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IS ADOLESCENCE CULTURALLY TRANSFERRED? IS IT UNIVERSAL? WHY SHOULD THE SOCIAL HISTORIAN CARE?*

Abstract: Youth historians generally agree about the “modernity” of adolescence. Whether it was discovered or invented, the publication of G. Stanley Hall’s *Adolescence* in 1904 marked a watershed, at least in popular consciousness. Yet historians cross this watershed all the time. Since adolescence is now thought to be universal, it only makes sense to find where adolescents hid before Hall and his fellow psychologists spotlighted them. This essay joins the search. Examples from fiction, proto-ethnographies, and pedagogical journals identify genre limitations for reconstructing adolescence in non-Western, non-bourgeois Europe in the nineteenth century. Recognizing that adolescence was culturally transmitted into Southeastern Europe, then, was merely the first step of the search.

Keywords: youth, social history, comparative history, family history, age groups

No one questions the place of adolescence in the life course. The university I am affiliated with offers courses like “Primary Care of Adolescents” to its future nurses, focuses its Developmental Psychology class on “birth to adolescence,” and encourages future youth ministers to “take the voices, dreams, questions, and struggles of adolescents seriously.” At a peer school, Barbara Natterson-Horowitz offers a class called “Coming of Age on Planet Earth.” Her book with Kathryn Bowers posits that adolescence cuts across species. Bracketing the fruit fly’s short lifespan (which averages 50 days), human parents might envy this species’ short teenage period of five days and dread the Greenland shark’s 50 years of adolescence (of a 400-year life). They end their book by suggesting that even “non-animal enterprises” like start-ups and relationships go through an “awkward and unflattering phase of development.”¹

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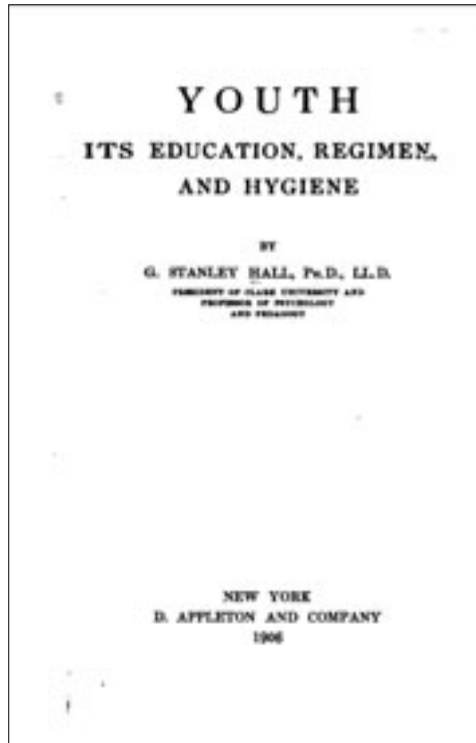
1 Barbara Natterson-Horowitz and Kathryn Bowers, *Wildhood: The Epic Journey from Adolescence to Adulthood in Humans and Other Animals* (New York: Scribner, 2019), 265.

Back to humans, the universality of adolescence is not as evident. John W. Santrock's textbook, *Adolescence*, begins with a three-page history of the concept. In three paragraphs, it jumps from Plato and Aristotle (2 paragraphs) to the Middle Ages (1 sentence) and Rousseau (5 sentences). Then, "a number of psychologists, urban reformers, educators, youth workers, and counselors" developed "the concept we now call adolescence" between 1880 and 1920. This development he terms "invention."² John R. Gillis, the eminent historian of youth, preferred the term "discovery" and the chronological span 1870 to 1900.³ Both focus primarily on the Anglo-American world and on a similar range of actors. G. Stanley Hall, who published a two-volume work called *Adolescence* in 1904, is essential to such historical narratives.⁴ Adolescence, invented or discovered, seems like a case of cultural transfer.

