

A PORTRAYAL OF YOUTH IN AN INDUSTRIAL SOCIETY:  
A NOISY COMMUNICATION CHANNEL FOR THE TRANSMISSION OF CULTURAL TRADITION<sup>1</sup>

by

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on the concluding chapter of a forthcoming work (in Finnish) reporting the results of a series of nationwide studies on Finnish youth between ages of 10-24 carried out during 1968-1969 jointly by the Finnish Broadcasting Company and the State Committee for Youth Work. The problem areas covered include (1) physical, economical, educational, occupational conditions etc., (2) leisure-time activities, e.g. hobbies and sports, (3) group formation, e.g. gangs, (4) participation in organizational activities, e.g. clubs, (5) use of mass media, (6) sexual behavior, (7) general values and life aspirations, and (8) expectancies as to institutional youth work. The empirical material includes (1) a mailed all-round questionnaire returned by 1070 respondents, (2) another mailed questionnaire concerned in particular with values, and returned by 527 respondents, and (3) participating observation by two researchers during three months in ten communities, comprising altogether some 1000 contacts.



If the term youth is broadly interpreted to include so-called early youth and young adults - i.e. the age group from 10 to 24 - this group comprises over a quarter of the population of the country. Interpreted more narrowly, as the age group from 13 to 17, youth includes roughly one tenth of the population. This group is characterized on the one hand by a breaking off from the childhood growing environment, from the home, and on the other hand by gradual incorporation into the system of production, either directly or through educational institutions. From the point of view of society, youth can be considered as a channel of information transmission; the information consists of the cultural heritage - the knowledge, skills and values - which are transmitted from one generation to the next. The origin or sender of the message is the home, the school and other socializing institutions; the destination or receivers are one's own children and future occupational life.

This information channel, however, does not function without noise; it adds its own contribution to the tradition of information which passes through it. Thus the years of youth, and young people themselves, should be considered not only as transmitters of the cultural heritage, but also as its modifiers and innovators. The tradition is renewed when it encounters, as it were, a touchstone in the process of socialization and education; as they are transmitted into "fresh" minds, the prevailing values and ways of thinking are weighed against the reality of the moment.

From the point of view of the system of production, youth can be considered a labor force reserve which must be integrated as



effectively as possible into its service. This means on the one hand teaching a skill or vocation, and on the other hand inculcating values consistent with the prevalent system of society, i.e. the ideas of the older generation. Thus from the point of view of the system of production - and from that of the older generation - youth is essentially an object of socialization and education, which is expected to adapt itself into the adult world as an animal adapts itself through instrumental conditioning to the rewards and punishments of the scientist. In general, this is in fact what has happened; "learning disturbances" have been relatively rare, and those which have occurred have been treated as "sports" of nature, similar to mutations.

If the traditional conception of the position of youth outlined above is called the "cultivation theory", then the modern view described in the following can be termed a "cognitional theory". The basic difference is that the latter considers youth from the inside, as a self-governing cybernetic system, rather than from the outside in terms of imposed objectives. Youth is seen not as the recipient of "treatment", but as a critical opponent. The appropriation of information and values is also seen as a spontaneous learning event, rather than as a process of instrumental conditioning; it is motivated not by the use of rewards and punishments, but by the spontaneous pleasure and satisfaction involved in learning something. According to this view, "learning disturbances" are natural and necessary, and their infrequency is considered as stemming from the repression imposed by the educational and socializing system based on manipulation.



This latter way of thinking - which corresponds essentially to the marxist concept of society, at least in theory - proves to be a useful frame of reference in examining the position of youth in present-day society. The view of youth on the one hand as capable of spontaneous awareness and on the other hand as subject to manipulation on the part of society is consistent with the concept of man which has recently come to the fore in linguistics and psychology; according to this new view, man should be seen as organism with an active and creative awareness of its environment, rather than as a passive learning machine, as has been the traditional concept in western behavioral science.<sup>1</sup> This "cognitional" approach, however, should not be used to the exclusion of all other frameworks; the needs of the productive system and the cultural heritage of the older generation form in any case the social reality which serves as the frame of reference for the mental world of young people. In Ahmavaara's terms, we can say that the process of production in society produces the means of existence - products always have a certain instrumental value - while the cognitive process produces the criteria of existence, which enable the individual to question the meaningfulness of his way of life.<sup>2</sup>

