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On the track of contemporary youth

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**Johannes Andersen**  
**On the track of contemporary youth**  
**Youth cultures and reflexive strategies**

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**1996**



Johannes Andersen

## On the track of contemporary youth

### Youth cultures, reflexivity and strategies for tomorrow

A crucial issue in the contemporary debate on *welfare policy* concerns how to conceptualize the young and how to "activate" them. What gives some urgency to this issue is that the young seldom evince much interest in such activation programmes and that - at least in the Danish context - its incredibly difficult to make sense of government policy on the subject (e.g. the Danish Socialkommissionen 1992 og 1992a)

When we, qua sociologists, attempt to pigeonhole contemporary youth, they immediately protest and attempt to break out of the classification and to find new tracks that their environment has as yet no words to describe. So, as soon as we have decided that that youth should dress in that or that way or hold this or that view, the whole theatre changes and new groups take over the stage by breaking with the conventional stereotypes of the young. Such new groups constitute a fresh challenge to their environment in general and to welfare policy in particular.

#### 1. Contemporary youth -four categories

But, however oversimplified, we can, notwithstanding the above, state that today we can locate four different forms of youth culture, and, furthermore, forms which are not mutually consistent. But they do constitute sorts of radio beacons for contemporary young. Some of them identify with such groups at a distance, others mix together forms of expression from different cultures while yet others accept them wholeheartedly. All this serves to confuse the picture even more. But it is my conviction that we can delimit four characteristic types (Issa et al. 1994).

At the one end of the spectrum we can locate young people with considerable resources that, more or less consciously, turn their backs on the system and instead throw themselves at the cultivation of "exciting"

cultural offers and challenges. One day they cultivate philosophy, the next hard (and loud) rock music, the third surfing, the next cartoons etc. etc. They are a group that will do things themselves, because they think they are *exciting* and apart from this, they don't assign to the activities any further perspective or goal. Here *autonomy* plays a major role. Through their dress they combine everything from black, far too small and pretty worn out clothes which signal their independence from their environment. For example, Icelandic sweaters are once again fashionable together with a curious combination of flannel and black leather. With this *extreme* expression they try to tell all other people, that they are independent, and want to do things by themselves, accompanied by *Smashing Pumpkins, Sepultura, Black Grape* or *real punk-death-metal-music*. If we have to put a label on this culture we could call it *grunge*.

The next group also consists of young people with considerable resources, but they are at the opposite end of the spectrum to the *grunge culture*. It's a group of young people that fights for a footing within the system. They struggle for the best grades, for entrance to the best education and, after that, to get a permanent and secure job in which, at one or other time, they can expect to get exciting tasks and to develop their own personalities. It can be said that this group has a very direct response to the hopes and expectations of the institutions of the welfare state about youth. They do pretty much what youth counsellors, teachers etc. say they should do. So such a group is often characterized as *the respectable girls and the decent boys*. For this group *the hope of security* by appointment to an independent and creative job is crucial. For example, it doesn't need a lot of information about shortage of schoolteachers for members of this group to start queueing up at the teacher training colleges. Culturally and aesthetically this group expresses itself as *colourful new smart suits* and as ordinary *grey boys and girls*. They try to combine big breasts and small hips, young insecurity and adult maturity and a assumed happy approach to life. One day they dress up like new hippies, and on another they look like Marilyn Monroe and handsome chaps, accompanied by *Oasis, Blur, Crowded House* or *Alanis Morissette*.

That part of youth which for a variety of reasons cannot manage within the effectively warm embrace of the educational system, but which all the same despite poor job prospects do try to adapt to the expectations of the system, establish a *romantic family life* in which they seek the *security and comfort* of the home and consumption. Cheap consump-

tion goods can satisfy this when the need is stimulated. Having a baby is quite a thing for this group since a baby can give a meaning to daily life, partly by keeping the family together and finally showing their parents' generation that they are better at making families than their parents were. In this neo-romantic group such things as *Safeways -culture, fitness, romantic restaurants, books of coupons* and *big shops* all have a key role as expressions of fast and effective satisfaction of immediate needs plus room for a little personal happiness in daily life. It is also possible to behave as a member of this group even if one is single.

The last group consists of those young who, from the bottom of the social pile have, more or less aggressively, turned their backs on society. These are young with few resources that have had trouble in school, got into the meshes of social security and from there into a daily life in which the immediate satisfaction of the spontaneously arising need is crucial. This group lives a daily life almost as kinds of ghetto groups or *tribal warriors*: they are not scared of breaking the rules when they think something's really happening. This is a group which the system, first and foremost, tries to keep at some distance from the rest of society by ensuring that it can satisfy its immediate needs for stimulation. This is a group in which (committed) self consciousness can suddenly take the form of violence, aggression, hatred of foreigners etc. etc. and whose most important cultural identity can be heavy metal music, german shepherds, tattoos and dirty jeans, also with leather.

