H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Kriste Lindenmeyer. *The Greatest Generation Grows Up: American Childhood in the 1930s.* Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Publisher, 2005. xiv + 305 pp. $27.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-56663-660-5; $18.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-56663-730-5.

Reviewed by Dominique Padurano (Department of History, Horace Mann High School, New York)
Published on H-Amstdy (September, 2007)

American Children and Childhood during the Great Depression

Kriste Lindenmeyer has produced a fine account of childhood in the United States during the Great Depression of the 1930s. In *The Greatest Generation Grows Up*, Lindenmeyer argues that social, economic, and cultural factors reinforced an idealized, modern definition of childhood, which the government strove to implement during the decade through a variety of federal and state initiatives. Characterizing the book as a "synthesis" (p. 3), Lindenmeyer has marshaled an impressive array of primary sources–including her own oral histories of Americans who lived through the Depression during their youth–to illustrate an argument, which is rooted firmly in the existing historiography. Though the author fails to adequately distinguish New Deal efforts to institutionalize a common ideal of childhood from earlier periods of activism and reform on behalf of American youth, Lindenmeyer's contribution to the histories of childhood, of the Great Depression, and of the United States more broadly remains significant.

The book's first chapter, "Stable and Fragile Families in Hard Times," situates American children of the 1930s within the context of the nuclear family. Such a starting point is effective not only because families remain children's most important social milieu, but also because most of today's undergraduates and graduate students (not to mention a sizeable portion of the present cohort of assistant professors) will remember this generation as senior citizens, if they can recall the "greatest generation" at all. In this inaugural chapter, Lindenmeyer establishes the engaging narrative structure for the entire book, alternating between the local and the national. For example, she recounts the stories of the Pettways of Gee's Bend, Alabama, and the Caliguris of Brooklyn, New York, during the early years of the Great Depression before discussing the federal government's efforts to improve the lives of the nation's youth before the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt. Though the reader is frequently frustrated by the author's failure to see the individual families' lives out through the end of the decade, her strategy of juxtaposing micro- and macro-accounts of the Depression is effective for maintaining readers' interest. (For scholars who specialize in the period, much of Lindenmeyer's macro-story will be familiar.)

Photographs in this and subsequent chapters are helpful for readers unfamiliar with the era to visualize the privations suffered by many children during this era. This chapter's images, in particular, help to materialize one of Lindenmeyer's greatest strengths: attention to race and ethnicity. She argues that New Deal policies "aggressively promoted" the "middle-class family ideal … regardless of race, class, or ethnicity" of the single (male) breadwinner and the stay-at-home mother supporting children who performed only small chores at home while attending school full-time through adolescence (p. 44). Through small case studies of communities around the country, Lindenmeyer illustrates how difficult it was for many families of the period to live up to that middle-class ideal. The author's selection of cases and accompanying photographs show that this difficulty was experienced nationwide, shared by African Americans and poor whites in Alabama, as well as by Mexican American migrant farm workers in California. The photograph of a white boy playing with an erector set provides an effective contrast to the chapter's other images (p. 13), illustrating the middle-class ideal of childhood that Lindenmeyer argues drove New Deal programs aimed at American youth, at the same time it reminds readers that not all children experienced the Great Depression in the same way.

The next four chapters–"Work, If You Could Find It" (chapter 2), "Transient Youth: On the Road to Nowhere?" (chapter 3), "The Importance of Being Educated" (chapter 4), and "Players and Consumers in Popular Culture" (chapter 5)–display the strengths and weaknesses that *The Greatest Generation Grows Up* exhibited in chapter 1. Chapter 2 demonstrates that despite the federal govern-

ment's efforts to regulate childhood as a protected period of Americans' lives, economic circumstances dictated that many children, such as Arizona-born Cesar Chavez, who Lindenmeyer discusses, worked alongside adults in fields or with other children in the nation's urban factories (p. 56). The author's description of Lehigh Valley's (Pennsylvania) "Baby Strike" in this chapter was particularly engaging due to both the depth of coverage (seven pages as opposed to much shorter anecdotes earlier in the book) and the ways in which she showed the strike's relation to earlier child labor reforms (i.e., that the 1933 strike "demonstrated that the onset of the depression threatened the progress of the 1920s" [p. 68])–as well as its impact upon later New Deal legislation (i.e., a catalyst behind the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938). The coverage of young "hoboes" during the 1930s in chapter 3 showcases Lindenmeyer's sensitivity to race, gender, and sexuality exceptionally well; similarly her treatment of the Scottsboro boys demonstrates prostitution and homosexuality among girls and boys on the rails.

