

Chapter Five

The Making of Children's Culture

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Because psychic structure must always be passed from generation to generation through the narrow funnel of childhood, a society's child-rearing practices are not just one item in a list of cultural traits. They are the very condition for the transmission and development of all other cultural elements, and place definite limits on what can be achieved in all other spheres of history.¹

Children's culture in the West has a complex history. Even the most cursory mapping would require an overview of the succession of institutions—family, law courts, church, school, media—that have had a stake in the matrix of socialization. This is because what might be taken for children's culture has always been primarily a matter of culture produced for and urged upon children. This appears to be as true of the hunting games or planting tales of preindustrial life as of the street games and nursery-school songs of modern children. The earliest stages of maturation have always been the period in which the young are most intensely subjected to cultural forms designed for and directed at them. Childhood is a condition defined by powerlessness and dependence upon the adult community's directives and guidance. Culture is, after all, as the repository of social learning and socialization, the means by which societies preserve and strengthen their position in the world.

The forms of children's cultural expression are therefore intimately bound up with the changing alignments that define a community's social beliefs and practices of cultural transmission. Whether it is participation in medieval festivals, or the nursery songs, riddles and stories of nineteenth-century childhood, or more recent playground games and jokes, the seemingly autonomous expressions take shape within a broader cultural framework. Medieval festivals needed to have church sanction, nursery rhymes presumed both nurseries and books, and games require both playgrounds and time to play. Children's culture is always highly inflected with societal purpose.

This is not to say that young children on their own, in their games, humour, songs, stories and interactions, do not create and express themselves authentically. No doubt, wherever children gather together and interact among themselves, spontaneous acts of self-expression occur. Indeed, the momentum of contemporary trends in childrearing is towards granting greater freedom and encouragement to young children's leisure. Through language, art, play, music and peer interaction contemporary childrearing practice privileges children's cultural activities, including 'playfulness' itself. At first glance it appears that children's humour and play may be the two authentic (emancipatory) regions of their culture. Yet, as a Dutch study of the relationship between family practice and play concluded, even 'children's play seems to become more and more a product of the educational and cultural orientation of parents'.² The emphasis on play also makes the contemporary framework for socialization confusing, because the very idea of play cloaks the momentum of socialization in a hoped-for perception of autonomy and freedom.

In a series of interviews, a number of parents from the Toronto area responded to questions about priorities for their children's development. Some 78 per cent of them said learning to read and write was the top priority. A tie for second priority went to learning moral behaviour and interacting with peer social groups (52 per cent each), while the parents considered fitting in with society (44 per cent) and becoming imaginative and self-expressive (43 per cent) to be relatively less important. In other words, although parents recognize the importance of children's imagination and self-expression, that recognition exists within the context of a very directive concept of socializing purpose. Indeed, the results of this survey indicated some very confused and conflicted reasons for buying children toys and encouraging their 'free and expressive play'. Although the parents believed that these activities gave their children great pleasure, 38 per cent of the sample also expressed serious concerns about the way children play, especially with toys promoted on television. To some degree we must look back in history to find the roots of this conflicted attitude.

The Invention of Childhood

Modern society's fascination with children's culture and with the physical factors that shape children's maturation is possibly one of the most important inventions of the industrial era. As Edward Norbeck noted, 'It is still surprising for most of us to learn that various languages lack a generic term for play, and lack a concept of work and play in binary opposition.'³ Our contemporary notions seem to be bound up in attitudes which link play and childhood. In early medieval life, however, children appear to have been more fully integrated into the daily flux of making and consuming, of getting along. They had no autonomy, separate status, privileges, special rights or forms of social comportment that were entirely their own.⁴ Commenting on the parallel if somewhat miniaturized existence of the preindustrial child, historian J. H. Plumb notes:

There was no separate world of childhood. Children shared the same games with adults, the same toys, the same fairy stories. They lived their lives together, never apart. The coarse village festivals depicted by Breughel, showing men and women besotted with drink, groping for each other with unbridled lust, have children eating and drinking with the adults. Even, in the soberer pictures of wedding feasts and dances the children are enjoying themselves alongside their elders, doing the same things.⁵