Both the means of existence (the productive system) and the criteria of existence (cognition) are of course necessary; the relation prevailing between them has varied at different times in history. In industrial society, cognitive awareness and the search for criteria is evidently more common than in agrarian society; the young individual no longer makes the transition at home directly into the productive system, but goes through a stage of



education, during which more alternatives are available to him than before.

In the post-industrial society of the future, we can assume that cognition will become even more important in society; technological development, with automation as the end result, will free man's time and energy for intellectual activity as an end in itself. Under these conditions, the cognitive process will separate itself from the restraints of the productive system and will gradually become free of the manipulation imposed by the prevailing system of society.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, the position of youth is expected to change in the future so that socialization into the adult society and into the system of production will occur earlier than at present, for example by lowering the voting age and by dividing the learning period into several stages of re-education, spaced throughout life.<sup>4</sup> It should be pointed out, however, that these changes will not result in a reduction of cognitional possibilities; a high level of education, abundant alternatives and the transition from the parents' occupation to another position in the productive system will result in a turning point in the young individual's life which is likely to further cognition.

What, then, is the portrait of Finnish youth today, under the cross-pressures of the production system based on tradition and the cognitive process representing the new? In the following, we shall illustrate the position of youth in Finland today in the light of empirical data accumulated during a nation-wide youth study.



The system of values prevailing among young people was studied by various methods, including a 24-item battery of questions as to things considered important in life. A factor analysis of youth's value objectives indicates that basic values become more differentiated and articulated with increasing age. For example, in the youngest age-group (under 15) good relations, particularly between youth and adults, are an integral part of all life values, whereas in older youth this objective is differentiated into an independent value; this indicates both the corresponding independence of other values and the increasing potential of the conflict between the generations. Goals concerning political participation and equality are also fairly undifferentiated in the group under 15, compared to older youth.

Although these changes in the articulation of the system of values can be observed, there are few changes in the relative order of importance of the values themselves; this remains highly consistent (see Appendix 1). Most important for all age-groups are objectives related to education and integration into working life. Respect for authority and good relations with adults are also in the foreground at every age, although respect for authority becomes less important and good relations with parents more so with increasing age. There is no special emphasis on recreational youth culture or on religious values, and participation in political and social activity is even less important, although the importance of information about politics increases with age. It is significant that personal participation is most important in the 15-19 age group - the same stage at which a recreational youth culture is also stressed the most (see Appendix 2).



The impression obtained in participant observation as to the attitude of youth toward their parents and generally toward adults can be expressed in a few words. Young people say that adults are somewhat out-of-date, that they don't really understand what is happening in the world today, nor do they understand young people. The adult generation is rarely praised for anything, but on the other hand only few young people are bitter or resentful toward adults. Their attitude can be considered critical, but at the same time there is an understanding of the experienced deficiencies and inadequacy of the older generation. "They haven't had it easy", "They didn't start out as easy as youth today" are some remarks. This attitude is a combination of the criticism aroused by the position of parents and by social institutions together with the respect and serious attitude aroused by old age as such.

Accordingly, parents are considered "okay"; you can get along with them, if... The underlying idea seems to be that parents can and should be manipulated; in other words, young people seem to realize that parents don't really understand things, but that you also can't expect them to; thus it's best to save them from shocks, not to tell them everything, to keep quiet about one's own opinions, etc. Many aspects of the relation between youth and parents are potential sources of conflict; the fact that the relationship is not generally experienced as one of clear conflict is due to the fact that open conflict or breaking off of relations is not acceptable to society. Furthermore, young people today, especially with the prolonging of formal education, are often dependent at least financially on their parents long into physical maturity; in exchange for this "bonus", they try to maintain "peaceful coexistence".

