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Contents

Introduction

"I DON'T UNDERSTAND WHAT'S
COME OVER THE CHILDREN OF
THIS GENERATION"

The 1980s, the years of my own adolescence, were the decade of the films of John Hughes and his muse, Molly Ringwald. The most celebrated movie in his oeuvre, *The Breakfast Club* (1985), featured five teenagers, each of whom fit a specific adolescent stereotype: the jock, the bad boy, the nerd, the weirdo, the popular girl. Forced together for an all-morning detention, the five argued, got high, formed new alliances, and, finally, came to understand that despite their superficial differences they had one crucial thing in common: they were all teenagers in an unjust adult world.

Coming from a teen culture in England in which this was *not* the common wisdom, and in which clothing styles, racial identity, social class, political affiliations, and taste in music all combined to construct a variety of specific (and often mutually exclusive) youth identities, I found exotic the message that differences in style were ultimately meaningless.[1] Although a mainstream urban youth culture was definitely in abeyance in the mid-1980s in the United States, on hiatus from the fierce energies and fashion innovations of punk and funk and before hip-hop and its attendant styles reached beyond black and Latino neighborhoods, Hughes's movies represented an adolescent culture bubbling away in suburban and small town high schools, gently rocked by the conflicts between jocks and nerds, popular kids and hermits, bad boys and yearbook editors.[2]

In retrospect, the manageable suburban adolescents represented in popular culture during the 1980s were the exception rather than the rule when it comes to the way teenagers have been imagined in the United States. However, there was no question that they *were* teenagers, that is to say, members of a defined, knowable age cohort who had in common, if nothing else, their identities as adolescents. The 1990s returned the image of adolescence to its previous incarnations—threatening, exciting, wild, unpredictable, sexually powerful, and uncompromisingly urban—with the twin phenomena of postpunk rock and hardcore rap, movies like Larry Clark's *Kids*, and new fashions in clothing and body styles that sufficiently outraged parents and the mainstream media. Ironically, this combative relationship between the adult power structure and

teenagers seemed both comfortable and convenient for all involved: older people could rest assured in their sense of superiority and confidence that this new resistance at worst opened up new market possibilities, and young people could occupy various postures of rebellion and independence through combinations of different commodities. Adolescent stroppiness has always been, after all, inextricable from the marketplace, from the short dresses and shorter haircuts of the flappers to the leather jackets of Marlon Brando and James Dean, the foppish glamour of the Rolling Stones, the antifashion of hippies and punks and (later) Seattle-birthed rockers, and the violence-infused glamour of gangsta rappers.

Although the insight that youth rebellion is more often than not intertwined with the pressures of consumer capitalism is hardly earthshaking (which is not necessarily to say that the market wholly co-opts or defangs the power of the protest), it did lead me to become interested in where these assumptions about adolescence as a time of *épater les adultes* came from.[3] I knew from my work in nineteenth-century U.S. cultures and literatures that the equation of adolescence with social mutiny was a fairly new phenomenon: among the bourgeoisie of the antebellum period and into the late nineteenth century, harmony between children and parents of all ages was a moral imperative. In texts in which there was generational conflict, the source was most often identified as a larger dysfunction outside the family that disrupted the family more generally.[4]

By the mid-1920s, however, this assumption of sympathy between parents and their adolescent children had become increasingly moth-eaten. It is an indication of the cliché that conflict between teenagers and their parents had become that Sinclair Lewis's 1922 satirical novel *Babbitt* took for granted that the Babbitts would complain about their distance from their son Ted, despite the comparatively good-natured relationship within the family. After a family dinner and an enthusiastic conversation between Babbitt and Ted about the virtues of correspondence courses, the young man takes off to give his friends a lift to their chorus rehearsal (could his choice of leisure activity be any less threatening?). Once Ted has left, Myra Babbitt laments: "Ted never tells me anything any more. I don't understand what's come over the children of this generation. I used to have to tell Papa and Mama everything, but seems like the children to-day have just slipped away from all control" (Lewis 75).

For Babbitt, this is a recent development. His daughter, Verona, a few years older than Ted, seems much less mysterious to him. During a party that Ted hosts for his high school senior class, Babbitt recalls a high school party held by Verona, eight years earlier, in which "the children had been featureless gabies," pliable and undistinctive. Ted's friends were quite different, not children but "men and women of the world, very supercilious men and women. . . . Babbitt

had heard stories of what the Athletic Club called 'goings-on' at young parties; of girls 'parking' their corsets in the dressing-room, of 'cuddling' and 'petting,' and a presumable increase in what was known as Immorality." While this is not markedly different from the teenage affection a young George Babbitt bestowed upon his soon-to-be wife Myra Thompson, to him it feels quite separate. These young people "seemed bold to him, and cold" (Lewis, 185). For his part, Ted Babbitt condemns his father in the most damning terms he can imagine: "He doesn't know there's any fun going on anywhere" (187). (Ironically, Babbitt himself says the same thing about Verona, with her New Woman seriousness and her interest in self-improvement.)

