

An Intro to Generation X

What's in a Name?

Gen X: “It’s like, we don’t even have a name. Yours—‘Baby Boomers’—is so big we fall in its shadow.” Howe 7

“Lost generation” (echoing those who came of age in the 20s), “Baby-bust” (defining in terms of what they followed), “13er” (13th generation of Americans), “Generation X” (X for unknown, coined by Douglas Coupland), “the Free Generation” (Holtz—without boundaries, spare, superfluous, uninhibited, drifting, rootlessness). (Holtz 3-4)

Where does it start?

Baby boom was said to be 1946-1964 — but this “approach crams people into a generation based on the fertility traits of their parents, not on the behavior of the people themselves” Howe 12

Sharp difference of those born 1961-1964 from Boomers.

“Trace the life cycle to date of the babes of ’61. When they were born, they were the first babies people took pills not to have. When the 1967 Summer of Love marked the start of America’s divorce epidemic, they were the wee kindergartners armed with latchkeys for re-entering empty homes after school. In 1974, they were the bell-bottomed seventh-graders who got their first real-life civics lesson watching Nixon resign on TV. Through the late 1970s, they were the teenage mall-hoppers who spawned the ‘Valley Girls’ and other flagrantly non-Boom 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, marched off as the high-quality 19-year-old enlistees who began surging into the military, and arrived on campus as smooth, get-it-done collegians who marked a sudden turnaround from the intellectual arrogance and social immaturity of Boomer students. In 1985, they were the MBA grads who propelled the meteoric rise in job applications to Wall Street. In 1991, they hit age 30 exactly when ABC pulled the plug on *thirtysomething*—and when young-adult viewers began flocking to Fox-TV.” Howe 13

Defining moments: 1960—the introduction of the pill and 1980—Election of Reagan, a return toward tradition and away from experiment. Holtz 2

Atari-wave — born in the 60s. “lie at the more abandoned, damaged, criticized, alienated end of their generation. ... They are also the 13ers most impeded, and angered, by Boomers.” Howe 14

Nintendo-wave — born in the 70s. “those Super Mario III and Tetris joystickers — represents the true ‘baby bust’: Since World War II, 1975 marks America’s record-low birth year.” They “entered school when adults were beginning to reinvent some of the old societal shields that once protected the world of toddlers. As precursors of the wanted-baby Millennials, Nintendo-wavers are aware that adult treatment of children is improving, if mostly to the benefit of kids just a bit younger than they are.” Howe 14

A Generation with no Respect

Denounced as slackers, shallow, dummies — especially by Boomers, who saw their generation as the apex of history Howe 17, 21

“The doofus generation” “The tuned-out generation” “a generation of animals” “the numb generation” “the blank generation” “a generation without a soul” “the unromantic generation” “generation of self-centered know-nothings,” malcontents, underachievers, complainers. Holtz 1, 5

Letters to the editor in *America*, after article by Tom Beaudoin.

Please, Mr. Beaudoin, stop crying in your proverbial soup. Your solipsistic hymn to your generation’s alleged ‘suffering’ and ‘wrestling with ambiguity’ strikes me as hollow. ... You have truly hit the mark when you describe your generation’s ‘sins’ as ‘a certain self-absorption.’

There are times when young people need ... to be taught that their concerns and interests are not always as profound as they think. It is part of growing up.

Every civilized person of the past would easily see modern (or postmodern) pop culture for what it truly is—decadent, juvenile and brattish, the culture of the spoiled child who won’t grow up. ... The daily lives of most self-identified Gen-X Catholics are chock-full of self-obsession, self-gratification, and—like the piercing scream of a baby who has lost its pacifier—a hankering after experience that they cannot even begin to comprehend the moral demand upon them to open themselves up to, and learn to sacrifice for, the truth. It’s time to stop the infantile demand that the church adjust its teachings to cater to a late 20th-century and doomed lifestyle.

The Boomers We Are Not!

