

mind-bending and into a lesser standing of “interesting, but. . .”

Johnson alludes to this, noting that particle physicists of Gell-Mann’s generation sought “truths so wispy and subtle that it was never entirely clear whether there was any substance to them at all.” He notes as well that Gell-Mann himself scorns many abstract claims about physics as “quantum flapdoodle.” One such idea is the postulation, based on a literal reading of Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle and seriously entertained by some researchers, that the universe would stop existing if we weren’t here to look. The Uncertainty Principle holds that particles only snap into a fixed location when observed: if unobserved, the components of the firmament would seem obligated to cease having fixed locations, and then the universe couldn’t exist. Maybe this means God keeps the universe in existence by observing it, but maybe it means there’s a lot of flapdoodle in physics.

In the 1980s, Gell-Mann shifted his attention from particles to “complexity theory,” an attempt to understand how elaborate phenomena (biological cells, the mind) can arise out of interactions of relatively simple rules. Gell-Mann was a founder of the Santa Fe Institute, which studies this emerging discipline. One of

the goals of complexity theory is to figure out why there is life instead of inanimacy. It’s not clear that complexity thinkers will attain any breakthroughs, and they are often derided by “hard” scientists as dreamers who have drunk too much wine while watching New Mexico sunsets. (When chaos theory and complexity theory became fashionable at around the same time, orthodox scientists scoffed at them collectively as “chaoplexity.”) But the potential of complexity theory is great.

For some reason, Johnson, who lives in Santa Fe and knows the work of the institute well, devotes nearly all his attention to Gell-Mann’s first career in physics, saying little about his second. Nascent though it is, complexity theory has the potential to be much more relevant to human lives than quantum theoretics. Complexity might help us learn how biology began and why sociological structures develop. It might even tell us not just what the universe is made out of, but whether it has a purpose and a destiny. Still only 70, Gell-Mann has turned his dazzling mind to this subject, and we can hope that he will find something of sufficient value to merit a *Strange Beauty* sequel.

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Conscripts to Adulthood

THE RISE AND FALL OF THE AMERICAN TEENAGER.

By Thomas Hine. Bard/Avon. 322 pp. \$24

READY OR NOT:

*Why Treating Children as Small Adults
Endangers Their Future—and Ours.*

By Kay S. Hymowitz. Free Press. 292 pp. \$25

by A. J. Hewat

There is a moment at the beginning of each of these books when you wonder whether to keep reading. Thomas Hine, arguing that parents should give

teenagers more rein, mentions that he doesn’t have any children. Kay Hymowitz, arguing that parents should exert more control, lets fall that her young daughter



Homecoming (1995), by Bo Bartlett

wrote a story in which the mother was “not very dependable” because she was “a writer . . . always dreaming about [her] book.” Let that be the chance for an adult exercise in amused compassion, a moment to reaffirm that—statistics and scholarship notwithstanding—when it comes to the messy affair of raising children, we’re all just guessing.

Hymowitz, a scholar affiliated with the Manhattan Institute and the Institute for American Values, has written widely on the subject of child rearing and education. Her prescription runs along fairly established lines of neoconservative thought: parents, take back your children—eat meals together, turn off the TV, cultivate and enforce good habits, and, above all, protect your kids from a culture hellbent on making them grow up too fast.

Hine, the former architecture and design critic for the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, takes a more iconoclastic approach to what is for him a new subject. Having reached the awful clarity of 50, he was provoked into writing this book, he says, by “a certain exasperation” with his generation. How is it that these former revolutionaries “seem to have moved, without skipping a beat,” from blaming their parents to blaming their children for violent crime, civic apathy, and other social problems? Why, he asks, do we expect our children to embody abstinence, forbearance,

and other virtues that we ourselves rarely practice?

Both writers take as their point of departure the perception that American youth is in crisis. As Hine phrases this widespread belief: “Everything seems to be crumbling. . . . Ideas and institutions that appeared true and eternal seem to be under siege, and what is taking their place

seems empty or even evil.” To Hine, these views demonstrate that the pace of social change has driven Americans to hysteria. To Hymowitz, by contrast, such perceptions are articles of faith.

Hymowitz traces our troubles back to the 19th century, when, paradoxically, methods of child rearing improved. In the early 1800s, ministers, intellectuals, and educators began framing “a republican childhood” to prepare the young for citizenship. Parents were encouraged to spare the rod, give more time for play, teach personal and civic morality. During this epoch, society “embraced the goals of freedom and individuality” without quashing the all-important authority of parents. But gradually, and perhaps inevitably, Americans began to lose sight of two crucial principles: that youth’s individuality must be shaped, even “constructed”; and that American egotism must be countered by grounding in a common culture. The idealism of early educators devolved into demands for greater equality between parent and child. Told she cannot not play at a friend’s house, the modern child cries: “It’s a free country!”

Hymowitz blames “those who help shape our understanding of children,” including “psychologists, psychiatrists, educators, child advocates, lawmakers, advertisers, and marketers,” for promoting the belief that children are “capable, rational and autonomous . . . endowed with all

the qualities necessary for entrance into the adult world.” This belief, which Hymowitz calls “anticulturalism,” was spurred on by educator John Holt and other “liberationist thinkers” of the 1960s and ’70s. It has lately gotten a boost from unwelcome quarters—conservative public officials who propose to extend capital punishment to minors.

