

HOMEWORK: 1980s and 1990s Youth (The New Generation Gap)

Introduction

The discussion of differences between generations became something of an intellectual cottage industry in the 1990s, as the children of the postwar Baby Boom entered midlife and saw their place in the social, cultural, economic, and political limelight threatened by the ascendance of those born after 1961, often called Generation X. Popular music, film, and television helped define the worldview of many in both generations, but the occasional overlap of cultural references did not go far to bridge the gap between those who were mostly in their forties and those who were mostly in their twenties.

Two world views, reflecting fundamentally different visions of society and self, are moving into conflict in the America of the 1990s. A **new generation gap** is emerging. In the late 1960s the fight was mainly between twenty-year-olds and the fifty-plus crowd. Today it's mainly between young people and the thirty- to forty-year-olds. The first time around, the members of that generation attacked their elders; now they're targeting their juniors.

Born from 1943 to 1960, today's 69 million Boomers range in age from thirty-two to forty-nine. The younger antagonists are less well known: America's thirteenth generation, born from 1961 to 1981, ranging in age from eleven to thirty-one. Demographers call them **Baby Busters**, a name that deserves a prompt and final burial. First, it's incorrect: The early-sixties birth cohorts are among the biggest in U.S. history—and, at 80 million, this generation has numerically outgrown the Boom. By the late 1990s it will even outvote the Boom. Second, the name is insulting—"Boom" followed by "Bust," as though wonder were followed by disappointment. The novelist Doug Coupland, himself a 1961 baby, dubs his age-mates "**Generation X**" or "Xers," a name first used by and about British Boomer-punkers.

The old generation gap of the late 1960s and early 1970s featured an incendiary war between college kids and the reigning leaders of great public institutions. Back then the moralizing aggressors were on the younger side.

The new generation gap of the 1990s is different. It features a smoldering mutual disdain between Americans now reaching midlife and those born just after them. This time the moralizing aggressors are on the older side.

What separates the collective personalities of Boomers and Thirteeners? First, look at today's mainline media, a hotbed of forty-year-old thinking. Notice how, in Boomers' hands, 1990s America is becoming a somber land obsessed with values, back-to-basics movements, ethical rectitude, political correctness, harsh punishments, and a yearning for the simple life. Life's smallest acts exalt (or diminish) one's personal virtue. A generation weaned on great expectations and gifted in deciphering principle is now determined to reinfuse the entire society with meaning.

Now look again—and notice a countermood popping up in college towns, in big cities, on Fox and cable TV, and in various ethnic side currents. It's a tone of physical frenzy and spiritual numbness, a revelry of pop, a pursuit of high-tech, guiltless fun. It's a carnival culture featuring the tangible bottom lines of life—money, bodies, and brains—and the wordless deals with which one can be traded for another. A generation weaned on minimal expectations and gifted in the game of life is now avoiding meaning in a cumbersome society that, as they see it, offers them little....

Thirteeners

As they shield their eyes with Ray-Ban Wayfarer sunglasses, and their ears with Model TCD-D3 Sony

Walkmen, today's teens and twentysomethings present to Boomer eyes a splintered image of brassy looks and smooth manner, of kids growing up too tough to be cute, of kids more comfortable shopping or playing than working or studying. Ads target them as beasts of pleasure and pain who have trouble understanding words longer than one syllable, sentences longer than three words. Pop music on their Top 40 stations—heavy metal, alternative rock, rap—strikes many a Boomer ear as a rock-and-roll end game of harsh sounds, goin'-nowhere melodies, and clumsy poetry. News clips document a young-adult wasteland of academic nonperformance, political apathy, suicide pacts, date rape trials, wilding, and hate crimes.

Who are they, and what are they up to? On the job, Thirteeners are the reckless bicycle messengers, pizza drivers, yard workers, Wal-Mart shelf-stockers, healthcare trainees, and miscellaneous scavengers, hustlers, and McJobbers in the low-wage/low-benefit service economy. They're the wandering nomads of the temp world, directionless slackers, habitual nonvoters. In school they're a group of staggering diversity—not just in ethnicity but also in attitude, performance, and rewards. After graduation they're the ones with big loans who were supposed to graduate into jobs and move out of the house but didn't, and who seem to get poorer the longer they've been away from home—unlike their parents at that age, who seemed to get richer....

In them lies much of the doubt, distress, and endangered dream of late twentieth-century America. As a group they aren't what older people ever wanted but rather what they themselves know they need to be: pragmatic, quick, sharp-eyed, able to step outside themselves and understand how the world really works. From the Thirteener vantage point, America's greatest need these days is to clear out the underbrush of name-calling and ideology so that simple things can work again....

When they look into the future, they see a much bleaker vision than any of today's older generations ever saw in their own youth. Polls show that Thirteeners believe it will be much harder for them to get ahead than it was for their parents—and that they are overwhelmingly pessimistic about the long-term fate of their generation and nation. They sense that they're the clean-up crew, that their role in history will be sacrificial—that whatever comeuppance America has to face, they'll bear more than their share of the burden. It's a new twist, and not a happy one, on the American Dream.