The participant observation indicated that for a great majority of youth, politics and public affairs are alien irrelevant. This does not mean that they deliberately disassociate themselves from common affairs, but that political planning and decision-making are too remote from the ordinary youth, as they are from the ordinary citizen. This concerns local as well as national affairs. The "bosses" make their decisions without bothering to consult the opinion of the ordinary man, whether old or young.



The young are not deliberately disassociated from politics. They are in fact interested in it to a certain extent; and those who are not interested are anxious to give as their reasons the unwillingness of those in power to bring public affairs within the reach of the ordinary citizen. Also the failure of ordinary school education to provide sufficient instruction concerning public affairs and events is brought forth as a reason for lack of interest. There is no basis for interest, nor would it be meaningful, since it is impossible to affect the course of events. Thus there is a kind of frustration with regard to practical politics. Only few individuals are able to conquer this, and have the strength to follow and participate in public affairs.

Young people do not consider politics as such a "dirty game"; if it is, it is only as dirty as the players. Conceptions of those who manage public affairs are not particularly high. The idea that politicians are concerned only for their own profit, that they distort facts and do not know enough about the affairs they manage, is a common one.

One interesting aspect of this is youth's relation to political parties. Their attitude to the political party as an institution is a relatively neutral one. On the other hand, many terms in ordinary language use, such as "far right", "communist", "socialism" arouse strong negative emotional reactions in part of Finnish youth. Young people are not very well informed as to the political programs and activity of the parties, which they follow from the sidelines. A majority doubt the parties' wish to obey the will of the citizens and to consider issues from the point of view of the good of the entire nation.

Questions which can be considered to belong to the sphere of religion were shown by participant observation to be surprisingly close to the concerns of youth. Although everyday problems and issues are more prominent in the conversations of young people, and although the attitude toward questions of religion in youth groups is often one of banter and ridicule, similar to that prevailing in sexual matters, young people are nonetheless concerned with questions of religion. A young man employed in a machine-shop had the following to say:



The world makes you think, what happens after death. When you're alone, you start thinking about sin, about the rightness or wrongness of things ... The Bible is a wise book, but it doesn't pay to read it much; there should be more explanation of what it means ... for instance in school.

The solitary and when intoxicated "hard-boiled" looking, greaser, like the philosophically inclined teeny-bopper, both enjoy thinking about questions such as the meaning of life, life after death, our responsibility for our deeds, the nature of sin etc. Young people do not have stereotyped answers as to the underlying nature of the universe or the meaning of Jesus to man. On the other hand, the personal interview indicated that young people are practically indifferent to the church as an institution.

Reflections of pop-culture can be observed among Finnish youth. Part of youth adopted the external, most visible signs of this culture as soon as it arrived in Finland. Thus pop-culture has been the basis for a highly visible distinction between two youth groups, the "teeny-boppers" and the "greasers" (free translation of the Finnish terms). Of these, the former have adopted at least the external symbols of pop-culture, together with the language of music, while the latter take a negative attitude toward the whole culture.

Pop-culture is today probably the most important distinguishing factor in group formation among Finnish youth. Distinctions based on level of education are related to those based on the pop-culture, in that the teeny-bopper groups include both high-school students and working young people, though students form a clear majority. The greasers are students in vocational schools and workers; their groups do not include any high-school students. About one third of all Finnish youth belong to one of these groups, a somewhat larger proportion of boys than of girls.

Public criticism of the overemphasis on material well-being has been due mainly to the activity of young people, and this criticism is likely to continue. Young people do not despise material comfort, nor do they deny its importance to people, but they (or a majority of them) emphasize the primary importance of good



interpersonal relations, of responsibility for one's fellow-man, and of the non-material factors involved in a good life: freedom and the possibility of fulfilling oneself. At least in conversation most young people claim that the most important thing for them, after a secure even if modest income, is to have friendly people around, a husband or wife whom one loves and who loves one, and the freedom to do what one wants. The primary emphasis varies with age and way of life. In the youngest and those still in school, the emphasis is on the freedom to do - also as one's adult work - that which gives pleasure. Older youth and those already working, i.e. responsible for their own livelihood, emphasize economic security, continued employment and livelihood more than the others. This emphasis is probably a symptom of the material culture which is most likely closer to the middle-aged Finn than to the very old or the very young.