“The ‘60s for me are like one of those stories where nobody laughs, and you say, ‘I guess you had to be there.’” Howe 44

Vietnam: “A war he can’t forget in a time I can’t remember” (song by Poison, “Something to Believe In.” Howe 51

“Constantly stepping into post-Boom wastelands and getting bashed for it, 13ers see Boomers as a generation that was once given everything—from a *Happy Days* present to a Tomorrowland future—and then threw it all away. Whatever the phase of life, childhood to college to young adulthood, 13ers accuse Boomers of having used up its moral capital, squandered all its elder goodwill, and told the last exiting Boomer to turn off the lights on the way out.” Howe 45-46

“Many a 13er would be delighted never to read another commemorative article about Woodstock, Kent State, or the Free Speech Movement. Or to suffer through what Coupland calls ‘legislated nostalgia,’ this celebration of supposedly great events in the life cycle of people they don’t especially like.” Howe 47

“They fume when they hear Boomers taking credit for things Boomers didn’t do (civil rights, rock’n’roll, stopping the Vietnam War) and for supposedly having been so much more creative, idealistic, morally conscious, and generally *better* than 13ers.” Howe 47

“The 13er image of the proto-Boomer is an ugly mosaic built out of the worst figments of each Boomer phase of life. The klutzy naivete of vintage Mouseketeer pre-teens blends into the flaky radicalism of Woodstock hippies, into the dissolute narcissism of Travolta disco dancers, into the Sharper Image consumerism of brie-and-chablis yuppies, into the smug pomposity of today’s politically correct neopuritans. Glomming this into one life cycle pastiche, 13ers see Boomers as the most colossal hypocrites in the million-year history of *Homo sapiens*.” Howe 48

A Conservative Backlash?

Stereotype of generation: Liberal parents with conservative kids — *Family Ties* — reverse of *All in the Family*. Howe 161

1980, split between freshmen and seniors, with 50% more freshmen than seniors agreeing, “my country right or wrong.” “These USA!-chanting kids struck tenured ‘60s-style radicals as precisely what they thought they’d never see: a reactive, revanchist generation. A decade earlier, college kids wore flowers in their hair and were proudly ‘greening’ America. Now they dressed in black and were busy tracking down jobs.” Howe 50

Boomers as college students fought for free speech — as professors, controlled speech. Holtz 137

Education: “increasingly, what one sees is ... a more traditionalist student body resisting the exhortations of a markedly more radical faculty.” Howe 72

“Yes, history does play tricks. A generation that came of age yearning to take everything out of the closet never dreamed it would someday raise a generation that wouldn’t mind putting a few things back in. A generation of parents suffering from claustrophobia never imagined that its own children would someday suffer from agoraphobia—a fear of openness.” Howe 55

A Look Back at Formative Factors

The Children No One Wanted

The most aborted generation in history: through the 1970s, one fetus in three was aborted. Howe 56

Belief that population control should be enforced. Fear of population growth; popularity of Malthus (1798) and Paul Ehrlich (1968), latter founded “Zero Population Growth, Inc.” (membership was 700,000 by 1980s). 1971 survey said 2/3 of US agreed population a problem. Babies were seen as “like headaches, things you take pills not to have.” 1972 Nixon Commission on “Population Growth and the American Future” spoke alarmingly, and urged liberalization of abortion laws. But ironically, the birth rate had been dropping drastically since 1960. Holtz 9-20.

Anti-child sentiment carried over in 60s and 70s from pill, to Rosemary’s Baby, to Exorcist, to Omen. Kids portrayed as hucksters (paper Moon), prostitutes (Taxi Driver), spoiled brats (Willie Wonka). Kids movies ceased being made — G rated films fell from 41% to 13%. Disney laid off cartoonists. Kids heard they weren’t wanted and not liked by adults. 13ers “the first to have

grown up with a 'mature' medium that bombarded children with the harsh realities and dark desires of adult life." Howe 63-64.

In 70s and early 80s, 70-90% of new apartment complexes in Dallas, Houston, and Denver refused to accept children. Holtz 10.

Attitudes toward parenting: Ann Landers survey 1975: if you had to do it over again, would you have children? 70% said no. 1970 survey showed that 2/3 of parents felt "parents should be free to live their own lives even if it means spending less time with their children." 50% agreed "parents should not sacrifice in order to give their children the best." *Kramer vs. Kramer* — mother had to find herself, and do things for herself, "Being your mommy was one thing but there are other things..." Feminists were vocal in their hostility to children: Shulamith Firestone said, "Down with childhood!" Betty Friedan, motherhood a "comfortable concentration camp" for women. Children's author Judy Blume, "I hate the idea that you should always protect children. They live in the same world we do." Holtz 20-21.

Divorce and Its Consequences

40% of Gen X are children of divorce (as of 1995). 1961 375,000 divorces — by 1975, it was 1,000,000 a year. Number of unwed mothers doubled. Parents often stopped parenting in wake, moving, changing schools, mother working, latch-key children or baby-sitters — leaving children alone to deal with their emotions. Absence of father. Holtz 26-33.

