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Generation OMG

By [KATE ZERNIKE](#)

IN 1951, [Time](#) magazine set out to paint a portrait of the nation's youth, those born into [the Great Depression](#). It doomed them as the Silent Generation, and a generally drab lot: cautious and resigned, uninterested in striking out in new directions or shaping the great issues of the day — the outwardly efficient types whose inner agonies the novel "Revolutionary Road" would dissect a decade later.

"Youth's ambitions have shrunk," the magazine declared. "Few youngsters today want to mine diamonds in South Africa, ranch in Paraguay, climb Mount Everest, find a cure for cancer, sail around the world or build an industrial empire. Some would like to own a small, independent business, but most want a good job with a big firm, and with it, a kind of suburban idyll." The young soldier "lacks flame," students were "docile notetakers." And the young writer's flair "sometimes turns out to be nothing more than a byproduct of his neuroses." (This even before [Philip Roth](#), born 1933, had published a novel.)

"The best thing that can be said for American youth, in or out of uniform, is that it has learned that it must try to make the best of a bad and difficult job, whether that job is life, war, or both," Time concluded. "The generation which has been called the oldest young generation in the world has achieved a certain maturity."

Today we are in a recession the depth and duration of which are unknown; Friday's job loss figures were just the latest suggestion that it could well be prolonged and profound rather than shorter and shallower.

So what of the youth shaped by what some are already calling the Great Recession? Will a publication looking back from 2030 damn them with such faint praise? Will they marry younger, be satisfied with stable but less exciting jobs? Will their children mock them for reusing tea bags and counting pennies as if this paycheck were the last? At the very least, they will reckon with tremendous instability, just as their Depression forebears did.

"The '30s challenged the whole idea of the American dream, the idea of open economic possibilities," said Morris Dickstein, an English professor at the Graduate Center of the [City University of New York](#), whose cultural history of the Depression will be published in September. "The version you get of that today is the loss of confidence on the part of both parent and children that life in the next generation will inevitably be better."

How today's young will be affected 10, 20 or 40 years on will depend on many things — the children of the Depression were shaped as much by the war that followed. The recession generation will include those born into it, at the youngest end, and those emerging out of college and high school into a jobless marketplace, at the oldest. If history is any guide, what will matter most is where they are on the continuum.

“There is no simple cause-and-effect relationship in how economic adversity pushed a generation into any one kind of behavior,” said Neil Howe, who with his longtime co-author, William Strauss, is credited with naming today’s 20-somethings the millennials. “The impact depends on the context and the mood of the time and how children understand the spirit of the times.”

In an afterword for the 25th anniversary edition of his 1974 book, “Children of the Great Depression,” Glen H. Elder Jr., a sociologist at the [University of North Carolina](#), noted differences even between two cohorts of children born relatively close together: one in Oakland, Calif., in the early 1920s (comparable to today’s 9-year-olds) and those in nearby Berkeley at the other end of that decade (today’s toddlers).

In long-term studies, the younger group suffered the bigger psychic scars. For them, the worst disruption of the Depression coincided with the critical years of development when they most needed their parents. With incomes dropping, parents fought more and drank more, leaving children bewildered and often alone. Years later, the group looked back on their childhood as a period of unpredictability, and their high school years as a time they lacked direction or a sense of confidence. As one small-business man put it, “my entire adolescence was a period of painful and frustrating disorientation.”

The older children were better able to understand the hardships, and to get outside the household to help the family earn. They went off to World War II and benefited from the structure of the military, then returned to the booming economy and the G. I. Bill. Ultimately, Professor Elder said in an interview, “they came out with an ability to know how to survive and make do and solve problems.”

Today, the most immediately affected may be the oldest members of Generation Recession — those in high school and college.

Research shows that the wages of those graduating into the recession of the 1980s were held back for more than a decade. And weak stock markets tend to make the young more risk averse about investing into the next decade.

Those who study these young adults predict that they are about to get closer to their parents, at least physically, as more move home to save money. And their higher-education experience may be more a patchwork as they move between two- and four-year colleges as a way to save money getting degrees.