Contemporaries recognized the importance of Hall's work. *Adolescence*, a Hungarian journal hailed in 1906, was "one of a kind, as it examines youth as growing out of childhood" [*gyermekkorból kilépő ifjúkört vizsgálja*].⁵ Writing for the social-democratic journal *Borba*, the Croatian sociologist Filip Filipović credited Hall with importing paedology from Germany to the United States, where it was "immediately naturalized."⁶ Yet the study of adolescence was not as quick to reach other realms of the world. A summary of Hall's findings appeared in Yugoslavia in 1925, but books about adolescent psychology waited until the 1940s.⁷ While psychology has been taught in Egypt since 1908, calls for studying youth were first heard in the 1930s and matured into research agendas in the 1940s.⁸ Adolescent psychiatry divorced child psychiatry only in the late 1950s, first in the United States and then elsewhere.⁹

The project of locating adolescence in human psychological, sexual, and biological development has had significant consequences on those

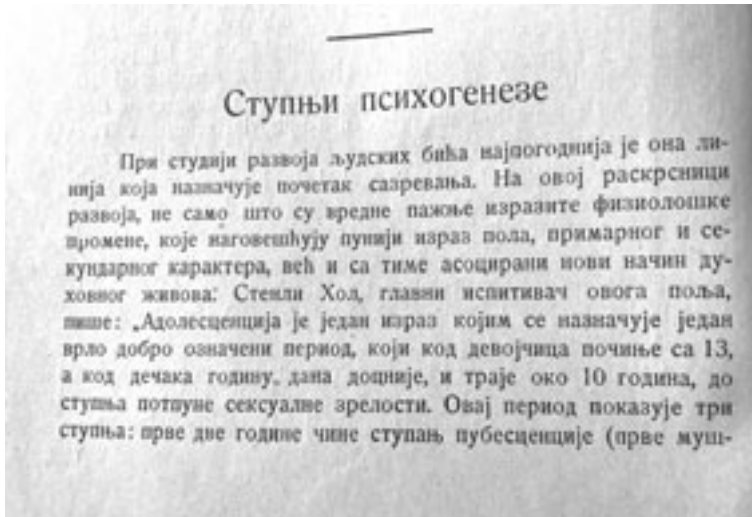
- 2 John W. Santrock, *Adolescence*, 17th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2019), 3.
- 3 John R. Gillis, *Youth and History* (New York: Academic Press, 1974), chapter 3.
- 4 G. Stanley Hall, *Youth: Its Education, Regimen, and Hygiene*. (New York: Appleton, 1904).
- 5 Jázon Benczelits, "Stanley Hall nevelésügyi munkája," *Huszedik század* 7, No. 2 (1906), 333.
- 6 Filip Filipović, "O pedologiji," *Borba* 2, No. 16 (1910), 628.
- 7 Joseph John Findlay, "Stupnji psihogeneze," trans. Ž. Ivanović, *Glasnik profesorskog društva*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (1925), 100–111.
- 8 Omnia El Shakry, "Youth as Peril and Promise: The Emergence of Adolescence Psychology in Postwar Egypt," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 43, No. 4 (2011), 596–97.
- 9 Aaron H. Esman, "A History of Adolescent Psychiatry," *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 200, No. 12 (2012), 1058–60.



*Title page of Stanley Hall's book *Youth: Its Education, Regimen, and Hygiene* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1906).*

now identified as adolescents. It allows adolescents to get better medical care, tailored education, and (if their parents turn to the right shelves of the library) more profound empathy for their age-specific torments. The ubiquity of adolescence in our social and cultural life only deepened the interest of scholars and practitioners in its cultural and temporal variation. The literature produced in the humanities and the social sciences alone has become impossible to master.¹⁰ What follows contributes

