

Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood

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A profound analysis of the millennial generation. But what about the family?

This is a sociological study that began with a telephone survey in 2001 of a few thousand men and women who were born 1986 to 1991. This initial survey was followed up with personal interviews of 267 of them in 2005 and of 122 again in 2008 when they were 18 to 23 years old.

The book draws on the interviews rather than on data collected statistically. It is rich with quotes, presumably taken from tapes of the interviews.

The authors note all of the problems in conducting such a survey. They cannot be representative because some of the initial respondents die wind up incarcerated or institutionalized or simply cannot be located. In other words, the interviews would've self-selected for respondents was somewhat more successful lives. Nonetheless, the authors were troubled by what they found. The chapter titles for their findings are:

- 1) Morality Adrift
- 2) Captive to Consumerism
- 3) Intoxication's "Fake Feeling of Happiness"
- 4) The Shadow Side of Sexual Liberation
- 5) Civic and Political Disengagement

This review includes significant quotes from each of the chapters.

1) Morality Adrift

These young people were not getting much moral instruction. Their Boomer parents did not receive much themselves, and they are such moral relativists that they are reluctant to give their children moral instruction. They leave it to the schools, but the schools absolutely wash their hands of the matter.

Smith writes "In short, it appears that most schools, especially public schools, are not teaching students how to constructively engage moral issues about which people disagree. Quite the contrary, schools are teaching students that the best way to deal with difficult moral problems and questions is to ignore them. The moral pedagogy of most middle and high schools clearly seems to be: avoid, ignore, and pretend the issues will go away. Needless to say, that is naive and impossible. It actually resembles highly dysfunctional families that have sets of issues that nobody is allowed to bring up or discuss and that are instead carefully tiptoed around.

"To be clear, we do not think that American public schools should be in the business of promoting one particular substantive moral position on specific moral issues. Private schools may do that, but not public schools. But all schools certainly should be promoting the particular position that it is good to learn how to think clearly and coherently about important issues, including moral issues. That is what education is all about. Schools do not need to teach what in particular students should believe on every moral matter. But they certainly could, and, we think, should, teach how to reason well when it comes to moral problems."

"... emerging adults have observed how purportedly universal, absolutist moral claims have led to horrific destruction and violence. The attacks of September 11, 2001—which took place when this cohort of youth was 11 to 16 years old—is an archetypical case in point. These emerging adults have also heard about the Crusades, Jim Crow America, the Holocaust, Communism's destruction of more than 100 million people, the Rwandan genocide, and so on. At the same time, these emerging adults have not been taught well how to differentiate between strong moral and religious claims that should be tolerated, if not respected, and those that deserve to be refuted, rejected, and opposed. Very few have been given the reasoning tools and skills to discern such important differences. As a result, many emerging adults simply

end up trying to completely avoid making any strong moral claims themselves, as well as avoiding criticizing the moral views of others..."

In this chapter Smith does not address the basis of morality, a sense of purpose in life. He mentions it only in the conclusion. But without the kind of purpose in life that is given by Charles Murray's four fundamental personal characteristics undergirding a happy life --- honesty and industry, meaningful relationships, and a satisfying marriage --- they are like marionettes with cut strings. Nothing to hold them up. In this reviewer's words, the fact that they are not committed to family, community, church or nation leaves them adrift. This book describes what it is to be adrift.

A factor that Smith does not address is the schools' active disparagement of Western values. The quote above says that they do not accept absolutist moral claims. This is absolutely true, and their teachers beat it into them. They are repeatedly told of the evils of slavery, colonialism, the treatment of Japanese at Manzanar, our display element of the environment, the mistreatment of women under the patriarchy and so on. While what they are taught has a basis in historical fact, no credit is given to the fact that it was Western man, very often Americans, who recognized the existence of problems like slavery and did something about it. Quite the contrary, the private schools in Washington DC that my grown children (born 1982, 1983 and 1988) attended taught them that straight white males were uniquely evil. Mine are typical of the children that Smith is describing.

