CHAPTER 1

# *Questioning the concept of youth*

## 1.1 A problem of definition

> We are living in a period of considerable indignation and concern about our young people. If we believe the media, there is little right with today's youth: they drink too much, they overindulge in sex and violence, they hang around the streets and disturb the neighbourhood, they are irresponsible in taking risks and not thinking about the future, they have no concern for other people and are only interested in their own gain, they are self-indulgent and lazy, and are obsessed by the internet. In education there is a culture of 'a pass is good enough' – and these malingerers then have the nerve to go on strike!

These are the opening words of a lecture delivered in 2008 by P. M. Westenberg, Professor of Developmental and Educational Psychology at Leiden University in the Netherlands. The lecture was on 'The Youth of Today!' Westenberg and his team at the Leiden Brain and Development Lab have studied the cognitive and psychological development of adolescents. Their research has demonstrated that the brain is not fully developed at the end of childhood: the brain continues to mature up to the age of twenty or even twenty-four. The different parts of the brain do not develop synchronously: development runs roughly speaking from the bottom up and from back to front. The frontal parts are the last in line. Since particular parts of the brain support specific functions, the cognitive and psychosocial behaviour of adolescents seems to be influenced by the continuous development of the brain. Adolescence is thus not limited to puberty. These new insights explain in part the age-old confusion about young people: are they mature or not? In some ways yes, and in others no. Westenberg throws historical light on the subject: 'For centuries, adolescents have been put in a bad light because of their impulsive, restless and immoral

behaviour. This was the case in Egypt four thousand years ago, and it is no different now.'[1]

Neuropsychological research informs us about human behaviour and human reactions – patterns we all share in a certain sense across the borders of time and culture, by the very fact that we are all human beings. When these statements are applied at the level of society, one practises sociobiology. Yet the relation between historians and sociobiologists has never been a happy one. If one wishes to examine love over a period of many centuries employing sociobiological theories and axioms, one is prone to be seduced by history of a very *longue durée*, inevitably coming to the conclusion that people from the past in many cases reacted 'just like us'. A radical application of sociobiological premises is found in Linda Pollock's original book *Forgotten Children. Parent–Child Relations from 1500 to 1900*. It seems as if humans are programmed into feelings of attachment in the course of bringing up children, since the survival of the species is dependent on this. So it comes as no surprise to read that Pollock in her study of autobiographical documents from over a period of more than 400 years concludes that parents and educators have always loved their children and have always done their utmost to secure their best chances of survival.

In the conclusion of this book, we will again turn our attention to the question as to whether it is advisable to exclude the results of sociobiological research from sociocultural studies. Suffice it to mention here that historians are not so much interested in general biological patterns as in the ways people and societies in the past shaped those patterns.[2] In the case of pubescents or adolescents, did people in the past recognise their typical youthful behaviour? Did they use specific terms to denote these youngsters and their way of life? Did they have laws or social customs to protect this particular phase of life? Was this life stage a problem at all? This last question in particular became increasingly important and urgent in the first half of the twentieth century. The immediate cause of the renewed attention brought to bear on youth was the findings of a young American anthropologist on the beautiful Polynesian island of Samoa in the South Pacific. This anthropological description came at exactly the right moment and was so skilfully reported in the media and popularised that no true intellectual could afford simply to pass over the question.

[1] Westenberg 2008. For more information on the neuropsychological research on adolescence at Leiden University, especially by the Brain and Development Lab (part of the Leiden Institute for Brain and Cognition), see www.libc-leiden.nl or http://brainanddevelopmentlab.nl; see also Chapter 8.1.

[2] For an example from the field of ancient history, see Evenepoel and Van Houdt 1997.

## 1.2 Mead in Samoa

The American anthropologist Margaret Mead (1901–78) performed her fieldwork on Samoa during 1925–6. She wrote about social life on this island in her best-selling book *Coming of Age in Samoa*, which first appeared in 1928 and which describes many remarkable findings concerning upbringing in this remote part of the world. Readers were struck by the very different attitude towards children and education. While people in Samoa celebrated the birth of a baby, birthdays and age awareness were hardly important in later life. Children at the age of five or six were entrusted with caring for the toddlers in the community. In no way did children form a segregated and protected group: adults frequently behaved brutally towards children who did not belong to their own families. There were very few significant choices to be made by young people. While boys had to choose between a limited number of professions, namely those of fisherman, hunter or builder of huts, girls had to look to their honour and good reputation in order to become marriageable and wanted wives.

