

SOCIETY

Hothouse Parents, Shrinking Violets

“A Nation of Wimps” by Hara Estroff Marano, in *Psychology Today* (Nov.–Dec. 2004),
115 E. 23rd St., 9th fl., New York, N.Y. 10010.

“Get off my back!” was once just lip from a defiant kid. Now those huffy words have the backing of psychologists. “Hothouse parenting” is harming a generation of children, asserts *Psychology Today* editor Marano.

Today’s controlling baby-boomer parents aren’t willing to let their children deal with the mess of life without constant intervention. “With few challenges all their own, kids are unable to forge their creative adaptations to the normal vicissitudes of life,” Marano writes. “That not only makes them risk-averse, it makes them psychologically fragile, riddled with anxiety. In the process they’re robbed of identity, meaning and a sense of accomplishment, to say nothing of a shot at real happiness. Forget, too, about perseverance. . . . Whether we want to or not, we’re on our way to creating a nation of wimps.”

The result is evident in new levels of psychological distress among the young. Depression was once a malady chiefly of middle age, but during the 1990s children’s rates of depression surpassed those of people over 40. And in 1996, anxiety overtook traditional—and more developmentally appropriate—relationship issues as the most common problem among college students. Binge drinking, substance abuse, self-mutilation, anorexia, and bulimia afflict college campuses with new intensity. Marano sees the cell phone as a particular culprit: This “virtual umbilical cord” connects kids directly with Mom and Dad well into their college years, infantilizing them and keeping them in a permanent state of dependency.

The “fragility factor” is incubated at young ages. Harvard University psychologist Jerome Kagan found that about 20 percent of babies are born with a high-strung temperament, detectable even in the womb by a fast pulse. But some overexcitable kids can grow up with normal levels of anxiety—if their parents back off while they’re very young. For the vast majority of kids, who fall somewhere between invulnerable to anxiety and very fearful, overprotective parenting can be the decisive factor.

Yet a third of parents pack their young ones off to school with sanitizing gels. They pursue learning-disorder diagnoses so their kids can take tests—including the SAT—with no time limits. Play is so scripted that kids lack the know-how to conduct a neighborhood pick-up game, sans shouted instructions and coordinated uniforms. Recess has been scotched altogether at more than 40,000 U.S. schools.

Marano blames hothouse parenting on adults’ perception that the playground is as cutthroat as the boardroom. Perfectionism rules the roost, and parents can’t refrain from mother-hen behavior long enough to let kids puzzle through math homework or tie a shoe by themselves.

Without breathing room, kids are simply taking longer to grow up, tacking on their “playtime” in their twenties and waiting to achieve classic benchmarks of adulthood such as a steady job, marriage, and parenting. In other words, playtime needs to happen on the playground, even if it means the indulgence of an occasional skinned knee.

America the Ordinary

“American Exceptionalism Revisited” by Daniel T. Rodgers, in *Raritan* (Autumn 2004),
31 Mine St., New Brunswick, N.J. 08903.

As the United States embarks on a campaign to promote freedom and democracy around the world, the idea of “American exceptionalism” has come back into parlance.

To many academic historians, however, it’s an idea whose time has passed.

“Anticipations of escape from ordinary history run deep in the American past,” as far

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back as the 17th-century declaration by John Winthrop, the governor of Massachusetts Bay Colony, that the colonists would create a morally exemplary “city upon a hill.” But the notion that America isn’t merely different from other nations but a fortunate exception to the historical forces that rule all the others didn’t fully develop until the 1950s, notes Rodgers, a historian at Princeton University. To many Cold War intellectuals and scholars, the United States suddenly seemed “an island of stable consensus in a world of heightened class divisions, ideological polarization, and revolutionary instability.” Because America had no feudal past, these thinkers argued, Americans were more individualistic, socially egalitarian, and religious than Europeans. The fact that socialism, so strong in Europe, had made few inroads in America seemed to underscore the nation’s exceptional standing.

But these exceptionalist arguments long ago went out of vogue in the academy. There, all “grand narratives” are viewed with distrust, especially since the decline of Marxism, the grandest narrative of all, after the Cold War. And without any scheme of history unfolding over time in accordance with some general historical law, “there can be no exceptions—no exceptional nations and no exceptional histories.”

Impressed by globalization’s power, historians have embarked on “transnational” studies highlighting the continuous flow of people, goods, and ideas between nations in the past. New “diaspora” studies of African slaves, Asian workers, and others depict them as “simultaneously ‘here’ and ‘elsewhere.’” They are not fundamentally reborn in the United States, nor are they evidence of the nation’s extraordinary redemptive powers and possibilities.” And the traditional notion of the frontier as a place where a uniquely American character was forged has been challenged by new “borderlands” studies that treat places such as the Great Lakes region as “zones of cultural contact” where “peoples and spaces meet and their influences spill over into each other.”

Even America’s exceptional resistance to socialism no longer looks so special to these scholars, who note that socialism is now on the run even in Europe.

Beneath the recent revival of exceptionalist rhetoric, Rodgers detects “a deep anxiety” caused by the “historically unprecedented sense of vulnerability” among Americans, their fear that the United States “is simply a nation in a dangerous world like every other.” In his view, it would be better for them to squarely face this truth.

Game Theory

“Digital Gambling: The Coincidence of Desire and Design” by Natasha Dow Schull, in *The Annals* (Jan. 2005), The American Academy of Political and Social Science, 3814 Walnut St., Philadelphia, Pa. 19104-6197.

They’re in every casino: the glassy-eyed video poker players glued to their machines, hands tapping a steady rhythm. Every intrusion—a check-in from a cocktail waitress, even winning too big or too often—distracts players from the “zone.”

Video poker isn’t the only game in town, but it is the biggest: Poker terminals and other coin-operated machines now occupy more than three-quarters of the floor space in Nevada casinos. And the gaming industry aims to exploit that real estate for all it’s worth, using new technologies to create machines that seduce gamblers into playing faster and longer.

With microchip brains and dazzling elec-

tronic displays, coin-operated gambling machines are now, more than ever, gamblers’ private islands. Drinks, game chips, and machine mechanics are summoned at the touch of a button, the seats are ergonomic, and the cards appear on the screen so quickly that experienced gamblers play up to 900 hands an hour. Machine manufacturers know that the game—not the winning—is the important thing for most players, notes Schull, an anthropologist and postdoctoral research scholar at Columbia University. One industry executive told her that his company had to scale back the electronic bells and whistles: Players didn’t like pausing to celebrate a win.

All these careful calibrations translate into