

# The Unnoticed Generation

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*Notes on the social life of young men in an industrial suburb*

EXAMINATION of the social life of young people requires, no less than that of adults, scrutiny of three broad sets of factors: firstly, those general economic and political factors which have produced the civil state of the society at the time; secondly, the general ideological and cultural factors which have gone to make up the moral and spiritual state of the society; thirdly, the actual social relations in which people are involved in everyday life. The first two sets of general factors are the object of systematic study by historians, economists, and political scientists, and the everyday concern of critics, in the broadest sense of that term. Accordingly, for the purposes of this exposition, I take them as given, and do not seek further to explain how they came about. Moreover, I also take largely as given two of the broad spheres into which the activities and social relations

of everyday life may be divided, namely work and the family, the better to examine a third sphere, namely leisure and friendships.

Work and the family so manifestly constitute a set of limits to leisure activities and friendships that they need no more than schematic presentation. The class-status of a family affects its residence, the kind of schools children attend, the chances these children have of going into professional or unskilled jobs, and hence, in the long run, who meets who, and even, as the necessary condition of the foregoing, their chances of surviving to adult life in reasonable health. Compared with the many economic and social forces generated within or mediated by the work-place or the home, the impact of personal friendships and individual leisure activities is usually quite small. Hours of work and wages sharply

restrict the amount of spare-time young people have and how they spend it. The demands of the family for help, financial and domestic, may press heavily upon them too, especially the girls. The local availability of various recreational facilities sets another obvious limit to how young people spend their time outside work. In spite of all these limiting factors, and indeed partly because of them, the study of leisure activities and social relations outside work and the home can be extremely revealing, since here the pressures of modern industrial society are partly relaxed, its influences diffused and attenuated. You can associate with other people, not simply because they work on the next machine or at the same desk, but because you like them; do something at a particular speed, not because the work-study boys have fixed it that way or the office-manager is breathing down your neck, but because that's how you feel; you're doing what you want to do and doing it in your own time. It is sometimes possible to observe in the course of studying leisure activities, sets of social values and modes of association which otherwise remain almost entirely hidden from view.

### **Out with the boys**

The original inquiry on which this article depends concerned only a small sample of young men in their early twenties in a single industrial suburb in Britain during the years 1951-53. Modesty alone would counsel extreme caution in generalizing my observations to other parts of Britain, let alone other societies. However, other sociological studies of young people, especially in Britain, the U.S.A. and in Israel, and the findings of Eisenstadt's comparative studies of young people and youth movements, summarized in his *From Generation to Generation*, suggest that there is no need to indulge the peculiarly British vice of pseudo-modesty to the full. Subject to qualifications which I will discuss later, I think that most of my observations would hold good in any modern, industrial, predominantly urban, society.

I am encouraged in this belief by the remarkable amount of agreement among sociologists, and perhaps more important, between parents and welfare workers, laymen and doctors, policemen and psychiatrists, journalists and academics, that "something happens" in the early teens, when young people are clearly children no longer but, equally clearly, are not fully accepted as adults with commensurate tasks and responsibilities, rights and privileges. At this period of development, there is a rapid growth of activities, interests, and attitudes which are so commonly found among young people and sometimes peculiar to them that the whole complex has come to be called the "youth culture," and to be accepted as an important phase in their lives. There is much less agreement on the point at which this phase ends, and it is almost certainly subject to class-variations. The most important working-class criterion of social maturity seems to be marriage and the birth of children, and since most young working-class men do not reach this state before they are in their late twenties, the young men I interviewed and in whose activities I shared may be accepted as to some extent representative of the later part of the "youth culture." Most of the young men I saw came of families which were "working-class" on any reckoning. Whether the young men themselves were equally "working-class" is much more a matter of dispute and definition; certainly some of them were in "white-collar" jobs, and generally speaking, white-collar workers marry later and have children later than manual workers. However, less than one-tenth of the sample I saw were married, and only a half of these had children. In any case I gained a fair amount of information from them about how they had spent their time before they started "going

steady" and "settling down," which is the period with which I am most concerned. There were some socially and statistically significant differences in the leisure activities of manual and white-collar workers. For instance, the manual workers went to the cinema more often; the white-collar workers attended evening classes and various kinds of clubs more often. Not surprisingly the actual tastes in entertainment of the students were different from those of the unskilled manual workers. But on examining the social contexts in which these activities were carried out, the similarities became much more striking than the differences. It is with these similarities that I am especially concerned.

