

# ADOLESCENT BOYS OF EAST LONDON

PETER WILLMOTT



LONDON

ROUTLEDGE & KEGAN PAUL

## IX

### IN CONCLUSION – GROWING UP IN A WORKING-CLASS COMMUNITY

The preceding chapter ended by suggesting that there is a distinctive pattern of 'rebelliousness' among some boys. This final chapter begins by trying to take the analysis further and distinguish two other more common patterns of response to the problem posed by growing up in a working-class community.

Why, it may be asked, is there a 'problem' at all? For most boys, for most of the time, there is not. But in adolescence they are all facing a series of choices about their future. These are critical years: how they behave – and how they 'get on' – at this stage will probably be decisive for the rest of their lives. As they pass through the last years at school and move on into working life, their actions decide what sort of adult they will become. And this poses a question about their attitude to the local community and its way of life.

This was touched on in the earlier reference to 'delinquent sub-cultures'. The boys all know, some at a more conscious level than others, that judged by the standards of the wider society their community and its residents are not 'successful'. They know that, despite the 'affluence', local people are relatively poor financially and relatively low in status. They know that the national society to which they belong – and for that matter, 'western society' generally – values 'success' largely in terms of money, fame, yachts and Rolls-Royces; that these things are relatively scarce in East London; and that if they themselves are to succeed in these terms they need to break with the local way of life.

Most of those to whom we talked about this in any detail – they amounted to about fifty, of whom something like a third were in the main sample – recognized clearly enough that social class came into this. There are of course the entertainers, the pop stars and the professional footballers who achieve success and, in some

### *In Conclusion - Growing Up in a Working-Class Community*

sense at least, retain contact with their origins; occupations like this were mentioned by about one in ten of the boys as what they would 'like' to be doing ten years hence. There are also the adults who get a profitable living from crime or near-crime. These are, however, exceptional; in the main to get on in anything but the most modest sense depends upon belonging to, or joining, the middle or upper classes - what a 17-year-old garage mechanic described as 'the very rich, the top class, and the people with money, the middle class, the people who live in Woodford and places like that'. A 16-year-old sprayer said:

'You get these so-called "middle-class" people, who think they are higher than you because they live in higher-class places. People with bowler hats and umbrellas. They think they own the world. They look around with their noses in the air and talk to you as if you were nobody.'

The boys knew that membership of these 'superior' classes could be inherited - 'They're born to money, they've got every chance,' said an 18-year-old warehouseman, 'They're thorough-breds, we're mongrels.' But they also knew that a 'higher' social position could be achieved; said a 17-year-old tailor's presser, 'The governor of our firm comes from our class but he's pushed himself up. He's nearly middle-class already.'

Though membership of the 'successful' classes can be won on merit, it does not depend simply upon achieving financial success. It demands too - and indeed the financial success itself may turn on - different values, different attitudes, different modes of behaviour from those common to the East End. The issue can be illustrated by what some of the boys said about accent. Many were aware that a 'Cockney accent' could be a drawback.

'At work, you're dirt. I'm a Cockney and there's classes, isn't there? And when people know you're a Cockney, they think, "Oh, he isn't much good, he's from the East End." That's the point - there's classes in this world, you've got to have a big house and a big car and speak the right way.' (16, apprentice telephone engineer.)

'If you try hard, you can speak as good as any Englishman, though you're a Cockney. If you speak posh you have more

*In Conclusion – Growing Up in a Working-Class Community*

chance of a job; if you speak Cockney you get a dirty job, a barrow-boy and that sort of thing.' (18, *shop assistant*.)

This focuses the issue with which the boys are posed – though, as I suggested earlier, it is hardly a real choice for most of them. They can decide that they want to succeed in middle-class terms and set out to make themselves into middle-class kinds of people.

'There's a proper way of speaking everyone should have,' said a 17-year-old clerk, 'and I'm trying to get it. I'm trying to change my accent, to sound my aitches and say "Good evening" instead of "Wotcher" and "Goodbye" instead of "Ta-ta".'

'You have to talk a bit different to what you do at home,' said a 15 year old, a would-be bank messenger. 'That's if you want to get on well. Because you're in the City and talking to all posh people. You want to be able to mix with the right sort of people.'

Such a path was renounced by most. They insisted that they would not – or could not – make the kind of changes exemplified in 'trying to talk posh'.

