

D27

Transitional Radicals

by Amitai Etzioni

YOUNG RADICALS: Notes on Committed Youth. By Kenneth Keniston. 368 pages. Harcourt, Brace & World. 1968. \$5.95

Why do students rebel? Why do they demonstrate, violate the law, flout authority? Where did the parent generation fail? Is this young generation the product of an over-permissive education which prevailed after World War II? Is it "all Dr. Spock's fault"? These are questions asked repeatedly these days. Kenneth Keniston, associate professor of psychology and member of the department of psychiatry of the Yale Medical School, has a partial answer to these questions. The young radicals, he says, are far from being a sign of educational failure or a cause for parental guilt or alarm. On the contrary, he sees in them not only a group of fine young men and women, dedicated to moral causes and actively engaged in their behalf, but also unusually "healthy" persons, youth who have solved their psychological problems to a higher degree than most and achieved "an unusual degree of psychological integration."

Keniston's study is based on interviews with fourteen students. Eleven were working in the summer of 1967 on a project designed to educate the American public to the horror of the war in Vietnam. Three had been studied previously. (Keniston conducted an often-quoted and favorably reviewed study of students, *The*

Uncommitted.) Interviews lasted several hours and were accompanied by observation of the young radicals "in action" at their headquarters. The book, though, draws almost exclusively on interviews, and its readability and value is much enhanced by lengthy quotations from them. The author sent the manuscript to the young radicals and extensively expanded it, following their comments. If he maintains the pace of doing a field study in the summer of one year and having the findings, analysis, and commentary published by spring of the next year, Keniston may earn the title of the "fastest scientist in the East."

Keniston has characterized as "inadequate" two hypotheses which are widely used to explain young radicalism. The "radical-rebel" proposition argues that the radical projects his inner turmoils and family conflicts on society; he rejects societal authority because he did not and does not accept that of his father. Keniston found that the radicals he studied were not particularly preoccupied with the question of authority. Many do not reject their father, and when they clash with authorities — such as the President of the United States — it is in political rather than psychic terms. Since Keniston sees both continuity and change in

AMITAI ETZIONI is Professor of Sociology at Columbia University, and is a contributing editor to *Psychiatry & Social Science Review*.

the young students he observed, he rejects the static notion of a rebellious personality formed early in life and immutable thereafter. Actually, the focus of his study is "the process of radicalization."

The "red-diaper" proposition, that most young radicals come from old radical families and are "successful" products of their educational efforts, is also defined as inadequate. Many of the radicals studied never wore a red diaper because they did not know any reds in their infant days. Those who did passed through a rather complex re-adjustment of their relations to their red families before evolving their quite different brand of radicalism.

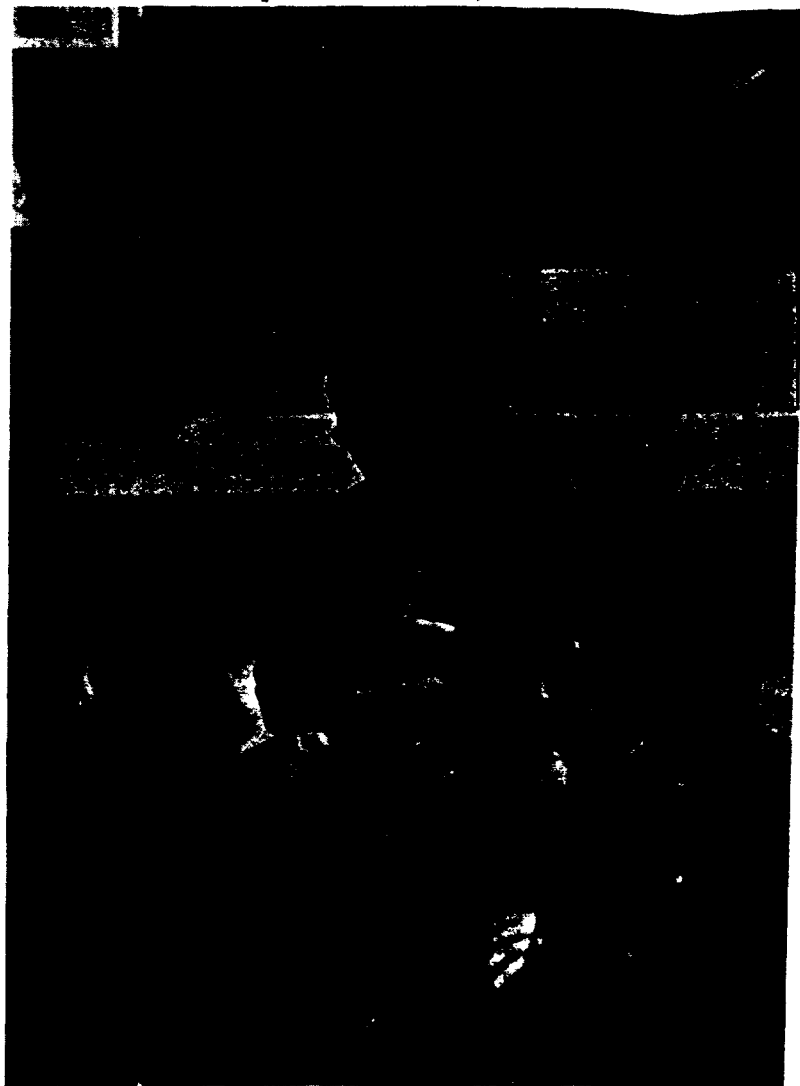
What then are the psychodynamics of radicalism as seen by Keniston? Radicals are young persons, ambivalent about their fathers, whom they see as subscribing to moral values but not actively engaging in their realization. They acquired relatively early in life a "special sensitivity to principle, . . . early sense of specialness, [and] concern with the issues of struggle, conflict, and violence." For a while many tried to become run-of-the-mill good students and conforming members of their peer culture. But with the crisis of early adolescence they returned to their childhood conflict, by now internalized, and sought to resolve the tension between moral commitment and political impotence.