10 Very select examples include Joseph F. Kett, *Rites of Passage: Adolescence in America, 1790 to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1979); Alice Schlegel and Herbert Barry, *Adolescence: An Anthropological Inquiry* (New York: Free Press, 1991); Barbara A. Hanawalt, "Historical Descriptions and Prescriptions for Adolescence", *Journal of Family History* 17, No. 4 (1992), 341–51; Ilana Krausman Ben-Amos, *Adolescence and Youth in Early Modern England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); Cynthia Comacchio, *The Dominion of Youth: Adolescence and the Making of Modern Canada, 1920 to 1950* (Wilfrid Laurier Univ. Press, 2006); Catherine Cox and Susannah Riordan (eds.), *Adolescence in Modern Irish History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Eve Krakowski, *Coming of Age in Medieval Egypt: Female Adolescence, Jewish Law, and Ordinary Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).



A section from the Serbian translation of the article of Joseph John Findlay, "Stages of psychogenesis" published in: Glasnik profesorskog društva, Vol. 5, No. 1-2 (1925), 100-111.

thoughts from the workbench about the challenges of reconstructing adolescence in past societies. These thoughts emerge from the intersection of my concern with social structure and the inevitable recognition that adolescence was, at least somewhat, a foreign construct to many human societies around 1900.

In the European countryside, away from the industrialized modernity considered the cradle of adolescence, autobiographies are scarce but sociographic literature is abundant. Forms of literature that represented peasants were not neutral, of course. In Serbia, the call for a deeper psychological portrait of peasants in fiction came from Svetozar Marković during the transition from liberalism to socialism.¹¹ The desired literature, to quote one of his followers, was to be "stuffed with [political] tendencies."¹² Non-fiction literature is not without tendencies. Limitations of the genre also burden it: ethnographic and sociographic traditions differed in what they considered essential to note down.

The preoccupation of nineteenth-century observers with agriculture allows adolescents to make, at most, cameos. From Ion Ionescu de la Brad's study of Dorohoi County (1866), one can glean some information about schooling and ponder upon his division of the population into

11 Svetozar Marković, "Pevanje i mišljenje," in *O realizmu*, ed. Aleksandar Ilić (Belgrade: Nolit, 1984), 151.

12 Quoted in Dušan Ivanić, *Srpski realizam* (Novi Sad: Matica srpska, 1996), 36.



*Title page of Franciszek Bujak's book *Żmiąca, wieś powiatu Limanowskiego: stosunki gospodarcze i społeczne* (Kraków: G. Gebethner, 1903).*

three age groups: 1–15, 15–25, and 25+.¹³ Franciszek Bujak's study of a village in Limanowa County offers more valuable data. Subchapters include schooling, courting or the road to marriage, dowries, and “the fate of the heirs' siblings.” For example, these discussions can teach us about the relationship between parents and their newlywed children who expect to inherit their farm.¹⁴

Bujak covers the life course in two contexts: land inheritance and marriage. Ionescu's tripartite age grouping could map into these transitions. Since he classifies the first two age groups as mostly dependents, 25 was likely the age he considered as a threshold for marriage. What followed this threshold, Bujak tells us, varied greatly. The life course of the inheriting child was predictable: upon marriage, he waited until his parents retired and left him and his wife the farm. His older siblings re-

13 Ion Ionescu, *Agricultura română din județiului Dorohoiu* (Bucharest: Imprimeria Statului, 1866), 67–68, 84–86.

14 Franciszek Bujak, *Żmiąca, wieś powiatu Limanowskiego: stosunki gospodarcze i społeczne* (Kraków: G. Gebethner, 1903), 67–68.

ceived money but were freer to choose a path to adulthood. In Bujak's village of choice, the younger brother or daughter got the farm. Birth order must have shaped the siblings' psychological experiences of adolescence. Their experience of youth must have also differed from that of families who did not live off the land. Shepherds, agricultural workers, artisans, and other occupational categories lived through different transitions and enjoyed other freedoms. Bujak's concern with the peasantry makes the adolescence of these other groups difficult to reconstruct.