What happened to American adolescence in the decades around the turn of the nineteenth century that made George and Myra Babbitt, the most phlegmatic of parents, assume that they have to worry about, and be held in contempt by, their teenage son? Most studies of adolescence place the development of this new identity in the 1920s and 1930s, with the flaming youth, the flappers, and the sexual freedom that cinemas and automobiles afforded young people of the middle classes.[5] Moreover, the number of young people attending high school increased precipitously at the beginning of the twentieth century. Joseph Kett has argued that the popularization of high school attendance among the upper working and middle classes that reached a peak in the 1910s was a powerful factor in redefining adolescence as a time and high schools as the place for socializing young people into the culture as a whole, "preparing [them] for membership in social and economic groups," reinforcing their membership in an age cohort while strengthening their class affiliations (236). Many of the rituals of adolescence, and the nostalgic myths to which adults look back, have grown out of the mass experience of a high school education and the feelings of age-group solidarity that developed from that experience (a solidarity that *The Breakfast Club* more than half a century later clearly invokes).

Many historians of adolescence have demonstrated that despite their group consciousness and apparent daring, the young people of the first two decades of the twentieth century were remarkably passive in relation to their parents (and, in fact, all adults)—much more passive, in fact, than was expected of prepubescent boys. Ted Babbitt himself is hardly a rebel, his most pressing social engagements being at school, church, chorus, and the local ice cream parlor. But it is telling that a twenty-first-century reader would be surprised by the lack of conflict between the Babbitts and their adolescent son, particularly since he manifests all the other signs of what we now understand as teenagerhood: the creation of a separate culture defined by fashion, commercial recreation, sexual experimentation, and membership in an age cohort. What is the history of this assumption of antagonism between adolescents and their parents?

I got my first clue to answering this question when I taught a course on the New Woman in U.S. culture from the 1880s to the 1940s. At the beginning of the course, we read Jane Addams's 1912 memoir and social history *Twenty Years at Hull-House*, and one story in the text leaped out at me. In her work at Hull-House, Addams became increasingly worried about the disintegrating relationships between immigrants and their U.S.-born adolescent children. Fully Americanized, usually working full-time in factories or department stores, with access to some disposable income and an impressive array of leisure activities on which to spend it, these young people developed a sense of superiority and even contempt toward their "greenhorn" parents that disturbed Addams. In response to the growing distance between parents and children, particularly mothers and daughters, Addams came up with the Labor Museum, a space in which immigrants could exhibit their native crafts. Addams's plan was not to display primitive folkways to a sophisticated bourgeois audience; rather, she hoped that the museum would show the teenage children of these immigrants how similar their factory work was to the traditional crafts in which their parents were steeped, and thereby reunite families through the dignity of work.

This episode in *Twenty Years at Hull-House* struck me with unusual force. As I began my research, I saw that at the turn of the century and into the 1920s, the teenage children of immigrants occasioned an impressive amount of hand wringing among reformers, sociologists, journalists, creative writers, educators, policy makers, and intellectuals of all persuasions. Moreover, the terms in which they discussed these adolescents were remarkably similar to the ways in which teenagers were agonized over for the century that followed. Concerns that writers at the end of the nineteenth and in the early twentieth centuries explicitly linked to the young people of immigrant communities—the explosion of commercial sites of leisure (amusement parks, dance halls, theaters, and beer gardens, for example), a loosening of controls on premarital sexuality, rebellion against parents and other authority figures—became the defining characteristics for teen culture more generally as the twentieth century progressed.

In fact, I came to recognize that the children born to the millions of immigrants who arrived in the United States between 1880 and 1920 and who lived in densely populated urban areas were the first "teenagers," as we understand the term today (although the word "teenager" itself did not come into use until several decades later). Rather than locating the beginning of a teenage identity in the 1930s, as Grace Palladino does in her book *Teenagers* (1996), or in the 1910s and 1920s, as Joseph Kett did in his groundbreaking *Rites of Passage* (1977), we can look further back, into the late nineteenth century, to see the foundations of U.S. culture's creation of the category of adolescence. United with each other, and often against their parents, by their familiarity with the

English language and their experiences as city kids, the immigrant young people constructed an identity—most commonly referred to as "youth" by contemporary commentators—that was cemented by participation in commercialized leisure, popular culture, and a kind of bricoleur Americanism that combined elements of their cultures of origin and what they saw as defining characteristics of "being American."

