

Coming of Age in America

GROWTH AND ACQUIESCENCE

**"... ought to be read by anyone
interested in the education of adolescents."**

—Morton White, *The New York Review of Books*

***EDGAR Z.
FRIEDENBERG***

A Vintage Book



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COMING OF AGE IN AMERICA

Growth and Acquiescence

Edgar Z. Friedenberg



Vintage Books

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COMING OF AGE IN AMERICA

Values

Dignity

Non-personal basis

Anti integration

Alternative

Cooperativity

FOR
MICHAEL
AND
DIANE

PREFACE



During the two-year period that I have been writing this book, I have also been carrying on a research study of a particular aspect of the influence of a mass society on adolescence. The book and the study are quite separate undertakings. The study is, of course, limited in scope to certain manifestations of the social processes with which the book is concerned. But the observations, formal and informal, that I have had to make in the course of the research have been essential to the book, both as data to be reported and, equally, as a realistic discipline to my conceptions of just how these processes take place in the social institution—the secondary school—to which nearly all adolescents in our society are consigned.

The experience of protracted school attendance cannot be grasped by an abstract approach. By projecting and extrapolating the demographic trends and social and economic developments that affect the school, one can, to be sure, quite accurately predict and precisely dissect the major problems that confront both youth and the educational system. But the results are likely to be bloodless and, for that reason, unduly optimistic. Experience is never categorical; what matters about it is always detailed and personal. Centuries of accumulated data attesting to the ineffectiveness of capital punishment in lowering the murder rate will never move anyone who is capable of supposing that hydrogen cyanide smells like peach blossoms to the condemned.

My metaphor may lead the reader to wonder whether the account to follow will be free from personal bias. I wish to

allay such doubts from the outset. It is not. Even if I had begun my investigation without bias—and this is an unlikely event, for unless one is working purely for the record one must have some reason for thinking that what one is studying is important—I should be ashamed to have completed it without bias. The subjects of my study are adolescents, and I brought to the study my feelings about them and my prior judgments as to how they should be treated. These will be apparent to the reader: perhaps more apparent than they are to me.

The technics of scientific investigation are useful in preventing the observer from perceiving phenomena that are not really there even though he wishes they were; and in keeping him from exaggerating the significance of chance events by mistaking them for evidence of a prior relationship. But they do not obligate him to be neutral or dispassionate in assessing the significance of his findings; and they do not exhaust the possibilities of truth.

"Scientific truth," Ortega writes in the opening passage of "The Sportive Origins of the State,"¹

is characterized by its exactness, and the certainty of its predictions. But these admirable qualities are contrived by science at the cost of remaining on a plane of secondary problems, leaving intact the ultimate and decisive questions. Of this renunciation it makes its essential virtue, and for it, if for naught else, it deserves praise. Yet science is but a small part of the human mind and organism. Where it stops, man does not stop.

Certainly, in writing this book, I did not. But the relationship between the book and the research study is close. The most important effect of life in a mass society is on the values of the people who share it. Our study is a study of ~~student values as these affect, and are expressed in, the~~

¹ José Ortega y Gasset, *Toward a Philosophy of History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1941.)

choices they make about school situations and their attitudes toward school and the possibilities it affords. My colleagues and I were especially interested in how students would face the choice between support for excellence or distinction and a more general extension of opportunity to less well qualified but needier candidates; between well-roundedness and devotion to special talents and immediate personal commitments; between privacy and inwardness and effective socialization in the interests of the welfare of the group.

This book is not, and is not meant to be, a full or formal report of our findings. Our study was conceived quite independently of this book and had technical and specific purposes that lie, in part, beyond its scope. But it provided an incomparable opportunity, and an obligation, for me to immerse myself in the actual day-to-day activities of secondary schools, in a context that kept my mind on the issues we have been discussing. As the research proceeded, I found that what I was learning both supported and required me to modify the positions I had been planning to discuss in this book.

