Rock 'n' Roll

Is there an adolescent subculture in our society, with its own elite group, independent values, and aspirations?

William Petersen

The very process of education induces most who write about it, including the authors of virtually all of the recent spate of books on American public schools, to see students as merely passive, molded by their teachers, their curricula, their school administrators. Here is a book—entitled **The Adolescent Society**—that tells us something of the independent values and aspirations of high school students. Coleman has looked under the rock on which the school system is built and has opened up to adult view fauna of which even the parents among us generally know little.

Ten schools in northern Illinois participated in the study, ranging in enrollment from 150 to almost 2000, and situated in communities that typified a farm village, a small town with light or heavy industry, a working-class or a middle-class suburb, and the center of a large city. Two questionnaires were administered to the entire student bodies, and supplementary information was gathered from school records, teachers and administrators, and parents.

Many of these facts are of considerable prima facie interest. About half of the respondents prefer rock-and-roll to any other kind of music. Two-thirds of the boys and more than three-quarters of the girls never smoke or drink even beer. The proportion of boys owning a car ranges from four-fifths in the farm community to almost one-fifth in Chicago, and everywhere car ownership is an important symbol of status and a great aid in dating. Many more would rather be a good athlete or a leader in extracurricular activities than a brilliant student; and this preference is fostered by the colleges, which compete for the football or basketball player but let the good student seek his own admission. "Because high schools allow adolescent societies to divert energies into athletics, social activities, and the like, they recruit into adult intellectual activities many people with a rather mediocre level of ability, and fail to attract many with high levels of ability." Bright students, just because they are bright, see that the greatest social rewards are paid for activities officially defined as peripheral to the school's main purpose, and some of the boys and girls respond accordingly.

Nonintellectual Clutter

A good high school administrator, in Coleman's view, uses extracurricular activities to make the school attractive to its students, while still maintaining the regular curriculum in its central place. The author returns to this dilemma in a number of contexts. In a discussion of the problems that have developed out of coeducation, for example, he points out that "the opposite sex in a school pulls interests toward the school, and then partly diverts it to non-scholastic matters." Similarly, athletics, clubs, high school bands, and all the rest of the rich variety of nonintellectual matters that clutter up secondary education are legitimate as bait; for the basic fare of science, history, and literature could not otherwise be made palatable. This is particularly so, he maintains, for schools in working-class neighborhoods, but it holds also for others, even where all the students are oriented toward college. As these examples suggest, Coleman tries to avoid joining sides in the great debate on public education. The antithesis between "academic emphasis" and "life adjustment," he writes, is "a false one, for it forgets that most of the teen-ager's energy is not directed toward either of these goals." In other contexts, however, he suggests that one important reason students find their studies dull is that educationists have eliminated scholastic competition, which has been largely supplanted by competition for social standing.

In maintaining a balance between curriculum and athletics, what shall be done with a student who is able to excel in one or the other? "Is it better for the social system to push an athlete toward studying and a scholar toward athletics, or to push them further in their present directions?" Even those who administer college scholarships seemingly prefer breadth to depth, and Coleman shows what price is paid for such a policy. By emphasizing what the author terms the "all-around boy," administrators can force athletes to raise their grades, but they also induce good students to lower theirs one or even two grade points below the average in schools that encourage adolescents to concentrate on their studies.

As these examples suggest, this interesting and important book, highly competent within its narrow range, deserves attention from not only educators and sociologists but also the literate lay public. Unfortunately, it is also marred by a number of flaws, and these are typical enough of the genre to warrant extended comment. Survey analysts have developed some highly specialized skills with which they can often, as in this case, add new insights to a well-worked field. These skills, however, cannot be an adequate substitute for everything that came before them. Even with a well-constructed questionnaire, careful coding, and provocative analysis of the opinion data, one cannot write a book without knowing how to write, or analyze an institution in a social vacuum.

The professional cant of survey analysts is at best inelegant, at worst incomprehensible. In this book one encounters "most no-answers were nonfinishers," "the average number of mentions of someone," "the within-girl variance in grades," and so on and on. Telegraphic non-English, endemic throughout the text, dominates in the tables and graphs, most of which cannot be understood apart from the accompanying commentary. One column is headed, for instance, "2+ Be like"; this means, those students named two or more times in response to the question, "Thinking of all the boys (girls) in this school, who [sic] would you most want to be like?" It is his insensitivity

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to language, one presumes, rather than his naivete, that induces the author to tell us that "adolescents as a whole are not delinquent," or that "athletics is an activity in which all boys start on a fairly equal footing, regardless of background," or to make a dozen similar statements that startle only because they are ineptly worded.