Family life in Samoa did not resemble the western nuclear family at all. Concepts such as maternal love or gratitude towards a parent hardly existed. Children often moved into other families – they certainly did not stay with their biological parents during the entire period of their youth. Age groups were important for socialisation and entertainment. In such groups, the division between boys and girls was very strict. First encounters and sexual experiences between boys and girls were regulated according to fixed traditions and rituals.

The lack of privacy, as western people understand it, was striking. Owing to the circular construction of the huts, which had only one living space, the people of Samoa were hardly ever alone. Moreover, daily conversation did not pay much attention to the inner psychological motivations which led people to perform specific deeds. However, the so-called *nusu*-attitude served to compensate for this lack of privacy. At every single moment a person could refuse to do something. He was not expected to give a reason for his refusal, nor was it customary to ask about this. This was the way in which people were somehow protected against others constantly looking at them or interfering with their psyche.

Mead marvelled at the open and unrestrained attitude of the Samoans towards sexuality. Children were confronted with it at an early age. The lack of privacy caused them to view adults' sexual acts. First menstruation was a subject openly discussed. Masturbation occurred in groups and homosexual acts were tolerated as a kind of boyish game.

There were hardly ever conflicts over education as so often arise in western society. When education became a problem in one particular family, the young person was simply transferred to another family. Moreover, alliances between peers were never binding: tensions were resolved simply by moving into another group. Mead mentions conflicts which arose at the mission school: yet neither there did conflicts ever escalate. Parents considered sending their children to the mission school to be a very normal event (they could also simply send them to another family), and the children were not troubled by tensions at school since they were simply transferred to another family in the case of difficulties. Generational conflicts were most rare: the elders' advice was appreciated. Old men continued to contribute to Samoan society, just as older women continued doing jobs in the household.

Based on her description of Samoan society, Mead came to far-reaching conclusions. It seemed to her that the unspoiled society of New Guinea was in many respects happier than western society. There were hardly any frictions or tensions and no neuroses as in the modern world. Life was much more casual, without passion or hate, war or ambition. Life was slower: upbringing and education were gradual processes. Precocious children were not particularly appreciated, nor was precocity encouraged. There was no distinction between work and play: children both worked and played and often learned their trade while playing. Samoan children were never confronted with difficult and distressing choices, whether relating to religion or sexuality or group membership (there was no intermingling between girls' and boys' gender groups). Moreover, children were not exposed to the ambiguities of divisive hypocrisy (Mead was drawing attention both to the United States of her lifetime – which preached equality in the Declaration of Independence while practising racism – and the Christian churches – which suffered from the contradiction between ideals and everyday reality). Some evident truths of western societies were simply non-existent in Samoa. The individual had no importance. For this reason, there was no 'specialised' parenthood, whereby parents transmitted their personality to their children; rather there was a plurality of educators, thought of as aunts or uncles. Friendship was considered to be a category (the fact of having good contacts with people from the same age or sex group) rather than a special feeling. Birth, sex, and death were considered natural things: children were often confronted with these phenomena, and the confrontation was not regarded as traumatising.

Mead's main conclusion was that the *Sturm und Drang* period of youth in western Europe and the United States was not at all caused by physiological factors. On the contrary, it was a product of western culture and the

role imposed on young people in that society. In all this western education played a major role. In her final remarks, Mead displayed her own paedagogical concerns. It was no longer possible to return western people back to a 'primitive' society and a life without difficult choices. The major task of both parents and educators now consisted of teaching children how to make choices: 'Children must be taught how to think, not what to think.'[3]

Mead's description of an untouched, peaceful and stress-free society beside the white beaches of the South Pacific resonated with a large audience of readers in American society, then troubled by the economic crisis of the nineteen-twenties. With her first book, the young anthropologist became a leading figure in her branch of scholarship and a media personality whose theories were eagerly adopted by paedagogues and psychologists. *Coming of Age in Samoa* has been a classic for students of anthropology for decades, and was considered to provide definitive proof of the theses of Mead's supervisor Franz Boas (1858–1942), who had stated that nurture dominates nature and that human behaviour and social customs were by and large culturally determined.

