The Delinquents: Censorship and Youth Culture in Recent U.S. History

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Throughout the twentieth century, and even earlier, adults have attempted to publicly control, and even censor, teenagers’ access to various artifacts of mass culture—including magazines, music, comic books, movies, television and radio programs, and books. The motivation has been twofold: to shield the young from certain perceived pernicious influences and to encourage a national cultural uniformity/conformity heavily motivated by Christian morality and the dread of racial (and class) mixing. Fears of youthful extremism, sparked by corrupting influences, have waxed and waned, depending on various social, political, economic, cultural, technological, and other configurations. But attempts at censorship have generally continued, earmarking even newer forms of mass communication, most recently cable television and the computer Internet. Any understanding of this development must take into consideration both the fears and motivations of the adult majority, as well as the complexities of modern youth culture, all within a larger national matrix. Adults’ fear of youthful rebellion and their urge to control youth became particularly glaring during the 1950s, when the winds of change seemed particularly brisk.¹

¹Historians have made a distinction, in the twentieth century, between adolescents (individuals who are at a time of awkward searching for maturity between childhood and adulthood, roughly ages 13 to 20), teenagers (a term used more after World War II to signify the emergence of a separate teen culture, somewhat carefree and semi-independent, between 13- and 18-years-old), and youth (an older group, 18 to 21 or so, college age, with more independence but not yet possessing full autonomy). I tend to use all three terms, as well as juveniles and young people, interchangeably. Often it is difficult to separate childhood from adolescence/youth in exploring various issues, so I am often vague in making any rigid distinctions, but will usually try to focus on those between the ages of 13 and 19 or so, whatever the designation used.
As the twentieth century winds down, concerns about youthful excesses—sex, drugs, drinking, violence, ignorance, sloth—appear as alive as ever and remain a combination of behavior, perceptions, expectations, and dreaded anticipations. “American adults have regarded adolescents with hope and foreboding throughout this century,” Mike Males concludes in his recent, sweeping survey of contemporary generational wars. “What is transpiring today is new and ominous. A particular danger attends older generations indulging ‘they-deserve-it’ myths to justify enriching ourselves at the expense of younger ones. The message Nineties American adults have spent two decades sending to youths is: You are not our kids. We don’t care about you.” Males summarizes what seems increasingly evident, a perception of a generation run amok, which should be ignored, controlled, or a combination of both. The drug war is only one manifestation of such fears. The emphasis on family values in the current public sphere, fanned by the religious right and steadily infusing mainstream politics, smacks of nostalgia for the good old days—of order, control, prosperity, stability—and nervousness about the crumbling present and indistinct future. American jeremiads have been around since the seventeenth century, expressions of gloom and doom, seeking moral regeneration as well as the intervention of a higher power, whether God or the government and Supreme Court. Such perceptions and insecurities are nothing new, however, as the search for control of the young has perplexed each generation.

Adolescence, that stage of life hovering precariously between childhood and adulthood, has technically existed only in the twentieth century—the term first publicized by G. Stanley Hall in 1904—but it certainly had vestiges dating back to the colonial era. Perhaps it would be less confusing to use the word teenagers, which denotes a chronological period easily quantified but just as hard to clarify. Through the nineteenth century males and females experienced this stage of life, marked by the onset of puberty, in various ways, depending on race, ethnicity, class, geographical residence, and other factors, but it was a vulnerable and stressful time for many. The transition from play and school to work, dependence to independence, single to married life could be smooth or rough. Always, however, adults attempted to exert much control—physical, spiritual, intellectual, moral, educational—as was their right and duty. And often

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2Mike A. Males, The Scapegoat Generation: America’s War on Adolescents (Monroe, Maine, 1996), 43 (italics in original). For the latest survey of one aspect of delinquency, see Robert M. Regoli and John D. Hewitt, Delinquency in Society: A Child-Centered Approach, 3d ed. (New York, 1997), which, oddly, has very little to say about cultural issues and censorship. There are no listings in the index for music, books, magazines, television (cable or otherwise), movies (although two pages are devoted to a discussion of violent films, 157–58), or computers.
the young resisted or ignored such manipulation, perhaps at their peril, as the generational struggle continued.3

With the coming of mass society in the twentieth century, marked by racial, ethnic, class, religious, geographical, and other rifts, generational frictions seemed to escalate, and therefore increased the need for control, through rapidly expanding schooling, the invention of the juvenile court, supervised youth groups, and even censorship. Heightened sexuality seemed particularly threatening. Censorship, aimed at shielding adults as well as children from pornography, birth control information, excessive depictions of violence, and the like, waxed and waned, depending on various religious and cultural influences. During World War II older children often seemed out of control. A juvenile delinquency scare, probably exaggerated, pervaded the country. Magazines had already been full of advice articles for teenagers—about dating, sex, marriage—but with the war teenagers were perceived as real or potential rebels as well as valuable consumers with their own wholesome lifestyle. As James Gilbert has summarized the situation, “the attention devoted to delinquency during the war years was in part the response of society to the immense cultural and social changes initiated in this period. Those changes continued undiminished into the postwar world. And the response to delinquency rose and fell with the shifting argument about the nature of adolescence in American culture.” A complex phenomenon, adolescent behavior, particularly its seemingly more destructive elements, increasingly baffled adults, who lashed back in a variety of ways. One approach was to encourage healthy, uplifting books, movies, and the like.4

