

Of Adolescent Cultures and Subcultures

Anthony M. Deulio

For a new civilization may be stirring in its roots. . . . Perhaps that is the unheard echo of graffiti; the vibration of that profound discomfort it arouses, as if the unheard music of its proclamation and/or its mess, the rapt intent seething of its foliage, is the herald of some oncoming apocalypse less and less far away.—Norman Mailer, *The Faith of Graffiti*

Sometimes the most important clues to the study of a culture are found in its humblest and most pervasive activities. There is a sad misunderstanding in American education about the value of the study of the adolescent underculture of which graffiti is one small but significant part. Perhaps if it were called by a highfalutin' name, it would encounter less suspicion and derision by those of us who are the professionals in the field. Nevertheless, graffiti—from the stylus of Pompeii and the spray paint on New York subway cars, to the scrawls on our bathroom walls and the scratchings on our desktops—are the adolescents' way of saying, "I am here, I exist, I have something to say."

Graffiti have been with us since prehistoric times. The Oxford English Dictionary defines a graffito as, "A drawing or writing scratched on a wall or other surface; as at Pompeii or Rome." It

TURN
THE
GUNS
AROUND

Photo: Michael D. Sullivan.

mirrors the world of its own day, and it throws a broad beam of light on the preoccupations and fears, dreams and desires, feelings and hopes of the people whom the social scientists quantify and computerize. So too with the graffiti of adolescents. Graffiti gives adolescents a certain satisfaction also, for through it they can vent their hostilities, express their fantasies, communicate their triumphs, declare their rebellion, and promote their propaganda.

Characteristics of Adolescent Graffiti

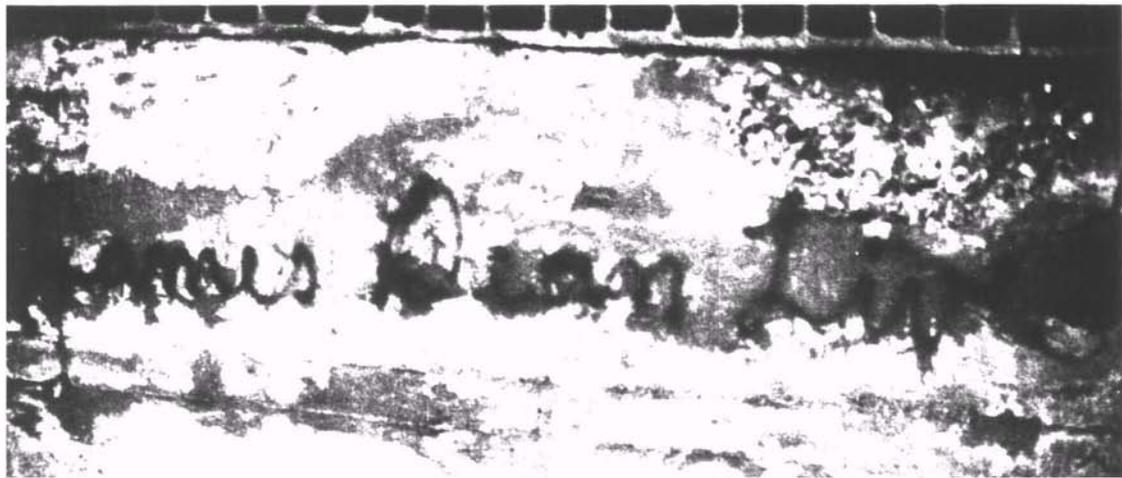
Certain characteristics of the phenomenon of adolescent graffiti, based on a number of long-term research studies, should be noted:

- *It is universal.* The sprays, scrawls, and scratches appear in all the world's teenage cultures. According to recent reports from Moscow, the handwriting is on the wall even in Russia with its long-time reputation as a graffiti-free society.

- *It is costly.* The New York City Transit Authority recently spent \$4 million to clean its 6,200 subway cars of spray paint graffiti. In San Francisco, secondary students were to be granted cash incentives by the Board of Education if they could reduce the graffiti in their schools. And in some states, laws have been passed making parents financially responsible for the graffiti their children paint on buildings, rest rooms, and other property.

- *It can take several forms.* Usually graffiti appear as statements, single words, or pictures, but often can include various symbols to which certain meanings are understood or have been attached.

- *It is difficult to differentiate graffiti on the basis of sex.* Graffiti written by girls—that found in the girls' lavatories in churches and schools, for example—is as strong, political, trite, or sexual as that written by boys. One slight difference: girls' graffiti may sometimes show faint signs of the traditional romanticism of the girl-loves-boy theme. One other possible distinction, according to a report by the Council of British Ceramic and Sanitary Manufacturers, is that the quality of art work is higher in the ladies' "loos" than they found in the gents' lavatories.



