BOOK REVIEWS


Compared to families and schools that have had the lion’s share of research on adolescent development, informal youth groups have been relatively ignored. In his book, The Origins of Postmodern Youth: Informal Youth Movements in a Comparative Perspective, Reuven Kahane turns our attention to the important and unique role of informal youth groups in adolescent development. His thesis is that youth movements (a general term which includes nonformal clubs, student movements, pop culture, etc.) arose in response to conditions of accelerated social change and uncertainty. In the wake of industrialization and urbanization, when work and family became disconnected, youth emerged as an important social category. The youth became a force to be reckoned with and new movements (OF youth rather than FOR youth) were born.

The subtitle of the book, “Informal Youth Movements in a Comparative Perspective,” suggests what Kahane contends is both essential and unique about these movements. Unlike other institutions of development, the informal character of youth movements enables young people to create authentic meaning in a climate of uncertainty. In these voluntary associations young people practice autonomy with a group of peers who are their equals in authority. Together they decide the groups’ projects and its collective identity. In the process they develop the competence to act in democratic societies and the confidence to deal with uncertainty.

Clearly, one organization is not equal to the next in the opportunities for youth autonomy and leadership it provides. In the second section of his book, Kahane compares three paradigms of youth move-
ments that emerged in Europe at the turn of the twentieth century: The German Wandervogel, the British Boy Scouts, and the Soviet Komsomol. He contends that, despite structural differences in the amount of autonomy members are allowed and the degree of conformity to adult influence each represents, these three types have served as models for a wide array of nonformal youth associations and cultures. Each represents to a different degree the paradoxical nature of youth movements, i.e., allowing young people to express some level of autonomy while at the same time allowing adults to provide monitoring and guidance.

In fact, Kahane believes it is the paradoxical nature of youth movements (enabling youth autonomy while maintaining adult supervision and influence) that has legitimized them as settings that assist young people in dealing with the uncertainties of contemporary life. They are settings in which young people can practice innovation and autonomy without threatening social stability. In the final chapters of the book, Kahane compares three historical periods in the Israeli youth movements: the golden period of nation-building, the transformative period after statehood, and trends in contemporary youth movements, including those with rightist political tendencies.

Reuven Kahane's book is a gem, packed with historical information and a compelling argument about the unique role of youth movements for adolescent development in a postmodern world.

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An edited book is like a potluck supper. The host (editor) invites a group of his/her friends (authors) to make contributions to the supper (book). Often the host specifies a theme, but usually the contributors are given wide latitude as to what their particular offering may be. Sometimes this results in a delightful range of unexpected but quite successful combinations; other times it results in a buffet of offerings that may each be fine dishes in their own right, but which do not quite work together. The book edited by Noack, Hofer, and Youniss is in the latter category.

The stated goal of this book is to provide a psychological perspective