The postwar years, through the 1950s, were marked by an uneven social, political, cultural, and economic mix of stability and fragility, com-


placency and apprehension, optimism and cynicism, looking backward as well as forward. Adults poured their love, faith, and resources into the young, the hope of the future, but also dreaded their corruptibility and fragility, perhaps harboring the seeds of moral and social decay. Children had always possessed the potential for either good or ill, and so had been raised accordingly, but a more pessimistic mood settled over the country with the dawning of the nuclear age and the lowering of the Iron Curtain in Europe. During the 1950s, especially, fears of youthful rebellion took on added dimensions, in the midst of general internal security and prosperity, whipped up by a combination of anticommunist hysteria and racial unrest. Villains and disrupters seemed to lurk everywhere, certainly in the proliferating artifacts of youth culture—music, comic books, movies, and much more.

Social control, through censorship, appeared increasingly necessary—and slippery. “The confusion and uncertainty extended to the most basic beliefs, values, and priorities” as the 1940s merged into the 1950s, William Graebner has concluded. “ Unsure of how to carry out the most essential and elemental social tasks, Americans welcomed the advice of experts in child-rearing, marriage and many other fields.” This search knew no bounds. Marynia Farnham’s *The Adolescent*, appearing in 1951, sought to fill the gap because adolescents “seem to be out of gear with the rest of society. They have become a problem. By some, they are listed as the Number One problem; indeed to many people, adolescence is almost synonymous with delinquency.” Although such a view seemed misguided, the author yet believed, “There is some important evidence that during these years youngsters are particularly prone to get out of kilter.” A few years later William Wattenberg had a more toned down approach in his text, *The Adolescent Years*, stressing development rather than neurosis or psychosis. “As to radio and television, the evidence indicates that teen-agers listen to much the same fare that is generally popular among their parents,” he found. “Popular magazines, movies, radio and television programs help teach certain basic ideas of our culture. For example, the battle between Good and Evil is perennial and is won by Good with the help of magic or coincidence; and, perhaps a keynote in the social relationships of adolescents, romance is the most important drama in living, with true love conquering all obstacles.” The mass media, through ubiquitous advertising, struggled to swell consumption. Wattenberg made no mention of youth culture inundated by depictions of amoral behavior, violence, or extreme sexuality. He presented a sane voice crying in the wilderness.1

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Any attempt to comprehend young people and their cultures in the 1950s immediately runs into conflicting memories and images, running the gamut from docile, confident, bland suburbanites, to troubled greasers and other assorted rebels, urban and rural, mostly white. The potential for good or evil lurked everywhere. The middle-class lifestyle, part of the rise of corporate America, also had its snares and pitfalls. Suburban delinquency seemed increasingly menacing. "Split-level delinquency in the quiet suburban communities is just as deadly a menace to the younger generation as are the festering conflicts of the housing projects and old slums," Harrison Salisbury concluded in 1958. He blamed the problems partly on fathers distracted by the office workplace. "Children are as emotionally starved as those in the deprived areas of the slums." Two years later Richard Gordon, Katherine Gordon, and Max Gunther repeated such strictures against fathers and also blamed prosperity for spoiling children in "Disturbia," "full of obedient parents and spoiled, lazy, materialistic children." The young seemed to be either dangerous rebels or rudderless slackers, spoiled by affluence, and beyond adult control.6

Previously, "teachers and parents had direct control over the levers they could apply to motivate children. Now the levers are other children themselves, acting as a small society, and adults must come to know either how to shape the directions this society takes, or else how to break down the adolescent society, thus re-establishing control by the old levers," James Coleman gloomily concluded in 1961. He feared that, "Because adolescents live so much in a world of their own, adults remain uninformed about the way teen-agers spend their time, the things that are important to them, and the things that friends have in common." Based on his survey, girls and boys behaved differently in their television watching, movie going, and music preferences, but these did not seem to be major factors in negatively molding their values. Indeed, while they both preferred rock and roll to other forms of popular music, their musical taste ran more to Pat Boone than Elvis Presley.7

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After a decade of fearing and censoring adolescent popular culture, not much appears to have changed by the 1960s. Teens influenced each other and shaped their lives in often negative ways, perhaps with or without much adult input or mass cultural influence, a frightening, perplexing prospect for many critics. A few, however, saw some promise. "Much of the ambivalence of adults toward 'teenagers' is, I should judge, simply a kind of repressed panic-response to the liquidation of authority over them," maverick critic Edgar Z. Friedenberg argued in 1959. But he harbored no fears of teen autonomy, if not too destructive. "Apathy, a fawning acceptance of authority, or a hard-eyed campaign of organized delinquency with enough real violence to show you mean business, may all be understood as functional for adolescents bearing certain kinds of wounds. But understandable or not, functional or not, these are dangerous expedients for the young." He welcomed positive youthful action, which would erupt within a few years of his remarks.

