

The Struggle for Equal Adulthood: Gender, Race, Age, and the Fight for Citizenship in Antebellum America.

Corinne T. Field

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In this engaging book, Corinne T. Field makes a compelling case as to the necessity of exploring how contemporaries understood and made use of age, as well as gender and race, in making sense of political, social, and cultural divisions in nineteenth-century America. More chronologically wide-ranging than the title suggests, Field examines how women's rights activists – black and white – and black male activists stressed the necessity of, and their capability to reach, “equal adulthood” in order to gain political rights. As white male suffrage became determined almost solely by the individual reaching the age of twenty-one, Field notes this offered activists a common language with which to appeal against their exclusion: ‘since age was something all could attain, the struggle for equal adulthood had broad appeal (p.78).’ Moving deftly from the revolutionary era to the end of the nineteenth century, Field examines how debates on suffrage, representation, and republicanism referenced and helped shape ideas on age, maturity, and political capability.

Field makes use of an extensive range of source material in order to explore the debates over age and political representation. The biographical sketches of influential thinkers such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Abigail Adams, Frances Harper, Frederick Douglass, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton are well done; while many of these individuals will be well known to scholars of eighteenth-and-nineteenth-century America, Field's focus on their use of age-based distinctions adds to our understanding of the nuanced and complex ways contemporaries understood the fight for rights and representation.

The first chapter explores how contemporaries attempted to deal with the ramifications of the American Revolution, addressing how republican ideals and demands required a new explanatory framework for the clear distinctions in rights and responsibilities between Americans in the new nation. Field takes such ideas further in the second chapter, where she considers the limits of the democratic “revolution” in antebellum America: ‘by the 1840s, voting had become both a political right and a rite of passage defined by chronological age – but only for white men (p. 53).’ Field notes how these same rights were systematically denied to black men and all women and, while many scholars have explored the racial and gendered ideologies that accompanied such denials, Field argues that what helped unite this discrimination was the claim that these groups were incapable of gaining “maturity”. While the expectation was that all ‘white boys should grow up to become men’, this transition to “adulthood” was deemed impossible for ‘all black people and all women [who] remained dependent throughout their lives (p. 33).’ At times more could have perhaps been made of how contemporaries justified and rationalised the infantilisation of these groups, but the overall perception that they were deemed incapable of reaching adulthood is clearly expressed.

In chapters two and three, Field explores how women's rights activists and black male activists found common ground in highlighting the self-serving nature of white male denials of their ability to transition to mature adulthood. Field argues that ‘equal adulthood thus emerged out of interracial debate and cooperation between black and white reformers eager to claim the rights, duties, and privileges conferred on young white men at twenty-one but denied to the majority of adults, whatever their age (p. 76).’ The third chapter also offers

some indication of the growing tension between the two movements, as political arguments over abolition and the rights of black men increasingly appeared to take precedence over those of all women.

In chapter four Field offers sophisticated analysis of contemporary views on the ‘voyage of life (p. 97)’, making use of images and illustrations from the period to note how popular ideas of age-related rights and responsibilities were disseminated, internalized, and critiqued. Indeed, Field notes how seemingly naturalised distinctions in the life course were challenged by the advocates of equal adulthood, who stressed instead the racist and sexist restrictions which limited the life choices of all women and black men. In doing so Field is able to move beyond simply acknowledging the use of age as a dividing line by contemporaries, but also to examine how such ideas reflected and were shaped by economic, scientific, religious, and cultural perceptions of human possibility and potential.

Chapters five and six explore the impact of the Civil War and the changes wrought during Reconstruction, including the gendering of suffrage in the Constitution. Field, as other scholars have done, stresses the significance of the bloody conflict in the conferral of black male suffrage (p.126), and then examines the divisions between formerly united activists and the concern among some white female suffragists that the prioritisation of black men, and masculinity in general, left white women behind. Yet the hierarchical, classist, and, above all, racist ideas which some suffragists used to promote the rights of educated white women over black men served only to divide former allies: ‘rather than reuniting around a shared campaign to defend the equal rights of all adults, they continued to promote disparate measures of maturity and to infantilize each other (p. 157).’ Field also notes how the use of chronological age and the accepted arbitrariness of age based distinctions allowed white men to continue justifying the exclusion of women and, in spite of the early possibilities of Reconstruction, black men. By stressing how age-based restrictions proved voting was a privilege, and not a “right”, proponents of white male superiority were better able to justify other forms of exclusion, including those based around race and gender.

Overall, Field offers a compelling assessment on the use of, and understanding of age-based distinctions in determining political, cultural, and social rights in nineteenth-century America, and the book will be of use to students and scholars of gender, race, age, and identity in the period.

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