

Introduction

CORINNE T. FIELD AND NICHOLAS L. SYRETT

Sixteen. Eighteen. Sixty-five. In the United States today, we recognize these numbers as key transitions in the life course, precise moments when our rights, opportunities, and civic engagement change—when we become eligible to drive, cast a vote, or enroll in Medicare. Likely, we associate these chronological milestones with more subtle but no less pronounced changes in self-understanding—we recognize ourselves as more independent at eighteen, and worry that we are getting old at sixty-five. But these age markers themselves have a history; at a specific moment in the past Americans determined that eighteen, for instance, was the age at which citizens were capable of voting, imbuing that age with both symbolic and legal meaning. This book investigates how, when, and why age itself, as well as various specific ages, came to have significance in American culture.

Age is both a biological reality and a social construction. While human bodies change over time as they become older—they age—the numbers we assign to those bodies—their ages—are a human invention. It is clear that people of different ages—infants, for instance, or the elderly—are, by and large, unable to do things that those in the “prime of life” are capable of doing; human development is a biological process, in other words. At the same time, the meanings that we assign to precise ages—six, sixteen, twenty-one, thirty-five, sixty—are cultural constructions. Not all people reach puberty or intellectual maturity or incapacity at exactly the same ages, and yet cultural expectations, not to mention legal disabilities and responsibilities, are fixed to precise ages. Human beings have approximated; they have chosen specific ages to stand in for the beginnings and endings of life stages and the societal expectations that accompany them. The means by which Americans imposed chronological boundaries upon the ongoing and variable process of growing

up and growing old offers a paradigmatic example of how people construct cultural meaning and social hierarchy from embodied experience. Furthermore, as the contributors to this volume argue, chronological age always intersects with other socially constructed categories such as gender, race, and sexuality. What makes age different from other categories such as whiteness and maleness is that, if we are lucky to live long enough, we will all pass through the chronological markers that define us as first young, then middle aged, and finally old.¹

With these observations as a starting point, this book has three goals. The first is to document age in the American context, to demonstrate how and why specific chronological ages have come to have meaning over the course of American history, from the colonial period to the modern era. Some of these precise ages—like that for ending an indenture, for instance—are no longer applicable to the world in which we live. But many others—like the ages at which Americans may marry, vote, drink, drive, have sex, work, retire, immigrate, and enter legal, cultural, or religious adulthood—are so engrained into our consciousness that we scarcely question their origins. The ages of eighteen, twenty-one, and sixty-five, to take just three important examples, have come to seem natural precisely because we rely upon them so frequently to demarcate the beginnings of adulthood and of old age. But our reliance upon these ages has a past, and it is that history that imbues the ages with meaning. All eighteen-year-olds are not, in their very nature, any more or less mature than seventeen-and-a-half-year-olds or nineteen-year-olds. But our use of this specific number for the past century has made them seem so.

In demonstrating this, the contributors to *Age in America* also make clear that, as Corinne T. Field argues in her essay in this volume, these age markers are “arbitrary but necessary.” They have been necessary, for lawmakers especially, as a means of apportioning legal incapacity and responsibility in a way that has seemed logical and all-encompassing, if not always equal and fair. But they have also been arbitrary in that the same lawmakers could have selected a different and perhaps proximate age for making their legal distinctions; recognizing this, opponents generally contested whatever ages were chosen. Many of these ages rely on precedents in the common law brought by English settlers; others harken back to French or Spanish precedents in canon law or to religious traditions in Catholicism or Judaism. Legal commentators of the

seventeenth century, for instance, attributed the ages of marriage under English common law, fourteen for boys and twelve for girls, to the ages at which both reached puberty. But contemporary historians have demonstrated that on average the onset of puberty was actually later than these ages during the early modern period.² The point is that those who first utilized the ages *believed* them to be accurate measures of the aging process, or as close to being accurate for at least some of the people they were designed to regulate as was possible. The ages, then, were arbitrary, but they were also necessary. There was no better way to describe the moment at which all children or all youth might arrive at a certain developmental stage that could also be effective as a matter of law; age could do so, but only if one accepted age qualifications as both arbitrary and necessary boundaries that always failed to account for individual variation but nonetheless offered an efficient means for apportioning rights and responsibilities to young and old.

