HOW AMERICANS RAISE THEIR CHILDREN:
GENERATIONAL RELATIONS OVER TWO HUNDRED YEARS
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Paula S. Fass
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA AT BERKELEY

Over the past twenty years, as children became important subjects of historical inquiry, some scholars have been studying childhood history broadly as an expression of general developments in the West. In this perspective, the United States, and to some extent even Latin America, participated in the expansion of Europe after the seventeenth century and the modernizing thrust of the post-Enlightenment period. Bound together by religious beliefs, scientific and philosophical theories, technologies, and attitudes towards women, this diverse area also experienced similarities in demographic patterns and shared in the general evolution of capital, industry, and markets. All of these factors influenced both child life and how we have defined and institutionalized childhood on both sides of the Atlantic world. My own work, most recently two edited books — one on the development of Western childhood since antiquity, and another on children’s experiences since World War II — encouraged this view and with it the cross-national understanding of western societies as part of a single evolving cultural system.1 There is much to recommend it, since historians have learned a lot that we need to know through this expansive vision, and I am delighted to be identified with its development.

At the same time I have been pursuing a different kind of investigation by studying how parents and children in the United States related to each other over the course of two hundred years, from the founding of the Republic through the era of globalization.2 Specifically, I am trying to understand if and why Americans raised their children in ways that differed from their European counterparts and how this has laid the basis for the creation of a specific tradition of American child rearing.

I.

Starting in the late eighteenth century, European visitors proposed and many Americans adopted the view that children in the United


States are differently brought up. American children, Europeans observed in the nineteenth century, are rude, unmannerly, and bold; and even very young children were described as unnervingly confident. Some commentators were pleased by this directness and saw it as a refreshing sign of American vigor; others were far less charmed. “English children in the presence of strangers are reserved and shy,” one noted. “They feel that the nursery and school room are their proper sphere of action … Most unlike to these is the sentiment of the American, both parent and child. The little citizen seems to feel at a surprisingly early age, that he has a part on the stage of the world, and is willing enough to act a little before his time.”

Alexis de Tocqueville famously believed that parents in the United States treated their children more equally than parents did elsewhere and that they took them more seriously, but he was hardly alone. Sometime after de Tocqueville travelled to the United States, Polish Count Adam de Guronski did so as well. After his travels, he noted that in the United States children were early “emancipated … from parental authority and domestic discipline.” “Children accustomed to the utmost familiarity and absence of constraint with their parents, behave in the same manner with other older persons, and this sometimes deprives the social intercourse of Americans of the tint of politeness, which is more habitual in Europe.”

Observers variously attributed these changes to the availability of land, the shortage of labor, the equality of laws, and the absence of an aristocratic tradition with its emphasis on lineage and its many markers of class distinction.

Indeed, according to de Tocqueville, American children considered independence “an incontestable right,” and fathers and sons treated each other with far less formality than in Europe. Since American opportunities for individual advancement beckoned, children started to work early, according to de Guronski, and were, as a result, treated more equally within the household. One English woman thought this youthful independence affected even very young children, and not just their manners but their habits of learning and inquiry. Young children were entrusted with delicate objects like porcelain cups, which they handled with care, while they probed into the mechanisms of other objects with focused curiosity. Like contemporary psychologists, she was invoking an early version of the theory of the scientist in the crib and applying this to American babies.
These visitors, you might say, came expecting to see “the new world difference,” an America freed of tradition and lacking the usual restraints, and they found just what they expected, exaggerating small differences in demeanor and mistaking these for more fundamental changes. To some degree, of course, this was true, but it hardly undermines either the observations or the facts behind them. Americans did have land, needed labor, and put their children to work early. And they took seriously a revolution that emphasized greater equality and dismissed artificial deference. They also lacked the kind of aristocratic class system in which family was an expression of lineage and children were beholden to inherited descent.

Americans also wanted to see themselves as different — fresher, newer, younger — bringing the breezes of new world freedom as Benjamin Franklin brought his coonskin cap to Versailles. Moreover, the ideas articulated in the Revolution had stimulated the notion that child-rearing should be informed by revolutionary principles, and many Americans hoped to infuse it with their sense of change and future possibilities. Americans were more open to endowing children with greater independence and flexibility so that they might continue to believe as Nathaniel Willis, the editor of *Youth’s Companion* magazine, observed in 1827 that they were “born to higher destinies than their fathers.”

