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The Case Against Adolescence: Rediscovering the Adult in Every Teen. Robert Epstein. Sanger, California: Linden Publishing, 2007, 490 pages, $24.95 hardcover.

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The Case Against Adolescence: Rediscovering the Adult in Every Teen by Robert Epstein is both a profoundly important and problematic contribution to the literature on the social construction of adolescence. It is important, because it adds new and substantial data from the discipline of psychology, which until the advent of this book has not, as a discipline, ventured into this area to this degree. It is problematic, because it overvalues adulthood and holds a peculiar nostalgia for a world of young people and adults that may never have existed.

Let me begin with the important contributions that Epstein makes to our understanding of adolescence as a particularly pernicious social form. He begins in chapters one and two "The Chaos and the Cause" and "The Creation of Adolescence" by examining the historical and cultural data regarding the social construction of adolescence in order to propose a central hypothesis: "That adolescence is an historical anomaly, that we infantilize our young people unnecessarily and extremely, that many or most teens are capable of functioning as adults in a number of ways, and that infantilization has serious negative consequences for our society" (p. 16).

Robert Epstein argues that adolescents, in contemporary Western society are a deeply troubled, largely dysfunctional, and unhappy group or as he puts it, "a pretty scary, confused, and angry group of people" (p. 2). He asserts strongly that young people are in serious trouble, "suffering high rates of depression, suicide, crime, substance abuse, pregnancy" (p. 3) and provides statistical evidence for this assertion throughout the book. Indeed, he has very little use for contemporary teen culture or subculture, which he describes as "vacuous" and destructive (p. 188). The cause of this, it is asserted, is the increasing infantilization of young people through the denial of their inherent evolutionary capacities as deferred adults.

The author proposes that if we were to treat young people on the basis of their competencies rather than their age, the problems he associates with teen culture such as suicide, criminal activity, assaults and violent crime, guns in schools, epidemic drug use, and unwed mothers would largely resolve themselves. He suggests that we are missing the possible contributions adolescents could make to our society if we acknowledged that: (1) each young person is unique and should be accorded adult privileges without

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reference to the general category of age, (2) young people are competent in ways that can be measured and tested allowing more young people access to responsible adult activities and practices, (3) in this regard young people have unrealized potential that is masked by the ways that we infantilize them, and (4) labeling young people through the social and developmental category of adolescence is profoundly problematic.

Epstein initiates his argument by drawing on the historical and anthropological literature that demonstrates that adolescence as a category is less a developmental stage than an attempt to solve a variety of social ills largely rooted in the emerging system of industrial capitalism. He cites scholars from a range of disciplines to argue that adolescence didn't exist in pre-industrialized societies and that indeed it is "a recent and very dangerous cultural invention" (p. 19). Epstein does at nice job at laying out the historical discontinuities between descriptions of young people in the world of medieval Europe and the concept of adolescence in our contemporary society. He argues strongly against our current notions of adolescence as a time of inherent social upheaval fraught with storm and stress. The storm and stress that we see in adolescence today, he argues, is an effect of current socialization practices rather than a natural feature of adolescent development. Indeed, Epstein asserts that young people have historically worked alongside adults and do so today in much of the developing world. Only with industrialization does the category of adolescence arise, separating youth from adults and producing teen culture.

The social construction of young people, or what Epstein calls the infantilization of teens, is accomplished, he says, through a combination of laws and educational initiatives. He outlines two complementary social initiatives at play in the emerging industrial society. First, there is a need to remove young people from the world of work or labor so as to protect jobs for adult men. The history of this movement is traced from the 1800s to the 1960s. Over this period of time youth went from working alongside adults to being marginalized and removed from the labor force. In this process organized labor "pushed aside the centuries-old apprentice system that had allowed generations of young people to transition smoothly from childhood to adulthood" (p. 36).