Smith writes "That the social order that emerging adults enjoy works as well as it does can simply be taken for granted. That schools, banks, corporations, and the rest function as well as they seem to is simply assumed to be normal. Functional order and social prosperity are taken to be the natural default, not valuable accomplishments that take real collective human effort. The idea that a democracy or a republic or any humane society requires that its citizens continually invest in the common good, or even actively contribute to institutional functionality, by sustaining and practicing moral virtues, such as acts of care and goodness, that go beyond simple procedural justice, is either inconceivable or else sounds laughably old-fashioned."

I agree with Smith. Yes, our children assume these institutions are infinitely resilient. They can absorb ANTIFA, BLM and other assaults, infinite talk about assassinating the president, fake news, leaks etc. with no damage. They do not appreciate how irreparable the damage being done today in 2017 will turn out to be.

2) Captive to Consumerism

The emerging adults whom Smith interviewed talked endlessly about the things that they wanted in life. They wanted not only the big things – a house and a car -- but the ability to shop extensively and almost aimlessly. The ability to consume. The freedom to while their lives away in Starbucks and Applebee's.

Smith writes: "Material comfort, security, family, and happiness. When asked about what makes a good life in terms of an 'ideal kind of lifestyle' and about goals when it comes to 'buying, owning, and consuming,' most emerging adults expressed some variant of this answer: 'A family, a nice car, nice house, my own practice, be happy, stuff like that.'"

Surprising to me, and certainly worth more mention than Smith gives it, is the lack of talk about children. Some of the respondents talked about "having kids." That's it. There is not a single mention of providing for the kids. Planning their education, passing on the culture and moral values, paying for vacations with the kids, paying pediatricians and the other specialists that they require. "Having kids" seems to be a distant and abstract thought to all of these respondents.

On education, Smith writes: "Most, though not all, emerging adults believe in the importance of finishing high school and getting a college education. Large numbers want to do well in school, go to college, get a degree, and put it to good use. But for most, the reasons they value college seem to have little to do with the broadly humanistic vision of higher education described above. Rather, their motivations have almost entirely to do with the instrumental advantages it produces for them as competitive individuals—as well as the fun they want to have while in college. What really matters

to emerging adults is getting the credits, earning the diploma, and becoming certified as a college-educated person so that they can get a better job, earn more money, and become a good salary earner and supporter of a materially comfortable and secure life."

"In any case, seldom did anyone we interviewed mention family alone as defining their vision of what they ultimately want to get out of or accomplish in life. Usually, marriage and family were combined with a few other goals, values, and interests."

"The systemic imperative of economic growth in early 20th-century America launched not only new methods of mass production on the assembly line, which brought the price of most goods down to popularly affordable levels, but also three other key economic institutions. The first was a new marketing and advertising industry, which learned to sell products based not on the actual features of products themselves but on the identities, emotions, aspirations they as advertisers could construct for consumers to (often arbitrarily) associate with the products. Advertising thus became fundamentally irrational in the character of its appeal, making products desirable in ways often having nothing to do with their actual product characteristics. The second key institution generated by America's burgeoning mass consumer economy was 'planned obsolescence,' first experimented with in the 1920s and 1930s. In some cases, this meant intentionally designing products to have limited useful lives, so they would break or wear out and have to be replaced. In other cases, this meant purposefully changing products' visual styles and fashions, in order to make still-functioning products unwanted by consumers seeking to stay fashionable and 'with the style.' Thus, the former CEO of General Motors, Alfred P. Sloan, who helped invent the automobile's annual model change, said in 1941, 'Today the appearance of a motorcar is a most important factor in the selling end of the business—perhaps the most important factor—because everyone knows the car will run.' The third institution invented to meet the systemic requisites of the rapidly expanding mass consumer economy was consumer credit. Until the early twentieth century, when the economy shifted from being production-oriented to consumption-oriented, most Americans called borrowing money to pay for consumer items 'debt' and considered it moral vice and practical foolishness. Good, smart people only bought what they could afford and saved up the money before purchasing new goods. In order to create a new consumer mentality that would encourage people to buy all they could afford and more, therefore, financial leaders replaced the old term 'debt' with the new term 'credit' and promoted credit-buying as a consumer right and moral good."

