Rodney Hessinger. *Seduced, Abandoned, and Reborn: Visions of Youth in Middle-Class America, 1780-1850.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005. 255 pp. $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-3879-2.

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Kids Those Days

In every generation, Americans worry that young people are getting out of control. The sources of anxiety shift over time and the levels of collective concern vary from mild to hysterical, but the overall pattern is unmistakable. Children reach an age at which they begin roaming on their own into the world. Adults worry that, unsupervised and unguided, those children are ill-equipped to handle exposure to dangerous new influences. Easily tempted to indulge in adult freedoms while feeling little obligation to acknowledge the responsibilities of adulthood, the young become unruly and immoral, with dire consequences for them as individuals and, by extension, for the nation as a whole. Indeed, reflecting on the marvelous array of bogeymen that have appeared on the social and cultural landscape to destroy the character of America's young over the centuries, it seems nearly miraculous that the United States has managed to avoid being overrun by sex fiends, addicts, and violent criminals of all stripes.

In *Seduced, Abandoned, and Reborn*, Rodney Hessinger explores how and why Americans betrayed these sorts of concerns on a massive scale for the first time, and the meanings of those concerns for class formation in the United States. In the generations after an American Revolution ostensibly predicated on democracy and individual liberties, patriarchal systems of authority appeared increasingly untenable. With such ideological pressures for change given intensifying material force by new economic opportunities available in America's cities and on its frontiers, young American men in particular left their parents' homes in larger and larger numbers to discover their own paths to maturity in the commercial world. Republican man was ever more surely being transformed into the self-made man.

Such a transformation, however, raised both fears and hackles among adult Americans, particularly among those of a more traditional bent. An environment of expanding economic prospects offered all sorts of new avenues to upward mobility for members of the developing middle class, but it simultaneously engendered the growth of a consumer marketplace that presented ambitious and striving young men with seemingly limitless choices over everything from how they spent their leisure time and which women they pursued to where they went to church and what kinds of books they read. Without conventional sources of authority to help the young navigate through such treacherous waters, adults worried that many would become easy prey for corrupting elders and foolish peers. Seduced by the temptations of the gambling hall, the brothel, and the tavern, they would be left morally and fiscally bankrupt before their lives had even really begun.

But America's self-styled guardians of virtue were not to be undone. Fighting back both rhetorically and institutionally, conservative moralists reached out to young people. Recognizing the futility of even trying to use coercion and threats to control a population that could no longer be compelled to listen, educators, ministers, authors, and other reformers tried instead to persuade their target audience to adhere on their own to a slowly codifying bourgeois set of values, and to craft organizational frameworks within which young Americans would internalize behavioral codes of decency, order, and respectability. If the morals of young people in big cities could not be effectively policed as if they still lived in a colonial village, then they would have to be taught to police themselves.

The general trajectory of this story, which sits at the heart of Hessinger's work, is a familiar one to students of the early republic and the antebellum period. But Hessinger has some provocative and original insights into how these historical changes unfolded and thus into how the American middle class itself was made. Centering his analysis on the city of Philadelphia, Hessinger argues that the middle class was forged essentially by the very processes of those who would be its members working

out, articulating, and trying to resolve fears about their children. Tracing a broad arc through a diversity of efforts to reform the young, Hessinger begins with a discussion of seduction fiction popular in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, in which authors warned young women to be cautious in their courtship lest they be duped by rakish men who would deprive them of their chastity and toss them aside, leaving them forever ruined. Reflecting larger concerns about the increasing freedom of young people to choose marriage partners independently of their parents, Hessinger argues that the didactic message of seduction fiction was an inherently unstable one. It may have reinforced associations among vulnerability, virtue, and femininity, but it was also difficult if not impossible to glean a straightforward model of accountable and conscientious manhood from stories that depicted men primarily as sexual predators.

