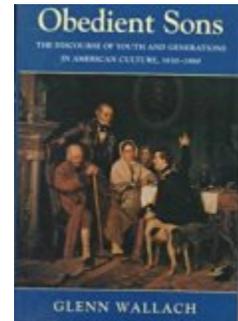


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Glenn Wallach. *Obedient Sons: The Discourse of Youth and Generations in American Culture, 1630-1860*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997. ix + 265 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-55849-057-4.

Reviewed by Ann Fidler (Ohio University)  
Published on H-SHEAR (March, 1998)



## Straight Talk About Youth and American History

It is not often when I read a history book that fragments of songs keep drifting through my mind. Sometimes when I read about African-American culture during slavery, the haunting spiritual “We are Climbing Jacob’s Ladder” (featured in the Ken Burns series on the Civil War) starts up in my head, but this phenomenon is rare, perhaps because my speciality of legal history is rarely the subject of snappy tunes. However, during the course of reading Glenn Wallach’s book on youth and generation in American history from 1630-1860, snatches from well-worn anthems of youth sung by the Rolling Stones and David Bowie resounded frequently. I divulge this peculiar information because it graphically illustrates one of the major arguments made by Glenn Wallach’s *Obedient Sons: The Discourse of Youth and Generations in American Culture, 1630-1860*. In the book, the author asserts that when American historians approach the subject of youth between the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries they do so with a particular soundtrack running through their heads—a soundtrack that emphasizes rebellion of the young against their elders. *Obedient Sons* suggests that it is time to change the tune.

Historians are not immune to the never-ending fascination of popular culture with youth rebellion. Unconsciously or consciously, the search for the clash of generations has emerged as the focus of a considerable portion of research on young people. Wallach suggests the study of youth in history has become formulaic—youth equals rebellion. His book *Obedient Sons* offers a thoughtful challenge to this historical predilection. Rather than tak-

ing for granted that the refrain of youth has ever been one of conflict with elders, Wallach believes that for over two hundred years, young people were energized by their interactions with their seniors. The heady pull of responsibility, instead of the divisive tension of rebellion, characterized the words and thoughts of youths from the days of Cotton Mather to those of “Young America.” The author bases his conclusions on a careful and creative study of the social discourse that infused ideas about youth and generations. With patience and precision, Wallach sorts through the tangled heaps of rhetoric about young people. In so doing, his book makes a valuable contribution to the study of youth in American history.

*Obedient Sons* begins by mapping the meaning and use of the words “generation” and “youth” in the 17th and 18th centuries. Wallach’s analysis of these two terms reveals that rather than being static and imbued with a universal meaning, both words exhibited a flexibility and complexity that historians have all but overlooked. In his first chapter, the author traces the concept of generation from its Old Testament origins to its evolution into “the basis for a public vocabulary used to describe and explain changes in New England society” (p. 11). Likewise, in Chapter Two’s discussion of the word “youth,” Wallach eschews the simplistic notion that the term was entirely defined by questions of age. In a section that studies the rhetoric associated with the participation of young men in militia service, the author suggests that individuals who spoke about youth used the word “as an umbrella term to describe a complex sociopolitical con-

dition as well as one of age” (p. 39). Through his careful dissection of the terms “youth” and “generation,” Wallach lays the groundwork for his argument that responsibility and consciousness of the past served as the hallmarks of young people in the years following the Revolution.

Chapter Three shifts the focus from the wider purview of general rhetoric to the discourse uttered by youths participating in the heady mixture of temperance, antislavery, political, and benevolent organizations that sprang up in the first half of the 19th century. While these organizations exhibited distinctive characteristics, Wallach finds that many of them shared some basic rhetorical concerns. In a wide-ranging discussion that includes analysis of the public speech of free black youth groups, the author turns his argument against the current historical tide by suggesting that young antebellum men were not dispossessed souls peering into an abyss of national emptiness or disgruntled rebels bent on patricide. Rather, the rhetoric of young men’s organizations of every stripe clearly demonstrates a strong desire to maintain “continuity with the fathers,” and to assume the obligations relinquished by those who came before them (p. 57). Antebellum youth organizations were not incubators for rebellion, but institutions that created “complex, multiple bonds between young men and across generations” (p. 57).

