Childhood and society
Growing up in an age of uncertainty

NICK LEE
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Collectively, the social sciences contribute to a greater understanding of the dynamics of social life, as well as explanations for the workings of societies in general. Yet they are often not given due credit for this role and much writing has been devoted to why this should be the case. At the same time, we are living in an age in which the role of science in society is being re-evaluated. This has led to both a defence of science as the disinterested pursuit of knowledge and an attack on science as nothing more than an institutionalized assertion of faith, with no greater claim to validity than mythology and folklore. These debates tend to generate more heat than light.

In the meantime, the social sciences, in order to remain vibrant and relevant, will reflect the changing nature of these public debates. In so doing they provide mirrors upon which we can gaze in order to understand not only what we have been and what we are now, but to inform possibilities about what we might become. This is not simply about understanding the reasons people give for their actions in terms of the contexts in which they act and analyzing the relations of cause and effect in the social, political and economic spheres, but also concerns the hopes, wishes and aspirations that people, in their different cultural ways, hold.

In any society that claims to have democratic aspirations, these hopes and wishes are not for the social scientist to prescribe. For this to happen it would mean that the social sciences were able to predict human behaviour with certainty. One theory and one method, applicable to all times and places, would be required for this purpose. The physical sciences do not live up to such stringent criteria, whilst the conditions in societies which provided for this outcome, were it even possible, would be intolerable. Why? Because a necessary condition of human freedom is the ability to have acted otherwise and thus to imagine and practice different ways of organizing societies and living together.
It does not follow from the above that social scientists do not have a valued role to play, as is often assumed in ideological attacks upon their place and function within society. After all, in focusing upon what we have been and what we are now, what we might become is inevitably illuminated: the retrospective and prospective become fused. Therefore, whilst it may not the province of the social scientist to predict our futures, they are, given not only their understandings and explanations, but equal positions as citizens, entitled to engage in public debates concerning future prospects.

This new international series was devised with this general ethos in mind. It seeks to offer students of the sciences, at all levels, a forum in which ideas and topics of interest are interrogated in terms of their importance for understanding key social issues. This is achieved through a connection between style, structure and content that aims to be both illuminating and challenging in terms of its evaluation of those issues, as well as representing an original contribution to the subject under discussion.

Given this underlying philosophy, the series contains books on topics that are driven by substantive interests. This is not simply a reactive endeavour in terms of reflecting dominant social and political preoccupations, it is also proactive in terms of an examination of issues which relate to and inform the dynamics of social life and the structures of society that are often not part of public discourse. Thus, what is distinctive about this series is an interrogation of the assumed characteristics of our current epoch in relation to its consequences for the organization of society and social life, as well as its appropriate mode of study.

Each contribution contains, for the purposes of general orientation, as opposed to rigid structure, three parts. First, an interrogation of the topic that is conducted in a manner that renders explicit core assumptions surrounding the issues and/or an examination of the consequences of historical trends for contemporary social practices. Second, a section which aims to ‘bring alive’ ideas and practices by considering the ways in which they directly inform the dynamics of social relations. A third section then moves on to make an original contribution to the topic. This encompasses possible future forms and content, likely directions for the study of the phenomena in question, or an original analysis of the topic itself. Of course, it might be a combination of all three.

The very idea of possibilities for the future organization of social relations is related to the potentials that are taken to exist in the present. What we were, what we are and what we might become are linked in various ways, but it does not follow that this is determining. However, the very categories we employ to make sense of stages in our life course can be both empowering and constraining. There is a particular stage which is more pertinent to the idea of potentiality than any other: childhood. The ways in which adults view children and how they govern their activities is given in their contemporary practices. The question, of course, is whether these serve to maximize their potential or seek to constrain it in the name of the dominant ideas of the present?
Within the British context the certainties of the adult world are manifest in government policies which inform processes and practices within schools. Here it may be argued that we are witnessing a slide from education to training. Education is about the power and freedom of thought including, where deemed necessary, the ability to think otherwise. Nevertheless, children are required to reproduce conventional wisdom which is tested at regular intervals from an early age. Inevitably, in using criteria they are then compared with others and this produces images of what they are and what potential they possess. Texts are constructed accordingly and claims are made concerning ‘progress’ and ‘efficient’ and ‘effective’ teaching practices. Children are not only compared, but also contrasted and what proud parent can afford to ignore such a process?

Nick Lee turns his attention to the issues that underlie such practices: for example, ideas of being and becoming and dependence and independence. As he notes in his preface, the idea of taking childhood seriously might appear, at first glance, odd. Yet if we are concerned with what we might become, taking childhood seriously is fundamental to this endeavour. However, whilst recognizing the legitimacy of this activity, children are often regarded as those who should be ‘seen’, but not ‘heard’. Spaces and places are demarcated accordingly and those who do so and seek to police such boundaries are those who apparently have never been children and if such an admission is apparent they were ‘different’ from the current generation.

Such views are based upon the certainties that come with the maintenance of boundaries which, upon examination, are not rigid, but fluid. At one level the idea of an age of certainty regarding the differences between the realms of adult and childhood may be nothing more than expressions of nostalgia for that which did not exist. Now, however, there is generally believed to be more fluidity. Whilst experts are there to reassure those anxious about being a parent there is no manual or template which can prepare them for this new role and the advice itself is not static, but subject to continual change. Similarly, as economic globalization questions the independence of the state, so therefore is the idea of children being dependent upon the state itself open to question. As governments fall uncritically at the alter of consumer capitalism, alongside an increasing regulation of the school curriculum, ambiguities are bound to increase. Modes of consumption then emerge with children becoming the targets of advertisers as the technicians of persuasion. The reaction is a heightening of what has been termed ‘pester power’ and the lives of children, as with adults, are then opened up to alternative forms of seduction and regulation. Taking the implications of these changes means that new ways of understanding childhood are required. Childhood, understood as the process of becoming towards a mature state, can find itself in question. Differences between adults and children are often thought to require further socialization on the part of the latter in order that they conform to the expectations of the former. This undermines the validity of expressions of difference which are seen to be in need of ‘repair’ according to dominant modes of rationality.
Finding itself in question, different ideas of ‘becoming’ are now required when it comes to understanding childhood. It is to the expressions and reasons for this fluidity and its manifestations in various places – including city streets, home and school, forms of national and global regulation and testimony in courts – that Nick Lee turns his analytic attention. Children can be constituted as threats and this can prompt extraordinary acts of barbarism from the adult world. In Brazil this has been graphically illustrated in situations where off duty police officers have opened fire on groups of street children. Having murdered them, such acts are condoned on the basis that these children are not human, but instead more like animals who exhibit subhuman traits and so are a threat to social order.