A combination of forces unites these young people: their class; their relationship to shifting labor markets; their involvement in and usually enthusiastic engagement with the semi-public, semi-private scenes of commercial amusement; their separation symbolically if not wholly from their parents, which freed them, at least in part, from adult supervision; their surprisingly self-conscious membership in an ethnically diverse, generationally specific, mixed gender cohort; their insistence on themselves as Americans. As *Inventing Modern Adolescence* shows, working-class youths carved out an identity that was sui generis, a new kind of American identity that then traveled beyond the geographic boundaries in which it was formed.

I also contend that dominant assumptions about immigrants and the worlds they made for themselves and their children in the cities of the turn of the century provided the framework for later beliefs about teenagers. The need to control the teenage children of immigrants—their seemingly insatiable appetite for fun, their sexual desires, their unprecedented spending power—set the stage for future conflicts between adolescents and adult authority that reappeared time and time again in social science literature, in novels, in films, and in the American imagination, and that did not appear in mainstream representations of adolescence until several decades later, emerging out of networks between immigrants and urban bohemians, filtered through the children of these first adolescents, and coming to fruition in the years after the Second World War, when white ethnics were almost wholly integrated into U.S. society.

What liberal and conservative social critics of the American fin-de-siècle had in common was a belief that adolescents had an innate desire for pleasure and recreation, but that the commercialization of recreation had transformed a healthy and generative need into a corrupted search for cheap thrills. Debates that raged over appropriate recreation for working-class youth, particularly young women, stemmed from a variety of sources. These concerns melded stereotypes about southern and eastern European immigrants with the meanings implicit in the emerging category of the adolescent, forming a new American sense of self that outlived its connections to immigrant identity and took on its own character. While these early discussions of adolescents conflated their urban immigrant circumstances with their age identity, within a few decades the language used about this particular group of young people migrated to the larger class of adolescents,

particularly (and ironically) the bourgeois Anglo teenagers who were previously defined in opposition to these working-class kids.

This book, then, is about how adolescence, or, rather, *the adolescent*, emerged at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries as a new object of theory and prescription, an identity separate from childhood on the one hand and adulthood on the other, and how that identity formed in immigrant communities in the major cities of the U.S. Northeast and Midwest.[6] American studies has long been interested in how specific elements of U.S. identities are formed and find their way into the mainstream of the culture. As Michael Omi and Howard Winant have argued in relation to race (with a methodology that can certainly be extended to other categories of identity), American identity formation is a "sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed. . . . It is a process of historically situated projects in which human bodies and social structures are represented and organized" (55). For Omi and Winant, the status of "race" is less interesting than the process of what they call "racialization"—the ways in which racial identity accrues, shifts, folds in on itself, and undergoes changes that are historically contingent but, in the aftermath, feel inevitable.

Age categories work in very much the same way. While the concept of adolescence has been part of the public American imagination for only a little more than a century, and the figure of the teenager for just over half that time, young people and adults today see as transparent and eternal the assumption that adolescents have "the right to choose their own friends and run their own social lives, based on teenage notions of propriety and style, not on adult rules of appropriate conduct," and we connect that belief directly to the experience of being an adolescent (Palladino 8). Nonetheless, that sense of self is hardly inevitable or necessary: it grew out of a specific set of historical, material, and cultural conditions that combined to make possible the quasi-independent identity of adolescence. There is a growing field of study around what Joe Austin and Michael Nevin Willard have called "age formation," that is to say, an examination of "the changes in the way 'youth' is historically constructed and understood as a social identity, . . . the discourses and meanings that are applied to young people and their lives" (4).

In light of this work, I have found myself exploring how discourses that later characterized adolescence were mapped onto the children of immigrants in large cities at the turn of the nineteenth into the twentieth century. The conventional definition of teenagers as not just as people over twelve and under twenty, but rather as young people suffused with the "determination to establish separate identities and to demonstrate their independence, one way or another, from their parents' world [that] often brands teenagers as potential troublemakers in the public mind," seems to dovetail perfectly with the

kinds of fears immigrants, reformers, and anti-immigrant activists had about this huge new group of adolescents (Palladino xiv). At the same time, like all social formations, adolescence did not remain stable and unchanging. Like other social categories, adolescence "is marked historically by complex processes of continuity, rupture, and transformation" (Austin and Willard 3).