The pervasive Red Scare of the 1950s, which peaked just before mid-decade, legitimated the sanitizing of the nation's political culture, through not only prosecuting and persecuting anyone or anything smacking of communism, but also manipulating a whole range of suspect people, ideas, and artifacts. Purifying society of corrupting influences became a permissible activity, upheld by the religious, political, economic, legal, and cultural establishment. Everyone was vulnerable, but particularly the impressionable young, whose naivete and search for excitement could easily lead to moral corruption or worse. Everything was suspect. Public schools became a prime battleground, with teachers and the curriculum scrutinized for unhealthy thoughts or actions. Adolescent culture, more problematic because harder to channel and control, was continually examined under society's moral microscope, scrutinized, picked apart, and cleansed, if necessary.

The ballooning birth rate following World War II created a baby boom, peaking in 1957, that would have momentous repercussions into the foreseeable future. The steadily proliferating number of children, mostly potential teenagers through the 1950s, was connected not only to more emphasis on the structure and meaning of family life, but also the growing awareness of potential (or real) social disruption, even destruction, for many that would come to fruition in the 1960s. The child-centered family, most noticeable in the rapidly expanding white suburbs, was underpinned by a general emphasis on women as wives and mothers, as well as the peddling of televisions as devices to bring the family together. Cold war fears

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heightened a natural tendency to connect the defense of democracy with the sanctity of the nuclear family, seemingly stabilized through high employment rates and heightened consumption. “The sexually charged, child-centered family took its place at the center of the postwar American dream,” argues Elaine Tyler May. “The most tangible symbol of that dream was the home—the locale of the good life, the evidence of democratic abundance.” The rise in church membership, from 50 percent of the population in 1940 to 63 percent in 1960, also should have indicated increasing social and cultural stability, a national moral compass pointing in the right direction. The private sphere—family, church, job, community—was supposed to solve most problems, but yet fell short in many ways, releasing a myriad of jolts and fears. Censorship seemed one method of muzzling discontent and channeling behavior.9

The comic book scare, for example, generated much heat but little light, although resulting in a thorough upheaval, many would say cleansing, of the industry. William Gaines inherited Educational Comics from his father, Max, in 1947; at that time it was releasing such bland titles as Picture Stories from the Bible and Tiny Tot Comics. Gaines, restless and imaginative, transformed the floundering company in 1950, soon issuing such tantalizing titles as The Crypt of Terror and The Vault of Horror, followed by The Haunt of Fear, Crime SuspenStories, Weird Science, and Frontline Combat. Gaines collected a variety of creative artists, particularly Harvey Kurtzman, Al Feldstein, and Jack Davis, whose output appealed to a swelling, enthusiastic, young audience. Pooling their imaginative genius, in 1952 they unveiled the first issue of the iconoclastic Mad, followed by Panic in late 1953, that would revolutionize satirical humor and the comic industry. Horror and satire comics appealed to a wide swath of children and particularly adolescents—Abbie Hoffman, later antiwar activist and cofounder of the Yippies, was an avid Mad reader—which probably guaranteed a hostile reception among parents and other adults.10

Gaines met his match in Dr. Fredric Wertham. A senior psychiatrist for the New York City Department of Hospitals for twenty years and a


10Frank Jacobs, The Mad World of William M. Gaines (Secaucus, N.J., 1972); Maria Reidelbach, Completely Mad: A History of the Comic Book and Magazine (Boston, 1991). My brother started my addiction to Mad when he brought home issue no. 4, I believe; thereafter, I rushed to the local newsstand each month to purchase the latest issue, until the comic became a magazine following issue no. 23. I also joined the EC Fan Club, shared a Mad language with a good friend, and still have my club pin. I hope it corrupted my mind.
political progressive, Wertham’s diatribe against comics had begun in 1948 and culminated in Seduction of the Innocent, published in early 1954, the bible of the censorship forces. Filled with tantalizing, horrifying descriptions and illustrations, and a plethora of cautionary tales, the book has remained a riveting, but seriously flawed, challenge to those who deny the connection between literature and behavior. “The public is apt to be swayed by theories according to which juvenile delinquency is treated as an entirely individual emotional problem, to be handled by individualistic means,” but Wertham knew better. He argued that the millions of crime comics in circulation, over half of all comics sold—perhaps sixty-five million a month—had a deleterious influence, or worse, on highly suggestive youngsters. (In 1952 there were about five hundred separate titles, perhaps one-third of which dealt with crime and horror.) Even Superman and Batman were suspect. “The cultural background of millions of American children comes from the teaching of the home, the teaching of the school (and church), the teaching of the street and from crime comic books. For many children the last is the most exciting,” he had to conclude. “It arouses their interest, their mental participation, their passions and their sympathies, but almost entirely in the wrong direction.” Comics not only encouraged violence, but also racism, sexism, historical falsification, even homosexual conduct: “In vain does one look in comic books for seeds of constructive work or of ordinary home life. I have never seen in any of the crime, superman, adventure, space, horror, etc., comic books a normal family sitting down at a meal.” Only Batman having breakfast with Robin. Indeed, all of the mass media, including television and the movies, appeared to encourage violence, but he targeted comics because of their specific clientele. “What all media need at present is a rollback of sadism,” Wertham concluded. “What they do to children is that they make them confuse violence with strength, sadism with sex, low necklines with femininity, racial prejudice with patriotism and crime with heroism.”