## **2. Youth who want to make things different themselves**

These four groups constitute the key points of reference that the young more or less identify with. As between the groups one can locate signal differences and even open tension. One of the differences is between, on the one hand, those who adjust to the given system and, on the other hand, those who signal a distance to the system. The former group seek *security* within the systems they know in an insecure and confusing world. They hope that the institutional security that teaching systems, shopping centres or other forms that are on offer from other institutions of the welfare state also give results. The other group has given up this project and, instead, seeks *autonomy* - in such a way that they're not constantly forced to choose among the many offers of the welfare state (at least, the many



offers in *Denmark*.) They make *not choosing* their central strategy and they attempt to determine themselves how they will express themselves. *In brief, there is a tension between those who seek security in what the system has to offer and those who seek autonomy from the very same system.*

Figure 1. *Strategies in the youth cultures of the 1990s*

	<i>Strategies</i>	
<i>Social situation</i>	<b>Security and Comfort</b>	<b>Autonomy</b>
<b>Self-Realization (creative expression)</b>	<p><b>The respectable girls and the nice boys</b></p> <p>... It's hard being young in today's Denmark. There are many demands and a tendency to think of everybody over 18 as adult. We've got to be perfect and grown up. We've got to get really high grades to get an education...</p>	<p><b>Grunge</b></p> <p>...I've really no plans or dreams of becoming a rock star but I'd like to get really into music. Its the most exciting world for me to get into. Maybe I'm going to teach music. But first I want to find somewhere I can be myself, completely..</p>
<b>Stimulation (entertainment)</b>	<p><b>The romantic family or single person</b></p> <p>...I'm crazy about animals. What I'd really like to do is to live on a farm. I don't want to be a farmer. But I want to have a lot of animals and ecological vegetables. Anyway, I've got to have another horse.. I want this to be with a husband, and our children and a Mercedes, the lot....</p>	<p><b>Scattered groups of young (with dog)</b></p> <p>The statistics show there's more chance of getting a violent husband because I've been in it myself. If I had a lover or a husband that beat me I wouldn't dare to say anything. Cos they would surely think: Oh well, she's just like her mother...</p>

Quotations from Stark et al (ed). 1996

A second difference between those who adapt and the "non choosers" is related to the difference between those who have resources (e.g. money) and those who don't. Those who have many resources - e.g. a solid family background and a good education -very often go for *self-realization* while those who dont have such resources seek shelter in coping with their immediate needs, by stimulating them as much as possible. The two differences between the dimensions is summarized, as an illustration, in figure 1.

Together they define some *basic strategic choices* that the young can choose. What these choices have in common is that, in the 1990s, it's the *young themselves* who are the point of departure, who assign their strategic choices significance. Far more than before, is is the young themselves who must find themselves in relation to society (Andersen 1996). And the way they express themselves is through aesthetics and culture. While this last is perhaps not new it is the first, very new and key part of the youth culture of the 90s.

### **3. Youth as a societal phenomenon**

Youth cultures *as such* emerged for the first time in the 1950s. This took place in the US due to a mixture of post war frustration and emerging mass consumption of products that were designed for young people e.g. Coca-Cola. It was here that the first youth groups appeared, groups that distanced themselves from the way the established system thinks about life. The young wanted to decide themselves and, for example, to choose who they were going to have sex with. Sex became an end in itself, something that was fun and not just something you did on the route to getting married and having kids. This was one of the things that made Elvis dangerous to the system since he told his story with his body on stage (Gudmundsson 1992).

### **4. The Youth revolt of the 60s**

Since the sixties, the youth culture phenomenon has spread, inter alia to Europe and youth *qua youth* have become more visible. It all started slowly, with long hair, the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. With the

conquest of the street corner, the pubs, parks and city squares. Later it spread by word of mouth, academic discussions, cultural manifestations and collective actions, inter alia anti-war and anti-nuclear war demos. and the message was clear enough: here comes a group that wants to be itself. They want to decide about their own use of leisure time and they want to be there where it's all happening. In other terms, they distance themselves - consciously and loudly - from the *alienating* world, its materialist consumption, its authoritarian values which their parents' generation cultivated, if *crudely*, up through the 60s.

The reaction to this from the surrounding society was natural enough. They exaggerated their authority wherever possible: parents scolded their children, their professors shouted at them and told them what and what not to do, employers demanded more discipline and the political system expected higher support to the elected elite.

So the 60s can be regarded as an ever spreading *confrontation* between, on the one hand, a *youth* - a long way from alienation and authoritarian systems - that will define and appreciate its own social space and, on the other hand, *an authoritarian and traditional system of adults*, that were being undermined and challenged precisely by youth. The confrontation was, so to speak, a natural and necessary result of the way in which society had changed and the most important thing about the process was that youth now insisted on defining itself and its own space: by, in the first instance, distancing itself from its environment and by cultivating the real inner values. With, of course, the help of hash and Jimmy Hendrix.

This all happened at a time when the welfare state grew in order, among other things, to cope with demand from the labour market. Generally, the education of the young improved and, from the end of the 60s and up through the 70s the demands on the educational system grew greater and greater. This was the time when access to further education was really opened up: not just for the children of the bourgeoisie, but for the children of workers and peasants. And the educational system simply wasn't geared for this. The mixture of a general youth revolt with an old-fashioned and authoritarian lead educational system under pressure was, to put it mildly, explosive.