The second goal of this volume is to demonstrate that age has, throughout American history, always mattered for at least some people. While a number of historians have argued that for much of early American history most settlers, and the Native Americans alongside whom they lived, were largely unaware of both their birthdays and their ages, there is plentiful evidence that many Americans were well aware of both. Literate New England colonists recorded birthdays in family Bibles. Catholic priests transcribed the ages of prospective brides and grooms in their matrimonial investigations in the territories of New Spain and New France. And many English colonists abided by the English common law, which stipulated the ages of majority, indenture, guardianship, and marriage, among others.

When individuals did not know their exact date of birth, colonial authorities were quite adept at choosing an age for them, likely based on a rough assessment of size and capacity. For example, illiterate European immigrants may not have recorded births in a family Bible, but town authorities nonetheless mustered their sons into the militia based on age. Enslaved Africans may not have known their exact date of birth, but masters often kept such records or otherwise recorded the ages of their slaves in case they wished to sell them. For many of these people, age did not matter in daily life, but it would be wrong to think that age was a meaningless category of identity for early Americans. While age

consciousness—the belief that our ages are a fundamental part of our identity—was certainly not as widespread in colonial America as it would become in later eras, the legal function of age was clearly important to many, even if only at particular times in a person's life.

Contributors to this volume agree that reformers intensified the use of chronological age during the late nineteenth century. Indeed, research presented here deepens this narrative by explaining how exactly bureaucrats, lawyers, and politicians convinced ordinary Americans to conform to a proliferating number of age-based regulations. But other contributors reveal that this is not the whole story. They set Progressive Era innovations in a broader context, looking back to the colonial period to explain how Europeans, Indians, and Africans wrestled with the salience of age in defining civic obligations, interlocking dependencies, and relative status.

By the twentieth century, with age qualifications well established and accepted, debate intensified as to which ages, exactly, should matter. Spirited debates flared over when a person should be able to drink, vote, or claim Social Security benefits—all controversies detailed in this volume. The collection as a whole, then, documents the often overlooked significance of numerical age before the later nineteenth century, deepens our understandings of the significance of Progressive Era innovations in age stratification, and explores the debates surrounding modifications for various age-based privileges and responsibilities in the later twentieth century.

The third goal of *Age in America* is to encourage historians, and indeed all scholars of American culture, to incorporate age into their analyses as a key axis of identity for Americans. Imprecise and arbitrary as it may be, age has been a marker of identity fundamental to the way that citizenship has been constituted in American history, right alongside sex, race, class, and sexuality. Americans have used chronological age to construct race, gender, and sexuality, at the same time that they have used these other categories to shape the meaning of age. This has been true for the elderly and adults, just as it has been for children. While much of the work on age as a category of analysis has heretofore focused on young people, we hope this collection will serve as encouragement for all scholars of age-defined groups of people (children, youth, adults, and the elderly) to critically examine the ways that age markers

themselves have been constructed historically, and refracted through the lenses of gender, race, class, and sexuality.³

Today it is a commonplace for historians to note a person's age as a means either to show something important about her or his identity or simply to allow the reader to place the person, to categorize her or him. Contemporary readers, historians assume, understand what it means *to be* five or thirty-five or seventy. But until relatively recently, few scholars have bothered to explore those ages themselves, what meanings people in the past ascribed to specific ages, and whether or not earlier Americans believed the same things about particular ages that we do. The scholarship on childhood and children on the one hand, and old age and the elderly on the other, has been plentiful. Some scholars have also explored the more ill-defined world of adulthood in between. But there has been far less scholarship on the history of age itself: which numbers are meaningful and why.

The few who have written on age can be roughly divided into two groups: those who have focused on the development of age consciousness, the belief that one's age is an important part of one's identity; and those who have studied age grading, that is, the organization of institutions such as schools, juvenile courts, and government welfare programs around age-based criteria. Those who have studied age consciousness have tended to employ the tools of cultural history—focusing as they have on a cultural phenomenon—whereas those who have studied bureaucratic uses of age have drawn on the tools of political, legal, and social history.

