

## **Making Adolescence at the Turn of the Century: Discourse and the Exclusion of Girls**

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### **Introduction**

At the turn-of-the-20th-century, a time of national uncertainty (Wiebe, 1967) and massive cultural change in the U.S. (Lutz, 1991), the adolescent came to occupy a highly visible and recognizable place and was commonly invoked in discussions about the erosion of Anglo Protestant values in urban areas (Collins, 1979), threats to the nation and empire (Rosenthal, 1984), and fear of racial suicide (Bederman, 1995). The adolescent, a being defined as "becoming" and hence, potentially in peril (in today's terms, "at risk"), was a trope for turn-of-the-century worries about unknown futures and the ability to succeed and triumph in changing circumstances. Adolescence was a social fact produced through a set of both educational and material practices that functioned as a technology to regulate the lives of young people, as well as reinforce dominant social norms at a time of great transition and uncertainty.

The technology of adolescence, which included the control of sexuality, separate juvenile justice facilities for delinquents (Bakan, 1972), and segregation of girls' and boys' curricular areas in increasing years of compulsory schooling, served to create certain kinds of persons within certain particular social arrangements<sup>1</sup>. Rallying around the concept of the "adolescent", social reformers re-ordered social institutions, such as the juvenile justice and education systems.

The emerging discourse of adolescence in the late 1890s and early 1900s was, in large part, attributable to G. Stanley Hall, commonly referred to as the "father of adolescence." Hall's idealized as well as popular view of the adolescent as the apex of human development was based on the concept of evolution drawn from Darwin's work in biology and Spencer's social application of Darwinism. For Hall, the period of adolescence was the beginning of a new life that, if properly administered, could contribute to the evolution of the race. Within a social Darwinian framework, the growth and development of individuals reflected the development of the race from savagery to barbarism, and barbarism to civilization. Hence, adolescence would be the point in which the individual, reflective of society as a whole, would either develop into a superior, Western self or remain stunted in a savage state. He and his colleagues also issued 'pedagogical imperatives,' that is, disciplinary and instructional techniques that were essential for each stage of adolescence.

The discussion of the special potential and pitfalls of adolescence resonated with worries about manhood, masculinity and dominance, which were coded as civilization or the future of the race. The notion of the adolescent was linked to nationhood, particularly the future of the U.S. as a nation. The composite portrait of urban laggards--sullen, non-virile youth who smoked cigarettes, masturbated, and lived in unhealthy conditions--threatened the further evolution of the race and the material growth of the nation. Furthermore, in the northeast of the U.S. at this time the actual number of white, middle-

class boys was low. These population figures likely augmented fears of social decay through a lack of manly Christian leaders (Macleod, 1983).

Within this context, the education of boys was meant to produce young, masculine Christians. In order to sculpt strong-willed boys rather than weak-willed, effeminate youth, reforms reflected boys' "naturally-occurring" interests in sports, camping, and physical activities. Adolescents were massified and then the massed populational characteristics were applied as naturally occurring characteristics of individuals. A concrete social situation in which certain youth played particular kinds of games became, for example, a statistic (such as a percentage of all immigrant youth) and eventually an inherent trait of youth in general (Popkewitz, 1998). The cataloging of boys' interests, spontaneous ideas, and activities furthered the dominance of adults and made young people ever more dependent on adult experts, all in the name of developing young males' strong powers and firm wills.

Although white, middle-class boys were the focus of reform efforts, their problems could not be articulated or understood without the specter of women and girls. While the discussion of adolescence was largely centered around boys (the girl problem had a lower profile and fewer resources), the girl problem was fundamental to this discourse. Although seemingly absent, girls were always present, in fact, hauntingly present. In *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison (1992) offers a critical reading of American literature that argues that blackness is necessary in order for whiteness to exist. Similarly, I will argue that girls were necessary to define masculinity and manhood by virtue of their difference from and distance from manliness. Fin de siècle masculinity came to depend upon femininity in order to define itself. This paper examines the multileveled absence/presence of girls in reformers' ideas and theories and in progressive programs and policies for girls.