These ‘particular’ children are taken to be the cause, not the symptom, of social and economic decline. Thus removed from the burden of the problems they have created, the adult world can target certain children as manifestations of problems that are taken to lie beyond their responsibility. The same underlying ideas, with obvious differences in consequence, can be found in approaches to inner city disorder in Britain. The turning of political issues into technocratic administrative solutions leads to a by-passing of matters of inequality to focus upon schemes such as curfew orders, parenting orders and so on. The result is the same: adult concerns with order are played out on poor children who are regarded as the source of social disorder.

The discussion and analysis in this book is highly illuminating. At the end of the book Nick Lee asks if the sociology of childhood must become like the ‘mature’ discipline itself? Following an account of issues associated with agency and convention, he turns to an ‘ethics of motion’. This dynamic approach, he argues, can allow for positions to undertake research on children, but does not foreclose the possibilities that are evident in conventional approaches and so allows for ‘extensions’ to understanding and experience.

A process of ‘becoming-adult’ does not allow for creativity and imagination in play to be the sole preserve of children, thereby reproducing a romantic image of childhood. Instead it allows for an examination of the ranges of extension that are available at different stages in the life course and thus opens up the possibility for thinking differently not only about childhood, but also adulthood. The implications of this position are worthy of the same effort that goes into the maintenance of the boundaries between the supposed self-evidence of the two worlds. This book should be read, therefore, not only by social scientists, but all those concerned with what they are in terms of what they have been and thus might become.

Tim May
Preface and acknowledgements

I first became interested in ‘growing up’ through Rex Stainton Rogers’ classes in social and developmental psychology at Reading University. Rex seemed to use teaching as an excuse to spread a generous and disorderly spirit among his students. He had Les Murray’s (1991) ‘quality of sprawl’ in spades, a quality, never destructive or malicious, that assembles alternative orders on the hoof and cheerfully accepts human diversity and fallibility.

I worked for a while as a ‘play-worker’ for Reading Borough Council. At the time, the job of the play-worker was to establish a space for 5–11-year-old children that was quite unlike school. In play-work, adults were not primarily authority figures and were certainly not ‘experts’. It was not our job to control children (beyond issues of physical safety and bullying) but, instead, to help them realize their imaginations in drawing, modelling, sports, games and stories. Doing this job made me think about dependence and independence. The children were often very keen to involve adult play-workers in settling arguments and organizing games. Did this mean that they needed a grown-up to validate their activities and opinions? Was it a sign of children’s dependence? In some ways, it was. They knew that to be allowed to play in some places they had to be supervised. In another way it meant something quite different – adults were valuable as a resource, a ‘hook’ on which to hang a game. Of course it helped that we had privileged access to the toy-store.

I started the odd business of taking childhood seriously as a doctoral student. Here I was not so much concerned with children themselves as with what expert adults made of them. I followed police and social workers as they tried to implement new policies and practices for dealing with cases of suspected child abuse. I came to realize how dependent they were in doing this difficult work on ‘extensions’ like official forms, guidelines and even the structure of the buildings they worked in. Just like the
children I had worked with, they had to have hooks to hang their activities on too.

This book is an attempt to supplement the social study of childhood. Existing sociologies of childhood are diverse in the research methods they use and the goals that they pursue, but the field has been drawn together throughout the 1990s by a common commitment to the recognition of children as ‘beings’ who have ‘voices’ that are worth listening to. It still astonishes me that any effort has been required to establish this. Part of the purpose of this book, then, is to explain just why this effort has been necessary, why it is that children and adults have ever been thought of as fundamentally different types of persons, why, in other words, we need the sociology of childhood.

For all its faults, the being/becoming division that I discuss throughout the book did at least allow for some very limited recognition of the diversity of human life. Like many other dichotomies, such as male/female, gay/straight and black/white, however, it allowed for only two ways of being human and asserted one as standard and the other as deviant. When we ‘multiply’ becoming later in the book we shall be pointing out one way to allow for the recognition of the unlimited diversity of ways of becoming human. I like to think that Rex would have enjoyed this.

Many thanks to Tim May and Justin Vaughan for making the production of this book such a pleasant process.

I would also like to thank the following people for helping me to think: Rex and Wendy Stainton Rogers; Rolland Munro and Joanna Latimer; Alan Prout, Jo Moran-Ellis and Priscilla Alderson; Bob Cooper, Steve Brown and John Law; Emily Campbell; the students who have taken my ‘constructions of childhood’ course; and Arabella, Jamie, Albhi, Eliza and Saskia.
Introduction: childhood and human variation

Humans differ from one another in numerous ways. Variations in sex, shape, size and skin colour have formed the basis of social hierarchies in many different times and places. External appearances have often been taken to say something about people’s intrinsic natures. In many circumstances, being one human variant rather than another has had serious consequences for people’s life chances and the degree of respect and personal dignity that they have been allowed. Chronological age is among the axes of human variability that have been linked to the social distribution of dignity and respect. Children can be marked out as a social group, distinguished by the visibility of their low chronological age. Their points of view, opinions and desires have often been ignored because their age has been taken as a sign that they are not worth listening to.

Some commentators, feeling that this treatment is unjust, have sought to break the links that have been forged between external appearances and children’s intrinsic natures. In this vein, it has been argued that variations in chronological age are not nearly so important in shaping childhoods as are the attributions that societies make about children on the basis of their external appearances. Childhood on this view is ‘socially constructed’. One of the problems that this constructionist approach to childhood has faced is that it tends to interpret all differences between adults and children as works of imagination. Thus, when this approach meets people who think it is only right and proper that children’s voices be muted, the only resource it has to convince them otherwise is to tell them that they are deluded.