Of course the two have sometimes gone hand in hand. Howard Chudacoff's *How Old Are You? Age Consciousness in American Culture* (1989), until now the only book-length treatment on the subject of chronological age in U.S. history, combined both approaches to explore the intersections between age consciousness and age grading, both of which intensified after the Civil War. Chudacoff argues that many early Americans did not know their own birthdays or ages and that age consciousness did not begin to gain traction in the United States until the spread of pediatric medicine and age-graded schooling made age markers a meaningful part of people's identities. This occurred after

the middle of the nineteenth century, first in the industrialized Northeast, spreading unevenly and gradually to other areas of the country. Chudacoff shows how birthdays, age scheduling (the idea that major life transitions should normally occur by a particular age), and thus age consciousness became meaningful for wider swaths of Americans over the course of the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries, so much so that age would eventually become a central “organizing principle” for how we interact with each other.⁴

While much of the work by historians since Chudacoff complements rather than contradicts his findings, particularly in its general conclusion that the use of age to regulate children and the elderly grew in the Progressive Era as it coincided with greater state bureaucratization, some more recent work also complicates his assertions. For instance, legal historians have long recognized that English common law, which formed the basis for the legal code in the Anglo colonies and later the United States, is riddled with precise ages: the age of majority, which governed the ability of adults to manage and convey property, or to make wills, or otherwise act independently of their parents; the ages of consent to marriage; and the ages when children might choose their own guardians. The French and Spanish carried their own particular age markers with them to the New World as well. These Europeans confronted Indians and Africans with their own distinct assumptions about age and life stage. Many colonies, and later states, passed statutory law that codified English, French, or Spanish age markers as meaningful transitions in the lives of young people.⁵

While the existence of legal age markers does not presuppose that most people either knew these markers or, for that matter, their own birthdays, more recent scholarship by Holly Brewer has demonstrated that the thinking of religious leaders, philosophers, and legal scholars both in England and its North American colonies underwent a profound shift in the early modern period that gradually coalesced around a consensus that children, who had previously been capable of marrying, contracting, bearing legal witness, and assuming criminal responsibility, were incapable of providing meaningful consent and thus should be denied those rights until age rendered them fit to do so. In the colonies this transition culminated in the revolutionary ideal that citizenship required informed consent, the kind that children were unable to give. But

in order for that to work, various laws had to be passed stipulating the precise ages at which young people were eligible for the rights of adulthood; this occurred over the course of the colonial and early national periods. The overall point is that various ages did matter, at least legally, prior to the middle of the nineteenth century, indeed from the arrival of the first Europeans on North American soil. These ages may have mattered at the margins—that is, for only a minority of young people who were tried for a crime or attempted to marry or defy a guardian before reaching majority—but they mattered for those individuals and for people around them. And the laws' existence at all demonstrates that age mattered for legislators and practitioners of the law.⁶

As historians have shown, the military was one of the first institutions to rely upon chronological age as a means to demand obligations and provide benefits during fixed periods of life, though often only for white males. In both Europe and its colonies, governments employed age to define who had an obligation to muster for militia duty, who could qualify for service in government armies, and who was eligible for veterans' pension benefits. In the American colonies, the requirement that white males serve in the militia at a specified age, generally sixteen, created an intermediate stage of citizenship between boyhood and manhood. These youth were still legal minors who would not qualify to vote until they reached twenty-one and, what often took much longer, acquired property of their own. Nonetheless, these young and propertyless white men could stand proud on muster day knowing that they fulfilled obligations never demanded of their sisters and only rarely of their nonwhite peers. Recognizing that many of these youth lacked any written proof of age, militia laws empowered local officials to determine individuals' ages in the same way as they empowered tax assessors to fix the value of property. Numeric age thus came to define a clear path to citizenship for white males long before people could prove how old they were.⁷

As James Schmidt has argued, regulating the right to contract was more complicated. Some jurists in the new Republic sought to define age twenty-one as a universal qualification for both political and civil contracts, while others recognized that the shift from apprenticeship to wage labor, combined with widespread geographic mobility, necessitated that minor youth be empowered to contract their own labor. During the early years of the nineteenth century, judges in the Northeast

generally worked to facilitate young people's participation in the labor market, whereas by the end of the century, a new generation of jurists helped build the consensus that young people belonged in school and not at work.⁸

Historians of slavery have demonstrated that chronological age functioned very differently for enslaved people, who could claim no rights on the basis of age, but nonetheless found that their vulnerability to sale and the demands upon their labor increased markedly as they grew from childhood to young adulthood. Masters, traders, and tax assessors relied upon chronological age to determine the monetary value of enslaved people, assigning the highest value to those in their mid- to late teens. To be sure, other traits such as sex, health, temperament, and skill entered into the equation, but the shorthand notation in account books was often name, age, and dollar value—age functioning as a rough gauge of capacity and hence of price. As a result, masters and mistresses were among the most careful recorders of births. Given the market incentives, however, slave owners likely quite often misrepresented ages to either save on taxes or boost a sale. Chronological age may have mattered less to enslaved people themselves, who generally lacked access to written records, but evidence suggests that enslaved parents used what power and influence they had to both shelter children from the worst aspects of exploitation and prolong childhood as long into the teenage years as possible.⁹

