

## KIDULTS AS A PHENOMENON OF POSTMODERNITY

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### КІДЛІТ – ЯК ЯВИЩЕ ПОСТМОДЕРНІЗМУ

**1**. **An attempt to identify kidults.** The English word *kidults* is formed from two words: “kid” and “adult”. The *kidults* term was first used in “The New York Times” in 1985. The author of the term, Peter Martin, applied it to describe people who take advantage of the experience of adulthood, while at the same time – like children – fleeing from its hardships and obligations. Although they are adults, in many respects their views and attitudes hide a reluctance towards adulthood. In other words, *kidults* are those who try to return to a safe childhood, to happy ignorance. They want, Martin writes, freedom from responsibility for the world, and wish for the right to arrange matters in a specific, unique pattern which brings them a sense of wonder and wellbeing.

The description of *kidults* published some years ago in “Rzeczpospolita” is also interesting. It includes, among other things, the idea that “a kidult is a middle-aged person who participates in youth culture and surrounds himself with gadgets of this nature. This is the definition. In practice, this term resembles a

bottomless pit into which you can throw everything, and everyone who has passed the magical age of thirty, will find something of a kidult in himself. This can be a fascination with Harry Potter, a collection of tin soldiers on the shelf, a miniskirt with colorful ruffles, a hoodie on a serious CEO, ponytails instead of elegantly styled hair, lilac flowers painted on a silver car”<sup>1</sup>.

Highlighting the originality of this phenomenon, the author of the text in “Rzeczpospolita” rightly noted: “The thing is that once it did not seem right to do certain things at a certain age, whereas today no one is surprised. Although a true kidult may seem ridiculous. Just as Kuba Wojewodzki, who is old enough to be a grandfather, and yet is a teenage idol, seems to some”<sup>2</sup>.

Frank Furedi, the English sociologist, and author of many publications about this phenomenon, writes of a whole generation *kidults*, whose characteristic features are: 1. Consumer behavior; 2. Style of dress; 3. A return to children’s literature (eg. Harry Potter); 4. Children’s gadgets; 5. Keeping the world at a distance; 6. Spontaneous behavior; 7. Having fun<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Kidults w średnim wieku, “Rzeczpospolita” (November 7, 2007.), in: <http://www.rp.pl/artukul/67388.html> (June 10, 2015.).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. M. Gębicka-Andrian, Dzieci Piotrusia Pana, “Wprost” 2006, Nr. 22, p. 69.

All in all, one can even speak of the “*kiddification*” of the entire Euro-Atlantic culture. What form does this take? Adults often give up seeking creative solutions in the field of intellectual endeavour, and limit their communication to superficial media, as well as becoming addicted to the content transmitted via this media, accepting it uncritically and unthinkingly.

It seems that this trend, which occurs in European and North American culture, and so in developed and wealthy countries, bears a close resemblance to the fantasy literature character Peter Pan. Of course, the story of Peter Pan is a classic work of children’s literature by James Matthew Barrie. Peter Pan was a little boy. His lifelong dream was to stay a child, to be able to live in a child’s imagination, to have endless fun, and – obviously – to avoid taking on the challenges and obligations of adulthood. The story is – of course – a long and interesting one. The reader learns that the desire of Peter Pan was so strong that he did, in fact, never grow up. He always remained a little boy, not ready for fatherhood or starting a family.

Well, what was once only a figment of literary imagination (Barry published his book in 1902), today could be described as a social manifestation of the syndrome of Peter Pan. For example, Francesco Cataluccio, author of the book *Immaturity – the disease of our time*, believes that this syndrome is a disease that has taken control of the modern world. People behave as if they did not want to be adults. They do not want to take responsibility for the world in which they live. They do not even want to take responsibility for their own lives. For them, imitating the role models of immature pop culture is enough. They can be satisfied with such experiences as an adventure or any kind of travel. In general – according to Cataluccio – those people do not pose questions, do not think, do not worry about the future, do not take anything or anyone seriously, are satisfied with their illusions, looking for endless fun and relaxing moments.

The author notes, however, that people affected by the Peter Pan syndrome, a generation of *kidults*, may also adopt an attitude of “infantilisation” because society gives them a sense of security. He suggests, probably rightly, that the *kidults* phenomenon is mainly a problem in rich, wealthy societies.