The constructionist approach to childhood draws strength from a contemporary ethical view that all humans should be treated ‘equally’. When translating this ethical view into theoretical and empirical study it is all too easy to try to confirm it by painting a picture of all humans, regardless of chronological age, as fundamentally the same. Awareness of human variation
is sacrificed to remove the potential for unjust attributions. So the study of childhood involves a tension between recognizing human variation – which carries the risk of allowing unjust attributions to be made – and discounting human variation – which carries the risk of overemphasizing the ability of imagination to shape the world. These tensions around the facts of human variation form the intellectual context of the book.

In Part one we ask how it is that variation in chronological age has come to form the basis of social distributions of rights, responsibilities, dignity and respect in the contemporary world. Chapters 1 and 2 offer an account of how and why the category ‘human’ has, throughout modernity, been divided into adult ‘human beings’ and child ‘human becomings’. Chapter 3 reports on attempts that are currently being made by sociologists of childhood to resist this common-sense division. Whatever differences there may be between adults and children, contemporary sociologies of childhood urge that children be treated equally, at least in terms of recognizing that children have views and perspectives of their own. On this view, all humans, regardless of chronological age, are and should be treated as ‘beings’.

In Part one, we also paint a picture of the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries as an ‘age of uncertainty’, arguing both that adulthood can no longer be understood as the state of stable completion and self-possession on which ‘being-hood’ once rested, and that childhood is increasingly open to ambiguity. The nature of adult ‘being’ is becoming unclear just as the question of children’s status as either ‘beings’ or ‘becomings’ begins to look unanswerable. Building on this assessment of the contemporary condition of adulthood and childhood, Part two then examines a number of locations where the contemporary ambiguity of childhood is brought into sharp focus: the streets of the world’s cities; the institutions of the family home and the school; and the national and global regulation of childhood. We argue that these ambiguities demand a novel response from childhood researchers – to withdraw from attempts to resolve childhood’s ambiguity so that they can better study the social distribution and consequences of ambiguity.

Part three lays out the conceptual resources and research orientations that can help social studies of childhood become more sensitive to childhood ambiguity and less reliant on problematic notions of human ‘being’. It offers a new way to understand and to chart human variation. We advance the view that there are no ‘human beings’ but that there are instead potentially unlimited numbers of ways of ‘becoming human’. The emphasis of work based on this view is placed on detecting and understanding ‘real stabilities’ (Lee 1998a) in patterns of human becoming, rather than in detecting and criticizing sets of attributions about people made on the basis of their chronological age. Part three then is an attempt to turn our attention away from arguments over whether or not visible age differences should be taken as a sign of intrinsic difference, as a reliable or unreliable basis for attributions, and toward variations in ways that people are ‘extended’ (Munro 1996) by other people, the material world and technological devices.
The aim is to give a positive alternative to age-based discrimination by maximizing our acknowledgement of human variation and by showing that there are many ways to 'become human', some more and some less available to children.

The new direction that we lay out for the social study of childhood (and by implication the study of all human becoming) comes in the form of a call for an 'immature' sociology. To call for immaturity is not to suggest that researchers should try to 'see the world as children see it'. Instead it is to advance the view that sociologists of childhood should seek confidence and inspiration in the creative potential that comes with working in their relatively new field of social study, rather than seek to model their work on the problem space defined by 'mainstream' sociology. It is, in other words, a call for the imagination and creativity needed to understand and to intervene in a world that is increasingly revealing itself as 'unfinished', a world in which mediascapes and short-term flexibilities of planning allow the imaginations of the powerful to be realized perhaps too rapidly. Thus the chapters in Part three may be read as an attempt to understand the relative speeds of change and modes of interaction of the imagination, the materials (bodily and inorganic) and the institutions that together comprise the social world. It is out of this vision of social inquiry that our redescription of 'growing-up' as 'slowing-down' evolved.

Finally, a word on definitions. Given that chronological age has been so important to the definition of childhood, I should give some indication of what ages I take 'childhood' to refer to. On one legalistic view, childhood extends from year zero to 18. A few of the issues under discussion here are relevant to the higher end of that range, but the bulk of the argument concerns children in the middle years. I have not explicitly excluded the very young, but I do feel that the patterns of human becoming that babies are involved in are so tightly woven that they deserve a degree of examination that is beyond the scope of this book. Alderson (2000) has a particularly interesting approach to this area.
In 1948 the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted and proclaimed a Universal Declaration of Human Rights (see www.un.org). The signatories to the Declaration, including most of the countries of the world, agreed that all human beings, regardless of the political regime they lived under, had a number of basic rights and freedoms that no state could take away from them. Forty-one years later in 1989 the General Assembly adopted the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. This provided a special range of rights for those under 18 years old. Why was an extra, special Convention needed for children? If the first declaration covered all humans, did it not cover human children along with human adults?

This division of international regulation reflects a widespread tendency to think of adults and children as fundamentally different types of humans. Qvortrup (1994) captures the nature of this division well when he describes it (critically) as one between adult ‘human beings’ and child ‘human becomings’. The human being is, or should be, stable, complete, self-possessed and self-controlling. The human being is, or should be, capable of independent thought and action, an independence that merits respect. The human becoming, on the other hand, is changeable and incomplete and lacks the self-possession and self-control that would allow it the independence of thought and action that merits respect. The division between becomings and becomings is that between the complete and independent and the incomplete and dependent.

In this first part we shall ask where this division between two types of humans came from and why it has such widespread plausibility. We shall find answers in the historical growth of two figures: the ‘standard adult’ that is understood to have all the properties of an independent human being, and the ‘developmental state’, which is a model of proper relations between states and their populations within which children are understood
to have all the properties of human becomings. We shall argue that the plausibility of the being/becoming distinction rests on the social and economic conditions that gave rise to the standard adult and to the developmental state. Essentially then, we shall argue that the being/becoming division is a product of historical development and that, as such, it is open to change.