Mead's picture of Samoan society turned out to be a dream, a dream from which Mead was possibly awoken at the end of her life. According to the testimonies of her personal friends, she met the anthropologist Derek Freeman at this time. He informed her of his discoveries about Samoan society. The results of his research were devastating for Mead's theses, and the personal allegations were not to be dismissed easily: Mead's fieldwork was characterised as careless and inaccurate, and she was accused of prejudice and generalisation in her conclusions, even of academic fraud in order to confirm the cultural-deterministic theories of her supervisor Boas.[4] Freeman published his findings five years after Mead's death. The reactions of the anthropological establishment were violent. In 1983 the American Anthropological Association accepted a motion in which it was stated that Freeman's work was 'unscholarly, irresponsible and deceptive'. It seemed as if the mere thought that the image of the 'noble and untouched savage' needed adjustment was unbearable to cultural relativists.[5]

One can hardly claim that Freeman's direct attack came from a suspect source. Freeman had become fascinated by Samoan culture shortly after the publication of *Coming of Age in Samoa*. He became a regular visitor to the

[3] Mead 1928: 240–54 (quote on p. 253). [4] Freeman 1983: 281–93.
[5] Meanwhile, anthropologists have partly acknowledged the existence of errors in Mead's work. Kleijwegt 1991: 7 mentions some modest anthropological defences of Mead, which turned out to be unconvincing.

island, learned the language and got to know the culture; he even became a full member of Samoan society, in which he was politically active. His deep acquaintance with Samoa led him to conclusions which were remarkably contrary to Mead's results. He sharply criticised the methodological shortcomings of her research: she spent only ten weeks learning the language and had to rely on interpreters. During her short stay on the island she never lived with the inhabitants, as she stayed with an American family. She often conducted her research using interviews, the results of which she never checked. Moreover, she was not always aware of the customs or peculiarities of Samoan culture: on her trips she was often accompanied by two Samoan girls who told her stories about sexual encounters and games with their peers. It turned out that an open conversation about sexuality was very unusual in Samoa: teasingly lying about such matters was considered a national sport. In an interview in 1987 one of the girls acknowledged that they had indeed both lied about their first promiscuous sexual experiences. It should not come as a surprise that Freeman's conclusions were radically opposite to Mead's views. Samoa was not at all a paradise of sexual liberty. The inhabitants stuck to a rather strict sexual moral code, emphasising the girls' virginity. Freeman's analysis of the composition of households revealed that the nuclear family was by far the best represented, and that children were in no way arbitrarily exchanged. Samoan society was quite brutal and violent: physical punishment of children was a rather frequent phenomenon.

As was to be expected, Freeman's attack was in turn nuanced. The findings of Raymond Firth and the Ritchie brothers on the Polynesian isle of Tikopia largely confirmed Mead's views. Moreover, these anthropologists found education and upbringing to be secured by the broader social environment, a smooth transition from childhood to adulthood and labour, and rites of passage which strongly emphasised adult status, not the specificity of the youthful stage of life. In the end, it is hardly possible to deny the significant differences between western and Polynesian views of youth.[6]

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One could question the relevance of an anthropological discussion of Samoan society to an ancient historian's inquiry into youth in the Roman Empire. Indeed, through its preference for wealth and conspicuous consumption, Roman society seems much closer to contemporary society than

[6] Kleijwegt 1991: 7–11 succinctly summarises Firth's and the Ritchies' theories.

to the habits of a remote nation in the South Pacific. However, the Mead case can be instructive for ancient historians for two reasons. Firstly, Mead's mistakes are a reminder of the dangers of theoretical prejudice (the obstinate defence of a theory, even if all proof runs counter to it). Her faults can serve as a warning against projecting a view from the present and the erroneous conclusions which are then based on it. If even a direct form of investigation like the interview proves to be unreliable (this being due not to cheating but rather to forms of self-representation or language games in a certain culture), so much more caution should an ancient historian exercise when confronted with seemingly personal information in literary sources embedded in fashions of composition and rhetorical conventions. Nor should one view Samoan society as a paradise of sexual liberty simply because Samoans exhibited sexual acts which seem strange or libertine from our western point of view. On the contrary, they too had rules and standards, although these norms were quite different from our own.