With mothers working and fathers spending little time with kids, kids spent more time alone or with peers. Holtz 52-53.

Spent more time with TV than with parents. Latchkey phenomenon led to addition to popular culture — how many can sing TV theme songs? Beaudoin 5

Drug use — marijuana use peaked in 1979, at 50% of the 12th grade population — steady decline thereafter. Rate of sex increased, shooting up after 1983. Rate of abortions highest for teenagers. In 1979, 1.2 abortions for every live birth to a teenage mother. Suicide rates climbed, peaking in early 80s. Holtz 67-77.

Why Johnny Can't Read

Educational experimentation, decline of core curriculum, new math, grammar and phonics downplayed, open education, desire to "feel good" — test scores plummeted, and students blamed for being "dumb." Howe 72-75

A teacher said: "Traditional became synonymous with bad and innovative synonymous with good. So the way we used to do it was wrong and the new way was at least worth trying." Holtz 106

John Holt, 1964 book *How Children Fail*: "schools should be a place where children learn what they most want to know, instead of what we think they ought to know." Holtz 106

Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society* 1970: "teachers, more often than not, obstruct such learning of subject matters as goes on in school... Children learn most of what teachers pretend to teach them from peer groups, from comics, from chance observations, and above all from mere participation in the ritual of school." "School leads many to a kind of spiritual suicide." Holtz 107

Theorists attacked the “oppressiveness” and “conformity” of school. Called for “encouraging spontaneity, compassion, sensitivity, and self-expression, rather than competition for grades and test scores.” “Schools without walls,” “Free” and “open.” “The idea was no longer to ‘educate’ the child in the traditional sense of filling him up with knowledge, but to free him from his dependence on teachers, schools, and books.” Holtz 110-111

Self-esteem more important than grades, and grade inflation as a result — but SAT scores plummeted. Holtz 112

1982 report by James Coleman showed however that students in private schools with strict requirements showed higher self-esteem than the public school students. Holtz 115

Students, on the other hand, wanted to learn. Those wanting more stress on academics grew 50% from 1972-1980. 66% of black children said school wasn’t challenging enough. Student survey in 1982 showed that students thought a good teacher was one that knew and taught their subject well, not one who made them feel good. Holtz 117-118.

Salaries for teachers declined—while number of administrators and their salaries increased. Fewer people saw education as a profession worth going into, and parents who said they’d want their children to become teachers dropped from 75% to 46% from 1969-1982. Greatest stress for teachers in 1989? Lack of parental support and interest. Half of teachers changed careers. Holtz 107-108.

Growing Up in a Time of Insecurity

Fear of nuclear war: 1983 TV film, *The Day After*, leading George Schultz to appear on TV afterward. 1986 Challenger explosion, with kids watching at school AIDS, terrorism, Mt. St. Helens. Beaudoin 9-10.

Impact of September 11?

How to Describe Us? (Grouped according to characteristics identified by *Center for Ministry Development*, so not every item has examples)

1. Pragmatism

Pragmatic, able to work within institutions and in diverse world, street smart and tech-smart, negotiation skills, how to get things done, and how to cope with adults. Howe 79-81

Not grand global fixes, but local, pragmatic change. Xers “refuse to trust anything they can’t see and feel with their own eyes and hands.” Higher volunteer rate. Howe 173, 182.

Example: Goals of College Freshmen

		1970	1989
To be very well off financially	39%	75%	
Develop a meaningful philosophy of life	80%	41%	
Degrees as percentage of all		1968	1984
Business		13%	24%

Education

21% 10%

Entered college more pragmatic, pre-professional, politically conservative. Shift to right on topics like drugs, death penalty, and rights of criminals. Drop in interest in issues such as environment. Holtz 128

2. Fear of Commitment (Relationship Insecurity)

Identity issues

“As the children of distracted adults, 13ers learned young to be survivors, to confront problems on their own, to sort themselves out into winners and losers.” But they did this before having a deeply-rooted sense of identity and self worth. They have a “patchwork self,” having been “denied the time needed to put together a workable theory of self.” Howe 86

When things go wrong: blame self. “Thirteeners in pain have never quite learned how to weep, how to cry out for help and get heard.” Don’t know where to get help. Howe 89

“All living is an interchange of masks” Beaudoin 104

Sense of suffering, especially related to family issues Beaudoin 104

“A meltdown of *meaning*—the primary source of Xer suffering” Beaudoin 115

“Our most fundamental question is ‘Will you be there for me?’ We ask this of our selves, bodies, parents, friends, partners, society, religions, leaders, nation, and even God. The frailty that we perceive threatening all of these relationships continually provokes us to ask this question.” Beaudoin 140

Piercing and tattooing as related to this — something that will always be with us, no matter what we do. Beaudoin 141

Marriage & Cohabitation (from NCCB Study)

From 1965-1974, 11% of couples cohabited. Today, over 50% of all first marriages are preceded by cohabitation. 60-80% of the couples coming to be married are cohabiting (50% among Catholics).