• *It is usually transitory.* Despite those found in the excavations of Pompeii, most do not last a very long time. A custodian's paintbrush, a teacher's washcloth, or a plasterer's trowel are all impending threats to the longevity of these inscriptions.

• *It is not all pornographic.* The correlation between pornography and graffiti is not as high as many would like to believe. In fact, in some of the long-term collections, one can see the increasing seriousness of purpose and the larger issues being dealt with as opposed to the mere epithets, obscene statements, and pornographic invitations one finds among the earlier evidence.

A more serious look at this aspect of our adolescent underculture can give us a clue as to who our future criminals might be. Some authorities believe that the adolescent graffiti artist eventually graduates into serious felony crime; that the graffiti problem is multidimensional and involves a subculture that produces tragic criminal behavior. A long-term study of youths who were arrested for graffiti crimes over a two-year period showed that 40 percent of them faced other, more serious criminal charges in subsequent years. In this study, 90 percent of the youngsters arrested on graffiti charges were between the ages of 11 and 15. A random sample of the 15-year-olds was then followed over the next three years. By the time these 750 youths were 18 years old, 29 percent had been re-arrested on felony charges; 11 percent for misdemeanors. Eight of them were accused of murder.

It would be convenient to report that as we

reach the end of the decade of the 1970s an analysis of the adolescent subculture from recent graffiti studies shows we are reaching the end of an era. But such is not the case. The graffiti written by them and analyzed by the graffiti researchers tend to reflect the same feelings as those uncovered in the formal studies of adolescents done by the sociologists, consulting firms, and pollsters. Perhaps in the first years of the seventies, when the return to normalcy from the turbulent sixties began, that may have been. But what's happening now seems to be neither the beginning nor the end of an era.

The Struggle Is Still with Us

For a large number of older adolescents, the struggle is still with *us*. *Us* who have all the power, control the schools, the government, industry, commerce, and the media. They struggle because they know they're right and will soon have All The People on their side. And yet their struggle dissipates into many disparate elements and settles into other things—a hundred other movements bobbing aimlessly about. The graffiti show that they have gone from suppressing their differences to proudly flaunting them. Now the graffiti ask if you're male or female, white or black, gay or straight, smoke pot or not, liberal or conservative. Or maybe it shows they're into exploring one of a hundred gurus, meditation groups, or other odd mystic orders.

And then, of course, there are the rest of them. Their graffiti say they don't belong to any-

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thing, except of course, their cliques. They like to think of themselves as free spirits, but changing values and sex roles threaten and confuse them, and they often find themselves falling back on the old ones. Yet, paradoxically, they have scuttled the old-fashioned "my country right or wrong" kind of patriotism. They are alienated from the religious Establishments that have allied themselves with the conservative political Establishment, in disregard of the demands of social justice and reform. And they reject the authority of governmental or corporate institutions that have grown unresponsive, oppressive, or corrupt.

What does come through the graffiti is the nature of the new values that seem to be replacing the old. These tend to cluster around such terms as "self-fulfillment," "gratification," "doing your own thing." It is the new cult of the self that says there's more to life than making a living, making ends meet, caring for others. It asks why should one sacrifice oneself for family, employer, and community.

The graffiti show the current classic paradox of our adolescents: turning toward a hedonistic

individualism on the one hand, yet demanding reform of big business and political parties on the other. How will they reconcile their easy-going private morality with their attitude that businesspersons are too concerned with profits, and politicians are not clean and public-spirited?

Graffiti do have their uses. Just as in almost any city of Europe, they offer the strolling tourist an index to the political temper of the day that is almost as reliable as an opinion poll, so too for those of us who work in school and college buildings do graffiti have their uses. They can serve as a multiframed, often pornographic, barometer, a series of pictures that unfolds panel by panel on desk tops, walls, and toilet booths like some netherworld's Sistine. It is important that we listen, think, and act. ^[E]

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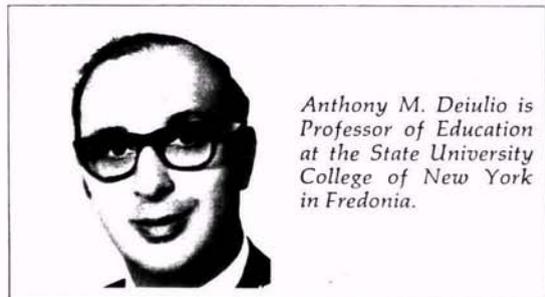
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