

Unit 10: Ruth Sandwell: How did the experience of young people change in the 1940s and 1950s?

Q: How did the experience of young people change in the 1940s and 1950s?

A: I think that youth really did change, but historians like to talk about the creation of certain things that we take completely for granted. In the 19th century, historians have talked about the creation of motherhood as a separate kind of activity that could be taught, mothering classes, and had to be learned and involved a certain set of skills. Other historians have talked about youth, that youth was something that was created at a particular historical time and that time varies, according to historians. But there is a strong sense that youth became something-- that period of time, let's just say between 12 and 16, 17, became a separate and identifiable period. Instead of being-- well, in agricultural societies, people would be working from a very early age, but they would really become full-time workers from the age of let's say 12 to 14, sometime in there. They would take on a full load of work in an agricultural setting. So what happened with urbanization and industrialization-- one of the things that happened was compulsory schooling. So compulsory schooling, which at first only went up to age 12, that meant that-- different definitions of childhood were beginning to emerge at that time. Childhood was a time when you were protected and that language was used, you were protected from being forced to work and you were going to be nurtured, like a flower or some precious living being, through that period that extended much, much longer than had been common, certainly in agricultural societies. And it was going to be a time of learning and of creativity. So from the late 19th century, these new ideas about childhood, about what was appropriate during childhood emerged. There's a fantastic book written many, many years ago now by I can't remember her first name, Zelizer, called, *Pricing the Priceless Child*. And she talks about that moment between about 1870 and 1890 where children changed, their meaning in society changed from being sort of not worthless, but children who had to-- their contribution was weighed by how much they could help the family survive, that was in the 1870's, still a predominant idea. And then contrasting that with the 1890's, where for the first time, children, instead of being seen as worthless, became priceless. And you weren't to look at them for their economic value. You weren't to look at them for what they could bring to the family. You were supposed to be nurturing them for the benefit of their own individual souls and selves. So at the same time that--

well, actually, not at the same time. So in the 1890 to sort of 1940 period, the idea of childhood, up to say the age of 12 or 13, was one where you were supposed to be protected. You were supposed to be nurtured. You were supposed to be educated about the larger world and society in which you lived. At the same time, the later period in people's lives, between let's just say 14 and 18, was seen, originally in agricultural societies just as a time for working, perhaps not as well, and as a kind of training mode. But after the 1940's, a whole bunch of changes happened that resulted in the consolidation of a trend whereby that later period of time was also seen as a time when people needed to be nurtured. They needed to be protected. And they needed to be controlled. With the growth of urbanization, there as a phenomenon and a fear of a phenomenon of kids not having enough rules, enough constraints. Because, frankly, before large scale urbanization, people, including teenagers, were really, really strictly under the eye of their parents, of their family, of their extended kin and as well, of a small local community. So that was a lot of surveillance, a lot of oversight, a lot of discipline in the sense of being reprimanded, but also being very constrained in what people could do. So with urbanization, with ongoing industrialization, but in the post-World War II period, there was such an increase in people's wealth in Canada, which I think is really key to understanding why there was-- all of a sudden, burst onto the scene were teenagers, teenagers who had opinions. They had what they considered their own culture, a culture that involved things that adults found troubling. One of the kinds of things that were identified with teenagers were youth gangs. That had been a phenomenon that had begun in the early days of urbanization in Canada and in Great Britain and Europe. So that was a source of fear. Then there was kind of a redoubling that we don't want our children to become juvenile delinquents. That was a really big concern, but it's also a reality. I mean then, as now, young men are some of the most violent people in our society. But that became that period, from the 1940's, it became a phenomenon, there was social commentary about it. There was also medical commentary. The idea of psychological issues related to being a teenager became very, very important. Psychology itself tied in with these changing ideas of childhood and development and growth to be a human being. Those became very important as well.