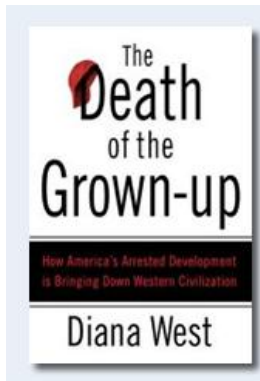


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Arrested Development and the Civilizational Crisis

Monday, September 24, 2007



This much is now clear — Americans are taking a lot longer to grow up. As a matter of fact, this society has developed a period of extended adolescence that is completely without precedent in human history.

Diana West traces this development in *The Death of the Grown-Up: How America's Arrested Development is Bringing Down Western Civilization*, and the book is not to be missed. She sees this pattern of arrested development as disastrous for individuals and for society at large.

The literature on extended adolescence is considerable already. The fact is that most young Americans in their 20's are unmarried (including almost 3 of 4 young males). Young Americans are putting off marriage and family and many are even moving back in with mom and dad after college. That much of the picture has been clear for some time. What Diana West adds to this analysis is her perceptive observation of how older adults now act like adolescents and identify with adolescent culture.

As she explains, “More adults, ages eighteen to forty-nine, watch the Cartoon Network than watch CNN. Readers as old as twenty-five are buying “young adult” fiction written expressly for teens. The average video gamer was eighteen in 1990; now he’s going on thirty.”

Then again, some demographers are suggesting that adolescence should be seen as extending into the 30's: “The National Academy of Sciences has, in 2002, redefined adolescence as the period extending from the onset of puberty, around twelve, to age thirty. The MacArthur Foundation has gone farther still, funding a major research project that argues that the “transition to adulthood” doesn't end until age thirty-four.” A nation of thirty-four-year-old adolescents? Actually, it would explain a great deal.

As West notes, teenagers of an older generation tried to identify with adult culture. Now, the tables are turned. In her words:

That was then. These days, of course, father and son dress more or less alike, from message-emblazoned t-shirts to chunky athletic shoes, both equally at ease in the baggy rumple of eternal summer camp. In the mature male, these trappings of adolescence have become more than a matter of comfort or style; they reveal a state of mind, a reflection of a personality that hasn't fully developed, and doesn't want to - or worse, doesn't know how.

Her look at America's adults is not very encouraging. She writes about “parents who need parents” and parents who facilitate the misbehavior of their teenage children. Few seem to know what an adult is supposed to look like, or how an adult supposed to act.

She writes:

Such is the unbearable lightness of being a grown-up today, a condition that belies the ever-thus canard that our social order is no different from the one our parents inherited. It may be natural to cling to this comfy thread of imagined continuity; after all, “it was ever thus” is a whole lot more comforting than “this is something new to the species.” But

our society, our “establishment,” no longer has a solid foundation, and rests on random pillars that sway or even fall for lack of communal support. This is not as much a matter of saying, “It was better when...” as a matter of saying “It was different because...” And it was different because adults used to be repositories of cultural tradition – such as, the fairly pretty basic taboo on sexual exhibitionism in the high school gym. As pillars of propriety – even sobriety – today’s adults are shaky at best, wholly unequipped to hold down their end of the once-mighty generation gap.

Not a pretty picture. The scariest aspect of her analysis is its accuracy. This is who we are and the kind of civilization we are building.

But, then, this kind of pattern is far more likely to bring down a civilization than to build a new one in its place. Civilizations require adults. The second part of West’s book argues that this pattern of “arrested development” leaves America unprepared to confront challenges like Islam and terrorism.

Diana West writes with an engaging style and offers a much-needed argument. *The Death of the Grown-Up* offers a diagnosis of one major problem facing families, churches, and nations today. It will take real adults to deal with the problem of delayed adulthood.

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