This view, often voiced after the Revolution, together with the availability of land (on a breathtaking scale) and an absence of laws that specifically regulated generational relations and obligations (as was common in Europe) did give the relationships between American parents and their children a different cast and lowered the degree of control that parents exercised over the young. Renowned colonial historian Bernard Bailyn argued over fifty years ago in a book on the special qualities of American education that younger people had an advantage in the new world environment, which provided conditions that encouraged youthful innovation. In the United States, youth, not age, was a better guide to success.

Two things need to be said from the outset: First, this did not make American parents indulgent toward their children, and children did not have a longer or more leisured or more playful childhood. American children were early engaged in the work of the world. Land and labor ratios made children’s work desirable and necessary. Nevertheless that work provided children, in the words I quoted earlier, the sense that they had “a place on the world’s stage.”

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than expressing subordination, work was seen as leading to self-improvement or future options. Their parents, in turn, allowed for what de Tocqueville described as a much easier and earlier transition to adulthood. Fathers, according to Tocqueville, felt “none of that bitter and angry regret which is apt to survive a bygone power.” Instead “the father foresees the limits of his authority long beforehand, and when the time arrives, he surrenders it without a struggle.”9 Second, it would be folly to imagine that what I am saying was true for the entire population in a society that was not only expanding with many kinds of immigrants, but in which at the time of the American Revolution one tenth of all children were slaves.

Instead of thinking of this pattern as applicable to all children or true for all parents, it would be best for us to imagine that this early period of the Republic established a particular kind of American formula or recipe, one that shifted the standard of what might be expected in the relations between parents and children and established a base line that could subsequently be invoked as desirable and legitimate, even as the initial circumstances that created it receded, and then disappeared. It is a recipe to which we still subscribe today, in a vastly different world.

Let me illustrate the pattern I am describing in the life of an individual. Ulysses S. Grant became a great Civil War general and then the 18th President of the United States. As a child, he grew up in the kind of household de Tocqueville or de Guronski might have observed as they traveled through rural Ohio, a state that produced more than its share of generals and presidents. Grant’s father was a prosperous leather tanner, and in “comfortable circumstances,” but young Ulysses was expected to do much of the work on the land his father owned. His father, Jessie, did not force him to labor in his own trade, which his son “detested,” but Ulysses began to work in the woods from the time he was seven or eight years of age “hauling all the wood used in the house and shops.”10

“When about eleven years old,” Grant later wrote, “I was strong enough to hold a plow. From that age until seventeen I did all the work done with horses, such as breaking up the land, furrowing, plowing corn and potatoes, bringing in the crops when harvested, hauling all the wood, besides tending two or three horses, a cow or two, and sawing wood for stoves, etc., while still attending school.”11 As he performed almost all the tasks of farming, young Ulysses played a significant part in the affairs of the Grant household and he
knew that this part was important and valuable. He was assuming a role on the world’s stage.

Grant’s early life reflected the kind of special American circumstances that de Guronski had in mind when he said that in the United States “the space, the modes to win a position by labor were unlimited, and thus children began early to work and earn for themselves. Thus ... they became self-relying and independent, and this independence continues to prevail in filial relations.” What to us might seem to be young Grant’s hard childhood, burdened by early responsibilities and physical labor, was a response to the American labor shortages of the day, which made the work of children valuable and a household necessity. They also made this work, as de Guronski understood, unusually liberating.

Grant also understood this. He explained that since he did everything expected of him he was never scolded or punished but was given the right to both “rational enjoyments” and a large degree of independence. This independence allowed him to roam freely, travel widely, often for many miles beyond the family home and frequently overnight. By the age of eleven, he was even allowed to trade horses on his own account. Grant was early trained to both responsibility and to freedom. By the time he was a teenager, he knew that he could engage in the world’s tasks and was rewarded for it. Grant knew he did well, and his growing sense of competence (despite various mistakes made along the way) made him strong. By the time he went off to West Point, Grant had been making an important contribution to his household since he was seven, and more over time as his capacities were proven and expanded. Ulysses Grant’s experience of a mid-western childhood was not unique. Other boys also worked hard at many tasks, enjoyed leisure, and were early invested with the ability to operate independently and to succeed as adults. So were many girls.

II.