. . . Childhood specialness now became a frightening sense of inner difference; high childhood principles became moralistic self-condemnations; and early sensitivity to conflict became an adolescent fear of passion and an angry denunciation of parents.

In later adolescence, continuity with childhood was reestablished — the pattern of intellectual achievement, leadership, and success was resumed. But this new equilibrium also proved provisional. Faced with imminent entry into adulthood, they faltered, turned their backs on the Establishment options, and little by little became immersed in the New Left. In one sense, these young radicals "rebelled" twice: first, against their parents and the inconsisten-

cies of their immediate environments; second, against the options that society offered them as adults. Finding none of these options morally satisfying, they (and others of their generation) chose an option outside of the System — the identity of a radical.

The radicals find their answer in a life dedicated to the pursuit of social justice; they found the answer with the help of an "unusual insight into the connection between their personal lives and political lives, their pasts and their presents." In short, as Keniston sees it, radicals are healthier persons than most, fol-

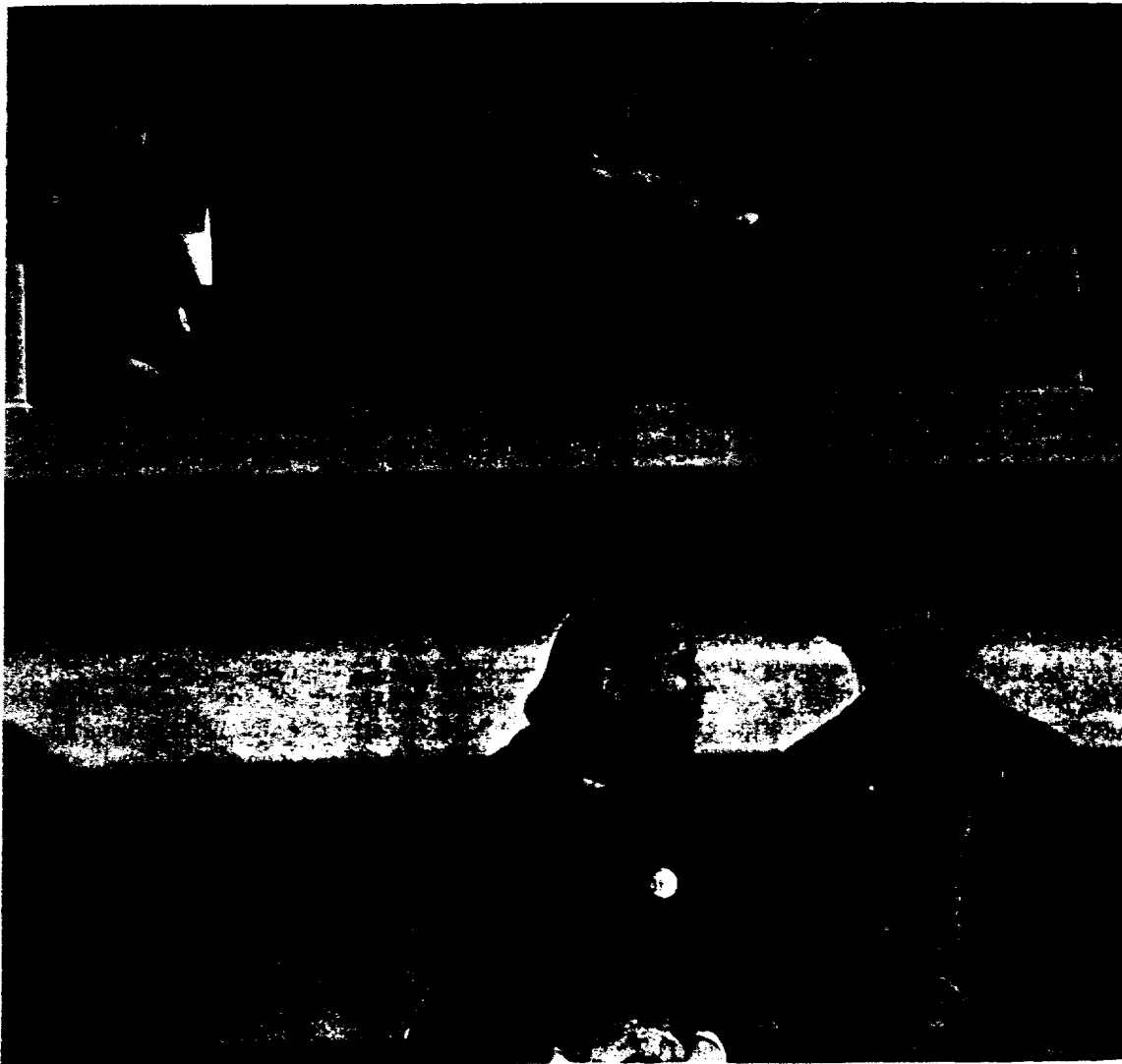


lowing a nobler life than most. The book is studded with sympathetic or approving remarks. If compliments appealed to radicals, they would surely name Keniston their favorite social scientist.

But, says Keniston, radicalism is a phase, not a personality type. The reasons young radicals rarely grow to be old radicals, we are told, are sociological rather than psychological: radicals cannot raise a family in the movement nor hold a decent job. Why, with the fine adjustment they presumably have made to radicalism, the young persons desire

either a sexual or a labor routine, is less clear.

By and large, Keniston's analysis is much superior to most psychological and psychiatric writing. It is jargon-free, unbound by a dogma or "school," and quite perceptive in its psychodynamic analysis. His style is often irritating (e.g., "in the era of the Pill") and often curiously unconvincing ("not only did everyone I approached agree to be interviewed, but, without exception, the staff shared my interests in the origins of their involvements . . . No topic was too personal to be discussed, no matter how obviously painful or difficult").



Most important, Keniston's approach is a dynamic one. He takes into account that a person may change rather significantly over his life cycle, although a constant "theme" may reappear. In many ways Keniston's analysis seems to be Eriksonian, especially his stress on a sequence of phases. Keniston's explanation of the phenomenon of radicalism, though, is largely from the inside. He has much to say as to how it evolves *once* a person is slated to be a radical. Because Keniston dealt with the non-radicals in an earlier study, it may be said that the comparative basis (and "control" group) is already provided for. What is still missing, however, is a fuller sociological and historical analysis. Keniston attempts this in the closing pages of his book, but here he is clearly out of his area of specialization.