3) Intoxication's "Fake Feeling of Happiness"

Partying is on campus. There is pressure to drink.

Smith describes the social pressure to drink. It is not merely on campus. Half a century ago I felt it strongly both in fraternity life and the military. He attributes a commercial motive to much of it. The alcoholic beverage industry floods us with advertising. The same is starting to happen with legalized pot.

4) The Shadow Side of Sexual Liberation

Smith's whole discussion about sex does not talk about building relationships. Not romance, not marriage, not family.

Smith writes: "Emerging adults can jump into intimate relationships assuming that sex is just another consumer item, recreational thrill, or lifestyle commodity. But many of them soon discover the hard way that sex is much more profound and precious than that."

I would point out that the world's oldest profession, prostitution, certainly treats sex as a commercial item. Nothing new here. What is new is that men (and women) are no longer interested in forming families to reproduce themselves, so sex becomes little more than the act. Making love can be commercialized; making and raising children not so much.

Smith writes: Historically, human societies and cultures have known that sex is both powerful and potentially destructive. So everyone has devised ways to regulate sex. Typically, the social regulation of sex throughout human history has involved the exercise of patriarchy, repression, domination, coercion, and exploitation. The social control of sexuality has not always or even often benefitted the individuals involved. The sexual revolution of the 1960s and '70s was in part an attempt to remedy some of those problems, to lift former restrictions on sexual expression and leave more up to individual choice and happiness."

A factor Smith does not consider is the evolution of the family described by Carle Zimmerman, from trustee to patriarchal to nuclear. Monogamy and fidelity are concepts associated with a patriarchal family. Since the Industrial Revolution liberated women, hypergamy has become the norm. Women do not want to settle for mere average men. Media expose them to the most attractive models, and as consumers that's what they want. There are not enough alpha males to go around. Women aspire for the best, giving themselves wantonly, only to suffer disappointment. It is consumerism gone amok, destroying our civilization's ability to reproduce itself.

5) Civic and Political Disengagement

Smith writes: "But whatever any popular cultural or political observers have had to say about the political interests of emerging adults, we—without joy—can set the record straight here: almost all emerging adults today are either apathetic, uninformed, distrustful, disempowered, or, at most only marginally interested when it comes to politics."

"Most emerging adults also have positive relationships with their parents, relationships that most value and spend time and effort to maintain. But most of those family relationships have also been renegotiated to selectively keep parents in the dark or at a distance about many of the important things going on in emerging adults' lives. Parental relationships may remain important in many ways, but they usually do not form the fabric of the daily interactions or consume the hours of time spent together that other emerging adult relationships do. This means that, structurally, most emerging adults live this crucial decade of life surrounded mostly by their peers—people of the same age and in the same boat—who have no more experience, insight, wisdom, perspective, or balance than they do. It is sociologically a very odd way to help young people come of age, to learn how to be responsible, capable, mature adults."

"Yet there are ironies in American individualism. Having freed people from the formative influences and obligations of town, church, extended family, and conventional morality, American individualism has exposed those people to the more powerful influences and manipulations of mass consumer capitalism. Stripped down to a mere autonomous individuality, people stand naked before the onslaught of commercial media, all-pervasive advertising, shopping malls, big-box stores, credit-card buying, and the dominant narrative of a materially defined vision of the good life. In this, one form of external authority has been displaced by another, much more insidious and controlling external authority—all done in the name of individual self-determination."

6) Conclusion

Only in the conclusion does Smith, the agnostic social scientist, note that a structured system of values, such as a religious faith, may be required to give meaning to life and resolve the issues that he so extensively chronicles. Yes! People must believe in family, society and nation. However, the message they receive from all quarters is the opposite: celebrate diversity, and devalue your own historical antecedents.

My personal solution, after having raised a family in the United States that is dysfunctional in all the ways Smith describes, has been to move to a more traditional society in Eastern Europe to raise a second family. It is under assault

by cultural influences from Western Europe and America. However, as I write this those forces seem to be imploding from overwhelming debt, abysmal birthrates, and a profound lack of belief in themselves.