

Adolescent Perspectives on Law and Government

JOSEPH ADELSON – *University of Michigan*

LYNNETTE BEALL – *University of California, Berkeley*

The research we report here has had as its aim a study of the acquisition of political philosophy during the adolescent years. We have always known, in a rough and general way, that adolescence is marked by a rapid growth in the comprehension of political ideas. At the threshold of adolescence, at eleven or twelve, the youngster has only a dim, diffuse, and incomplete notion of the political order; by the time he has reached eighteen, he will be, more often than not, a fully formed political creature, possessing a stable and coherent understanding of political structures and functions, and in many cases, committing himself to a philosophy of government. How does this transition take place? In particular, how do learning and cognitive maturation interact to produce these sweeping changes? As a first approach to these questions, we undertook a developmental and cross-national study of adolescents. Youngsters of eleven, thirteen, fifteen, and eighteen were interviewed in three countries: the United States, England, and Germany. (German eleven-year-olds were not interviewed because of fund limitations. Hence, the cross-national analysis compares subjects thirteen through eighteen years of age.) By interviewing youngsters from pubescence to late adolescence we hoped to discern the maturation of political perspectives; by comparing youngsters in three

countries with rather different political traditions we hoped to get some sense of the differential impact of social ideas.

BACKGROUND

For our interview schedule, we wanted a format which would not prove to be too difficult for younger subjects, and at the same time not be tediously simple-minded for older adolescents. Our pretesting taught us that we should avoid questions tied to current political issues, for these tended to elicit ready-made opinion—that is, slogans, clichés, and catch-phrases. We devised an interview schedule which began with this premise: Imagine that a thousand people leave their country to move to a Pacific island to establish a new community. Once there, they are confronted with the task of developing rules and regulations for governing themselves. The items were open-ended and to some degree projective: We asked simple open-ended questions, such as, “What is the purpose of government?” or “What is the purpose of law?” We also asked dilemma questions—for example, “What should be done about a religious sect which refused to undergo vaccination?” or “Should people without children pay public school taxes?” We also made extensive use of linked sequences of questions which allowed us to explore a political issue as it unfolded. For example, we said that some concern was expressed about cigarette smoking, and we asked the child to comment on a number of proposed solutions, such as forbidding it, raising taxes, prohibiting advertising, and so on. We then said that a prohibition law had been passed, but was being commonly violated. What should be done then? This format allowed us to survey a wide array of topics, many of them traditional issues in political philosophy: the scope and limits of governmental authority; the reciprocal obligations between citizen and community; conceptions of law, freedom, crime, political partisanship, political influence, utopias; and so on.

In selecting the sample, we were primarily concerned about assuring comparability among ages and among countries. At each age level, Ss were matched for sex and IQ; the national samples were matched for age, sex, and IQ. At each age level in each country, we had thirty Ss, equally divided as to sex, two-thirds of whom were of average, and one-third above average intelligence. We did not match for social class, hoping that the IQ matching would produce essential comparability. As it turned out, the American and German samples show roughly equivalent class distributions—the Americans somewhat higher—but the English sample has a greater proportion of working and lower-middle-class subjects. However, our analyses make it quite clear that national differences are not a function of class differences. As a matter of fact, and very much to our surprise, neither sex, nor IQ, nor social class is of much importance in determining the growth of political ideas. To anticipate our findings, what does matter, primarily, is age, and secondarily, nation.

DEVELOPMENTAL RESULTS

Perhaps our most striking finding is the sharp decline in authoritarian conceptions of government and law over the course of adolescence. It is a tendency which is equally visible in the three national samples, though with some variations, as we will see. The purpose of government, for younger adolescents, those thirteen and under, is felt to be the enforcement of law and in turn, the aim of law is to curb wickedness. Whether the topic be law, government, or justice, the young adolescent's attitude is essentially the same: the citizen's duty is to obey authority, and the failure to do so merits punishment. The social contract, so to speak, is unilateral; the citizen is viewed as owing obligations to the state, but not as possessing rights.

Although this often tacit way of formulating the relations of citizen and state is everywhere discernible through the interviews of the younger subjects, it is perhaps most clearly seen in the understanding of the law. Asked the purpose of the law, about seventy percent of those thirteen and under mention restrictive or coercive functions exclusively; at fifteen, the percentage across all countries has dropped to forty-four percent, and at eighteen, to twenty percent. An exclusively beneficial view of law, one which stresses its contribution to the common good, is found in only eight percent of those thirteen and under, and rises to twenty percent and forty-one percent at fifteen and eighteen. For example, a characteristic response of an eleven- or thirteen-year-old, asked the purpose of law, would be: "To help keep us safe and free," or the even more sophisticated, "I think they are a statement of customs and the ideals that people have about how they should live at certain times."