In Chapters 1 and 2 we shall chart the rise of standard adulthood and of the developmental state. But we shall also argue that, in recent years, global economic, political and social changes have begun to erode both of these figures. In the age of uncertainty that these changes are bringing about it is hard to believe in the standard image of adulthood, and relations between states and their populations are changing in a way that makes it harder to see children simply as human becomings.

In Chapter 3 we shall see that the effects of the age of uncertainty have not gone unnoticed. Sociologists of childhood have tried to give expression to the erosion of the being/becoming distinction and to put our understanding of childhood on a new footing. They have argued that we should see children as beings alongside adults rather than as becomings in distinction from adults because children deserve respect and recognition in their own right. In short, they have argued that the category 'human becoming' should be emptied and abandoned. As we shall see, however, the erosion of our principal image of human being – the standard adult – makes it hard nowadays to see what ‘being’ means.

In summary then, this part will give an account of the historical emergence and contemporary erosion of the being/becoming division. It will also raise the question of how we are to understand childhood when both our human categories are coming under question.
A division is often drawn between adult ‘human beings’ and child ‘human becomings’. As we have already seen, children and adults would seem to be fundamentally different types of humans, requiring different sorts of global regulation. How are we to account for the existence and widespread credibility of this division? In this chapter we shall build half an answer to this by giving an account of the circumstances that have made it possible to think of adults as stable, complete human beings. But we shall also begin to draw the contours of our ‘age of uncertainty’, arguing that at the beginning of the twenty-first century widespread economic and cultural changes are eroding this understanding of the nature of adulthood.

A few decades ago there were very good reasons for thinking of adulthood as a state of personal stability and completion. Once an adult had a stable job and a stable intimate relationship, there would be very few significant changes in their life, except, perhaps, for having children. Even though many adults did not attain this level of stability in their lives, such stability still had the status of a norm or a guiding model of adult maturity. Against this backdrop of a stable, predictable adulthood, one’s early life could be understood as a period in which one built toward that stability, secure in the assumption that it would arrive. Childhood, then, could be viewed as a journey towards a clear and knowable destination. But, as we enter the twenty-first century, the experience of adult life is a lot less stable than it used to be. With regard to being ‘grown up’, we have entered an age of uncertainty, an age in which adult life is newly unpredictable and in which whatever stabilities we manage to produce cannot be expected to last our whole lives.
Childhood and society

This change in the experience of adulthood is of central importance to the social study of childhood because after some decades of adult stability, we had grown used to making sense of childhood through adulthood, interpreting everything children do, or have done to them, in terms of how this will affect their journey toward adulthood, or in terms of what it might tell us about how far a given child has travelled. Children’s lives and activities in the present are still envisaged, in the main, as a preparation for the future. This peculiar dependence of thought about children on a picture of adulthood is reflected in the conceptual frameworks that, to this day, still dominate research into children and childhood. The ideas of ‘socialization’ and ‘development’, for example, carry that sense of childhood as a journey toward a destination. A sense of certainty about adulthood and its stability has been the rock on which social scientific knowledge of childhood is built.

As long as adulthood could be treated as a fixed point that everybody understood, childhood could be defined in relation to this certainty. Thus, children were often defined as whatever adults were not. Where adults were stable and mostly unchanging over time, children, as they grew up, were going through many changes. This made them, by nature, unstable and incomplete. Where adults’ stability and completeness are understood to allow them to act in society, to participate independently in serious activities like work and politics, children’s instability and incompleteness mean that they are often understood only as dependent and passive recipients of adults’ actions. The clear contrast between adulthood and childhood, between beings and becomings, meant that it was hard to understand children as persons in their own right.

But now the permanent jobs and permanent relationships that made adulthood look like a state of stability are not so widely available. As we shall see, twenty-first-century adults have to adapt to, and remain adaptable to, a world that is full of the promise and threat of rapid change, both at work and in their intimate lives. Change and incompleteness have entered adulthood as principles for living that replace stability and completeness. In other words, one of the main bases for the clear contrast between adulthood and childhood is being eroded. Journey’s end is receding from view and, thus, can no longer be relied upon to make sense of childhood. The implications of this destabilization of adulthood are vitally important for understanding contemporary relationships of authority and power between adults and children.

Standard adulthood: deviant childhood

We have already noted that childhood has been defined in opposition to adulthood. Growing up, then, is often taken to be a process in which something (a child) turns into its opposite (an adult), a process in which the boundary between becoming and being is crossed. But how can something
What do you want to be when you grow up? 9

turn into its opposite? How can one type of human turn into another type of human? Perhaps we have become used to thinking of adulthood as journey’s end because the process of growing up presents itself as a riddle. Perhaps the idea that adults and children are in some way fundamentally different, adults being complete while children are incomplete, was always just a convenient fiction, a quick and easy way of avoiding confusion. If so, then it has proved a fiction of extraordinary power and utility. If we can convince ourselves that we know what we as adults are like, then it makes it easier for us to decide how far a given child has to go before counting as a person in their own right, deserving of rights, responsibilities and recognition. Adulthood, with all its connotations of stability and completeness, has operated as a kind of standard model of a person, which stands ready to be used to measure children’s incompleteness. This process of measurement underlies, and acts as a justification for, many distributions of power and authority in society along lines of age and maturity. To take a simple example, across the democratic world, the right to vote in elections is withheld from many young people on the grounds that they are not yet competent to make such important decisions. The rights of full citizenship are distributed according to a logic of maturation that assumes that adults, simply by virtue of having attained the age of majority, are competent to make such decisions.