Fugitive slaves who joined the abolitionist movement in the North used chronological age to explain how enslaved people lacked the rights and protections routinely accorded their free peers. Frederick Douglass, for example, recalled his despair as an enslaved boy knowing his white peers would grow up to be “free at twenty-one.” Harriet Jacobs contrasted the protections accorded white girls with the sexual exploitation she faced beginning in her “fifteenth year—a sad epoch in the life of a slave girl.”¹⁰ Indeed, narratives of fugitive slaves, coupled with the protests of disenfranchised adults in the North, suggest that age consciousness was particularly intense among those seeking equal rights for black men and all women, even as it may have been less salient to the enslaved in their day-to-day existence.¹¹

To better understand the development of age consciousness over the course of the nineteenth century, historians have focused on the work of educators, doctors, and reformers, especially those in the urban North-

east, who first advocated the use of age-based criteria for determining social services, distributing rights, and organizing institutions. Chudacoff credited age-graded schooling with doing much of the work of spreading age consciousness. Grouping together children in separate classes based on their birthdays resulted from the reformers' conviction that children should develop common characteristics, particularly the maturation of reason, as they aged. Once states and localities, beginning in the urban Northeast, started organizing their classrooms by age, the experience of age grading spread age consciousness to ever greater proportions of the population. This led to the belief that those children shared common characteristics, which increasingly they did, thanks to their shared schooling. This in turn inculcated the notion that age itself was a fundamental facet of one's identity.¹²

A number of scholars have demonstrated persuasively that rights and restrictions were also forged at the nexus of age, gender, and sexuality. Michael Grossberg shows that during the nineteenth century, age (along with race, medical fitness, and consanguinity and affinity) became a way for marriage and divorce reformers to "guard the altar" from those they believed might harm the institution of marriage. Marriage was for adults, not children, and age was the tool to make sure that this would henceforth be the case. Historian Mary E. Odem and political scientist Carolyn E. Cocca document the development of statutory rape laws in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, respectively, demonstrating the ways that age was initially used to protect only girls, undergoing a revolution in the late twentieth century as the protections of statutory rape laws were extended to boys. Cocca also explores the ways that reformers developed age-gap exceptions to exempt the elder of two similarly aged teenagers from prosecution, even if one of them was actually younger than the legal age of consent. In particularly nuanced ways, historian Stephen Robertson has argued that by the twentieth century sexuality and sexual acts were always understood through the prism of age; in the courtroom and beyond, age structured how witnesses understood the sexual actions of a child, an adolescent, or an adult. Robertson also demonstrates, and in more recent work Nayan Shah further shows, that in legal cases of sexual abuse or same-sex sexual acts, both the ages and possible age differences, the sexes and possible sex differences, and the races and possible race differences of the two people involved all inter-

acted in order to create plausible victims and assailants. Understandings of age structured whether a sexual act was legally a crime.¹³

Age has also been integral to the analyses of child labor laws and of the juvenile justice system as both developed at the turn of the twentieth century. In order for reformers to protect young people from what they perceived as the harm of the workplace and of culpability for criminal acts, age was necessary to define childhood in the first place. Indeed, arguments about these ages were key parts of the debate over just when childhood actually ended, and for what purposes. Perhaps inevitably policy makers did not always agree with lay people about these issues. James Schmidt has demonstrated in the realm of child labor, for instance, that working people in Appalachia long resisted the notion that just because a child had not reached a certain age he or she was ineligible for work; for these people a child worked when “big enough,” not “old enough.” And Joan Jacobs Brumberg has shown that supporters of leniency for juvenile criminals met with formidable resistance in the face of the horror of crimes committed by young people. Age clearly mattered in these circumstances, most especially in the legal framework designed to protect young people from work or criminal responsibility, but not all Americans necessarily agreed with lawmakers.¹⁴