Mauricio Mazón's description of the adolescents who came of age during the Second World War functions as an excellent definition for the group that in 1941 was first labeled "teenagers": this group was "more independent economically than any preceding generation of American youth. They made their tastes felt in matters of clothing, movies, music, and language, and their younger siblings copied them" (7).[7] In his landmark study of (mostly male) adolescence, *Rites of Passage*, Joseph F. Kett traced the development of people who by dint of their age fell into the category of adolescence, and the identities of "adolescent" and "teenager" that crystallized around those people in the middle decades of the twentieth century. For Kett, the "pattern of age segregation" that characterizes contemporary adolescence is one of the most striking hallmarks of teenage identity and a singular development of the last century (3). In large part, Kett argues, the rise of the adolescent is intimately linked to the industrialization and urbanization of the United States, as young people became increasingly economically powerful, and as consumer choices became more available to them. These changes are reflected in the nostalgia among urban elites for "the rural past as a time when young people were firmly in their place, subordinated by the wise exercise of authority and bound tightly by affective relationships to family and community" (Kett 60).[8]

This nostalgia, in large part fictional, was nothing new. As Paul Boyer has shown, most reformers in the nineteenth century held onto the "conviction— explicit or implicit—that the city, although obviously different from the village in its external, physical aspects, should nevertheless replicate the moral order of the village" (viii). Moreover, reformers yearning for an agrarian past (which, ironically, was the background of many of the city dwellers they were trying to reform) ignored the realities of rural life, since in fantasizing that "communal warmth and subordination had been characteristics of the past, they missed all the elements of tension and conflict between age groups and ignored the footloose ways of antebellum youth" (Kett 61).

At the same time, these footloose ways were most usually attributed to "boys," a category that extended from prepubescence into the years before marriage. Boys were firmly distinguished from "men": a man "was expected to be a distinguished figure—sober and purposeful—while the boy possessed a sense of play that was utterly unacceptable in a man" (Rotundo 7). The end of boyhood did not signal the beginning of adolescence but movement *toward* manhood, a limbo period in which a young man "took his first steps toward marriage, a life's work, and a home of his own" (Rotundo 54). Even

with the invention of "boyology," as Kenneth Kidd has shown, the definition of "adolescence" was inseparable from that of "boyhood," which stretched well into the teens, as far as organizations like 4-H or the YMCA were concerned. The concept of "youth," which began in a boy's teens and extended up to marriage or comfortable bachelorhood, was not adolescence as we know it now, but a kind of apprentice manhood, in which the "savage boy" was trained up into an assertive man.

Until their entrance into adulthood, though, young people were encouraged to lie low and deal as little as possible with the outside world. For much of the nineteenth century, Americans were eager to follow Rousseau's recommendation that young people maintain a childlike innocence for as long as possible. Although puberty as a period of biological development was seen as a time of great change and tumult, the cultural response was to calm the storms as much as possible and encourage self-restraint, obedience to authority, and, in the years after 1840, to regulate young people's environments and activities to "guarantee the right moral development for children and youth" (Kett 116).

Even if this kind of "moral development" was equally desirable for the working-class immigrants who increasingly peopled the United States and thronged the cities, it was certainly much less possible. The overcrowding of immigrant tenements, the need to send children out into the workforce, and the often more communal patterns of child rearing presented a significant challenge to bourgeois assumptions about the nurture and training of adolescents.[9] While the divisions between middle- and working-class social expectations had always been problematic to all parties (the complaints of the Tract Visitors of the mid–nineteenth century well attest to this), this new adolescence developed in a space that was created in large part not just by class but also by the predominance of immigrants in large urban areas, to the extent that the metropolitan working class was often indistinguishable from the group constituted by immigrants and their children.[10]

As I show in the chapters that follow, demographic, cultural, and legal changes brought into being the adolescence we recognize today. The campaign against child labor, especially successful in large urban areas, extended childhood into the early teen years, cordoning off the years after fourteen (and, in some areas, sixteen) for paid work. With children largely excluded from the labor market, and the marriage age climbing into the midtwenties, a new group of young people, old enough to work but not yet of an age to marry, dominated urban workplaces. In the early days of this new identity, formed around the coconstituting phenomena of teenage labor and commercial leisure, adolescence began later than we now imagine it, usually around fourteen, and could last into the early twenties.