From the point of view of the system of production and the values held by the adult world, Finnish youth seems to have learned its lesson fairly well; in accordance with the values of their fathers, young people, as a fairly united front, are striving to jump on the bandwagon of production. Training for one's own vocation is most important of all; becoming familiar with social processes and having a say in them is of secondary importance. Schools and organizations are also expected to give more help in preparing for working life, instead of the personal contacts and the traditional value systems which are at present their main concern (see Appendix 3). It should be observed, however, that the schools and other institutions of socialization have succeeded extremely well in transmitting the cultural heritage of previous generations; traditional values are held in respect, and ideological views are molded during the years of school education in a direction openly favorable to the prevailing social system (see Appendix 4).



The fact that the traditional values have been adopted by youth so uniformly is evidently not due to their incomprehensibility or abstractness. The traditional system of values in fact does not consist of a few highly generalized principles, such as democracy or non-violence, but rather of a large number of highly detailed values which must be considered more or less as prescriptions or behavior patterns, such as marriage or patriotism. The consequence of this is a highly inconsistent and conflicting system of values - a set of cliché-like directions which shut the individual into a narrow cage and do not permit him any space to move about in.

The system of values prevailing among young people is inconsistent and unarticulated. This is shown, for example, by their reactions to statements concerning work. In theory the principle of human worth and of equality is accepted and even emphasized, but in particular life situations there is a tendency to forget this and to stress individual success and performance.

The system of values can further be surveyed in terms of national independence and internationalism. The various materials consistently indicate that young people are unanimous as to the importance of national independence. Internationalism, in terms of increased contact and acquaintance with the inhabitants of other countries, and negatively in terms of dislike of restrictions on movement across national boundaries, has the support of a majority of young people. On the other hand, internationalism in terms of responsibility for the poor of the whole world does not receive their support. Most young people feel that we should first solve our own problems of poverty before we give assistance to the developing nations, and only 1/5 would be prepared to pay more taxes for help to these countries. It is interesting that girls are more willing than boys to help the developing nations and to pay taxes for this purpose.



Similarly, the attitude of young people toward the army and toward war is not a well-defined or consistent one. Opinions are acquired from external sources, rather than arrived at independently. Discussions indicate that young people can be made to believe just as firmly in the need for a strong army as in the usefulness of unilateral disarmament. In principle the attitude toward war is negative and that toward general disarmament positive, but in the background there is still the belief that war will never be eliminated and that disarmament will never be carried out. The absurdity of rearmament is realized, but the road to a better solution is not clear. This is related to the way in which history is taught in the schools; there is a great deal of information about wars and about military strategy, but very little about the causes of war and about the interdependence of events.

From the point of view of the system of production, this restrictedness is useful, since it leads to an attitude to society free of doubt or hesitation; the criteria of existence are thought about as little as possible. Since the values are not questioned, and since furthermore in the value system which has been adopted social questions are in the background, life is seen not from the point of view of human values and goals, but rather from that of practical activity and means. Discussion of values in society is not of much interest, and in general information about the world situation is neglected for entertainment. The informational material offered by the mass media falls on barren ground, while entertainment providing an escape from reality is eagerly accepted. Youth does not take advantage of the pluralism of industrial society, which thus remains a mere gesture; versatile information and multiple values are available, but the value system which has been adopted, together with the overemphasis on entertainment in the supply of mass media, ensure that the traditional value system will be preserved intact.



A rigid system of values and the favoring of fictional entertainment at the expense of factual information are symptoms of youth's alienation; the reality of life is considered as something external and self-evident, which isn't worth thinking about or trying to influence. Alienation from society is further affected by the fact that young people's possibilities of affecting the institutions close to their lives - schools, organizations and commercial consumption - are in practice minimal. Another factor is unemployment; one third of all the unemployed in Finland are between the ages of 15 and 25, which reinforces the feeling of being at the mercy of society. Youth is an object to society, rather than a subject.

