1970

The Nature of College Student Perceptions in America Today (Circa 1970)

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Original Citation

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Various commentaries analyzing the present troubled college scene in America…offer
distinct explanations for the turmoil and unease among students. Thus, Margaret Mead, in
her most recent treatise, sees the problem in terms of youth in a new technological,
cultural environment, born and reared in a world in which there could be no prior
example and experience. They constitute the hope and example for the older generation,
acting as scouts in the new frontier. Lewis Feuer, writing in Conflict of Generations,
discovers, in the current militance and the idealism as well as the emotional identity with
the underclass in America, the need for direction action. [It is] one further instance of an
historical pattern of generational conflict among the young and old. [There is] intense
generational solidarity among the college students…. Today, there is [a rejection of the
authority of adults and their institutions].

Spokesmen on the left, historian Lynd, psychologist Friedenberg, educator Goodman,
philosopher Marcuse perceive the cries of anguish, the demonstrations, the sit-ins, the
demands for restoration of individual liberation and participatory democracy as correct.
[These are] desperate actions of a youth, sufficiently removed from the clutches of a
manipulative society that it can seek to rebel. [It understands] as the deceived working
man cannot, that there is a capitalistic elite in control in America; that the notion of
democratic process is mere faced; that a corrupt power class drains not only the
individual within but externally as well; that the mass communications and armed forces
are firmly under the control of such an elite and thus so-called traditional means of
expression and redress such as peaceful petition and pamphlet are merely straws in the
wind; that piecemeal “reform” does not impair the corruption of the system but indeed
reinforces and co-opts those who might otherwise free themselves from it; that the
individual must be educated to be made aware of his non-freedom. Spokesman on the
right contend that militant and violent college student activities have the distinct mark of
Marxism-Leninism, in perceptions, in organizational plans, in strategy and tactics. No
more innocent activities by the young, conservatives are quite fearful of
the capture of American college student youth by Marxists, fostered by a too-large assortment of
faculty, even more left-liberal than in the fifties when a younger William Buckley
inveighed against them in God and Man at Yale.

The liberal camp seems to split down the middle in assessing the nature of the present
student movement. One group, in which a Harold Taylor can be found, writes of
“students without teachers,” lacking guides to follow and emulate because of the faltering
of the professors, the latter too interested in secure and comfortable positions within the
American establishment to assume their role as radical critics of the social institutions in
America. In the other group stand individuals like Sidney Hook and Bunzel, writing of
Academic Freedom and Academic Anarchy, and the Apolitical Politics, opting for an
academic freedom to reason out and analyze in a free university environment rather than
a politicization of a campus, which would restrict and prevent articulation of “non-
liberating” points of view, while forcing university involvement directly on the side of
“libertarian” forces; speaking for the fundamental importance, not sufficiently
understand, of the delicate American political process, as the essential democratic means to grapple with admittedly substantial social questions.

The hardhats no doubt are angered and puzzled by the language, the longhaired style of life, the rejection of flag the charges of imperialism, by college students. Going to a college affords the luxury of contemplation. These students, cry the hardhats, will not have to make it by the sweat of their brows. They believe that the men who made America and are continuing to do so, understand the true American dream, and the vast good that the flag represents. The kids don’t!

And what of the six million college students that now fill America’s colleges today? How do they see America? Obviously, the diverse viewpoints found among non-students, already considered by the author, will be found among the college students. And as I will contend at a later time, the percentages of persons who take different views constitute a fundamentally important consideration in understanding social developments. Certainly, a large percentage of students, perhaps a majority, continue to desire what students have always sought in America: secure, comfortable places within the middle and upper middle [classes] and [substantial] economic and political positions. However, the demonstrations and strikes this past year after the invasion of Cambodia and the killings of Kent State students seemed to have substantial student support, especially by undergraduate liberal arts students. It is a safe estimate that at least 1/5 of such students were shocked and dismayed by these events.

Elected student leadership, throughout the country… seem to be moving left, to the view that the millions in poverty, lacking in minimal levels of food, shelter and education are the shame of capitalist America; that race inequality is a demonstration of a hypocritical older generation that mouths the Jeffersonian declaration that all are equal while comfortably maintaining a racist system; that such racism is demonstrated anew by our war in Vietnam in support of the more reactionary side; that hypocrisy is seen in non-student horror and furor over the student-drug culture and sexual relations while adults gulp down tranquilizers, martinis, cancer-inducing cigarettes, and there are pollution-releasing auto and factory exhausts, and the divorce rate climbs steeply within a Puritanical sexual culture; the ever-larger and larger bureaucracy is turning students into numbers and computer cards that must not be “bent or mutilated; that there must be reinvigoration, a new individualization of the artificial, depersonalizing industrialized system; in which students, markedly affected by the system and its personnel, demand power commensurate with the effect of the system upon them; there is a uniquely new, and deadly environment, laying like a mushroom cloud over the lives of the future generation. There is little time for humor, for slow progress, for study, perhaps the luxury of prior generations, as the potential nuclear Holocaust, the population bomb, and the changing ecological balance reduce the time left on Earth.

