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SOCIAL ORDER AND THE REACTIONS OF YOUNG PEOPLE

Those who read books, or write them, are used to the fact that language consists of words. They are so used to this fact that they can easily forget that the most important messages perhaps aren't communicated by word of mouth, and definitely not by letters, but rather through body postures, facial expressions or actions, and life conduct. Poets know this and allow their protagonists to speak through actions. Yet social scientists struggle to interpret unspoken and unwritten communication. This, however, should be the primary task of these scientists. They should be trained to read that which isn't expressed in words or—if words are used—lies behind the words. And then they should attempt to communicate through other words, or at least other metaphors, some of what they believe to have understood. The social scientist is an interpreter who tries to help society understand itself. It goes without saying that clear distinctions cannot be made between poetry and sociology.¹

Let us, with this perspective in mind, consider some of the features that many find typical of young people in industrial societies. I will describe some of these phenomena, attempt

to interpret them, and hint at what I believe they tell us about our society. On the basis of this description, we can establish a new foundation for understanding and evaluating the ends served by our schools as well as the young people that the schools encounter.

AN EPISTLE ON USELESSNESS

It is time to tell a story about a fisherman's wife living somewhere in northern Norway.² It will not be a story about hard work and privation, or about a husband who died at sea, and children who ate gruel until the authorities came and gave them split cod instead. No, it will be a story of success. The fisherman was—and is—a good fisherman, and Norway was—and is—a good country. The fisherman fished his way to prosperity and thereby a bigger boat. This meant that he no longer needed to live in a remote location at the mouth of the fjord. It was also advantageous for Norway as a nation that he no longer lived there. It is cheaper and more convenient to have the nation's inhabitants settled in clusters, and therefore the state offered subsidies to those willing to relocate. The fisherman and his family moved into a nice, modern house in a friendly little town.

So far everything was idyllic. And it still is. My point is limited to the observation that the idyll is beginning to show signs of strain. Not once have any of the authorities from children's services ventured into their home, and they probably never will. Yet the fisherman's wife has encountered all the problems that everyone shares, with the only difference being that she sees them more clearly, because for her, they are new.

There was no oil furnace in the house on the fjord. That didn't matter. She had three high-spirited young boys who rushed around the beach and collected driftwood, chopped and stacked it, carried it inside, and built fires in the woodstoves. The handiest of them filled the lamps with paraffin and poured water from buckets, the strongest fetched water from the well and cleared the pathway to the latrine, and everyone helped to catch fish for the evening stew. And if every chore was completed—and the boys still needed an outlet for their energy—there was always a pile of potatoes to be peeled or nets to be mended.

Then they moved into town. Now water flowed from a tap, heat came from a thermostatically controlled furnace, and the lights had switches. Potatoes were bought in small quantities from the local store; there was no storage space in the small city house. It is unnecessary for me to say more about the predicament of the fisherman's wife. My point should be clear by now. For her, their wonderful children became—as they are now for us—*useless*. Most of their usefulness pertained to chores for a life in a remote location on the seacoast or in comparable settings.³

An interesting parallel can be drawn between the relationship of parents and children and the relationship of husband and wife in the modern family. In sociological studies on the family, we commonly claim that the intimate sharing of work between a husband and his wife has become massively reduced. In this situation, the importance of the intimate sharing of emotions has doubled. Romantic love now holds in place the very bonds that were once secured by the common pursuit of holding material privation at bay. Even more extreme, but at the same time less overt, is the situation of

many adults in their relationships to children and young people. Our love remains eternal, but it now arises more from the absence of any intimate sharing of work rather than because of it. Married couples are left with only the remnants of a work-related commonality. Instead, spouses are mutual sources of services, pleasure, and long-term guarantees against loneliness. Children and young people are in a similar position, but are becoming increasingly ineffective, useless, an increasingly greater burden, and a source of strain—a fact we are reluctant to acknowledge. Children, youths, persons with disabilities, and unskilled workers have many common characteristics in a modern industrial society such as ours. Everything they can do, others can do better and, above all, more cheaply. We have created a form of society in which it would be for the best if people were born as adults. To redress this, we have made some of them teenagers.