Wertham was no lone voice crying in the wilderness. On the contrary, he fronted a swelling tide of revulsion, a rising chorus calling for censorship of comic books that had been building since the late 1940s, aroused by his steady stream of articles and speeches even before the book appeared. The Hartford Courant mounted a two-month editorial crusade against horror comics in early 1954, one of many such attacks at the time. The ongoing Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency of the Senate Committee on the Judiciary launched its own investigation in April 1954, with hearings at the Federal Courthouse on Foley Square in New York, site of the trials of top Communist Party leaders and other alleged sub-

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versives. The committee easily assumed a connection between comic reading and the perceived delinquency scourge. Gaines and Wertham squared off during the hearings. Gaines refused to admit any guilt. When asked by Senator Estes Kefauver about a particularly gruesome cover scene of a man holding a woman's severed head, the publisher blithely responded that it could be worse: "A cover in bad taste, for example, might be defined as holding the head a little higher so that the blood could be seen dripping from it, and moving the body over a little further so that the neck of the body could be seen to be bloody." The committee was not buying such obvious nonsense. Gaines also defended a satirical editorial, entitled "Are You A Red Dupe?" appearing in all of his comics, that accused his critics of being Communists, which particularly offended the committee. Noted criminologist Frederic Thrasher backed Gaines and the other horror comics publishers, but he was practically alone. Gaines's EC Fan-Addict Club Bulletin asked its seventeen thousand subscribers to send their thoughts to the committee's members. In the end, to no surprise, subcommittee members agreed with Wertham that many comics were detrimental to the health and safety of children, although they rejected any thought of federal censorship.¹²

While the senators refused to take explicit action—Wertham had suggested a law barring the sale of comics to those under fifteen and the regulation of some advertising—they did encourage citizens' groups to pressure vendors and wholesalers and also endorsed self-regulation by the comics industry. Gaines tried to head off such a move by attempting to rally the other publishers, who had been criticizing Wertham since his first attack in 1948. They now collapsed, however, and formed the Comics Magazine Association of America in September 1954; they named New York Juvenile Court Judge Charles F. Murphy as the comics czar, with a mandate to ban all horror books. Cooperating companies would follow the new Comics Code, submit all comics for prior approval, and display the proper seal. Violence and sex were particularly censored; the words horror and terror could not be used in a comic title. Distributors and wholesalers refused to handle any unauthorized comics. Gaines immediately withdrew his entire horror line and tried to substitute New Directions comics—Aces High, Extral, and the like—but without the seal they could not be initially sold. Gaines finally joined the association, but still had troubles. Twenty-four of the twenty-nine publishers subsequently went out of business, but not Gaines, who barely survived with a revamped Mad, now a twenty-five-cent, black-and-white magazine not bound by the code. While the national government took no overt action, by 1955

thirteen states had passed legislation regulating crime and horror comics. The crusade appeared triumphant. The intrusive English Tory government also recognized the danger, particularly after American horror comics became available in 1954, and so passed the Children and Young Persons (Harmful Publications) Act the next year. Strong support came from the Comics Campaign Council (CCC), spearheaded by Dr. Simon Yudkin, a pediatrician and member of the British Communist Party; the party’s reaction was initially sparked by its anti-American stance.¹³

Wertham and the censorship legions had broad support from the General Federation of Women’s Clubs, the American Legion, the Junior Chamber of Commerce, even the radical sociologist C. Wright Mills, but there were also a few detractors. The American Civil Liberties Union issued a statement in 1955 decrying censorship and arguing that there was no consensus that comics caused antisocial behavior. Over the years additional voices have been raised in protest. Cartoonist Jules Feiffer agreed with Wertham that comics were corrupting, but so what? “Comic books, which had few public (as opposed to professional) defenders in the days that Dr. Wertham was attacking them, are now looked back on by an increasing number of my generation as samples of our youthful innocence instead of our youthful corruption,” he wrote in 1965. “A sign, perhaps, of the potency of that corruption. A corruption—a lie, really—that put us in charge, however temporarily, of the world in which we lived; and gave us the means, however arbitrary, of defining right from wrong, good from bad, hero from villain.” Comics had become tame, devoid of controversy, and generally boring. Writer Robert Warshow questioned Wertham’s broad brush approach, and grudgingly admitted “that these outrageous productions may be in one sense ‘better’ than The Lone Ranger or Sergeant Preston, for in their absolute lack of restraint they tend to be somewhat livelier and more imaginative; certainly they are often less boring. But that does not make them any less objectionable as reading matter for children. Quite the contrary, in fact: Superman and Donald Duck and The Lone Ranger are stultifying; Crime SuspenStories and The Vault of Horror are stimulating.” Still, Warshow supported some sort of restraint. Juvenile crime and irresponsibility were current realities, and “to blame the comic books, as Dr. Wertham does, is simple-minded. But to say that the comics do not contribute to the situation would be like denying the importance of the children’s classics and the great English and European novels in the development of an educated man.” Warshow’s sophisticated approach bypassed the masses, whose fears of social disruption, moral

decay, and adult helplessness sanctioned various forms of control, voluntary
or coerced.\textsuperscript{14}