The removal of teens from the work place was accomplished through the implementation of child labor laws, which Epstein connects to compulsory school attendance and an escalating pattern of social control through the creation of delinquency laws and status offenses that gradually created teens as a group operating under what is essentially a separate legal code. Epstein argues that this legal construction of adolescence as being in need of increased surveillance and discipline was driven by, "nurturing tendencies by women to protect," "the elevated status of women," "the view that young people are tender, helpless and incompetent," the desire of the upper and middle classes to "impose their moral standards on poor and working class youth," and "the emergence of new business and industries which catered to the young and help build a 'youth culture'" (p. 72).

It is at this juncture, in chapter three, "Adolescence Abroad," that Epstein opens what I would consider to be one of the most problematic aspects of the book. He begins by suggesting that pre-industrialized societies are in significant aspects better for teens than current Western societies. He goes as far as to assert that, "Where teen problems are beginning to emerge in various countries around the world, they can be traced to the increasing isolation of teens from adults brought about by Western educational practices, labor restrictions, and the media" (p. 75). He argues that teens in pre-industrial societies were working alongside adults and that if organized labor and women's rights, as traced in chapter two, hadn't interfered, teens would be better off. To suggest that there is a paternalistic and potentially misogynistic thread running

through this argument may be too strong, but the tendency to devalue nurturance and over-emphasize self-reliance runs throughout the book.

The argument for self-reliance is bolstered in chapter three, as Epstein traces the role of teens in the developing world. Here he valorizes, in Horatio Alger form, what can only be described as brutal living and working conditions for young people. He proposes that selling bubble gum and milk on the streets in Mexico creates "a strong work ethic" and self discipline that is missing in spoiled American youth. In arguing for teen competence, Epstein asserts a kind of bootstrap vision of what teens could be if they hadn't been Westernized.

In this rather troubling chapter the author continues by tracing the development of teens in pre-industrialized societies. Drawing from several anthropological studies including Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa*, he concludes that these societies have very little aggression, violence, or anti-social behavior among teens and that in over half there is no term equivalent to adolescence. Indeed, he asserts that the spread of Westernized adolescence is a kind of pathological process with negative effects across the globe as industrialized capitalism spreads.

While I have some sympathy for this argument, I would suggest that Epstein's reading of the problem is somewhat narrow. To suggest that it is the Western conceptualization of adolescence without accounting for the impacts of capitalism as an economic system with immense social impact is to omit a significant aspect of the historical landscape here. Epstein does trace the impacts of what he calls industrialization but he fails to connect that to the system of value that leads to the specific mode of socialization called adolescence.

Indeed, one might more effectively argue that, as Marx tells us, capitalism as a system, which includes industrialization as a phase, has an absolutely devastating effect on traditional social structures. As Hardt (1998) points out in his essay "The Withering of Civil Society," it can be cogently argued that capitalism as a world force has an imperative to empty institutions of their culturally specific content and replace it with capitalist logic: that is, to make a profit without regard to the social cost. This is perhaps a more coherent explanation for the evisceration of traditional social structures that define youth–adult relations.

In his arguments, Epstein locates the epicenter of Western adolescence in the women's movement and organized labor. He gives a nod to psychology as well in a very interesting and provocative reading of Hall's construction of the term, but his primary attack is on the separation of teens from adult life and the over-nurturance of young people by well-intentioned female reformers. Of course, neither organized labor nor the women's movement is responsible for the spread of globalized capitalism. Indeed, they are social responses to its worst excesses. While Epstein does give some credence to the importance of the reform movements vis á vis the exploitation of children and youth, his primary thrust is a peculiar form of free market rationale. That is, the idea that adolescence would be best lived within the world of unregulated market conditions in which their innate capacities would rise to the surface.