Thus the “Now Generation” seeks action, physical and emotional pleasures now, rejecting the pleas of hypocritical older generation who got us into the mess and now leaves the young student to dwell in the misery of the creation. The religious institutions spew forth a language, and a ritual so foreign to the problems, the culture, and the style of
college students that they offer little spiritual comfort, or guidance. [Students turned to] the mysticism of the East, the romanticism of individuals of the past who have taken action against the system, [and to the likes of] Thoreau, Che, Sorel, Mao, and to the language framework of Marxism.

Such differing perceptions and interpretations face the analysts of the nature of the college scene today. The author believes that comprehension of our present turmoil cannot be found in discovering the one correct perception and rejecting the other perceptions as totally false. Rather the differing perceptions should be seen as complementary—each part of a total picture, yet with differing weights of causal importance of causal importance.

Before we consider such notion of complementary perceptions, let us dwell on the notion of perception. By perception I mean the way in which a person looks at reality, what he focuses on as important, what kinds of sources of evidence he sees and their weight, what kind of language context he puts particular fact situations into the meaning of acts. What happened? What does it mean? Karl Mannheim in the Sociology of Knowledge made clear that knowledge is no objective content handed down from generation to generation. Instead, it is relational, the person in the particular social organization culture seeing things in relation to his distinct environment—omitting, coloring, labeling, emphasizing by virtue of his historical environment. The struggle for knowledge capable of crossing such boundaries requires the scholar to be aware of his relational influences. Boulding made much the same point in his Images. That knowledge is relational also can square with the view that the biological and psychological nature of man is fundamental in determining the manner of gaining information and its content and use by man.

Freud ad Fromm, the psychologists, emphasized the unconscious influences upon man, and the need to restore healthy environments in which man is encouraged to make individual decisions and to be creative. [We are reminded of] the place of gene and biological makeup in explaining the historical development and area of free choice of man. The notion of perception is further complicated by the particular discipline context. For example, the political scientist has categories of analysis involving notions of power relationships, coalition building, governing elites, allocations of values, communication and opinion formation and socialization. The notion is further involved when one asks what level of acts, what language level and sophistication of explanation.

What, then, is the nature of student perceptions students we mean college students regularly enrolled (the phenomenon of non-student cultures around Berkeley requires another paper) in undergraduate education. (Graduate students and professional students increasingly are having their views felt but a focus on the undergraduate is useful and fair since in the main, it is the undergraduate who is arguing for a different lifestyle and perception. How do we find out what students are thinking and feeling We ask a representative sample in meaningful categories that can best provide clues that are not distorted, intentionally or unintentionally. We watch, categorize, and weigh student and non-student acts within the particular institution in historical and comparative contexts. Under theory, we hypothesize, refine, observe, and revise. The recent polls of student
opinion, interviews of certain students, speeches, student strikes, participation in demonstrations, and other acts would seem to provide the best present sources of what, in fact, current college undergraduate student perceptions are.

What are the apparent causes of student perceptions in America today? The impressions, which follow, are meant for further study and testing, and not as a substitute for such study.

Feuer’s analysis would seem to be an essential element in understanding the student perception. Evidence suggests that the generation gap is no mere gap between cultures…Historically, young persons and their elders have become frustrated at the weaknesses of the other, relative to their own capacity. And Feuer’s recounting of student movements in Europe during the nineteenth century convincingly points out the similarities in patterns—the idealism, the guilt, the effort to identify with the downtrodden, the action-orientation during the [rejection of institutions of authority].

Yet Mead’s position is fundamental as well. [Her view is that] youth today finds itself in a dramatically new environment, in which the elders--by virtue of their being raised in a different technological and cultural period--can offer no guide or experience. One may wonder whether this does not imply some arrogance on the part of the present generation, believing that this generation is the most unique in history. While other, former generations have felt that the world was in danger of ending—witness the Athenians, the Romans during the late Empire, and Western Europeans in 1940. Mead argues that, nonetheless, it is not a form of present generation arrogance. This generation does indeed live in a totally new ominous environment, with nuclear holocaust a possibility, an ever-present picture of a world that is rapidly changing, culturally, the statistical and factual horror of population explosion inching up to a disaster, and a polluted environment.