Trace the life cycle to date of Americans born in 1961. They were among the first babies people took pills not to have. During the 1967 Summer of Love they were the kindergartners who paid the price for America's new divorce epidemic. In 1970 they were fourth-graders trying to learn arithmetic amid the chaos of open classrooms and New Math curricula. In 1973 they were the bell-bottomed sixth-graders who got their first real-life civics lesson watching the Watergate hearings on TV. Through the late 1970s they were the teenage mall-hoppers who spawned the Valley Girls and other flagrantly non-Boomer youth trends. In 1979 they were the graduating seniors of Carter-era malaise who registered record-low SAT scores and record-high crime and drug-abuse rates.

In 1980 they cast their first votes, mostly for Reagan, became the high-quality nineteen-year-old enlistees who began surging into the military, and arrived on campus as the smooth, get-it-done freshmen who evidenced a sudden turnaround from the intellectual arrogance and social immaturity of Boomer students. They were the college class of 1983, whose graduation coincided with the ballyhooed *A Nation at Risk* report, which warned that education was beset by “a rising tide of mediocrity.” In 1985 they were the MBA grads who launched the meteoric rise in job applications to Wall Street. And in 1991 they hit age thirty just when turning “thirtysomething” (a big deal for yuppies in the 1980s) became a tired subject—and when the pretentious TV serial with that title was yanked off the air.

Like any generation, Thirteeners grew up with parents who are distributed in roughly equal measure

between the two prior generations (Silent and Boom). But also like any generation, they were decisively influenced by the senior parental cohort. Much as GIs shaped the *Sputnik* 1950s for Boomers, the Silent Generation provided the media producers, community leaders, influential educators, and rising politicians during the R-rated 1970s, the decade that most Thirteeners still regard as their childhood home. And what did Thirteeners absorb from that generation and that era? Mostly they learned to be cynical about adults whom they perceived to be sensitive yet powerless, better at talking about issues than solving problems....

From Boom to Thirteenth, America's children went from a family culture of *My Three Sons* to one of *My Two Dads*. As millions of mothers flocked into the work force, the proportion of preschoolers cared for in their own homes fell by half. For the first time, adults ranked automobiles ahead of children as necessary for "the good life." The cost of raising a child, never very worrisome when Boomers were little, suddenly became a fraught issue. Adults of fertile age doubled their rate of surgical sterilization. The legal-abortion rate grew to the point where one out of every three pregnancies was terminated. Back in 1962 half of all adults agreed that parents in bad marriages should stay together for the sake of the children. By 1980 less than a fifth agreed. America's divorce rate doubled from 1965 to 1975, just as first-born Thirteeners passed through middle childhood....

From the late 1960s until the early 1980s America's pre-adolescents grasped what nurture they could through the most virulently anti-child period in modern American history. Ugly new phrases ("latchkey child," "throwaway child," and later "boomerang child") joined the sad new lexicon of youth. America's priorities lay elsewhere, as millions of kids sank into poverty, schools deteriorated, and a congeries of elected politicians set a new and distinctly child-hostile course of national overconsumption. Then, when Thirteeners were ready to enter the adult labor force, the politicians pushed every policy lever conceivable—tax codes, entitlements, public debt, unfunded liabilities, labor laws, hiring practices—to tilt the economic playing field away from the young and toward the old. The results were predictable....

Welcome, Thirteeners, to contemporary American life: While older age brackets are getting richer, yours is getting poorer. Where earlier twentieth-century generations could comfortably look forward to outpacing Mom and Dad, you probably won't even be able to keep up.... Everywhere they look, Thirteeners see the workplace system rigged against them. As they view it, the families, schools, and training programs that could have prepared them for worthwhile careers have been allowed to rot, but the institutions that safeguard the occupational livelihood of mature workers have been maintained with full vigor....

Like warriors on the eve of battle, Thirteeners face their future with a mixture of bravado and fatalism. Squared off competitively against one another, this melange of scared city kids, suburban slackers, hungry immigrants, desperate grads, and shameless hustlers is collectively coming to realize that America rewards only a select set of winners with its Dream—and that America cares little about its anonymous losers. Sizing up the odds, each Thirteener finds himself or herself essentially alone, to an extent that most elders would have difficulty comprehending. Between his own relative poverty and the affluence he desires, the Thirteener sees no intermediary signposts, no sure, step-by-step path along which society will help him, urge him, congratulate him. Instead, all he sees is an enormous obstacle, with him on one side and everything he wants on the other.

And what's that obstacle? Those damn Boomers.

READING QUESTIONS: 1980s and 1990s Youth (The New Generation Gap)

1. What is the “new generation gap” that the authors mention in the first page of the article? Who is this gap between and what does it look like?
2. Why do the authors take issue with the nickname “Baby Busters” for America’s 13th generation?
3. DEFINE: “Generation X”
4. Take notes below on the section entitled “Thirteeners.” *(Notes should address the following: Who are these Generation Xers? What do they do for a living? What do they see when they look ahead to the future? What are some of the forces shaping their worldviews?)*