Secondly, Mead's opinions were accepted by such a large audience of scholars that the refusal to take part in a dialogue would suggest an almost unworldly aloofness. We should at least be prepared to face the possibility that youth is not a cross-cultural and self-evident phenomenon, and that some societies did not in a certain sense recognise youth. This counts for Roman society too.

## 1.3 Ariès, Shorter, and Stone: in search of change in history

*L'enfant et la vie familiale sous l'Ancien Régime* by Philippe Ariès first appeared in 1960 and was to become a milestone in the historiography of childhood and youth in earlier centuries. Ariès' main thesis is well known: in the past, childhood and youth were hardly ever appreciated as specific phases of life with their own identity.[7] Childhood was a short period characterised by physical weakness and dependence. Immediately after this stage of life, children were thrown into adult life. There was no period of youth with an adolescent crisis or a search for identity. The sensibility of childhood and youth (Ariès uses the somewhat ambiguous term *le sentiment de l'enfance*) is a modern invention. This gradual invention is to be situated in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, beginning with the upper class, but spreading to a larger part of the population as well in the nineteenth century.

[7] 'The past' Ariès refers to is the Middle Ages, mainly in France and England. In the foreword to the third edition (1973, p. ii) he admits that things might have been different in antiquity.

It would take us too long to set out all Ariès' arguments in the present book. He tries to prove the absence of a specific phase of childhood or youth in divisions of the human life span, in arts and in clothing. Play and games were also approached very differently in the Middle Ages: they were not specifically oriented towards children. Dolls were adult figures. Adults and children often played together, especially in communal participation in seasonal festivities. As far as bodily matters and sexuality are concerned, there was a remarkable indifference, contrary to the fearful attention towards childish innocence and concerns for the moral integrity of adolescents in modern times. On the other hand, Ariès describes the harsh disciplinary approach towards children in schools as a product of the invention of childhood. In schools and colleges of the Early Modern period youngsters were placed in quarantine, as it were, segregated from society. Finally, the rise of the bourgeois family in the eighteenth century and the new ideals of privacy and intimacy were factors that contributed to the valuing of children and youths. Evidently, some of Ariès' theses have been revised and corrected by historical research of the past forty-five years. But it has to be admitted that some critics have made oversimplified judgements about Ariès. Prevailing opinion alleges that, according to him, people in the past, before the invention of childhood, did not care for their children. This is at the very least an incomplete rendering of his thesis. Ariès has always stressed that the nuclear family was by no means the exclusive focus of love and affection in the Middle Ages. Love and care could be found in the broad social context of, for instance, the village community.[8] So, according to Ariès, love and care also existed in the medieval family, but it was not an essential part of it, as it is at least expected to be in our society.

What methodological objections could be made against Ariès' 'discoveries'? Of course, he approaches the past from quite a narrow point of view. The past is, as it were, evaluated against a twentieth-century concept of childhood. When practices or concepts do not match contemporary ideas, they are branded as *absence du sentiment de l'enfance*. Consequently, Ariès sticks to a very linear approach to history, presupposing a progressive evolution towards the present. Meanwhile, refined methodological approaches towards history have taught that it is possible for historians who are imprisoned in their own age to free themselves from extremely relativist opinions.[9] Furthermore, the metaphor of 'discovery' is in fact an infelicitous one. It is much safer to assume that people in the past also had

[8] In the 1973 edition Ariès defends himself against this unjustified critique on pp. ii–iii.
[9] Wilson 1980: 147–9.