In the medieval imagery of an organic and integrated social milieu there is no evidence of the existence of either special prerogatives for childhood or of children's culture. Children were expected to participate in the household economy almost as soon as they could walk. They worked more or less as servants. They toiled in the fields with their parents, helped to tend livestock, or picked and sorted wool. Children in the 'lower reaches of society', perhaps as young as five years old, were apprenticed off to learn a trade for terms of seven to nine years. In feudal society, children were defined through the property rights of their progenitors, and their activities were defined by the role of their families in society. The objects that children handled were no different from the cultural objects that adults had, and children's lives were essentially no different from those of adults. The whole community shared work and leisure as well as games, songs and tales.

The feudal worldview contrasts sharply with our own centuries-deep concern with children's rights, leisure and pleasure—a change in attitude most clearly expressed in the profusion of toys and specially designed objects that fill a typical child's own room.⁶ But more importantly the change is rooted in a framework of legal and social structures that have crystallized children's rights and prerogatives, expanding upon legal definitions first articulated in England in the cruelty acts of 1889, which for the first time extended to children the same protection from abuse granted to animals under the earlier cruelty-to-animals legislation. It is only during the twentieth century that children's legislation began to extend and elaborate on children's property rights and apply new principles that cushioned children from the common law, including the controversial exemption from the adult criminal justice system on the grounds that due to developmental inadequacies children were 'incapable of a guilty mind'.⁷

The significance of this major revision to the conception of childhood has gone almost unnoticed by a historical gaze narrowly directed towards the cataclysmic social transformation that followed the mechanization of production. Children's lives began to be featured in fictional and social historical accounts of the early industrial period, notably in the novels and stories of Charles Dickens, often either as warnings about the brutality of industrialism or as indications of social progress achieved by the factory acts of the opening decades of the nineteenth century and the 'free' schooling acts of the later third. Indeed, these changing attitudes had first taken hold earlier, prodded by an active social movement that had its protective aspirations focused on removing children from the industrial environments that were oppressing adult working women and men.

During the early decades of the nineteenth century children as young as five

worked alongside their parents in factories and mines, maintaining patterns of work continued from the feudal order. In England the factory acts of 1802, 1816, and especially 1833, began to challenge the assumption that children were simply the property of their progenitors and to restrict the abusive practices of industrial managers to use this cheap source of labour as they wished. Under the banner of protection, children were gradually excluded from the industrial world, helping to destroy the system of apprenticeship that had made the family an important locus for the transmission of skills and craft knowledge.

Until a small coterie of social historians, starting with Philippe Ariès, recently began to explore the issue, the sweeping changes in the conception of childhood and childrearing practice that occurred within the new framework of protection for children had rarely been carefully examined.⁸ The related issues of family life and children's culture were largely ignored by the historians of the industrial era, who saw in the science, technology and the political economy more significant forces shaping social life. During the nineteenth century a powerful idea came to prevail as the dominant view of child development: that children are innocent beings in need of formation and learning, to be protected from the harsher realities of industrial society.

Historically, this was a radical idea, for within it we find the origins of a new, more self-conscious conception of children's culture. Throughout the nineteenth century the cultural matrix of socialization was changing dramatically. Children were being excluded more and more from the crucial arenas of life and the inherent conflicts and struggles that had shaped so much of the rest of history. They were similarly being denied the value and power such participation might bestow. In compensation they were granted rights of protection and a separate institutional space—the schools—which established the new agenda for their training. In that agenda, literacy and knowledge became the privileged objectives of socialization. This transition is critical, for it marks a period when the state was not only prescribing protective buffers for childhood but beginning to assert its own 'interest' in social communication with children.