'I don't want promotion. I just want to stay ordinary,' said an electrician's mate, aged 19, 'A friend of mine went into a bank. He had to change his voice and now he says "Hallo"; you'd think he was a poof.'

'I couldn't change the way I spoke,' said a butcher's boy, aged 18. 'I've been brought up like that. I know my way around here, anywhere else I feel out of place.'

This illustrates what I mean by the boys' 'choice', the dilemma posed by growing up in a working-class community. Broadly, there are two ways of responding, and in the course of the research we came to recognize two general categories of boy. The first were those whose values, sentiments and aspirations were essentially like those of their working-class fathers; they had manual occupations and they expected to stay in them. They were, in the main, content with their lot and looked forward to the same kind of job as they had now. They could be called 'working-class' boys. Secondly, there were those who looked beyond

## *In Conclusion - Growing Up in a Working-Class Community*

Bethnal Green for their inspiration, who criticized it and renounced its values, and whose ambitions and sentiments were closer to those of the middle class. They could be called 'the boys more middle-class in outlook' or 'middle-class' boys (as long as it is borne in mind that I mean 'middle-class' only in this special sense). These two types correspond to those described by Whyte<sup>1</sup> in his classic study of 'Cornerville', an Italian working-class district of Boston in the United States; Whyte called the first 'corner boys', the second 'college boys'.

Both sorts of boys - 'working-class' or 'corner boys', and 'middle-class' or 'college boys' - were, in their different ways, making an adjustment to their condition. They were coming to terms with society, either accepting their status in a manual occupation or seeking for advancement in a non-manual one. But there was also the third group already referred to: the 'rebels', who rejected both the standard 'working-class' values of the local community and the 'middle-class' values that predominate in the wider society.<sup>2</sup> Despite what has been said earlier, the boys who rejected standard 'working' and 'middle-class' values were not all delinquent or even potentially so; this is discussed later, but meanwhile I describe all the deviants collectively as 'rebels'.

### \* *The three types*

Two questions follow - what proportions are there of the three types in Bethnal Green and what are the main characteristics of each? In an attempt to answer these questions, we used two methods of analysis described in more detail in Appendix 4.

Briefly, the first method took twenty-one items from the survey questionnaire and gave each of the 246 boys a score according to his answers. Each boy was then assigned to the category - 'working-class', 'middle-class' or 'rebel' - on which he had the highest score; those (on the borderline) were, after careful examination of the interview, assigned to the category we judged most appropriate. The second method, like the series of correlations referred to in earlier chapters, had to be confined to the 177 boys at work; using a computer and drawing on a total of thirty-four items from

<sup>1</sup> Whyte, W. F., *Street-Corner Society*, p. xx.

<sup>2</sup> This three-fold distinction is similar to that of Cohen who, in his *Delinquent Boys*, added to Whyte's 'corner' and 'college' boys a third category of 'delinquent' boy. (Cohen, A. K., *Delinquent Boys*, pp. 128-30.)

### *In Conclusion - Growing Up in a Working-Class Community*

the interview, it used 'component analysis' to calculate for each boy two statistically weighted scores - one on 'social class' attitudes and behaviour, the other on 'rebelliousness'.

The results of these two methods of analysis were then compared.<sup>3</sup> They showed some variations but also a good deal of consistency. The computer analysis, in other words, broadly confirmed the findings of the more arbitrary and subjective method: that there were 'clusters' of behaviour and attitudes among the boys and that our three-fold distinction reflected some real differences.

The boys obviously vary widely in the consistency of their answers. Many are 'middle-class' in some respects, 'working-class' or 'rebel' in others. For this reason, it is difficult to say with any precision what proportions of local boys are of each type. But, on the basis of the two sets of analysis, it seems that something like a fifth could be described as 'middle-class', a tenth or less as 'rebels' and about two-thirds or three-quarters as 'working-class'. The principal characteristics of each 'type' are shown in the following 'profiles'.

*The 'working-class' boy* He goes to a secondary modern or possibly 'comprehensive' school and leaves at 15. He did not dislike school; on the whole he was not critical of the teachers and he approved of most of the rules, though he thought the lessons of little value and school generally rather remote from life. He is most likely to have a skilled or semi-skilled manual job which he is broadly content with. When he is asked what job he would like to do in ten years' time if he could choose, he will probably say the job he has now, which is also the one he 'expects' to have in the future: 'Plumber's mate now, expect to be a plumber, and if I could choose, that's what I'd like to be.' He expects to marry, probably before he is 25. He is more likely to spend money than to save it, and to say that one should 'enjoy oneself' rather than 'work hard'.