Many scholars have also focused on the work of doctors, particularly the psychologist G. Stanley Hall’s late nineteenth-century efforts to define adolescence as a distinct stage of life bounded by age.¹⁵ Where Hall focused on young men, other doctors were more concerned with the health of young women, for whom menarche marked a clear transition to reproductive adulthood. Crista DeLuzio demonstrates that during the antebellum period, many doctors formulated age-based schedules for normative human growth and argued that young people—girls in particular—needed to postpone marriage and childbearing until their bodies and minds had fully developed, a slow process extending into the early twenties.¹⁶ As doctors increasingly tracked female growth by age, they noticed something surprising: a marked decline in the age of menarche. By the late nineteenth century, many parents and medical experts were aware that American girls were maturing earlier than their mothers and grandmothers, a phenomenon that worried many and fueled efforts to protect the health and morals of young girls, particularly those who were white, native-born, and Protestant.¹⁷

At the same time, doctors concerned with the end of life worried that Americans used up their vital store of energy by late middle age and debated what to do with aging workers, whose capacity, they believed, declined with every passing year. Others optimistically argued that with proper habits, all individuals could enjoy health and productivity into their sixties and seventies, and, perhaps with the advance of science, for many decades more. Gerontology, which developed as a scientific and medical discipline in the twentieth century, took as its subject an elderly population defined by chronological age.¹⁸ Medicine has thus also increased the significance attached to age, for men and women sometimes in different ways.

Historians interested in the history of retirement agree that individual capacity rather than chronological age generally determined individuals' decisions to withdraw from the labor force through the mid-nineteenth century. Many attribute the rise of age-based criteria for retirement to the expansion of the welfare state, first with the payment of military pensions for union veterans following the Civil War and then, even more important, with the passage of Social Security in 1935. Historians interested in the growth of state bureaucracies, and their reliance on chronological age to categorize population groups, agree that the expansion of government benefits led many Americans during the mid-twentieth century to regard retirement as a normative stage of life beginning at age sixty-five.¹⁹

Historians interested in old age have also debated the extent and impact of age discrimination in the labor market. From the late nineteenth through the mid-twentieth century, American corporations increasingly adopted age-based seniority and pension systems as a tool to manage their employees. Some social historians, however, have noted that the labor force participation rates of older workers remained fairly constant. All agree that because white men were most likely to qualify for private pension benefits, age discrimination affected men of color and white women in distinct ways, often rendering them less secure in old age.²⁰

During the middle years of the twentieth century, chronological age also came to figure centrally in various efforts to market products. As sociologist Daniel Thomas Cook has demonstrated, retailers first began to market age-sized clothing to children and youth in the 1920s. Over

the course of the twentieth century, marketers promoted ever more fine-grained age segmentation of the youth market, popularizing new age-defined terms such as “toddlers” in the 1930s, “teens” in the 1940s, and “tweens” in the 1980s. Of these markets, teenagers emerged as by far the largest. Increasingly concentrated in high schools, with free time and money to spend, teens developed an age-segregated youth culture in the years after World War II. Movie, record, and television producers profited by targeting their content to age-defined audiences. While many marketed to the young, some developed niche markets among older adults, often tapping into anxieties about old-age decline to market products that promised to prolong youth.²¹

Historians and sociologists have also traced the process by which medical experts, politicians, and lawyers have applied age-based measures of human development to the period before birth. In her history of the fetus in modern America, Sara Dubow shows how embryologists came to understand fetal life in terms of developmental stages measured by weeks since conception, and lawyers to pin new rights and obligations on fetal age, even as antiabortion activists confounded these stages by referring to fetuses as babies and seeking to classify embryos as persons. Sociologist Miranda Waggoner, meanwhile, explains how since the 1980s public health advocates have begun to target the months before conception as the crucial window during which potential mothers need to begin certain medical interventions—such as taking folic acid. The result is that the span of time relevant to human development has extended to encompass not only gestation but also a newly defined stage of pre-pregnancy.²²

At the turn of the twenty-first century, sociologists, psychologists, and opinion leaders concerned with both youth and old age began to question whether chronological age was losing its relevance as a marker of distinct life stages. The psychologist Jeffrey Arnett coined the term “emerging adulthood” to refer to the period between ages eighteen and twenty-five as a prolonged phase of experimentation in which the markers of adulthood no longer come according to any fixed schedule or sequence. While sociologists and journalists debate the significance of this prolonged youth, all agree that variation and diversity in experience trump clear chronological norms.²³ Pursuing what is in some ways a parallel inquiry into the last stage of life, critical gerontologists noted

that many baby boomers entering their sixties and seventies insisted that they felt much younger than their calendar age. Some see liberatory potential in the articulation of a postmodern life course, rooted in heterogeneity and indeterminacy rather than chronological milestones. Some worry that new models of aging are linked too closely to consumerist models of forestalling old age through the purchase of products, while others warn of a new and more virulent form of ageism lurking in advice that urges people to age well by concealing and denying how old they are.²⁴ By showing how age categories have changed over time for children, youth, adults, and the elderly, this book provides a richer historical context for understanding these contemporary debates.