The comics scare was only one indication that something seemed ter-
ribly amiss in Eisenhower’s America. In Buffalo, New York, the Mayor’s
Advisory Committee on Salacious Publications and the Buffalo Youth
Board, in mid-decade, “focused their attention on comic books, ‘girlie’
magazines, and other materials that might incite youth to ‘lust and sex
criMes.’” Concerns somewhat varied throughout the country, although
there were general issues that suffused cities and suburbs alike. Movies cer-
tainly struck a sensitive nerve. Calls for movie censorship dated from the
earliest flickering images, escalated during the 1920s, and reached a fren-
zby in 1934 when the studios agreed to adhere to a voluntary Production Code
(a model for the later Comics Code). There was some grumbling by the
industry during the 1940s, with an occasional challenge to the code’s stric-
tures, but most of the studios’ weekly output hardly ruffled any feathers.\textsuperscript{15}

With the growing market of young viewers in the 1950s, however,
movies increasingly included youthful topics and messages. An affluent white
teen subculture, particularly evident in the emerging suburbs, eager for rel-
evant themes and provocative actors, made a visible imprint on the Hol-
lywood dream factory. At decade’s end, \textit{Life} estimated teenagers had
perhaps $10 billion in discretionary income, with 16 percent going for ente-
tainment. Most teen films concerned innocent topics, distinguished by
such pot boilers as \textit{Summer Love}, \textit{Going Steady}, and \textit{Gidget}, but some had
more violent and disturbing themes. Indeed, the science fiction, detec-
tive, red scare, and war films of the time featured much violence and may-
hem, but always in a tasteful setting with a happy ending. A Supreme
Court ruling in 1952 somewhat loosened the censorship code’s iron grip.
The delinquency films were part and parcel of this fixation on fright, secu-
rity, and salvation, with sometimes adverse consequences.\textsuperscript{16}

Movies about the young running wild filled the screens in the 1930s,
died down for the next decade, then reemerged with a vengeance during the
1950s. Fears of Communist aggression and subversion easily con-

\textsuperscript{14}Jules Feiffer, \textit{The Great Comic Book Heroes} (New York, 1965), 189; Robert
Warshow, \textit{The Immediate Experience: Movies, Comics, Theatre, and Other Aspects of Pop-
ular Culture} (1954; reprint, New York, 1962), 97, 102; J. P. Williams, “Why Superheroes
Never Bleed: The Effects of Self-Censorship on the Comic Book Industry,” \textit{Free Speech
Yearbook} 26 (1987): 60–69. For an example that the comic wars have not ended, see John

\textsuperscript{15}William Graebner, \textit{Coming of Age in Buffalo: Youth and Authority in the Postwar

\textsuperscript{16}Thomas Patrick Doherty, \textit{Teenagers and Teetops: The Juvenilization of American
Movies in the 1950s} (Boston, 1988). See, in general, Garth Jowett, “A Significant Medi-
um for the Communication of Ideas: The \textit{Miracle Decision} and the Decline of Motion Pic-
Couvares (Washington, D.C., 1996), 258–76.
nected to a grossly exaggerated apprehension of family disintegration, juvenile rebellion, and terrorized adults, all well captured in a myriad of Hollywood films. And the problems were not just on the screen. “Vandalism in theaters, a serious problem since the end of World War II, continues unabated to the extent that theatermen in various sections of the country regard it as a greater menace than television,” Variety reported in 1953. “While the degree of vandalism varies in different sections of the country, it is a nationwide problem.” In addition to the slick and ground-breaking The Wild One in 1954, followed by the impressive Rebel without a Cause and Blackboard Jungle the next year, scores of lesser delinquent films appeared throughout the remainder of the decade. Schlock producer Sam Katzman rushed out Teenage Crime Wave on the heels of Rebel without a Cause, soon followed by a plethora of copies by Katzman and others: The Night Holds Terror, The Young Stranger, Reform School Girl, Dragstrip Riot, Teenage Thunder, Hot Rod Rumble, and many more. The Delinquents, filmed in 1955 but not released for two years, trod the well-worn path—drinking, teenage love, accidental death, and final repentence. Confused or missing parents were often responsible for their teenagers’ recklessness, destruction, even death. Marijuana and heroin eventually entered the plots, in The Cool and the Crazy and High School Confidential, for example.

The delinquency films offered a stark contrast to the complacency of Father Knows Best and other such television fare, representing youthful wildness and parental guilt. “Crime and delinquency, which had been almost a working-class monopoly, suddenly engulfed middle America,” David Considine has written. “Hollywood was certainly not alone in discovering delinquency or providing it with a public forum,” but it perhaps rendered a disservice by presenting such a blatant picture without much resolution. Most prints of Blackboard Jungle carried the following message: “Today we are concerned with juvenile delinquency—its causes—its effects. We are especially concerned when this delinquency boils over into our schools.” Perhaps this and other films were meant to carry a warning and moral lesson, but the generally youthful audience probably missed the message, which occurred to the censors. The adults who ran the movie industry had fixated on the bottom line, as usual. The Kefauver committee investigated films as well as comics, but the former seemed the greater evil and were certainly easier to manipulate.