What happens, then, to the question of whether adults themselves match up to the image of the ‘standard adult’? When it comes to adults, the question is, more often than not, forgotten. Because adults are of a certain age, they stand safely outside its terms of reference. Chronological age can serve as a cloak of invisibility that conceals adults’ shortcomings. So it looks like we sometimes simply forget to use the standard model of adulthood to ask questions about adults. But, just as often, questions of how well adults match up to the image of the standard adult, and of whether indeed a given adult has reached ‘journey’s end’ become buried in the number and urgency of other issues that, as adults, we feel the responsibility to address. Among the many other kinds of work that adults do, they are also often engaged in the work of making decisions about children and about how they are to live, particularly when they are acting as caregivers, childcare and educational professionals or public policy-makers. Sometimes adults make decisions on behalf of children, or in children’s ‘best interests’. Sometimes adults even make decisions about whether children are capable of making decisions for themselves or of formulating valuable opinions about how their lives should be.

This tells us something rather important. The images of journey’s end, and of the standard adults who are taken to have arrived at journey’s end, are crucial in maintaining the authority that adults often have over children, the right and duty to make decisions for them. Our convenient fictions about adulthood are of greatest use when we are exerting that authority or facing the responsibilities toward children that adulthood brings with it. In other words, the way we go about defining adulthood and childhood and
the way we discriminate in our decision-making between adults and children is closely tied to the distribution of authority and power between age groups. If we forget to test adults against a standard, then that forgetting is distinctly ‘motivated’. Much authority is distributed on the basis of age, and this distribution is itself supported by the notion that children do not match up in their competences to the standard adult. Journey’s end and standard adulthood are ‘convenient’ fictions, then, only in cases where we would wish to preserve the existing age-based distributions of authority in society.

Some commentators think that there are very good reasons for challenging existing distributions of power and authority between adults and children. We shall be discussing their arguments in greater detail in Chapter 3. In the mean time, we ought to note that one of these reasons is that adults do not always use their power and authority well. The more one is in a position to make decisions for children, to speak on their behalf, the more one is able to silence their voices. Abusive, cruel or unfair treatment of children can hide behind this wall of silence.

So far, then, we have seen that adult authority over children, the ability of adults to speak for children and to make decisions on their behalf, has been supported by the image of the standard adult. We have also briefly noted that there are good reasons to be suspicious of the degree of authority that adults have, and that, in the light of these suspicions, adult authority has become controversial. But beneath this controversy, widespread social changes have been taking place that are bringing those forgotten questions of whether adults match up to the image of the standard adult to the fore. In fact, these changes are eroding standard adulthood. Over the past few decades, changes in working lives and in intimate relationships have cast the stability and completeness of adults into doubt and made it difficult and, often, undesirable for adults to maintain such stability. We shall shortly explore some of those changes in adulthood in greater detail. We shall see that as the social conditions that allowed adulthood to seem stable and complete are eroded, it is becoming harder to identify adulthood with stability and completeness.

Flexible adults in an age of uncertainty

We have portrayed the connection that is often made between adulthood and stability as a convenient fiction. But we should not imagine that this image of adulthood lacks any material support, or that we have grown used to thinking of adulthood as journey’s end by sheer accident. Rather, we need to discover what social and economic arrangements have, over the twentieth century, made such a view of adulthood credible. We shall see that this image of standard adulthood was supported by specific patterns in the organization of people’s working lives and in the organization of their intimate relationships. Once we have laid out the social and economic context in which the nature of adulthood seemed certain and obvious, we
can then turn to describe the changes in social and economic arrangements that are making adulthood uncertain today. We need to begin with a little economic history.

**From Fordist adulthood to flexible adulthood**

Harvey (1989) describes the shape of national economies and patterns of work that were prevalent between the end of the Second World War (1945) and the early 1970s as ‘Fordist’. The term derives from the name of Henry Ford, the founder of the Ford motor-car manufacturing company. Ford founded his company in 1914 in the USA on certain principles of organization that were not normally applied in motor-car manufacture at that time. Up until Ford, cars were a luxury commodity, built one at a time by small teams of craftsmen in small businesses. Ford introduced principles of mass production to the manufacture of cars. By breaking the process of car manufacture down into many small, simple steps, by spreading these steps along an assembly line, and by setting large numbers of employees to the repetition of these small simple steps, Fordist production methods allowed for a great increase in the number of cars that could be produced per employee, and an increase in the efficient use of each employee’s time. By making many cars at one time, rather than one at a time, Ford’s methods allowed his business to enjoy economies of scale, such as reductions in costs of raw materials for bulk purchasing and the ability to use and reuse expensive tools and manufacturing plant many times. This meant that Ford could produce many identical standardized cars at a relatively competitive price. Ford’s strategy, then, involved large factories employing many people. It took considerable investment to start this business up. Ford had to make long-term plans and financial commitments in order to build large enough factories to employ enough people to profit from efficiencies of the assembly line and economies of scale.

During the Second World War, and in the wave of post-war economic reconstruction that followed, Fordist principles of production were adopted in key industrial regions around the globe. From the west Midlands of Britain to the Tokyo-Yokohama region of Japan (Harvey 1989: 132), Fordist mass production became the standard model of ‘blue-collar’ manual work. As long as Fordist businesses continued to be profitable, employees could look forward to very stable conditions of employment. Once one had learnt one’s task on the assembly line well enough to keep up with the pace of production, one need not seek to change one’s range of skills. Further, since so much capital had been invested in the factory in which one worked, according to a long-term plan, one could feel relatively confident that one would continue to work in the same place and among more or less the same people until retirement. The sheer scale of Fordist production and the level of investment it required helped to stabilize employees’ lives.

As Harvey (1989: 135) points out, Fordism, with its stability, reliability and standardization of products, was not just a business strategy, it was a
'total way of life'. This meant that the Fordist economy brought business, government and individual aspirations into alignment around goals of long-term political stability and economic growth. As a recipe for business success that would guarantee high levels of employment, Fordism attracted the support of many governments. For Fordism to provide those high levels of employment, it was necessary that markets for mass-produced goods be maintained. Wage levels needed to be high enough for the bulk of the population to afford the new range of consumer goods. Thus national governments became involved in making wage settlements between employers and employees. Across western Europe, developing welfare states gave ordinary people the sense of security against sickness, injury and unemployment needed for them to risk spending their wages on consumer goods like cars and refrigerators. The production and consumption of mass-produced goods were linked in a 'virtuous spiral' of increasing prosperity.

