

Murray, Milner, Jr.
Freaks, Geeks, and Cool Kids: American Teenagers, Schools, and the Culture of Consumption.

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For decades sociologists have tried to explain teenagers' behaviours. With a few exceptions, most explanations have pointed to physiological and psychological factors (e.g. 'hormones'), 'the media', family and parenting strategies, social class, and school organization (e.g. tracking) and its actors (e.g. teachers). Less attention has been paid to how the way in which we organize teenagers' lives in secondary schools shapes the contours of their social formations, their culture and their status systems. The interplay of these dynamics is at the heart of Milner's analysis to explain: Why do teenagers behave the way they do? What are the connections between teenage culture, consumerism and status systems inside and outside of school?

Drawing on an intensive two year fieldwork study of one high school and over 300 written interviews from undergrad students about the status systems of their high schools, Milner takes a fresh approach to these age old questions. In contrast to earlier explanations, Milner argues that teenagers' behaviours arise from their lack of control over the central features in their lives. Most teenagers have little say over the school they attend, their courses of study, and their classmates, while fewer still have voting and drinking privileges or are financially independent. These conditions give rise to more symbolic forms of currency within high schools through the creation and elaboration of peer status systems. Put simply, while teenagers wield little economic and political power, they can control and evaluate one another.

Milner is careful to point out that American high schools do *not* cause teenagers to behave in competitive and sometimes cruel ways, but rather it provides the ideological framework for a particular type of social system based on status and lifestyle differences. And it is this framework, not immaturity or poor parenting, that unwittingly distills some of the least desirable features of America's consumer society, encouraging adolescents to become hyper-sensitive to these status hierarchies, and obsess over who sits with whom in the lunchroom, dating protocol, and what people are wearing. Gaining high status not only means conforming to the ideal, but paradoxically also requires the careful elaboration and complication of social norms. In this way, high schools have affinities to credentialing institutions (see Collins, 1979) and professional associations- members must first conform to the wills of the organization to gain access, yet must also constantly 'ratchet up' or innovate those requirements in order to ward off competition and keep the pool of potential 'eligibles' low. Yet for high school students, the informality of their status system (e.g. unlike professions, they lack codification) encourages students to strike out against and create social distance from deviants' (e.g. handicapped students) or students who may potentially threaten their own position. Milner explains these strategies as a distasteful, yet highly rational, response to the inalienability and inexpandibility of status more generally.

Milner then takes this analysis outside of schools, and links the status preoccupations of teenagers

to the development and maintenance of consumer capitalism. High school status systems play an important role in socializing people to be concerned with the way in which their status is displayed through the acquisition of commodities. Yet while teenagers and advertisers are often to blame for adolescents' quest for designer jeans, cell phones and cars, Milner reminds us that schooling officials, parents and, most importantly, America's culture of consumerism are also to blame. In a culture that emphasizes its populace's role as consumers (remember when Americans were told to 'shop' after 9/11?), and producers (e.g. divorce has less of a stigma than getting fired) other values are submerged.

Consumer capitalism and high schools are not inevitably linked, but they are mutually supportive and highly compatible with one another. When we turn schools into walking billboards for soft drink and computer companies, or persuade our students to push chocolate in exchange for school trips, we send a clear message — consume. When we promote athletes over science fair winners, or whip high schools into football and prom mania, we further encourage the existing status hierarchy by privileging athletics and beauty over academics. *Freaks, Geeks and Cool Kids* reminds us that if we want to understand teenagers and schools, we need to focus on how most adults behave in the context of their social, cultural and economic institutions.

Milner's book is well-written and accessible to academics, undergraduate students, teenagers and non-academics alike. His depiction of high school status hierarchies is startlingly accurate, and most readers will be transported back to their high school days — albeit unwillingly at times! An unfortunate rarity in some sociological works, Milner carefully crafts his argument without overextending his data. He successfully links high school culture with broader societal trends without making grand connections between teenagers and the larger economic forces of capitalism. Nor does he make unsubstantiated predictions about the long term effects of these behaviours. Compatible with status relations theory, Milner instead demonstrates that these behaviours are often intense in the early years of high school, and then slowly dissipate as alternative sources of power become available (e.g. having spending money from a part-time job). He also effectively demonstrates how these behaviours vary by school and community size, the degree of diversity and racial composition both within and outside of the school, and the structure of the schooling organization (e.g. policies that promote within grade solidarity). In the conclusion of the book, Milner also offers some pragmatic solutions and policy initiatives that could lessen the intensity of status hierarchies in high schools.

I have but two small critiques of the book. While Milner should be applauded for the accessible presentation of his material, I found the beginning of the book to be overly descriptive. Milner systematically walks his audience through how geeks, nerds and more ambiguous groups such as the goths, freaks and punks live a lowly and sometimes tortured existence, while a stable of athletes, preps and beautiful people reign supreme. For most readers who have attended high school in the last three decades, these images are so commonplace and engrained in North American pop culture that neither elaborate definition nor thick description that places these ideal types into the typical high school hierarchy are required. This critique, however, perhaps reflects a generational and experiential gap between this reader and the author, rather than any inherent flaw with Milner's book.

Related to this first critique, Milner's insightful links between schooling organizations and status cultures could have been more boldly established in Section I and II of his book. In these sections Milner appears at times to be apologetic for using “sociological jargon,” though admittedly his

references to intellectuals such as Durkheim and Collins are clearly intended for those who are new to the field. Yet given the wide appeal of this book's topic, particularly to undergraduate students, Milner could have smuggled in additional sociological concepts and made better use the available theoretical frameworks earlier on. The meatier sociological substance in these sections is sometimes relegated to a few summary paragraphs at the end of larger sections and to the first Appendix, which I suspect many readers (including academics) will not read or assign to their students.

Critique aside, Milner's book is a powerful tool to assist undergrad students in overcoming the analytical hurdles between theory, methods and data analysis. A thoroughly engaging book, Milner offers one of the most insightful and innovative sociological explanations for teenagers' behaviour. In the same way that Coleman's *The Adolescent Society* altered our understandings about the values of American youth, *Freaks, Geeks and Cool Kids* will change the way social scientists examine the intersection between teenagers, schools and societies.

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