The delinquency scare and related films coincidentally appeared just as the movie industry was undergoing some upheaval and beginning to shake off the iron grip of the censorship office allied with the Catholic church. “The enormous outpouring of concern over juvenile delinquency in the mid-1950s presented the movie industry with dangerous but lucrative possibilities,” James Gilbert has pointedly argued. “An aroused public of parents, service club members, youth-serving agencies, teachers, adolescents, and law enforcers constituted a huge potential audience for delinquency films at a time when general audiences for all films had declined. Yet this was a perilous subject to exploit, for public pressure on the film industry to set a wholesome example for youth remained unremitting.” While the teen films attracted both young people looking for adventure or even role models as well as their elders searching for explanations and short-term resolutions, others, considerably more pessimistic, saw the films as provocative, even dangerous. Censors in Memphis, Tennessee, banned Blackboard Jungle for its violence; others, including New York Times reviewer Bosley Crowther, the Girl Scouts, the Daughters of the American Revolution, and the National Congress of Parents and Teachers, denounced the film. The box office hit Rebel without a Cause also generated a negative reaction in various quarters, as the Chicago police ordered some cuts and the city of Milwaukee banned the film. Blue Denim (1959), touching on teenage delinquency, drinking, and sex, was censored in Memphis and Dallas. “To the majority of Americans, confronted with news of gang wars, Elvis, and drag racing, there were only two kinds of kids: the good ones and the bad ones,” Richard Staehling recounts, with some hyperbole. “The same stereotypes emerged in films, only in exaggerated form. The wild-youth-kid stereotype was of a bum who rode around in his hot rod, half-crazed from drugs and liquor looking for a chick to lay, a store to rob, or another car to drag; discourteous, greedy, irresponsible, and mean. In short, he was un-American and nobody’s kid.”

The rapid outpouring of delinquency films, mostly appearing on drive-in theater screens, generated some consternation, but censorship became increasingly difficult as the decade waned and the films seemed to lose their sting. Gilbert concludes: “Of course, elements of adult expectations and standards remained in these films. But, in many cases, they were self-congratulatory pleas for understanding the dramatic changes in language, behavior, and the culture of modern American youth. Where the issue of delinquency remained, it appeared only as a variant of adolescent life.” And in the early 1960s the bikini beach films of Frankie Avalon

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and Annette Funicello, portraying fun-loving, innocent youth, usually with no parents in sight, came to symbolize the switch from dangerous to perky young people. Menacing teens sometimes still appeared on the silver screen, but society’s moral guardians had more pressing concerns as the 1960s advanced.20

The hostile reaction to Blackboard Jungle centered as much on its musical soundtrack as on its disturbing depiction of city youth gone berserk. Bill Hailey’s “Rock Around the Clock” made its spectacular debut, ushering in the remarkable advent of rock and roll, a racially mixed musical style guaranteed to arouse adolescents while stirring revulsion in teachers, ministers, and parents. The rock and roll scare compounded the familiar generational split in the 1950s and focused on teenage violence, drinking, outlandish behavior, sex, and other forms of delinquent conduct, seemingly all too prevalent, at a time when domestic tranquility was deemed necessary in the bitter struggle against atheistical communism and racial unrest.

The black musical style known as rhythm and blues, which became popular after World War II, underwent a metamorphosis in the early 1950s with the rise of disc jockeys tailoring their shows to an emerging market of youthful white radio listeners and record buyers. Record companies still targeted their releases to separate white and black markets, but the dividing line became increasingly fuzzy by mid-decade. Adults had long feared the polluting influences of raucous dance music, dating from early in the century with the advent of ragtime, followed by jazz and blues in the twenties, and finally swing by World War II—music with black origins readily adopted by whites. The emergence of rock and roll, however, touched off an unprecedented fear and loathing, quickly followed by an energetic crackdown that escalated through the 1950s.21

Bill Haley officially launched the rock and roll craze with “Rock Around the Clock” in 1954, featured on the soundtrack of Blackboard Jungle, a fateful linkage. “Blackboard Jungle contextualised rock & roll in a world of teenage violence and ignorance, an unfair categorization which did however provide a perfect opportunity for dramatizing a changing era,” Haley biographer John Swenson has pointed out. “The overstatement of this imagery served to identify rock & roll as music of gangster rebellion and incipient communist infiltration in the minds of horrified adults.” An unlikely teen idol, former country musician Bill Haley and his Comets

20Gilbert, A Cycle of Outrage, 197; McGee and Robertson, The J. D. Films, ch. 4.
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nonetheless followed with a string of hits, including “Shake, Rattle and Roll” and “See You Later, Alligator.” “Sh-Boom” by the Chords, soon covered by the Crew-Cuts, and other black-inflected songs also began appearing in 1954. The censorship floodgates quickly opened.22

An editorial in Billboard in September 1954 alerted readers to the suggestive lyrics in many rhythm and blues songs (the term rock and roll, popularized by Alan Freed, would become common the next year), and a backlash mounted. Radio stations banned some records and the police in Memphis confiscated jukeboxes and fined the operators. Billboard, followed by the other trade paper, Variety, continued the onslaught, reinforced by the Music Publishers’ Protective Association (MPPA), representing the major publishing companies, which condemned “dirty” songs. The dominant record companies shied away from suggestive, rowdy songs, often by black performers, but they were increasingly challenged by the independent labels—Apollo, Savoy, Atlantic, Vee-Jay—which had no such qualms. The establishment tried to close ranks, which became progressively difficult as both white and black adolescents, in cities and suburbs, small towns and rural areas, patronized the radio programs and music stores that featured the new sounds. “While 1954 had seen a surge of complaints against the off-color music, 1955 produced a tidal wave of opposition, led by the trade papers, but then quickly picked up by various segments of the general population. For the trades it was a continuation of the attempts by the white, pop music ASCAP [American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers] to remove its growing competitor, the black, rock and roll BMI [Broadcast Music Incorporated],” Linda Martin and Kerry Segrave argue in their detailed analysis, Anti-Rock: The Opposition to Rock ‘n’ Roll. In addition to racial, generational, and political frictions, commercial competition between the two dominant music publishing and licensing conglomerates, ASCAP and BMI, fueled the mounting censorship of rock and roll.23