their *sentiment d'enfance* (even if it were quite different from ours) and that changes in mentality (affective, rational or moral changes) develop only very gradually in different periods and in different places (geographical and/or social).[10] Moreover, the remarkable underestimation of the Middle Ages is symptomatic of Ariès' work. Many studies have shown Ariès' picture of medieval times not to be in keeping with reality. Theoretical and reflective treatises from the Middle Ages did pay attention to the specificity of children. The daily life of small toddlers did happen in the family – it was the family that took care of babies' development in terms of early nutrition, first steps or hygiene. Apprentice boys were mostly older than Ariès believed them to be. Sending children away from their homes at an early age was not a widespread practice. Disciplinary measures were certainly not an invention of the Modern period: the beating of children with a rod by the schoolmaster is frequently mentioned in medieval literature.[11] Ariès' neglect of demographic evidence and the numbers it can provide for life expectancy, mortality rates, etc. is distressing. Moreover, he paid but little attention to early childhood, the period before seven years of age, most probably because he presumed that such children were mainly left to fend for themselves. However, psychology has pointed to the crucial importance of this phase of life for further human development. First contacts with adults, the discovery of love or rejection, the development of the motor system and intelligence, are fields one should bear in mind when sketching a balanced view of children, regardless of the period of time or society. Paradoxically enough, Ariès somehow stuck to the traditional picture of children's clothing, school and games, despite his broad view and attention to unconventional sources.[12] Finally, Ariès' use of iconographical sources is debatable. One can justifiably ask oneself how far the appearance of child portraits in Renaissance art points to changing attitudes in society. Other factors might have played a role: Renaissance artists deeply admired art from antiquity, they had better technical possibilities at their disposal, ideas on art had changed. Until the fourteenth century art had been basically religious and symbolic. One should therefore question whether the lack of realistic or everyday scenes in paintings reflects a lack of interest in these aspects of life.[13]

[10] See Flandrin 1964: 329; Wilson 1980: 142–3; Kleijwegt 1991: 17–18. Ariès himself has confessed to this weakness in his work: Ariès 1973: vii–ix.

[11] Wilson 1980: 140–3; Kleijwegt 1991: 18–19 and Becchi and Julia 1998: 23–4 on Ariès' misconception of the Middle Ages and an ample bibliography on childhood in this period of history. The standard work by Orme 2001 strongly opposes Ariès' view of the Middle Ages.

[12] Flandrin 1964: 322–3; Becchi and Julia 1998: 20.

[13] Flandrin 1964: 328; Wilson 1980: 145–6; Strubbe 1982: 50–1; Becchi and Julia 1998: 24–5.

Despite these critiques, one can say that Ariès' work has stood the test of time: childhood and youth are no longer considered as suprahistorical givens but as phenomena which are closely linked with cultural customs and change in a particular society.

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Even more ambitious and proof of an even bigger intellectual force is the monumental *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500–1800* by Lawrence Stone (1977), a massive book of more than 800 pages and about 1,300 footnotes. The manner of its composition and presentation, the size and nature of its subject, as well as the author's academic reputation, all contributed to the interest with which the book was received, not least through attracting a large audience of readers. Much more than Ariès, Stone directs his attention to the lower middle class and the poorer sector of the population. He has an eye for social diversity and changes through time, and sketches a truly brilliant picture of daily life in England in the period under study. Generally speaking, he sees a shift from the extended patriarchal familial model, operative until about 1600 after having been the predominant model in Europe for at least a millennium, via a smaller family with strict patriarchal power, to the 'modern' nuclear family unit, in which affection, privacy, exclusivity in the choice of a partner, love, and understanding between spouses and children were cherished as important values. The patriarchal family model came into being around 1540, reached its zenith in the Puritan period of 1580–1640, only to die out around about 1700. Stone dates the beginning of the nuclear family to about 1640, and it became the dominant model only after 1800. Stone carefully shuns naive belief in progress and emphasises that the history of family life actually progresses at different speeds, depending on social class and cultural diversity. As explanatory factors for the rise of the modern nuclear family he points to what he calls the typical Anglo-Saxon sense of individualism, fed by Protestantism and philosophical currents.

Edward Shorter's *The Making of the Modern Family (18th–20th Century)* appeared two years before Stone's book, but belongs to the same Anglo-Saxon school as far as definition of the problem, methodology, subject, and conclusions are concerned. Shorter opposes the exclusive attention to literary sources which are not representative of the lower classes and radically opts for a study of the daily life of ordinary people, relying on documents such as medical reports by doctors from the country, administrative documents, and folklore. For him too domestic love and intimacy, romantic love, and the privacy of the nuclear family unit are 'inventions' of