When we inquire more deeply into the younger adolescent's view of the law by questioning him about specific laws, we find that he rarely imagines, on his own, that a law might be absurd, mistaken, or unfair. He assumes authority to be both omniscient and fundamentally benign; hence, law is enacted only for good and proper reasons. The younger child does not possess a functional view of law; he does not, for example, suggest that a law which is inadequate or ineffective might be revised; he does not see law as mutable, as susceptible to amendment. Laws emerge from the empyrean; once there they must be submitted to.

Later in adolescence—the watershed mark is usually, though not always, between thirteen and fifteen—a radically different view of law is evident. It is now understood that law is a human product, and that men are fallible; hence, law is to be treated in the same skeptical spirit we treat other human artifacts. Law is no longer seen as absolute, or as external to the citizen. It is an experiment, a rehearsal. We try out the law and consult the common experience. If trial determines that the law enhances the general welfare, then it is retained; otherwise it can be abandoned or revised.

With the passage of time, we find, in short, that a critical, pragmatic, relativistic view of law emerges and become dominant. In confronting a proposal for a new law, the older adolescent subjects it to several sorts of scrutiny. What are its latent effects? Whose interests are served, whose are damaged? What are the long-range as against the short-term effects of a law? Can the law be enforced, and are the costs of enforcement worth the good gained by the law? Finally, does the law, whatever its superficial appeal, violate some more general principle of political belief? This is not to say that all or even most of our subjects analyze so relentlessly most of the time, but these questions are tacitly being considered as the older adolescent considers the law proposed to him, while the younger one does not or cannot. Consider, as an example, the responses to a proposal that the island community draft a law prohibiting cigarette smoking. Our younger Ss were somewhat more likely to favor the idea; when asked, later on, what they would suggest if the law were widely violated, they tended to propose an Orwellian apparatus of spies, informers, secret police, and so on. Older Ss were more likely to question the feasibility of the proposal in the first place, pointing out that the law is not easily enforced, or that to enforce it would require costs far beyond the good achieved by it, that an unenforced law produces contempt for legal institutions, and that in any case the law violates the ideal of personal freedom.

THE CONCEPTION OF GOVERNMENT

Let us turn now to the conception of government. The trend toward decreased authoritarianism so visible in the child's formulation of law is also evident here. An exclusively restrictive view of government—that is, one which sees government only in its negative, constraining aspects—falls steadily from twenty-seven percent at age eleven to only one percent at age eighteen.

What is of greater moment is that the idea of government itself is an achievement only slowly won. The concept of government, or indeed of any collectivity, is too abstract for our younger subjects to manage. They recognize only dimly, if at all, the existence of a social order. Hence such terms as "society," "government," and "community" are essentially empty of meaning for them. What they can imagine are personal transactions; thus, education is not an abstract process, but is reduced to the interaction between teacher and student; law is what takes place between the police and criminal; and government is a mysterious territory occupied by mayors, presidents, and an omnipresent though obscure "them." In short, the abstract, ephemeral, intangible processes of the political domain are concretized and personalized by those adolescents below thirteen.

This cognitive limitation—the incapacity to imagine the social order, its structure, its functions—dominates, by its absence, the political discourse of the child younger than fifteen. It means that the youngster, in making

political judgments, does not take into account the wider and more general social necessities. Let us offer several examples. In the area of health legislation, we asked about the purpose of a proposed law requiring vaccination and immunization. Younger Ss reply that it is to protect the health of the child; older Ss feel that its aim is to protect the health of the total community. In the area of education, we asked the purpose of a law requiring children to stay in school until they are sixteen. Younger adolescents answer in terms of the child's needs; it is to protect his future in life. Older adolescents may mention this, but they will also say that society needs an educated citizenry if it is to function adequately, or that it needs a supply of educated leaders for the future. In responding to a question on whether adults without children should pay school taxes, our older Ss point out that the society as a whole profits from public education. And we have already seen in our discussion of law that adolescents past fifteen are able to relate law to the larger purposes of society.

It will not have escaped your attention that cognitive maturation seems to be deeply involved in the developmental changes we have considered. This is quite obvious in regard to the conception of government, where a failure to achieve abstractness appears to underlie the failure to adopt a sociocentric stance on political discussions. But it is also involved in the decline of authoritarianism. The child's authoritarianism seems to be based upon cognitive simplicity, as well as upon limitations in social experience. The authoritarian doctrine is simpler conceptually and thus easier to manage cognitively. That there is marked cognitive shift in the level of abstraction with increasing age may be discerned from these results: a coding of level of abstraction—from concrete to low level to high level abstraction—reveals that in response to a question on the function of government, fifty-seven percent of eleven year olds are concrete, while none are highly abstract; at eighteen, none in the entire sample are concrete and seventy-one percent are abstract.