This picture of employment conditions in the post-war period has, so far, focused on blue-collar employees. But a similar motif of stability can be found in the careers and employment conditions of white-collar workers such as civil servants, office workers and managers between 1945 and the early 1970s. Arthur et al. (1999) draw on Galbraith (1971) to sketch what they refer to as the 'industrial state', a socio-economic arrangement that is quite similar to Harvey's Fordism. On their account, the idealized organization of this period was 'a large, stable hierarchical pyramid' (Arthur et al. 1999: 8) and the ideal worker was someone who would stay loyal to the organization, building a career by gradually climbing that pyramid. In pursuit of this ideal, in which stability and long-term planning worked to the mutual benefit of employee and organization, companies developed career planning systems to encourage staff to remain with the company. A stable workforce was something to be treasured. As employees aged, so their jobs became more secure, since they had built up a larger stock of valuable experience and expertise. It was certainly the case that white-collar workers, unlike blue-collar workers, were expected to add to their range of skills in order to progress through the hierarchy, but these changes were understood as minor additions to the worker's basic personality. Organizational career planning was largely based on the notion that each employee had highly stable psychological characteristics that suited them to one career path or another (Arthur et al. 1999).

In summary, between 1945 and the early 1970s across the industrialized world, economic arrangements between businesses, governments and employees were such that once one was in employment, one could reasonably expect that one's working conditions would remain stable. This meant that once 'adult' and employed, one could expect to stay 'the same' for the rest of one's life in a range of ways; one's identity was stabilized by sharing the work environment with more or less the same people throughout one's working life; the geographical area one lived in would remain the same since the organization one belonged to had set down firm roots in that area; and, even if one were dissatisfied with one's job, one would not have to
seek a position with another organization (in another place with different people) because time and effort would bring the reward of career progression. These stabilities depended on the maintenance of Fordism’s ‘virtuous spiral’ of mass production and mass consumption.

Our contemporary associations of adulthood with stability grew from this soil. For a great number of people whose working lives were organized along Fordist lines, the transition to adulthood, marked by getting a job with a large organization, actually was journey’s end. Familiar faces and one’s locality were quickly settled, on employment, along with the list of skills one would have to use at work until retirement. One important thing to note here, however, is that these stable adult lives were highly gendered. The majority of the Fordist workforce were men. We might begin to suspect, then, that the image of the standard adult who has reached journey’s end is similarly gendered. We shall return to this shortly. For the moment we can move on to describe the changes that lay behind the rise of ‘flexible’ adulthood.

Though Fordism or the industrial state developed, spread and strengthened for nearly 30 years, defining a clear picture of adulthood and shaping expectations for generations, in the early 1970s this widespread socio-economic and cultural preference for stability was to end. As we have seen, Fordist strategies for economic success had aligned the interests and activities of manufacturing industry, governments and the lifestyles and expectations of individuals. This alignment had been achieved through mass production for mass markets, markets which were themselves fostered and supported by government interventions in the setting of wage rates and the provision of welfare. But for Fordism to continue to deliver the benefits of stable adult lives within a stable and growing economy, it needed ever-expanding markets for its goods.

By the late 1960s the domestic markets of Fordist economies like those of the USA or the UK were reaching saturation point. The virtues of mass production were turning into the burden of over-production. At the same time the global marketplace was becoming more competitive. The newly industrialized nations of South East Asia had adopted the methods of mass production, but, principally because of lower wage costs, they were able to undercut western manufacturers and to intrude on their domestic markets. The large scales and long-term investments of Fordism acted as a brake on western businesses’ ability to adapt their product designs and business practices in order to compete. In this new environment, what had seemed to be a valuable stability in the economy became a problematic rigidity (Harvey 1989: 142). Workforces’ expectations of stable working conditions and national governments’ policies for the stabilization of a domestic consumer base added to this rigidity. The ‘virtuous spiral’ of mass production and mass consumption became a ‘vicious spiral’ of inflation, recession and industrial disputes.

Over the course of the 1970s and 1980s, the western economies that had suffered from the collapse of Fordism were to reorganize in response to the
changing conditions of the global economy. The response was to react against stability, for fear of becoming rigid. All that had been carefully stabilized and managed in accordance with long-term plans and expectations was rendered flexible. Why employ your whole workforce for a lifetime, when you could save on wage bills by employing them only when demand for your products was rising? All a flexible manufacturing business needed in order to thrive was a core of managerial staff, access to part-time and short-term contract workers and a group of other businesses – subcontractors – to buy services and parts from, as and when they were needed. Harvey (1989: 141) describes this new economic regime as ‘flexible accumulation’. For Arthur et al. (1999: 8) it is simply the ‘new economy’. In the new economy flexible manufacturing strategies have produced a new obligation for adults who want paid employment – be prepared to adapt at any time or find oneself economically dead. Arthur and Rousseau (1996) advocate the boundary-less career in which there is no loyalty between employer and employee, and in which the ideal employee moves frequently between employers taking the opportunity to develop a portfolio of new skills as they go.

Employment arrangements under ‘flexible accumulation’ can serve those adults who are ready to adapt and to be flexible quite well. It can also serve to punish those who are unwilling or unable to adapt or are simply unaware of the necessity to be adaptable. Either way, the stability in conditions of employment that allowed us to think of adults as intrinsically stable and to associate adulthood with stability and completeness, has been considerably eroded. So at the beginning of the twenty-first century, many adults are unsure about where, with whom and in what capacity they will be working in five years’ time. It seems that the figure of the standard adult against which we still make judgements about children, the figure that still serves as the basis for adult authority over children, is a ‘convenient’ fiction that belongs to a Fordist past rather than a flexible present.