*The 'middle-class' boy* He went to a grammar or 'comprehensive' school, and left at 16 or over. He liked school and approved of the teachers and the school rules; unlike his 'working-class' counterpart, he regarded the school curriculum as 'useful'. If he is not still at school - as he may be until 18 - his present job is as a clerk,

<sup>3</sup> See diagram 1, p. 214.

### *In Conclusion - Growing Up in a Working-Class Community*

a salesman or a junior executive. His father is often a shopkeeper or clerk. The boy likes his work, and is looking forward to moving up the career-ladder as he gets older. He believes in saving money, and in studying and working hard so as to 'get on'. He expects to marry, but this is likely to be after 25 rather than before. His work and interests are outside Bethnal Green; he does not particularly like the district and looks to the day when he will live somewhere 'better'.

*The 'rebel'* He went to a secondary modern school and, like the 'working-class' boy, left at 15. But he did not like school: he disliked the teachers and the school régime, as well as thinking the lessons 'useless'. His job is manual, and is more likely to be unskilled or semi-skilled than skilled. He is discontented with his work and particularly the lack of prospects. He has probably had at least three jobs since leaving school, sometimes many more. He does not get on too well with his parents and he dislikes the police. He is more likely than other boys to say that he does not intend to marry at all or that he does not know whether he will. He rejects, even more firmly than his 'working-class' fellows, the idea of 'deferred gratification'. It is probably from boys like this that the seriously delinquent are drawn.

To this much simplified typology some important qualifications have to be added. First, about the 'working-class' boy: the suggestion that he is 'content' with his life should not be made too much of. His contentment is relative, and there is little doubt, (from what the boys told us in the longer interviews), that many feel bored and frustrated at work; the point is that they do not express any serious rebellion, because they do not think of their condition as being something that can be changed. In other words, what I report should not be taken as an excuse for neglecting the problems of such boys at school or at work. Secondly, if they are less 'aspiring', in occupational terms, than the 'middle-class' boys, this does not mean that they have no aspirations. For some, as has been suggested, the aim is to become more skilled, a craftsman. And outside the occupational sphere, many have other aspirations: they would like to move out of Bethnal Green when they marry, want a semi-detached house with a garden in the suburbs, look forward to having a car, washing-machine, refrigerator and

### *In Conclusion - Growing Up in a Working-Class Community*

holidays abroad. 'The people of Bethnal Green,' said an 18-year-old apprentice instrument maker, 'are more homely and easy to get on with, but I'd like to get away to raise a family. Out in the suburbs, with a nice little house, it's better to bring up children.' If one chose to define 'middle-class' in terms of aspiration to higher consumption standards, together with some limited aspirations at work (mainly towards a more skilled job or sometimes a more technical one), then many of these boys could indeed be described as somewhat 'middle-class' in outlook, and more so than earlier generations of East Enders.<sup>4</sup>

As for the boys described as 'middle-class', I do not want to give the impression that they are uniformly content with their lives. Some of them had experienced, or were still experiencing, the problems of grammar school boys described in an earlier chapter. Such boys were the victims of 'culture-conflict' - the pull of loyalties towards the grammar school and its values on the one hand and their family and local community on the other. Of course those who were themselves the sons of shopkeepers and white-collar workers were less subject to these pressures. The others were the 'scholarship boys' described by Hoggart and by Jackson and Marsden. Examples of the resistance of some of these boys to school have been cited earlier in the book; the conflict the other way round, from a boy who had largely accepted the school, was expressed by an 18-year-old grammar school boy:

'There is a social stigma in Bethnal Green about staying on at school and going to university. They think you are a stuck-up so-and-so because you've got intelligence, because you want to improve yourself. This stigma of doing something different from the rest, it's the big conflict in my life. My grandmother still thinks you should go out to work when you're 15 - that you should work for your living and if you want to improve yourself the only thing is to become an apprentice. I'm in the sixth form now, and if I go on to university it will be worse.'

Finally, a qualification about the 'rebels'. There were few enough of them in our sample, and it seemed reasonable to include in one category all those who showed marked indications of

<sup>4</sup> Though the whole matter is more complicated; see, for instance, Goldthorpe, J. H. and Lockwood, D., 'Affluence and the British Class Structure'.