As historian Lloyd DeMause has pointed out, the concern with children and the attendant conception of childhood were revised dramatically over the nineteenth century. The very idea of the family and schools as 'socializing' agencies—that is, as agents of conscious attempts to shape and mould children into civilized beings by orchestrating their learning and social experiences—gains its full force precisely during this intense period of upheaval. Interest in and concern with children's thought and experience permeate the second half of the nineteenth century. In the literature and popular writing of the period childhood became both a way of understanding the changes of industrialization and a fitting metaphor for growth and development.

DeMause's characterization of the Victorian approach to childrearing as becoming less concerned with dominating the child's will than with protecting children and guiding them in the proper paths, teaching them to conform through more conscious and civilized means, seems an apt description of this

revised attitude.⁹ The expression of such progressive ideas can be traced back to social thinkers such as John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and even to earlier community traditions that highly prized and valued children in their own right. But it was the industrializing Victorians who took this new attitude seriously, who worked at undoing the feudal matrix of socialization with its strict definition of children based on the family's property rights.¹⁰ In feudal society the family was not only the means of organizing working life; it was central to the transmission of property and power. The undoing of this concept of lineage was a precursor to the acceptance of children's rights. In this sense the child-labour laws and factory acts were aimed as much at limiting the rights of families who were pressuring children into work as at rejecting the cruel and abusive practices of the industrial workplace.¹¹

The factory acts in Britain, however, do confirm that throughout the early industrial era childhood was increasingly seen as a stage of growth that in the long-term interests of civilized society had to be isolated and guarded from an abusive world. This implied a radical realignment not only in the rights and interests of those major agencies of socialization—the family, church and state—but also in the means and instruments of acculturation. Implicit in the new attitude towards childhood was a gradual drifting away from the notion of control towards an approach that sought to instil models of self-control in children. This attitude conceived of civilization as expanding its hold around a core of transmitted moral (Christian) precepts. Protection brought with it an equally important conception of the child as a separate social stratum, as an innocent in need of protection, and as an underdeveloped mind in need of nurturing, guidance and instruction.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the church followed these principles, becoming increasingly engaged in organizing an alternative to home and factory, hoping minimally to expand the religious, moral and ideological training within children's learning experience. Arguing that education 'civilized' the naturally enthusiastic but underdeveloped child and infused everyday experience with moral rectitude, the churches became outspoken advocates and supporters of educationism and built church schools as the preferred venue for children's guidance. Schooling was also seen as a liberating and progressive element by early socialists, such as Robert Owen, who set up schooling for his millworkers' children. Schools were meant to inspire and create the basis of a more humane industrial order, an inspiration that similarly underwrote Friedrich Froebel's kindergarten, and later Rudolph Steiner's Waldorf schools and Maria Montessori's new system of education.

Through the activities of the schooling movement the issue of socialization became of increasing interest to the state. By 1871 the problem of educating children had become such an important social issue that the Free School Act made it compulsory for young children under the age of twelve to attend an institution of learning. The new mission for childhood was to become literate, numerate and well behaved. In accepting this mission, the school system was

being built upon a less harsh vision of childhood: schools were to be a special world within which children could learn at a more leisurely pace, free from the demands and pressures of both parents and industrialists.

The Victorian state school and curriculum did not provide a children's paradise. Brutality was accepted and justified on the grounds that it was necessary to discipline the recalcitrant learner. Learning itself was defined and viewed as a very unliberating process of knowledge assimilation and repetition. Nor was the school completely without an industrial social purpose. The knowledge, skills and training offered children were praised widely as the training ground for the necessary attitudes, skills, knowledge and good work habits needed in both professional working and domestic life. Children were meant, as they progressed through the education system, to experience more fully the relations of production based on an industrial model: in the schools children encountered the 'educational' values of achievement, competition, authority, principled behaviour, obedience and reward and punishment in a significant way. The school curriculum featured these dimensions of social behaviour and moral growth as important dimensions of learning. For example, the London board schools included housewifery lessons that taught the science and practice of hygiene, home economics, and cookery as progressive innovations in girls' education.