From roles to choices: flexibility in intimate life

So far we have seen that the image of the standard adult has played an important role in giving adults authority over children, and that adult ‘stability’ was a key element of that image. Economic and social change since the early 1970s has been turning one major source of that adult stability – the workplace – from a zone in which long-term certainty might be expected and experienced into a zone of flexibility that demands adaptability, willingness and ability to change from adults. We also noted that the Fordist standard adult, the figure whose life had been most effectively stabilized by large-scale hierarchical organization, tended to be male. The image of adult stability was not solely dependent on working conditions for its credibility. Stable adulthood was also generated in long-term intimate relationships such as marriages. As we shall see, recent decades have seen changes in this intimate sphere of life that are placing long-term relationship stabilities in
question, just as the ‘new economy’ has rendered the workplace uncertain and adulthood ‘flexible’.

The sociologist Talcott Parsons (1971) identified what he called the ‘normal American family’. This ‘normal’ family was based on a monogamous marriage between a man and a woman and was expected to last until one or other partner died. The adult members of this stable unit lived together, shared their income and raised children. According to Parsons (1971), this way of organizing family life had developed from an earlier middle-class standard, and had spread across US society as prosperity increased in the course of the twentieth century. Decreases in mortality rates and increasingly widespread stable conditions of male employment meant that once a couple were living in such a ‘normal’ family, the only significant changes in their way of life would come with the birth and maturation of their children. This normal family, then, could be thought of as providing a stable context in which the instability and incompleteness of growing children could be safely and comfortably accommodated. For Parsons (1971) it was the stability of the adult intimate relationship within the normal family that allowed for the successful socialization of children. In other words, it was the stability of adults within the family that gave legitimacy to whatever authority adults wielded over their children.

Parsons’ general picture of society relies heavily on the concept of ‘role’ (Parsons 1956), where a role reflects one’s allotted place within the institutions of society. Whatever social institutions Parsons examined, he sought to identify the roles people occupied. The role one had determined the range of actions which were appropriate to you, and to a large extent governed the way you lived your life. It was clearly defined roles then, that were the key to social stability for Parsons. For each person, knowledge of their role reduced the amount of choice they had to exercise in their lives, and, if each person acted according to role, according to others’ expectations of them, then confusion would be minimized, order would be maximized, and society would remain stable. For Parsons, ‘growing up’ equated to the socialization of children, during which process children gained knowledge of their and others’ roles in society so as to allow for the reproduction of society’s key institutions, not least the family. Ideally, each generation should pass on knowledge of roles and norms to the next. In Parsons’ view of society the traditional patterns of the past were reproduced for the future through the family unit. Families were not just stable in themselves, built on traditional relationships of authority, they were also a major source of social stability in that they helped to reproduce traditional relationships of authority.

It is easy to see how Parsons’ stable, clearly defined roles within stable families reflected the socio-economic conditions of Fordism. Rather like Ford’s production-line employees, adults in intimate relationships had only to realize their roles and discharge their duties and responsibilities in order to secure a stable life and stable authority over their children. The normal family that Parsons identified was founded on just such a set of clear roles...
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and mutual expectations. While male employment was relatively stable and long term, the adult male household role was to bring home the principal share of the family’s income, while the adult female household role was, principally, to keep the house in order and to take care of any children. Likewise the roles of male and female children were to receive socialization from their parents, toward the end of taking up similar stable, gender-appropriate roles within stable marriages when they, in their turn, reached journey’s end.

According to Giddens (1992), the degree of stability, certainty and conformity to roles that composed Parsons’ ‘normal’ family was closely linked to what people of his time were looking for in intimate relationships. In the industrial west a dominant model of ‘love’ organized people’s expectations as they sought and entered intimate relationships in young adulthood. This was ‘romantic love’. From the nineteenth century onwards, to ‘fall in love’ was to have found a partner for the rest of one’s life, a partner with whom one had a deep emotional and psychological affinity. On marriage, this affinity would form the basis of an emotional and economic union to last a lifetime. Ideally, money and mutual care were shared without reservation, and the degree of trust this sharing involved was secured by the knowledge that this relationship, being romantically founded on the stable emotional and psychological characters of the two partners, would last ‘forever’.

Romance provided stability for the love relationship. Any conflicts or dissatisfactions attendant on the gendered division of labour in the household could be dissolved within the acknowledgement of mutual dependence and in the lifelong terms of the agreement of trust that such a relationship was founded on. The long-term stabilities of romantic love and the degree of clear separation of gender roles that it allowed were also offered support by the Fordist economic environment that sustained men as the principal economic actors in the family.

But on Giddens’ (1992) view, romantic love can no longer claim to be the dominant principle of intimate relationships between adults. Across the western world it has been supplanted by a new ideal that he calls the ‘pure relationship’ (Giddens 1992: 58). The central difference between intimate relationships that are based on romantic love and those that are based on the pure relationship is that the latter are maintained only so long as they satisfy the needs of the persons involved. This does not mean that ‘love’ has disappeared. Rather a new form of love has emerged – ‘confluent love’ (Giddens 1992: 61). Love is understood to last just so long as it makes sense for each lover, just so long as they are both satisfied by it. As Smart and Neale (1999) write,

The idea that one finds the right person and then stays committed to him or her through thick and thin is supplanted by the idea that if that person proves to be inadequate in some way, he or she can be replaced with a more suitable or compatible partner.

(Smart and Neale 1999: 8)
If the standards of good relationships have indeed changed in this way, then intimate relationships can no longer automatically provide adults with a stability they can be sure of. One must negotiate and renegotiate one’s relationship rather than take it for granted. In other words, one must be flexible. Adults no longer feel obliged to follow socially sanctioned standards of commitment or to live out roles that they have inherited from their parents. Indeed if one feels that one’s partner is ‘acting out a role’, this might nowadays lead one to question the quality of the relationship. This change in people’s expectations of their relationships has played its part in increasing divorce rates in the west (Smart and Neale 1999). But, just as significantly, even intimate relationships that do last are now forged against a backdrop of possible separation and in the knowledge of their potential instability.

What factors lie behind this shift from permanent romantic love rooted in tradition to contingent confluent love rooted in mutual satisfaction? We can look to recent economic change for an answer. The flexible ‘new economy’ means that one’s geographical location, one’s employment status, one’s range of skills and, above all, one’s self-identity now remain open to change. It might seem that the flexibility of today’s intimate relationships is the direct result of flexible working conditions. But as Castells (1997) argues, the sources of change in intimate life are more diverse than this. He places the increased availability of birth control, the increasing visibility of gay and lesbian relationships, and, most importantly for us, the global development of feminism since the 1970s, alongside economic change in explaining the increasingly flexible nature of intimate relationships.