The importance of cognitive maturation is given added weight by the fact that, by and large, developmental changes are essentially similar in all three countries. For American, British, and German adolescents, then, we find a shift from concrete to abstract modes of discourse, and, in Piaget's terms, from concrete to formal operations in analyzing political problems; a decline in authoritarianism and a growth in democratic and humanistic views of social and political issues; a shift from a punitive to a rehabilitative emphasis in dealing with crime; an increased understanding of the needs of the total community as against the single individual; and, in general, a change from absolutistic to relativistic and pragmatic ways of formulating political issues. We have constructed indices for many of these variables, and we find almost uniformly, from analysis of variance estimates, that most of the variance is accounted for by age.

CROSS-NATIONAL RESULTS

Nevertheless, there are important national differences present, which the dominance of the age factor does not obscure. Because our findings here are both numerous and complex, we will be unable to document them fully. What we want to do is offer a discursive summary of the patterns of political thought unique to each of the national samples. Bear in mind that these samples cannot be taken as representative of the nations from which they are drawn; yet, we feel that the patterns discerned in these interviews reflect some common, though not necessarily universal, tendencies in the three countries.

GERMAN

Let us begin with the German sample. They are the easiest to understand, perhaps because German habits of political thought have already been the subject of so much analysis and commentary. Relative to the other countries, our German youngsters prefer having the government strong, and they see the citizen's duty as obeying the authority of the state. There is relatively less emphasis on the rights and privileges of the citizen. The preferred asymmetry of power between the rulers and ruled appears to rest upon a view of the citizen as weak, dependent, and inept; authority is idealized because it is competent and strong, and thus can protect the helpless and insecure citizen. The emphasis upon the confusion of the people is a constant refrain in the German interviews. Some excerpts may illustrate this: On the purpose of government, "People must all be guided somehow . . . they can't otherwise make sense out of what happens to them." On why laws are needed, "so that all the people can live in such a way that they don't have to think about what's going to happen to them very much." On why a law forbidding smoking is a good idea, "Otherwise people could have to decide for themselves if it's good or bad for their health or not." Related to this is a fear of diversity, for diversity breeds chaos and disunity. Our German subjects stress the need for a homogeneity of opinion. One S argues that laws must be uniform. "Everyone must have the same opinion." Another says that if people followed their consciences in regard to law, "a lot of different opinions would arise." The result would be anarchy, and anarchy seems to be seen not as people running around berserk and following their lusts, as an American imagines it, but rather people wandering about lost, confused, unguided. The solution to this is a strong, united state, centered upon a few wise leaders.

ENGLISH

Turning to the English, we find them to be the most surprising and the most difficult to understand of the three national groups. This is so perhaps

because one can find traces of three political traditions in their interviews; the English are in part Hobbesian, in part nineteenth-century liberals, à la John Stuart Mill, in part children of the welfare state. They are Hobbesian in that they take a guarded view of human nature; men are greedy, selfish, willful; it is the war of all against all. The English sample comes through as intensely oral, obsessed about supplies, deprivation, self-indulgence, theft, and envy. They score highest of the three groups on an index measuring concern with impulse control. And because they see men as prepared to steal what is not rightfully theirs, they are prepared to see government take a strong hand in regulating public conduct. Thus, they are in some respects as authoritarian as the Germans are. But there is a vital difference in that the English do not idealize authority—far from it; they are suspicious and resentful of those who would rule them. Government is a necessary evil; hence, the English seek to limit the scope of government. They make much of the distinction between the private and the public. Government must not interfere with the private domain, especially the pursuit of pleasure; yet it must be strong enough to regulate the competition of private interests in the public domain. At the same time, the English are attuned to a welfare concept of government, and see it as the obligation of the state to distribute benefits equitably and assure minimal standards of subsistence. Government, then, emerges as a kind of stern headmaster, setting down rules which limit the invasion of one's terrain; at the same time, it is a kind of nanny who distributes supplies equally.

