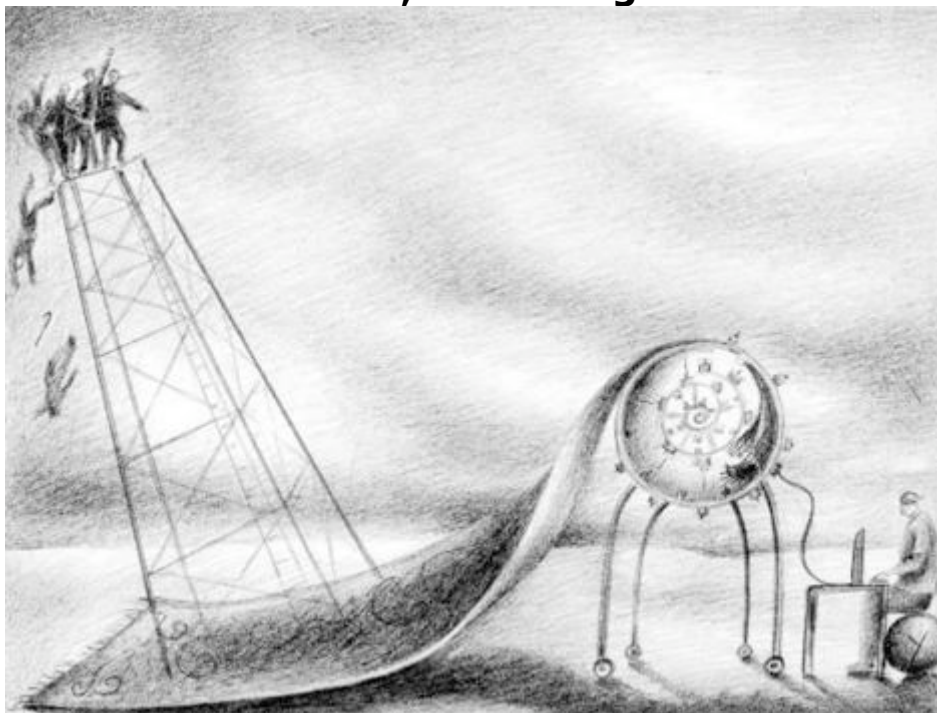


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Gen Ys dish it back, for the right reasons



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The displeasure Generation Y youngsters are causing is more than par for the course - it is refreshing, writes Miranda Devine.

GENERATION Y youngsters seem to be displeasing their elders, which, of course, is what younger generations are supposed to do. But supine, mini-me generation Xs have been aping the baby boomers for so long it is refreshing to see real rebellion arrive.

The gen Ys - an artificial marketing group usually defined as those born between about 1980 and 2000, or those aged between six and 26, though the margins vary a lot - are at last dishing back some attitude.

In return they have been derided by their elders as conservative, materialistic, over-nurtured, ignorant, insular, apolitical and untroubled by ideas.

Sydney newspaper columnists fume about the supposedly slack attitudes of gen Y waiters who don't serve coffee quite as they would like.

And when Saulwick Muller Social Research released a study into gen Y this month, co-author Irving Saulwick was so horrified by the results that he dropped the traditional pollster's impartial tone.

"There's a sense, if you're going to change the world, you think about changing it when you're young. There was not much of that here. Personally, it saddened me," he said.

Last year it was theatre director Jonathan Biggins complaining about a bad review of one of his "progressive" plays in the Sydney University newspaper *Honi Soit*.

"The conservatism of the young poses a greater threat to those still on what is laughingly called the left than John Howard's move into the suburban fringes," he said.

What the interminably hip baby boomers don't get is that their ideas of rebellion and progressiveness are 40 years old. It's time for a new revolution, and the signs from gen Y so far are that the future will be in good hands.

Demographers and marketers have defined them as the most globally aware, rational, technologically savvy generation yet.

They have been described as the "overachieving, overscheduled" generation. But they were lucky to be born in a period when children were back in fashion for the first time in a couple of generations.

They are cherished, not only by their doting parents but by the low-fertility nations into which they were born. Mercenary politicians such as Peter Costello recognise them as the taxpayers who will bear the burden of supporting their elders.

Having been raised to have strong opinions, gen Ys have become the most influential consumers. A study released this month at an American National Retail Federation conference, says 13- to 21-year-olds influence 81 per cent of their families' clothing buys and 52 per cent of car choices.

Gen Ys have also discovered ways to keep at least some of their culture to themselves. Inventive with slang, they coined terms such as "emo" - meaning something like an emotionally dysfunctional, melancholy person, though it defies precise translation. Perhaps only a gen Y can really understand what an emo is.

They download high-pitched ringtones, audible only to people under 30, for their phones. In New York, the generation gap manifested itself in a clothing ad on the side of a bus in 2004. Featuring a scantily clad female, the ad for Akademiks said: "Read Books, Get Brain."

It was banned once a grown-up realised "Get Brain" was gen Y code for get oral sex. Gen Ys have been branded conservative but, as the *South Park* and *Simpsons* generation, they are sceptical about any ideological extremism and are ready to poke fun at the holy cows of political correctness.

The Saulwick-Muller study of 16- to 24-year-olds described their "conventional" ambitions - marriage, children, car and house. The authors, Saulwick and Denis Muller, complained gen Ys aren't aware of the "old certainties ... created by arbitrated wages, protected industries and regulated markets" and have "not a trace of fear about what might lie ahead". It doesn't occur to them that maybe young people have no reason to fear a world without such things.

Of a Sydney group they wrote: "While they weren't ebullient about the future, they had a quiet, perhaps uninformed confidence that it would look after them or that they would have

enough determination to survive."

Well, good for them. It's better than sitting around being an emo, and they are probably more informed than the authors know, being members of the most streetwise, internet-savvy generation.

Saulwick and Muller seem like fuddy duddies locked into a particular world view while accusing gen Ys of being ignorant, conventional and inward looking. Their special beef with the youngsters is they are not idealistic. But gen Ys are just idealistic about different things. Being idealistic about creating a stable home and family is not nothing.

Many gen Ys are products of broken families and may want to create the stable family life their parents couldn't give them. Not only do they believe in marriage, they are less likely to drink and take illegal drugs. They are more willing to volunteer to help others than any other generation.

They have been called a generation of "institution builders" or the "civic minded heroes", according to US authors William Strauss and Neil Howe in *Millennials Rising*.

They are poised to replenish the moral capital that has been squandered by previous generations, ready to reject the moral relativism that Pope John Paul II said threatened humanity's "great democratic project".

The last pope saw new hope in this generation, and the millions of young people who flocked to the Vatican when he died was a sign of that. Yippee for generation Y. Maybe at last we have a generation gap.

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