Almost without exception, the young men spent most of their leisure-time with other young men of about their own age, or had done so until they started "going steady." No matter what the activity in which they engaged, it was invariably described as being much more enjoyable and interesting when it was carried out in the company of their friends. Even when an activity seemed interesting in its own right, somehow or other, they said, "It wasn't much cop if you had to do it on your own." On the other hand, "Just hanging around and doing nothing very much in particular" could be most enjoyable if you were with your friends. The favourite way of spending leisure time was "being out with the boys"; "off somewhere with the lads"; "hanging around with my mates." Being "out with the boys" meant a group which usually consisted of three, four or five young men who reckoned to spend most of their leisure time together. There was no doubt in their own minds or those of their other friends about who did or did not belong to a particular group. In practice the group might last for only a few months, it might go on for several years. One or two of its members might drop out, and perhaps be replaced by others. Over a period of time, therefore, the actual membership of these groups could change considerably but the particular *form* of grouping remained intact. All the young men I saw had belonged to one or more of these groupings at some time in their lives, and most were still very deeply involved in them. Indeed, these "peer-groups," as American sociologists have aptly labelled them, seemed to constitute an almost universal form of sociability among young men in the suburb.

### **Early peer groups**

These peer-groups of early adulthood were the lineal descendants of the peer-groups of early adolescence, themselves a development of the play-groups of childhood. Usually their members had known each other most of their lives, though they might not have been such close friends in the past. Indeed, a certain reshuffling of friendships and loyalties in the course of growing up was the rule. Members of a peer-group, like those of their childhood play-groups, were usually of much the same age. Even in early adulthood there was rarely more than 18 months difference in the ages of the eldest and youngest in a group. Members of a group usually lived fairly near each other and had often been to the same school—though this tendency was more marked among manual workers than among white-collar workers. The latter more often drew their friends from a wider area.

I did not encounter a single peer-group whose members all worked in the same factory or office. There was a tendency for members of a peer-group to be in similar types of jobs but this was almost invariably because the peer-group sometimes operated as an informal employment exchange. What I did not find, though I looked pretty hard for them, were unequivocal instances of individuals joining peer-groups or being excluded from them purely on occupational and "class" grounds.

One of the most striking features of peer-group activity was the continuous discussion of matters concerning its members and other people they knew; what they were going to do that evening; what they could do at the week-end; and what they had done earlier in the week; where to meet, who they had seen; what films were coming; what dances were on; what magazines and books they had read. If one of the group had not been able to go out with the rest the evening before, the others told him what they had done and said, who they had seen and met. They commented on their own activities, they gossiped about other people they knew, they criticized each others' tastes in clothes and girl-friends. They exchanged jokes and stories. They remarked on engagements and marriages reported in the local newspapers, and exchanged bawdy comments on those which they knew about and which were not reported in the local papers.

Some of the matters which they rarely if ever mentioned are equally significant. They did not discuss each others' families, or their jobs, unless something had happened that had prevented them from meeting up with the others as usual or that provided them with a story to tell. They did not openly talk about what they earned, though they usually had some idea of what each others' wages were. Occasionally, if someone was thinking of changing his job, he might mention the matter, and there would then be some discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of various jobs and employers. Young men quite often learned of vacancies in this way, but the actual details of their everyday work were seldom mentioned. Finally, with the exception of those few who were active in political parties and had like-minded friends, they rarely discussed national and party political issues.

### **Work, politics and family**

Work, politics, and family life were all potential sources of differentiation, division and conflict within the peer-group. They were therefore ignored as far as possible and their consequences largely denied. Discussion within the group was almost entirely limited to matters on which they could either hope to reach agreement or on which no decision need be taken. Thus most groups were quite prepared to abandon an activity which threatened the unity of the group and was likely to lead to irreconcilable differences. In other words, membership of the group became an important value and end in itself. Not only was the consumption of available "recreational goods" predominantly social in character, but as Riesman points out in *The Lonely Crowd*, "people themselves, friendships, are the greatest consumables of all; the peer-group itself is a main object of consumption." Of all the social groupings in modern industrial societies, peer-groups seem to approach most closely to Simmel's notion of "pure sociability," which entails social intercourse between equals "for its own sake," and not the kind of co-operation required to achieve some externally imposed task as for instance occurs among work-groups in industry.