*In Conclusion - Growing Up in a Working-Class Community*

deviance. I have already suggested, what cannot be proved from our figures, that being a 'rebel' of the kind outlined is associated with more serious delinquency. But it seemed to us in the interviews that there was another kind of rebel. One such was Robert Young, aged 19 when interviewed.

He was alone, playing records by Billie Holiday and Miles Davis. He said, 'Just a minute, I'll turn this down,' and then flopped on to the old rexine-covered sofa, where he spread his long arms and legs. He was wearing a light-blue shirt with a tab collar, open at the neck; close-fitting silver-grey slacks, fawn suède boots. He went to a secondary modern school, left at 15 and worked at two other jobs before he got his present one as a lorry driver's mate. About school, he said, 'At that age I had a mad feeling that nothing was worth it. I didn't take much interest in nothing at school. Now I think I was silly. I really regret leaving school.' He does not like his job; 'It's not the sort of thing I want at all. The best you can hope for is when one of the drivers dies you take over his job. I'd like to be a journalist, but I don't know how to get into that line. I've been thinking about going to evening classes but I don't know where to go.' He says of his parents, 'They couldn't understand me in a hundred years. Like most ordinary East End people, their idea of living is to have a steady job and settle down with a nice little wife in a nice little house or flat, doing the same thing every day of your life. They think the sort of things I do are mad.' What sort of things? 'Well, I might decide to take the day off and go up the park and sit and meditate. Or go round my friend's pad for an all-night session. A group of us drink whisky and smoke tea (marijuana) and talk about what's happiness and things like that.' He says that he and his friends regularly take Purple Hearts too: 'It may seem sinful to some people. But we're just young people who like to enjoy ourselves and forget the Bomb.' He reads Jack Kerouac, Norman Mailer, James Baldwin - 'That's the sort of thing I dig. I suppose I'm really searching.'

As far as we can make out, there were only four such boys in the sample of 246, and, although we met a handful of others, the total numbers were too small to build up a clear picture of their

### *In Conclusion - Growing Up in a Working-Class Community*

characteristics. But they were hardly 'delinquent'. Although tending to be critical of school, unhappy in their job, at odds with their parents and disinclined to marry, they had no disposition towards violence, theft or other crime. They were, rather, inclined to cultural, intellectual and artistic pursuits. They were left-wing or anarchistic in their politics; they read 'serious novels' and some of them tried to write or paint. Their friends and their interests, like those of some 'middle-class' boys, were outside Bethnal Green - usually in the West End. Although, with numbers so small, the following fact could well be due to sampling variations, it is worth putting on record: all four of the boys in the sample that we judged as of this kind said they spent their weekends 'right outside Bethnal Green', compared with about a third of the boys generally.

These boys had attended secondary modern schools or the lower streams in grammar schools, and, although they seemed intellectually lively, had been passed by in the educational system, which had failed to win their co-operation. As it is, they may well, like the boy quoted, drift for a while into drug-taking and heavy drinking, in an attempt to resolve their sense of frustration against a society whose opportunities seem closed to them.<sup>5</sup> Only further research, with a much larger sample, could provide a check on these impressions.

#### *Withdrawal and return*

'Rebelliousness' is not just an attitude of certain sorts of boy: it is also a phase through which many pass. There were 'rebels' at all ages but they seemed to be concentrated in mid-adolescence. The numbers in the group distinguished as 'rebels' by our first method of analysis were too small for us to be able to say confidently whether 'rebelliousness' was in fact related to age. We therefore drew instead upon the special analysis of the 177 boys at work, comparing the quarter who had the highest scores on the 'rebel scale' with the others. The more 'rebellious' boys, measured in this way, amounted to a sixth of those aged 15 and 16, over a third of those aged 17 and 18, and a fifth of those aged 19 and 20.

<sup>5</sup> In terms of the delinquency theory of Cloward and Ohlin, they could be said to have chosen the 'retreatist' solution. (Cloward, R. A. and Ohlin, L. E., *Delinquency and Opportunity*, especially pp. 25-27.)

### *In Conclusion - Growing Up in a Working-Class Community*

This is no surprise: it sums up the findings of chapter after chapter and the main theme of the book. This study has demonstrated in detail what has long been known in a general sense: that during adolescence most boys withdraw from the mixed-age society of childhood into a one-age society of their fellows, and that as they mature and particularly as they move towards courtship and marriage, they rejoin the mixed-age society as adults.