On Reality and Perception

A generation ago the American sociologist W. I. Thomas set forth a theorem for his professional associates: "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences." Today, when survey analysts have learned this lesson too well, one must again emphasize the obvious: No matter what persons perceive, or say they perceive, events and behavior are determined in part by what is, by social reality. That is to say, no analysis can be complete if its only foundation is responses to a questionnaire.

Consider, for example, the following passage: "All parents' questionnaires were coded by one person, who was otherwise unfamiliar with the communities, the schools, or the aims of the research. After finishing the parents' questionnaires for a given school, he made a page or two of notes on the community and school as seen through the parents' eyes and as reported by them in their comments. These descriptions, of course, are not accurate, but they give a flavor of the community and school as seen by parents." Granted that this flavor is useful, should there not also be a main dish of empirical facts about the communities? One could imagine that northern Illinois is some exotic land, with no census or other records, to be known only through the patently inaccurate characterizations by a few of the natives. Or at least this is the best description available from a well-known sociologist, working with grants from the U.S. Office of Education and the Ford Foundation.

If this judgment seems too harsh, consider the way that Coleman puts his study in historical perspective. He begins with a newspaper account of education among the Amish, a small rigidly fundamentalist sect, and uses them as a contemporary example of what Americans were like before industrialization. Journalists who know no history often contrast the prior stable agricultural society with the rapidly changing present one, but seldom in such preposterous terms. Several generations ago Illinois was still a frontier; two generations ago many of its inhabitants were European-born. Around 1900, the high school was essentially the preparatory school for the small minority that went on to college. Today the native-born students, mostly of native-born parents, attend high school almost as a matter of course. To call their social world less, or more, stable is a generalization that must be specified to acquire any meaning.

When survey data are analyzed in a social vacuum, this fact is usually not apparent on the surface, for the data are used to construct the framework within which they are studied. There is a fundamental difference between asking persons whom they will vote for as president of the United States and asking high school students who they think is in "the leading crowd": we know that there will be an election, but whether there *is* a leading crowd is one of the questions the researcher must ask—not beg. Sociologists have made a number of studies, for instance, of what they termed the "power elites" of various communities; more recently, it has been shown that different persons decide which books should go in the public library, whether a street should be paved, whether a rise in pay for firemen should go on the ballot, and so on through all the decisions that constitute municipal life. Whether students, who have very little formal power, throw up an elite in any sense is even more dubious; and in one isolated passage Coleman says as much:

"Who shall be called the elites in these schools? At the extremes there is no question: those never named are obviously not elites, and those named most often are obviously elites (in the sense indicated by the questions). But the problem is not so easily solved for those in the middle who received some, not a great many, choices. The answer seems to be that in such a situation of informal organization, people cannot be clearly divided into leaders and non-leaders, popular heroes and non-heroes. Instead, leadership resides in many people, in varying degrees."

If this is true, and I think it is, then much of the argument of the whole book is undermined. If the "leading group" or the "elite" is not really a model (a "be like," in Coleman's idiom) for more than an indeterminate, but probably small, proportion of the students, then a study that presumes to analyze "the adolescent society" by looking mainly at this model suffers from a fundamental inadequacy.

Is there an adolescent subculture? (With an indifference to technical language remarkable in any professional social scientist, Coleman uses adolescent "society" or adolescent "culture" more often than the more correct term.) One dimension of this question we have already touched on: do all adolescents form a unit? In the sense that they are all intermediate between childhood and maturity, obviously yes; with respect to their values and aspirations, just as obviously no. There are not only differences of sex (which Coleman if anything exaggerates) and of social class (which he analyzes with acuity), but differences among various schools or even the four classes within a single school, and particularly among "cliques"—that is, individuals and those they chose as their friends. That the young persons interested in intellectual matters make up only a minority of Coleman's sample does not distinguish it, I would say, from any human population whatever; and the reiterative suggestion that social disintegration is in process is—like Mark Twain's death notice—a bit premature.

Teen-agers' Viewpoint

The second dimension of the question of the adolescent subculture is how, and how much, it is distinguished from the general adult culture. Coleman insists that "the adolescent lives more and more in a society of his own"; "our adolescents today are cut off, probably more than ever before, from adult society." I would say that the comment of an anonymous teen-ager, cited in one footnote, is better social analysis: "As an adolescent, looking at our [adolescent] society from a distance, it seems to me to be merely an immature adult society. This immaturity is responsible for the 'world of difference' between the culture of the teen-ager and the adult. . . . The adolescent borrows for his society the 'glamorous and sophisticated' part of adult society. The goals and worthwhile activities of the adult world are scorned because they involve responsibilities, which the adolescent is not ready to accept."