As we hope to have demonstrated, chronological age has clearly not been absent from historical scholarship, though with the exception of Chudacoff's *How Old Are You?*, it has rarely taken center stage. Instead, scholars have grappled with how age has been one factor that structured the experiences of school, work, retirement, slavery, medicine, sex, and legal capability, and interacted with other identity categories like gender, race, and class in order to construct legible human subjects. Here we bring age to the fore, placing it at center stage, where we believe that, in conjunction with race, class, gender, and sexuality, it belongs.

The Contributors

Ann M. Little and Sharon Braslaw Sundue both demonstrate the salience of age categories in early America, and among a diverse cast of characters. Focusing on relations among French, English, and Wabanaki on the northern frontier in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Little argues that the cross-cultural significance of ages four, seven, twelve, and fourteen shaped the experiences of children taken as captives and provided grounds for diplomatic agreements between warring peoples. Through a case study of gradual emancipation in Pennsylvania during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Sundue shows how chronological age became central to debates over slavery and freedom in the early republic. In an era when historians have concluded that chronological age lacked meaning, Little and Sundue demonstrate that for some people, age was actually crucial to decisions about life, death, freedom, and citizenship.

Corinne T. Field, Jon Grinspan, Nicholas L. Syrett, and Yuki Oda all focus on how age categories intersected with gender, race, and class differences across the long nineteenth century. Field explores how politicians in antebellum America used the requirement that voters be twenty-one as proof that suffrage was not a natural right but a privilege that states could regulate at will, thus disqualifying white women and African Americans. Grinspan turns to diaries and letters to explore what voting at age twenty-one meant to young white men themselves and to party leaders eager to tap their support. Noting that most states enabled young girls to marry several years earlier than boys, Syrett argues that the differential age of marriage and of ages of majority in western and midwestern states constructed differently gendered prescriptions for adulthood, some of which paradoxically allowed girls opportunities not afforded to their brothers. Turning to immigration law, Oda shows that by the 1920s chronological age determined who could become a citizen, but in very different ways for European and Asian immigrants. All four show in distinct ways how lawmakers used age to construct the categories of race and gender, and in turn how some Americans internalized and battled against the identities forged at those crucial intersections.

Where other contributors trace the significance of age qualifications in law, Shane Landrum answers the important question of how exactly Americans proved their age by showing how the informal, personal records accepted by public officials in the nineteenth century were replaced by official, state-issued birth certificates common by the 1910s. James D. Schmidt covers a similar period and demonstrates another way that Americans came to know their ages: the twinned regulation of labor law and mandatory schooling. Schmidt argues that although they are often studied separately, they amounted to the same thing, both using chronological age to determine who belonged at work and who did not. Taken together, both essays help us further understand not just how lawmakers used age as a tool to regulate Americans, but how those same people came to see age as a fundamental category of their own identities.

By the early twentieth century, as more and more Americans could prove their age, the debate shifted to questions about which ages exactly should qualify the young and old for entitlements and responsibilities. No longer was age itself at issue, the fundamental question was which age. Taking a long view of attitudes toward old-age retirement, William

Graebner argues that chronological age became a dominant factor in retirement only in the 1930s with the creation of Social Security as an entitlement beginning at age sixty-five. Rebecca de Schweinitz, meanwhile, shows how the federal draft intersected with the expansion of public high schools to fuel support for the Vote 18 movement. However, even as Americans ratified the Twenty-Sixth Amendment and lowered the age of majority in many states, Timothy Cole demonstrates that a coalition of concerned parents and lawmakers organized to reassert their authority over adult teenagers, most notably by using federal highway funds to ensure that states would set the minimum drinking age at twenty-one. These three essays all show how the ages of sixty-five, eighteen, and twenty-one have come to have such salience in American culture today.

