

## AMERICAN YOUTH AND THE PROCESS OF SOCIAL CHANGE: A SOCIOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Americans have always been on the move, physically and spiritually. We have been a messianic and nomadic people from the time of our origins in self-elected saints and unashamed smugglers. Yet in the past our hopes for the future were rarely mixed with terrible doubts about the present. Today this is no longer true. We are a troubled people and our youth are at once the incarnation and the origin of much of what troubles us. Phrases such as "the youth culture" and "the generation gap" are on everyone's lips, whether one views the alleged differences between the generations with approval, dismay or skepticism.

The number-one best seller in non-fiction over most of the last year has been Yale law professor Charles Reich's, *The Greening of America*. Despite the general rancor of the critics, and judging from the book's sales, his thesis that the young are the bearers of a revolution in consciousness which will transform our institutions and lead us out of the swamp of alienation seems to strike a responsive chord among the reading public. At least they seem to feel that something is going on that they had better try to understand.

Some of his most vitriolic critics have attacked Reich for ignoring Marx's contention that changes in institutions produce changes in consciousness rather than the other way around. I do not intend to get involved in this argument except to express my conviction that both institutions and values affect human behavior and experience and that experience and behavior affect institutions and values. Values are embodied in institutions while institutions themselves generate and transmit values. There is a tendency for cultures, just as for individual personalities, to strive for integration and coherence. A revolution in consciousness will tend to produce a revolution in institutions just as a change in institutions will tend to create a new consciousness. But what causes a system to lose its relative integration and coherence? What creates the radical disharmony or

imbalance between consciousness and institutions which leads to revolutionary change? What, in short, is responsible for the emergence of "Consciousness III"?

One obvious source of change within any system is the intervention of outside factors. Today the Third World is in disarray as the result of the importation, voluntary or otherwise, of modern medicine, the factory system, bureaucracy and democratic institutions (notoriously poor travelers). There are perhaps some benighted enough to credit the restlessness of the young to foreign ideas—Marxism or Maoism, but surely no informed person takes such an explanation seriously. Eastern religious tradition (if one can legitimately use a single term for such a broad spectrum of insights) plays a role in the counterculture, but had Zen not existed, one can safely assume that something like it would have been invented. The revolt of American youth has its parallels throughout industrial society, but it is a home-grown product: Berkeley came before Nanterre or Berlin.

We must search for the levers of change not without but within our society. I would suggest that the principal levers are two: technology and human genius.

Our technology has developed within our own society, of course, although the multiplier effect of major inventions is so great that for practical purposes an invention such as the automobile, television or the computer might just as well be considered an exogenous force. New technologies act on institutions such as church, state, family and schools like an invading army, on values such as work, community and verbal cognition like an epidemic plague spread by travelers. The new technologies, though, can spread only if they receive at least some support and legal sanction from existing institutions and only if they can be justified on the basis of some aspects of the existing value system. New technologies are not wholly autonomous, independent variables as some pundits have suggested. Nonetheless, they do have second order consequences beyond the ken of either their inventors or their supporters, which become visible only to later generations. The fundamental changes and multiple problems which have followed the adoption of the automobile as our prime means of transportation are only the most obvious examples of this phenomenon.

Genius is an internally generated force for change which also operates in much the same way as an external one. My working definition of genius is simple. Nothing in our world is created from nothing; creation is the novel juxtaposition of already existing elements, material or spiritual (to use a terminology as rhetorically convenient as it is increasingly obsolete)—this is genius. It is even possible to argue that values never change, only the relative importance people attach to them. But to see new meanings in old values, to reorder them, to plumb the implications of these redefined values for existing institutions and to devise new institutions for implementing them, this is the work of creativity which I call genius.

Are American youth the bearers of a new creativity—a new genius—which is about to transform American society? Have they recognized emergent social changes resulting from our changing technology which require a drastic reinterpretation of our values and a fundamental reorientation of our institutions?

There is no question that on balance, there is a significant cleavage between contemporary American youth and their elders. Not all youth and not all elders, but enough to change the normal social center of gravity. There are differences in clothes, in behavior, in tastes and in opinions. There are new ways of seeing and being. The value hierarchies espoused by the young differ from those of their parents and so do their evaluations of existing institutions. The generation gap is real.