The urgency of providing a truly engaging formative experience, including the social skills to participate in adult life, underscored much of the state's interest in schooling. It was at school, after all, that children would derive their first sense of their position in the broader social matrix of jobs, civic duty, social responsibility and moral choices. These liberating and democratizing possibilities for education were particularly taken up by twentieth-century educational theorists such as John Dewey in the United States and Susan Isaacs and Teddy O'Neil in England. The same underlying social perceptions were leading to a dramatic expansion of children's organizations, many of them focused on cultural activities, including games and other play activities. Sunday schools, scouting movements, camps, playgrounds, organized sporting groups, youth groups, and even pleasure parks, were mostly directed at the poor and working classes, whose idle hands and leisure were somewhat mistrusted. In play, games and sports activities a model providing a wholesome focus to the patterns of children's development was discovered. Play, it was argued, was not simple idleness but the 'work of childhood'—the moral equivalent of labour. Street children were ushered into the playground to have a taste of organized collective activity. Structured game play and organized sport were also highly recommended as ways of preparing children for a competitive society and of creating a location for class mingling and negotiation. Games for the young in which children pretended to be animals were recommended as providing models of appropriate childlike behaviour to the very unchildlike street children of the working class. It was upon these formative foundations of the nineteenth century that toys, sporting and play equipment, uniforms, and other accoutrements have been added as a now common part of so many children's lives.

This idea of free play was most particularly celebrated in Friedrich Froebel's

notion of the kindergarten, which gained acceptance in the twentieth century as the most appropriate and widely accepted modality of early childhood socialization. Froebel's kindergarten—or children's garden—was not only a place of natural innocence but also a site that granted children *Spielraum*—room to play and mature according to their own dictates and schedules.¹² Helping children to enjoy learning became the concern of most educationists, social thinkers and psychologists, who in detailing children's underdevelopment and special needs implicitly backed the idea of a unique role for children's culture—a cultural environment that would support children's own developmental agendas.

The Rousseauian theme of innocence develops through the educational writings of the period and continues throughout the twentieth century. The favoured comparison is between childhood experience and the garden. Sometimes the metaphor is there to ascribe to children a state of prelapsarian grace and the originary state of Eden. At other times the allusion is to the neat, well-tutored, and ordered rows of a more familiar landscape benefiting from well-managed nurturance. The ambivalence of the metaphor did not not undermine the common emphasis on the need for new forms of social control and conformity, which within the emerging developmentalist approach could be achieved by recognizing and empathizing with children's needs, especially their needs for culture. The garden metaphor was particularly favoured by the writers and artists who furnished children's primary cultural artefact—the book.

Toys, pianos and sports equipment—and not the teacher's rod—were to become the privileged instruments of childhood enlightenment, delight and entertainment. Music, art, sports and dance lessons were expected activities for the properly civilized middle-class child. More broadly, an interest in the full spectrum of cultural development was being impressed on public institutions such as museums, art galleries, playgrounds and parks, places that became the mark of civic pride and achievement. From the narrow confines of literacy the garden of children's culture came to full flower.

The Commercialization of Childhood

During the closing decades of the nineteenth century, rapid industrialization was dramatically increasing the capacity of manufacturers to meet people's needs by supplying more goods. Much of the commentary on industrialization has focused on the changing relationship between capital, technology and labour within this process of social transformation, overlooking marketing's specific historical task in expanding the sale and distribution of these goods—that is, the insertion of manufactured goods into an ever wider sphere of human activity. Yet it was with a verve and energy equal to that of the engineers and designers that marketers sought new means of increasing the public's interest in buying the goods that the factories were producing. The motif of children's culture, which through the next century became ever more visible, emerged within the broad spectrum of the market's communication activity.

The neo-medieval art of the period gave vivid expression to the new sensibility of innocence and unassailable purity that grounded the Victorian perspective on childhood, and also lent itself to products. The cherub and fairy motifs long established in painting became part of the decorative frame and backdrop for goods. Indeed, this same imagery of childhood was featured in the poster art of the period and among the classics of turn-of-the-century advertising. The babe of the new century ventured optimistically on the sea of life, riding a wave of material goods or, fairy-like, bestowing the cornucopia of life. At the turn of the century this simple metaphor captured not so much the reality of industrial society as a sentiment of hope in an emergent order. In most turn-of-the-century advertising the child seems to symbolize not only the end to the rigidities of the past but also the promise of a gentler purer future. Within the world portrayed in advertising, personal growth, health and fulfilment were not incompatible with industrial progress and economic expansion.