THE TEENAGER: THE CONTROLLED DEVIANCE

There was a time—not long ago—when the period currently known as adolescence didn't exist to the degree that it does today. From a social perspective—and that is quite important in our case—adolescents were seen as either large children or young women and men. Few people over the age of sixty in Norway have been teenagers. They went from being a child to an adult and were, perhaps, a little bit of both before they made the definitive transition. Most were probably part of a natural community made up of others their age, but they did not—and this is the point—belong to any distinct culture of their own, a specific in-between phase squeezed in between childhood and adulthood. The concept of a “teenager” simply

did not exist. There was not as there is now a phenomenon in need of a label, no social category requiring a definition, which would have been further reinforced once the term was coined. The teenage years did not appear out of the blue. They reflect a specific type of society, and a “solution” to a dilemma produced by the currently reigning social order.

What, then, is a teenager? Seen from the outside, it seems easy to answer: a teenager is a person who is between thirteen and nineteen years of age with a somewhat deviant style of dress, is part of a community of others from the same age group, and has insecure, ambivalent, and often conflict-ridden relationships with representatives of other age groups.

If we look just a bit beneath the surface of these truisms, there are three characteristics of teenagers in particular that I find worthy of note here.

First of all, *unproductivity*. Few of us would expect a teenager to contribute anything to the community beyond that of assisting with a few minor chores in the home, and doing a good deed here and there. That’s it. Instead, they are supposed to learn with the aim of preparing for a future life and perhaps even an occupation.

The second main characteristic of teenage culture is, as I will call it, an *orientation toward consumption*. This is of course connected to the previous point and is again a reflection of the significance of society’s structures. Young people do not enter society as disruptive producers but instead find their most appealing function in the role of consumers.

For the third characteristic of teenage culture, I want to make use of the expression *freedom from responsibility*. This can also be connected to the characteristic of unproductivity. People with no responsibility for production or any

other important activity in society will probably have to be allowed a greater margin for deviance in other areas of life. Another word for freedom from responsibility becomes, in this sense, irresponsibility. Objectives become short term; others will take care of the long-term ones. The teenager's life orientation becomes an orientation toward pleasure, which easily becomes a form of consumption. I think that the typical example of freedom from responsibility is found in the Norwegian phenomenon of *russetid*, the period comprising the last half year of upper secondary school for Norwegian students. Here the common norms of public order, alcohol consumption, and sexual conduct are violated in pursuit of a life of somewhat forced, unbridled exuberance. Historically, the tradition probably has its roots in a reaction against tutelage. It is the ritual clashing of a low-status group with its oppressors. But it is—at the same time—a clash that in its form would never be accepted if the protagonists had responsibility for anything other than themselves.

Seen in this light, the teenagers become a direct reflection of the society we live in. We have created a society in which young people are taken out of production. In return, they are encouraged to consume and granted greater leeway when it comes to irresponsible behavior.

Yet in the “solution” described above—echoing our tale of the fisherman's wife—lies also some of the seeds of the downfall of the teenage culture. As you may remember, when the fisherman's wife moved to town, she struggled to find meaningful tasks for her children—while at the same time she was provided with more free time in which to find this problematic. But her problem also became the children's problem. They too experienced their own meaningless uselessness. It

is precisely herein that we find the possibilities for alternative teenage cultures.

ALTERNATIVE SCENARIOS

Today, a plethora of alternative youth cultures have sprouted up in contrast to the conventional teenage culture. Most visible—and the source of greatest horror—are the representatives for the long-haired lifestyle. Most people are aware of the extreme version here—if only from pictures and terrifying descriptions: long, shaggy manes, beards for those able to grow them, strange garments, a guitar hung over one shoulder, bells around the neck, bare feet in the summertime, and perhaps insufficient personal hygiene in all seasons. We once called them hippies, but the hippies died out and became yippies, and they are supposedly also dead, but the phenomenon isn't dead, and the hair hasn't been cut. It is even possible to sense the effects of it in the most respectable offices where the length of employees' neck hair has increased by several centimeters in only a few years. And perhaps it isn't solely the length of the hair that has changed?