But it may be mislabeled, or at least misleading. The gap is, in large measure, not so much a generational as an educational one. That is to say, the values of youth which are most deprecated by the older generation will, on careful observation, be found to be most deprecated by those elders of least education. Even where educated parents are loath to endorse unqualifiedly, much less adopt the behavior and beliefs of the young, they are apt to sympathize with or tolerate them to a far greater degree than the police, segments of the press, or the population at large. Where the most bitter conflict between youth and their elders is likely to occur is in those families and communities where there are significant differences in the educational levels of young and old. This is reflected in the widespread tendency for conservative community elements to trans-

fer their fear and resentment of the young to the schools which have supposedly spawned them. It is possible to hypothesize that there would be little "generation gap" had the proportion of Americans going to high school and especially to college remained constant over the last two generations. But it has not, and the differences in values between the schooled and the unschooled works itself out in what can easily be perceived as a clash between the generations.

But if differences in educational levels alone were responsible for the new culture of American youth, it is unlikely that it would pose a basic threat to the major existing social institutions. Equally important has been the rapid rate of change in society at large. Margaret Mead has usefully described our present situation as one in which the world around us has changed as much as the world of the immigrant changed when he moved from Europe to America. Just as the immigrants found themselves in a situation where their American-born and educated young were ordinarily better able to understand and cope with the world around them than their parents were, despite their years of experience, so those over thirty (or whatever advanced age you choose) are less at home in the world of nuclear weapons, endless colonial wars, television, automation, affluence and the pill than are their young. Much of the unwillingness of the young to follow the guidance of their elders obviously stems from the fact that the young are almost unconsciously convinced that they know their way around this new world better than people from the "old country" of the first half of the century.

Another factor which helps explain why today's youth are so untypically failing to follow in the path of their elders is their sheer numbers. The median age of Americans has fallen for some time despite the fact that our birth rate is happily not as high as those of many other lands. This means that there are more young people around today than there were when we were growing up. In addition, the increased length of schooling has meant that virtually all of them are being kept out of the adult world of work until later in life than was the case in the past. At the same time healthier conditions have meant earlier physical (including especially sexual) maturity, while TV and better schooling (by some standards at least) has meant earlier sophistication. The result is that for most

purposes adolescence begins at about eleven and youth lasts till the early or even the late twenties. There are enough young people in our population to make a world of their own—a capability reinforced by general affluence which makes it possible for them to create their own culture in dress, music, books and periodicals, food, means of transportation and places to congregate. Without increased education and rapid social change, the size of the youth group alone would probably not have led to the creation of a divergent subculture, but given the existence of these levers for change the vast numbers of the young have reinforced their ability to create their own world.

What are the characteristics of the new youth culture? How important is it and what is its future? A whole literature, ranging in tone from adulation to excoriation, deals with the culture of American youth. But often the popular literature, especially that which is disapproving, is so obsessed with deviance in dress, politics and sexual behavior that it misses the more basic elements of this new movement. What are the themes stressed by the young themselves?

Politics in the narrow sense has served to mobilize the young and to make them visible and a subject of public concern, but politics of this sort may be the institution least changed by the youth culture. The Vietnam war has been the occasion of a breakdown of respect for legitimate political authority on the part of large numbers of the young. But this opposition is based on notions far more subversive of past patterns than the anti-Vietnam demonstrations would suggest. The implicit assumption underlying this activity is the notion that political authority rightfully comes from those most directly affected by the actions of that authority and that its mandate must be constantly renewed. By implication no power structure which operates from "above" and on the basis of authority conferred in the past can ever be legitimate. The existential community, preferably the small community, is the only legitimate source of authority. Remote structures and fixed systems have no legitimacy. Today's American youth are radical democrats and anarchists in the tradition of Thoreau and Jefferson. Even the extremists who bomb banks, though they may mouth the sayings of Mao, are really the heirs of John Brown and the children of the American president who wrote that the tree of liberty is watered with the blood of tyrants.

There is little that is intellectually original in such a position. What is new is that this rejection of the centralized national state should come on the heels of an era in which most men of good will—whether liberals or socialists—placed their hopes for the creation of the good society on the reformatory action of national political power. In a strange way, the young of today are closer in spirit to traditional smalltown Republicanism than to Franklin Roosevelt.