Chapter 4 further highlights the book's fortes and shortcomings. Her discussion of the Lemon Grove incident, *Williams v. Zimmerman* (1937), and Lorenzo Mattwaoshshe demonstrate that while the federal government may have encouraged schooling for adolescents as a way to make the labor market less competitive for adult men, racial prejudice sometimes prevented members of minority communities from achieving the middle-class ideal of childhood. Lindenmeyer's narrative also sheds light on how access to education was considered a key civil rights issue a full two decades before *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). Nevertheless, this reader occasionally wished to hear the experiences of schoolchildren in their own words. A wonderful anecdote which illustrated the agency of children in school–so difficult for the historian to present given the usual silence of children in the historical record–could have been enlivened further if the author had used Hiroko Kamikawa's own words rather than paraphrased them from her oral history (p. 114). Moreover, a stronger analytical framework might have led Lindenmeyer to examine the extent to which the state's encouragement of teenagers to remain in school through high school graduation engendered an implicit *quid pro quo* between the state and the nation's children: i.e., the state pledges to provide Americans under age eighteen protection and benefits as "children," who in turn agree to submit to becoming "good" citizens as defined by the state. Most problematic, however, is Lindenmeyer's failure to wrestle with certain conclusions about American childhood and education reached by an earlier generation of scholars. Many historians will be familiar, for example, with Paula Fass's argument in *The Damned and the Beautiful: American Youth in the 1920s* (1977) that the rise of high schools in the United States during the 1920s helped to define modern adolescence and to shape many characteristics associated with youth culture to this day. Lindenmeyer neither references Fass's 1977 work (though she does note a later and less groundbreaking book by the same author on minorities and education), nor grapples with a question that her own work raises: "how did American childhood during the 1930s differ from childhood during the 1920s?"

The closest that the reader comes to a satisfying answer to this query comes in "Uncle Sam's Children," in which Lindenmeyer fully explicates the thesis which she has hinted at since the outset of *Greatest Generation Grows Up*. In this chapter, the author argues that the New Deal "provided the framework for what the depression generation understood as the parameters of modern American childhood" (p. 206). Lindenmeyer shows that New Deal programs which were aimed explicitly at youth, like the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and the National Youth Administration (NYA), as well as those geared towards the amelioration of the lives of Americans of all generations, such as the Rural Electrification Administration, helped millions of families to begin to achieve the ideal of middle-class childhood, for example, by helping children to stay in school and to read and study into the night with the advent of electric lamps in their homes. In the conclusion, Lindenmeyer argues that, in its attempts to avoid charges that the New Deal represented socialism, the Roosevelt administration shied away from including financial aid to children under the Social Security Act. Instead, the old-age pensions included in Social Security were characterized as "entitlements based on returns for individual independent initiative" while Title IV, Aid to Dependent Children, was "charity and not a right" (p. 246).

In this respect, the 1930s represented both the culmination of a decades-long movement to sanction childhood as a protected period and a template for future limits on state efforts on behalf of American children. The virtual abolition of child labor accomplished by the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, cited by Lindenmeyer as a crucial component toward the realization of a middle-class ideal of childhood for all Americans, realized a major Progressive goal, while the New Deal's failure to ensure universal health care, basic nutrition, and equal educational opportunities for the nation's youth remains a legacy left unfulfilled to this day. Kriste Lindenmeyer's book is a fine source for students of American history who wish to examine further this unfortunate paradox.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Dominique Padurano. Review of Lindenmeyer, Kriste, *The Greatest Generation Grows Up: American Childhood in the 1930s.* H-Amstdy, H-Net Reviews. September, 2007.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13561

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.