The young men themselves did not possess a highly developed vocabulary for discussing their own sociability—in contrast to the vocabularies they had for talking about, say, football or jazz. When describing their leisure activities in interviews, they often initially said they didn't do much in the evenings. They might "just go for a mooch round the town" or "hang around" with their friends. Some investigators seem to have taken such replies quite literally and have concluded that a great many young people really do do little or nothing in their leisure time. This is to ignore completely the importance of informal social activities and groupings which cannot be readily subsumed under simple, definite, and commonsensical headings, and to overlook a whole category

of social groupings whose structures hold considerable ideological implications.

The peer-group does not possess an explicit structure of differentiated social positions which define and regulate the relationships between members occupying those positions. It consists solely of individuals who engage in activities together on the basis of equality, and who share certain values, of which equality in their relationships with each other and the maintenance of the group itself in this state are by far the most important. In groups with an explicit structure and differentiated statuses, the factory, the youth club, the political party, and the trade union, for instance, individuals can leave or join without changing its structure or threatening its very existence. Such groups can endure in spite of chronic disputes and virtually permanent conflicts between some of their members. Peer-groups lack this kind of structure, and, setting great store upon sociability at the expense of other activities, must, if they are to survive, avoid activities and situations which might generate conflicts impossible of resolution with the means at their disposal. At the same time, the greatest importance is attached to equality. Ideally, members of a peer-group treat each other exactly alike. Everybody ought to have the same say in deciding what the group will do. Everyone ought to be able to take an equal part in whatever is to be done. This emphasis upon equality within the group and the concomitant hostility to the idea of having anyone tell them what to do is in sharp contrast to the state of affairs prevailing in the kind of gang which W. F. Whyte describes in his study of pre-war Boston, *Street Corner Society*.

Gangs like the "Nortons" in Boston, or those of Chicago described by Thrasher, have a clear-cut, established leadership which is recognized by the members and easily ascertainable by an observer. This was most certainly not the case among the young men in the suburb. On the contrary, in describing their groups, they insisted that they had no special leader; everyone was treated the same. They made it very clear that anyone who set himself up to tell the others what to do would be ignored, derided, and, if he carried on like that, left out of things altogether. Nor, in the groups which I observed directly, was I able to pick out individuals who consistently took the lead in any activity, or whose opinion seemed to carry more weight when anything came up for discussion. Individuals did, of course, take the lead on particular occasions in the sense that theirs were the suggestions finally adopted by the group, but no one seemed to attain a position from which he was able to direct or consistently influence the groups' activities. Thus peer-groups may be said to have leaders in particular contexts; they do not have an established *leadership*.

### **A shifting leadership**

Both Whyte's and Thrasher's studies suggest that gangs with an established leadership had usually developed from peer-groups, and were always tending to break down into such groups again. My own observations in the Borough revealed the other side of the coin. There was always a possibility that leadership might emerge within peer-groups but it was not given a chance to become established. What is, I think, interesting is that much the same processes which hindered the development of leadership in the Borough seem to have operated in the gangs of Chicago and Boston. Since Thrasher, Whyte and also Homans, who re-analysed Whyte's data in *The Human Group*, have dealt at length with the ways in which leadership did become established in gangs, I shall concentrate upon the social processes and mechanisms which hinder and, in the suburb, inhibited, the development of

peer-groups into gangs with an established leadership.

One of the most important practices in the everyday activities of the peer-group was "treating"; making small gifts to the other members of the group, which the giver expected to be repaid, usually in kind. "Treating" could be, and was applied to every activity on which a group needed to spend money; tickets for cinemas, dance-halls, and variety theatres; snacks; bus fares; games of billiards and snooker; drinks. In a well-established peer-group the procedure was sufficiently flexible to allow for the return of gifts which were different in kind, though of about the same value, or for the return to be effected at another time. The young men themselves frequently stressed the obligatory nature of these exchanges, and their reciprocal character. By and large, you should not buy a drink for someone unless you thought he could and would buy you one later on; and you should not accept a drink from anyone unless you were prepared to buy him one in turn. If someone did not have enough money, his friends would always lend him some, unless, of course, he made a habit of not repaying it, when he very quickly got left out of things. In this way the group always tended to push up expenditure to the limits of what its members could afford—and it was from this practice, I think, that the importance attached to having about the same amount of money to spend arose.