Whatever the case, it is easy to note, however, that the *kidults* phenomenon also occurs in poorer

countries, in which it has economic causes. Young people put off the time of maturity and self-reliance, because it is convenient for them to be dependent on their parents. According to Eurostat, nearly 2.5 million Poles between the ages of 25 and 34 years old still live at home. On the other hand, two-thirds of young Europeans still rely on the support of their parents. In Italy, 70 percent of the so-called *mammoni*, namely men aged 30 – 35 years old, still live in the family home<sup>4</sup>.

This is also a problem in the United Kingdom, France, Germany or even the United States and Japan. These countries face the problem of young people who in adulthood are still dependent on their parents. Most of these *kidults* cannot even leave their parents because they do not study, have no job, no idea of what to do in life<sup>5</sup>. They describe themselves as “very close to their parents”, “satisfied with life”, “well-dressed and good-looking”, “single”, “not wanting too much independence”. In contrast, people around them perceive them as “very close to their parents”, “dependent on the family”, “conservative”, “mentally weak”, “standing on the sidelines”<sup>6</sup>.

*Kidults* have problems primarily with healthy human relationships. This is particularly evident in attempts to establish friendships with others. Psychology distinguishes three levels of developing and maintaining friendships in children: the level of “profit and loss”, the level of standards and the level of empathy. Peter Pan usually stops at the first level. It is a friendship characteristic of the development of a child up to the age of eight, based on shared activities, residing in the same neighborhood, similar expectations. Peter Pan is not interested in the normative level, or empathy. His friendship lasts as long as the friends meet his desires and needs, how long they have similar interests, and so as long as the “profits” of these relationships are larger than the “losses”. If the standards and principles that guide his friends begin to be dissimilar to his views, the friendship ends, simply disappears.

## 2. *Kidults’ presence in the social sphere.*

The *kidults* mentality can penetrate into the realm of political life. Then it becomes dangerous because everyone, willy-nilly, is exposed to its effects. For many politicians, concern for appearance, choice of emotions, the need to produce a good impression, become their priority, but that’s not all. The most dangerous aspect seems to be that *kidults* do not have a sense of perspective in political activity. What matters

<sup>4</sup> Cf. A. Bojar, M. Mistrzak, Maminynek polski, “Wprost” 2010, Nr. 43, pp. 60 – 61.

<sup>5</sup> In Poland, the *kidults* phenomenon has only a partial resemblance to what can be observed in developed countries. Not all young people living with their parents and dependent on them, can be classified as *kidults*. Many of them remain in this situation because of unemployment. They would happily leave this kind of dependency, and so often choose to emigrate to find work.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. A. Zwoliński, *Tato gdzie jesteś?*, Wydawnictwo Petrus, Kraków 2015, p. 125.

is the present moment for them. They dissociate themselves from the past, treating it as unnecessary burden, and do not reflect too much on the future. Quite like children.

It seems that this infantilisation in the political sphere is concealed in a so-called social or political lemming attitude (a category beloved of sociologists and political scientists today). The infantilisation of political lemmings is sometimes staggering. One of the readers of "Gazeta Polska Codziennie", in a text entitled *Lemmings will believe anything*, wrote: "I know what I'm saying, because I have a son who is a lemming. He is 34 years old and when I tell him that, for example, will not have a pension, he attacks the "Prawo i Sprawiedliwość" (Law and Justice) party. I express my opinion and he sticks to his... I tell him: I'm not talking about PiS, but about your future, that's what I'm worried about! Because in 10 – 15 years, you're going to come begging to me ... It makes you want to sit down and cry over this generation"<sup>7</sup>.

What is a political lemming? The phrase itself seems to be appropriate, because it refers to the name of a rodent, which reportedly has suicidal tendencies. A political lemming is a person who uncritically accepts the information given to him. He consumes media information without reflection and unwittingly lets himself be seduced by propaganda. Doing this, he harms himself and all those with whom he shares his fate.

Sometimes the *kidults* generation adopts an attitude which is almost a caricature, as reflected in the almost obsessive cult of youth. In many rich countries, the younger generation includes not only teens or twenties, but also thirty- and even forty-somethings. The results of one survey conducted in the U.S. and the U.K. are interesting. More than two-thirds of teenagers wrote that their parents do everything to appear "cool" to their children and their children's friends (*a cool mum*). Therefore, they wear jewellery meant for young people, have tattoos done, wear hipsters, willingly go to joint parties<sup>8</sup>.

It is clear then that the *kidults* generation stubbornly associate life with childhood and adolescence, which leads to the weakening or even the disappearance of responsibility and the work ethic, and a reverence for hedonism. A key feature of hedonism is that it sees pleasure as an unequivocal priority in life. And it tries to reduce life itself, which it associates with childhood and youth, to joy and fun. *Kidults*, taken over by hedonism, as well as selfishness, see adulthood as boredom and stagnation.

