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A THEORY OF MIDDLE CLASS JUVENILE DELINQUENCY

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Since 1948 the number of children aged ten to seventeen coming before juvenile court authorities has more than doubled, while the number of children within these ages in the total population has increased by only 19 percent.¹ Despite the caution with which one must regard juvenile court data, police arrest statistics and the testimony of numerous persons working with youth support the Children's Bureau figures.² There exists non-statistical evidence that an unprecedented share of the apparent increase in delinquency is being contributed by "normal" youngsters from middle class families in communities and neighborhoods lacking previous experience with serious misbehavior among their children. Rowdiness in and out of school, abuse of driving privileges, joy-riding thefts, excessive drinking, vandalism and sexual misconduct are among the principal forms of disapproved acts seemingly becoming more frequent among teenagers from "better" backgrounds. And the problem is not merely a phenomenon of metropolitan areas: towns and smaller cities in which delinquency of any kind was nearly non-existent before the war are reporting similar difficulties.

A number of researches have shown the existence of considerable unrecorded delinquency among socially advantaged youths,³ but few theoretical attempts have been made to explain such behavior. In an article published in 1942 Talcott Parsons

¹ JUVENILE COURT STATISTICS: 1956, Children's Bureau Statistical Series, No. 47, U. S. Children's Bureau, Washington, D. C., 1958.

² HERBERT A. BLOCH AND FRANK T. FLYNN, *DELINQUENCY: THE JUVENILE OFFENDER IN AMERICA TODAY*, Random House, New York, 1956, p. 29.

³ F. IVAN NYE, JAMES F. SHORT, JR. AND VIRGIL J. OLSON, *Socioeconomic Status and Delinquent Behavior*, *AMER. JOUR. OF SOC.*, 63: 381-389 (Jan., 1958), note 3; FRANK E. HARTUNG, *A Critique of the Sociological Approach to Crime and Correction*, *LAW AND CONTEMP. PROB.*, 23: 703-734 (Autumn, 1958), p. 730.

touched briefly upon the existence and nature of a "youth culture".⁴

"Perhaps the best single point of reference for characterizing the youth culture lies in its contrast with the dominant pattern of the adult male role. By contrast with the emphasis on responsibility in this role, the orientation of the youth culture is more or less specifically irresponsible. One of its dominant notes is "having a good time" in relation to which there is a particularly strong emphasis on social activities with the opposite sex (pp. 606-607).

"... it is notable that the youth culture has a strong tendency to develop in directions which are either on the borderline of parental approval or beyond the pale, in such matters as sex behavior, drinking and various forms of frivolous and irresponsible behavior (p. 608).

"[The youth culture] shows strong signs of being a product of tensions in the relationships of younger people and adults (p. 608)."

The last sentence foreshadows his later theory that in the process of acquiring a masculine role-identity middle class boys react against the feminine identification of their childhoods by engaging in "masculine protest" behavior of a rough, destructive kind. The relative inability of youths today to observe directly their fathers' occupational roles, coupled with the ubiquity of feminine roles in the home, forces an eventual rebellion not only against "feminineness" but against the "goodness" which seems to the child an integral part of femininity.⁵

⁴ TALCOTT PARSONS, *Age and Sex in the Social Structure of the United States*, *AMER. SOC. REV.*, 7: 604-616 (Oct., 1942).

⁵ TALCOTT PARSONS, *Certain Primary Sources and Patterns of Aggression in the Social Structure of the Western World*, *PSYCHIATRY*, 10: 167-181 (May, 1947).

A number of objections to this theory can be raised. (a) In the process of "protesting masculinity" why is the trait of adult male responsibility shunned while other presumed traits of the male (loud, aggressive, rambunctious behavior) are adopted? (b) One can imagine middle class boys who live in dormitory suburbs and large cities having some difficulty picturing their fathers' occupational roles, but this may not be true in smaller cities and in towns where the fathers' places of work are more readily accessible for visits, and where their roles are less likely to be obscured by employment in bureaucratic organizations. (c) How can the participation of girls in the youth culture be explained by Parson's theory? (d) Are mothers' roles especially ubiquitous in communities where commuting time for the father is not so great that he cannot be with his family meaningfully except on weekends? "Catching the 7:05" each morning before the children are up and returning in the evening shortly before their bedtime is a pattern found only in our largest cities. (e) Is it to be assumed that the seeming increase in middle class delinquency since the Second World War is the result of a post-war increase in sons' difficulties in identifying with their fathers' roles, in the absence of basic post-war changes in our society's occupation structure?