**Standard adulthood and gender**

We have already noted that stable Fordist adulthood, based on long-term unchanging employment conditions, was more an experience of men than one of women. If many men’s experience of labour throughout their lives was a more or less smooth and uninterrupted passage through well-planned pathways, represented by the blue-collar assembly line or the white-collar career path, women’s experience was quite different. Traditional gender roles placed married women in the home and charged them with the responsibility of actively producing stability in the home for men and for children, by (among many other things) preparing regular meals, keeping the house tidy, and attending to children’s emotional and practical needs. So while men had stabilities made for them at work and at home, women had to create stability for others. Further, women’s access to stable lifelong employment was compromised by childbirth. If the Fordist workplace gave stability to employees’ lives it also required employees to be available for work throughout their lives without interruption. The Fordist workplace was not designed with childbirth in mind and thus tended to exclude women from the workforce.
For these reasons then, women under Fordism did not have easy access to the stabilities of standard adulthood. It was difficult for a woman who was a wife and mother also to be a standard adult. The degree to which a woman could be an economically independent person was limited by her financial dependence on her male partner. The degree to which she could pass as a complete and stable person was limited by her continual involvement in producing stabilities for others. If children, by comparison with adults, were non-standard persons, then, because of their socio-economic position, adult women were non-standard too.

The feminist movement of the late 1960s and 1970s was a range of different protests against the values and socio-economic arrangements that effectively excluded women from the status, powers and privileges of standard adulthood. Living in a world that was designed to produce stability, security and authority for adult men tended to produce frustration and anger for many women. The feminist movement gathered women and their experiences of exclusion together and, over time, made these once purely ‘personal’ matters ‘political’, that is to say, available for public discussion and recognition. Once women’s discontents with the normal family and all that surrounded and supported it were a matter of public record, it became possible to see that whatever arrangement had been struck upon within an intimate relationship was open to negotiation and revision as circumstances and individuals aspirations changed. By criticizing existing standards and norms, and by building alternative standards and norms (such as gender equality within the home), feminism opened the terms and conditions of intimate relationships to factors of preference and choice.

In the confluent pattern of relationships that has resulted, the stability of the intimate relationship is not taken for granted. If it is achieved at all, it is achieved on a provisional basis through the flexibility of partners and their openness to changing their lifestyles. Ideally, such flexible intimacy should equally accommodate the desires and aspirations of both male and female partners. We should note for the sake of clarity that it is not at all necessary for such relationships to be based on a clear understanding of, or commitment, to feminist politics. Flexible adulthoods in intimate life arise simply because people’s intimate lives are now lived with the sense that there are always alternatives. In stark contrast to Parsons’ (1971) picture of society, the past is no longer a reliable guide to the present or, for that matter, to the future. More reliable birth control methods and a growing awareness of the viability of gay and lesbian intimate relationships have only added to this sense of choice and provisionality in intimate life (Castells 1997). Today models of the family based on ‘traditional stability’ and ‘flexible choice’ are in conflict across the world. In the industrial west, political debate about social policy has become fixated on the issue of ‘traditional family values’ as more egalitarian relationships between men and women are developing (Risman 1998). For Castells (1997), many of the present-day Christian, Muslim and Jewish ‘fundamentalist’ movements are primarily concerned with preserving traditional parental authority.
What do you want to be when you grow up? 19

(most often paternal authority) against a global tide of flexibility, diversity and choice.

**Conclusion: adulthood, authority and the age of uncertainty**

We have seen how important the assumption of the stability of adulthood and adult lives has been in distributing authority between age groups. The 'finished' standard adult has powers over and responsibilities toward the 'unfinished' child. We have also seen that this assumption of finished stability no longer holds good in either adults' working lives or in their intimate relationships. Indeed, this model of stability has only ever been fully available to men, just less than half the adult population. So let us now outline the consequences of the changes we have described for the place of children in society as they grow up in this age of uncertainty.

The destabilization of adulthood in the sphere of intimate life is eroding the traditional basis of parents' authority over their children. As flexibility has become a basic principle of intimate adult relationships, the reproduction of traditional roles has become a less important feature of family life. As long as tradition and the reproduction of roles was more important than choice, flexibility and negotiation in shaping the family, then adults, simply by virtue of having greater experience of the past than their children, could enjoy the status of *experts* on how to live. Parents could rely on always 'knowing better' than their children, and their superior knowledge and understanding was given institutional support in the form and functions of the family. Along with their responsibility to raise their children to fit into society came a legitimate and well-grounded authority over their children. Though the sense that adults have greater experience than their children has not disappeared (far from it) it is less likely today, especially in the industrial west, to translate directly into parents’ ability to command children’s obedience. Beck (1998: 65) sums up the significance of these changes with the phrase 'the democratisation of the family', which suggests a future in which children as much as parents may become actively involved in shaping their families through negotiation and participation in decision-making.

As adulthood is led into flexibility by socio-economic and cultural change across the globe, it is clear that stable, complete, standard adulthood can no longer be presumed to exist. It can no longer be relied upon to form the basis of our understanding of childhood and, as we have seen most clearly in the case of intimate relationships, it can no longer form the basis of adult authority over children. The fictional aspect of the 'standard adult' is fast outgrowing its convenience. Uncertainty over the nature of childhood and uncertainty over how properly to treat children is emerging just as the capstone of standard adulthood is lifted from societies across the globe. To give a sense of the issues that now confront us, we end this chapter with the following quotation:
Modern parents know a lot about children and child development as compared with previous generations. Still, many of them simply feel at a loss at what to do. They listen eagerly to the advice of experts, but soon discover they often change their minds and prove themselves to be unreliable... Nobody can give hard and fast advice, the know-how changes just as quickly as the development itself. Uncertainty is chronic.

(Dencik 1989: 174)