If the politics of the young are novel mainly in their intensity and their context, their sexual attitudes are somewhat more complex. Some studies indicate that the amount of premarital sex activity (among men at least even if not among women) is probably only marginally if at all greater than in the past, and the conclusion is drawn that what has changed is not the fact but the open acceptance of the fact. While quite true, this analysis may subtly miss the point. Throughout human history sex has had an overwhelmingly public and social character. Marriage involved property, the procreation of children and their assimilation to a stable social status as embodied in the position of their parents. Since any lasting personal commitment outside this framework was virtually impossible, extramarital sex was—when not the result of the natural curiosity and anxiety of the young—almost purely hedonistic and/or exploitative. What distinguishes the non-marital sex relationships of today's young from those of the past is not merely that better contraceptive practices remove, in theory at least, the fear of pregnancy, thus divorcing sex from child-bearing, but that the interpersonal bonds of commitment or simply of communication between two human beings has been removed from the context of a permanently fixed, property centered relationship. Sexual activity, even forms of group sexuality, are viewed not in the context either of establishing permanent social structures or of simple hedonism but in terms of the same emphasis upon shifting but intense community that underlies the anarchist political premises of the young.

This underlying attitude is apparent also in the role music and drugs play in the youth culture. Music ideally is not passively listened to but is participated in as a kind of communication with other human beings about some basic natural reality. Drugs such as marijuana serve a social function like alcohol in promoting conviviality but are presumed not only to promote a sense of community

among the partakers, but to create a higher level of sensibility. However unrealistic or idealistic such descriptions may be when applied to actual behavior they are essentially accurate when applied to motivation. The underlying emphasis is on loss of self in relationship to others and to the whole world.

Much more important than attitudes toward politics, sex, drugs and music, but not unrelated, are the attitudes of the young toward work and leisure. The civilization of the Western world has been based, not only in capitalist but in so-called socialist countries, on the progressive material conquest of the world for human betterment. Work was functional toward that end, leisure functional only in relation to work, as words such as rest, relaxation, and recreation indicate. Our whole structure of education and social incentives is designed to prepare young people to work and to reward them for doing so. Because of an increasing disinclination to participate in this structure, American youth are regarded by many of their elders as lazy. But we know they are capable of great effort when convinced of the intrinsic worth of what they are doing—tinkering with a stereo, customizing a motorcycle, even marching on Washington. They are no more lazy than the wealthy aristocrat who devotes his efforts and attention to breeding horses or mountain climbing. To say that someone who spends hours smoking pot and listening to rock is lazy is on a par with saying that a traditional contemplative is lazy. What is involved is not a rejection of physical activity but a rejection of work oriented toward the acquisition of material rewards which are regarded as unnecessary. One aspect of the culture of the young that troubles many (especially academics), who can find some sympathy for their politics, sex lives, drugs and music and even their rejection of the work ethic, is their attitude toward the intellectual life. Increasingly the youth culture is profoundly anti-intellectual in the traditional sense, and it is this fact much more than such particular problems as ROTC on campus or curricula changes that sets them at odds with schools and universities. It is not simply that they do not dig reading as a result of watching too much television. They are basically hostile to the whole cognitive mode on which our civilization is based. The notion that there is an external world which can be univocally understood through the

data of science or the logic of philosophy leaves them cold. Because verbalizing implies objectivity (they are all unconscious McLuhanites) they become increasingly inarticulate. Intersubjective communication increasingly takes place on the non-verbal level, and is based on shared experience rather than vicarious knowledge. As a group they reject the notion of being in favor of process; they are all relativists and phenomenologists, radical empiricists and sensualists. They believe that traditional intellectuality was a tool for conquering the world; they seek only to swim in the world.

But "they"—they—who are they? How much of American youth fit the above description or other such descriptions, sympathetic or hostile, about today's youth? In its purest form the youth culture is found only among a small minority of young people from upper or upper-middle class families, mainly from religious and ethnic backgrounds correlated with high socio-economic status. Most of the young by no means share the political or sexual attitudes of this elite or can afford to share their attitudes toward work and leisure. A somewhat larger group has had some experience with drugs, and such superficial aspects as music and dress and hair styles have been accepted in whole or in part by perhaps a majority of the young.

Some sociologists have argued that the youth culture is self-liquidating because, as those involved drop out of the places of leadership and affluence in society which would be their natural inheritance, their places will be taken by clean-cut, hard-working kids from the lower classes or the "sticks." Harvard and Berkeley will lose out to Wichita, Auburn, and De Paul when it comes to the new American elite. The children of the blue collar workers will take over from those of the wealthy lawyers who read *Ramparts* and, in the felicitous phrase of Peter and Mary Berger, we will see not the "greening" but the "bluing" of America.