Moreover, reformers working under the assumptions of the seduction novel discovered, to their surprise, that the real world was not the fictional world. Focusing on the efforts of the Philadelphia Magdalene Society to put the city's prostitutes back on the path to bourgeois rectitude, Hessinger describes the operators of the society's asylum as frustrated that their offers of assistance appealed to very few of the women they believed needed their help, and confused that even fewer had life stories that matched the seduction narrative they anticipated. Yet out of such consternation came the stuff of class formation. Rather than accept that seduction narratives and women's lives failed to jibe because poverty forced difficult choices onto women with the misfortune to suffer from it, society members instead formulated a class-based understanding of morality, concluding that only middle-class women could truly be victims of deceitful men. Poor women, by contrast, became morally inadequate prostitutes because that was just how poor people behaved.

There still remained, of course, the knotty problem of how to keep young men from patronizing those prostitutes, for middle-class adults increasingly saw premarital chastity for men as valuable and as much a hallmark of class status as it was for women. Colleges and institutions of higher learning might have seemed like promising places for young men to imbibe developing bourgeois moral values that called for such kinds of self-discipline, but for the fact that the colleges of the early republic were widely beset by riots and generalized disorder among students who refused to obey college authorities or even to work particularly hard at their studies. Aware that a college degree was usually a gratuitous credential for making a living and that there was always another school that would take their tuition money, the few students who did go to college were an impetuous bunch that hardly promised to fulfill the republican vision of graduates serving as a vanguard for a virtuous citizenry. Turning his attention particularly to the experience of the University of Pennsylvania, Hessinger delineates how college administrators struggled to devise structural enticements that would make students behave themselves and give professors greater authority in the lecture hall. The most critical and ultimately successful of these was the introduction of a meritocratic system in which students would be ranked and rewarded based on their classroom performance. An academic meritocracy was (and, to this reviewer's way of thinking, largely remains) an ingenious device. It gave students incentives to work in competition with one another rather than in coordination against the faculty, simultaneously encouraging self-discipline and returning to professors a sort of parental rule by handing them a cache of rewards to bestow upon young men who wanted to work for them.

Although a merit-based hierarchy had a certain appeal in a world of economic strivers and helped educators articulate a framework for keeping rowdy young men somewhat in check, it hardly transformed obnoxious undergraduates into obedient grinds overnight. Young people simply did not feel that they had to give their elders much respect, a reality that even churches confronted. Turning from the realm of higher education to that of religion, Hessinger describes how the Sunday school movement, centered in Philadelphia and booming in the 1820s and 1830s, marked an effort by established churches to co-opt rebellious young parishioners, who were so strongly encouraged by evangelical revivalists to develop their own individualized piety that they openly and self-righteously challenged traditional churches and their leaders. Conservative clergymen were less than thrilled about handing any sort of pastoral authority over to laypeople. But using young people as Sunday school teachers kept them somewhat under the supervision of church authorities and persuaded them to remain respectful of those authorities, while also allowing them to feel they played a valuable role in the direction of the church.

Critical to the Sunday school movement's success beyond Philadelphia, Hessinger notes, was the publishing activity of the American Sunday School Union, whose press churned out a remarkable six million volumes by 1830. The importance reformers saw in the persuasive possibilities of reading material runs throughout *Seduced, Abandoned, and Reborn*, perhaps never more so than in the book's final chapters, which focus on antebellum ad-

vice literature marketed to young men. In some ways, these materials returned to the themes of the seduction fiction that had been popular decades earlier, except now authors stressed the vulnerability of young men rather than young women to tempting but dangerous illusions. Warning that the economic success young men sought in American cities would only come to them if they developed a sound character, a moral conscience, and a pious lifestyle, advice book authors tried alternately to persuade and frighten their readers into compliance by exposing the deceitfulness of licentious women, confidence men, and purveyors of pornography who promised sexual pleasure and easy money but in fact delivered penury, death, damnation, and diseased self-indulgence, the last symbolized by authors' obsessive concerns with masturbation.