Like boys, girls were linked to discussions about nationhood; however, the relationship of girls to the concept of nationhood was distinctly different from the relationship of boys to the nation. Girls' bodies mattered as much in 1900 as in 2000: girls required help to save themselves for marriage and children, which ultimately supported white racial progress and patriarchy along the way. The objective of programs for girls was in line with the values associated with the woman's sphere-to make "better mothers and guides [for] the next generation" (Dyhouse, 1981, p. 110). A large body of advice literature for women and girls appeared in the early 1900s in Britain "characterized by a strident, imperialist vocabulary, urging women to regard the preservation of their own health as a moral duty, a duty they owed to 'the Empire and the Race'" (Dyhouse, 1981, p. 136). Health became a moral and patriotic duty and extended to untidy dress, the lagging step, and the dull eye and heavy countenance. Empire and Race demanded good posture, a brisk pace, and a bright, cheerful face (Dyhouse, 1981, p. 137).

Fears of precocity overshadowed every discussion about girls and their organizations. Girls, like boys, were dangerous when they failed to go through the right steps and slow pace of socialization to their future status and girls' bodies were examined to interpret their moral status. For girls, too much independence, early paid work, or experiences without school or family oversight made precocity imminent<sup>2</sup>. Sexual precocity was most feared, and state intervention in the U.S. around adolescent girls was generally

around issues of sexuality. Separating girls from males and from urban environments was deemed sufficient to keep them pure.

### **Juvenile Justice as a Technology of Gendered Sexuality**

While team sports and character building were directed at boys, efforts targeting girls were largely centered around the juvenile justice system, with early interventions by this system (the ultimate means of control) directed at young women's precocity. In calling for state regulation of female sexuality, middle-class women reformers envisioned the creation of a "maternal state" that would become, as nearly as possible, a "real mother" to the girls (Odem, 1995, p. 109). The juvenile justice system that was produced during the Progressive Era institutionalized new ideas and practices, as it also mixed new legal ideas with traditional approaches to rearing children (Schlossman, 1977). The enlightened juvenile courts, reformatories, and probation policies contributed significant elements to the emerging discourse on adolescence. Victorian justice for youth had thrown accused juveniles into detention facilities that warehoused all kinds of adult criminals; those convicted of crimes were sent to large prison facilities that sought to control every moment of the prisoners' lives. Common across different reform efforts was an insistence on prevention and diagnosis. The broad surveillance that was usual can be gauged by examining records of intake examinations at the Western House of Refuge, a women's reformatory in Albion, New York. The form assesses physical, temperamental, moral, and mental traits. At the bottom of each report is the diagnosis--from normal to feeble-minded or alcoholic to hysteric. The progressive juvenile justice of prevention launched a surveillance of every aspect of juveniles' (especially girls') bodies and souls.

The conventional marking of the beginning of the juvenile justice system is Cook County, Chicago in 1899--a central piece of the making of adolescence as a social fact (Bakan, 1972) as well as of state intervention in the lives of girls. The primary aim of juvenile courts was not to decide guilt or innocence, but to "assess the conditions in a youth's life that had led to delinquency" (Odem, 1995, p. 111). In the gendered and sexualized practices of juvenile justice from its inception, we see an additional aspect of adolescence as a technology of self- and population-making. Although the "boy problem" dominated public consciousness and private and public efforts, and boys committed more serious crimes, by the late 1800s the "girl problem" came into its own and reformatories for girls proliferated. Girls were brought to court almost exclusively for alleged early sexual exploration and received harsher punishments than did boys (Schlossman & Wallach, 1978, pp. 70-71). In part, their disproportionate share of "justice" was justified as preventive intervention into the lives of antisocial girls, who were depicted as especially vulnerable to temptations and immoral forces.

Massachusetts had inaugurated female juvenile justice in 1856 with the first reform school for girls, but campaigns for the moral protection of young women were not new. What was new in the late 1800s and early 1900s was the broadened scope of the campaigns and the mounting demands for state regulation of the problem. Public anxiety about the morality of young women greatly intensified and spread to all regions of the country during this period of rapid urban and industrial growth. Instead of the religious and voluntary efforts pursued earlier, moral reformers now began to insist on a forceful response from the state (Odem, 1995, p. 1).

Widespread fears of immigrants and of the poor were also reflected in disproportionate representation in the juvenile courts. Promiscuous girls called forth prejudice against racial, ethnic, and class differences and concerns about inter racial/ethnic/class mixing. Girls were mostly charged with non-criminal activities, generally "immorality," which might be actual sexual acts, but was often merely a "sign" in their appearance or conversation that they had had intercourse in the past or "might do so in the near future" [emphasis added] (Schlossman & Wallach, 1978, p. 72)<sup>3</sup>. Since immigrants were considered, like other groups on the lower rungs of the civilized/savage-state continuum, instinctively emotional and lacking in self-restraint, their daughters were read in the same way. Thus, language and demeanor that seemed insufficiently demure and repentant were interpreted as evidence of "immorality." Whenever a girl used vile language, masturbated, or indulged in lascivious thoughts, the court intervened.