The Victorian awakening to the preciousness of childhood helped ensure that children's goods would expand along with other markets. Childhood was being increasingly characterized by specific behavioral traits and products. The increasingly vivid image of a separate domain of childhood became standard in both the late Victorian arts and product appeals. Pears soap, for instance, focused on the images of childhood in its promotional efforts, equating cleanliness and spiritual purity. Pears commissioned the famous Pre-Raphaelite painter Millais to design one of its display ads, with memorable effect. Other advertisers followed suit, making the Victorian cult of cleanliness part of the essence of good parenting. But implicit in the soap manufacturer's invocations was a new sense of childhood: the young were no longer viewed as simply miniaturized replicas of adults.

Many families across the social spectrum—not just the wealthy—were benefiting from the rapid mechanization of production and the increasing availability of manufactured goods. The shift of focus towards youth helped ensure that children shared the industrial largesse. Along with soap, other products—shoes, clothes, foods, medicines for children—were being produced in greater abundance than ever before and distributed in rural as well as urban communities. Families now had additional resources available to purchase products in the market rather than having to make them within the household or buy them from local artisans. The ability to provide more adequately for the family became recognized as a touchstone of progress itself. One prominent example was the gentle expression of anxiety about the ill child, which in the context of advertising became a powerful reason for buying manufactured medicines.

The child's health was a bearer of another message locating childhood in a grander organic unit. As T. Jackson Lears was to point out, in response to the rationality and mechanization implicit in progressivism, a contrapuntal theme was being voiced in the nineteenth-century organs of popular culture. Ads were stressing a 'therapeutic' ethos with an emphasis on well-being, self-help and betterment:

A characteristic therapeutic strategy domestic responsibilities with nostalgia for a pristine, natural state. 'Mothers do you not know that children crave natural food until you pervert their taste by the use of unnatural food?' a Shredded Wheat advertisement asked in 1903. Unnatural food develops unnatural and therefore wrong propensities and desires in children.¹³

Food and health always play an important role in family life, and specialized breakfast foods and medication were among the first brand goods to become associated with the theme of children's natural innocence and their unique nutritional and health needs.

The rounded and pliant images of the child convey these organic qualities. Pictures of both contented and suffering children began to decorate the packages and displays for an ever-increasing circle of products. Advertising repeatedly articulated the need for parents to become aware of the unique needs, vulnerabilities and sensitivities of their child. Most particularly, this idea was expressed through a madonna-and-child motif: the concerned mother and the frail and innocent child were coupled in the image of a bond rooted in a deep emotional concern for the child's well-being. Indeed, the theme of anxiety about children accompanied one of promise and innocence in the imagery of turn-of-the-century advertising. Advertisers found in the nurturing instincts of mothers a useful thematic warp into which they could weave their products complete with the evolving protectionist sentiments.

The increasing awareness of the domain of children's goods was also witnessed in the new and often elaborate department stores, which began to feature children's sections. Children's goods infiltrated the catalogues and display advertising of these early pioneers of merchandising. The department store established its place as purveyor to the whole family by bringing forth in one place a greater range of goods required for family life. This pattern of marketing continues today, with 65 per cent of the volume of children's wear still purchased in department stores. Stocked with a variety of general-purpose provisions for the family, the department stores thrived by responding to parents' perceived sense that family well-being was a matter judged across the whole spectrum of consumption and care.

Meanwhile, the educational interest in child development and welfare encouraged manufacturers and producers to consider a distinctive children's array of goods. Some of the new products of the period were even designed differently to strengthen their association with the new attitudes and activities that had arisen in children's culture. For example, during the nineteenth century clothes were being more extensively designed and styled for children's use: pinafores, knickerbockers and smocks, sailor suits and short trousers. In paintings and illustrations, too, clothing helped to signal the child's new station in life. Similarly, new items of furniture—for example, high chairs and chairs, school desks, and chairs that made children sit more erectly at the table—were among the design innovations at the end of the period.