Much of the initial criticism centered on the sexual innuendoes of many “leer-ics,” a term coined in a Variety editorial. Radio stations in Memphis (Tennessee), Mobile (Alabama), Shenandoah (Iowa), and throughout the country escalated their censorship, applauded by Catholic teen groups and a whole host of other organizations. The greater the music’s


reach and popularity, the more extreme the backlash. Six Boston radio stations, meeting with local journalists and religious leaders, formed their own review board; disc jockeys from throughout the country vowed to play none of the suspect records, generally by black performers on independent labels. The specific attack on “leer-ics” peaked in 1955, however, as Chuck Berry, Little Richard, and other black performers broke into the white market and demonstrated the commercial reach of rock and roll. For the rest of the decade the attack broadened, to encompass a whole host of fears and concerns. The television and radio networks, except for ABC, tried to restrict much music, including songs by Bobby Darin, the Coasters, even Elvis.

The roller-coaster career of Alan Freed encapsulates the situation. Beginning his second decade as a radio disc jockey, Freed moved from Akron to Cleveland (Ohio) in 1950, where he first appeared on television but quickly returned to radio, specializing in rhythm and blues music. Both Freed and his crosstown rival Bill Randle also staged dances featuring top black and white acts, as the music increasingly appealed to a cross section of Cleveland’s youth. In 1954, he moved to New York, where he soon began to use the term rock ’n’ roll and became its biggest promoter and most visible symbol, for good and bad. His popularity soared, his rock and roll shows packed the largest New York theaters, and he continued to feature mostly black artists. Freed, however, would become caught up in the mounting backlash, leading to his downfall.24

The second half of the decade witnessed a strange national anti-rock-and-roll frenzy, a mixture of racial, generational, and professional fears. As the concern over obscene lyrics subsided in 1955, the attack shifted its focus to the raucous live concerts, with racially mixed performers and audiences. The music obviously encouraged young people to start dancing in the aisles and crowding the stage, which was not only morally offensive but often a violation of fire and other regulations, and soon the police began closing shows throughout the country. Since disc jockeys were often involved, they became another target. “The jockey quickly came to be viewed as little more than a pimp for rock music, the prostitute of the industry,” Martin and Segrave write. Disruptions broke out in Boston, Hartford, Atlanta, Washington, D.C., and San Jose (California). The Parks Department in San Antonio (Texas) banned rock and roll from jukeboxes near city swimming pools, since teens were dancing in their bathing suits. Cleveland’s city fathers dusted off a law banning public dancing by those under eighteen. The release of the first rock and roll movie in 1956, Rock around the Clock, with Bill Haley and the Comets,

the Platters, and Alan Freed, resulted in little trouble in the United States, although in England the police constantly cracked down on teens for dancing in the theaters or milling around after the showing. In early 1958, a radio station in St. Louis spent two days breaking offensive records on air, then, after protests from youth clubs, donated its remaining stock to local teen groups. The next year a station in Erie, Pennsylvania, loaded seven thousand of the obnoxious discs into a hearse, staged a mock funeral procession to the harbor, and dumped them in the water. Other stations, refraining from such destruction, just gave the records away and proudly announced their rock-free programs, untainted by such trash.  

Some objected to rock and roll because of its black overtones and hints of racial mixing. Southern racists, inflamed over the accelerating civil rights movement, opposed the music, although such fears also existed in the north. Freed's natural friendliness to black performers often generated hostile reactions, and even the rumor that he was a mulatto. Buffalo disk jockey George "Hound Dog" Lorenz faced much criticism as he cultivated an interracial persona and audience. "Lorenz was at the center of a complex set of relationships between white and black cultures," according to Graebner. "Though white, Lorenz was responsible for transmitting the energy and sexuality of black culture to white teenagers. Besides programming black music, he regularly referred to himself as 'the big round brown Hound,' used a 'jive hip talk' adapted from black language patterns, and, according to one source, lived in the black community." Most of the city’s radio stations refused to play rock and roll, and the sanctioned record hops and school disc clubs followed suit, sticking to more acceptable pop sounds. Graebner argues "that the number, variety, and swiftness of responses to rock and roll and rhythm and blues are evidence of the extraordinary energy given over to containing and incorporating the new meanings and values being created by an incipient counterculture."  

