

There is also a strong economic element to the current culture of youth violence. As our young people become more and more demoralised by the absence of employment and opportunities on offer, there is an overwhelming lack of incentive to ensure that they engage with their communities and society in a positive way. This has allowed for the further compounding of the polarisation that young people commonly experience anyway. In turn, this marginalisation makes it acceptable for young people who otherwise feel at a loss when seeking their place or role in their community to form an identity built around violence. Often this is through rioting against a common cause, such as during the marching season, or a common enemy, such as the police or those who live on the other side of the interface.

As in other areas of the world, such as Palestine and Israel, physical structures still ensure that our young people remain very much segregated from each other. The now infamous “peace walls”, separate Catholic and Protestant areas to the extent that many of the young people I have worked with have never knowingly experienced or had meaningful conversation with someone from the “opposite” side. While youth and community groups have striven for years to increase each group’s understanding and tolerance of the other, it is undeniable that this work still holds many challenges in the context of a society where we live, socialise and are educated almost entirely separately. In the 2001 census, it was reported that more than two thirds of us still live in areas which are more than 90% Catholic or Protestant, with 93% of us still being taught in either exclusively Catholic or Protestant schools. This being the case, one can see the challenges we as youth educators continue to face in our efforts to decrease youth extremism; how can we increase empathy for the “other” when they may have never had an opportunity to engage positively with someone from the opposite side, knowing them only as the rival?

Many youth workers dealing with young people engaged in violence and extremism point to the current funding climate as a massive issue in tackling the problem. Despite the early intervention of funders on the scale previously discussed, many in the sector fear that there is a huge underestimation of the ongoing impacts of the conflict which is still not being addressed. Funding is now being focused on other areas, with the obvious implications this has on areas of work undertaken.

In my view, I fear that for too long we have avoided talking to our young people about difficult questions. Rightly or wrongly we have wanted to protect the next generation from the horror of the troubles, and have too often mistaken their silence for resilience. While local government need to play their role in ensuring that these issues continue to be addressed at a policy level, it is incumbent on us as youth workers to tackle the hard issues through open dialogue, and to help these young people find a more productive means of engaging with their community and each other.



# My kid is an extremist

By Gisèle Evrard and Filip Coussée



One morning of summer 2012 Myrddhin, a 10 year-old kid, stops what he is doing and asks: "What does it mean to be unconventional?" After receiving the relatively standard definition that it generally relates to a behaviour that isn't "in accordance with the given norms and conventions" and some examples, his next question is: "Does that mean that it is necessarily bad to be unconventional?"

The point here is not to try to define what is normal and what is not; other articles in this issue will tackle the question of "normality". Nonetheless, it raises two predominant issues: how teenagers perceive the question of norms and social behaviour and how adults deal with that perception. When linked to social behaviour, extremism is always measured against "something" that is supposed to match a series of norms and standards. The relativity of the latter can and possibly ought to be questioned. If it in any way diminishes the importance of social conventions, it certainly highlights the fact that norms are not only different for each of us or our social groups (something we knew already) but also the fact that adolescents behave differently than adults, for reasons that can be social as well as neurological.

## The social brain of an adolescent

Let's first take the time to look at how the so-called social brain of an adolescent functions. Recent studies in neuroscience have demonstrated that certain parts of our brain – and especially the prefrontal cortex – develop differently depending on our age and neuroscientists have paid particular attention to how the brains of adolescents evolve. In her recent talks and work on this topic, Sarah-Jayne Blakemore, neuroscientist at University College in London, defines adolescence as a period going from “the one of physical changes during puberty to the capacity of an individual to play an independent role in society”. One may smile reading this, wondering when the second part of the definition really comes into reality, if ever. Nonetheless, in numbers this supposedly relates to young people aged 10 to 15, on average.