Perhaps, but don't count on it. For what virtually all the sociological analyses and public opinion surveys neglect is that history is made by minorities and not majorities. Victory usually comes to new movements only when a majority accedes to change (this is how we ordinarily define victory). But what would a public opinion study of Rome in 50 AD have told us about the future of Christianity, or a study of Russia in 1910 about the future of Communism?

Not much, unless one asked more searching questions than such studies usually do. There is no question but that the youth culture exists. The only issue is whether and how far and fast it will spread up and down the age and social scales. So far no definitive answer is available. The evidence seems to be that there has been some movement down, age-wise, from the college level to the high school, the junior high school and even the grade school within the middle class milieu which originated it. Because the upper-middle class life style has long been regarded as the American norm by most of the media, it seems likely that much of the life style of upper-middle class youth will filter down the social scale through imitation as well as conviction. Many commentators have recorded their impression that the participants in the marches on Washington this spring, particularly the members of the Mayday tribes, were less affluent and less educated than previous demonstrators.

But simple style-setting on the part of a minority, promoted by the media and such factors as novelty and boredom, can not by itself make American youth a major lever for social change. Their new perceptions must have some relationship to reality. Consciousness can survive on the basis of fashion for only so long. The basic question is: are the structures of our society—our economic and political institutions, our schools and churches, really subject to such severe internal stresses as a result of changing conditions that the appropriate response is that of the youth which I have described? Or, put another way, can we deal with problems such as race relations, urban decay, poverty, pollution and population growth, war and peace by means of the values and institutions we have inherited from the past? How much have we been changed by the rise of automation, television, mass education and the pill? If these changes can be accepted and understood in terms of our current hierarchy of values and can be effectively dealt with by our traditional institutions, there is no problem. If they cannot be, then our values and institutions will have to be changed. This is in fact the essence of a pre-revolutionary situation. It is one in which a once viable set of values and institutions can no longer encompass a new social reality.

If the American system as presently constituted can cope with

its problems to the satisfaction of the vast majority of its citizens and of the world it will survive despite discordance and perhaps some repression of dissidents. In such an event, the present movement which I have called the youth culture will become merely a footnote to history, even if longer hair and bell bottoms remain. But if the value system cannot explain and the institutional framework cannot cope with the many pressing problems which plague our society today, the way is open for revolutionary social change.

What form might such a revolution take? At present there would seem to be three major possibilities. One would be what Rudi Dutschke has called "the long march through the institutions." Already there is evidence that some at least of today's law and medical students intend to use their professional standing and expertise to alter radically the forms and goals of the country's legal and medical institutions. Is it not possible that students of business administration, too, may someday soon see it as their mission to reorient the tactics and aims of America's business corporations?

A second possibility is that proposed by such "free intellectuals" as Paul Goodman and Arthur Waskow, who propose the establishment of a whole range of alternative institutions—industrial, agricultural, health, educational and political—as experiments in social anarchist community building, as models for emulation by others in the society and, ultimately, as clearly viable alternatives to the present institutional structuring of society.

Thirdly, an increasing proportion of the young may simply refuse to accept any responsibility either for present institutions or for possible alternative ones and settle for manual jobs, purely interpersonal commitments, music and pot.

Any or all of these reactions could be combined with increasingly frequent and severe confrontations with the established order.

There is plenty of evidence that all of these approaches are being tried by some young people. What their over-all effect will be on the future shape of American society cannot now be determined. But at the moment, this so far highly diffuse movement seems to be growing rather than declining.

What position should we take toward these strivings? Many of the premises of the youth culture are in direct contradiction to many

of our traditional moral attitudes. Theologians will be forced to take stands on the problems it raises, though, of course, the final outcome will only be marginally, if at all, the result of their interventions. As for the rest of the over-thirty generation, I can make but one concluding observation. It is easy, especially in an age such as ours, for the old to make fools of themselves by adulating and emulating the young. But there is something even worse, and that is through fear or self-interest or envy to determinedly resist any changes. Every parent knows that to give life involves the obligation to give the ability to live as autonomously and fully as possible. To deny the future of youth by seeking to freeze the structures and values of the present is to deny them life. To refuse to learn from them about the world in which we live is to choose ourselves to die before our time.

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