The reasons why this withdrawal takes place are obviously complicated, but some of the threads can be disentangled. In any society, the transition from child to adult involves a dramatic change in social roles; during adolescence the child has to prepare himself to behave differently towards others and become a different sort of person.<sup>6</sup> He has to learn to be more independent, more self-reliant, more confident, more authoritative. Authority, in particular, presents a crucial problem of role-change. A child is subordinate to the authority of adults; on the whole children do, and expect to do, what parents and other adults tell them. This relationship of subordination must give way to one in which the adolescent can himself exercise authority. Not only does he find, as he gets older, that he *wants* to assert his independence; it is actually *essential* for him to do so, as part of the preparation for his new role as an adult and a potential husband and father. This process underlies the clash between adolescents and their parents or other adults. It also partly accounts for the withdrawal; in feeling their way to their new independence and authority, young people *keep* their distance from parents and other adults. Their parents, particularly, are bound to try to exercise authority over them and constant challenges are likely to be painful or at best embarrassing.

There is of course more to it than this. The physical changes in puberty and the rapid rate of growth themselves impose psychological strains: young people understandably feel physically 'odd' and 'awkward', and therefore self-conscious.<sup>7</sup> And the boy's awareness of these manifest physical and social changes reinforces the big questions of his future adult role: 'Who am I?' and 'What sort of adult am I going to become?'<sup>8</sup> In simpler societies, where adult

<sup>6</sup> Ten major 'developmental tasks' that adolescents have to undertake are set out by Havighurst, R. J., *Human Development and Education*, pp. 111-58.

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, Wall, W. D., *The Adolescent Child*, p. 5; Miller, D., 'Adolescence'.

<sup>8</sup> Erikson in particular has drawn attention to this 'crisis of identity' in adolescence. See e.g. Erikson, E. H., *Childhood and Society*, pp. 261-2.

### *In Conclusion - Growing Up in a Working-Class Community*

roles are clear-cut and settled in advance, and where choice is limited, such questions are seldom posed with any urgency. In complex industrial societies like our own, where choice is, at least in theory, almost infinitely open, there is more of a problem.<sup>9</sup> It is complicated by the awakening of sex; a boy's questionings about his adulthood become mixed up with anxieties about his sexual potency and 'normality'.

When young people are trying to grapple with this problem of 'identity' - assessing and re-evaluating themselves, trying to resolve who they are - what is, again, more natural than that they should draw back for a while from adult society? As we have seen, they do not merely withdraw: they associate with age-mates more than at any other stage in life, looking to them for company and moral support. Since the boys are going through the same processes, they feel they can understand and sympathize with each other. And the informality and equality of the peer group makes it a setting in which its members can assert and test together their new independence. The peer group, in other words, provides a social context in which boys can help each other work through the processes of adolescence.<sup>10</sup>

#### *A war of the generations?*

This withdrawal into the peer group is only a matter of degree. Most boys in Bethnal Green remain members of their family and of the wider kin-group. Their lives are set in a locality in which they know many other people, including shopkeepers, stallholders and publicans. Though some are antagonistic to school and others unenthusiastic, there is little sign of widespread hostility to the schools or teachers. Many boys work in small local factories, having secured their job through relatives or friends, and even those in large concerns share a common life with workmates of mixed ages; more than a quarter of them - probably something like the national average for their age - are trade union members. Then, too, most belong or have belonged to youth clubs and similar organizations. In other words, they are very much

<sup>9</sup> Eisenstadt, S. N., *From Generation to Generation*, argues that adolescent age-groups figure more in societies that are relatively 'open' than in others (see especially pp. 52-53 and p. 270).

<sup>10</sup> This function of peer groups is described by Mays, J. B., *The Young Pretenders*, pp. 46-47.

### *In Conclusion - Growing Up in a Working-Class Community*

members of their society, linked to it in a host of other ways as well as through their membership of peer groups.

There is little sign either of what one sociologist has called 'the war of the generations',<sup>11</sup> nor of any widespread feeling of resentment against adult society. When the boys in the sample were asked if they thought they had 'as much chance to enjoy life as you should have', over four-fifths said they had. Asked whether they thought they had 'as much chance to get on in life' as they ought to, nearly nine out of ten said 'Yes'. Even allowing for a tendency to make the best of things, the consensus is impressive.