While I have serious qualms about this line of reasoning — it strikes a bit too close to social Darwinism — the book is put to good use in debunking a number of prevalent theories about adolescent incompetence. In an extended section entitled, "The Capabilities of Young People," Epstein makes the case that, "When one looks carefully at the competencies required to function as an adult, one finds that once people have passed puberty, age is a poor predictor of competence" (p. 147). In a very interesting and provocative chapter he sketches research he and Dumas engaged in using what they term "The Adultness Inventory." This tool investigates, "The mysterious charac-

teristics that make one truly an adult." Scales on the instrument include love, sex, leadership, problem solving, physical abilities, verbal and math skills, interpersonal skills, handling responsibility, managing high risk behaviors, managing work and money, education, personal care, self management, and citizenship. The results of their study, using the instrument, indicated that adults were "barely, if at all" superior to teens in the fourteen competency areas.

Based on this research they began to wonder about adult perceptions of teen competence. Epstein and Dumas created a second inventory that investigated what adults believe about the potential of teens. The results of this study showed that "the average adult appears to think pretty poorly of teens" (p. 159). Epstein notes that the enormous range of scores on adult perceptions of teens seems to indicate what he calls a possible "faulty preconception about teens."

He believes that some of this may be rooted in the difference between competency and performance. That is to say, teens may have adult competencies but social conditions and regulations don't allow or encourage performance. As a result, adults don't recognize teen competence because they don't see it being actualized. However, Epstein notes that the number of errors adults made in answering basic questions on every scale also indicated that those labeled adults may have significant gaps between performance and competence indicating that under current social conditions, very few people, regardless of age, function as actual adults.

Epstein follows this by debunking in some detail common misperceptions about teen competence. In the next series of chapters, he asserts that young people are competent thinkers. Against research indicating developmental limitations of the "teen brain," he makes the claim that adolescents have equal reasoning capacities to those of adults. He notes that, "The teen brain is, at best a reflection of teen problems not their cause" (p. 163). Love and the capacity to love is also examined and again the common misperception that only adults can experience romantic love in a real sense is debunked using a combination of psychoanalytic theory and cross-cultural research.

In an extremely provocative section on "love and sex with minors" an argument is made through a series of examples, including the controversial Mary Kay Latourneau case, that relationships between adults and minors should be weighed individually based on the maturity level of the persons involved. Laws that regulate love and sex for teens are critiqued as being built on "faulty assumptions" (p. 223) about young people's capacity to love, to engage in sex responsibly, to have the capacity for good judgment, and to enter into stable relationships. Epstein further argues that the idea that all adult–teen romantic or sexual behavior is coerced is false and that such relationships do not necessarily inherently cause harm. He states, "These laws imply that the person who is over the age boundary is necessarily coercing the person who is underage. But as we've seen in many cases there simply is no coercion, and it is certainly possible in some cases that coercion or manipulation flows the other way" (p. 224).

While his argument is consistent with the research he has cited about teen competence thus far in the book and challenges, in a useful way, the false notions that we hold about teen sexuality (a project begun with Freud, but largely taboo today under the current sway of moral panic), I would suggest that his assertions about adult–teen romantic involvement are possibly a bit naïve and unfortunately largely anecdotal. That said, his argument that there is no magic age post-puberty that indicates a readiness for romantic or sexual involvement is compelling and calls for a far more reasoned discourse in this area.

In the final chapter in this section Epstein makes an extremely compelling case for teen creativity as an absolutely essential aspect of social life. Arguing for non-conformity,

day-dreaming, and the arts, he asserts that creativity is universal and needs to be supported rather than discouraged. He decries the limited avenues for free creative expression for young people and wonders what could be done if young people were truly in charge of their creative capacities. Citing numerous examples of creative young people in arts, business, and philanthropy he makes a strong case for the importance of creative expression as an integral aspect of social life.