The present paper begins with a backtrack on Parson's thinking to his idea that hedonistic irresponsibility characterizes the youth culture of the United States, and a departure from this in another direction from that taken by him. The theory to be presented here is that some middle class delinquency is the result of an interaction between certain aspects of our general cultural system and an emerging teenage system, producing norms entirely functional to the latter but not to the former.

THE TEENAGE SYSTEM

The groundwork for the emergence of a teenage culture in our society was laid a century and more ago when youngsters were gradually removed from functional roles in the economy through restrictive apprenticeship codes, protective labor legislation, the compulsory education movement, and the withdrawal of children from agricultural activities attendant upon urbanization. However diverse the forces were which led to this removal from productive roles, the result was that for probably the first time a major society deactivated a large and energetic segment of its population without

clearly redefining the status and function of that segment. The resulting ambiguity of status, the blurring of the lines separating childhood from youth and youth from adulthood, has been commented upon by many observers; the middle class teenager, with his typically lengthened period of ambiguous status compared with working class youngsters, is faced with contradictory expectations. He is not expected to engage in productive labor, but neither is he encouraged to loaf; he is discouraged from early marriage, but is allowed to engage in proto-courtship; he cannot vote, hold public office, or serve on a jury, but is expected to be civic-minded; he is given many privileges and a large measure of individual freedom, but without the obligatory ties to significant others which, for the adult, help keep privilege and freedom from deteriorating into license.

Bloch and Neiderhofer⁶ have recently suggested that certain attributes of adolescent life (tattooing, hazing, the adoption of nicknames, etc.) serve as latter-day rites of passage into adolescence to lessen the anxiety-producing absence of adult-sponsored rites. For several generations the teen years have been a singularly faddist time of life, and peculiarities of dress, speech, values and interests are increasingly conspicuous among this population group. It seems reasonable to presume, as have Bloch and others, that these widely-shared peculiarities are highly functional to teenagers, and are not simply youthful fancies. Some might, indeed, be the equivalent of primitive rites of passage; others might serve to maintain the new status; still others might be the ordinary *impedimenta* of a burgeoning youth cultural system.

It is the writer's contention that certain post-World War II changes—mainly in communications—have speeded the development of long-nascent tendencies arising from the ambiguous status of our teenage population. These changes have had the general, if inadvertent, effect of making teenagers newly aware of themselves as a nation-wide segment of our society by fostering communication within this population group. Probably none of these changes singly could have produced this effect, but their conjuncture following the war provided means for teenagers to enter into at least secondary contact far beyond the pre-war confines of their respective communities.

⁶ HERBERT A. BLOCH AND ARTHUR NIEDERHOFFER, *THE GANG*, Philosophical Library, New York, 1958, Ch. 5.

1. Perhaps basic is the exploitation of an enlarged market for teenage goods and services following our post-war rise in living standards and the consequent possession of large amounts of spending money by youngsters. An estimated nine billion dollars are spent annually by teenagers.⁷ National advertising campaigns, many found only in the new teen magazines, publicize products tailored to the interests and needs of this age group: motor scooters, acne creams, portable phonographs and radios, western and rock-and-roll movies, auto accessories, hot-rod conversion kits, unusual clothing, mail-order dance lessons, etc. The wide distribution of these items is contributing to the growth of a nationally shared but age-restricted material culture.