Television is ever present in our lives. Our language is affected; our desires are affected; likewise are our values. War comes into our living rooms every night. So do riots, pictures of poverty, claims of inequality, as well as advertisements of great material consumption, awareness of group identity and solidarity, means of attention-grabbing during confrontations, and all the means of educating mass groups to elite leadership points of view. The college student today has had more education by the “tube” than in school.

The nuclear [power of the Soviet Union] and the American potential for overkill make the capacity for mutual destruction an uncomfortable balance of terror, as other nations seek to join the “nuclear club.” With the nuclear development, the nationalistic expressions the Soviets and China, as well as the movements within Eastern Europe, the old categories of containment of monolithic communism by military and possibly nuclear response are clearly outmoded. Capitalism v. Communism, a theology of the 1950s generation is clearly inappropriate. The reduced living capacity caused by polluting of the ecosphere further forms of the perceived context of young students. Dirty water, dirty air, the use of phosphates, fertilizer, and inorganic and organic pollutants, bespeak to the young, the product of wanton destruction of the limited ecospace…. 
The population explosion...causes births to far outrun the food supply, as the underdeveloped world runs further behind. Efforts to save for capital investment are being drained by present political and social pressures for current consumption, while an inevitable brain drain sends fresh-trained minds to the developed nations, thus furthering the...gap between modern and traditional societies.

An evaluation of the New Left perception of reality calls to mind the difficult effort to evaluate reality. Perceived viewpoints are not acquired in any careful, scholarly way. Knowledge is gained in a relational context. There is socialization of the young in an essentially captive environment, peer conformity desires, television and education indoctrination, hero-worship—These are the strains in a symphony of perception reception. The empty glass analogy is useful here. Even if we agree that a person has poured water into a glass half full. There will be disagreement about whether the glass should be seen on as half full (thus, an optimistic appraisal of the situation), or half empty (a pessimistic appraisal). Perception of the simple act is never taken by itself. One’s ideological colored glasses will no, doubt, contribute to the larger picture. “Others are getting champagne; I had to force him to give me at least some water; the glass is not full; the water is dirty or poisoned. After I drink the water, there will be none for others in my family; nor will there be food; after I drink, I will get sick because of my physical condition; I will be shot; I am being given this water so that I will not cause trouble for the system.”

The optimistic picture might include: “I might have worked hard for this water, and it is only half full, and others have champagne, but it is refreshing and clean nonetheless; no one is taking it from me; and there is a chance to get more water, and even champagne, even for me, and for my children.

What agreement exists across the political spectrum in America about one of the New Left perceptions? It is that there are serious and substantial intolerable conditions in America. To a certain extent, the ideologues across the spectrum disagree upon what these intolerable conditions are. But all would agree upon the existence of substantial poverty, substantial inadequate medical attention, inadequate housing and education. But there would be disagreement upon what is meant by substantial, who caused the problems, how to alleviate them, with what costs, how they compare with previous history, other societies, utopia, and what legal and moral responsibility, and on whom? All would agree that freedom and democracy are concepts, they strongly endorse. But what are those concepts? What are their dimensions? When must they be restricted? How must they be taught about? What does America have now? What are the causes and effects?

What are the facts generally agreed upon across the board? These should serve as a strong foundation to build upon: The United States is an entity lying between Mexico and Canada, in the Western Hemisphere, bounded on the east and west by oceans. The nation has rich natural resources, high relative technological skills, and a highly literate (functionally literate?) population of 200 million. While the entity as a distinct political society dates to 1776, the time of articulating an independence from Great Britain, the
descendants of present inhabitants go back several centuries. They include Indians, Eskimos, slaves and prisoners forcibly brought to this continent. Others came over in waves of population. First came those from Northern Europe, then those from southern and eastern Europe, along with pockets of Asian and African immigrants. The new republic rejected kingship, and in its preamble, called for government concern for the people’s welfare. The Constitution, however, was not …voted upon by a colonial majority. Yet the land provided substantial opportunities, at least for white males. Enslaved blacks were a basic cog in the Southern plantations. Following a bloody, civil war, blatant black slavery of the previous form ended. But a substantial underclass and a new form of slavery and killings continued. The solution as to Indians regretitably involved their cultural destruction. New economic forms found a private sea in government to further industrialize, expand and speculate. The railroads opened up the country. There was upward mobility for some. The country raced onward toward higher economic productivity. In the twentieth century, as population climbed to 200 million, America involved itself in four major wars.