## 5. The left-wing young in the 1970s

The result of all this was a number of militant acts and actions at the beginning of the 70s: sit-down strikes in classrooms, office and buildings occurred about every three months. Some students went so far as to boycott student elections to Universities.

Naturally enough, all this led to a great growth in political consciousness and many students became militant marxists. Primarily because marxism offered, on the one hand, a straightforward critique of alienation and materialism generally and, on the other hand, a critique of societal authorities. All this, of course, linked to the critique of capitalism. Just about every educational institution was affected by all this and a new group of young started to define more rigorous goals for their culture - similar to the way they were very conscious about their aesthetic critique, a critique they launched themselves. One ought to be soft, collective and considerate. In whatever dimension. And here we can locate the first cracks in youth cultures.

The political point of departure of the youth culture of the 1970s was very concerned with the welfare state. Its goal was to influence institutions as much as possible by, inter alia, sensible teaching policy, insight and, as Americans say, the way people relate to each other. The collective was *the* positive word that would bind the whole lot together. And here the hope was that the institutions of the welfare state could have an emancipatory and positive effect on everybody who ever came in contact with them. Children were to be taught, from year one, how good and collective they ought to behave in society and this would spread like ripples to other social groups: to clients of the state as well as to ordinary citizens.

## 6. Neo-Conservatism in the 1980s

The collective, left wing welfare state-culture was very strong in the 70s but it met its natural opponent in the 1980s when new groups of young looked down their noses at the most of what that culture contained. The agenda was set by a black and desparate middleman, through the punk, and the blackboard was pretty much wiped clean. After this it was the "ma alone" that was cultivated, the foul word, the openly gender-based sexual-

ity, money and individual initiative: all at the cost of society and collective interests. This occurred in a space far from the institutions of the welfare state e.g. in the neon-lit cafés and in a context in which it cost money to join in. And preferably a lotta money, money you could use to make a profit (Fornäs et al 1988).

This youth culture also cultivated a new aesthetic. The briefcase, the time manager, clothes that accentuated sexuality etc. The very best thing was to combine personal strength, a strong body and a sharp mind, one that could think strategically in the stormy waters of potential competitors (Lyngård 1994).

The target of this youth group was to conquer the private sector, which was in its way logical given that the youth of the 1970s had, in a variety of ways, used the welfare state as a compass for their culture: and used it, too, in order to get jobs in it. And now the youth of the 1980s focussed on doing the same to the private sector which of course doesn't give many job opportunities for the employment prospects of the future generations of youth.

## **7. The internalized revolt of the 1990s - just life politics**

Hence the youth culture of the 1980s in turn meets a turning point: this time in the form of the more introspective youth cultures of the 1990s: which in practice means the grunge culture, the neo-hippies, the romantics and the less conscious, half-aggressive small groups of young men with dogs with which this brief survey/classification started. The first group especially is difficult to unravel. It has no external goal and is satisfied if things are, in themselves, exciting.

In a way one can say that the youth cultures of the 90s are a clear and clean expression of the whole historical development we have sketched above (Fornäs & Bolin 1995). The key to this has been the two dimensions sketched above and this is the key motif in the above account.

First of all, the role of culture and aesthetics as that which makes the decisive difference and which also assigns significance to the groups which try to distance themselves from other groups. If we look at the actual youth groups they actually use precisely culture and aesthetics to tell us who they are just as this is their way of telling what it is they want - if they do want anything.

Secondly, the youth cultures of the 1990s show how a *life policy perspective has been cultivated*, in which the crucial things is the emancipation of individual resources and opposition to all obstacles to this in society, the neighborhood and in oneself, obstacles that can hinder the self-realization of the individual (Giddens 1994). In another sense, the new youth cultures signal a new boundary. The earlier youth cultures had conquered the territories that had been worth conquering. First came the youth revolt of the 60s, then came collectivity, education and welfare in the 70s and then came individuality, the private sector and the willingness to risk in the 80s. Now these territories are conquered and the groups of young of the 1990s have to find other tracks when they *have to assign things and themselves significance*. And what have we got left is *the individual him/her self*. The significance emerges by and through the individual. And that is why some groups cultivate the exciting while others seek security. By so doing, they know where they are and what they are.

It's not always that easy to be the person who *him/herself* assigns things significance: and anorexic girls, suicidal thoughts and general insecurity all bear testimony to this. The tendency to constantly seek the exciting, and in so doing be a bit incoherent and flighty is not completely unknown among contemporary young. All this is clearly a challenge to any form of *welfare policy strategy* that attempts to activate the young in some more permanent way.

Perhaps this is particularly true of the *grunge culture*, one which clearly indicates a quite different track. This group's emphasis on autonomy can result in an isolated loneliness if it is unadulterated in the direction of individualism. But it can also lead to the establishment of new communities in which the will to get together on *autonomy* is the key. And if this really does happen, then this group is more *radical* in its revolt against wage labour, the institutions of the welfare state and consumerism than any of the previous groups.

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