"Resistance and Class Reproduction Among Middle Class Youth"

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RESISTANCE AND CLASS REPRODUCTION AMONG MIDDLE CLASS YOUTH

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Except for major uprisings like the counterculture and the antiwar movement of the sixties, middle class American youth are not viewed as engaging in resistance as the term is commonly understood, that is, engaging in resistance to the wider social order and their place within it. Middle class youth are certainly seen as problematic, but mostly for their parents. I want to argue in this paper that teenage rebelliousness within the family may in fact be a form of class resistance, and moreover that, at some level, their parents know that this is the case. The discussion is based partly on interviews with some of my high school classmates, now parents of adolescent or college-age youth; partly on a sampling of the vast body of popular advice literature concerning American adolescents; and partly on my own experience as a middle-class adolescent in the 1950's.

The notion of "youth culture" as a culture of class resistance has been placed on the map primarily by the members of the Birmingham Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies in England. The key text, published in 1976, is Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in post-war Britain, edited by Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson. The Birmingham group specifically focused on working class subcultures - self-styled groups like Mods, Rockers, and Skinheads; practices like drug use, fighting, and involvement with rock music - arguing that these subcultures must be understood as being forms of class culture, as well as forms of youth culture. The full range of the oppositional meanings of these practices only comes into focus if one recognizes them as particular - youth-based - variants of a larger working class oppositional culture.

Throughout the book, however, there is a running, and ambivalent, counterpoint with the largely middle-class counterculture, not surprising as the bulk of the book was written in the early seventies. The contrast is never fully drawn, but the general tone of the scattered comments is that, although the counterculture bore some of the marks of its middle class origins - especially a greater individualism as against the greater group-orientation of working class youth subcultures - it was also a more thoroughgoing assault on the total system, offering alternatives models of

productive labor, sexuality, and domestic arrangements, as well as those of "style" and "leisure" emphasized in working class youth subcultures.

The counterculture as a mass movement in America survives in only certain of its dimensions, largely in American feminism. Middle class American youth for the most part seem to have returned to expressing their rebelliousness largely within their families, and often largely in terms of "style" as well. The lack of a public and collective dimension to American youth resistance, its enactment of confrontation largely within the family context, might be taken to confirm the widely held view that middle class youth have little or no enduring social conscience, and that they only react when their very specific interests are threatened, as in the case of the draft during the Viet Nam war. Before I present an alternative line of thinking, however, I want to say a bit more about the importance, as well as some of the limitations, of the Birmingham Cultural Studies project.

I remember when I first began reading this literature I was quite annoyed. The culture concept was being appropriated with nary a reference to the American anthropology that had invented it and in effect, at that point, owned it. Whole books about culture with no reference to the field of anthropology, or at least to Clifford Geertz? Outrageous. In the introductory essay of Resistance through Rituals, the culture concept is quite literally reinvented, rebuilt from the ground up, the authors drawing entirely on continental European thinkers - Gramsci, Sartre, Althusser, and that great enemy of culture, Marx himself. I later asked Stuart Hall about this, and he said well, yes, he regretted the omission in retrospect, and in the interim he had done his homework on the Americans. But he noted that, in the English context, at the time his group and his ideas were forming, "anthropology" was British social anthropology, which in its dominant forms not only failed to deal with conflict in general and class conflict in capitalist society in particular; for all intents and purposes it did not even have a culture concept. It was a point well taken, and given that point, the Birmingham school's reinvention of the culture concept is even more remarkable. And of course, they did not merely reinvent it; with their interest in class and class conflict, and their strong infusion of the Gramscian notion of hegemony, they transformed it.

There is a similar story with respect to the question of ethnography. Again there is no drawing on anthropology - not a single citation - for thinking about the ethnographic method, although extensive attention is devoted to the question in the Resistance through Rituals volume. Instead they draw on American interactionist sociologists like Howard Becker and Herbert Blumer. Although I did not ask Hall about this, I presume this choice derived in part from the specific urban Western focus of interactionist sociology, and thus its substantive and topical compatibility with the Birmingham school's interests. But here, unlike the situation with respect to the culture concept, I think this choice has been less productive. Like American sociology of all theoretical persuasions, and unlike anthropology, the Cultural Studies school tends to be highly

Eurocentric. And methodologically, what passes for ethnography - with the notable exception of Paul Willis' Learning to Labour - tends to come down to talking-heads interviewing, with not much in the way of either participation or observation. Models drawn from urban anthropology (e.g., Hannerz 1969, Stack 1974) and from Chicago-school sociology (e.g. Whyte 1943) were available and would have served them better.