In Milwaukee, for example, alleged girl delinquents were subject to close questioning about their private lives and "every girl who appeared in court was subjected to a vaginal examination" [emphasis added] (Schlossman & Wallach, 1978, p. 73). Even if an intact hymen indicated a girl was a virgin, doctors could diagnose "self-abuse" through masturbation and make a case for the necessity of state supervision. Thus, female delinquency was primarily precocious sexuality, judged by Victorian standards of women's moral passiveness in this area and necessary preparation for marriage and motherhood. Courts wanted the performance of docile femininity; if a girl would not "feign repentance" and if her parents "would not at least feign shock," the court responded punitively (Schlossman & Wallach, 1978, p. 75).

State interventions regularly involved the isolation of delinquent girls from males, preferably in rural settings like those that delighted G. Stanley Hall. According to Schlossman and Wallach (1978), "The mere act of isolating delinquent girls came to be seen as a rehabilitative tool"[emphasis added] (p. 76)<sup>4</sup>. Reformers who urged prevention also supported using the state for surveillance, legal prosecution and detention, and institutionalization of girls and young women who engaged in suspect behavior--effectively controlling, removing, and excluding them from membership in a democratic society.

### **Educational System**

Paralleling reform in the juvenile justice system was the simultaneous domestication of girls' education during the "progressive" era. Within the very schema of adolescence as a developmental stage, femaleness loomed as an obstacle that had to be navigated and surpassed; femininity haunted the modern developing male adolescent. Boys were segregated from girls to guard their emergent masculinity and superiority. One beacon of civilization was a clear, marked differentiation between the sexes: advanced societies sported greater differences between men's and women's appearances, social positions, characteristics, and, of course, education and training. At the 1903 National Education Association (NEA) conference, G. Stanley Hall asserted: in savagery women and men are more alike in their physical structure and in their occupations, but with real progress the sexes diverge and draw apart, and the diversities always present are multiplied and accentuated (1903, p. 446).

Hall encouraged educators to aim for more manly boys and more womanly girls, and there is evidence that this advice was widely heeded. For example, the mission statement of St. Louis high schools called for an education to "develop manhood and womanhood with strength of character and trained intelligence" (Graves, 1998, p. 129). Given the cultural preoccupation with promoting civilization and avoiding degeneracy, this rhetoric was likely quite meaningful, and it soothed those nervous about disorderly women because preparing for adulthood would follow the adult norms for separate male and female spheres.

In England, the Boer War and fears of national decline also produced a panic around working-class girls and their education. An overwhelming majority of army volunteers for the war had been rejected; in Manchester, for example, 8,000 out of 11,000 volunteers were unfit. The national report on young men's physical deterioration laid the responsibility, in part, on mothers' insufficient knowledge about "household affairs, hygiene and nutrition" (Dyhouse, 1981, p. 92). The report recommended an emphasis on domestic education for girls in state-supported elementary schools, which would teach female students, for example, how to cook cheap and nutritious meals. Lessons on childcare and infant management also came into being, because the infant mortality rate remained high, another eugenic concern for the future of the British Empire. In secondary schools, domestic science elevated the preparation for future positions as wives and mothers through a scientific mantle, and girls were routinely encouraged to substitute domestic science for natural science studies. Overall, girls needed fewer lessons in academics and more shaping into "efficient women citizens, good home-keepers and mothers" (Dyhouse, 1981, p. 114).

Feminist scholars record similar processes in the U.S. at the turn-of-the-century. In response to an enrollment of 60 percent girls, Los Angeles educators' "fear of feminization" fueled curricular reforms like manual training and domestic science, higher salaries for male teachers, and a dramatic shift in the definition of "school" that included the "thorough masculinization of interscholastic sports and student government" (Bissell Brown, 1990, p. 510). Despite the fact that the girls' basketball team had winning seasons between 1902 and 1907, by 1910, all interscholastic female teams at Los Angeles High had been disbanded and only intramural girls sports continued. In contrast, high school administrators offered a well-organized, competitive sports program run by rugged men in order to coax boys to stay in school, while channeling girls into cheerleading. Despite the growth of competitive sports for boys, girls were systematically excluded from this informal educational sphere.

