

Youths and Activism
A Social Reflection *

By

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The Sociological Function of Youth

One of the most enduring myths concerning youth as a social group is that they are naturally progressive, liberal, open-minded, supportive of change, and dynamic. The nature of youth is neither progressive nor conservative (Mannheim, 1966). There can exist youths who are conservative, close-minded, resistant to change, and rigid. In history, we saw how youth groups can manifest in two polarities – one advocating change and reforms, the other promoting status quo and conservatism, and opposed to change and reforms.

Thus, what makes our youth different in their orientations? One of the most important elements is the socialization process within a particular social condition (Fromm, 2002). Youth, as a social group, are susceptible to all types of movements and ideas. These movements and ideas will shape their style of thinking, their outlook towards life and their ability to address issues of concern in their society.

In this sense, any group or institution (the State, mosques, organizations, etc) that wants to promote a certain agenda – must realize the importance of youths as an asset. The value of this social group called ‘youth’ lies in the fact that they come to observe the conflicts of modern society from without, meaning from outside. Being from without, they are not yet completely involved in the status quo or the dominant thinking of society until after they are fully absorbed within the system (Mannheim, 1966).

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The question that youths have to ask is thus: **(1)** what kind of agenda do these institutions or groups have?; **(2)** will this agenda ensure the progress of society or stunt its development?; and **(3)** to what extent will this institution or group ensure the growth of the human potentiality in our youths. Youths have to come to terms with the fact that much of their sociological function is determined by the types of institutions and groups that dominate society.

Some Observations and Issues in Local Youth Activism

In our local context, there are no youth movements as what we observed in other countries. What exist are youth groups or bodies that either comes under the ambits of a bigger parent organization, or State or private institution. Within the bigger organization or institution, youth groups function in one or more of the following: **(1)** It acts as a socialization platform to garner new members for the parent body; **(2)** It provides manpower to run the activities and programmes dictated by the parent body or simply to provide an auxiliary support in various events of the parent body; **(3)** It becomes a pool to spot new talents and to test commitment for leadership renewal; **(4)** It acts as a co-curricular activity for those in academic institutions.

Observably, most of the youth groups (at least within the Malay-Muslim community), are organized along one or more of the following: (1) **cultural**, (2) **religious**, (3) **sports**, or (4) **social-welfare** lines. (Observably also, there is a lack or even absence of youth groups organized along intellectual concerns.)

In all these groups, several common tendencies can be observed. (1) **The concept of advocacy so central to the notion of activism is missing.** By its very notion, activism is about an active social participation for an ideal or cause. However, without a clear statement of what a group stands for, activism becomes meaningless and serves personal interest more than society as a whole. (2) **The dominance of recreational programmes.** In many youth groups, recreational activities form the main focus. Here, we are not denying the need for recreational activities in drawing in participation and fostering camaraderie. However, many

of these activities become an end in itself. The dominance of recreational activities correlates with the neglect of developmental programmes and intellectual pursuit. (3) **The struggle for power.** Power and prestige usually comes through holding important positions. In a minority context, the avenues for social prestige are lesser. Thus, competition is more intense even within a small organization or group. Power struggles are not uncommon in many groups and organizations. (4) **The problem of false consciousness.** Since the element of reflection and thinking are largely ignored in activism, false consciousness dominates the mind of the activists. An activist may be comforted by the fact that he/she is doing something good for society whereas in actual reality, his/her acts does not really address the situation or solve a problem.

In all these groups also, three types of leadership can be discerned. (1) **Reactionary.** This type of leadership reacts to issues only when it has become a major problem or highlighted in the public. It is unable to anticipate problems and lack the knowledge in how society operates. (2) **Replicative.** The major preoccupation within this type of leadership is on organizational stability. They are largely conservative towards new approaches, new ideas and revision of existing programmes and policies. (3) **Strategic.** This type of leadership has strong theoretical grounding on how society operates and thus employs this knowledge to anticipate problems or to provide viable solutions to problems and issues in society.

What is observable is the dominance of the first and second types of leadership. This explains (1) the relative lack of anticipation of new problems as a result of changes in society, and (2) the common approach of treating symptoms of problems and not addressing the root causes of such problems. The latter translates itself into naïve quick-fix programmes with little reflections done in addressing and trying to understand the problems at hand.

Bibliography

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