What must be added to Keniston's psychodynamic approach is a study of the institutions of society and their transformation. In part, it is a matter of the sources of protest. Why are there more fathers who live up to their moral commitments less in one era than in another? Why do some of their sons and daughters grow up conformists and others radicals? It is in part a question of outlets: Under what conditions does their rebellion lead young persons to campaign for McCarthy and thus accept, or at least give another chance to, the existing political system, while others equate McCarthy with Nixon, join the Maoist-oriented Progressive Labor Party, set fire to university buildings, and throw bricks at the police in their rejection of legitimate political avenues, both of routine expression and of peaceful protest, dissent, and non-violent civil disobedience?

The psychological factors treated by Keniston nevertheless are relatively set and set "early"; the story starts with the relation to the father in infancy. But perhaps mass psychology and the processes of imitation or diffusion are also at work. How is one to account for the sudden spread of riots from one prison to scores of others, from one men-

tal hospital to many others, from one campus to those in scores of countries? Where were the children of all those politically impotent fathers before the Berkeley crisis? Are we to disregard the organizational links among chapters of SDS in this country and those leading to other western ones? (Columbia is reported to have been picked in a national SDS meeting for an April crisis because a large peace march was planned for New York City and because Columbia was considered "ripe" in view of the relative unresponsiveness of its administration to students' demands.)

Questions such as under what conditions does mass protest arise rather than remain the affair of a few, or under what conditions is it channeled into existing institutions and not directed toward blowing them up, are not "adequately" answered, by Keniston or anyone else. Nor am I convinced that social forces do not affect the tendency of young radicals to outgrow their radicalism. If we had mass unemployment of *professionals*, i.e., an overproduction of intellect-workers, we might well find many radicals continuing their vocation into post-youth years, as they did in Italy and France after the war.

Actually, two other studies* suggest that the activism and radicalism of some students and youth is a more or less "normal" phenomenon appearing in most societies which have students, from Argentina to Japan, Holland to Israel, from medieval Oxford to contemporary New College. What needs explanation is the finding of no activism. The question of *magnitude* and *scope* of the phenomenon hence is an essential one. Keniston has much to say about the psychodynamics of a radical. We now need a full study of radicalism as a societal infection and of the conditions under which the rise in temperature involved is slight and therapeutic, not high and killing. ●

*"Students and Politics," 10th anniversary issue of *Daedalus*, Vol. 97, No. 1 (Winter 1968), entire issue, and "Student Politics," special issue of *Comparative Education Review*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (June, 1966), entire issue.