In the final section of the book, "How We Must Change," Epstein makes his case for how the social should be rearranged in order to essentially abolish adolescence and build a competency-oriented society. Here his brand of laissez faire socialization hits full stride. He makes detailed proposals about schooling, juvenile justice, sexuality, pornography, free speech, dress, appearance, curfew, and corporal punishment. Each of these areas is critiqued and proposals are made based on "establishing a competency-based system of rights and privileges" (p. 336). In this new society anyone can have full adult privilege if they can demonstrate competency in any given area. There would be no age cut-offs because each individual is unique and has specific competencies unpredictable by age. This would mean among other things the end of compulsory schooling.

However, Epstein is clear that he is not advocating more freedom for teens. Unsurprisingly, he repudiates the freedom of the 1960s that led in his opinion to the current vapid teen culture of consumerism, drugs, and violence. Instead, he suggests that the corrective for infantalization is responsibility not freedom. He states that teens have too much freedom and this is part of the problem. He suggests, in a moment somewhat at odds with his calls for unbridled creativity that, "teens have too much free time (unstructured, unsupervised hours spent doing meaningless things often with peers), too much free cash . . . and too much freedom from consequences" (p. 339). Indeed, he argues that perhaps this is an even broader social problem. In a society with too much freedom and not enough responsibility he suggests that we should withhold most rights from most people until they can demonstrate competence.

In the end Epstein tells us that if we don't make the kinds of changes he suggests then, "the vacuous world of teen culture will persist, teens and adults will continue to be adversaries and the horrific problems that plague our teens will continue and may escalate" (p. 351). In a singularly self valorizing moment at the end of the book he gives us an enemies list of those who would oppose his agenda, which he conflates with being enemies of teens. Top of the list are government agencies who, in a rhetorical gesture redolent with conservative overtones, he identifies as infantilizing our young, "for the simple reason that we now reflexively call upon government to solve almost every problem that confronts us" (p. 353). Next on the list are religious institutions who Epstein identifies as being over-controlling particularly in areas of sexuality. Given his intense dislike of contemporary teen culture it is not surprising to find the media on the list which he claims portrays teens as "irresponsible, overgrown children" (p. 355). The list goes on to business and industry, the mental health system, law enforcement and juvenile justice, elected officials, organized labor, the education establishment, non-governmental organizations, and parents. All of these groups are enemies of teens because they restrict them through infantilizing them in a variety of different ways.

As a youth studies scholar with a field of research that encompasses a rather critical view of social institutions, I find myself sympathetic to Epstein's project to a certain degree. Without a doubt, the social institutions of Western capitalist society have worked in both obvious and subtle ways to discipline populations of people to their own ends. In this process, certainly the social construction of adolescence with its rather dubious psychological pedigree stands as a case in point. Indeed, my own research

into youth subcultures covers many of the same authors and historical terrain Epstein covers. However, while I agree with him that adolescence is a deeply problematic social phenomenon and that young people are being poorly socialized for the world they inhabit, I disagree fundamentally with him on two main points.

In the first case, his characterization of teen culture as vacuous shows a profound lack of scholarship or understanding of the complex nature and social productivity of youth subcultures. In making pronouncements condemning teen culture, he makes no reference to the astonishingly rich field of subculture studies. Indeed, his critique really only encompasses the most commodified forms of teen culture which is by no means representative of subcultures as a whole.

The second significant problem I have with Epstein's text is in his suggestion that teens should become more like adults. That is they should become responsible members of the social world. There isn't room here to unpack the problems with this fully, but it would seem that this is simply a proposal for a new kind of social conformity premised in an ideology of competence; it is a proposal that claims to be radical but is in its deepest core fundamentally conservative. Epstein critiques the reformers and organized labor for what he calls their Draconian restrictions of teens. However, his proposals would subject all of us to a set of competency assessments premised on a set of values to be determined by whom? This is in the truly Foucaultian sense a way of sneaking a disciplinary apparatus in through the back door.

That said, the sections of the book that delineate the problematic aspects of adolescence as a social construction are compelling and coherent. I would definitely use the book in my coursework in youth studies if only because of the mix of solid scholarship and polemic excess.

References

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