A historian of design, Adrian Forty, writes:

Only at the very end of the century were there entire ranges of nursery furniture that were different from those for adults, not only in scale but also in form and appearance. Some of these new articles, such as the purpose-designed toy cupboards, specially filled children's needs, some offered the advantage of being hygienic and easy to clean, while others were decorated with pictures of animals or with colours that were particularly appropriate for children.¹⁴

Forty quotes the 1914 Heal's nursery furniture catalogue, which gives the reasoning behind the changes in design:

Formerly the children, even in the families of the well-to-do, were relegated to an attic or some room not thought sufficiently good for any other purpose. . . . Now the nursery is carefully chosen, well lighted and well planned . . . suitable to the needs of the occupants, and in every way a fit training ground, both physical and moral for the young. Children are admittedly very susceptible to their environment, therefore, how important it is to surround them with things at once beautiful and useful.¹⁵

The special designs made children stand out from the social continuum. In his painting *Bubbles* which appeared in a famous Pears poster, Sir John Everett Millais had presented a boy caught in a reverie, dressed in clothing befitting not only his station in life but also his youthful position in the social spectrum. The uniforms of school, the neckerchiefs of scouts and the caps favoured by youth-activity groups helped to create a cultural stylization that levelled children but clearly demarked childhood. Children are much easier to recognize in the art and photography of the twentieth century for this very reason: a separate clothing style and, implicitly, a unique place in society were created for them. Together, the new designs, catalogues, advertising and consumer-magazine stories and advisories of the turn of the century jointly contributed to a new sense that children were at the hub of the domestic scene.

The stylization and voice in early consumer-magazine advertising were directed to parents. The advertising duplicated the content of much of the popular writing in women's magazines and books, which devoted increasing attention to advisories on childrearing practice and discussions of children's well-being. In the advertising of the period this 'advisory voice' was woven into many product appeals. It was, after all, the mother's attention that was being targeted by advertisers. It was the mother's concerns that were being discussed: *health, ease of preparation, building strong bodies, gentle on the system*. These were appeals designed to connect with the maternal anxieties and values being more broadly discussed. There is no doubt that the parent was supposed to buy the product. There are only a few examples in the advertising of the period of goods marketed to children directly: an occasional bicycle or train set. The merchandisers had little interest in motivating or addressing children themselves.

Symbols of Domesticity

Among the ads for general domestic goods after the turn of the century was a new motif which pictured the modern family as a unit. This was not the stern and forbidding autocratic patriarchy that psychiatry described as the roots of repression, but a more engaging image of family life—a vision of the household as a cultural sanctuary from industrial life. The image was increasingly repeated in the advertisements of the 1920s and 1930s for food, cars, houses, furniture, appliances and a variety of other products. As advertising historian Roland Marchand comments:

If the view from the office window defined the dominant fantasy of man's domain in the world of work, another visual cliché—the family circle—expressed the special qualities of the domain that he shared with his wife and children at home. During the nineteenth century . . . the notions of work and home had become dichotomized. The home came to represent a sheltered haven to which men escaped to find surcease from the harsh world of competition, ambition, and cold calculation. More than ever, the concept of the family circle, with its nuances of closure and intimate bonding, suggested a protective clustering—like the circling of the settlers' wagons—in defense of qualities utterly distinct from those that prevailed outside.¹⁶

Stuart Ewen sees another parable in advertising's fascination with the family and home life. He argues that the emerging image of a modern nuclear family was not simply a reflection of broader social changes taking place in industrial society (for example, urbanization, mobility, population growth) but was more precisely connected to the conscious attempts by industrialists to solve the problems emerging with the maturation of industrial society. Industrialists during the 1920s, Ewen points out, were beginning to recognize that the family's home life, and with it the child's earliest experience, were growing beyond the family's grasp:

