

That Lean and Hungry Look— He Thinks Too Much*

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THOSE of us whose basic values and education were shaped during the period between World War I and World War II have established a mind-set that makes it nearly impossible to fully comprehend and accept what we see happening to our young people today. Conversely, the younger generation is equally at a loss to understand their elders who seem to them to be "just not with it." Those over 30 years of age are children of economic depression, whereas the younger group are children of affluence. This single factor, while not wholly responsible for present-day student unrest, has a great deal to do with how one perceives the world, what is important to him, and what is worth striving for.

Because those of the older group have control of the power structure that governs social systems and their institutions, they establish basic policies that reflect their perceptions of the good life. Members of the younger group feel that those policies and institutions are outmoded and archaic, and they seek to modernize them. In the process they are left with a sense of utter and complete frustration. The systems with which they are dealing make little sense to them, and yet they feel a hopelessness in being able to do anything to change them. The freedom that characterizes both our times and our institutions of higher education makes it easy for students to vent their frustrations by engaging in violent, attention-gaining strategies for change.

The campus disturbances of today cannot be equated with party raids and other foolishness of the past. They are much more serious and penetrate more deeply into the bedrock of society. They flow from profound and complex problems that have cultural, sociological, and psychological dimensions. It is interesting to note that the more thoughtful young people seem to have a greater awareness of the complexities of these problems than do many of their adult counterparts. As a result, students are not optimistic that needed institutional and social reform will occur within the

* Freely adapted from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*: "Yond Cassius has a lean and hungry look; He thinks too much: such men are dangerous."

framework of the existing power structure. They see little evidence that institutions can even cope with such relatively simple matters as streamlining registration procedures, improving teaching, or even providing better food services!

Student dissatisfaction and unrest is not going to be solved by a hard-line Establishment policy, nor by "student involvement" of a token-paternalistic type, nor by capitulation to militants and malcontents by institutional leadership—and faculties—when confronted with demands. The problem is likely to get worse before it will get better. Its solution lies in an extensive rethinking of the role of young people in our society, and this will take a great deal of time. If the solution sought is elimination of conflict between the older and the younger generations, it probably will never be solved completely.

Part of the present difficulties arise out of the disparity between biological or physical maturity and the point in one's life at which this culture is willing to grant adult prerogatives. The situation is further complicated by discontinuities in achieving adult status in this culture. For example, a young man may be required to give his life for his country at age 18, but he cannot vote until he is 21 in most states. He can physically beget children at age 14 or 15, but he cannot legally marry without parental permission until he is 18. Young people in our culture between the ages of about 14 or 15 to age 21 are in something of a no-man's-land. They are neither children nor adults. In many cases they look like adults, act like adults, and yet are treated as though they were children. The reverse may also be true.

Our culture has no clearly defined role for members of this age group beyond one that makes them dependent on their elders. Because of the nature of the human creature, he has a prolonged childhood at best, a period during which he is completely dependent on his parents for survival. In modern societies the period of parental dependence is extended far beyond survival requirements. This in itself is bound to result in adult-offspring conflicts.

Further conflict is generated when the parent seeks to achieve his own self-fulfillment through his children. At a certain point in life it is inevitable that one will want to be independent and free, to lead his own life, to make his own decisions. If he is not allowed to do so, he resents it. His feelings are expressed in rebellion or in various forms of guilt.

For the past 40 to 50 years we have steadily moved away from authoritarian policies in our social institutions to democratically oriented ones. This has accelerated in the past two decades. Young children are involved in decision-making processes in their homes. Teachers in the primary grades provide children with alternatives from which to choose. The whole thrust of our educational system in recent years has been to build thinking skills.

Additionally we have emphasized a social philosophy of self-fulfillment—everyone has been encouraged to "do his own thing." Why then should we be distressed when students reach young adulthood and do precisely what we have been trying to teach them for so many years—to inquire; to question; to express their views; to be creative; to make, hold, and defend moral commitments; to speak out on social injustice; and so on? "So," in present day parlance, "what's the hang-up?"

A Degree of Authority

The problem is that the student movement is not a single-purposed, responsible monolith but is rather a multidimensional phenomenon. There are those who are frustrated by the system and are militant in their efforts to bring about reform. They want to see institutions become more sensitive to student needs, to become more actively concerned about social issues, to become what they call "morally and ethically responsible." Other student activists represent minority groups, usually black, who want the institutional effort to provide more adequately for them.

Still others, among whom some imagine themselves to be latter-day Che Guevaras, perceive institutions as so corrupt that they are beyond reform and should be destroyed. Characterized by foul language, anti-conformity, and confrontation tactics, they seek to shut down the institutions. Because many students and faculty members share their dissatisfactions with institutional procedures, they are supported by sizeable numbers of fellow travelers and are therefore potentially dangerous. Many responsible students and faculty members have voiced the opinion that they "believe in their goals but do not support their methods."

It will take great quantities of patience, wisdom, and courage for administrators and faculties to sort through this hodgepodge of student dissent and to respond in appropriate ways. Student involvement in decision making does not always ensure a campus free of violence. In fact, there is some evidence to indicate that institutions with commendable records of student involvement have experienced severe disruption. Students cannot and should not always be accommodated. There is a place for firmness as well as for flexibility in dealing with them—something that seems to have escaped the attention of some administrators and faculties in the past year.

There is among young people today a contempt for authoritarian behavior of all types. Undoubtedly much of this results from well intentioned but nonetheless undesirable paternalistic over-direction. It is unfortunate that the feeling that runs so strongly against authoritarianism is confused with the concept of authority. It is on this point that the scales balance heavily in favor of the elders. Because of their greater life experience, older adults realize and respect the discipline required to gain authority. They know that, while we may have instant tea and instant breakfast, there can be no instant expert.

The development of authority in any field demands a dedication and investment of hard work that only the disciplined individual is able to make. If young adults are unwilling to accept the direction of institutions, which is intended to build such a discipline, they must develop self-discipline themselves. While it may be "cool" to sit around the campus wearing beads and strumming a guitar, or be "turned on" by protests against the "military-industrial complex," this is not the way one develops any degree of authority in anything, whether it be art, music, science, or life itself.

Is it true that the present middle-aged generation is too work-oriented for the purpose of achieving material gain, a goal that is allegedly rejected by the younger generation? If so, then other more acceptable goals will need to be defined that will be so attractive to individuals that they will be

willing to discipline themselves to achieve them. To date there is no evidence that such goals have been defined except in ways that raise serious questions about their impact on one's mental and physical health.

We have before us, therefore, the serious problem of rethinking our conceptions of the role of the young adult, or pre-adult, in our society. This has obvious and direct implications for our institutions of education and their basic policies. We must have an earnest concern for the "generation gap" but should not be alarmed or surprised that there is one.

The history, religious teachings, and literature of our culture, as well as those of other cultures, tell us that there has always been a generation gap. And there probably always will be. This brings to mind the wisdom in the words of George Ross Wells when he said, "Man is probably the only animal which even attempts to have anything to do with his half-grown young."

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