Chapter 1 explores the changing demographic and discursive patterns of the late nineteenth century that made space for this new identity. The immense upswing in southern and eastern European immigration, mostly Catholic and Jewish, reshaped the urban working classes in major cities throughout the United States, particularly on the East Coast and in the Midwest. At the same time, psychologists and social reformers were taking an increased interest in adolescence as an age category. These two phenomena were filtered through a belief on the part of young working-class people that participation in leisure, mixed-sex socializing, and freedom of movement were nothing less than their due as single wage earners in brightly lit cities. The new adolescents socialized in age-segregated cohorts, saw leisure as inextricable from youth, and recreated urban space and working-class pleasures in their own image.

I discuss the work of psychologist G. Stanley Hall, whose 1904 magnum opus *Adolescence* both rejected growing concern about this new kind of young person and provided templates for analyzing adolescent development.

Chapter 2 traces one origin of that sense of self—the campaign against and phasing out of child labor in favor of adolescent workers. The increasing legal and customary exclusion of children from paid labor contributed to the belief in childhood as a time of play, intellectual and physical development, and nurturance of all kinds, a definition that for the first time was extended to children of the working classes and the poor. As a result, the workplace became a site of socializing and socialization for the adolescent children of immigrants.

Tracing the development in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century of conventions for photographically representing children, I show how Lewis W. Hine, the in-house photographer for the National Child Labor Committee (NCLC), borrowed from these conventions to construct an image of the child worker for the Progressive Era. These children were trapped by the claustrophobic spaces of city tenements, dwarfed by immense machinery in textile mills and coal pits, handier with an oyster knife or a berry-picking pail than with a doll or a ball. Drawing upon the muckraking of Jacob Riis, the stark industrial images of Timothy O'Sullivan, the sensitive portraiture of Gertrude Käsebier and Edward Steichen, and the compositional virtuosity of Alfred Stieglitz, Hine constructed a photographic language that was highly connotative, speaking beyond the immediate message of the images or the captions he wrote to accompany them.

Hine's lesser-known pictures of young workingwomen and workingmen, taken between 1890 and 1930, represent adolescent labor as energetic, efficient, and modern, the opposite of child labor. While much of the work these young people performed is similar to that done by the children in his NCLC photographs, his representation of the work could not be more different. In contrast to the claustrophobia of the tenement parlor table and the

overwhelming size of machines on the factory floor, adolescent workplaces are, in these pictures, well ordered, clean, and spacious.

In Hine's photographs, as well as in their own self-representation, these young women and men integrated themselves into the economic life of their immigrant communities, creating an identity for themselves within the commercial world. Implicitly, then, the movement against child labor promoted the movement of adolescents into the workplace, the site in which they gained access to the conditions that made their identification as a group possible: spending money, freedom from familial control, and heterosociality.

Chapter 3 examines the language of the generation gap, a stereotypical complaint against American teenagers, and traces its origins to the divisions between immigrant parents and their American-born or -raised children. The change in power relations between immigrants who had trouble adjusting to the New World and their children who quickly assimilated the English language and American customs is a staple of the immigrant narrative. But this division was exacerbated by the financial power adolescent children of immigrants wielded, encapsulated by the phrase "I am earning my living and can do as I please." The majority of the chapter is taken up by an analysis of Jane Addams's Labor Museum and the ways in which Addams attempted to reconcile immigrant parents and their children. Addams imagined the Labor Museum as a living history of handicrafts, tracing their development from the most basic techniques to their transformation by mechanization.

The chapter concludes with a discussion of the conflicts between older and younger generations around that perennial source of trouble, sex, and a close reading of the letters of Maimie Pinzer, a former prostitute, to her patron. Like many of the commentators on immigrant youth, Pinzer saw her conflict with her mother as rooted in generational differences. Similarly, many reformers in the early twentieth century saw the recasting of sexual mores not simply as a matter of Americanization, but as a symptom of the breakdown of sympathy between immigrant parents and their adolescent children. While many parents tried keep a close grip on their children (especially their daughters), and the force of gossip and of the police attempted to keep young tenement dwellers in line, the power of the adolescent cultures these young people created often overwhelmed the efforts of even the most vigilant parents.

In Chapter 4, I analyze the importance dancing had for young working-class people at the turn of the nineteenth into the twentieth century, and the intensity of reaction from the political, social, and cultural establishment (newspapers, state and municipal legislatures, reformers, schools, and intellectual elites). Dance halls were crucial to the construction of an adolescent urban culture at the turn of the nineteenth into the twentieth century. They provided a public space away from the eyes of parents and their allies where young people could