Fewer people choosing to marry; cohabitation as permanent or temporary alternative. Percent of couples marrying declined 25% from 1975-1995.

High school dropouts twice as likely as college graduates to cohabit. But 40% of college grads will cohabit at some point — the higher the education, the more likely that the partners will go on to marry.

Children of divorce, especially women, more likely to cohabit than those from stable families.

Reasons vary widely ...

- ◆ Growing secularization and individualization
- ◆ Fear of or disbelief in long-term commitments
- ◆ Sexuality considered apart from marriage (85% of unmarried youth sexually active by age 20).
- ◆ “Trial marriage” or “Starter Marriage”
- ◆ Economic security
- ◆ Escape from home
- ◆ Rejection of marriage.

When they marry, they have a 50% higher divorce rate than non-cohabitators in the US (in Europe, 80%). If they had been married or cohabited before, even higher. They break up in the earlier years of marriage—if the marriage remains intact seven years, they have the same divorce rate as non-cohabitators.

Cohabitators are demonstrated to have inappropriately high expectations of marriage that can lead them to be disillusioned with the ordinary problems or challenges of marriage.

Experience of cohabitations changes attitudes about commitment and permanence and makes couples more open to divorce.

Have more conflict over money, and higher rates of domestic violence, less effective at conflict resolution, and use sex as a controlling factor.

3. Media Sophistication (and problems!)

4. Different Definitions of Family

At least 25% of those born in the 60s had an abortion. Howe 158

“Having grown up in a culture that celebrated sex more than children, 13er moms and dads are helping America rediscover that sex is also about having children.” Howe 160

Births to unwed mothers increased from 11% in 1970 to 28% in 1990. Holtz 179

Those who give birth unmarried more determined to raise on their own. Howe 158

Reverence for children again, and desire for stable marriages, once they get married. Don't want their kids to go through what they went through. Holtz 183-185.

“Sometimes We Get Sick of Sex” (Howe 146)

5. Economic Insecurity

Fear of economic future. Desire for things, money, success, good job. Howe 115

“McJobs.” Howe 109

6. Consumerism

7. Cultural Diversity

More accepting of diversity; least racist of living generations; know more about the languages customs and history of racial and ethnic groups of their own. Howe 137

Value independence, yet radical faculty want to force political correctness. Things placed in racial terms by older generations, or civil rights invoked for trivial causes. Howe 141-3.

“White 13ers know what it is to come of age feeling like guinea pigs in some vast and unguided social experiment—to hear elders demand that they relive the fears and wrongs of an era they never experienced—and to suffer the *noblesse oblige* of affluent older professionals who want to expiate adult guilt by requesting sacrifices from the young (in employment and education) that those elders never bore when young.” Howe 143

13ers tired of being lectured on racial issues, and think they handle it better than their parents. Howe 144

“Boomers discovered their souls in university towns, pasturelands, and wilderness communes. For 13ers, the hot youth spots are teeming immigrant cities—places with style and frenzy, offering the most jobs and the best fun.” Howe 184

Interracial marriage rate up 300% since 1970. Holtz 181

8. Cynicism

9. Hunger for Spirituality

Tom Beaudoin. *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998.

Geoffrey T. Holtz. *Welcome to the Jungle: The Why Behind “Generation X.”* New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1995.

Neil Howe and Bill Strauss. *13th Gen: Abort, Retry, Ignore, Fail?* New York: Random House, Vintage Books, 1993.

National Conference of Catholic Bishops. *Marriage Preparation and Cohabiting Couples: An Information Report on New Realities and Pastoral Practices*. Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1999. <http://www.usccb.org/laity/marriage/cohabiting.htm>

See also:

National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Sons and Daughters of the Light: A Pastoral Plan for Ministry with Young Adults*. Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1996. <http://www.usccb.org/laity/ygadult/sandd.htm> (on-line in English and Spanish; available in Korean and Vietnamese).