



The Modern Age: Turn-of-the-Century American Culture and the Invention of Adolescence

Kent Baxter

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The Modern Age examines the discourses that have come to characterize adolescence and argues that commonplace views of adolescents as impulsive, conflicted, and rebellious are constructions inspired by broader cultural anxieties that characterized American society in early-twentieth-century America.

The idea of adolescence, argues Kent Baxter, came into being because it fulfilled specific historical and cultural needs: to define a quickly expanding segment of the population, and to express concerns associated with the movement into a new era. Adolescence—a term that had little currency before 1900 and made a sudden and pronounced appearance in a wide variety of discourses thereafter—is a “modern age” not only because it sprung from changes in American society that are synonymous with modernity, but also because it came to represent all that was threatening about “modern life.”

Baxter provides a preliminary history of adolescence, focusing specifically on changes in the American educational system and the creation of the juvenile justice system that carved out a developmental space between the child and the adult. He looks at the psychological works of G. Stanley Hall and the anthropological works of Margaret Mead and explores what might have inspired their markedly negative descriptions of this new demographic. He examines the rise of the Woodcraft Indian youth movement and its promotion of “red skin” values while also studying the proliferation of off-reservation boarding schools for Native American youth, where educators attempted to eradicate the very “red skin” values promoted by the Woodcraft movement.

Finally Baxter studies reading at the turn of the century, focusing specifically on Horatio Alger (the Ragged Dick series) and Edward Stratemeyer (the Tom Swift, Nancy Drew, and Hardy Boys series) and what those works reveal about the “problem” of adolescence and its solutions in terms of value, both economic and moral.

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