A few more notes before returning to middle class youth in America. The term "youth" itself is in fact already class coded. In preparing for this paper I took a trip to the Ann Arbor public library, where I figured there would be a good collection of advice manuals to parents of teenagers. This turned out to be the case, but a look at the whole set of books within this call number was instructive. As a cultural native, I think I was assuming that these books would be speaking to a largely middle class audience - that was why I was looking for them. But as I perused the shelves I was struck with how exclusively that was the case. Working class or lower class parents are evidently never assumed to be an audience for such books. The working class or lower class is represented in the form of "studies" and "reports," such as the one published by the National Commission on Youth (1980), and the assumed audience for these reports is comprised of policy makers and social service workers. Further, where the middle class manuals (Narramore 1980, Norman and Harris 1981, Steinberg and Levine 1990) are entirely psychological (focusing on the young person's struggle for "identity,") and interpersonal (focusing on the ways in which individual parents should handle individual teenagers' problems, largely by talking to them), the "reports" are macro-social and macro-economic, and focus on how outsiders should handle the problems of a collectivized and objectified youth, largely in terms of bureaucratic solutions. And finally, there is the language itself. Middle class youth are "teenagers," "adolescents," "young persons," all terms that emphasize stages of development along an age continuum, and indeed one that is continuous with that of their parents, who are older, but not Other. The term "youth," on the other hand, is reserved for the lower classes (as the Cultural Studies people use it too). Although it too is an age term, it is a collective noun. While teenagers or adolescents are individual persons of a particular age range, youth has the ring of a tribe, an Other. And while the term "teenagers," coded as middle class, has a certain innocence about it, the term "youth," coded as lower class, is faintly ominous. I will try to jumble the usage and disrupt this coding in the discussion that follows.

Finally, I must note that my own data thus far are largely for middle class whites, and my sense is that the advice manuals are largely assuming a white audience as well. How well this discussion would apply to African-American middle class parents and children remains to be explored.

Let me return then finally to the question of white, American, middle class youth resistance. In an earlier paper on class and culture in America (Ortner 1991), I explored the

implications of the point that American culture lacks a developed discourse of class. But because class is real (in ways that I cannot spell out today), I tried to show how it continues to be spoken through other discourses of social difference - race, ethnicity, gender, and generation (for a related arguement, see Varenne 1984). I argued further that much of specifically middle class culture must be seen in terms of what Barbara Ehrenreich has called "the fear of falling," the threat of downward mobility (1989). This may seem somewhat counterintuitive. Much of the middle class appears to be what we call "comfortable," both in the sense of having secure and at least adequate incomes, and in the sense of normally not imagining that they are in any danger of losing their incomes or their positions.[1] The kind of shock experienced by middle class people when they do lose their jobs, as discussed eloquently in Katherine Newman's Falling from Grace (1989), itself betokens the degree to which the loss of middle class standing is largely unexpected in this society. Yet even when personal standing seems secure, transgenerational reproduction does not. Parents may have good jobs, careers, incomes; they may have internalized middle class values in a way that feels utterly natural and unquestionable; but the same is not true of their growing children, whose allegiance to the middle class social contract has not yet been fully established.

This is really my central point. If, as both academic psychology and popular advice books tell us, middle class adolescents are seeking to establish their "identities," there are in fact only a limited number of culturally available identities from which to choose. And if the teenager, for personal, autobiographical reasons, is drifting toward an oppositional identity vis-e-vis his or her parents, one of the most salient of these oppositional models in American high schools is manifested by the characters called, in various high school jargons, "hoods" or "freaks" or "burnouts". But these are more than styles. High school ethnographies (Varenne 1983, Eckert 1989) as well as personal experience show that these categories, which seem to be reproduced in virtually every American high school, are normally populated primarily by working class kids. Middle class kids who opt to style themselves as hoods or freaks or burnouts thus move into a stance which is not only parent-oppositional, but at least implicitly class-oppositional as well.

