# Sociological Journal Book Review of 'The Uncommitted'

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*The Uncommitted: Alienated Youth in American Society.* By Kenneth Keniston. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1965. viii, 500 pp. $8.50 ($2.45 Paperback).

The thesis of this book is that certain major trends in contemporary American society have produced an alienation in young people, a pessimistic rejection of their world, its goals, its people, its institutions. In order to establish this thesis, detailed biographical histories of young men were obtained and reviewed. A dozen young men were selected as being extremely alienated according to psychological tests (not presented, but apparently described in detail in a separate monograph).

Approximately 200 pages of this book deal with the alienated youth, while the remaining half deals with alienating society. The first half emphasizes the experience of a particular individual given the pseudonym of "Inburn," a young man of about 22 who seems emotionally deviant and isolated in a variety of ways. He is especially dependent upon his mother and alienated from his father, spends much of his time alone, has an intellectual style characterized by passionate interest in a few particular topics, is reluctant to join or really participate in social activities, has an ambivalance about social intimacy due to a fear that it is the "prelude to disappointment and disillusion," and, generally, has a set of attitudes and behaviors that suggest to the author: "non-commitment as a way of life." "Strong in opposition, these young men are weak in affirmation; unable to articulate or even to know what they stand for, they have little sense of self to stand on."

In Chapter 5 and elsewhere, the origins of this state of mind are traced, for "Inburn" and by implication for many other alienated young men, to being an only child in an unhappy family with a "possessive, ambitious, driving" mother who was also "moody, passionate, highly sensuous and physically attractive" (according to Inburn), and a father who was "taciturn, phlegmatic, acquiescent," "disappointed in his own life, perhaps at least in part because he 'acquiesced' to the extent of leaving his original vocation for a better-paying if less idealistic job." As a consequence, TAT and other devices reveal that "the alienated appear ... 'fixated' as young adults on the Oedipal drama and pre-Oedipal desires." They seem also to suggest a conviction that growing up meant disaster insofar as it meant emulating their fathers.

In spite of this psychodynamic emphasis, the author argues that the alienation of many young people is primarily a "commentary upon American society," for "alienation is a response to major collective estrangements, social strains, and historical losses in our society." These social sources are traced in the second half of the book. The alienating consequences of "chronic social change," the "cult of the present," and "foreshortening of the time span," with consequent conflict between generations and difficulty in finding a sense of identity are commented upon, as well as the emphasis on occupational specialization, lack of community, ascendancy of technological values of objectivity and rationalism, the decline in structural importance of the family and increased emphasis on its emotional functions, and the loss of meaningful myths, Utopias, fantasies, etc. Much of this has been said before, and seems unnecessary to one who has perused recent introductory sociology texts.

Because of the manner in which subjects were selected, one is not sure whether the first half of the book should be viewed as a study in abnormal psychology—at most, in the psychodynamics of family maladjustment—or as the *social commentary* which the author intends it to be. A broader study of the kinds of young people in the better colleges about a decade ago—their different commitments, rejections, searchings, resentments and frustrations—would, I think, be more useful in providing a picture of the subcultures of which case studies such as this can provide some depth. Moreover, when broadly conceived, alienation is no doubt a multi-dimensional complex, and it is perhaps misleading to assume that it is possible to single out a few "extreme cases."

When Keniston speaks of the "little alienations of the well-adjusted," he may be commenting on something as endemic in American society as the "lives of quiet desperation" commented upon by Thoreau in an earlier period. But in other respects Keniston's remarks seem particularly time-bound. If the conflict-ridden and negativistic withdrawal which he describes here was ever a widespread characteristic of youth, it was perhaps more relevant to the period of the "silent generation" than it is to the present. The students he is describing were not involved in civil rights protests, and would be no more than marginal observers at anti-war rallies. While he has provided the reader with much graceful writing and many insightful clinical and social analyses in an effort to understand some major trends of recent social history, the author would perhaps have produced a more useful document were we more able to define the temporal and social limitations of his observations.

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