There are, thus, at least three elements of adolescence to reconstruct. If we accept that adolescence is a "pivotal point in life history when somatic investments in growth and maturation are completed and resources are reallocated to reproduction," we are immediately confronted with the ill-match between physical and social maturation. Carol M. Worthman and Kathy Trang also note how, across the world, the age gap between the two keeps widening.¹⁵ Between the biological and social lies the psychological. Indeed, it is the psychological that drew the attention of many historians of adolescence. The internal contradictions in the adolescent mind are perhaps common to sharks and humans, but historians have considered them to be the result of particular cultural conditions. Quoting Freud, for example, one literary historian finds a plausible "correspondence between the process of adolescence and that of American culture." One may even be "tempted to say that the one recapitulates the other."¹⁶

This is, perhaps, another genre limitation. The "novel of adolescence" helps us see individual adolescents and not adolescents as a social group.¹⁷ Such novels emerged from the ashes of social realism. Their historical heyday was not Enlightenment-era Central Europe (as Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* might encourage us to think) or Victorian Britain. Most of Europe – and beyond – has begun to read and write adolescent protagonists only in the early 1900s. For most of the nineteenth century, novels mostly covered social milieux at the expense of individual development. Stendhal's *The Red and the Black*, published in 1830, was translated to Hungarian in 1905. The advertisements admired how the French author "had anticipated the ideas, aspirations, and struggles of our time" and "brought eternal truths to light" from the "mystique of the human soul."¹⁸ Is adolescence, as reflected in Stendhal's works, "eternal" or "of our time?" Earlier adolescents barely appear on record.

15 Carol M. Worthman and Kathy Trang, "Dynamics of Body Time, Social Time and Life History at Adolescence", *Nature* 554, No. 7693 (2018), 452.

16 Ihab H. Hassan, "The Idea of Adolescence in American Fiction", *American Quarterly* 10, No. 3 (1958), 314.

17 See, for example, Justin O'Brien, *The Novel of Adolescence in France: The Study of a Literary Theme* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1937).

18 "Vörös és fekete," *Népszava*, Oct. 27, 1907.

The very writing of an introspective autobiography that interrogates one's youth could be seen as a case of cultural transfer. Very few such ego documents exist in Southeastern Europe. Ion Slavici's *Amintiri* is a case in point. It contains statements about the transition from childhood, which involved disappointments and even nostalgia towards his "frighteningly happy" childhood (at least in retrospect).¹⁹ Mircea Eliade's earlier novels – *Novel of the Nearsighted Adolescent* (1925, published 1989), for example – are a better starting point for histories of adolescence. This is a problem. Autobiographies are a valuable source for the historical mentality of adolescence, but they only appeared among the middle classes of Europe c. 1900. Using them pushes us to study those who articulated their adolescence after digesting textual models produced in Germany, France, and Britain. Limiting ourselves to these writers gives us a textured insight into their sexual, emotional, and sometimes social development.

A textual gulf thus separates rural and urban Europe. We are accessible to different parts of these worlds on the documentary level based on what writers and scholars found notable. The rural, thus, lends itself more readily to social research. Since adolescence is mainly read as a cultural construct and anxiety, there is still much unknown on the ethnographic level since this anxiety is understood as urban. In many Hungarian communities, like much of premodern Western Europe, bachelors were organized into peer-led groups ("guilds" in Hungarian).²⁰ Even though these "guilds" disappeared in recent history and in a well-documented environment, we know little about this process. We also know little about the psychological experience of adulthood as reflected in ethnographic data like Bujak's. Were inheriting sons (whether inheriting lands or a profession) immune from worrying about their future? Is worrying about the future a feature of industrial modernity brought from the city to the countryside?