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Now that we managed to place adolescence on someone's personal timeline, what do we mean by the social brain? The social brain and in particular the prefrontal cortex of a human brain is what allows one to understand people's ways to relate and to interact, to understand emotions and to make decisions, among other aspects. It is therefore also a condensed set of cognitive functions that allow a person to take risks or not (to measure the consequences), to elaborate strategies, to plan, to adjust behaviours, to make social decisions, and to almost simultaneously assess the degree of a possibly rewarding process.

### So far, so good

Adolescents tend to have an extraordinary capacity to not only understand irony or to measure the part of truth and exaggeration in someone's discourse, but also to feel emotions to a higher degree than adults and, therefore, to experience intensely the rewarding feeling that follows decision making. This also explains why adolescents are high risk-takers, because the emotions and related rewards are as important and relevant as the level of risk to be taken. However, the part of the brain focusing on social relations – our now well-known prefrontal cortex – is less developed during adolescence than in adulthood. This means that factual analysis or reasoning is less predominant in an adolescent mind. This is the reason why impulses, emotions and the need to find greater recognition and support from one's peers and social group is higher than for an adult (in principle, at least). In her book, *The Art of Choosing*, Sheena Iyengar (2010) goes along the same line of analysis when examining how people make choices (in general) in order to highlight the differences between adolescents, young people and adults as well as what motivates them to opt for certain choices rather than others, even for those which could be considered extreme ones.

Knowing how the social brains of adolescents function does not explain it all. When proper guidance and support is not made available to



young people, extremist types of behaviour can more easily occur. The social abilities of an adolescent may turn into cognitive and emotional disorders, but knowing this does not justify everything. Being unconventional is not "bad" per se. The fact that conventions and norms exist means that they can also be challenged and questioned.

What is the link between the social brain of an adolescent and extreme behaviours? To answer this one must look at social issues and how social behaviours and societies as such have developed in recent years. Blakemore concludes her work by stating how important education is, especially during adolescence. Adolescence is a vulnerable period. Pedagogical influence needs to be exercised to support the adolescent in becoming an independent person. Adolescence is a turbulent period of *Sturm und Drang*. This brings perhaps bigger risks to positive development, but at the same time "offers a fantastic opportunity for learning and creativity" (Blakemore 2012). This is the huge pedagogical paradox that makes our work so exciting, and difficult: we need to influence and direct young people to become more autonomous and independent, provide them with structures and boundaries for them to either evolve within, or break.



### Spaces

A democratic society needs spaces for expression, for reflection, for demonstration, for rebellion, for cohesion and for development. Where are those social spaces today? About 30 years ago, adolescents and young people were able to find spaces to – in accordance with their "social brain development" level – take risks, act, plan, redo the world, change it, destroy it and rebuild it again, in concrete or figurative terms. A democracy needs social spaces to discuss, foment new ideas and new ideologies. Even though some of those new, wild ideas were possibly considered as "unconventional" because they challenged the norms and what dominant streams in society considered as "common sense", these spaces generated creativity, allowing a renewal of thoughts, turning into new sources of inspiration (for politics, social behaviours, fashion, culture and art, etc.) and therefore, were an important source for social transformation. These spaces for "social movement" seem to have decreased dramatically, at least in the view of those who do not want to limit themselves to spaces that are "allocated" to them and considered as "acceptable".

Still, and paradoxically, there have probably never been so many opportunities for young people to get actively involved in their society, to participate, to develop projects, to travel, to study abroad, than during the last decade. Access to education and to non-formal learning spaces has increased, thus allowing higher prospects and chances for professional and personal development.



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### What is the problem then?

Today, those social spaces still exist, but they are more directed at individual development than at social movement. To a great extent they are institutionalised or even privatised, giving much more weight to ideas that fit into the mainstream of society. Instead of creating spaces for young people to practice democratic citizenship they increasingly focus on educating young people to become democratic citizens.

Pressure may be another reason for the mismatch between the way young people (and their identity/ies) express themselves in their “category” (social and cognitive) on the one hand and what society expects from them on the other. Education, learning, behaviour and integration into a constantly changing society are all elements which take on more and more importance in the ways of accompanying and/or educating younger generations.