In Chapter Four, Wallach puts forth the argument that the language used by organizations like the Young Men’s Colonization Society spilled out into the public domain, influencing how America commemorated its past, and how American artists came to define their artistic uniqueness. The author suggests that “the discourse of youth and generations provided the framework to explore the coexistence of past and present and to examine related cultural issues that had no explicit ‘youthful’ content” (p. 90). Wallach graphically illustrates his point by turning to seven familiar genre paintings dating from the 1840s that feature depictions of interactions between the young and the old. Other scholars who have commented on these paintings tend to view them either as images of conflict or continuity. Wallach suggests that the images in question do not fall neatly into the straightjacket of single categories. Rather, they can be viewed as complex images that formed part of the ongoing antebellum dialogue about how to preserve the past for the future.

After investigating the links between art, memory, and the rhetoric of youth, the author focuses his attention on one of the most ubiquitous catch phrases of the 1840s and 1850s—“Young America.” As with his discus-

sion of the meaning and use of the terms “youth” and “generation,” Wallach challenges the rather lackadaisical assumptions historians have applied to the phrase. Chapter Five delves deeply into the matter of Young America, and the results are fascinating. Young America was not a single entity, but one that went through several transformations. Out of the multiple versions of Young America grew a complicated series of dialogues about the place of the young in society. Wallach argues that “Young America synthesized older traditions with new materials, some imported from Europe and some occurring locally, to create a rhetoric about youth that implied responsibility to the past while permitting an exploration of progressive change” (p. 117). Wallach carefully traces the thread of Young America through the rhetoric of individuals interested in creating a national literature and into the public speech of the political arena where it took on strident overtones. One of the highlights of the chapter is the author’s revealing discussion of the rhetorical bombast found in the first six issues of George Sanders’ *Democratic Review* of 1852. The *Democratic Review*, described by one newspaper as descending “upon the dead weeds of old fogydom like a whirlwind in a cane-brake,” seems chock full of the youth-as-rebel motif (p. 140). However, in a careful analysis of the publication, Wallach demonstrates that the *Democratic Review* cannot be understood as only an organ of revolt. Amidst its determination to roust out “the vile and contemptible arts and subterfuges by which old fogydom” ruled the nation, the *Democratic Review* continued to tap into older conceptions of youth and generations (p. 139).

*Obedient Sons* concludes with an epilogue in which the author uses his ideas about the rhetoric of youth and generations to critique the way in which twentieth-century Americans analyze the public speech of young people. In due course, Wallach confronts the specter of Generation X, created by marketing executives and individuals who “assume that a generation is a natural occurrence, like the Old Faithful geyser or Halley’s Comet” (p. 162). Rather than viewing Generation X as a preordained collection of young people, the author suggests that all of the recent hoopla about the X’ers simply forms another chapter in the ever-changing discourse about youth in American society that has persisted since the 1630s. The young men and women who adopted the term “slacker” as their cri de coeur may seem light-years away from the likes of Cotton Mather. However, after reading Wallach’s book, the notion that jeremiads and grunge anthems draw on a common pool of questions about responsibility and the role of the past makes sense.

A hallmark of any good book is whether it provides directions for additional exploration of the topic under discussion. *Obedient Sons* certainly does this. Historians who read Wallach's work will find a number of intriguing avenues for further investigation. To its credit, the book tries to incorporate more than just elite, white male rhetoric. In a variety of places, Wallach draws attention to the rhetoric of young African-American men and young white women. However, his analysis along these lines is never fully realized. Likewise, his discussion of class and region tends to rely on generalizations, never fully plunging into a complete discussion of the potential effects these elements produced on social and cultural concepts associated with young people. While he sometimes paints with a broad brush, Wallach should not be chastised too strongly for this tendency. Instead,

he should be congratulated for achieving his main goal of unraveling the rhetoric that surrounded young white men before 1860, and thanked for suggesting ways in which future generations of historians can enrich the study of "the mess of meanings" surrounding the language of youth and generations (p. 9).

Glenn Wallach's *Obedient Sons* is a work that greatly enriches the study of youth in America. I highly recommend this "up and doing" book to historians of any age seeking to get a better grasp on the complicated role of young people in American history.

Copyright (c) 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-shear/>

**Citation:** Ann Fidler. Review of Wallach, Glenn, *Obedient Sons: The Discourse of Youth and Generations in American Culture, 1630-1860*. H-SHEAR, H-Net Reviews. March, 1998.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1850>

Copyright © 1998 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](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).