I have now finished a year spent full time in interviewing twenty-five students in each of our nine schools, each of whom I saw three times for as long—with the exception of a few interviews that were truncated by scheduling difficulties—as the student felt our procedure required. The students were selected simply by taking every fourth name from a list of 100 tenth, eleventh, and twelfth graders who had previously rated the social climate and mode of operation of the school on a paper and pencil instrument. The group of 100 were also an unselected, alphabetical list, from which ninth graders were excluded only because we thought they would not have been in the school long enough to have formed a stable opinion of it. In most schools, I also added a few students who had given the school extreme ratings on this instrument or who had been recommended to me as especially interesting by the administration; these addi-

tions, of course, impair the randomness of the interview sample, but not of the rating-sample of 100 from which these—including the extras—were drawn. My observations about the students' interview responses will not, in any case, be quantitative. I was the only interviewer in the study and, though the interviews were taped and transcribed, my comments on what the students said and the reasons they gave for saying it are interpretations, subject to personal bias.

All but one of the schools—a private day school for boys in New York City—were co-educational, and located in small towns or small cities. Only one was strictly suburban, but only one was located more than 100 miles from a large city. Two were Southern. Two were of special interest because they were adjacent to centers of missilecraft and intelligence agencies that lie so close to the heart of our national purpose: one school enrolled mostly the children of technicians, while the other included sons and daughters of many high-ranking policy-level officials, military and civil. One school had an enrollment about 70 percent Negro; the small, rather attractive, mostly working-class community in which it was located was separated from its neighbors by the most nearly impenetrable woodland that survived in the region. Local real estate developers had carefully left it intact; had the climate been suitable, they would probably have stocked it with tigers. Another school served a fashionable exurb, while yet another served a consolidated district of small, unprosperous agricultural villages. We selected for the study schools that varied among themselves in the clientele they served as widely as possible.

The central procedure of the study, on which the interviews focused and which provided us with an elaborate but useful statistical basis for comparison among our participants, will be described in Chapter 3, where it is first applied; it is too complicated to explain in advance and, out of context, boring. Before turning to this operation, I wish to explore, in the opening chapter, the moral dimensions of the topic

with which the book is concerned and, in the second, to present my detailed personal observations of life in two schools in our sample. The practices that held my attention in these schools are common, with certain variations in degree, to all the schools in our sample. They must, over a period of years, rather strongly influence any adolescent's conception of dignity, of freedom, and of himself.

Besides myself, the professional staff of the study consisted of my co-investigator Carl Nordstrom, Associate Professor of Economics at Brooklyn College; and Hilary Gold, Assistant Professor of Education at Brooklyn. Professor Nordstrom's contribution to the research is at least as great as my own. Each of us wrote three of the six episodes whose use and function as semiprojective tests is discussed in Chapter 3, and which form the heart of our procedure. He devised all the ways in which the data have been analyzed quantitatively, and carried the analysis through, supervised the transcription of all interviews and, with a patience unrivaled since the death of Booker T. Washington, listened to them all, both to check the accuracy of the transcription and to get a feel for what had been said on which to base his own interpretations.

Professor Gold joined us after the study had been set up, at the beginning of our fieldwork. He preceded me at each school by several days, administering the paper-and-pencil test given to the hundred students at each school from whom our twenty-five interview subjects were later drawn. Professor Gold also contributed items to this instrument, of a different kind from those Nordstrom and I contributed or from those that were drawn from the Stern *High School Characteristics Index*. But his most important function was as liaison with the schools. After we had selected them, Hilary Gold was entirely in charge of the arrangements and negotiations that were necessary to establish the study in operation. Of the three of us, Hilary is by far the least rebarbative: he is young, affable, attractive, and since he is,

or was, British, school personnel tend to underestimate his intelligence. At the time we began, I should also have described Hilary as unusually sensitive; but I must in all candor admit that he completed his work on the study with his sanity quite unimpaired. Neither Nordstrom nor I would, I think, be inclined to make such a statement about the other.

The research was supported by the Co-Operative Research Division of the United States Office of Education, under Public Law 531 and a contract between the two sovereignties: Brooklyn College and the United States of America. I should also like to acknowledge most gratefully supplementary support provided by the College Entrance Examination Board to cover an essential expenditure—direct payment to the participating schools for administrative services, space, and goodwill. All the schools provided the first without stint, and as much of the others as could really have been expected under the circumstances. Several were generous with all three.

