

Against Anticulturalism: A Review of Two Books by Kay Hymowitz

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There is a social critic who looks upon the modern world in an almost Goethean manner, describing social phenomena in a way that lays bare the essential forces at work behind them. This is the case, however, with Kay Hymowitz. Her books focus on the world in which American children grow up today, a world of empty myths, anti-role models, uncertain parents, and no-holds-barred, profit-seeking media and marketing concerns. Hymowitz's crisp, non-sentimental prose strips away layer after layer of the soft artificial packaging of American childhood, revealing a vacuum that is void of spiritual direction and social imagination within a society that "ignores that childhood is the time when individuals are given the specific materials with which to 'construct' their identity, including their identity as free individuals."

In the first chapter of *Ready or Not: What Happens When We Treat Children as Small Adults*, Hymowitz addresses the widespread fallacy "that children already own the materials out of which to build their individuality and that adults, or 'society,' must beware of disturbing them."

How did our society reach the point at which it can deny a child's need for guidance, a society in which adults now all too often turn to children for direction? Hymowitz's work takes her back to the early years of the American republic and the emergence of a "republican" approach to child-rearing. This is an approach that puts into action Bronson Alcott's view that each "child must be treated as a free, self-guiding, self-controlling being." Children were encouraged to explore, to question, and to play, and imagination and self-directed activity were viewed as practical preparation for life in a democratic society.

These early practitioners, however, understood well the need for adult guidance in the life of the growing child. Discipline and cultural expectations worked to counter the forces of egotism inherent in American individualism. Hymowitz describes how this shifts during the course of the

20th century, and she traces the emergence of an "anticultural" approach to childrearing:

Unlike republican philosophers who wanted parents to actively shape the raw human material which is a child into an individual, anticulturalists viewed the child as an already complete, finished individual lacking only some skills and information. Not only would these complete individuals require no shaping by parents and other representatives of the culture into which they were born, but they would develop best outside of, or even in opposition to, that culture. The republican child who was supposed to be reared in an atmosphere of bounded freedom evolved into the anticultural child who required no rearing at all.

Anticulturalism may be one of the most important sociological terms to emerge in the last decades. It identifies one of the fundamental hurdles that arise as the age of the Consciousness Soul progresses. As humanity evolves out of a formative relationship to the spiritual world, forces recede that have previously filled traditional cultural life with meaning. These empty forms no longer move an individual soul deeply, weaving it into a greater communal tapestry. Humanity enters an "acultural" state in which the challenge to create culture becomes predominant. Anticulturalism, as Hymowitz describes it, is society's denial of or refusal to take up this challenge:

While anticulturalism champions autonomous individuals, it also deprives them of the nourishment to stand alone. By reducing culture to indifferent, arbitrary information to which the individual may or may not feel committed, it depletes the sources of full-bodied individuality. Anticulturalism denies the next generation a rich language for building their inner lives and imagining their experience.

The remaining chapters of *Ready or Not* and the essays collected in *Liberation's Children* trace

the presence of anticultural thought in popular culture and its tragic effect on the growing child. There are few facets of the golden myth of American childhood that retain their luster under the author's discerning gaze. From the view of a child as a biologically gifted learning machine—one that must be properly stimulated—to the juvenile justice system, from kindergarten as a springboard to corporate success to Sesame Street, from Barbie to the sexually provocative clothing manufactured for 9 and 10 year olds, Hymowitz brings to light the forces that push children into a world defined by the values of their peers and brilliantly manipulated by the corporations that develop these values in their marketing campaigns.

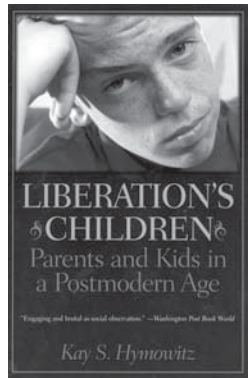
The chapter entitled "The Teening of Childhood" opens with a description of two television ads featuring youngsters between the ages of three and eight. The children are dressed in the uniforms of adolescence—baggy pants, T-shirts, and sweatshirts—and present the viewer with personas of hipness, edginess:

In the movies, in magazines, and most of all on television, children see image upon irresistible image of themselves as competent sophisticates wise to the ways of the world. And maybe that's a good thing too, since their parents and teachers appear as weaklings, narcissists and dolts. That winking eight-year-old in the Gap ad tells the story of his generation. A gesture once reserved for adults to signal to gullible children that a joke was on its way now belongs to the child. The child gets it; it's the adults who don't.

The author goes on to explore the effect of these images on children. In doing so, she uncovers perhaps the most devastating result of the anticultural approach. The media's image of children is one that has lost the ability to wonder, to need a helping hand, or to feel vulnerable. These have been replaced by skepticism and disbelief. Without wonder, children are locked into the narrow confines of the persona they share with their peers, a persona that is marketed unrelentingly to children. Unable to acknowledge vulnerability or the need for help, children become locked into an artificial sophistication, a veneer of toughness. These combine to deny children access to the two

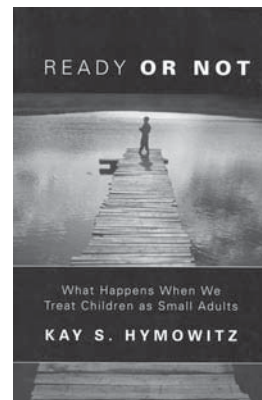
realms in which they may encounter the reality of a self: the surrounding world and the people in it.

Hymowitz does nothing to soften the edges of what she describes. The world she describes is in no way a pretty one. Yet in the crisp honesty of her approach is the seed of redemption.



*Liberation's Children:
Parents and Kids in
a Postmodern Age*

Kay S. Hymowitz
Ivan R. Dee, Chicago
2003
ISBN # 1-56663-495-4



*Ready or Not:
What Happens When We Treat
Children as Small Adults*

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Encounter Books
2000
ISBN # 1-893554-20-1