Stuart Schoenfeld and Norma E. Cantú both take a long view in their analyses of four enormously popular birthday-based rituals that have not just survived, but thrived, in the recent past: bar/bat mitzvah for Jewish Americans and quinceañeras/cincoañeras for Chicanas and other Latinas. Schoenfeld shows the evolution of the significance (or lack thereof) of the age of thirteen for American Jews, as bar and bat mitzvah themselves have gained in importance over the course of the twentieth century as a performance of Jewish identity. Using the tools of a folklorist, Cantú argues for the importance of quinceañeras and cincoañeras not just for marking status changes in a woman's life at ages fifteen and fifty, but also for reaffirming the importance of Chicana identity itself as a means of resistance in an Anglo-dominant culture.

Finally, W. Andrew Achenbaum suggests that in recent years chronological age has taken on a "paradoxical" meaning in the lives of older Americans as, on the one hand, ever more fine-grained age criteria confer a wide range of benefits from Medicare to discount movie tickets, while, on the other hand, gerontologists and many older people themselves insist that age predicts little about the physical, psychological, or spiritual experience of aging. As a fitting conclusion to a volume on the history of chronological age, Achenbaum wonders whether the revolution in longevity might lead Americans to turn away from age-based criteria toward more expansive, transgenerational definitions of social citizenship.

While it is true that age-based criteria proliferated with the expansion of government and corporate bureaucracies during the Progressive

period, the contributors to this volume demonstrate that chronological age has been used to define the rights and obligations of citizens from the earliest days of European settlement to the present. Far from being a Progressive addition to more fundamental categories of citizenship such as nation, gender, and race, chronological age was one of the tools that early Americans used to define such differences. For example, governing officials relied on age to determine which children captured in war could choose their own allegiances, to enable young white men to cast their first vote, to require “free” black children to remain bound to service longer than their white peers, and to limit who could participate in the wage labor market or marry. Americans thus interwove age with other categories of citizenship from the very beginning, using age to shape the development of national boundaries, white manhood citizenship, and industrialization.

As contributors to this volume show, the study of chronological age throws into sharp relief the process by which Americans constructed categories of difference. Historians have long argued that gender, race, and national origins are not inborn traits but social constructions. Given that no one has ever claimed to be born a certain age, and that some Americans did not know or could not prove how old they were, the reliance on chronological age in law and public policy demonstrates the process of constructing categories of difference. Age not only intersected with other categories of difference but provided a fundamental means by which Americans learned to rely upon an artificial distinction—in this case calendar age—to distribute rights and obligations in a heterogeneous population riven by social contrasts but living in a nation dedicated to freedom and equality. That Americans continue to debate such issues as when young people should vote or older people claim Social Security benefits demonstrates that far from being resolved, age remains a paradigmatic example of how we learn to recognize, accept, and rely upon artificial categories of difference.

NOTES

- 1 Margaret Morganroth Gullette, *Aged by Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Margaret Cruikshank, *Learning to Be Old: Gender, Culture, and Aging*, 2nd ed. (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009); Stephen Katz, *Disciplining Old Age: The Formation of Gerontological Knowledge* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1996).

- 2 Henry Swinburne, *A Treatise of Spousals or Matrimonial Contracts: Wherein All the Questions Relating to That Subject Are Ingeniously Debated and Resolved* (London: S. Roycroft, 1686), 47; Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls* (New York: Random House, 1997), 27–56.
- 3 Other scholars have also called on historians, particularly, to note the centrality of age in constructing the past. See, among others, Stephen Robertson, *Crimes Against Children: Sexual Violence and Legal Culture in New York City, 1880–1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), conclusion; James Schmidt, “The Ends of Innocence: Age as a Mode of Inquiry in Sociolegal Studies,” *Law & Social Inquiry* 32, no. 4 (Fall 2007): 1029–57; Barbara Young Welke, *Law and the Borders of Belonging in the Long Nineteenth Century United States* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 12–13; and the following contributions to the Winter 2008 edition (vol. 1, no. 1) of the *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth*: Steven Mintz, “Reflections on Age as a Category of Historical Analysis,” 91–94; Stephen Lassonde, “Age and Authority: Adult-Child Relations during the Twentieth Century in the United States,” 95–105; Leslie Paris, “Through the Looking Glass: Age, Stages, and Historical Analysis,” 106–13; and Mary Jo Maynes, “Age as a Category of Historical Analysis: History, Agency, and Narratives of Childhood,” 114–24.
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