AMERICAN

Finally, we consider the Americans. They are, by a considerable margin, the least authoritarian of the national samples. We thought at first that this might be due to the fact that the American sample has a somewhat larger number of upper-middle-class subjects, but closer analysis suggests otherwise: Americans of working-class origin score lower on authoritarianism than upper-middle-class German or British subjects. The democratic emphasis in the American interviews stems from a benign view of both the citizen and the government. It is assumed that the citizen ought to be and in fact will be responsive to the needs of the total community, and will accommodate his interests to the general good; on its side, the government is seen as the executive of the general will. Thus, there is little felt distance between the citizen and collective authority. The American political philosophy, as it is revealed in these interviews, bears the stamp of John Locke's thought—an emphasis on consensus, on social harmony, on the rights of the governed. But this optimistic view of the political process does not altogether conceal certain tensions and dilemmas. One of these has to do with the restraint of individualism. Our American subjects value such individualistic ideals as autonomy, initiative, and achievement. They fear a strong central authority because it

may inhibit the free exercise of these qualities. It is understood, as part of an implicit social contract, that the individual will not abuse these freedoms and will not infringe upon the rights of others, that he will exercise self-restraint. But there is no guarantee of this, and Americans seem preoccupied with finding some balance between allowing sufficient freedom for achievement and finding means of controlling rampant individualism. A second problem arises from the emphasis on consensus and social harmony. As many political commentators have noted, these can give way to a somewhat insipid politics of togetherness, one which stresses being a good fellow, not rocking the boat, going along with the majority.

NATIONAL PATTERNS

Since the intention of this paper is discursive, we have avoided to this point tabular presentations of the findings. However, some of the complex national patterns we have just discussed may be evoked more vividly by a presentation of specific national differences.

Table 1 reports some findings on the orientation to law. The subjects had been asked, apropos of a law which was commonly violated, whether it should be voted down or enforced more strictly. A code was devised which analyzed responses according to the underlying conceptions of the basis on which a law is felt to be legitimate. Thus, an *obedience* orientation is one which assumes that a law is given its legitimacy only when people are willing to obey it; the *pragmatic* orientation denies the legitimacy of a law when it cannot be enforced in practical terms; and the *popular will* category asserts that a law is legitimate when it reflects the decision of the populace. Table 1 shows that the obedience orientation is rarely found except among German youngsters, and more than half of the codable responses in that sample stress

TABLE 1
ORIENTATIONS TOWARDS THE LEGITIMACY OF LAW

	America %	England %	Germany %
1. Obedience orientation	02	05	27
2. Pragmatic orientation	33	29	20
3. Popular-will orientation	24	10	04
4. Not ascertained or other	42	56	49
TOTAL	101% ^a	100%	100%

n = 266
 $\chi^2 = 46.93$; d.f. = 6; $p < .001$

a. Error due to rounding.

obedience as the criterion of legitimacy. The popular-will emphasis is most frequently found among the Americans. The pragmatic orientation is more evenly distributed among the three national groups, the Germans favoring it somewhat less than the others.

The degree to which the British youngsters were absorbed in issues of impulses and impulse-control is evident in Table 2. An impulse-control dimension was developed from a number of questions on law and government; responses to these questions were included in the dimension when they were felt to reflect a preoccupation with aggressiveness, self-indulgence, impulsiveness, greed, selfish pleasure, and the like. As the table makes plain, British youngsters were the most likely to score high on the dimension.

Table 3 reports national responses to an item which asked what would happen if there were no laws. Here again we note some characteristic national

TABLE 2
PERCENTAGE SCORING HIGH ON THE
IMPULSE-CONTROL DIMENSION

	America	England	Germany
High	60%	84%	54%
n = 266			
$\chi^2 = 19.38$; d.f. = 2; $p < .001$			

TABLE 3
PROBLEMS FEARED IN A LAWLESS COMMUNITY

	America %	England %	Germany %
1. Impulse control or interpersonal conflict	37	63	42
2. Loss of guidance	19	21	28
3. Impulse control and loss of guidance	17	05	21
4. Community problems	15	09	04
5. Not ascertained or other	12	02	04
TOTAL	100%	100%	99% ^a
n = 266			
$\chi^2 = 30.56$; d.f. = 8; $p < .001$			

a. Error due to rounding.

tendencies. The British are the most likely to fear impulse problems and interpersonal conflict. The German youngsters most often stress the possible loss of guidance, a reflection, we take it, of their pervasive dependency. The Americans are the most likely to emphasize community problems, again a characteristic response, in that they consistently view specific problems in law and government in terms of their impact on the total community.

These national differences are intriguing, yet we should emphasize once again the importance of developmental similarities among the three national groups. For most of the concepts we have studied, the pattern of acquisition is essentially the same among adolescents in the three nations. There are some differences in tempo—for example, American subjects are precocious in attaining a sense of the community—but by the time they are eighteen, youngsters in all three countries are far more alike than different. They are alike in that they have acquired the fundamental concepts which equip them for reasoning about political issues; furthermore, they seem to share those assumptions about government and law common to the industrialized and democratic nations of the West. On the other hand, these cross-national uniformities by no means overcome certain national motifs—the German penchant for obedience, the British insistence on privacy, the American other-directedness—and who can deny that in their consequences, in their contributions to a nation's political temper, these motifs may prove to be more significant in the long run.