## Money to spare

Similar, complementary, processes worked to exclude individuals who had noticeably more money to splash about. Sometimes these "barons" gradually dropped out of their original group of their own accord, complaining that their friends "never wanted to do anything much, just the same old things all the time." Others whose conspicuous consumption passed the point where the rest of the group could tolerate them were quickly dropped.

In the Cornerville gangs followers and hangers-on borrowed money from the leaders and often did not repay it. The leaders, for their part, borrowed only from their "lieutenants," i.e. their own peer-group, or from outside the gang altogether. This asymmetry was one of the crucial mechanisms in maintaining leadership and distinctions of rank within the gang. In the peer-groups of the suburb, individuals borrowed and lent money publicly—and such loans were also repaid publicly. Both the lender and the borrower were pretty sure it would be repaid because they and their families were in steady employment. Young men in "Cornerville" by contrast were more often than not out of work, and much of the cash they acquired percolated into the gangs from various local "rackets" and political organizations. Gang leaders in Boston could maintain their leadership only so long as they were in funds, and when "Doc," the leader of one of the gangs Whyte studied, was penniless for months on end, he dropped out of the gang almost completely.

I think then that the constant practice of reciprocity and the use of similar mechanisms goes some way towards explaining how the emergence of an established leadership in peer-groups is inhibited. It does not, however, explain how such a high value comes to be set upon equality, nor how the peer-group comes to be the principal embodiment of egalitarianism in the everyday life of the young men. The importance generally of egalitarianism in working-class life is, of course, one of the ideological constants I referred to at the outset. Its embodiment in the peer-group originates, I think, in the play-groups of childhood from which the peer-group is structurally derived. Membership of the play-group in childhood is voluntary, and relations between its members are much more nearly equal than those between the child

and his family, or between the child and his school-teachers. Families and schools alike can only perform their functions by imposing a certain amount of discipline and constraint on the children, thus emphasizing their subordination and enhancing, by contrast, the approximate equality within the play-group. Thus I would argue that in childhood the play-group becomes important not merely because of the activities which can be carried on within it, but because of the *type* of social relationships which are possible within it. It becomes the focus and embodiment of all relationships of approximate equality.

In the suburb, the subordination of children within the family was much reduced by the time they left school to start work; but at work their subordination was renewed, even increased. On leaving school, the young men had had high hopes of what it would be like at work, even though many of them were not at all sure just what kind of job they wanted to do. Those who went into industry had seen themselves quickly learning to run machines and working them on their own. The world of work seemed remote and somewhat mysterious—and all the more marvellous for that. The reality turned out to be very different. They were given all the odd jobs and at every turn made to feel inexperienced and ignorant. Instead of being treated like men they were regarded as no more than kids. They felt that they were sat on by everyone, not only by the boss and the foreman but by the older workers too. The easy-going relationships within the peer-group where "no one's the boss" and "you do what you like in your own time" contrasted sharply with the set-up at work where "everyone's your boss" and "everything's cut and dried so you have to do it their way."

It seems possible, therefore, that the disappointments and rebuffs which young men encounter when they start work are directly related to their insistence upon equality within the peer-group; that their lowly status at work reactivates and reinforces the egalitarianism implicit in social groupings like the peer-group; it may even play a decisive part in inhibiting the development of established leadership within peer-groups. Many of the young men themselves remarked: "You get enough pushing around at work—you don't want it outside as well." I should like to stress the provisional character of this hypothesis. My evidence on it is far from conclusive, but the hypothesis does fit my own data and also the results of some other studies of young people. It also has the merit of relating behaviour and attitudes observable in everyday life to the economic and political constants of the society.

Before concluding this sketch of the social life of young men, I must make some mention of an important structural principle which virtually ensures the eventual disintegration of peer-groups and gangs alike. Up to this point I have, like the peer-groups themselves, carefully excluded girls. Particular peer-groups may break up for all sorts of reasons: someone moves away or goes into the Services, or gets interested in doing something else, or makes new friends. As a mode of social organization, the peer-group survives though particular peer-groups disintegrate—until "the women get them."