The controversy came to a head late in the decade and centered on Alan Freed. A 1958 integrated (both performers and audience) concert in Boston ended in disaster when the police tried to stop the show. The audience began throwing things and then the "riot" moved outside. A local grand jury quickly indicted Freed for inciting the "riot," and he was fired by station WINS, although he soon moved to WABC. Next, hard on the heels of the television quiz show scandal, with the exposure that Twenty-One had been rigged, the House Subcommittee on Legislative Oversight turned its attention to allegations that record companies bribed disc jockeys to play their records. No laws existed concerning such payments, called payola, but the procedure seemed sneaky and deceitful, certainly un-

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23 Martin and Segrave, Anti-Rock, 28.  
24 Graebner, Coming of Age in Buffalo, 32–34, 41.
American. Indeed, the practice was widespread, yet Freed became the center of attention as the investigation proceeded. WABC fired Freed, one of many disc jockeys to be terminated, which accelerated his slide to oblivion; he died in 1965, a sad alcoholic. Rock and roll, never the most popular music during the decade, even among teens, barely survived the 1950s, a casualty of generational frictions and other factors, but would soon reemerge with renewed energy and criticism. Trent Hill summarizes the situation, perhaps with some hyperbole: "Rock & roll was a powerful, contrary voice in 1950s American cultural discourse, a voice that bore with it disquieting news not only of the existence of others, but of the possibility of Otherness, of a different configuration of both personal and social energies. The achievement of the [congressional] hearings was to recuperate and co-opt that voice to make it not only safe for the tender ears of the children of power but an effective soundtrack for its collective reveries of stability." 27

"Beware Elvis Presley," the Jesuit magazine America warned in mid-1956, as the singer began to reach super stardom. Television impresario Ed Sullivan first ignored the polite youngster, then agreed to allow him on his popular variety show, following Elvis's success on The Steve Allen Show. Elvis first appeared in September 1956 and again the next month, but he initially could only be seen above the waist. (Communist authorities equally understood Elvis's subversive manner, even as an Army private. "When it was announced that Presley was bound for the U.S. base at Friedberg, the East German Communist Party accused the United States of plotting to undermine the morals of Red youth," Karal Ann Marling relates. "To show that this act of provocation would not be tolerated, party boss Walter Ulbricht ordered the arrest and imprisonment of fifteen teenagers who marched through the streets of Leipzig in 1959 shouting, 'Long live Elvis Presley!'") 28 ABC canceled Alan Freed's television show in 1957 because Frankie Lymon, the black teenage singer, had danced with a white girl. The home screen was as much, if not more, of a battleground for the moral health of the nation's young (and old) as was the case with movie screens, radios, jukeboxes, books, and comics.

Television had crept up on an unsuspecting population in the late 1940s, first centered in New York, then quickly spreading into the hinterlands. Stimulating and exciting, it mesmerized young and old alike.

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and promptly became a fixture in any self-respecting household, certainly part of the furniture in expanding suburbia. Yet its obtrusive nature also could be threatening to family values and harmony, intruding into private realms already shaken by numerous problems and disruptions. The number of households owning a set jumped from 3.8 million in 1950, to 15.3 million in 1952, 26 million three years later, and then 43.9 million by decade’s end, over 85 percent of the total.

Fears immediately surfaced. The story of eleven-year-old Frank Stretch in Ventura, California, who shot the cowboy villain along with the picture tube in 1955, published in Newsweek, reinforced the assurance of television’s total grip on the young. Wertham listed television programs along with comics as a baleful influence. National PTA members in 1949 voted to watch for “unwholesome television programs” and were soon followed by members of the National Council of Catholic Women, who counted violent acts. The National Association of Radio and Television Broadcasters passed a new censorship code in 1951, including a section on television and children, although during these years the political blacklist, mounted by right-wing groups and sponsors, took center stage. Still, the 1954 report on juvenile delinquency by the Senate Judiciary Committee found: “Through television, radio, movies, and comics, children are fed a heavy diet of violence. Although it is generally pointed out that law and order eventually prevail in these presentations, the life of the underworld is frequently glamorized in the process.” Perhaps such an exposure had a deleterious influence; the committee was not sure. A few years later the authors of a lengthy report on Television in the Lives of Our Children could conclude: “The roots of delinquency are, therefore, much lower and broader than television. They grow from the home life, the neighborhood life, and the disturbed personality. The most that television can do is to feed the malignant impulses that already exist.” Self-censorship by the networks, reinforced by the dominant advertising companies, guaranteed generally sanitized programs. Still, many adults fretted.29

Adult fears and suspicions during the 1950s of unruly children, and particularly adolescents, adversely influenced by various aspects of their popular culture—movies, music, television, and comics—were certainly exaggerated, yet signaled troubling social, cultural, racial, and political undercurrents. “From the mid-1940s on, individually or en masse, the young were regularly portrayed as soft and vulnerable, hence ripe for enemy

picking, or hardened and calloused, hence already aliens," Tom Engelhardt has aptly discerned. "In the public outrage over what was happening to the young, in a language so overheated as to seem, in retrospect, like a parody, can be felt a seductive release of fears and tensions of the moment onto children." It is extremely difficult to capture the scope and multiple meanings of youth culture during the 1950s (nonetheless a topic well worth pursuing)—hardly autonomous considering adult hegemony of the marketplace and general manipulation of tastes and wants through advertising. However, it is considerably easier to gauge and penetrate the often fearful reactions of parents and their allies. Exploring the various aspects of youth censorship allows us a window onto the still murky decade, a fascinating time of complacency and dread, conformity and rebellion, nostalgia for a quickly receding past and an eagerness to push into the onrushing future. Confused adults both encouraged and feared youthful autonomy. Glib assumptions about pliable young minds, negatively molded by the artifacts of popular culture, should not go unchallenged, however. What of the influences of family, school, church, peer groups, advertising, and so much more?30