Education as such requires not only more and more efforts and a huge diversity of knowledge and competences, but is also constantly increasing the level of efficiency and “meritocracy” which are expected from pupils and students. As Ken Robinson (2001, p.58) ironically highlights in his book, *Out of our mind*, in some urban centres the competition is so high and so intense that children are being interviewed for kindergarten.

A certain denial of the existence of “youth” as such has also emerged over the past 10 years.

“Adolescents” immediately access the status of “young adults”. Society (parents, policy, schools, youth workers, etc.) has transformed the youth period from a moratorium into a preparatory phase. Young people are demanded to fulfil the above-mentioned expectations as soon, as quick and as perfectly as possible. The whole idea of youth as a period of *Sturm und Drang* may still be underpinning our youth policies, but society seems to have decided to pre-structure that period so that experiments cannot go wrong and are channelled into safe environments instead of social spaces. We still talk about “young people” and refer to that age group between 14 and 20 year-olds as such, but there is no space anymore to “just be young”, or even to “just be”; young people are “adults-to-be”. Yet, it has become difficult for young people to be themselves. Their “social brain” is focused on exploring boundaries, taking risks, discovering the unknown, while our youth policies (or let’s say policies aimed at young people) focus on guiding young people into predefined territories of what we call “the democratic society”, based on economic development and individual meritocracy. The development of young people is pushed forward and further, stretched and confined into a concept of “rights and responsibilities” to be understood and practised from the youngest age possible. The younger children learn to behave as democratic citizens the safer our maintaining societal project will be.



### Making connections

The above does not mean that we detest the concept of “educational guidance” and that we should not foment a sense of initiatives, responsibilities and participation, but perhaps that we ought to allow more flexibility in the way, and when, this is effectively acknowledged, understood and a certain ownership of such process and concept is developed.

Without a bubble spacious enough for young people to express themselves, resist, contrast, confront, explode and come back, the risk of extremely divergent social behaviours gets undoubtedly higher. Indeed, together with a clear cognitive improvement during adolescence comes an increasing rate of antisocial and/or risky behaviours. As explained earlier, social properties and their related emotional significance are of utmost relevance during adolescence. Without proper spaces to develop and express themselves and without a proper “distant guidance” and support which allows for the former, frustration, impulse, inhibition or the incapacity to channel emotions can contribute to isolation, extreme risk taking and cognitive recession. In other terms and because adolescence is a period where recognition from peers is not only looked for but necessary for identity and personal development, the lack of spaces to “safely experiment” in one’s youth can lead to a certain rigidity of the identity, and therefore to extreme behaviours and to youth extremism.

That doesn’t mean that such a process is only one sided and negative (as we try to demonstrate in this issue, “extremism” is not necessarily bad and the connotation we give to the word is socially

and politically biased), but the danger of “losing young people on the way” may be higher. This has an impact not only on the young person as such, but also on the whole society. We need “extremist” spaces for young people to develop and express themselves because it helps the society to grow, to renew itself, to get inspired. Without those sources of social development, the rigidity reaches us all. But let’s not isolate those spaces from society. Youth spaces are not reservations where young people can grow up in splendid isolation. This attitude creates the conditions for young people to develop either “borderless” or “template identities”.

If you wonder if adolescents are different, think differently and behave differently than adults, you are totally right. Not only because they are “young” but because their bodies and minds function differently. Space and support, flexibility and guidance are the paradoxical, yet necessary elements to help them grow and develop into autonomous, critical and independent people. If we really are in favour of democratic societies then young people must have the freedom to experiment and express themselves, even in extreme ways. In our youth work jargon, we usually say that “to be challenged is a good thing”, don’t we? A bon entendeur...

*“As long as any adult thinks that he, like the parents and teachers of old, can become introspective, invoking his own youth to understand the youth before him, he is lost.”* Margaret Mead

Inspired by Muse, *Uprising*, Mushroom records

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