In chapters treating development from infancy to postadolescence, *Ready or Not* aims to show how anticulturalism has deformed youth and parenthood in recent generations. Hymowitz shakes her fist at child specialists who advocate no-pressure parenting, and marvels at the endurance of dubious educational approaches such as “whole language reading” and “learner-centered math.” Her chapter on sex yields predictably appalling examples of misguided academic exercises: students told to yell out “penis!” and “vagina!” in class; Massachusetts students told to masturbate as a homework assignment.

Most disturbing to Hymowitz are the legal “freedoms” extended to young people. By making it difficult for schools to discipline children, the government has “legalized child neglect.” Extending First Amendment protections to teenagers (to the extent of allowing them, say, to wear Ku Klux Klan armbands) has “had the effect of bestowing high moral purpose on adolescent obsessions and making the already difficult tasks of training teenagers’ judgment and refining their sensibilities seem quaintly irrelevant.” At the same time, teenagers are being made “legally responsible for behaving according to norms they have yet to internalize.”

The outcome of enforced early maturity, Hymowitz believes, is that youth-deprived children and teenagers extend their childish ways into their twenties and thirties. From boomers on down, adults are dressing in jeans, sneakers, and baseball caps, watching action-packed dinosaur movies, throwing themselves Halloween parties, and fussing over their food.

Hine sees many of the same problems but feels more sanguine about young peo-

ple’s ability to mature against all odds. In his view, adults have demonized and marginalized young people, placing them at the mercy of a battery of bureaucracies and sending them mutually exclusive messages: “Teenagers should be free to become themselves. They need many years of training and study. They know more about the future than adults do. They know hardly anything at all. They ought to know the value of a dollar. They should be protected from the world of work. They are the death of culture. They are the hope of us all.”

The very word *teenager*, Hine points out, was coined in the mid-20th century to describe an age group that had suddenly become attractive to marketers and social reformers. Teenagers were “a New Deal project, like the Hoover Dam.” No longer simply younger versions of adults, teenagers became a thing apart, not-quite-sane creatures “beset by stress and hormones.”

To Hine, the greatest single thing ailing young people today is not parental abnegation but the loss of cohesive social and economic roles. In a spirited, often less-than-scholarly narrative, he describes the range of activities, good and ill, that were once open to children and adolescents. Colonial children farmed and gardened. Out-of-wedlock pregnancies were as common in mid-18th-century America as they are now. Boys began military training as early as 10. Apprenticeship was the most common form of education, and schooling tended to occupy short, intense periods of people’s lives when there was nothing more useful to do. During the 19th century, American youth worked in factories, mills, and mines. That legendary western figure from New York’s lower East Side, Billy the Kid, killed his first man at 12.

Today, by contrast, young Americans are being segregated in mass detention camps for learning—supposedly to enhance later earning power. Newt Gingrich’s brilliant description of high school as “subsidized dating” correlates with Hine’s suspicion that no one has figured out anything better for young people

to do—and that young people sense it. Like the word *teenager*, high school is essentially a 20th-century invention. Neither of them began to go seriously awry until 1959, when the boomers arrived. A report by James Bryant Conant, a former president of Harvard University, advocated larger, more standardized schools. Quantity, as is its wont, overwhelmed quality.

Even minimal participation in the economic mainstream now requires more years of education than ever before. Yet tomorrow's jobs, Hine believes, will likely demand knowledge and expertise but not much schooling. During the high-tech employment boom of the mid-1990s, several top companies began recruiting people not yet out of high school to work at the forefront of innovation. The kids were able to do the job.

Hine concludes that while it may have been rational, convenient, and even lucrative to consign young people to a protracted childhood, that won't work much longer. In his view, it's time to offer teens a wider range of choices, letting them "coordinate work opportunities with education," "drop in and out of school without stigma," and "try something new and unlikely—and . . . fail at it—with-

out being branded a failure for life."

Hine shares Hymowitz's concern that children are being rushed into adulthood. But he believes that children want to grow up as fast as they can, and that the next generation of teens, having been raised on a diet of advertising, violence, and abundance, will help to shape our culture, for better or worse. Hine thinks we should fret less about what teenagers are doing and more about what we've done to create their subculture. He wants us, as a nation and as parents, to extend rights and obligations according to an individual's signs of maturity, not simply according to age. He doesn't think it's reasonable to try to prevent teenagers from having sex. Forget celibacy, he says; instead, train kids to view serious commitment as a prerequisite to sex.

"The young," he concludes, "persist in wanting to do what their strong bodies make them capable of doing: acting independently, working hard, having sex and families, and making lives." His prescription—to give young people more life options—seems more realistic than Hymowitz's wish to slow the process down.

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History

REFLECTIONS ON A RAVAGED CENTURY.

By Robert Conquest. Norton. 317 pp.
\$26.95

When a wise and sharp-edged historian of some of our era's greatest traumas reflects on the century as a whole, one should pay attention—especially if that historian also happens to have been involved in public life and is a fine poet besides. Conquest's *Reflections on a Ravaged Century* is short on warmth and fuzzi-

ness. Its few understatements are all meant ironically. But Conquest offers a view of our predicament that merits the attention of anyone seeking to look ahead.

For Conquest, ideas count. (His commitment to this notion seems almost quaint when a large part of academia is devoted to the proposition that they don't.) During the 20th century, a kind of "ideological frenzy" seized European minds and gave us communism and fascism, which he correctly sees as related.