This period did not last long. After the Civil War, to which Grant made a huge contribution as the general who commanded the Army of the West, it was cities, not the wide open country, that became the locale for opportunity for young boys and girls growing up. Industry was transforming these cities and young children hardly got the chance to trade horses as they experienced the pressures to help support
their families. Young immigrants, girls as well as boys, as young as eight sat cooped up for hours in sweatshops or large factories. Some were caught on the streets in mischief that portended a life of crime. More and more, they were in schools, where neither independence nor a sense of purposeful achievement were the defining qualities. These changes alarmed many Americans who began to propose solutions by using the old recipe, encoding an American way of child-rearing that remains alive to this day. What had once been a natural expression of family and social conditions, became a conscious approach to child-rearing as various reformers, educators, and child-rearing experts looked to preserve and to recreate a particular version of childhood, one they presumed would maintain the special characteristics of Americans — independence, a sense of future opportunity, and democratic participation. Let me provide you with four examples of this drawn from the past 150 years.

Even before the Civil War, immigration and city life had begun to challenge earlier patterns of life and some, like Charles Loring Brace, sought to save the children who were lost in this transformation — the growing army of street children, some of whom were trying to earn a living, some of whom were out for a good time, some of whom were engaged in illegal activities as pickpockets and other criminals. Through the Children’s Aid Society, Brace set out to find both more caring families for these youths and a substitute for the way of life he believed still available to the more fortunate boys of the countryside whose labor was enriching and fruitful. Brace and the Children’s Aid Society are usually remembered for starting the Orphan Trains to the West that placed children among rural families, where work would promote disciplined independence. In thus originating the modern idea of foster care to counteract the socially corrosive and personally destructive effects of neglectful families, Brace also hoped to preserve
the initiative and democratic qualities that he found in abundance among the street boys he hoped to save. What they lacked, Brace, believed was a context in which their energies could be deployed for their own future success without endangering the social order by law breaking. What they needed was rewarding work and better families. It was, of course, the life of boys like Grant that he had in mind when he put boys, and girls, on farms in Michigan and upstate New York.¹⁴

By the end of the nineteenth century, industrial dreariness, fetid cities, and rapid immigration seemed to overwhelm the familiar American past and to question the hopefulness about future improvement that Americans had once openly expressed. In trying to direct the torrent of change, America’s most important philosopher and educational theorist, John Dewey looked not just to those boys and girls who were likely to break the law, but to all children who were then, by law, gathered in classrooms around the country as attendance became obligatory and regular schooling a fact of life for everyone. The school, in Dewey’s vision, needed to become a proxy for the experiences of someone like young Ulysses Grant growing up in rural Ohio, a place where children would learn from their in-class experiences to become independent, competent in their practical knowledge, and capable of taking that knowledge into higher forms of learning as well as out into the real world. The classroom needed to become a place of authentic experience that would be the basis for individual growth and social progress. Rote learning, the standard experience for school children, made students, in Dewey’s words, “ductile and docile” undermining their initiative and depriving the classroom of its ability to prepare for the democracy that he valued and hoped to preserve in the United States. In proposing that the classroom become the laboratory of a restored democracy, Dewey tried to create the conditions for the active participation of students in their own instruction, replacing early independence in the work world with a new active engagement in the classroom. In the “Child and the Curriculum” Dewey noted that he hoped to restore to the branches of learning “the experience from which it had been abstracted.”¹⁵

Dewey was well aware that the schooling increasingly required of all was locking children away from the very life lessons that once assured their active independence. Dewey’s reforms were aimed to create a classroom in which the student’s “present powers ... are to assert themselves; his present capacities ... are to be exercised; his present


attitudes ... are to be realized.” At a time when American life was changing profoundly and industrial work and commercialized play were making it harder to develop traits of independence and democracy in children, Dewey looked to a revitalized, reformed education to provide the experience of accomplishment and competence that work and play had supplied earlier, at a time when both were changing beyond recognition.

Fifty years later, Benjamin Spock brought these same matters into the nursery. Just as schooling had reframed the social experience of children by the end of the nineteenth century, child-rearing advice was redefining the parenting of babies and young children in the twentieth. By mid-century, debates regarding how best to raise children occupied a considerable space in public life as new theories of learning and new psychological perspectives emerged from university laboratories and appeared on bookshelves, in newspapers, and in the conversations of American mothers and fathers.