Surveys have shown young people becoming more civic-minded in the last four years, and those who study them suggest this will increase, if only because the jobs will be in creating the public institutions and infrastructure of a new economic order.

And with the assumptions of the past decade now popped, the older among the recession youth might feel bolder striking out in more creative directions.

Typically, applications to medical and law schools go up in a downturn, as young people look for safe haven. Applications to the [Peace Corps](#) and [Teach for America](#), meanwhile, are up, as are those to some divinity schools and public policy programs.

Professor Dickstein notes that the 1930s, too, were freeing for a particular kind of young adult. There was no art market to speak of, so artists felt less constrained by commercial expectations. The thinkers who would go

on to be the public intellectuals of their day, people like Irving Howe and [Alfred Kazin](#), did not seek the traditional path of a doctorate because they knew there were no academic jobs (though in some cases, this was as much because they were Jewish as because of the economy).

Robbie Blinkoff, an anthropologist who runs a marketing consulting firm in Baltimore, hears both the anxiety and the potential in a class he teaches at Goucher College. One senior said he was applying to be a teacher — a profession he had never considered when there were so many more lucrative lines of work. The economic contraction, he told Mr. Blinkoff, “can give people more room to be creative.”

Neil Howe, who with Mr. Strauss considered how different cohorts react to economic setbacks in their book “Generations,” said history offered two models: the Depression, and the 1970s. Children born in the ’30s were raised in a cocoon. “The whole message was, we’re going to protect you,” Mr. Howe said. “We’re going to make these sacrifices for you and create a better world for you.”

The lesson, he said, “was to trust the system, keep your nose clean, study hard, be a technocrat.” That created the conformist, risk-averse generation that Time described. In job interviews, the first thing Depression babies asked potential employers about was the pension plan. As a generation, he said, they produced more than a dozen White House chiefs of staff, but not a single president.

Children in the stagflated 1970s, meanwhile, grew up in the too-much-information age of [Judy Blume](#). As Mr. Howe quotes one: “Our parents gave us answers to questions we never asked.” The system that produced Watergate had failed everyone, the lesson was to be a free agent, to take risks. Even today, Mr. Howe said, lottery officials report that those Gen Xers are their biggest customers.

But when it comes to raising their children, the pendulum has swung. Today’s youngest children — the recession babies — are being raised in the same kind of protective bubble as the Depression babies. (When Mr. Howe’s Web site did a contest to name this next generation a few years ago, the winner was “the homelanders,” as in security). They stroll in sidewalk versions of sport utility vehicles, learn to swim in U.V. protective full-body suits.

So while today’s high school and college students will be the ones creating the new public agencies and Internet infrastructures, Mr. Howe predicts, those who follow “will come of age wanting to participate in a system they trust and take for granted” — the next Silent Generation.

Regardless of their age, members of the recession generation will most likely be shaped by a return to Things That Matter, a re-definition of values.

The Depression saw a return to traditional values that had broken down in the go-go 20s, said Robert S. McElvaine, a professor at Millsaps College who has written several histories of the period. The difference now, Professor McElvaine said, is that the buy-it-on-credit, how-many-colors-can-I-get-it-in consumer culture runs far deeper, including in the young.

“Our definition of cutting back is not nearly what it was for people in the ’30s,” he said. “Younger people have been targeted at least since the baby-boom generation was young in the 1950s to get them into the whole consumption-oriented way of life. It may take a little longer because we’re so infinitely removed from those waste not, want not values — we’ve never really practiced them.”

But let's not doom anyone quite yet. In the studies of the Berkeley and Oakland Depression youths, Professor Elder notes that by middle age, the groups looked more similar. Both, as stereotypes have it, did marry earlier, value family life, pick jobs for security more than potential for greater reward. The less successful among them felt a lack of personal meaning. But as a whole, they turned out remarkably resilient.

As the director of the Berkeley study wrote, looking back in the '70s, "We have learned that no one becomes mature without living through the pains and confusions of maturing experiences."

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