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Teenage Wasteland: Suburbia's Dead End Kids

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divorce more harmful to them, how society reinforces the idea that women gain identity from parenting and the related idea that the process of pregnancy gives women a closer connection to the child. Their clinical and research findings revealed that “between 4 to 85 percent of females compared with 2 to 25 percent of males were involved in programming/brainwashing of their own children. Furthermore, females were more likely to fit at the extreme end of the continuum in degree and type of programming/brainwashing” (p. 155). Though this is an extremely sensitive topic, the authors discuss it in a manner that most will find effective.

But, again, this chapter and others as well would have benefitted from drawing upon other studies ranging far beyond the authors’ “clinical and research findings.” This is far from being a fatal flaw but it is a flaw nonetheless.

Both of these books are well worth reading and make a signal contribution to clinical sociology. As one who has practiced law—including domestic relations law—I enjoyed both books immensely.

Teenage Wasteland: Suburbia’s Dead End Kids, by Donna Gaines. New York: Pantheon, 1991. 262 pp., \$23 cloth.

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Teenage Wasteland is about teenage subcultures. The book begins with a suicide pact among four teenagers. Although it takes place in urban New Jersey, it could be Anyplace, USA: It is a social-psychological case study of teenage lives. Gaines shows how “young people are still the only minority without formal representation. . . . [They] suffer more absolute structural regulation than anyone. . . . The larger societal system seems to set up to strip young people of their desire for self determination” (pp. 239-40).

The book is written in an experiential, journalistic mode. A certain group of teenagers called “dropouts,” “troubled losers,” “druggies,” and “burnouts” are labeled and stigmatized by the larger order. Gaines hung out with them, got their confidence, and went into their lives and into their heads to know their experience and what it feels like to carry these labels. She shows the social psychological structure of their lives, and the importance of context in understanding their experiences and feelings. She goes into their experience in a way that leaves the reader identifying with the loneliness and hopelessness of their worlds.

Reading *Teenage Wasteland*, one begins to identify with these teens on an emotional level; the alienation they feel is overwhelming, with no one to turn to who understands their experience. No one seems to even try to understand. The “burnouts” see no future in what the world has to offer. This only touches the surface of their alienation, loneliness, and pain.

This book is valuable for anyone who wants to get into the mind and experience of our youths: social workers, probation officers, teachers, counselors, parents, almost anyone. Reading this book allowed me to appreciate in a new way not only teenagers taking deviant paths, but all young people of the 80s. It is a different generation than my own, and on the surface seems different. These young people do not have the same future opportunities as teens from the 60s had; there are fewer and fewer directions for young people to go. These young people are living in a more alienated world and are more alienated from the larger community—times are harder and chances for a better life have diminished. To outsiders they look “tough, scruffy, poor, wild. Uninvolved in and unimpressed by convention, they create an alternative world, a retreat, a refuge” (p. 9).

When we get below the surface, we can all relate to the experience of these people; the underlying emotions are the same for all of us—shame, humiliation, and anger. Often “dropouts, losers,” and so on are condemned for not wanting to read, for going through the motions of getting an education, for being apathetic, for taking an alternative route. Condemnation only increases the abyss. Hopelessness, anger, shame, and fear remain.

For “burnouts” or gangs, alienation is the common bond—this is the way they survive the pain. But in some ways they are one step ahead of the adult world; at least they are aware of the alienation. They reject a dysfunctional society. Adults are simply alienated, and are oblivious to the lack of bonds; adults are frightened and annoyed by kids hanging out, by green hair and skin heads, earrings—without dealing with alienation or feelings.

After reading *Teenage Wasteland*, you will not blame the teenagers for moving away from the mainstream. Many ask the question, “What is wrong with the burnouts, the dropouts, the druggies?” But we seldom ask what is wrong with the conformists who tolerate the alienation, who buy the world as it is and accept injustice—who become adults who perpetuate the system. “They can easily live in their own world, sleepwalking through stale family life, boring school, and bad jobs. The dullest, most apathetic students will come alive when left to their own devices” (p. 99). “Their way of fighting back is to kill themselves before everything

else does" (p. 103). Some of the young people do not buy the alienation of the adult world, but there is no one to turn to, nowhere to go, fewer resources.

Viewing the anger and alienation of teenagers as simply a personal problem removes the event from the social context and insults the person further. Alienation continues. Gaines keeps the issue within its rightful context.

What I was left with from *Teenage Wasteland* is a system of unacknowledged emotion which leads to blame: adults blame the kids who blame the adults who blame Heavy Metal, ad infinitum. I see a system where everyone is oppressed, some worse than others, some more aware than others. We are all in the boat together: our name is Alienation. The fundamental question that I went away with from this book is about alienation on all levels, within and between persons and groups: How do we communicate to bridge the gap? How do we manage our human bonds?

Scheff and Retzinger, in *Emotions and Violence: Shame and Rage in Destructive Conflicts* (1991), discuss the nature of human bonds and how communication works to increase or decrease alienation. Braithwaite's *Crime, Shame and Reintegration* (1989), on reintegrative shame, may give law enforcement officers a new perspective on dealing with teenage subcultures in a way in which they will be heard. "The police would not release the suicide note . . . most young people watching thought this was the worst insult. Even in death, the parents won out. The dicks wouldn't even let them get their last word in. Denied to the bitter end" (p. 27). Alienation goes on, but it need not.

The Social Costs of Genetic Welfare, by Marque-Luisa Miringoff. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991. 210 pp.

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Miringoff identifies an emerging viewpoint associated with genetic intervention and reproductive technological capacities in the medical arena and labels it "genetic welfare." For the most part, such gene tampering is viewed dysfunctionally. Disabilities will be identified and rectified before a person is born. The importance of the mother will be subordinated to the rights of the fetus. Biological determinism and eugenics once again become issues when the elite (physicians and scientists) make policy decisions as to who will and will not undergo genetic counseling and who will and will not benefit from genetic intervention. For those who do not—the poor, minorities, the disinherited—the old stigmas that the disabled have slowly been shedding may again be heaped upon them many-fold.