Starting in the second decade of the twentieth century, the U.S. Children’s Bureau distributed millions of pamphlets to mothers across the country urging them to follow special routines to ensure their children’s proper nurture. By the Second World War several visions competed for mothers’ attention: from the warnings and strictures of behavioral psychologist John Watson (who bluntly asserted “Parents today are incompetent. Most of them should be indicted for psychological murder”) to the psychoanalytically inclined discussions in Parents’ Magazine, to the developmental observations of Arnold Gesell. All of them shared a vision of child management in which mothers would carefully supervise a child’s emotions and behavior;

all of them placed a huge emphasis on carefully modulated parental guidance.

In taking over the field after the end of World War II, Dr. Spock attempted to encourage young mothers to adopt a more relaxed vision, one that acknowledged children’s autonomy by recognizing their competence to grow and mature. Children, he noted in his manual liked to do “Grown Up Things,” and he proposed a child-rearing approach that showed mothers what they could expect so that they could loosen their grip and give their children room to grow and make mistakes on their own. Spock told mothers to stop being afraid, to love their babies, and to respond to them naturally. Many believe, inaccurately, that he promoted permissiveness in childrearing. In fact, Spock hoped that households would serve as a site for children to discover their growing competence.

The context had changed radically and children’s growing competence meant something altogether different than when Ulysses Grant’s father had supervised his son’s upbringing, but the idea was the same; in neither case was the parent to be permissive. In neither was the parent to overwhelm the child’s own purposes and inclinations. Spock invoked Freudian principles, but it was not the Vienna of the late-nineteenth-century haute bourgeoisie that Spock had in mind when he told what would eventually amount to tens of millions of American mothers to enjoy their children because in the famous phrase that opened the book “Trust yourself: You know more than you think you do.” It was, instead, an American household in which the child’s strengths would develop in a family organized along democratic, non-authoritarian lines. The kind of formality between the generations that Freud observed and to which he directed his analysis was never the issue for Spock. While Spock nodded toward the Oedipus complex, his eyes were set on the complex of behaviors that led to over-mothering.

By the mid twentieth century, American parents placed far fewer demands on their children than their predecessors had a century earlier, and most American children now went through a long and often fraught adolescence because of their extended schooling and its associated dependency, an adolescence that Tocqueville claimed American youth did not have in the early nineteenth century. But, in many ways, the basic question that guided most of Spock’s advice adhered to that earlier recipe now brought into a new century. And it sought to answer a simple question: How in this new world of

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intensive parenting, elaborate schooling, and declining children’s responsibility would America’s young be allowed to be become independent, successful, and confident? What had once been built into an unselfconscious environment and grew out of active work and early maturity, had become the basic problem guiding the most important child-rearing expert in American history. It is a question that has not gone away.

It defines the last instance I want to bring to your attention: the recent, vigorous conversations about Chinese Tiger Mothers, French mamans, and American mommys. These conversations have emerged from the self-proclaimed success of the strict, old-world, child-training techniques described by Yale legal scholar Amy Chua in raising her daughters.20 Amy Chua’s book and the very loud controversy it has created bring us back to the American difference in child-rearing strategies. And it forces us to ask whether American mothers can continue to expect their children to succeed in a highly competitive, now manifestly global world, where none of the earlier rules seem to apply — not those of the Ohio countryside or those of the industrial city or even those of the managerial office of the mid twentieth century. It is a world in which schooling (not experience) goes on forever and where, even after decades of such training, children often come home because they cannot find jobs.

If Chua is to be believed, America’s looser, less demanding forms of child-rearing are failing because successful children need the firm hand of parental directives to lead them to goals set for them by parents who, in turn, are honoring their own parents. It is well for us to remember that it was the absence of deference to family honor and tradition that had freed American children to pursue their own goals in their own way back in the period of the early Republic. Unbound by obligations to a restricting past, children of the new world could adapt to changing circumstances and move beyond their parents’ knowledge to create and innovate. Over time, Americans had tried to substitute active knowledge in the classroom and autonomy in the nursery for the experience that had once stimulated children early in life to tackle problems and gain confidence. But in this new “new world,” is it still desirable for children to choose their own path and claim their own future? With challenging life experiences and productive work pushed ever further out of children’s reach, and with even chores and family obligations absent in many families, is there anything salvageable from the old recipe? I have heard American

mothers agonize about this question as a result of reading Chua’s book, second guessing how they raise their children and fearful of getting it wrong.

