Adolescence is Socially Constructed

If someone were to ask me what adolescence is, I would probably begin with a discussion of puberty. In fact, I’d have to speculate that a majority of the population would as well. The reason being is that the onset of puberty is a marker for the initial stages of adolescence; it is a biological marker that we can see and easily recognize. Many argue, however, that adolescence is socially constructed rather than biologically constructed. This may be true considering that adolescence itself is a recent invention: the era of the adolescent dawned in Europe and America in the two decades after 1900 (1). So if adolescence was always marked by biological factors, wouldn’t we have seen more importance paid to it in earlier times? Possibly, but biological factors do not determine the characterization of adolescence. At the same time they cannot be completely exempt from its definition either. The biological process of maturation became the basis of the social definition of this entire age group (1). From this base, the theory of adolescence has evolved in a changing society. It has been defined and redefined until it has been transformed into what we find today: a concept, whose roots stem from a biological origin, constructed by social influence. This essay will briefly discuss what it means for adolescence to be socially constructed, and will follow with an explanation as to how it has become this way in the last century.

Adolescence is defined as a stage of life traditionally understood as the time between childhood and adulthood. Biological markers such as the onset of puberty may be useful to indicate the beginning of adolescence as somewhere between 11 and 13 years of age, since this is when we tend to see a physical change in a child. But the end of adolescence, however, is a lot more difficult to pronounce. There isn’t a fantastic finish to puberty that is simple to identify. This is where social indicators have played their biggest role; the time at which an adolescent reaches maturity is defined by social
constructs. For example, the age at which a person can drive, vote, die for one’s country, and drink a beer are all efforts made by this country to determine the age at which teenagers are mature enough to handle certain responsibilities. And they are determined by society, not biologically, for if they were biological the ages would almost certainly never very based on scientific study. On the contrary, these social determinations have changed as often as society itself has, and neither one is consistent with the others in determining an age of maturation. A 18-year-old can vote for the President of the United States, and fight a war against another land and race, but he can’t drink an alcoholic beverage until 3 years later. He is also old and responsible enough to drive a vehicle on the streets (whose accidents are one of the leading causes of teenage deaths) at 16 years old, or is he? The legal driving age in California has just been raised to 18, showing instability within the law itself and variance among other states. What about something like guns? You might think that guns are just guns and the legal age determined at which a young adult may be held accountable for their use is applied universally to all firearms, but this is not true. Some guns are accessible to teenagers at 18 years old, while the remainder is available only after 21. Is this law stating that there is some biological development between the years of 18 and 21 that is necessary before the possession of certain weaponry is allowable? No, it is not saying that. Biology doesn’t tell us that 16 year olds can drive, or that they drive better at 18. It doesn’t tell us that 21 year olds are responsible enough to drink, society does. This is what is meant when we say that adolescence is socially constructed, because society sets its parameters.

As mentioned before, many sociologists argue that adolescence was created; that it wasn’t always what we see today. A review of history might detail the same. Many centuries ago, prior to the 19th century, children were considered little adults. They were expected to work at an early age, contribute to the family welfare, and they
even married early to start families of their own. Children, in fact, wore the same clothing as adults, just smaller. We might speculate that this was due to a continuity in society and social upbringing. Until modern times there weren’t many sociological advances. During the 1800’s however, as the United States became industrialized and urbanized, Americans began to treat children as a special category, and by the end of the century they had come to recognize adolescence as a discrete stage between childhood and adulthood (2). Prior to this even, Americans were already taking measures to distinguish this particular age group. Immediately after the revolution, Americans confronted the task of establishing the age at which people were legally too young to comprehend the serious responsibility of marriage (2). Socially, they were setting the parameters for adolescence, but not without its biological origins. They were concerned with setting ages below which children could neither physically consummate a marriage nor intellectually understand its significance (2). As society continued to change, and with it the arrival of the advanced stages of industrialization, young people where soon displaced from the job market. The earliest child labor laws, which date from the 1840s, established surprisingly low boundaries for the end of childhood: Pennsylvania, in 1848, prohibited individuals younger than 12 from working in mines, in 1855 Connecticut decreed that 9 was the age at which people could be employed, and in 1866 Massachusetts defined child labor as work performed by those under 10 (2). In the 1900s, organizations such as the boy scouts, were founded, further setting adolescents apart from their adult counterparts. Yet even as time wore on, there was something that remained constant about adolescents, and that is the idea that they are vulnerable, awkward, incapacitated by the process of maturation, but simultaneously the object of almost rhapsodic praise, the very bud and promise of the race (1).

So once there was childhood and adulthood, and now we see adolescence: a recent invention of 19th century industrialization, and further developed by 20th century
technology and sociological theorizing. Although it may be identified physically by biological maturation, it is definitely not solely defined as such. It has been continually refined by new societal perceptions and modified by the changing times. It will no doubt continue to do so as society and its conceptions evolve into the future.