

Historiography: Teenage Attitude of the 1950s

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The 1950's brought about change and evolution of the American teenager. Youths became independent, which was seen through certain shocking behavior, such as their new risqué dance moves, love of fast cars, and overall self-determining mindset. There were many publications that came out during this time, which tried to make sense of this seemingly teenage rebellion. However, it was not until the late twentieth century that historians truly began to analyze this adolescent change and do their best to pinpoint the causes and reasons for this juvenile delinquency. The study of teenage rebelliousness has no definitive categories because scholars have given a multitude of causes for this behavioral evolution in society. Certain historians initially accredited the adolescents' outcry simply to a normal cycle seen throughout history. However, as years progressed, this phase in America's history is now attributed to the influence of war and mass media.

One of the earliest historians to analyze the teenage rebellion that seemed to ignite in the 1950's was Theodore Roszak. Although his main focus was on the "hippie" generation of his current time, he still spoke out on how the teenage

resistance to adult culture came about and how society reacted towards it.¹ He stated that the youth rebellion of the age was just another individual movement, such as “The Romantic Movement” or “The Renaissance.” According to Roszak, people during those time periods went through the same struggle for independence the teenagers of his society were experiencing. Thus, he concluded the youthful resistance at the time was nothing more than a phase society goes through periodically. Roszak was one of few who took an in depth look at these youth revolts while their actions were still being practiced. It was not until almost twenty years later, once the initial shock of individual thought from the younger generations was more widely accepted by the adult population, that commentaries on the youth revolution of the 1950s began to be published in greater quantities.

From the last few decades of the twentieth century up to present day, numerous historians have theorized about the causation of the teenage revolution during 1950’s. One theory, held by William L. O’Neill, was that Americans of the time were so unsettled with all the havoc they were wedged between, with the politics and brutality of World War II and the panic and concerns of the Cold War, that the youth of the time were simply neglected.² O’Neill said no matter how wealthy a society is, everything cannot be attended to at once; something was bound to be forgotten. In *A Cycle of Outrage: America’s Reaction to the*

¹ Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition* (New York: Anchor Books, 1969).

² William O’Neill, *American High: The Years of Confidence, 1945-60* (New York: Simon and Schister, 1986).

Juvenile Delinquent in the 1950s, James Gilbert concurred with O'Neill in that the teenagers of the 1950s were greatly influenced from being raised by a war generation.³

Gilbert took this rebellion down to specifics and wrote about how those that grew up during World War II, who later become the teenage generation that seemed to go through so many problems and difficulties, were particularly affected by it. Gilbert said the change from constant parental involvement to little or no parental guidance and discipline caused by World War II, with fathers off to war, mothers in the work force, and children left to fend for themselves, contributed to adolescent problems. He also wrote how the resistance to cultural change in America at the time caused the youth to question how American society acted out towards those that were different from the majority. This made them lose a portion of their respect for their elders. Gilbert continued with his theory by commenting on the extreme amount of mass media culture that was thrown at and naively accepted by the youth at the time. He thought the way the media celebrated juvenile delinquency with movies, music, and magazines did not help soften the outbreak but instead egged on their behavior.

Many historians have agreed with Gilbert and his explanation of the media outbreak having disastrous effects on the teenagers of the past. Having the media suddenly dominating their lives at such a great extent overwhelmed them. Two historians distinctly analyzed the sway the cinema carried to influence the

³ James Gilbert, *A Cycle of Outrage: America's Reaction to the Juvenile Delinquent in the 1950s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

teenage generation. First, Thomas Doherty said film was one of the first forms of media to move from mass culture to teen culture.⁴ Doherty proceeded to say film started the evolution of teen idols, which greatly influenced the teen mindset of the 1950's. In 1998, David Sterritt, in his book *Mad to Be Saved: The Beats, the '50s, and Film*, looked at how movies affected the teen culture as well.⁵ He particularly investigated the Beat generation of the 1950's and how they became a cultural "lens" where the nontraditional behaviors of the time were portrayed through film. Sterritt concluded that this small group being depicted in movies encouraged individual and abstract thinking.

Grace Palladino continued the analysis of the consequences of this media focus through the attribution of the main influence of teenage independence to the serious escalation of advertising aimed at adolescents during the 1950's.⁶ They were told if they would buy certain products, they would be more popular and beautiful. By purchasing these products, which were presented as necessities, teenagers would consequently be able to form their own special identity. Palladino concluded that these endorsement pressures put an extra and unnecessary strain on teens by exploiting them because of the advertisers' greed. In addition, Palladino attributed the invention of the word "teenager" to the youth rebellion. When the word was coined in 1941, and started to gain in use and popularity, youth were given a better sense of identity, which thus caused them to

⁴ Thomas Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics: The Juvenilization of American Movies In the 1950s* (Great Britain: Billing and Sons Ltd, 1988).

⁵ David Sterritt, *Mad to Be Saved: The Beats, the '50s, and Film* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1998).

⁶ Grace Palladino, *Teenagers: An American History* (New York: BasicBooks, 1996).

crave greater independence.

The teenage rebellion of the 1950s was a huge concern to the adult world when it first came into the American culture and continued into extremities. Numerous historians have attributed the source of this juvenile delinquency to many different factors throughout the years, such as it being a part of a normal societal cycle, the wartime effects adolescents experienced, the sway of mass media, and a longing for identity. In order to grasp fully how this rebellious generation came to be, it is important to establish how the public received them. By exploring how different individuals, from educated scholars to “Everyday Joes” of the time, responded to the way the youth was acting, a better understanding of their attitude and feelings can be grasped.