Clearly, these conversations about Chua, and related ones around books by Judith Warner and Pamela Druckerman on French styles of child rearing,²¹ take for granted that Americans approach parenting differently. We give children more leeway, allow them to run their own lives (and sometimes those of adults as well). Now that we live in a multicultural society and in a global world, it should not surprise us that alternatives to the American way of child-rearing have become prominent parts of the public conversation. After all, this comparative perspective guided the many visitors to the U.S. in the first half of the nineteenth century. And we have become acutely aware of the changes affecting our children so that even without Tiger Mother warnings, over the past twenty-five years, many American parents have been taking command of their children’s lives, patrolling their internet contacts, strenuously overseeing their school success, and tightening the reins generally as threats to children’s wellbeing seem to loom everywhere in a media-saturated world and our youth battle for a place in a rapidly changing economy.

Today, the success of our children seems to be on everyone’s minds as we look around the world where economies are faster, students seem smarter, and their work-habits stronger. Once, the children Americans raised were innovative, hard-working and appeared to provide the nation with a special edge. No surprise therefore that ideas are coming at us from all sides, from immigrants who have been unusually successful in the American context or from cultures where women seem far less harried by childrearing duties. Maybe a new global world requires that we become manifestly more like everyone else? Maybe we already have.

III.

In the end, the question circles back to what exactly we think our childrearing is about and what it is we value. In the nineteenth century, American adapted to their new nation and to what seemed to be the large opportunities it offered, but they also faced large risks. Clearly the opportunities today are different and so are the risks. Can we trust our children to know how to operate in this new world? Or, let me reverse the question. Do we trust ourselves to know how

best to operate in this new world? This, of course, is a delicate dilemma. But child-rearing is always delicate and we have faced such dilemmas before.

It is worth remembering that success was only part of the basis for the American recipe. American children were bold, they were innovative, they were not afraid to be heard. They expected to play a part on the world’s stage. Do we still value these qualities at a time when the aim of schooling seems more than ever to be children who are ductile and docile, able to sit still and take exams, a direction that Dewey (despite his best efforts) could never permanently influence? Dewey valued democracy and thought it was an important part of how schools should operate and what education should encourage. Dr. Spock valued a child’s happiness and her ability to set her own course. How we bring up our children reflects many features of our culture: economics and marketplace realities, obviously, but also how we participate in politics, and how we hope to relate to each other ethically and morally. It reflects things that we value, like creativity. Finally, it also reflects our history of doing things. After two hundred years this history creates its own constraints, written into our social codes and our cultural products. While predicting the future is something no historian would casually encourage, I think that our conversations will almost certainly draw upon an American tradition that I hope I have shown you today — a vision of how we should raise our children that has often been challenged and continues to be shaken by changes in our lives, but remains firmly an American variant of the western tradition.

Paula S. Fass is the Margaret Byrne Professor of History Emerita at the University of California at Berkeley, where she taught for thirty-six years. Since 2010, she has also been Distinguished Scholar in Residence at Rutgers University, New Brunswick. Trained as a social and cultural historian of the United States at Barnard College and Columbia University, she has over the last two decades been active in developing the field of children’s history and worked to make this an interdisciplinary field with a global perspective. Her books include Children of a New World: Society, Culture, and Globalization (2007); Kidnapped: Child Abduction in America (1997); Outside In: Minorities and the Transformation of American Education (1989); The Damned and the Beautiful: American Youth in the 1920s (1977). With Mary Ann Mason, she edited Childhood in America (2000), the first anthology in children’s history. She was Editor-in-Chief of the award-winning Encyclopedia of Children and Childhood in History and Society (2004) and in the past three years published two other edited volumes on the subject of childhood: Reinventing Childhood After World War II (with Michael Grossberg) in 2011, and the Routledge History of Childhood in the Western World, published in 2013. Her family memoir,
In her memoir "Inheriting the Holocaust: A Second Generation Memoir" (2009), she recounts and examines her experiences as the daughter of concentration camp victims eager to understand the history of her new country and culture. She is currently researching and writing an interpretive history of parents and children in American history over the course of two hundred years, from the founding of the republic through the global era, tentatively entitled "The End of American Childhood."