The Left, from my perspective, seems well founded in several positions. Certainly there are statistically measurable intolerable conditions for many in the United States, in terms of health, housing, food and education. Admittedly, there is disagreement about the share of responsibility to be attributed to parents and about the fact that such intolerable conditions should be taken in light of even worse conditions elsewhere. Nonetheless, it might be useful to focus on the injustices fostered upon America’s children. Surely it is clear that wealth in America ordinarily advantages one in terms of educational opportunity, justice in the courts and economic opportunity. Clearly political weight and opportunities for influence and office are disproportionately in favor of the wealthy. Obviously the American leadership has too long ignored the dangers from pollution, non-conservation of natural resources, and a too-ready involvement of America in a Vietnam war without clear majority support.

The conservatives nonetheless seem well-taken on certain of their positions: Tradition and the small community bonds seem fundamental in understanding the nature of man in a stable healthy environment. Inculcating the virtues of self-reliance and self-pride seems important in arousing the best in man’s being. A larger and larger central bureaucracy seems incapable of curing the evils or supposed evils in America. Generally …actions by government encourage capital investment and competition, whether in America, Europe or Asia. Moreover, a strong national defense unfortunately seems essential in a world that remains divided and hostile. Certainly communism, with its ideological objectives, is no mirage. Nor is the claim that demonstrators and others express Marxist-colored perspectives, tinged at times with Leninist conspiratorial and violent overtones.

The “soft” liberal seems correct in ways as well: The hope of America’s future has to be its generations growing up. These may well be our best generation—the most aware, the most concerned about others. We must not lose them. It is our obligation not to lose them. We cannot turn our back on the intolerable conditions that we are all painfully, nor should we, with our middle age paunch, settle back into middle class comfort. We must be guides for the young; we must have their respect; we must not be hypocrites, in order
that our experience can channel their idealism and eagerness for action and results into reasonable paths. Moreover, getting tough with demonstrators will not make them disappear. Rather it will, as it has traditionally has done, escalate the conflict. It will produce generational solidarity, increasing in the face of intrusions onto places like university campuses, and making many members of the campus community cringe with horror.

The “hard” liberal thrust in part makes sense as well. We have to, as liberals, be clear on what worth exists in the American system, what kinds of means are available to private persons to achieve their goals, what kinds of means are allowable to government, acting in the name of, and meaningfully endorsed by a substantial part of the community. Despite the intolerable conditions existing, the hard liberal rejects disruptive tactics asserted in the name of freedom. The comparative and historical reference is accepted as the most sensible one. (In Utopia, there would be no intolerable conditions. Here we have intolerable conditions for millions. But the point is that given the fundamental nature of our vast heterogeneous population and vast land area, with different races and religions, and nations housed within us, it is to be expected that there would exist intolerable conditions, as would exist under any economic system. Or to put it differently, what comparable vast heterogeneous society—USSR, China Brazil—is doing a better job of reducing these intolerable conditions for its citizenry? Moreover, even if potentially another system might have been better for America, [there are risks involved in efforts to change a society] What will be the intolerable condition acceleration rate during attempts to transform the system? And during transformation and fulfillment?

The hard liberal accepts our system because he believes, [from a relative perspective], it is substantially good and equitable, and that there are adequate peaceful means of radical change built into the American political system, and because violence threatened or actuated will most probably increase the intolerable condition acceleration rate. He sees efforts to undermine the ordinary, peaceful channels as undermining the democratic fabric of peaceful change and negotiation built up. Whatever the rhetoric about motivation or good cause, the militant student take-over and the record burning are feared as a corrosive erosion of the delicate political process, undermining the conditions needed for academic freedom to think, and teach, learn, live, and work in a community.

The “hardhats’ too have a point. They do not deserve to be the subject of attack because they have striven to work hard, to achieve material comforts for their families, to see hope for the future and for their children, and because they seek emotional identity with the symbol of nation and community, the American flag.

And surely the present college student generation, by and large, is not deserving of the kind of criticism that it has been receiving. The overwhelming number continue as before, to go to school, to study and attend class, eager to become productive, idealistic members of the community [as in the past]. Their awareness of the evils around them, in racism, the slums, and the war machines…cannot be forgotten. Between the age of childhood and more sedate middle age, they founder in seeking to find their identities as they struggle for mates, careers, and emotional security. They find that they are the ones
being asked to participate in America’s longest and most controversial war, far off in Asia. They believe that attending college carries with it guilt feelings and awareness that others are in that war, fighting, being wounded and dying. They see the reality as so far distant from their dream of what a free society should be, and in their earnest young bodies, they struggle to act to reduce the gap. They wish to get a handle on a bureaucracy which seems a run away stallion, to rope it, control it, so that instead of impersonal computerized personnel, there can be organizations of individuals in close community, focusing on and solving relevant problems under community direction. And who can blame then?

Thus does the author believe that certain elements of the perceptions of distinct [ideologies], across the spectrum of belief, can be blended together in a total reality.