Given the present sharp division of labour between the sexes in our society, and particularly in the working-class, it is impossible to admit girls to a male peer-group as equal members and they are excluded. It is virtually impossible for young men to continue membership of a peer-group and form a steady relationship with a girl: it has to be one or the other. From the point of view of the peer-group the ideal relationship between young men and girls is a series of brief and temporary liaisons.

The peer-group very largely provides the initial encourage-

ment and opportunities to meet and get to know girls, who in the suburb of a large city, are usually strangers. It then acts as a brake, and usually an effective one, upon the further development of such relationships, while the young men are still settling down at work. Once they are settled in an occupation and really earning their own livings, this positive function of the peer-group disappears, and becomes a shackle on their further social development. At the same time, given the development of heterosexual interests in most young men, more permanent relationships with girls are bound to develop, and since girls are excluded from the peer-group, the peer-group itself is eventually destroyed.

In conclusion, I turn from behaviour I could actually observe, and inferences which could be drawn directly from it, to a brief and necessarily more speculative consideration of the more general, economic, political, and ideological contexts in which everyday life is lived.

The actual form of association that emerges among young men and the structure of the groupings in which they are involved seems to depend upon the economic organization and functioning of society in two ways. The existence of fairly high levels of employment and working-class prosperity enables, and the demands of industrial discipline motivate, a form of social grouping which is essentially leaderless. In the absence of these conditions, a larger, more highly structured grouping, the gang, with a definite leadership is likely to emerge. In all probability, other environmental factors, notably severe deprivation and a general background of lawlessness and violence are involved in the emergence of criminal gangs, as in the case of the American gangs studied by Thrasher and Whyte, and in South Africa, but full employment and relative prosperity do seem to set in motion forces which inhibit the development of gangs as the main and characteristic social grouping among young men. It is still possible for individual gangs to emerge from time to time, but they do not become the dominant or characteristic form of organization. I have been able to find no evidence in newspaper reports of the activities of so-called delinquent gangs in Britain of consistent leadership, with the few and notorious exceptions of the groups of hangers-on some middle-aged bookmakers seem to acquire.

In cities and large towns, residential segregation and the development of working-class quarters with their own schools and recreational facilities probably produces a fairly high degree of social segregation outside work, and hence class-status does not appear explicitly as a factor in the formation of peer-groups. In small towns and the countryside, however, where the outlines of class-status are likely to loom too obviously and persistently through the veils of courtesy and civility to be ignored, I would expect peer-groups to form much more explicitly along class lines.

Although most political parties try to recruit to their "youth" sections, on the whole their efforts are remarkably unsuccessful, and there is no obvious overall connection between the "youth culture" in Britain, and probably also in France and Scandinavia, and various political movements. This situation is in strong contrast to that obtaining in the U.S.S.R., the U.S.A., Germany, Yugoslavia and Israel, for instance, where the tasks of overcoming local and provincial separatisms and of creating and consolidating nation-states and national consciousness is by no means complete. This does not mean, however, that the youth culture in Britain is entirely devoid of political significance and ideological implication. The characteristic egalitarianism of the peer-group is surely of importance on any reckoning.

The shortcomings, limitations, and negative qualities of the kind of "equality" implicit in peer-group behaviour are only too apparent. Half the human race, womanhood in its

entirety, is excluded. If the stress on equality protects young men against an excess of invidious distinctions, it also leads them to ignore or deny real differences. The notion of equality tends to be merged with that of identity, at the expense of equivalence, leading often to an intolerant and intemperate rejection of values, ideas, and innovations outside the immediate range of their everyday experience and occasionally to a brutal disregard of the human dignity of individuals. Paradoxically this very insistence upon equality and disregard of differences between individuals produces an apparent blindness to real convergences of interests and underlying similarities in the situations of, say, white-collar and manual workers, or of men and women working on different jobs in the same firm. The tendency to distrust all leadership which seems to run through working-class life generally is reflected in and, I would argue, reinforced by peer-group experiences.

The positive aspects of "peer-group equality" are, I hope, no less obvious. Equality is seen to be no empty metaphysical category or abstract theoretical concept but something that can be realized in social relations between men in everyday life. Working-class aspirations for and ideals of equality and comradeship are constantly renewed by this realization, however imperfectly and on however small a scale. Thereby peer-groups and the youth culture play a part and, I believe, an important part in indoctrinating new generations in these values which, diffused later in life to broader social groupings, constitute a key component in working-class solidarity.

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