One way to look at this point is to consider the possible analogy, middle class parents:middle class children::middle class:working class. Barbara Ehrenreich has developed this argument brilliantly at the material level (1989). She points out that middle class youth, like their working class counterparts, are economically exploited, paid less for particular jobs simply because they are young. Further, the structure of certain highly valued middle class professions,

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1. At the present time the economy is in recession and we are reading a great deal in the press about the shakiness of the economic position of "the middle class." In my reading, the sector in question is really lower middle class; one might even consider them upper working class. The placement of this group in the American class structure is the subject of long debate and cannot be discussed within the confines of the present paper.

like medicine, involve prolonged periods of cheap labor on the part of the young practitioners. In addition, as the media-studies people have emphasized, the analogy works at the level of youth public culture, where African-American and white working class cultural styles are drawn upon not only for the creative aspects of youth-oriented music, dance, and fashion, but for the oppositional, screw-your-parents, aspect as well.

These points are worth pursuing further, but for today I want to focus on the arena of the family itself, and on the proposition that adolescent behavior within the family - the whole familiar image of the sullen, difficult, rebellious, anti-authority teenager - may represent a threat not only to the parents' personal authority, but to the reproduction of class status that is so central to the parents' identities. I particularly want to suggest that, although middle class American kids, unlike their working class (and especially British) counterparts, may not have a coherent sense of these implications, their parents do, if not at the level of discourse, at the level of practice.

I can begin to develop this point by noting the degree to which middle class parents are obsessed with how their children's lives are working out. This seems so obvious, so natural, that a middle class observer would hardly notice it, or would find it, as I did at first, a kind of small talk. When I began doing interviews for my current project on class and culture in the United States, I found that the interviews often degenerated - as I thought of it at first - into the informants talking about their kids. I was asking 50-year-old people to reflect on class in America, as they remembered it in high school, and as they think about it now. They found this a difficult - though sometimes interesting - task. The interview would proceed haltingly. But then eventually they would get onto "how their kids are doing." Here things opened up and flowed. I saw myself as going along with this part of the conversation as part of maintaining the rapport of the interview, not as producing "data." Finally, however, it dawned on me that their kids were their key symbol, to coin a phrase, and that much of what they had to say about their own class position, and the prospects for its reproduction, was being talked about through an idiom of their kids' rebelliousness, their kids' futures, their kids' "happiness."

There were always two main issues: how the kids were doing in school, and who the kids were associating with. Drugs have not come up yet in my (at this point) limited set of interviews, but I would argue in any event that the drug question itself is part of the social question, of the crowd the teenager is hanging out with. As Penelope Eckert has shown in her powerful ethnography of a midwestern high school, although probably most high school students nowadays do a certain amount of drugs, the use of drugs is differently structured into the middle class and working class social groupings in the school. For middle class kids, drugs are encompassed within an essentially middle class oriented school career, but for the working class kids, drugs are ostentatiously valorized as a symbol of a more general oppositional stance. The middle class teenager who is doing enough drugs, or doing them ostentatiously enough, to call the fact to his or

her parents' attention, is probably also hanging out with what parents always call the wrong crowd.

My interviews indicate at this point that the emphasis on grades or the emphasis on social life is gendered: parents lean more on boys about grades and girls about social life. But I will not pursue this today, and assume that in general both themes are present in different mixes in parental concerns about children of both sexes. It is easy for middle class parents to justify - to themselves, to their kids, and to an interviewer - leaning on their kids about grades. They can say that nobody can do very well in American society today without an education, or more precisely, without a degree, and this is probably objectively true. The class implications of not getting a college degree, and of winding up "flipping hamburgers at MacDonald's", as it is often put, are also fairly close to the surface, in the sense that, insofar as Americans have a concept of class at all, it is simply a concept of money.

The attempts to control the teenager's social life - whom he hangs out with, whom she dates - are less easy to justify to all concerned. There is no obvious income implication to hanging out with "the wrong crowd." There is no causal connection, as there is for a college degree, between having a boyfriend or girlfriend who comes from a certain family, and how much one will earn later in life. What then is wrong with the wrong crowd? Well, indeed they often have bad habits - drugs, cutting school, getting low grades - and thus their behavior ties in with the parents' other anxieties. But, as noted earlier, the core of the so-called wrong crowd tends to be lower or working class. That this is at least as central to the parents' objections as the drugs and grades is seen when parents attempt to break up a teenager's relationship with a person who does not have these bad habits, and whose only wrongness consists in wrong class background.

