry. In living memory the graph was a graceful curve, rising gently and slowly through adolescence and the twenties to middle age and dropping more suddenly through senility to the grave. But now the top of the curve is being pushed further and further back to the days of 'flaming youth.' We were 'too old' at forty, then at thirty, now in the twenties. In America, we understand, the glorification of childishness has almost completely put the worth of a human being in inverse ratio to his years.

There can be no doubt that a world of gurgling, beaming 'babies,' 'kids,' and 'big boys' is much more manageable material for the tyrant than a world of hard-thinking, self-willed men. So 'youth-politics,' by means of the 'gaga-technique' of the Press, is out to idealise youth and childhood and make babies of us all. In abstract terms this means, in Mr. Lewis's view, the exaltation of Power at the expense of Wisdom and Experience, of brute physical force at the expense of more spiritual values. This is an essential part of the conspiracy. For power must be set free before it can be harnessed; Niagara must flow before it can drive dynamos. The same sort of scheme lay behind the Feminist Movement (also a put-up job). Women were persuaded to believe that they would become 'emancipated' by bobbing their hair, cutting their skirts, 'reducing' their contours and abandoning the family kitchen. In effect, they made themselves cheap, efficient factory-hands and wage-slaves. Big Business tapped a new, cheap source of power. So now, Youth (and Energy which is the attribute of Youth) must be boomed; Age (and Brains which Mr. Lewis seems to regard as the prerogative of Age) must

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become a byword and a reproach—a 'back number' ready, when cosmetics and monkey-glands fail, to put itself unobtrusively and shame-facedly on the shelf. Press and Cinema are inspiring us all with the spirit of Peter Pan: the determination never to grow up. Youth is persuaded that it is 'emancipated' and that it rules the world. It thinks it has sent grandma away to suck eggs. But in reality it is the wicked and *elderly* capitalist uncle who is ruling youth and keeping it quiet with picture papers and Yo-yo.

That is not, I believe and hope, an unfair travesty of Mr. Wyndham Lewis's account of the boom of Youth. It occupies the bulk of his book. Only on the last page or two does the 'Doom' *motif* enter. The Youth Campaign will prove suicidal for youth, because (as Karl Marx knew when he launched his Proletariat-boom) the universalising of a value is the best way to destroy it. And the 'youth-politician' has no interest to preserve it once his aim is attained. For him 'there is strictly speaking *no youth*. There are only different degrees and powers of an abstract energy.' So Youth, Mr. Lewis prophesies, 'is to be abolished.'²

Some critics reproach Mr. Lewis for his vehemence. But heaven knows he has reason enough to be vehement if he really believes all this. But how incredibly far-fetched it is! What yawning chasms there are in his argument! We have already hinted that had he directed his research to the newspaper-reading and film-going public rather than to newspapers and films, he might have found the foundations of his argument

² This argument is indeed rather obscure and relatively unimportant. We are tempted to wonder if Mr. Wyndham Lewis would have bothered about this 'Doom' tail-piece had he not wanted the title for his book with its oblique reference to Mr. Alec Waugh's *Loom of Youth*. It will be noted that we have suggested another title which satisfies this requirement and at the same time covers more exactly the subject of Mr. Lewis's research.

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considerably less secure than he supposes. He quotes with approval the words of a German best-seller who describes the world created by the Youth Campaign as a *Scheinwelt*, but he does not seem to appreciate the implications of the term. A *Scheinwelt* indeed it is, a world of make-believe whence people escape from humdrum and monotonous reality. But who sincerely imagines that it is anything else? Why resent us this recreation?

Is it really credible that the Press Peers have the wit to devise so fantastic a conspiracy? And even were it so, may we not comfort ourselves with the thought that the Youth Movements, by reason of their very multitude and the opposition of their aims, will cancel each other out, as they are doing at the present day in Germany? But already the post-war Youth-boom is on the decline, and already *Doom of Youth* seems a little out of date.

But, after all, Mr. Lewis himself declares that he is 'not against youth-politics,' and we begin to wonder what the pother is all about. Nevertheless he has undoubtedly rendered a service in pointing out possible and serious dangers in some contemporary forms of Youth Movement. The pity is that he has made a quite sensible case look so grotesque by overstatement.

The Catholic Christian can breathe pretty freely in an atmosphere of youth-propaganda. He is himself, in certain respects, something of a Peter Pan, for it is not in this world that he looks for maturity and fulfilment. Childlikeness is indeed for him an ideal, be he never so aged and learned. The wisdom of this world must always seem to him rather comic, especially when it is untouched by humour or intellectual humility. Mr. Wyndham Lewis is courageously frank in his contempt for the 'English sense of humour' (a quality, be it said, that has much that is akin to the Christian virtue of humility and childlikeness), but a touch of it would

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have saved his book from many excesses. But he is right in inciting us to resist all attempts to stunt our growth in wisdom and stature, and his book is truly valuable if it warns us of the possible danger of mistaking the *Scheinwelt* in which we seek relaxation for the real business of life. Nevertheless the full realisation and development of our faculties is not incompatible with the preservation of youngness of heart; and indeed the latter will be found to safeguard the former from many absurdities. That the gay, irresponsible, brilliant, young artist who wrote *Tarr*, and the not inconsiderable philosopher who wrote *Time and Western Man*, should come to perpetrate the extravagances of *Doom of Youth* should serve as a horrid reminder of this.*

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* We have confined these pages to a consideration of Mr. Wyndham Lewis's main thesis. But there is much subsidiary matter in his book which deserves more serious attention. In particular we would recommend courageous consideration of his theory that a desexualising process is at work among us. This phenomenon is far more disquieting than all the Youth Movements put together and than the author himself seems to realise.