The shift in the definition of "school" that removed girls as active participants into positions of support was repeated in other activities. For example, at Los Angeles High, there was a movement from female-dominated literary clubs to male-dominated student government organizations.

Extracurricular clubs and sports were a key part of the educators' effort to give high schools an active, virile, masculine image and thereby persuade boys to stay in school. (Bissell Brown, 1990, p. 508) Manual training programs, designed "not to turn out mechanics but to make men" (Bissell Brown, 1990, p. 509), a night school program for male truants, and the hiring of more male teachers were aimed to keep boys in school.

To recruit and keep more male teachers, despite the lack of evidence that male teachers kept male students in school, men were offered ever-higher salaries; between 1890 and 1905, the gap between male and female teachers' salaries quadrupled (Bissell Brown, 1990, p. 506).

Karen Graves' study of St. Louis high school curricula demonstrates that social efficiency perspectives masculinized the courses of study by demoting and weakening the classical curriculum (academic study for its own worth rather than for vocational ends), which became seen as feminine. Science and commercial courses of study became the most valued and most popular tracks, which Graves links to a decline in the number of courses needed for graduation. We see several things occurring simultaneously: the decline of academics-for-themselves, the rise of preparation for citizenship and work, lowered requirements for high school graduation, and a masculinization of secondary schools that is linked to vocational education and extracurricular activities. Girls' presence in secondary schools needed to be carefully managed, for their dominance of a high school population produced a frightening image: If the boy quits school to go to work before he reaches the eighth grade, while the girl goes forward to the high school, intelligence itself is pretty sure to smack of femininity (Graves, 1998, p. 280).

If male supremacy was to be preserved, high schools could contribute by keeping boys in school, offering practical courses of study, and emphasizing the value of extracurricular activities, especially sports, which were all at the expense of girls who became increasingly excluded from the educational agenda. Male dominance in the curriculum also involved the ascent of a sporting, muscular, practical man over the effeminate, intellectual man.

### **Conclusion**

Although adolescence had been demarcated before the late 1800s, the line between youth and adulthood became sharper, more intently watched, and democratically applied by the turn of the century. Hall emphasized adolescence as a new birth, a new opportunity to move upward as a civilized society or downward into a state of savagery. The shapers of the modern, scientific adolescent made adolescent bodies and sexuality the primary foci in the proliferating discourse of adolescence.

According to Foucault however, such unceasing talk about sexuality cannot be seen as liberation, but rather as compulsion, a compulsion that requiring the control of adolescent sexuality. Controlling sexuality was the centerpiece of evolutionary progress, and adolescence was the time when sexuality and sexualized bodies became disturbingly visible. The "budding girl" included a romanticized vision of the next generation of "angels in the house," but the focus on girls' maturing bodies was simultaneously titillating and voyeuristic.[5] The idea of adolescence as always becoming (and not really existing in the present) fostered a hide-and-seek of knowing, watching, and cataloguing of developing bodies. Prevention necessitated unlimited scientific looking. The adolescent body, endlessly divided and described-as strong muscled or sunken-chested, chaste or self-abused-was the site of diagnosis, prescription, and action.

Thus, the administrative gaze of juvenile justice workers, teachers and educators, as well as parents, psychologists, play reformers, and scout leaders, was everywhere cultivated as the primary means of control. Precocity had to be prevented. This was the banner under which state and private interventions were orchestrated. Reformers uniformly recommended close monitoring of adolescent bodies to protect against precocity; boys' regimens mandated team sports and the building of strong bodies, while girls' programs were directed toward high culture and domestic skills. Working against youthful precocity enhanced economic dependency as well as the removal of any adult-like responsibilities. A slow, steady coming-of-age was prescribed. These prescriptions segregated youth from the world and from the pressures of adulthood, and gave them leisure, which became the most highly regulated and contested portion of their lives. At a time when movie theaters, beaches, dance halls, and other new, urban pleasures beckoned, it is unsurprising that juvenile justice was built largely on the misuse of leisure time.