These findings are broadly in line with other studies in, for instance, Sheffield,<sup>12</sup> a north Midlands town,<sup>13</sup> Stepney and Poplar.<sup>14</sup> Such research as has been carried out does not support the more gloomy or dramatic accounts of working-class adolescent rebellion. Not that one should be complacent. Nor that today's Bethnal Green boys or young people generally are just the same as those in earlier decades. Obviously they have more free time and are wealthier; their lives are less circumscribed, their opportunities greater in all sorts of ways. Obviously, too, their emergence as 'consumers' with relatively large disposable incomes, and the resulting commercial 'teenage culture', have helped to make them more aware of themselves as a distinct section of the population. For these reasons, they may be more confident, more assertive and somewhat more inclined to challenge adult authority.

Scepticism about more highly-coloured interpretations of contemporary adolescence is supported by such evidence as there is from the past. Besant wrote in 1901 of the East End boys:

"Their own idea of employing their idle time is to do nothing, to amuse themselves. . . . They begin by walking about in little companies of two and three . . . they occupy a great deal of the pavement, regardless of other people; they get up impromptu fights and sham fights; they wrestle; they make rushes among the crowd; they push about the girls of their own age. . . . The boys gather together and hold the street; if anyone ventures to pass through it they rush upon him,

<sup>11</sup> Wilson, B., 'War of the Generations'.

<sup>12</sup> Carter, M. P., *Home, School and Work*, Chapter 4 and Chapter 10.

<sup>13</sup> Musgrove, F., *Youth and the Social Order*, Chapter 5.

<sup>14</sup> Downes, D. M., *The Delinquent Solution*, pp. 230-31.

*In Conclusion - Growing Up in a Working-Class Community*

knock him down, and kick him savagely about the head; they rob him as well.<sup>15</sup>

A quarter-century later, in 1927, Harris wrote:

'Leaving school and plunging straight away into factory life, with an eight-hour day or longer, they arrive back to Bethnal Green tired, often noisy, and undisciplined, a reaction from the pressure of their work. . . . Groups of them pass up and down the Bethnal Green Road, three and four abreast on the causeway, making no effort to get out of the way of other pedestrians, making a nuisance of themselves. . . .'<sup>16</sup>

However one interprets these observations, the conclusion is not that today's East End adolescents are more troublesome, more rebellious, more at odds with adult society, than their predecessors. Indeed, one would hardly expect them to be if one remembers what things were like when their fathers and grandfathers were boys. With high unemployment and low wages, with overcrowding and large families, adolescents surely had more reason to feel resentful against adult society in general and their parents, who took most of their earnings, in particular. The contemporary youth, with his greater financial independence, more space at home, and a background of more exclusive parental care and attention,<sup>17</sup> might be expected to have sweeter relationships with the parental generation.

What, though, of the well-known 'fact' that juvenile delinquency is increasing? Wootton has pointed out the difficulty of interpreting criminal statistics (quoting, by illustration, an 'increase' of 48 per cent in crime in one district, which turned out to be largely due to a change in the system of police reporting), and she comments: '. . . we probably ought to refrain from the tempting and common practice of quoting movements in the criminal statistics as evidence of the ups and downs of criminal behaviour.'<sup>18</sup> This does not mean that delinquency is nothing to

<sup>15</sup> Besant, W., *East London*, p. 173 and p. 177. Besant also reported: 'In the autumn of last year (1899) an inoffensive elderly gentleman was knocked down by such a gang, robbed, kicked about the head, and taken up insensible; he was carried home, and died the next day.' (p. 177).

<sup>16</sup> Harris, C., *The Use of Leisure in Bethnal Green*, pp. 51-52.

<sup>17</sup> The fall in family size in Bethnal Green, and the rise in the status of children, are discussed in *Family and Kinship in East London*, pp. 5-7, pp. 13-14.

<sup>18</sup> Wootton, B., *Social Science and Social Pathology*, p. 24.

### *In Conclusion - Growing Up in a Working-Class Community*

worry about: only that the crime figures do not in themselves prove that the present generation of adolescents in Bethnal Green (or elsewhere) constitute more of a problem.

#### *Implications for policy*

Given the process of withdrawal from adult society described in this book, the problem is how to deal with it. How can the adjustments of adolescence be carried through in a way that inflicts least damage upon the boy, the local community and the wider society? More speculatively, I end by offering some suggestions, on the subjects of the last four chapters - education, work, youth clubs and delinquency.

