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SUMMER OF LOVE: How they changed the world

The decades in since 1967 have seen advances in racial and social equality

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There was a sense of heady optimism during the Summer of Love that the flower-power generation could change the world.

But as many drifted into middle age, they must have wondered about past ideals: Saddled with mortgages, they spawned kids who watched too much TV, played too many video games and suffered from more obesity problems than any previous generation.

The baby boomers also bought more pre-packaged food, riddled with chemical additives, than ever before in history. Food packaged in non-biodegradable containers, brought home in plastic bags.

While many were first stirred to environmental activism after reading Rachel Carson's seminal 1962 book, Silent Spring, it took years before the effects of global warming became too serious to ignore, now serving as a wake-up call to the boomer generation after years of rampant consumerism.

So, 40 years later, did the boomers change the world?

In some ways they did, says University of Victoria historian Dominique Clément, who's written a new research paper titled An Anachronism Failing to Function Properly: How the Baby Boom Generation Transformed Social Movements in Canada.

Sixties youth were the front-runners of a historical time when political activism and radical ideas were pronounced, his paper says, and while the generation was not revolutionary, it had a revolutionary impact.

The boomers fought for racial and social equality, gay rights, women's rights, student rights, and campaigned against war and poverty, Clément points out.

"The size of this demographic bulge, combined with widespread social and economic changes unique to this period, was bound to have a profound impact on social movement activism," he says.

One of the most identifiable impacts of the generation can be quantified by looking at the proliferation of professional social movement organizations (SMOs), which he defines as a formal organization that identifies its goals with the preferences of a social movement and attempts to implement those goals.

"The proliferation of SMOs in Canada in the '60s and '70s was astounding," Clément observes.

The number of women's groups in B.C. alone, for example, jumped from two in 1969 to more than 100 by 1974.

"The student movement and the New Left peaked in the '60s and early '70s as the boomers entered and graduated from college and university," he says.

"The boomers also left their mark on the women's movement. Disgusted at the rampant sexism among student radicals, women formed the first women's liberation groups in Canada."

At the same time, the first gay rights organizations were formed in Vancouver and Toronto, and a national association began in 1975.

Greenpeace started in Vancouver in 1971, the birth of the modern environmental movement, and between 1960 and 1969, four national aboriginal associations and 33 provincial organizations were born, he says.

Clément points out that boomers also created African-Canadian SMOs across the country while advocates for children's rights, prisoners' rights, animal rights, peace and official languages organized in unprecedented numbers.

By the mid-1980s, the federal secretary of state was providing funding to more than 3,500 social movement organizations, Clément says.

The boomers rode a wave of affluence that contributed to the rising number of SMOs, he says.

From 1962 to 1972, he explains, the annual growth rate in Canada never dipped below four per cent, unemployment dropped to less than four per cent by 1965 and more than 145,000 new jobs were created for people under 25 between 1964 and 1967.

This allowed the burgeoning middle class to achieve higher levels of education and join voluntary associations and political activities, Clément says.

Between 1963 and 1968, university enrolment increased more than in the previous 50 years - dozens of new institutions were born, hundreds of faculty were hired, tens of thousands of students swelled the ranks of undergraduate programs and capital expenditures on universities rose to more than $1.5 billion by the end of the '60s, compared to $100 million in 1955, he points out.

"This new cohort of professionals [professors, lawyers, doctors, social workers, journalists, etc.] played a central role in the formation and the maintenance of SMOs." He also credits the rise of television for spurring boomers to take action. "Television brought police violence in Georgia and riots in Gastown to the homes of millions of Americans and Canadians, whose support for a movement no longer depended on personal experience and immediate situational context," Clément says.

The historical impact of the '60s has not yet been fully written, he says. "I was recently at a conference in Kingston, Ont., where 250 papers were presented on the '60s," he says, "and I have just heard about a new academic journal in the U.S. beginning in 2008 devoted exclusively to the '60s. It is increasingly a topic of great interest for historians."

(For those interested in Clément's research, see his website: www.HistoryofRights.com)

Andrew Ramlo, a demographer with the Urban Futures Institute in Vancouver, says the leading edge of the baby boomer generation is 60 and thinking about the third stage of life - retirement.

Roughly one in three Canadians is a baby boomer, says census data, and will reach retirement age in the next decade.

"The aging of the generation is going to have an impact," Ramlo says. "They are going to drive some major issues. One is the labour force is going to change. We're going to see a large exodus from the labour force, and there will be a relative shortage of workers. There simply won't be enough warm bodies to replace them."

This will have two effects - productivity may suffer and jobs will be filled by increasing immigration, he predicts, and the removal of mandatory retirement at 65 may see some workers return as private contractors.

But if the robust economy wanes, that could affect the funding of the Canada pension plan and health care for the boomers, putting pressure on younger people to pay more federal pension deductions and taxes.

"There is some potential for intergenerational tension," says Ramlo, 35.

As for the housing market, the number of empty bedrooms is rising as boomers remain in homes after their children move out.

"The proportion of sewing rooms and workshops is going to explode," he says.
"The stats say, after 35, every year you get older, the less likely you are to move," he explains. "People get comfortable in their communities."

Vancouver's plan to increase urban density in residential neighbourhoods could work if homeowners buy into it, he says.

If neighbourhoods allowed coach houses to be built at the back of lots, more duplex zoning and row housing with ground-level access, the '60s generation may sell their homes and move into smaller quarters, he adds.

"But you have to convince the public that it's a good idea," Ramlo says, adding some areas of east Vancouver around Trout Lake and Commercial Drive are already moving in that direction.

Some people may decide to sell their suburban homes and move into downtown condominiums, but they will be atypical. Generally, he says, the boomers want to spend their golden years in peace and quiet.

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