On the one side stood the corrupting and masculine world of business; on the other, a home ruled by the father and kept moral and virtuous by the mother. Where the home and community had once attempted to comprise a totality of social existence, and patriarchy had been its 'legal code,' Victorianism elevated the patriarchal home into a spiritual sanctuary against the realities of the productive sphere.¹⁷

Ewen's reflections on the history of commercial culture see in industries a renewed interest in the social dynamics of the household and a rethinking of the problems of industrial overproduction. During the 1920s and 1930s, industrialists began to think seriously about the function of the family, and in particular of women, as a consuming unit. The family made its contribution in the form of the demand for goods rather than in terms of labour and its potential for labour. Youth became an element in visualizing the promise of consumption as a wholesome preoccupation of life:

In the opening decades of the twentieth century, the symbolic role of youth was central to business thought. The fact that childhood was increasingly a period of

consuming goods and services made youth a powerful tool in the ideological framework of business. Beyond the transformation of the period of childhood and adolescence into a period of consumption, youth was also a broad cultural symbol of renewal, of honesty, and of criticism against injustice—the young have always provided a recurrent rejection of the ancient virtues of the ‘establishment’.¹⁸

Advertising therefore began to configure its discussion of the benefits and uses of manufactured goods within a continuum of domestic consumption that featured the child as central in the dynamics of the household.

Ewen’s comments help show why women’s work, portrayed in advertising as the labour of consumption, was continuously denied significance and validity until merchandisers began to reveal to industrialists the real dynamics of the marketplace. Given the belief in men’s industrial work as the only valid form of labour, the nonwaged work of the household, including childrearing, was granted only marginal notice among social historians—at least until feminist theory refocused attention on the social significance of the household as a place of labour. Ewen’s study suggests the importance of the merchandisers’ increasing attention to the domestic scene. The marketplace is a meeting ground between producers and consumers: the expansion of production depends upon the expansion of consumption: yet the social dynamics of consumption are defined in and by the family unit—not the factory.

It is odd, therefore, that in the social commentary and advice that emerges around the topic of childrearing, so little attention has been given to children’s place in the framework of consumption. In twentieth-century advertising the imagery of childhood became vital in the tapestry of the consuming family—as a motivation for adequate provisioning, as an indicator of family pride and virtue, and as an easily understood symbol of the long-term benefits of continued economic prosperity. In an age of anxieties about social progress, advertising’s images of family solidarity provided some comfort. As Roland Marchand points out:

This visual cliché was no social mirror; rather, it was a reassuring pictorial convention. . . . When father, mother, and child in an advertising tableau stood gazing off into the distance with their backs turned directly or obliquely toward the reader, it could mean only one thing. In the language of visual clichés they were looking into the future.¹⁹

The future, though lacking in detail, was filled with hope and promise—for which children were often the visual clue.

Although the present became more troubled during the war years of the 1940s, advertising did not lose sight of this promised future. Even in the depth of those years, the images of war’s end indicated that in her airplane factory Rosie the Riveter still dreamed of the infinitely clean and modern domestic vistas of consumption. The kitchen, the hub of domestic labour and familial warmth, was to be transformed by the very technology and enterprise that was helping to win the war.

Indirectly, the advertisements for a remodelled domesticity in the first half of

the twentieth century also provide a glimpse of the impact of the emerging philosophy of developmentalism on the conception of childrearing. In advertising's version of modern domesticity, appropriate clothing and the central positioning of the child on the floor clearly demarcate a status that stresses the legitimacy of childish aspirations and pastimes. Some of the ads convey directly the need to recognize children's own playful and imaginary approaches to goods. In others, the presence of books, toys, wagons, special furniture, games and learning equipment, along with school bags, playground equipment, sports equipment and other pastimes all imply the expanding sphere of children's cultural products.²⁰ These product lines were starting to consolidate in the marketplace a conception of children's goods which compounded the perception of the autonomy of childhood.