The turn-of-the-century focus on girls invoked racial, gender, and national concerns. But this compulsion was shaped by neo-Victorian progressive traditions with a white middle-class base, and simultaneously identified working class, ethnic immigrant, African-American, and Native American youth as deviant. Civilized societies evidenced strict separation of men and women and precocious girls would contribute to social degeneration, racial suicide, and imperial decline. This discursive analysis of adolescence was a strategic one, aimed at demonstrating how "truths" of adolescence participated in and contributed to new ways of making-selves and making-society at the turn-of-the-century. This new form of governmentality emphasized keeping youth asexual, unintellectual, and dependent.

I have argued that modern facts of adolescence emerged within worries over the future of Western masculinity, the nation, and the white race, which raised the problems of degeneracy/progress to a frenzy. Adolescence became a way to connect with this set of worries and to establish new professionals who diagnosed problems in order to prevent further decline. Adolescence became a way to prepare individuals for a new social order, while maintaining the social hierarchy. Public schools and the juvenile courts were central elements of an enlarged and intensified discourse about adolescence, a discourse that remains vital and powerful even today.

This discourse on adolescence relied heavily on the increasing control and systematic exclusion of girls in education, as well as throughout society as a whole. Girls' formal and informal upbringing was needed to both safeguard their purity and docility and prepare them for the role of wife and mother. Within schools, domestic science often replaced natural science, and girls were enjoined to become supporters of male-centered activities rather than participants and leaders. The infant juvenile justice system watched girls closely for any nuance of possible impurity, and under the guise of protection, suspected girls were removed to reformatories. The removal of girls into the juvenile justice system was symbolic of how adolescence as a technology was a form of control of not only girls/women as individuals, but of society as a whole. It controlled not only how to behave, but who to become--as gendered individual citizens of a nation, and as a gendered (masculinized) nation in the world.

As modern, scientific production of truths and technologies, Hall and his colleagues' work on adolescence, although seemingly outdated and discredited, continues to exert enormous influence in both defining adolescents as natural and thus beyond social change or critique, as well as structuring what can count as "truth" about adolescence. Furthermore, emphasis on interpreting adolescent actions and ideas as a stage of human development is one of the strongest aspects of this discourse. The discursive strategy that we have inherited reads an individual's characteristics--sunken-chested, weak-willed, smoking, masturbating--in terms of future effects, and looks everywhere except in the present social relations, for the explanation. This interpretive strategy empties the present and lets the adults/scientists off the hook; like the discourse on nation that it mimics (Anderson, 1983), it looks toward the past and the future.

## Notes

1. Put in different terms, adolescents, like the primates of Donna Haraway's work (1989), occupy border zones between the mythic poles of adult/child, sexual/asexual, rational/emotional, civilized/savage, productive/unproductive. The stakes in being able to define proper sexuality and reason, for example, are high. From this perspective, the categories and processes involved in adolescents' identities are simultaneously sites of broader cultural debates about knowledge, identity, representation, and power. On the terrain of adolescent bodies is a struggle for what will count as an adult, a woman, a man, rationality, proper sexuality, and orderly development.
2. The rhetoric in England over girls sometimes declared them as having too much energy that needed channeling and sometimes not sufficient energy, and these typifications were attached to working-class and middle-class girls, respectively (Dyhouse, 1981). In putting the emphasis on fear of precocity, the otherwise contradictory problems can be seen to stem from the same issue.
3. The expanded state regulation of adolescent female sexuality was part of a broader trend toward control of sexuality in general. "Expressions of sexuality that did not conform to a marital, reproductive framework were increasingly subjected to government surveillance and control, as evidenced by a range of legal measures enacted during the period. These included legislation prohibiting the dissemination of obscene literature, the criminalization of abortion, stringent measures targeting prostitution, and heightened legal repression of homosexuality." (Odem, 1995, p. 2) Threats to marital, reproductive sex were the common denominator in this reading. Such a view is not inconsistent with a Foucaultian reading which sees the governing of sexual selves occurring in all the talk of sexuality, with homosexuals coming to be regarded as a separate species. So, I would add that a populational reasoning is being constructed in the proliferation of sexual categories, as well as, an incitement or compulsion to be normatively sexual.
4. This same logic appears in many contemporary discussions of single sex schooling, where the segregation of girls is the major and sufficient intervention.



5. Hall discussed female adolescent and sexual development in the following works: Adolescence, I: chap 7; II: chap 17; "Budding Girl" "Education and the Social Hygiene Movement." (cited in Odem, 1995, n. 15, p. 209).

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