The picture of youth outlined above illustrates only one side of the situation, that in which the beneficiary of the process is the system of production, and in which youth is only the raw material. This is of course a one-sided point of view, which needs to be supplemented by a picture drawn from the point of view of youth itself, in which the beneficiary is the cognitional system. What are the disturbances - noise in the channel of information transmission - which youth introduces into the cultural tradition?

In spite of the fact that the value system of the older generation is learned as a formula, without intellectual activation, a certain re-evaluation of values is still characteristic of youth. When the learnt behavior prescription differs too blatantly from the prevailing practice, the consequence is doubt and frequently a change in the value; this has been the case, for example, with sexual morality, which has come in conflict with the prevailing free sexual practice. Youth thus is less hypocritical than the



older generation; the levels of the physical behavior and the prevailing modes of thinking are brought closer together. On the other hand, it would be wrong to imagine that this reconciliation of theory and practice is carried to its conclusion; the rigid value system which has been acquired dominates attitudes the whole time, and in addition the constant material changes which are going on in the world push the level of practice further and further away. In any case, however, we can speak of youth's open mind - at least in comparison to the older generation.

A majority of young people can be considered as located closer to the "open-minded" pole of the dimension open-closed mind. This means that the young people encountered in situations of participant observation, taken as a group, are receptive to and tolerant of new and different ideas and phenomena. Young people are able to adopt to the new and to accept changes in the environment. This quality of mind involves a sensitivity to the way in which new ideas are presented; according to observation, they are unwilling to accept categorical statements and unconditional truths.

During participant observation, it was observed that young people suffered from a feeling that they were unable to come to decisions and draw valid conclusions due to lack of sufficient information. It also appeared that after the age of 20 personality defense mechanisms begin to play a part, attitudes begin to crystallize; the mind is gradually closed off to new ideas. But a majority even of older youth keeps an open mind and does not reject what is new and different out of hand.

In addition to this open-mindedness, another characteristic of youth which serves to further cognition and prevent the cultural tradition from being transmitted unchanged to the coming generations must be mentioned. Increased education and in general



a better social position tends to activate the young socially and to make them interested in questions of value. Typically those young people who have the least education and the lowest social position reject participation and factual information in favor of entertainment to a greater extent than do those with more education and a better position.

As a consequence, lower-class youth tends to be more conservative than that of the upper classes; the former are not even widely aware of their own class position, while the latter are in general quite well aware of the mechanisms by which society functions. The fact that the well-to-do are more radical than the poor is an indication of the crucial importance of the level of knowledge and the means of thinking; education and favorable material conditions are evidently more important in contributing to cognition than the objective social class of the parents. It can be said that in spite of dissatisfaction and causes for rebellion, lower-class youth strictly maintains the traditional system of values and the entertainment which reinforces it, while upper-class youth, in spite of the conservative atmosphere of the schools and of their family background, become involved in the quest for new information and new values. In the light of this contrast, the radicalism of students compared to working youth is consistent: it is the rule rather than the exception.

The meaning of a separate youth culture or pop-culture seems to be a double one: it furthers both the prevailing tradition and cognition which opposes this tradition. The traditional system of values and the system of production is served above all by the commercially governed entertainment sector of youth culture:



hit music, magazines, etc, since this both takes the place of independent thinking and integrates youth into a whole. On the other hand, cognition is served by the withdrawal of youth into an independent sub-culture with which young people identify and which has some characteristics of a separate social class. This culture is not by any means adopted by all young people - about one third remain outside it as isolated or passive spectators - nor is a rejection or doubt of the traditional values at all a dominant feature of the gang and organization youth who actively participate in various forms of the youth culture. Some of them, however, function as cognition mediators; the most prominent age-group involved in the youth culture, that between 15 and 19, demonstrates both the tendency toward recreational activities and the effort away from traditional values toward political activity.