The study shows that there are two crucial influences in the boys' lives. The first is the peer group, which rises in importance and then falls off as the altar begins to beckon. The second is the local community, which stays important to the great majority of boys and becomes even more so as they move into adulthood. Any suggestions for policy must take these two social forces into account.

It is sad that education has so little influence. The lessons, particularly in arts subjects, bore many boys; they sit through the ritual with better or worse grace, thinking it all a waste of time and effort. The power of the school is weakened because of its conflict with the peer group and the local community. To take advantage of educational opportunity, particularly through the grammar schools, boys usually have to give up the benefits of peer group membership and turn their back on their parents and the local community as well. As a result, some pass up the chance of further education, and later regret it.

The peer group presents one obstacle to education. Our study suggests that the decision whether to go on with education comes near the stage when the boys are most involved with peers, least sympathetic to parents, and probably least likely to accept the idea that they will soon 'settle down'. The boys, in other words, are at the point of maximum withdrawal from the influence of adult society. This very withdrawal may itself be encouraged by the school's tendency to treat them as children. 'Where society does not permit the adolescent to assume a social role compatible with his physical and intellectual development, but

*In Conclusion - Growing Up in a Working-Class Community*

keeps him dependent . . . adult maturity is come by with more difficulty.<sup>19</sup>

If the diagnosis is right, the first step is to find some way of treating pupils differently as they mature. Adolescents in education need to be treated more like young adults, less like overgrown children; they need too a greater freedom so that the peer group can exist as an association of near-independent students rather than a counter-system to a school régime geared to disciplining 11 and 12 year olds.

I do not know how this could best be done. The boys' own experience in further education indicates that there, already, something like the right atmosphere exists. This might suggest that young people should switch and take their last one or two years of compulsory education in technical colleges, colleges of further education and the like. This would have the added advantage that it would often pave the way for them to continue at the same institution in part-time study after starting work. Boys might be more sympathetic to education if they saw more clearly the relevance of its contribution to their growing up. From as early as is reasonable, therefore - say at 13 or 14 - the curriculum needs to be geared to future careers, and non-vocational subjects likewise should be taught in ways that connect up more with the boys' own lives and interests.<sup>20</sup>

The family and local community need to be brought in more. Schools could forge stronger links than at present with parents and others.<sup>21</sup> The process might be aided by special arrangements to provide council homes in the locality for teachers who work there. And the decision to stay on at school in particular would be helped by more realistic maintenance grants for the families of pupils; at present the arrangements for students of 16 and 17 are miserly compared with those for students of 18 and over.

Even with such changes, there would still be the problem of re-entry into education for those who realize their mistake after they have left. For these boys, there will always be a need for a

<sup>19</sup> Tanner, J. M., *Growth at Adolescence*, p. 145.

<sup>20</sup> See Chapter 14 of the Newsom Report (*Half Our Future*), which makes the same recommendations.

<sup>21</sup> See Young, M., *Innovation and Research in Education*, Chapter V; Mays, J. B., *Education and the Urban Child*, Chapter 6; and a forthcoming report, by my colleagues Michael Young and Patrick McGeeny, on an experimental study of the relationship between a particular primary school and the local parents.



*In Conclusion - Growing Up in a Working-Class Community*

second chance, an opportunity to get back into the educational system, whether full or part-time. It is important that the channels should be kept open to enable them to do this and that they should be able to find out what they need to do to re-enter. A few of the boys we interviewed spontaneously asked us for advice about further education. They were only a tiny minority, but it is likely there were others who had problems but did not raise them, and altogether there must be thousands of young people every year who need advice of this kind. There should probably be a special educational advisory service to help them.

As for work, the youth employment service does not seem anything like as helpful as it might be. In some other parts of Britain, the employment opportunities are more limited than in London. In districts like Bethnal Green, however, there are plenty of jobs in great variety within a few miles, and the major problem is 'placement' - that is, fitting the boy to a job that suits his abilities and interests. Many boys, as we have seen, get jobs through relatives and friends. But this informal system, operating in and through the local community, does not seem to connect up with the official service. As with the schools, the need is for the youth employment officer to link up with family and other informal contacts. He should see his task, not as 'finding a job', but as offering to lend his advice and skills to boys and their families, especially since the latter, as reported in Chapter VI, seem to do a better job of 'placing' young people.

