

Viewpoints

The Difference in Decades Is Overrated

By GORDON MEHLER

WE AMERICANS prefer our cultural history sliced and served in decades, each with its own distinctive flavor. The Nineties were gay, the Twenties were roaring, the Fifties were boring, and the Eighties — well, it's still too early to tell.

The Sixties and Seventies were defined, in large measure, by the doings of young people. The flood of commentary contrasting the "activism" of the former with the "narcissism" of the latter is usually directed at American youth. The sheer number of young people produced by the postwar baby boom partially accounts for this historical slant, but, in a sense, the culture of every decade carries a youthful imprint.

The conditions under which we become adults exercise a sizable influence on the rest of our lives. Schooling, marriage, career options — much depends on whether we mature in a climate of war or peace, conformity or change. As a result, each of us is a bit sentimental about the first decade of adulthood. My father raves about the Thirties with an enthusiasm normally reserved for my mother's cooking; the achievements of subsequent decades just don't measure up.

It is, therefore, not surprising that those who came of age in the Sixties should be similarly condescending toward my generation, which began driving and voting in the Seventies. We have been de-

nounced as creatures of the "Me Decade," bland, cynical, and self-absorbed, concerned primarily with physical and mental comfort and withdrawn from politics and public affairs. The Sixties, by contrast, were alive. Energy and idealism were everywhere, frothing and spurting like a shook-up Pepsi.

But at times the Sixties strikes me as a decade with a chip on its shoulder. I meet former flower children and college radicals who, though now quite conventional, still congratulate themselves for the ways in which young people shaped the events of their day. They seem to be saying: "We marched for civil rights, fought against the war, produced music with a social message, and got fired up about saving the environment. What has your decade done?"

THIS rendition of history is oversimplified. Stock descriptions of the Sixties and Seventies say more about how the media portrayed those decades than about what actually happened. Those who involve themselves in public affairs and make constructive contributions are always a small minority.

Yet the opinion-makers persist in labeling the youth of the Seventies and Eighties "narcissistic" when there may be as many public-spirited people in this group as there were in the Sixties. Just because the current crop of youthful idealists are generally less visible, and their strategies less sweeping, than those of their Sixties compatriots

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does not mean that good causes are not being furthered.

The end of the Vietnam War and our ailing economy are usually cited to explain the subdued outlook of young people today, but there are other reasons too. Certain ideals and life-styles thought to be exciting and revolutionary 15 years ago are now blase, and youth movements never have much staying power anyway because youth is, by definition, a transitory class.

Sixties militants who once admonished their peers not to trust anyone over 30 are today past the mark themselves and, supposedly, not to be trusted.

Some, in fact, have tied the alleged passivity and selfishness of post-Sixties youth to the aging of the baby-boom generation. Because of their numerical superiority, the baby boomers have continued to command a disproportionate chunk of national attention.

I am not applauding complacency, but only pointing out that the youth of the past two decades have been made to look too dissimilar. To those who eye the Sixties nostalgically as a time when young people were much less self-indulgent than today, I say consider the street-theater antics of the Weathermen.

Consider the drug culture's obsession with its own feelings. Consider the dress and life-style of the hippies intent on making a statement about being young in America.

The zeal with which we respond to various campaigns depends on many things, but high on the list is the extent to which we are privately affected. Young men of the Sixties who rallied against the war had a big stake in it: their lives. To them Vietnam was a lot more than a poor foreign-policy decision.

Selfless devotion to the welfare of others is a quality worthy of the highest praise, but it is nonsense to presume that Seventies and Eighties youth lack altruistic impulses or that Sixties youth possessed them

in abundance. If the social ferment of the Sixties expressed civic concern, in response to the events of the time, it also expressed the same desire for personal fulfillment and self preservation for which the Seventies generation has been disparaged.

That is why I believe we would do well to stop characterizing decades. Decading — the practice of dividing history into 10-year periods — is merely an attempt to package time and make it stand out. Like the calendar and the hourglass, however, the decade, too, has its limitations. I suggest the critics of American youth adopt a broader perspective. After all, astronomers traffic in light-years, and Lincoln liked the score.

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