

## review essay

### youth and old age in america

YOUTH AND HISTORY: TRADITION AND CHANGE IN EUROPEAN AGE RELATIONS, 1770-PRESENT. By John R. Gillis. New York: Academic Press, 1974. \$14.25.

rites of passage: ADOLESCENCE IN AMERICA, 1790 TO THE PRESENT. By Joseph F. Kett. New York: Basic Books, 1977. \$16.50.

GROWING OLD IN AMERICA. By David Hackett Fischer. Expanded Edition. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978. Paper: \$3.50.

OLD AGE IN THE NEW LAND: THE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE SINCE 1790. By W. Andrew Achenbaum. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979. \$13.95.

Whether youth and old age have histories of their own is the principal question raised by all of the works reviewed here. Until now the question has rarely been raised by scholars about American society or, for that matter, Western society. Underlying it is unprecedented scholarly concern with the history of the family in Western society.<sup>1</sup> What has prompted this concern can merely be speculated upon: contemporary laments about the alleged structural and moral decline of the family, the aftermath of the youthful rebellions of the 1960s and the almost simultaneous recognition of the plight of their elders.

Nevertheless, the history of youth and of old age cannot simply be subsumed under the history of the family, as has been the case until recently. All four of the works at hand contribute to the subversion of this assumption. Equally important, the history of youth, old age and the family likewise cannot be reduced to the history of the transition from pre-industrial, agrarian society to industrial, urban society—the transition often termed “modernization.” All four of the works undermine this common assumption, too.

Indeed, until 1960, when Philippe Ariès' pathbreaking *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* appeared, the family and its components were generally assumed to have remained virtually unchanged from the Middle Ages until the industrialization and urbanization of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Those developments allegedly produced, first, the decline of the extended family and

the rise of the nuclear family, and second, the decline of the family as the principal agent of socialization in Western society and its replacement by external institutions like the school, the workplace, the church and the government. Under this scheme the family had no history of its own, and neither did the young or the old.

Ariès' work reversed this assumption of the decline of the family in modern times, though he still pegged the family's fate to industrialization and urbanization.<sup>2</sup> According to Ariès, the family gained new importance in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries precisely because of industrialization and urbanization. For those grand forces prompted the family, albeit the nuclear family, to turn inward both to ward off an inhospitable "modernizing" society and to prepare its children to survive in that environment. This protectiveness toward children was itself as unprecedented as the changes in society which, argued Ariès, produced it. In an almost literal sense parents "discovered" their children, who had previously been treated as miniature adults and so had been treated far more harshly or indifferently than parents now believed they deserved to be. This development led, perhaps forced, mothers to spend the bulk of their time at home, tending to family affairs. Only fathers (and children in school) spent much time outside the home, though even they sought its refuge whenever the outside world loomed too hostile. Thus the growth of those external socializing agencies and the diminution of extended families profoundly altered but did not eliminate the role of the family in "modern" society.<sup>3</sup>

Ariès claims that this reorientation of the family and of children began among the new elite of the new society: the bourgeoisie. Gradually, he contends, it became the way of life for almost everyone else—not because this scheme was necessarily the most attractive or the most practical for all but because "a small minority of [bourgeois] lawyers, priests, and moralists,"<sup>4</sup> joined later by teachers, child psychologists and other bourgeois professionals, managed to impose it upon the rest of Western society.

*Centuries of Childhood* remains the starting point for all contemporary studies of the history of not only the family but also youth. Ariès' own subsequent research on changing Western conceptions of death has also contributed much to the study of old age.<sup>5</sup> Hence the fundamental links between Ariès' works and those discussed here.

*Youth and History* and *Rites of Passage* argue that youth in America and elsewhere<sup>6</sup> has a history distinct from not only that of the family but, in contrast to Ariès, that of industrialization and urbanization as well. *Growing Old in America* and *Old Age in the New Land* make the same cases for old age.