The disturbances caused by youth in the transmission of the cultural heritage from one generation to the next are not statistically very noteworthy; a great majority of young people adopt the values of their parents basically unchanged and enter into the productive system on its own terms. The disturbances are nevertheless extremely significant, since they reveal the existence of forces much greater than themselves: they reveal the existence of a conflict between the individual and industrial society. The great increase in these disturbances in recent years is probably not a passing phenomenon, but part of the process of social change, taking many decades, through which industrial society is gradually changing into post-industrial society.



NOTES:

- 1 Yrjö Ahmavaara, Yhteiskuntatieteen kyberneettinen metodologia (The cybernetic methodology in social sciences, in Finnish). Helsinki: Tammi, 1969. A short English translation of Ahmavaara's ideas is to be found in "Cognition and its manipulation", report on a round table "Communication 1980" on mass communication research and policy held in Hanko, Finland, April 9-11, 1970, published jointly by Finnish National Commission for Unesco and the Finnish Broadcasting Company. See also Noam Chomsky, Language and Mind. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1968.
- 2 Ahmavaara, op.cit. (1969), pp. 203-204.
- 3 Ahmavaara, op.cit. (1969), pp. 207-208.
- 4 J.A. Stalpers, Youth and Participation: A critical Survey, Symposium of European experts and research workers on youth problems (Helvoirt, 12-17 October, 1969), Council of Europe, Strassbourg 1969. See also report of the Helvoirt symposium.



The order of importance of the aspirations of youth for age-groups  
12-14, 15-19 and 20-24 (combined measures)

	12-14	15-19	20-24
wish to receive concrete assistance in education, finding a job etc.	1	1	1
wish to obtain information concerning education, vocations etc.	3	2	2.5
wish to maintain good relations between adults and youth	4	5	2.5
respect for authority considered important	2	3	4
internationalism considered important	5	6.5	5
wish to affect events by means of exchange of opinion	6	6.5	6.5
wish to solve difficult problems by means of discussion	9	4	6.5
national values considered important	7	8.5	8
wish to obtain information about the activity of political institutions	13	12	9
a recreational youth culture considered important	10	8.5	10
religion and temperance considered important	8	10	11
wish to participate in political activity on terms of equality	11	11	12
wish to take part in organizational activity	12	13	13
wish to affect events by means of demonstrations	15	15	14
wish to be allowed hobbies and pursuits unsuitable to youth	14	14	15



## Appendix 2

### Means of combined measures in various age-groups

	12-14	15-19	20-24
wish to obtain information about the activity of political institutions	2.79	3.01	3.40
wish to participate in political activity on terms of equality	3.06	3.27	3.09
wish to affect events by means of demonstrations	2.35	2.61	2.57
wish to affect events by means of exchange of opinion	3.64	3.71	3.66
recreational youth culture considered important	3.28	3.62	3.26

## Appendix 3

The importance of various fields of life in youth work, measured in terms of the mean of the means of all wishes located in the various areas of Parsons A-G-I-L system and distribution of stated goals (statutes) of Finnish youth organizations

	Hel-sinki youth	15-19 age group in whole country	stu-dents	goals of youth organiza-tions
systems of production (A)	4.08	4.23	3.74	3 %
systems of decision-making (G)	3.39	3.28	3.83	2 %
systems of contact (I)	4.03	3.79	3.85	36 %
cultural systems (L)	3.61	3.39	3.32	49 %



TABLE 9. PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF PARTY AFFILIATION AMONG SECONDARY AND VOCATIONAL SCHOOL STUDENTS AND THEIR FATHERS

	Secondary School		Vocational School	
	Fathers	Students	Fathers	Students
Socialists	21.3	16.8	42.1	40.4
Bourgeois Center	32.0	15.6	45.0	35.2
Traditional Bourgeois	46.7	67.6	12.9	24.4
Number of students responding	381	328	233	213

Source: Veronica Stolte Heiskanen and Ilkka Heiskanen, "Effects of functional bifurcation and social selectivity of the educational system in the political orientation of youth" (Research Reports from Institute of Political Science, University of Helsinki, N 21/1970; paper prepared for the VIIth World Congress of Sociology, September 14-19, Varna, Bulgaria)