Systemic Disaffection and American Youth: Antecedence and Consequences

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A political scientist reports findings in a study of the sociopolitical attitudes of today's young people. Have they reverted to passivity, or are they strongly activist in their political and economic views?

Much of the curricula in the secondary school, particularly that in the social studies, seems based on a model of the adolescent as being fundamentally apolitical, being detached from sociopolitical reality, and as being devoid of a specific political orientation. Surprisingly, few observers of the political learning process have commented on this aspect of the curricula; and those few who have challenged this model typically have replaced it with one assuming that the adolescent in America today manifests an allegiance, conforming, passive, and, most importantly, uncritical sociopolitical perspective.

A recent survey of 458 junior and senior high school students conducted in December 1974 in Lexington, Kentucky, challenges both of these models of contemporary adolescents. Specifically, findings in three areas appear to conflict with the notion that students today are either apolitical in their orientations toward the system or that students conform to the textbook definition of the good citizen. The students surveyed, in their responses to over 60 questionnaire items pertinent to their political attitudes, showed a marked tendency to express critical evaluations of the present state of the sociopolitical system, to express feelings of political alienation, and to condone the use of violence to change the current situation. These findings obviously have implications for the educational system, especially the social studies curricula. After the empirical findings have been outlined, these implications will be discussed and recommendations will be made with regard to the most effective means educators might employ in light of these findings.

The System Discriminates

With one notable exception, the survey results indicate that these students are quite sophisticated in their view of the functioning of the sociopolitical system. On a measure of racial dis-

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discrimination, for example, 41 percent of the students sampled agreed with an item that stated, "Police treat blacks worse than whites." Similarly, 84 percent disagreed with an item stating that "Most laws treat whites worse than blacks." Eighty-eight percent disagreed with the statement that "When they both commit the same crimes, blacks get shorter sentences than whites." In responding to the five items on this scale, 67 percent of the students indicated that the sociopolitical system was characterized by pervasive racial discrimination.

The students perceived the system as being discriminatory on economic grounds, as well. For instance, 65 percent of the students agreed that "Most laws treat the poor worse than the rich." And 62 percent of the sample disagreed with an item reading, "Political leaders take advantage of rich people more than they do poor people." An average of 56 percent of the students, in responding to this measure's five items, believed that economic discrimination exists in the United States today.

Sixty percent of the students felt that blacks had less political power than whites. On the item, "Black citizens have more political power than white citizens," 94 percent of the students sampled disagreed. Sixty-two percent agreed with the statement, "White people have more influence in our government than black people do."

Blacks are also viewed as having less reason to trust political leaders. Seventy-seven percent of the Lexington students, for example, disagreed that "Politicians give black people what they want more often than they give white people what they want." Again, in responding to "Our political leaders seem more interested in helping black people than in helping white people," 74 percent of the students disagreed. An average of 52 percent of the junior and senior high school students felt that blacks were justified in distrusting our political leaders.

On only one scale did the students' responses contradict the empirical research on discrimination in the United States; on this measure the students indicated that blacks themselves were responsible for their status in the social structure, and that the system itself was not to blame for their relatively low social standing. In this case, 39 percent of the sample responded to this measure in a fashion indicative of system—rather than individual—blame for black socioeconomic status. Seventy-three percent of the students agreed with a typical item from this scale: "The problem for many black people is that they aren't really acceptable by American standards; any black person who is educated and does what is considered proper will be accepted and get ahead."

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It is somewhat disturbing, in the author's opinion, to see such a level of agreement with an item embodying such racist sentiments, but on only this scale did such findings occur.

Feelings of Political Alienation

Not only were the students sampled critical of the functions and operations of the sociopolitical system, as evidenced by their responses on these measures, but they also exhibited feelings of political alienation. For instance, on a scale measuring feelings of political powerlessness, 58 percent of the students stated that they felt politically powerless. Eighty-six percent answered that "Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that I can't really understand what's going on." Fifty-nine percent agreed that "I believe public officials don't care what people like me and my parents think."

Seventy-five percent of the students felt political distrust. Only 36 percent of the sample agreed that "Politicians represent the general interest more frequently than they represent special interests," and 70 percent agreed that "People are very frequently manipulated by politicians."

On an even more sophisticated level, 60 percent of these students expressed considerable discontentment with public policy. For example, 71 percent agreed that "It seems to me that the government often fails to take necessary actions on important matters, even when people favor such
actions," and 74 percent agreed that "As the government is now organized and operated, I think it is hopelessly incapable of dealing with all the crucial problems facing the country today."

The most interesting finding relating to the students' feelings of political alienation, however, concerns the fact that 57 percent did not identify with the political system. Thus, 71 percent of the students disagreed with the item, "When I hear or read about the politics and governmental system of the United States, I feel that I am a part of that system." Furthermore, 55 percent of the sample agreed that "When I think about politics and government in the United States, I consider myself an outsider."

