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University of Kent sociologist Frank Furedi:

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# "Who am I?" is a relatively modern question

EXCLUSIVE



Frank Furedi is a Hungarian-Canadian academic, emeritus professor of sociology at the University of Kent in Canterbury, UK, and author of '100 Years of Identity Crisis: Culture War Over Socialization', published by De Gruyter in 2021.

Let's begin here: why do you think there is a crisis of identity?

I think that there are a number of reasons for it. The most important one is that there has been a disconnection between the present and the past, particularly in Western societies, where the organic links of people with their cultural legacy and their community has become very feeble and weak, and young people in particular are not socialized into understanding who they are, where they come from, and therefore, as they make their way in the world, they find it very difficult to give meaning to who they are and they become confused about that.

I think that that's something that began fairly clearly in the 1970s, and it's been getting more and more powerful ever since. So it basically means that people are not able to answer the questions that life poses for them.

So, why there is a 100 years of identity crisis on the title of your book?

The reason why I say that is because the problem that we're discussing emanates from the fact that at a certain point, many of the technocratic political elites within Western societies began to want to distance themselves from the ideals and the values of their society and instead wanted to substitute for that what they saw as more kind of scientific, expert-led ways of being. And in the course of doing that, what they did was they basically began to sort of encourage young people to ignore the legacy of the past to be seen as being outdated. And everything from before was called "outdated", that is, by definition, no longer relevant. As that kind of trend became stronger, and stronger, and stronger, over the 20th century, it created a situation where, at a certain point, people had no idea as to what the connection was between them

and their own history. And the question then became, well, what do you do if you tell children, that the values of the past are no good? What are you going to socialize them with? And the answer they came up with, was by using the resources of psychology. And, basically instead of telling them values like courage, duty, and solidarity, they began to emphasize children's emotional needs. Then, you had a kind of socialization that I call "socialization by validation", where you make children feel good, and you want to raise their self-esteem, and you don't criticize them, and you hope that by psychologically encouraging them in that kind of way, you don't have to worry about giving them clear guidance, clear inspirations, what the values that they should believe and uphold, as they make their way in the world.

So is it fair to assume that the problem you have identified is a problem of

too much individualization at the expense of the community?

No, really, I think that's false to counterpose those things. I think the problem is that when the individual is seen very much as an isolation, as an atomized individual. And when you regard the individual as being essentially weak, and in need of psychological support, and you emphasize their internalized, i.e., what matters is what they feel, rather than what they do. That's the tragedy when you begin to ignore the fact that you or me, should be defined by what we accomplished by our world, increasingly in Western society. People were validated by their feelings and their internal identity.

So, with those in mind, how does your discussion play into the whole thing of identity politics?

I think that what happens is at a certain point, people begin to become more and

more concerned with their identity, that is, more and more concerned with finding some kind of meaning in the absence of being socialized by proper values. One consequence of that is that as people become more and more obsessed with their identity, it becomes available for being politicized. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, we had this important situation where, as they said in America, the person became political: Your kind of identity became a political resource that was arguably more important than whether you believed in communism, or socialism, or liberalism, or conservatism.

In the second chapter of your book, you talk about the discovery, or actually the invention, of adolescence. Why was adolescence invented?

Gosh, I wrote that a long time ago. I think that adolescence was invented because of the fact that you needed to have access to

young people, for the moment in their existence.

And one of the ways in which that was accomplished was by making a very strong distinction between both children and young kids and adolescents. But also adolescents became both seen as a distinct stage, where you try to influence them to adopt the right kind of values. And the invention of the American High School, which I write about, becomes a way in which these people become socialized by these teachers who are teaching them stuff. That's very different than the values of their parents who kind of creating a site distance between a teenager and that parents and their grandparents.

It reminds me of the ideas developed by Neil Postman in his book, 'Disappearance of Childhood'. Do you see parallels between your work and his? I'm not really sure. I mean, his book is very interesting.