After all, European adolescence seems individualistic and simple compared to East Africa, for example. Anthropologists specializing in this region have long struggled to understand the interplay between age organization and sociopolitical organization.²¹ For example, the Harar of South Ethiopia traditionally divided their clans into age groups of eight years. These age groups correlated with socioeconomic functions: the third *gada* (ages 16–24) fought; the fourth shepherded; the fifth led

19 Ioan Slavici, *Amintiri*, ed. Gheorghe Sanda (Bucharest: Editura pentru Literatură, 1967), 10.

20 Imre Németh, "Legénycéh," in *Magyar Néprajzi Lexikon* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1982, 1977).

21 P. T. W. Baxter and Uri Almagor (eds.), *Age, Generation, and Time: Some Features of East African Age Organisations* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978).

the clan; the sixth provided sagacious advice. Then, at the end of the eighteenth century, they adopted a different system for clan governance without age bracketing. The Egyptian colonial rule led to further changes in social structure, likely spurring other changes in age categorization.²² The varying way African societies used the life course and youth to soothe theological concerns and neutralize the effects of wealth differentials certainly encourages rethinking the centrality of biology in our definitions of adolescence.

Thinking about the bachelors' guilds and the *gada* calls for a more nuanced understanding of how modern adolescence overrode deprecated modes of age organization. What were the exact borders of peer organizations like the Hungarian guilds? How did Harar society look like as adolescents 'broke free' (?) from their age cohorts? Our answers to these questions will only add to our understanding of European modernity's colonial expansion inside and outside the continent.²³ Tracing the process in which this "modern" form of social organization spread across the world is also crucial for the ongoing debates on the discrepancy between social and biological maturation as well as the ongoing debates about the universality of adolescence versus its particularity. Adolescence as a culturally transferred concept has been well studied; we do not know as much about socially transferred changes in adolescence.

My research focuses on "young adults" or "emergent adults," a category later to my period of interest and foreign to my region of interest. Jeffrey Jensen Arnett's survey of emergent adulthood covers milestones familiar to our discussion: parent-child relationships, love and sex, the road to marriage, post-secondary education, and work. He also ventures into media use and religious beliefs (the latter also features in accounts like Bujak's).²⁴ Although this concept is less than half a century old, it has gained wide currency. Its popularity is grounded in empirical observation. As Arnett claims, grouping people aged 10 to 25 together makes no sense if they face different concerns. More teenagers than ever before in human history remain in school until around the age of 18, for example. Others have even suggested a more complicated division: "adolescents, 15 to 19; young people, 20 to 24; young adults, 25 to 29; adult-young, 30–34."²⁵ These new categories are justified empirically by a prolonged way to "set-

22 Avishai Ben-Dror, *Emirate, Egyptian, Ethiopian: Colonial Experiences in Late Nineteenth-Century Harar* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2018), 97–98.

23 I build here on Alexander Etkind's *Internal Colonization: Russia's Imperial Experience* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011).

24 Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

25 Pierluca Birindelli, *The Passage from Youth to Adulthood: Narrative and Cultural Thresholds*, Lanham (UPA, 2014), 60.

ted” adulthood as defined by marriage, homeownership, reproduction, and other traditional milestones.

Thinking about young adults instead of adolescents, I believe, is helpful conceptually for the study of earlier periods that predate this prolonging. The discourse around young adulthood centers on institutional transitions, like schooling and labor market entry. This discourse is thus helpful in bringing social history back into the picture.²⁶ It might encourage historians of Europe to look at youth as detached from the themes encapsulated in contemporary discourses on youth and adolescence. These discourses, to be sure, have been tremendously productive in guiding historians, not least because they also dictated the production of source materials. Sexuality, for example, will be examined separately in adolescence (as the discovery of sexuality) and young adulthood (as its utilization and control in the transition to adulthood).

