
Book Reviews

States of Childhood: From the Junior Republic to the American Republic, 1895–1945

Jennifer S. Light

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If shielding children from adult realities was a central tenet of Progressive reform, the George Junior Republic stands out for doing the opposite. Established with the motto “Nothing without labor,” the Republic’s young citizens were literally forced to work or face the prospect of starvation. This occurred at a time when most reformers sought to protect “priceless” children from labor, arguing that employed youth were succumbing to the dangers of industrialization rather than nourishing their playful and inquisitive energies. Perhaps surprisingly, William R. George, the Junior Republic’s founder, moved in the same circles as other Progressives and had their support despite the labor component of his youth-serving institution. How do we reconcile, then, the protectionist narrative associated with Progressive reform

and a Progressive reformatory that sought to temper children through exposure to work?

Jennifer S. Light offers a compelling answer to this dilemma in her book *States of Childhood: From the Junior Republic to the American Republic, 1895–1945*. Trained in media and performance studies, Light uses the concept of “role-play” to make sense not only of the seeming contradictions of the Progressive Era but also of sheltered childhood itself. According to Light, children had long played adult roles, but turn-of-the-century popular culture and, especially, scientific thought increasingly defended such performances as integral to child development in a modern age. Through junior republics, junior municipalities, city schools, and countless other programs with similar labor components, children lived “double lives” that included protected experiences but also dramatic encounters with adult occupations. As children became increasingly separated from the adult world and islanded into protected childhood, they turned into subjects of a pedagogy based on learning about the adult world through doing. In other words, young people con-

tinued to do the same work that children had always done, but after 1895, they did so in protected spaces in which the work itself became conceptualized as role-play rather than the real thing. Children's labor was recast as pedagogy rather than exploitation.

Nonetheless, Light points out, despite this new understanding of occupational performance, children's work in protected spaces continued to be productive labor that benefitted the bottom lines of organizations, institutions, communities, and even the federal government itself. Hence, the other story of sheltered childhood is one of the construction of labor. Ultimately, role-play and the ideal of protected childhood devalued children's labor the same way the ideal of separate spheres had devalued women's work. Even as children built brick-and-mortar structures, policed neighborhoods, and produced saleable goods, their age identity divorced their labor from the economy.

Light's book is divided into three parts. In part 1, Light details the history of the George Junior Republic in Freeville, New York, and relates it to contemporaneous developmental psychology. The George Junior Republic was seen as a performative space, one where children could peer into the real world while remaining protected. Meanwhile, scientific theories advanced by familiar names like G. Stanley Hall supported the junior republic model. Child psychologists argued that play and imitation were foundational to childhood while recapitulation theory expected children to "perform" man's evolutionary history as they aged. Ultimately, the George Junior Republic aligned with scientific pedagogy, helping it to serve as an

example not only for copycat republics but also for a curriculum adopted by countless schools.

Part 2 explores the expansion of the republic idea during the first two decades of the twentieth century, particularly into school systems, municipalities, and children's organizations. This section of the book offers a close look at the vocational training of Gary, Indiana, schools, the integration of children into the infrastructure of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, through that city's newsboys' republic, and the role-play foundational to the Boy Scouts from its inception. While revealing ways in which the children within institutions like these were economically productive even when not framed as such, part 2 also exposes the conservative nature of role-playing pedagogy. Except in the cases of Milwaukee (where in 1910 Socialist mayor Emil Seidel told a YMCA boys' republic they should start a revolution [p. 150]) and Chicago's Boys Brotherhood Republic (whose members engaged in youth protest), children's spaces based on the junior republic model typically taught young people to fit into rather than to transform the social order. This disciplining for citizenship is one reason the republic model was also adopted by prisons such as Sing Sing.

Part 3 of the book traces the history of youth-serving institutions that taught role-playing pedagogies from World War I through the 1930s. Although children helped the war effort by planting war gardens and canning food, by the end of the 1930s, such labor was no longer seen as role-play. Instead, as the process of sheltering children was completed, performances of adulthood began to be conceptualized as authentic youth experiences rather than

imitative ones. Moreover, new child development scholarship focused on the influence of peers and mass media. Now, rather than performance assisting in recapitulation, learning by doing redirected group influence to more edifying ends.

The book's conclusion suggests that as the goal of training overshadowed production during World War II, the labor of republic-based learning lost much of its economic value.

Light's instructive way of interpreting sheltered childhood helps resolve the paradox of the George Junior Republic. It also introduces a host of new questions. For example, did the children in these institutions interpret their own labor as role-play? Light provides an anecdote of a boy who in 1903 insisted that making a hammock was not work but play (p. 114), but *States of Childhood* is told through the perspective of adult reformers, educators, and scientists rather than from children's points of view. In addition to understanding this history from the perspective of young people themselves, Light opens the door to identity studies. What roles did class, ethnicity, and race play in popular understandings of role-play? Light says that immigrant youth and children of color were deemed most in need of such training. In chapter 6, the author also details police-organized republics for Black children in places like Pittsburgh. But, as Light points out, sheltered childhood was unevenly applied over the course of U.S. history. If role-play depended on a child being seen as categorically different from an adult, what does the introduction of such pedagogies among different groups suggest about the history of dependency and identity? Finally, Light's work invites

others to consider this history through the lens of capitalism. Was children's consumption, for example, considered to be a performance of adulthood or authentic youth experience? What are the larger implications of children's labor being used as a disciplinary tool?

Historians of childhood will welcome Light's book but may question the author's unwillingness to engage with those who similarly work in performance studies, most notably Robin Bernstein. Light suggests *States of Childhood* is also in conversation with educators of the present. Indeed, readers may consider, as I did, the implications of Light's history for graduate student instructors and college athletes today, as well as for project-based learning and Girl Scout cookie fund raisers (the latter of which is described historically in the book). Light's work also provides new ways of thinking through play studies. How do we draw the line between work and play? When should the labor of play have economic value? How do we decide when anything, for that matter, is authentically adult or authentically juvenile? As Light's book makes clear, these distinctions are constructed and historically specific.

—Jaclyn N. Schultz, *Bellevue College, Bellevue, WA*

Serious Fun: How Guided Play Extends Children's Learning

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Washington, DC: The National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2019. Introduction, references, and resources for further learning. 144 pp. \$22.40. paper. ISBN: 9781938113390