2. Post-war changes in local radio broadcasting with increased reliance on canned material, particularly popular music, has brought into prominence the disc jockey, whose seeming chumminess with entertainers gives him some of the glamour of show business. Despite competition from television the number of operating commercial broadcasting stations increased from 890 to 3,680 between 1945 and 1958,⁸ many of them being located in smaller communities throughout the country. The number of disc jockeys has been estimated at 2,500,⁹ compared to a handful before the war, and their audiences apparently are drawn mainly from among persons in their teens and early twenties. The recent disturbance in Boston where a disc jockey was accused of inciting his young followers to riot, and the power of these men to stimulate teenage interest in charity drives, contests and the like, are suggestive of their role in teenage communications.

3. Similar to the above, but with the added element of visual impact, is TV programming of teen dance shows, from Dick Clark's nationally broadcast AMERICAN BANDSTAND to the one-channel town's airing of the local equivalent with a lone disc jockey providing the recorded music. The particular image of teenage life thus promulgated by many of the country's 544 operating commercial television stations (contrasted with six in 1945¹⁰) probably reaches a large audience.

4. Young people's magazines have been pub-

lished for many decades in the United States. With few exceptions, their common stamp was one of staid, moralistic conservatism which viewed adolescence as a period of preparation for an adulthood of similar qualities. Since, 1944, however, when SEVENTEEN began publication, a number of magazines have appeared whose kinship to the older YOUTH'S COMPANION and AMERICAN BOY is only faintly discernible. At least eleven of these are currently in the market, led by SEVENTEEN, whose monthly circulation is slightly over one million copies. CO-ED, 'TEEN, COOL, HEP CATS, MODERN TEEN, INGENUE and DIG have combined circulations of about 1,500,000.¹¹ These publications are similar in format to movie and TV magazines read by many adults, but their picture stories emphasize younger personnel from the entertainment industry, and they contain a thin scattering of teenage love stories, youth "forums", puzzles and articles on automobiles and high school sports. In sharp contrast with the moralistic flavor of earlier youth magazines, the post-war group is distinguished by its portrayal of hedonistic values within an essentially amoral setting: the teen years are not ones of preparation for responsible adulthood, but of play and diversion.

5. A final influence contributing to the teenagers' awareness of themselves as a distinct population group may be the very fact that the post-war years have seen public attention directed increasingly toward our youth because of the apparent increase in juvenile problems. Teenagers seem very much aware that such problems exist, even if their outlines are not clear to the youngsters.¹²

Given the existence of a large population segment permeated with anxiety arising from its ill-defined status, and communicating, however imperfectly, on a national scale, one observes elements necessary for the development of something akin to a minority group psychology: a shared sense of grievance and alienation among substantial

¹¹ CONSUMER MAGAZINE AND FARM PUBLICATION RATES AND DATA for May 27, 1959, pp. 400, 411-419. Circulation figures for DATEBOOK, TEENS TODAY and 16 are not currently listed in RATES AND DATA. A "Teensters' Union" has recently been organized by MODERN TEENS magazine, ostensibly "for the improvement of teen-age society."

¹² A crude measure of the increased public attention to our youth can be obtained by a count of READERS' GUIDE TO PERIODICAL LITERATURE entries under Youth—United States. For the respective two-year periods of May, 1945 to April, 1947; April, 1951 to March, 1953; and March, 1957 to February, 1959 the number of entries was 24, 42 and 60.

⁷ CONSUMER REPORTS, *Teen-age Consumers*, 22: 139-142 (March, 1957).

⁸ STATISTICAL ABSTRACT OF THE UNITED STATES: 1958, U. S. Bureau of the Census, Washington, D. C., p. 519.

⁹ NEWSWEEK, 49: 104-105 (April 1, 1957).

¹⁰ STATISTICAL ABSTRACT, *op. cit.*, p. 519.

numbers of persons readily identifiable by some conspicuous trait—in this case, being in the teen years. Listing further points of similarity between minority groups and today's teenagers, one could mention *leaders and spokesmen* in the persons of disc jockeys, young entertainers and some educationists; a distinctive set of material and non-material *culture traits; sentiments of exclusiveness* toward most adults and toward "square" (i.e., adult-oriented) youngsters; and *culture heroes*, selected mainly from among entertainers and athletes.