In advancing their arguments all these authors follow Ariès in utilizing cultural history more than demography and other social scientific approaches. Although hardly averse to using statistics and other empirical techniques, they generally find nonstatistical materials—literature, art, dress, furniture and so on—at least as illuminating. In the process they correctly broaden the boundaries of the "new" social history: an approach to the history of "ordinary" people too often restricted to statistical inquiries alone—and thereby removed from the methodological expertise of many in American Studies.

Most of the works considered here begin, however, with an exercise in intellectual history. Just as their authors wisely do not presuppose the wholesale dependence of the history of youth or of old age upon the

history of the family or of "modernization," so they wisely do not presuppose the existence of the concepts "youth" or "old age" throughout American history, much less in their present forms. Here again they break away from virtually all their scholarly predecessors save Ariès, who discovered the "discovery" of childhood in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Yet where Ariès found a distinction only between childhood and adulthood, which did not begin until the twenties, John Gillis and Joseph Kett uncover further distinctions. In the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, each shows, "youth" was "invented" as a third stage of life coming between childhood, which ended at eight, and adulthood, which was delayed till twenty-nine. In the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, they also show, "adolescence" was "invented" as a fourth stage coming between youth and adulthood. Though in theory it encompassed only the years from fourteen to eighteen, in practice persons up till twenty-nine were often treated as less than adults.

By contrast, David Hackett Fischer and Andrew Achenbaum demonstrate that the concept of "old age" as a distinctive stage of life is a universal rather than uniquely American one.<sup>7</sup> Fischer does, however, show that "As late as 1790, when the first federal census was taken, less than 20 per cent of the American population survived from birth to the age of seventy. Today, more than 80 per cent expect to do so."<sup>8</sup> As Americans began living longer, "old age" came to apply to ever later years.

Not only did the number and nature of stages of life change, but so did the behavior within them. Rebellion by the young against family and society alike has been virtually perennial, but the forms it has taken, together with the reasons given by the young for it, have, however, varied. The forms have ranged from playful verbal jousts with adults to deadly physical assaults upon them. The rationales have ranged from altruism to selfishness. At the same time the young have just as often conformed to societal demands as rebelled against them. To be sure, such demands have themselves varied, ranging from independence from parents at age eight or nine to dependence upon them until the early or even mid-twenties.<sup>9</sup>

Industrialization and urbanization have not been the sole source of these changing relations between society and the young. For several of the changes Gillis and Kett describe either preceded industrialization and urbanization or else took place in areas then unaffected by them. These forces did, however, intensify divisions within the young along class and sexual lines. They also intensified in turn different expectations of behavior and achievement for working and nonworking class young and for the males and females of both groups. Contrary to Ariès and other earlier scholars, they did not eliminate certain youthful traditions of pre-industrial America but instead produced what Gillis calls a "dialectic" between tradition and change.

To invoke "dialectic" and to mention alternating periods of rebellion and passivity ought not to imply that the history of American youth has simply been cyclical. For again, the forms each has taken have changed radically and permanently. The history of old age is similarly more complicated than the truism of an earlier, perhaps pre-industrial respect for the elderly supplanted by an obsession with youth instead. As Fischer points out in colonial America—from, that is, the early 1600s to the early 1800s—the elderly were venerated but not loved. As their social

status declined in the nineteenth century, however, filial bonds of affection ironically grew stronger. In the twentieth century, argues Fischer, the increasing numbers of persons who lived beyond sixty-five prompted unprecedented public concern for their plight and the first legislation to alleviate it.