The carefully constructed commercial scenes of these advertisements reflect the importance that parents attached to finding the right vehicles and objects to encourage their children's development. Few of the ads depict adults unreservedly impressing their ideas and will upon the child. Most of them, rather, convey the sense that the common tools of childhood—the ball, the doll, the bicycle—are essential to good parenting. The moral force of the presentation of these objects is that parents who cannot provide them are in some ways inadequate.

The toy has a special significance among the symbols of children's cultural requirements. The ball or wooden train serves as a useful reference point in the scheme of domesticated consumption, because it connotes a different aspect of utility. Roland Barthes notes that the toy is a cultural signifier conveying not only the common preoccupations of children with play but also their changing experience of things.²¹ The toy is a symbol of a world distinct from the processes and social relations of work. It is the possibility of a youngster's isolation and buffering from a harsh industrial reality that lies at the centre of these representations of childhood preoccupations. The child with toys is a symbol of the pleasures of consumerism, of the new objects primarily designed for leisure and fantasy. Play is a childhood labour whose essence is a mental transformation—the distancing from daily experience and the re-creation of self in an imaginary world. The toy is therefore an effective symbol of a simpler form of gratification steeped in pleasure alone and not in the rational adjudication of a product's attributes, benefits and construction.

In addition, toys are fitting symbols of economic progress because they direct consumers to the rewards of leisure and relaxation. The re-created atmosphere of domestic consumption takes its emotional cues and mood from the absence of labour implied by a playful child. The advertising of the 1920s ascribes to the family unit a new self-confidence and softer structure of feeling. For example, Roland Marchand notes how:

'Soft focus' defined the family circle tableau almost as readily as its specific content. Nostalgic in mood . . . the soft focus atmosphere suggested harmony and tenderness . . . the artist recognizing the moral ambience of the scene he was invading, washed an affectionate, rosy mist over the scene. It was the family circle, rather than the home itself, that laid claim to the soft focus treatment. . . . The addition of a child,

connoting family, increased the likelihood of a soft focus treatment. The addition of the father completed the circle, more or less assuring that the scene would fall into one of the sentimentalized categories of leave-taking, homecoming, sharing of a meal, or evening leisure in the living room.²²

During the 1930s the hues of family sentimentality were intensified, and the imagery of youthful play became increasingly crystallized as a symbol of the benefits of modernization.

Industrialists, notes Stuart Ewen, reconceptualized the family within the framework of their business interests by favouring a depiction of the household economy as an exemplar of the progressive democratic consumerism:

To businessmen, the reconstituted family would be one which maintained its reproductive function, but which had abandoned the dogma of parental authority, except in-so-far as that authority could be controlled and provide a conduit to the process of goods consumption.²³

Yet the imagery of domestic consumption was not an entirely placid affair. The image of the happily playing child had to assert itself against the traditional backdrop of industry and patriarchy. The tensions in the family often presented in allegory the contradictions experienced in the progressive period. In this respect much of the consumer advertising directed to women takes on an educational tone, instructing mothers on the values and practices implicit in new approaches to childrearing and contrasting these with the premodern values of unthinking autocratic paternalism. Sometimes a woman (generously armed with information provided by advertisers) is arrayed in argument with the old-fashioned forces of patriarchy. Sparing the rod can be justified, however, when another solution found in the market solves the problem. A rather typical ad shows a scene of family disputation centred on the failure of the father to understand the modern means of childrearing. Children were often caught at the middle of a tug of war, and an interest in children's needs turned out to be a metaphor for the struggles to establish a market democracy.

A corresponding tone of anxiety pervades much of the advertising of the 1930s, which overtly recognized the significance of a child's changing stature within the family. Much of the anxiety concerned parents' ways of relating to children, of controlling and directing their abundant energies, imagination and creativity. Sometimes mothers fretted over their lack of control of their children's well-being; sometimes experts intruded into the scene to help resolve this sense of insecurity; and sometimes parents disputed the appropriate ways to deal with the troubled moments of childrearing. These scenes seem to speak of a more fundamental unsettledness that went beyond the disputes over childrearing practice.

NOTES

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