A key aspect of this culture is the choice to be poor. It is in rich countries that this happens, and among the wealthy in these countries. In satiety—and with a sidelong glance to the suffering that afflicts large parts of the world—some people have become anticonsumers. These people have made deliberate attempts to withdraw from large, impersonal communities and enterprises to cultivate intimate relations with “whole” human beings instead, as opposed to the thin sliver of human beings permitted in large organizations. Because these people are anticonsumers, and because they live in

small communities, they can to a larger extent allow themselves to live in the moment and cultivate an awareness of inner values. Emotions, introspection, and inner experiences are of paramount importance. The question, “What are you?”—implying expectations of a professional specification—is replaced by the question, “Who are you?”—that is, “What kind of human being are you?” which can be said to characterize these ideals. Quantifying such qualities is difficult. The question thereby reinforces an already-pronounced tendency in this culture that values equality and equal status over performance and competition.

The political extremists on the Far Left as well as Far Right are another version of counterculturalists. They are often bitterly opposed to the long-haired specimen, who they believe undermines and depletes the effectiveness of political protest. But what they have in common is the rejection of our type of society. Another commonality is that none of them have the teenage culture’s caste-like appearance. Culture is not something they grow into, and then grow out of when they reach the age of twenty. The members may be primarily young, but they could have been old, and some of them are. Membership is a standing that is earned, and its achievement requires great personal courage. Here, counterculture is not marked as being a transitional stage like that of the teenager, whose lifestyle is understood as being something that will be “grown out of.” *Russetiden* is once again a useful caricature of the teenage phase: for one period in life, the individual not only can but in fact should flout social conventions and do all the things that neither children nor grown-ups are allowed to do. Because before they know it, adulthood has arrived and all deviance must come to an end. It is the

knowledge of this inevitability that makes teenage deviance acceptable for the adult members of the population. On the other hand, due to the uncertainty about whether the counterculturalists will in the end resist assimilation into the “normalcy” of socially accepted behaviors and conventions, their lifestyle and attitudes are perceived as a threat.

But our perception of young people could have been altogether different. They could be viewed as trailblazers. They could be seen as people who, precisely because they are young, discern new requirements in the society more rapidly and intensely than others. They could be perceived as people who—often at great personal cost—try out new solutions and forms of community that could perhaps prove valuable for many if society were to take yet another step toward technocracy.

When the technocracy has made further advances, when ordinary people have been deprived of even more activities, when even less air and soil remain, then, finally, it may turn out that it wasn't so stupid that some long-haired and bare-foot adolescents or enraged protesters attempted to retrieve the point of balance between need and abundance, between backbreaking toil and the experience of complete uselessness. The counterculturalists can be perceived as trailblazers for all of us. They can be perceived as people who bring along with them something important when they come to school. That is how we will choose to see them here.

TEENAGE CULTURE AND ITS COUNTERPARTS

The teenage culture is no counterculture. Quite the contrary, it exists in blissful harmony with the main structure

of the industrial society. But the phase beyond teenage culture became a counterculture. The immediate outcome of the phenomenon known as adolescence is the preservation of the main structures of society. In the long term, though, the phenomenon provides the foundation for change by creating an environment for and attitude of recruitment to a counterculture. Yet what teenagers and counterculturalists have in common is that they represent key answers for the society into which they are born. Teenagers and their counterparts are the product of a technocracy that has no need for them as young people, but only as adults. If we de-romanticize our conceptions of youth and acknowledge—not simply intellectually, but emotionally—its uselessness in a modern technosociety, then we will at least have arrived at a better basis for understanding something: teenagers do not come empty-handed. At the same time, we will have a somewhat greater possibility of glimpsing some aspects of the school's responsibilities in relation to young people and society that are sometimes overlooked.

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If Schools Didn't Exist

A Study in the Sociology of Schools

By: Nils Christie

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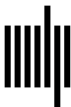
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