While the theory being presented here does not hinge on teenagers constituting a true minority group, it does assume that on a national scale there is evolving a complex of attitudes and values tending to control and motivate teenagers in ways consonant with the role implied by their position as a youthful group having leisure, relatively ample spending money and few responsibilities. The theme of this emerging culture seems to be one of an increasingly institutionalized but immature and irresponsible hedonism, as Parsons suggested.

It is evident that not all teenagers behave as if they were participants in such a culture. The degree to which any particular youth is controlled and motivated by the norms of the teenage system may be a function of the extent and intensity of his affiliation with youthful autonomous cliques, for these, rather than individuals, appear to be the social units of the teenage world. The relative importance of clique-membership may in turn be inversely related to a teenager's commitment to groups—usually adult-dominated—which purvey conventional normative systems, and which have the inherent disadvantage, in competing for teenagers' loyalties, of requiring accommodation to adult demands.

While strong peer-group appeal is exhibited among both working class and middle class youngsters, there may exist class differences both in the content of the youth culture shared by teenagers from the two strata, and in the duration of the culture's importance in the lives of its followers. Those teenagers currently labeled "hoods" by other youngsters are marked by levis and leather jackets, motorcycles and jalopies, frankly promiscuous girl friends, truculent, aggressive behavior in school, and a sneering avoidance of extra-curricular school social activities. For these youngsters delinquent motivations may indeed stem from their experiences with snobbish discrimination

within the high school social structure, as Cohen maintains.¹³ But their earlier entrance into the labor market and their lower age at marriage enable them to acquire adult roles—and to become saddled with adult responsibilities—sooner than middle class teenagers. By contrast, the middle class "social crowd"—more seemly and fashionably dressed, smoother mannered, driving late-model cars, peopling the parties and proms in their communities, and indulged by their prosperous and permissive parents—constitute the spending market alluded to earlier, and may be proportionately greater participants in the teenage communications network and in that part of the teenage culture depicted in it.

DELINQUENCY AND THE TEENAGE CULTURE

An ethos of irresponsible hedonism is not in itself productive of delinquent motivations, and I am not suggesting that middle class delinquency is simply a manifestation of unchecked impulses, as the term "irresponsible hedonism" connotes. The relationship between this ethos and delinquency is more complex. If the teenager's urgent need for status affirmation is met by the teenage culture, then it becomes necessary for him to reject influences from the adult world which threaten it, and to accept only those giving it support. The threatening influences are attitudes and values running counter to short-run, irresponsible hedonism, such as hard work, thrift, study, self-denial, etc., while those supportive of it are cultural elements adaptable to it. It is the writer's contention that delinquent motivations among middle class teenagers arise from this adaptive process, in which the teenage world, peopled by immature and inexperienced persons, extracts from the adult world those values having strong hedonistic possibilities, with the result that the values of the teenage culture consist mainly of distorted and caricatured fragments from the adult culture. These highly selected and altered values then serve to motivate and give direction to members of the youth world, sometimes in ways adults define as delinquent. Some examples of such value transformation will make my meaning clear.

1. Abuse of driving privileges by some teenagers is a persisting problem in most communities. Open mufflers, drag-racing, speeding, playing "chicken", or just aimlessly driving about constitute nuisances and sometimes dangers on public streets and high-

¹³ ALBERT K. COHEN, *DELINQUENT BOYS: THE CULTURE OF THE GANG*, Free Press, Glencoe, Ill., 1955.

ways. To emotionally mature adults automobiles primarily represent—and are operated as—means of transportation, but in the process of adaptation to the adolescent ethos they are redefined as play-things whose important qualities are less those pertaining to getting from place to place than to glitter, power and speed, and teenagers tend to operate them in ways appropriate to these qualities. Youth's intense interest in is reflected in the current number of magazines (twenty-one) devoted to the automobile. Eighteen of these were founded since 1945, and fourteen since 1950. Their reported combined monthly circulation is about 2,300,000. HOT ROD MAGAZINE leads this group, with about 490,000 paid monthly circulation.¹⁴ Some 2,000 so-called "speed shops" supplied by 100 manufacturers distribute parts and accessories for youthful car enthusiasts.¹⁵

A more serious problem with respect to automobiles is the increasing number of cars "borrowed" for joy rides by middle class (or at least "favored group") teenagers.¹⁶ Larceny is customarily defined as taking another's property with intent to deprive the owner permanently of its use; joyride thievery seldom involves this criminal intention, and apprehended youngsters are quick to point out—quite accurately—that they were "merely having a little fun". (It is worth noting that cars borrowed for joy rides almost invariably embody qualities extraneous to mere transportation. Flashy convertibles are especially vulnerable).