Hessinger builds a convincing case that many of the central values trumpeted by the antebellum American bourgeoisie–piety, chastity, self-discipline, moral conscientiousness, and meritocratic success–were born in significant measure out of their repeated and sustained efforts to contain the overly exuberant independence of their children as they stood on the cusp of adulthood. In addition, Hessinger is sensitive to the ironies, contradictions, and compromises embedded in this containment process. He smartly and repeatedly observes, for instance, that if reformers wanted to get young people's attention at all, they had no choice but to engage the competitive urban consumer marketplace that served as the very source of their anxiety. The American Sunday School Union and the publishers of advice guides could print all the books they wanted, but if they could not convince their target audience that reading their offerings was as worthwhile as reading titillating sporting magazines, their efforts would be for naught. Such a reality put reformers in a precarious position. They could encourage men to be self-disciplined, but they had to do so by promising that material success would follow, thus mobilizing the very selfish desires for gain that they viewed as part of the problem with young people in the first place. They could try to persuade men to stifle their premarital sexual impulses, but they captured the notice of readers with voyeuristic descriptions of masturbation and gruesome stories of the consequences of sexual misbehavior, thus indulging the same appetites for graphic sensationalism they were trying to undercut.

In part, these sorts of accommodations to the desires and preferences of young people were practical adjustments to the kinds of mobility and freedoms young people increasingly had at their disposal. Where adults had once dictated codes of behavior to their children, they now had little choice but to engage in a dialogue. But the theoretical underpinnings to reformers' efforts also necessitated talking with, rather than at, the young. Hessinger offers the intriguing suggestion that for whatever undeniable significance religion played in the formation and content of middle-class values, reformist strategies to persuade rather than to coerce the young to behave and discipline themselves owed less to any Christian educational principles than to secular pedagogical ideas like those of John Locke, who recognized it was impossible simply to force young people to behave in a free society. In such circumstances, if you wanted young people to listen, then you had at least to make gestures toward engaging them on their terms.

Such dialogue and such contradictions, however, point to significant questions for the kinds of conclusions Hessinger ultimately tries to draw from his work. Hessinger insists that the values and institutions crafted by conservative reformers "did have impact" on young people (p. 179). More broadly, in fact, he asserts that they forged the foundation of a "coherent middle class" (p. 182). But it is hardly clear how values fraught with contradictions about things as fundamental as the moral quality of the free market made for anything coherent at all. Moreover, and perhaps more significantly, Hessinger concedes that for whatever "impact" they had, conservative reformers trying to rein in the young not only had to compromise with young people's desires but that they were, at best, partially successful in imparting middle-class values and behavioral standards to young people. No matter what they read in the books of William Alcott and heard in the sermons Old School Presbyterian ministers, many children of the bourgeoisie (and more than a few of their parents as well) continued to drink and gamble. They still went to brothels. They still read dirty newspapers. And heaven knows they still masturbated. So, then, were these young men still middle class, even as they behaved in ways that stood so obviously beyond the acceptable pale of middle-class standards? If so, then one has to wonder less whether the middle class was coherent than whether the gap between their articulated values and their lived behavior was so vast as to amount to rank hypocrisy. If not, then when exactly did these young men become middle class? When they got married? When they had children of their own?

To a certain extent, this sort of criticism may be an unfair one to make of Hessinger's work. Hessinger is writing about the realm of articulated ideology rather far more than about that of social and material reality, and it is perhaps unrealistic to ask for any single book to cover all of those enormous bases. And yet, if Hessinger is right

to take ideas seriously, not having any thorough sense of the realities of middle-class life or of the unfolding of a middle-class person's maturation process as it was actually lived makes it difficult to get a firm sense of the connection between what the middle class said and believed they were in their own minds and what they really were. Certainly, belief and ideas shape behavior. But they are not the same thing as behavior itself. Hessinger convinces that the things middle-class parents said they believed came from their frustrations and fears about their children. To what extent the things they said altered the ways they actually lived remains open to debate. Given that the professed values of the antebellum middle class became supposed "American values" and that we still live in a world where claims about those values and who possesses them enable the mustering of enormous social and political capital, this is a question of no small import.

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