

Commentary Journal Review of 'Young Radicals'

Walter Goodman

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Under Thirty

Young Radicals: Notes On Committed Youth.

by Kenneth Keniston.

Harcourt, Brace & World. 268 pp. \$5.95.

No one knows better than Kenneth Keniston that fourteen interviews do not constitute an unshakable foundation for a study of *Young Radicals*, even when the claim carries the modifier, "Notes on Committed Youth." Yet Keniston has built just such a study on just such a foundation, and once again, as with *The Uncommitted*, his work on "Alienated Youth in American Society," his observations are more impressive than his evidence.

Keniston, an associate professor of psychology at Yale Medical School, invites our trust not by means of a rigorous methodology—that scrap of stuff which less talented members of his trade have borrowed from the proper sciences in order to cover their nakedness—but by means of his candor, his intelligence, and his sensibility. He is no reductivist; he understands that political movements do not altogether lend themselves to psychological explanations, and he has a grasp of the larger conditions that help to explain them. He does not use the case history as a device for putting down his subjects or for shielding himself from human complexity. He is sympathetic to the ideals and receptive to the problems of his fourteen young people, and he takes pains to relate them to their time and place. As a result, he has produced an illuminating book.

The group on which Keniston concentrates were workers in the national office of the 1967 Vietnam Summer project—a major and quite successful effort, initiated by a part of the New Left, to create wide opposition to the war. He talked with eleven men and three women, all white, all between the ages of nineteen and twenty-nine, all radicals. No blacks here; nor any of the more manic New Leftists who thrive on demonstrations and cannot abide office work; nor any of those who, because of their principles and temperament, are turned off by big operations and prefer to do their thing with small groups in poor neighborhoods. Nevertheless, Keniston's radicals do represent a significant—and rather attractive—part of the New Left, and he has an abundance of interesting things to say about them. He finds, for instance, that they are not in rebellion against their parents, who have given them "great strength, integrity, and worth," nor are they merely carrying on a heritage of the Old Left. They seem to have absorbed their ideals from liberal-to-Communist parents, but they have been troubled by the ineffectuality of the older folks in doing away with inequality, injustice, and violence. In their somewhat restricted view, the main accomplishments of American liberalism are ghettos in the cities and blood in Vietnam.

(Keniston is least persuasive when he attempts to establish a causal relationship between the violence of our age and the development of a passionate anti-violence among his non-typical New Leftists. To be sure, our technology is murderous, but direct contact with violence was certainly rarer as this generation was growing up than during most periods of our history. I would think that in the development of fundamental attitudes, it is personal experience that counts.)

Keniston notes that the famous generational gap separates not only young radicals and old liberals. There is also a chasm between the twenty-nine-year-old radical, on the verge of losing his youth credentials, and the nineteen-year-old radical, mistrustful of everybody who failed yesterday and is not quite with it today—a situation that discourages the development of leaders but keeps the Movement from being taken over by perennial students. Part of being “with it” is a readiness to swing with the most up-to-the-second technology; Keniston observes how naturally and pleasurably the radical organizers use the latest means of communication and transportation which, in their more polemical moods, they attack as symbols of the national decline. They are truly children of the times and of the nation they despise.

A most striking characteristic of the New Left, which Keniston does much to elucidate, is the tendency to evaluate political action in personal terms. Where others have seen men’s conflicts on earth as reflections of the ultimate struggle between Satan and the angels of God, or as the working-out of historical necessity, these young radicals fit their activism into the course of their emotional development. It has a place there, obviously, and the conscious quest for a sense of personal achievement gives them a much more spontaneous quality than the radicals of the 30’s ever had or particularly cared to have. At the same time, however, the identification of political goals with personal satisfactions holds obvious perils.

For one thing, an action that leaves one exhilarated, happy, and fulfilled may nonetheless work against one’s objective goals. Then, too, private despair can lead to desperate and self-defeating tactics. What is more, there are no ready measures of one’s emotional development; one just has to *feel* that things are shaping up. It is, of course, true that working together for a cause—no matter whether the cause is good or bad—is conducive to warm inter-personal relations; who knows what undying friendships were formed in the Hitler Jugend? “In your heart you know he’s right!” the Goldwater posters proclaimed, and millions surely did know. The heart and the viscera doubtless have their reasons, but reliance on them is unfortunately associated with a denigration of intellect and the kind of smug arrogance exhibited by some of the SDS leaders who led the takeover at Columbia University. The New Left is peculiarly vulnerable to both afflictions.¹

Keniston is aware of the darker side of the New Left’s apparent virtues, but as the book draws on, his affection for the young people he interviewed and his sympathy with their cause prompt him to trade the role of observer for that of apologist. Perhaps Keniston felt that he was thereby keeping trust with his new, idealistic friends who had been so frank with him on such short acquaintance, but his change of role has the

¹ See “The Politics of Self-indulgence” in Arnold S. Kaufman’s *The Radical Liberal*, Atherton Press, 1968.

effect of weakening his work. Indeed, by the final pages, his subjects have become his clients.

Certainly the New Left has considerable charm—and particularly the branch of it with which Keniston is involved in this book. Its members are bright and decent and many of them have proved their willingness to sacrifice for the sake of their ideals such conventional objectives as a college degree or a good job. They are not caught up in the factionalism, conspiracies, and bureaucratism of the Old Left; they are not trapped by doctrine; and they are wary of being controlled or manipulated from within or without. Keniston writes: “The New Left is different from the Old Left in part *because* it emphasizes process rather than program, and *because* it seeks to avoid the doctrinaire interpretation of society, the rigid structuring of goals, and the inflexible definitions of the ideal of earlier radicalism.”

All of these welcome traits are tied in with a psychologized politics, the pursuit through political activity of the satisfactions of commitment, of inner harmony, of friendship and love. There is, however, no reason to believe that political effectiveness necessarily grows out of such satisfactions. Causes like peace and civil rights require more than the hard work, dedication, and courage of which the young radicals have proved themselves capable; if these causes are to be sustained, they also require an emotional discipline that admits of compromise and ambiguous success. There is nothing very warming about compromise, and there is nothing so burdensome for relations among comrades as a dubious success. Disappointment is difficult enough to bear in any high-pitched movement; where what is constantly at stake is the activist’s total happiness, every disappointment threatens to become a personal tragedy that can only distort one’s outlook on the world.

So thoroughly politicized is the New Leftist that he may in fact become politically irrelevant; for, as Keniston notes, keeping up with the Movement requires an estrangement from American life. Keniston is not unaware of the “unrealistic” qualities of the New Left, its impatience with undramatic long-term programs, but he argues that criticisms of its ineffectiveness “somehow miss the point” since its goals are not to win elections but “to increase the social and political consciousness of the American people.” Such a distinction, it seems to me, can easily become an excuse for finking out.

After years of complaining about the Silent Generation and its rejection of politics, I confess to a certain discomfort in finding myself chiding young people for investing too much of themselves in a movement which has had such a remarkable influence on the country. Yet for the sake of his private needs as well as his public goals, the radical must, I think, sort out which satisfactions he can reasonably hope to extract from any single source. Political action in a democracy is necessary, but in a man’s life it is far from sufficient. “The attempt to change as a person and the effort to create a radical movement can no longer be clearly distinguished,” writes Keniston. To the extent that

this is true, the New Leftists are likely to find that they are simply asking too much of politics.

The Ted K Archive

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