Given the hiddenness of class discourse in the United States, the American teenager, unlike the English youth, is probably unaware of this point. The "wrong crowd" is rarely labeled in class terms, but in terms noted earlier like "hoods." Even the parents' many euphemisms for what is wrong with the wrong person - different religion, bad manners, not sharing the child's interests - should be seen less as a "cover-up" for their class reasons than as an effect of the lack of a class vocabulary in American culture. But if the parents do not know whereof they speak, they know whereof they do. Not only do they attempt to break up these relationships; many parents consciously attempt to forestall any possibility that the child could get interested in such relationships in the first place. Thus one parent gave me a new insight into the classic middle class practice of spoiling their children. The folk view of spoiling is that parents can't help it; they are caught up in a kind of culturally induced enthrallment with their children, in a way that many observers - from other classes and other societies - often find repellent. But one middle class parent said to me that "he spoiled his kids by design," so that they would get attached to "the good things in life" and thus presumably stay on the middle class track to get them. This man did

in fact express great love for his kids, and he probably spoiled them because spoiling is part of the middle class notion of parental loving. This does not negate the class reproduction point, however, as he himself was reasonably well aware.

If all else fails, middle class parents have recourse to an enormous array of what I have come to call rescuing mechanisms. Anything the parents see as a threat to the child's future happiness will be agressively countered with such mechanisms. Parents of pregnant middle class daughters will arrange abortions or adoptions on the daughter's behalf (for a rather appalling personal story along these lines, see Israel 1988). If a son happens to get in trouble with the law, the parents will spend money and influence not only to get him off, but to expunge the record. Tutors will be arranged for kids not doing well in school, booster courses will be arranged to get them into better schools, and donations will be made to get even an academically hopeless kid into some institution of so-called higher education. Kids who have drug or alcohol problems will be put into the hands of very expensive private rehabilitation programs. Kids who are merely unhappy will get therapy. One way or another, middle class parents will do virtually anything to prevent their kids from what parents often call "throwing their lives away."

It all comes down to what middle class parents call "happiness." What one means by happiness in America is of course coded in class terms like everything else, and what one means by happiness for one's children has largely to do, for the middle class, with reproducing the parents' lifestyle and class position. I think here of one long interview I did with a successful lawyer and his therapist wife. The interview had "degenerated" into the couple talking about their worries about their daughter wanting to drop out of college. Quoting from the fieldnotes: "So then - it took me long enough to remember to stop agreeing with them and ask an ethnographic question - I finally asked, why? why do we worry so much about this? And the wife - here I think as a trained therapist who also has learned to ask questions about seemingly natural feelings - said, yes, that's a very good question. Why do we worry so much about this? And she said, well, we want them to be happy, we are afraid they won't be able to have a happy life." But I countered with a story of a middle class guy, the son of a successful businessman, who had dropped out in the seventies and never really came back - he married an Italian woman (the type-case working class ethnicity in our area of New Jersey), doesn't work regularly, didn't have kids, and seems to be happy as a clam. Quoting again from the notes: "They seemed surprised when I said he was happy, and asked, well, like how?... [it seemed] unimaginable to them that one could be happy outside (or below) the middle class."

It would be vulgar and reductionistic, and even downright silly, to claim that everything parents feel for their children, and do for and to their children, is only a matter of insuring class reproduction. Yet it would also be silly to deny that, in some very broad sense, this is a large part of what is going on. The broad sense, from the parents' point of view, derives from subscribing to notions like happiness, with or without an awareness that a good part of what happiness is for the

American middle class is middle classness itself.[2] As for the youth, there is no doubt that they are seeking to construct their personal identities, as all the manuals tell us (and the social scientists, too, of course: see Csikszentmihalyi and Larson 1984). But identities do not come in generic American forms; they come shaped and coded in terms of class like everything else in America. Moreover, the only place for an adolescent to seek them outside the family is in high school social groupings that are themselves class structured. American youth may not have a consciously oppositional class subculture, like the working class youth of England, but the class implications of their "private rebellions" are not hard to find if one looks, and not entirely invisible to their parents.

2. One could even argue that "happiness" is largely a middle class term. I suspect, but cannot prove at this point, that working class parents rarely talk about their own or their children's lives in terms of "happiness" and "unhappiness."

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