Opening up the possibilities of age categorization can also help us understand adulthood. The discovery of childhood and adolescence must have been accompanied by the construction of adulthood and old age.²⁷ Thinking about adulthood as constructed – though one without a deluge of discursive interest in adulthood or a key figure like G. Stanley Hall – can help us detect more subtle influences of knowledge and cultural transfer on the life course. It can also help rethink historical life courses. Think one more time about the inheriting son/daughter in Bujak’s monograph. His brothers might have migrated to towns, become servants, joined a monastery, or bought a small farm. They became independent adults at once, forced by their birth order to make a dramatic shift. Their younger

26 The literature on the transition to adulthood, inspired by life-course sociology, in history is mostly quantitative. John Modell, Frank F. Furstenberg, and Theodore Hershberg, “Social Change and Transitions to Adulthood in Historical Perspective”, *Journal of Family History* 1, No. 1 (1976), 7–32; Ann Larson, *Growing up in Melbourne: Transitions to Adulthood in the Late Nineteenth Century*, Ph.D. Diss. (Australian National University, 1986); John Modell, *Into One’s Own: From Youth to Adulthood in the United States, 1920–1975* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); Linda Lee Dahlberg, *Pathways of Change: The Transition to Adulthood in Nineteenth Century Indianapolis, 1860–1880*, Ph.D. Diss. (Indiana University, 1995); Wendy Sigle, David I. Kertzer, and Michael J. White, “Abandoned Children and Their Transitions to Adulthood in Nineteenth-Century Italy”, *Journal of Family History* 25, No. 3 (2000), 326–40; Lisa A. Alberici and Mary Harlow, “Age and Innocence: Female Transitions to Adulthood in Late Antiquity”, *Hesperia Supplements* 41 (2007), 193–203; Harriet Ward, “Transitions to Adulthood from Care in Late 19th Century England”, *Child & Family Social Work* 26, No. 2 (2021), 222–30.

27 See, for example, Winthrop D. Jordan, “Searching for Adulthood in America,” *Daedalus* 105, No. 4 (1976), 1–11; James E. Cote, *Arrested Adulthood: The Changing Nature of Maturity and Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 2000).

brother had a more secure road to adulthood: he would inherit their parents' estate, bring his wife to the family farm, and eventually become the head of the household. When did his adulthood begin? With marriage, even though he remained under his parents' tutelage? When they retired, perhaps as he neared his fifties?

There is more maturation to undergo beside the set of maturations subsumed under adolescence. The inheriting son kept refining his management and agricultural skills. He learned how to manage daily workers or servants and train his children for the tasks they would one day need to mature into performing. Limiting ourselves to adolescence might reflect the spell this "discovery of adolescence" had on the Anglosphere c. 1900. Then, adolescents were mostly understood as emerging individuals. This was a problem. The term 'youth' (*Jugend*, for example) left the realm of the middle classes when working-class youth were suspected of delinquency and truancy.²⁸ Perhaps importing the term "young adulthood," which had no contemporary connotations, can overcome the power of these connotations on us. Cultural transfer, if so, is not only an intriguing research topic. It can also hinder studying "social facts" through its limitations on our scholarly imaginations and our sources' priorities when writing.

Yet we must not do away with the transferredness of adolescence and young adulthood. By studying cultural and social transfer in tandem, we can help uncover how the "science" of adolescence (ranging from sex education to psychiatry) impacts societies still in transition or even resisting it. A recent study of the United Nations Development Programme's Millennium Project voiced the idea that adolescence "is already [a concept] saturated with the colonialist foundation of phylogeny re-capitulating ontogeny." Grounded in a South African context, the study shows how the Millennium Project thus transfers a set of values that can change social behavior. It further drives the globalization and standardization of desirable adolescent behavior. The cultural transfer of adolescence is thus far from over. There is much more to know about how these processes of transfer shaped adolescent cultures, practices, and structures long after the "heyday" of adolescence ended in our scholarly imagination.

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²⁸ J. Robert Wegs, "Working-Class 'Adolescence' in Austria, 1890–1930", *Journal of Family History* 17, No. 4 (1992), 439–50.

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