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What is your generation paying for?



From the misfortune of finding yourself on the wrong side of a war via exposure to terrorism, helplessly submitted to the the stupidity of our leaders, all generations will be studded at some point with the trials of victimisation, prejudice, bad timing and rotten old bad luck.

A brief tour of convenient catch phrases is a way of viewing a rough guide to the generations of the 20th to early 21st centuries, how they generally fared and how they emerged from the pressures and challenges they faced.

I have no idea who coined the various denotations for the rather randomly classifications of the various generations. 1946 heralded the “Baby Boomer” explosion: the post-war rise in birth rates following the horrors of World War II and a new hope for humanity where the recent horrors would not be repeated.

Alas, it took little time for the the nuclear threat which led to a nerve wracking, fraught few decades which haunted the second half of the 20th century.

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But there was notable progress in the 50's: University education, previously more of a preserve of the wealthy and socially superior, began to exploit the possibilities of tertiary education.

New institutions sprang forth throughout the UK: no longer were the hallowed halls of Gloriana Oxbridge the pure reserve of the lower class and less wealthy; now any successful school candidate could gain access to tertiary education be it in a modern red brick or longer standing academic institution,

work as hard as they could, and become the professional they chose to be. They were as important part of society as their class superiors.

And then emerged Generation X. They burst on the scene in the mid-1960's; were spared the impending apocalypse of the threat of the Cuban Missile Crisis and savoured the taste of the liberating, swinging 60's.

The straightjackets of 1950's society petered out; some scraped the tail end of the Swinging Sixties; most fell into the cauldron of Thatcher revolution: arguably the UK's most dramatically economically reforming decade of the 20th century.

Sweeping behind her the gridlock of Trade Union rule in the 1970's UK, Thatcher sought to replace the UK's industrial bases with an under regulated strongly pro-services sector, there was no need for the odd “waste of time” degrees; (although University fees were free, only 7% of University-aged students chose to complete an Honours degree - you just hit the City of London and “made lots of money”.

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The jury is still out on the consequences of Thatcherism - hell, she even threw a war into the mix. Love her or loathe her it is still questionable how history will assess that whirlwind decade.

She was the “Greed is Good” generation - obsessed with low inflation to boost the economy with the consequences of unprecedented unemployment levels - they reached 10% and you wondered whether she cared whether some people would ever get a job in their lives.

Some will say it was fun while it lasted. Like most high-end social controversies, the 80's

ethos inspired memorable innovative contemporary music, biting political satire and, for the hapless female population predominantly, atrociously awful fashion.

It couldn't last and it didn't. The turn of the millennium beckoned; the Berlin Wall was dismantled (mainly by the youth of the New Millennials born between the early 80's and mid-1990's).

Suddenly, I would argue that this was the critical point in the for the first time in the UK's educational history.

Demand for a University degree went meteoric: suddenly a degree was not only available to everyone - but a sine qua non.

Screeds have been written on this issue - howls of accusations of "dumbing down" (diluting University entrance qualifications, reducing the quality and value of degrees, rendering many of them useless.

Should we associate this phenomenon with the unavoidable and notorious British class obsession linked to the possession of a University degree?

Arguably worse, the use of family contacts to win an advantaged University place rather than earned on proven results is too difficult to prove.

I believe there is a neologism known as "nepobabies", but this might not apply to people's academic records.

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So how are the Generation Z (born 1997-2012) faring? Possibly not so well. Nobody predicted a global pandemic and a lengthy lockdown

interfering with their education and ability to leave home for the first time.

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To make things worse, it has been announced that there will be an officially "harsh" post-Covid markdown of the exam papers of this year A level students which will affect 60,000 aspiring University applicants.

The hardest time for any of the 20th Century generations? Will we find an acceptable approach to regulating AI to assuage this?

Personally, I regret not having bought shares in Zoom. But I remain optimistic about progress and the insuppressible human spirit.

Every generation has its own cross to bear. You decide on your own approach.