Achenbaum agrees with this overall scheme but disagrees with several parts of it. Where Fischer finds exceptionally rapid changes in the status of the old between 1780 and 1820, leading to their long-term status decline after 1820, Achenbaum finds gradual changes in their status from 1790, when his analysis begins, until the present. Similarly, where Fischer suggests that another, more positive stage in the status of the old may have begun in the mid-twentieth century, Achenbaum again suggests caution in further subdividing this area of American history. Finally, where Fischer attributes the allegedly revolutionary changes between 1780 and 1820 to changes in ideas, Achenbaum attributes the allegedly more gradual changes from 1790 till now to a variety of factors. They nevertheless agree, first, that industrialization and urbanization at most reinforced, not caused, any of the changes they describe, and second, that even in colonial times old age in America was not a golden age.<sup>10</sup>

To answer the question raised at the outset: in view of the recent research barely summarized here youth and old age would indeed appear to possess histories of their own in America and presumably elsewhere. Their histories, moreover, seem as complex as that of the family, with whose past their pasts are, as noted, closely connected but not identical. Yet the histories of all three may really be less "autonomous" than the authors suggest. All of the authors rely as much on perceptions of youth and old age by others in the past as on the self-perceptions of the young and old themselves. The accuracy of the outsiders' perceptions is uncertain. Moreover, processes of socialization and so of conformity may far outweigh any proclivity toward independence on the part of young and old alike. In fact, rebellions by both may represent striving for an independence presently denied them. Nevertheless, all four of the works considered here, like the best pioneering works, deserve to be reread, rethought and, in due course, replaced.

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#### notes

1. See, for example, Edward Shorter, *The Making of the Modern Family* (New York, 1975); Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England, 1500-1800* (New York, 1977); Christopher Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World: The Family Besieged* (New York, 1977); "The Family," *Daedalus*, 106 (Spring 1977); and *Turning Points: Historical and Sociological Essays on the Family*, eds. John Demos and Sarane Spence Boocock (Chicago, 1978).

2. Aries concentrated on the family in Western Europe but implicitly included its North American counterpart.

3. For a brief but provocative analysis of the American home as the scene of both refuge from the "real" world and preparation for it, see William E. Bridges, "Family Patterns and Social Values in America, 1825-1875," *American Quarterly*, 17 (Spring 1975), 3-11. For an elaboration of this argument see Bernard Wisby, *The Child and the Republic: The Dawn of Modern American Child Nurture* (Philadelphia, 1972). Other studies which have appeared after Aries', it should be noted, have presented considerable evidence that the nuclear family preceded rather than, as previously assumed by Aries and others, followed the industrial revolution.

4. Philippe Aries, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, tr. Robert

Baldick (New York, 1962), 329. For an interesting if not altogether convincing critique of some of Aries' ideological assumptions and consequent findings, see David Hunt, *Parents and Children in History: The Psychology of Family Life in Early Modern France* (New York, 1972), Chapter 2.

5. See Aries, *Western Attitudes Toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present*, tr. Patricia M. Ranum (Baltimore, 1974).

6. As its subtitle indicates, Gillis' work focuses upon the history of European youth, and specifically English and German youth. But his basic arguments are also intended to encompass the history of youth elsewhere, especially in "modern" societies like the United States. In this regard see Gillis' illuminating—and critical—review essay of several works on the history of American youth which appeared between 1969 and 1973, "Youth in History: Progress and Prospects," *Journal of Social History*, 7 (Winter, 1974), 201-207.

7. On the presence of "old age" in one form or another in apparently all societies see David Hackett Fischer, *Growing Old in America*, Expanded Edition (New York, 1978), Introduction.

8. *Ibid.*, 3.

9. For additional recent studies of the young in early America see Philip Greven, *The Protestant Temperament: Patterns of Child-Rearing, Religious Experience, and the Self in Early America* (New York, 1977), and Steven J. Novak, *The Rights of Youth: American Colleges and Student Revolt, 1798-1815* (Cambridge, Mass., 1977).

10. For Fischer's critique of Achenbaum's writings, albeit writings which preceded his book, see *Growing Old in America*, 255-257. For Achenbaum's critique of Fischer's book, see his "From Womb through Bloom to Tomb: The Birth of a New Area of Historical Research," *Reviews in American History*, 5 (June, 1978), 178-183. For a pioneering account of the history of old age in France, see Peter N. Stearns, *Old Age in European Society: The Case of France* (New York, 1976).