It's hard not to agree with the author of an article in "Rzeczpospolita", who wrote: "This collective immaturity benefits global manufacturers the most. This is demonstrated by the presence on the market of luxury gadgets resembling children's accessories – designer toys, pink cell phones, household appliances in the shape of fantasy creatures, animated films not intended for children, and clothing. These are expensive items, but *kidults* can afford them. In Poland, this longing for youth is also seen in nostalgia for the communist era. Today's thirty-somethings are eager to return to the cartoons of their childhood, the comics, bambino ice cream. Still, it is difficult to see a consumer culture-produced kidult in every lover of the adventures of Kapitan Ibik. Young Poles who are growing up in this new era, will no doubt soon live to see a sociological pigeon hole of their own"<sup>9</sup>.

### 3. The Christian aspect.

The *Kidults* generation is undoubtedly a challenge for Christianity. What strategy should evangelization adopt for them? When confronted with the *kidults* generation, one need certainly needs to avoid extremes. In pastoral practice, the problems of the *kidults* generation can neither be made light of (met with laughter) nor exaggerated, assuming that nothing in this area can be changed for the better.

Christianity has the means to effectively overcome that which in the *kidults* phenomenon constitutes an existential threat, disputes mature adulthood, obscures awareness of human dignity, plunges a person into spiritual apathy and distorts the image and likeness of God in man. The most important measure is the active power of Christian love, expressed in interpersonal relationships.

At this point, it is worth recalling some obvious truths that may be obvious, but which can lead to an effective breakthrough in the Peter Pan syndrome.

1. In friendships, it is essential to exit from the "profit and loss" level (as already mentioned above) to go on to higher levels. First, the normative level (where it is important to respect the same values, norms and principles), and then reach a mature stage of friendship – the empathetic level (which assumes mutual understanding, trust and shared interests).

2. However, reaching the empathetic level must be based on a specific anthropology, which gives a clear answer to the question of who man is. The Christian revelation provides this answer.

3. Entering the level of empathy in relationships with other people, which is a sign of maturity, in particular assumes that we always treat other humans

<sup>7</sup> Cf. M. Janicki, W. Władyka, Strategia leminga, in: <http://www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/kraj/1528687,1,kim-jest-polityczny-leming.read> (June 20, 2015.).

<sup>8</sup> P. Kozłowska, Dorosłe dzieci, "Przekrój" 2006, Nr 14, pp. 56 – 58; cf. A. Zwoliński, Tato gdzie jesteś?, p. 125.

<sup>9</sup> *Kidults w średnim wieku, "Rzeczpospolita"* (November 7, 2007.), Ibid.

personally. It seems that the childish human, the proverbial Peter Pan, has a chance to discover the personal wealth of his humanity, if he first discovers the person in another human (the discovery that another human is a person, leads to the realization that “I am also a person” – the personalistic theory).

4. In order to achieve a mature and responsible social attitude, it is important that Peter Pan sees in others both a neighbour (a close person with whom he is in a direct personal relationship), as a member of the community (and thus someone who, like him, is responsible for the fate of the community, for the common good). Both aspects are important when it comes to the practice of Christian love that liberates us from egoism. The intuition of faith suggests at this point that to “love person as a neighbour” means to reach out to him with direct acts of love. In contrast, to love a person as a member of the community, is to reach out to him with love indirectly through the structure of social life, institutions, societies, communities, or groups.

5. What is important is the approach, the general attitude, which the practice of love involves. *Kidults* usually do not realize that their way of showing love is not so much “bearing witness to love”, as mainly a “love of bearing witness”. Instead, it should be both. Here, it is extremely important to have the appropriate emphasis. The witness of love is nothing but the love of a particular human being, who we are in a personal relationship with, and the love of bearing witness is like love of love itself. Both of these elements must be in harmony with each other. If, in fact, there is only “love of a human being”, this love will be a kind of selflessness or altruism or selfless altruism and nothing more. If, however, the emphasis is exclusively on the “love of love” (when someone loves for the sake of love, because he likes to love) this love makes another human being its instrument. He or she becomes an opportunity to practice love. In fact, it may be that love as an idea or practice (eg. a charitable act) is more loved than the person.

6. In the Christian vision, the Pauline hymn to love in the First Letter to the Corinthians, a famous Christian manifesto of love, has a key significance. For *kidults*, this text can be a wonderful guide that enables a return to a mature and responsible adulthood.

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