

Beginnings of the End of Ideology?

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Young Radicals. Notes on Committed Youth. Kenneth Keniston. Harcourt, Brace, and World, New York, 1968. xii + 368 pp. Cloth, \$5.95; paper, \$1.95.

“Vietnam Summer,” a movement to oppose the American involvement in Vietnam, took place over several months in 1967. Many of the participants were students, and it was led by a group of “young radicals”—people in their 20’s—whose criticism of established values and policies went far beyond those concerned with the question of the Vietnam war and who had committed their working lives, at least temporarily, to acting on their beliefs. Kenneth Keniston, a psychologist, was invited to make a study of Vietnam Summer as it took place, and he accepted.

A small number of taped interviews of a small number of people, and a book written soon afterwards—it doesn’t sound promising. Presumably another of the many superficial and therefore boring interview studies that overflow our bookshelves at present. Yet it hasn’t turned out that way. Keniston has produced a work that is valuable and interesting, mainly because of the depth and honesty of his thought, partly because he studied a group of people who were unusually open and self-reflective, towards whom he came to feel admiration and sympathy. They fired his enthusiasm.

The men and women of this study seem to have been very fortunate in their experience of life, having been born of affluent parents who treated them with directness and humanity. “My old man is very straight with the kids,” says one of them, and this is a typical statement. The parents did not set themselves up as authorities whose views were by definition correct, but readily permitted criticism. The family atmosphere was the opposite of that which has come to be thought of as “schizophrenogenic.” In consequence the children were secure enough to identify with their parents *selectively*: to imitate the qualities and views which appeared to them to be valuable and to oppose others with energy. In general they retained the “core values: basic assumptions concerning desirable human relationships, feelings and motives,” but rejected the particular way in which these values had become systematized—the political philosophies and institutions. Moreover, it would seem that the childhood experience of creative personal interchange was carried over to their later political stance. They pinned their political hopes on personal values rather than on abstractions and ideologies.

Keniston’s study is primarily a psychological one. His intention is to explain, as far as he can, the personal factors in the formation of their political viewpoint. Although (as one would expect in an American psychologist) he takes for granted the fundamental discoveries of Freud, his interpretation is far from being a typical Freudian one. He does not regard his subjects’ radicalism as a neurotic defense mechanism—the result, for instance, of repressed antagonism to parents or of guilt over aggressive urges—but sees it as a natural, integrated, and realistic outcome of their life-experience. My own guess is that if these people presented themselves for a “classical” psychoanalysis, one would find the sort of things Freud found: the presence of an Oedipus complex and so on. But this would not seriously detract from Keniston’s observations, for his account of the crucial factors in the formation of the political beliefs is convincing.

We are here on most dangerous ground. The best and safest criterion of a political belief is whether it is realistic and valuable, not why it is held. To attempt to undermine the authority of a political belief by a reductive psychoanalysis can only do incalculable harm, to the subject or the analyst or both. A particularly destructive example is the Freud-Bullitt study of Woodrow Wilson. Yet we cannot help making judgments on this kind of basis, for it is a matter of common sense to suspect the views of the man with an axe to grind; therefore we are bound to *take into consideration* those elements in a person's political beliefs which are based on compensatory maneuvers or other defense mechanisms. What is important in Keniston's study, in this respect, is that, with a sophisticated approach, he comes to the view that the beliefs of these young radicals are the outgrowth of considered opinion based on experience and are not engendered neurotically. Of course we can, in turn, question Keniston's personal bias, but at least he is frank enough to tell us about it in some detail.

Keniston develops a rather interesting explanation for the ambivalent appraisal which the young men make of their fathers, based on the perception of the difference between what these elders believe is right and what they actually do:

... in no society do parents (or anyone else) ever fully live up to their own professed ideals. In every society, there is a gap between creedal values and actual practices; and everywhere the recognition of this gap constitutes a powerful motor for social change. But in most societies, especially when social change is slow and social institutions are powerful and unchanged, there occurs what can be called the *institutionalization of hypocrisy*. Children and adolescents routinely learn when it is "reasonable" to expect that the values parents profess will be implemented in their behavior, and when it is not reasonable. . . .

In a time of rapid social change and value change, however, the institutionalization of hypocrisy tends to break down. "New" values have been in existence for so brief a period that the exemptions to them have not yet been defined, the situations to be excluded have not yet been determined. The universal gap between principle and practice appears without disguise. . . . But what is special about the present situation of rapid value change is, first, that parents themselves tend to have two conflicting sets of values, one related to the experience of their early childhood, the other to the ideologies and principles acquired in adulthood; and, second, that no stable institutions or rules for defining hypocrisy out of existence have yet been fully evolved. In such a situation, the young see the Emperor in all his nakedness, recognizing the value conflict within their parents and perceiving clearly the "hypocritical" gap between ideal and behavior.

This argument suggests that the postmodern youth may not be confronted with a gap between parental preaching and practice that is "objectively"

any greater than that facing most generations. But they do confront an unusual internal ambivalence within the parental generation over the very values that parents successfully inculcated in their children, and they are “deprived” of a system of social interpretation that rationalizes the discrepancy between creed and deed. It seems likely, then, that today’s youth may simply be able to perceive the universal gulf between principle and practice more clearly than previous generations have done.

Although this explanation is one to be considered, it seems to me that the most likely reason why the children are able to perceive the discrepancies is that they have been brought up in such a way that they have the courage and strength to perceive them. But whatever the reason, the perception is there and, Keniston believes, contributes to their political outlook:

This points to one of the central characteristics of today’s youth in general and young radicals in particular: they insist on taking seriously a great variety of political, personal, and social principles that “no one in his right mind” ever before thought of attempting to extend to such situations as dealings with strangers, relations between the races, or international politics.

Although Keniston writes as a psychologist and for the most part confines himself to his own chosen field of study, he is clearly impressed and moved by the political approach of the young radicals:

The new radicals are at least confronting the central issues of our time, and confronting them more directly than most of us can afford to. They are asking the basic questions, making the mistakes, and perhaps moving toward some of the answers we all desperately need.

To my mind, one of the most significant features of their approach is the lack of idealization of leaders and leadership; and this is a natural outcome of their upbringing, an aspect of their basic attitude to life. Society has always idealized leadership, usually at terrible cost; and the hierarchical structure of our society is based on this idealization. It is so universal, so intrinsic to our thinking, that we take it for granted and fail to note the evil consequences. Is it possible that a new generation is growing up whose criticisms of society are more personally authentic, who have become accustomed to rely on their own immediate perceptions rather than on ideologies, and who do not need to idealize their leaders? Or is this group merely a bunch of raw youths who will learn better as they grow older? Are they just naive? If they are, then so is Keniston. And so am I. But I hope not.

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