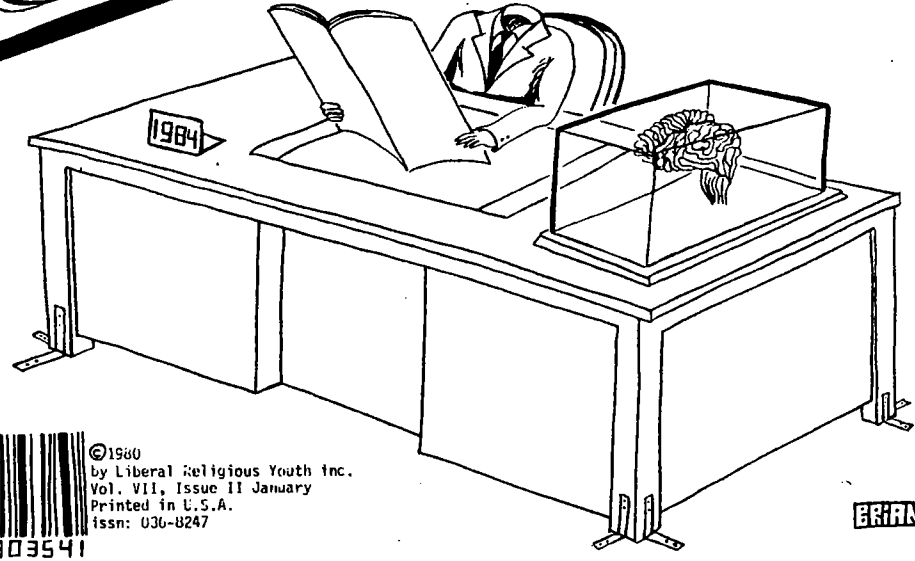


People

CONFORMITY



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CONFORMITY IN HIGH SCHOOL boyd watters

CONFORMITY TO CLASS STATUS

IF someone asked you what the overall purpose of high school is, you would probably reply with something like "to educate." Most people think of education as the knowledge gained from the classes one takes in school, but this is actually only part of our education. The purpose of the modern American high school is not only to teach its curricula, for high schools are at least as concerned with socialization, but to teach what society considers proper, acceptable behavior. It is this socialization part of our education that this article is concerned with.

High schools socialize their students to conform to social norms. Three ideas which students are taught to conform to and to accept are that of the class status system, nationalism, and the blind acceptance of outside authority.

References to high school situations in this article are taken from my own recent high school experiences. I do this because I believe that the large midwestern high school I attended is representative of the average American high school. Obviously, policies and all characteristics of the students, teachers, and school administration vary dramatically in high schools around the country and between those in cities and rural areas, but I contend that all serve the same social function; to teach conformity to class status, nationalism, and blind acceptance of authority. Moreover, it seems from meeting high school students from around the country that the way high school students deal with the socialization they get to conform to is similar. The conclusion we will reach is that despite all the social rejection and harassment which comes with nonconformity, the only real difference between a conformist and a non-conformist is that the nonconformist questions the authority of those who want him or her to conform. Nonconformity is not a preference for different things, but rather the willingness to trust one's own reason. In this way, we should all strive to be nonconformists.

One important thing which high school teaches is conformity to the class status system: that is, the belief that people of some backgrounds are somehow different than others, and that some should enjoy higher status and reward. Students learn first that there are class differences between people, and second that some classes have more power, and moreover, should have more power than others. Students have already been introduced to the idea of class status long before entering high school, for very early in life they learn that they have less power than their parents and older siblings, and probably have more power than their younger siblings. Still, high schools further perpetuate the class status system by putting students of different classes (socio-economic and grade-level) in closer contact, and by further magnifying the class differences between teacher and student.

High school reinforces the students' belief in socio-economic class status by exposing students to others of different socio-economic backgrounds; that is, to people of all levels of wealth and work status -- rich, poor, in-between, children of blue-collar workers, business people, and professionals. This does not happen to nearly such a large extent in earlier school situations since grade schools are usually much more localized than high schools; that is, the "neighborhood school" is smaller and more numerous, and is likely to serve students from a smaller geographical area. Since people in a neighborhood are more likely to share similar levels of wealth and occupational status than people in other neighborhoods, the students in a grade school which serves only a few neighborhoods are more likely to have similar background than students in a larger high school which serves a much larger area. Since public schools are funded largely by

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