2. The competitive spirit, valued in our larger society as a spur to achievement, but hedged about with customary and legal restrictions, becomes productive of bitter and childish rivalries when it is applied to high school intermural contests. The youngsters, aroused by pep committees, coaches and alumni, transform competition into a hedonistic travesty: witness the growing problem of fights, car chases and vandalism attendant on important games.

3. Whether or not we are a sex-obsessed society, as European observers sometimes contend, the

meaning of sex to our teenagers is confused and contradictory. On the one hand, pre-marital chastity and forbearance are upheld as prime moral values. On the other, sex is heavily exploited in most of the popular media of entertainment. The image of sex, love and romance presented by these media is one rejected by most adults whose views have been tempered by the realities of life, but the middle class youngsters of the teenage world, bemused by their burgeoning sex drives in the prolonged and presumably chaste interval between puberty and marriage, and betrayed by their inexperience, are inclined to accept this image as valid. More importantly, this image is considerably more congenial to their ethos than one conveying restraint and self-control; sex and love are redefined as ends in themselves, and have acquired sufficient preeminence in the teenage system since 1945 to motivate youngsters of twelve to begin "going steady", and of sixteen to contemplate marriage seriously.

4. Among the adult values attractive to the teenage ethos, the use of alcoholic beverages is perhaps the one most readily lending itself to distortion, for the temperate use of alcohol by adults themselves requires a degree of restraint seldom found in youngsters. Normatively, alcohol is utilized by the middle class as a social lubricant and as an adjunct to food, and strong social pressures help limit its use to those functions. By custom (as well as by law) teenagers are forbidden generally to use alcoholic beverages on their own for any purpose. But its fundamental hedonistic quality—its capacity to intoxicate—makes it so highly adaptable to the teenage ethos that when alcohol is used, this quality is emphasized, and drinking to excess becomes the norm. A further difficulty arises from the obligatory secretiveness of teenage middle class drinking: it must be done quite apart from adult eyes in automobiles, public parks, rented cottages and motels where drinking parties can easily get out of hand.

SUMMARY

Post-war changes in communications processes are heightening in-group feelings within a large population segment which, during the last one hundred years, has experienced increased status ambiguity as the productive roles of this group have diminished. The intensive preoccupation with play among today's teenagers results from the circumstance that hedonistic pursuits, evoked by

¹⁴ RATES AND DATA, *op. cit.*, pp. 65-74.

¹⁵ CONSUMER REPORTS, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

¹⁶ WILLIAM A. WATTENBERG AND JAMES T. BALSTRIERI, *Automobile Theft: A 'Favored Group' Delinquency*, AMER. JOUR. OF SOC., 57: 575-579 (May, 1952). In studying 3,900 cases of juvenile auto theft in Detroit, the authors observed that not only were the boys from somewhat better neighborhoods than other delinquents, but were well socialized in their peer-group relationships. The 'favored group' characteristic has reportedly been observed also in Britain. See, T. C. N. GIBBENS, *Car Thieves*, BRIT. JOUR. OF DELINQUENCY (April, 1958).

the youngsters' present position in the social structure, are becoming the status-defining "function" of this emerging national interest group. In order to retain the need-satisfactions produced by this new status clarification, the group's values and norms must support its play function by constituting a hedonistic ethos, and must neutralize

non-hedonistic pressures from the adult world either by denigrating them entirely or by altering them to conform with the teenage culture. Once incorporated into that culture, they become controlling and motivating forces for those teenagers sharing the system, but in directions sometimes inconsistent with adult norms.