Attitudes Toward Violence

Even more interesting results appear when the students' attitudes regarding political violence justification are considered. When queried regarding whether political violence works, for instance, 23 percent of the students answered that it does. Thirty-three percent of the students disagreed that "The use of violence is never an effective way of influencing the government." Twenty-seven percent of the students disagreed with an item stating, "Nothing can be gained politically through the use of violent methods which could not be gotten by more peaceful means."

Twenty-eight percent of the secondary school students feel that political violence is not morally wrong. For example, 52 percent of the students felt that "Some people in this country are justified in threatening to use violence against the government if it doesn't give them what they deserve." And 25 percent of the sample felt that "Under certain circumstances, the people have the right to use violence against the government and its leaders."

Forty-seven percent of the students sampled also condoned the use of various form of unconventional behavior, ranging from nonviolent sit-ins and strikes (70 percent), peaceful picketing and boycotting (69 percent), and peaceful protest rallies and demonstrations (70 percent) to seizing public buildings and property (36 percent), using physical assault and armed action (34 percent), and mass rioting (28 percent) to bring about change in the United States.

Finally, an average of 17 percent of the students were even willing to justify political assassination to effect political reform. Twenty-two percent of the students agreed that "Sometimes I have felt that the best thing for our country might be the death of some of our political leaders," and on an item reading, "There'd be a lot more justice in this country if a few political leaders were killed," 17 percent of the students agreed.

The results of this survey take on an even more important meaning when it is realized that these different attitudinal measures are not independent of one another. Thus, if a student tends to believe the United States is racially discriminatory, he or she also tends to perceive economic discrimination, system-blame for racial discrimination, black political powerlessness, and black political distrust. Similarly, feelings of political powerlessness, political distrust, policy discontentment, and political estrangement are also highly related, as are the four measures of political violence justification. These secondary school students, therefore, are quite consistent in the attitudes they express.

Relation Between Alienation and Violence

Even more significant is the finding that these three sets of measures are also highly correlated with each other. Thus, critical perceptions of sociopolitical reality are associated with feelings of political alienation and with political violence justification. This relationship is of interest in at least two respects. First, because it suggests that these secondary school students are not simply withdrawn from the sociopolitical system, but rather are actively rejecting it. Moreover, the linkage between these three sets of measures contradicts social science theories, which posit an asso-
cation between personality disfunctioning, or psychopathology, and such feelings of systemic rejection. In this case, not only are the system-oriented measures more powerful predictors of systemic rejection, but the individual-oriented measures, for example, self-esteem, have almost no relationship to feelings of systemic rejection among these students.

To what extent do these findings vary with the characteristics of individual students? Our statistical analyses indicate that sex, grade level, grade-point-average, socioeconomic status, level of extracurricular activity, religion, political interest level, and political information level have no systematic effect on these types of attitudes. On the other hand, race has a substantial impact on these measures, with black students registering more critical perceptions of systemic functioning, higher levels of political alienation, and more political violence condonation. Moreover, the black students' responses on the individual measures tend to be more internally consistent, and the correlations between their responses on the three sets of systemic rejection measures are also higher.

Implications for Today's Teaching

Are these findings unique to students in Lexington, Kentucky in 1974? Responses from over 10,000 secondary school and college students to similar questionnaire items in five different states over the past six years suggest that the students in Lexington are not atypical in their reactions to the sociopolitical system. In other words, dissatisfaction with the operation of the system appears to be pervasive among American youth. Evidence from nationwide surveys indicates that these sentiments are prevalent among adults as well, although political violence condonation may be somewhat more restrained.

In light of these findings, what can the secondary school teacher do to cope with the situation in the classroom, without at the same time having less impact on students or, worse, exacerbating feelings of systemic rejection? A number of strategies may prove fruitful in this respect. First, the traditional approach to social studies education, with a descriptive, historical, institutional emphasis, probably is counterproductive in the face of systemic rejection attitudes, since this approach does not really deal with the issues at hand. Similarly, a stress on good citizenship, civics, and patriotism probably is also subject to failure. On the other hand, the referents of these attitudes should not be avoided in the classroom, first, because students are very much interested in this subject matter, and, second, because avoiding these topics of discussion probably would only heighten feelings of systemic rejection among these students.

Probably a more realistic attack on this subject matter is the best strategy, perhaps with an emphasis on the overly perfectionistic nature of certain assumptions underlying these feelings. Also, since recent research indicates that many adolescents feel personally threatened by the activities of the political system, this topic should be realistically confronted, and perhaps discussed within the context of constitutional rights and legal safeguards. Finally, since these attitudes seem to generate tendencies toward withdrawal from political activity, classroom activities, such as role-playing, simulation, and gaming, may be effective in promoting a more realistic understanding of the operations of the sociopolitical system, as well as countering adolescents' rather idealistic views of sociopolitical conflict and perfectionistic demands on the sociopolitical system.

Given the recent history of the sociopolitical system, however, our educational goals must themselves be realistic. Finally, the educator must be cautioned regarding the belief that today's adolescents are in some way naive politically. The results of this survey show that, in fact, they are quite sophisticated in many respects, and that many of their views can be substantiated empirically. Thus, we should not assume that these attitudes of systemic rejection are necessarily wrong or false in their entirety.

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