Davis, California
February, 1965

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COMING OF AGE
IN AMERICA

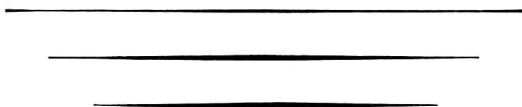
I



ADOLESCENCE

in an

OPEN SOCIETY



What is most extraordinary about youth today is that adults everywhere should be so worried about it. I do not mean to suggest that this concern is groundless; on the contrary. A great many young people are in very serious trouble throughout the technically developed and especially the Western world. Their trouble, moreover, follows certain familiar common patterns; they get into much the same kind of difficulty in very different societies. But it is nevertheless strange that they should. Human life is a continuous thread which each of us spins to his own pattern, rich and complex in meaning. There are no natural knots in it. Yet knots form, nearly always in adolescence. In American, British, European, Japanese, Australasian, and at least the more privileged Soviet youth, puberty releases emotions that tend toward crisis. Every major industrial society believes that it has a serious youth problem.

Adolescence is both a stage and a process of growth. As such it should proceed by doing what comes naturally. Instead, there is a widespread feeling that it cannot be allowed to proceed without massive intervention. The young disturb and anger their elders, and are themselves angered and disturbed, or repelled and depressed, at the thought of becoming what they see their elders to be. Adults observe and condemn the "teen-age tyranny" of "the adolescent society," over which they seek to establish and maintain hegemony by techniques of infiltration and control.

X Adolescents are among the last social groups in the world to be given the full nineteenth-century colonial treatment. Our colonial administrators, at least at the higher policy-making levels, are usually of the enlightened sort who decry the punitive expedition except as an instrument of last resort, though they are inclined to tolerate a shade more brutality in the actual school or police station than the law allows. They prefer, however, to study the young with a view to understanding them, not for their own sake but in order to learn how to induce them to abandon their barbarism and assimilate the folkways of normal adult life. The model emissary to the world of youth is no longer the tough disciplinarian but the trained youth worker, who works like a psychoanalytically oriented anthropologist. Like the best of missionaries, he is sympathetic and understanding toward the people he is sent to work with, and aware and critical of the larger society he represents. But fundamentally he accepts it, and often does not really question its basic values or its right to send him to wean the young from savagery.

Like the missionary among his natives, the youth worker finds the young in no virgin state. By the time he gets there it is too late for that. "Youth cultures" vary from the more flamboyant forms of delinquency to the conservative eroti-

cism of the college fraternity. But all of them have been altered by continuous interaction with the adult world; the youngsters, unlike natives of a primitive tribe, have never known anything else and have no traditions wholly their own. The idols of the "teen-age" culture are the entertainers who use their "teen-age" clientele to make it as disk jockeys, on TV, or within the residually "teen-age" enclave of the B-movie. The explicit values of the juvenile gang are taken from the adult world; they, too, covet status and success, and do not imagine that these could be conceived in terms more compelling than those they find familiar. The worst off, perhaps, are the traders and interpreters: the big men on campus, the boys who wear the sports jackets clothing manufacturers are trying to introduce to the "teen-age" market, the occasional gang leader who, at seventeen, is already working up the memoirs of his reformation, as told to the youth worker or his parish priest. In any society, marginal individuals have especially severe problems.

The economic position of "the adolescent society," like that of other colonies, is highly ambiguous. It is simultaneously a costly drain on the commonwealth and a vested interest of those members of the commonwealth who earn their living and their social role by exploiting it. Juvenile delinquency is destructive and wasteful, and efforts to control and combat it are expensive. Schooling is even more expensive. Both undertakings are justified on the assumption that youth must be drawn into the social order if the social order is to continue, and this is self-evident. But both act as agents of society as it now is, propagating its values and assumptions among a youth often cynical and distrustful but ignorant of the language or the moral judgments in terms of which its complaints might be couched. Neither the youth agency nor the school is usually competent or suffi-