Bethnal Green, though relatively 'deprived' in most respects, is strikingly well-off for youth clubs, both in quantity and variety. It is of course difficult for a survey like ours to judge the 'quality' of the youth work; there is no doubt that the local clubs could be improved, particularly with better buildings and more money spent on them. The study does show, however, that the clubs can perform a useful function in helping young people to mature, and that, where there are plenty of clubs, with a wide range of choice, the overwhelming majority of boys join at some stage in their adolescence. The Bethnal Green clubs are for the most part regarded with affection by adults and young people alike; they are thought of, not as hostile institutions, but as part of the local way of life. Since so many young people do attend them, the clubs might themselves run advisory bureaux, linked with the schools and the youth employment service, on further education and on

### *In Conclusion - Growing Up in a Working-Class Community*

jobs. In this way, boys could feel free, in a familiar setting, to turn for help and advice.

Finally, about delinquency. I have suggested that the withdrawal into the peer group is inevitable; and at least some of the boisterousness of youth is inevitable too. Most of the delinquency is relatively trivial - sweets or a pencil stolen from a store, a scooter borrowed, 'insulting behaviour' or 'rowdiness'. This sort of behaviour should not, of course, be condoned; but it hardly threatens the fabric of society. Most boys who appear before the Courts do so only once or twice and, in terms of their own future development as responsible adults, their adolescent transgressions are not much to worry about. The exceptions are those boys (about whom we know far too little) who commit more serious and systematic crimes, or who go on to an adult criminal career. But even the misbehaviour of the majority is a social nuisance and it sometimes leads, often unintentionally, to serious harm. Cars are stolen, windows smashed, cinema seats ripped up, public telephones put out of order, girls assaulted and other people, boys or adults, dangerously injured.

If the answers to this were easy they would have been found and applied long ago. Three proposals, modest and undramatic, seem to flow from our research. The first has to do with the fact that, though most local boys are not seriously delinquent, they apparently have little positive sense that theft or vandalism are 'wrong': the result is that in such a district it is incredibly easy for adolescent boys, in Matza's phrase, to 'drift into delinquency'.<sup>22</sup> They do not usually set out to break the law; the opportunity presents itself and, since their resistance is weak, they succumb fairly readily. One way to counter this, as the police constantly argue, is simply to make crime more difficult. Stores could make shoplifting harder, people could be encouraged to fit their cars and motor scooters with thief-proof devices, and more could be done to discourage vandalism with, for instance, less vulnerable public telephones and public lavatories.

A second approach would be to try, as with education and job-finding, to work more actively with the local community. Most parents are against law-breaking and most boys influenced by parents. Since a boy's first offence is usually trivial, it might make more sense to warn him and his family, rather than taking him to

<sup>22</sup> Matza, D., *Delinquency and Drift*.

*In Conclusion - Growing Up in a Working-Class Community*

Court. This might be done by the police or by special Juvenile Liaison Officers (as has been tried in Liverpool<sup>23</sup>); the so-called 'family councils', proposed in a Government White Paper in 1965, might have similar effects, since they would try to work with the family, outside the Courts.<sup>24</sup>

A third line might be to recognize the boisterousness of adolescence and provide more in the way of legitimate outlets for it. I have quoted the Bethnal Green boy who complained that, while the high spirits of students were tolerated, the reaction to himself and his fellows was 'Mad gits. Sit on them'. One advantage of being a student is that his need to 'let off steam' is acknowledged and much of his horse-play channelled into university 'rags' and the like. New ways might be found to provide equivalent outlets for working-class adolescents. One suggestion is that the local youth clubs might combine for an annual 'rag' of their own on behalf of local hospitals, old people's clubs and so on.

No policies can hope to do more than ease the course of adolescence. To restate the main theme of this book, adolescent boys need to draw away from the all-age society into a one-age society of their own, and some tension between the two is inevitable. The tension is not necessarily harmful and seldom causes lasting damage; there is no evidence, as far as I can see, of any more serious estrangement between the generations than in earlier decades. But the withdrawal into the peer group is clear enough, as is the fact that like adolescence itself it is transitory. If there were wider recognition of the processes - and above all of the reasons why they are bound to produce some strain - the transition to manhood might become less distressing to both generations than it sometimes is at present.

<sup>23</sup> Mays, J. B., *Growing Up in the City*, pp. 139-46, described the work of Juvenile Liaison Officers in Liverpool.

<sup>24</sup> *The Child, the Family and the Young Offender*, pp. 5-8.