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"Gen Z Will Save Us": Applauded and Dismissed as a Gen Z Climate Activist by Tobias Hess

The kids came in with steadfast conviction. It was September 2019 and young members of the Sunrise Movement, the youth movement for a Green New Deal, walked into the San Francisco office of U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein of California and urged her to support a Green New Deal that would decarbonize the U.S. economy by 2030. Her reaction is now infamous. In response to a young girl saying, "The government is supposed to be for the people, and by the people, and all for the people," the Senator said the following¹:

I've been doing this for 30 years. I know what I'm doing. You come in here and you say it has to be my way or the highway. I don't respond to that. I've gotten elected. I just ran. I was elected by almost a million vote plurality and I know what I'm doing. So, you know, maybe people should listen a little bit.

After the Sunrise Movement's video of the encounter¹ garnered 23,000 retweets, the Senator released a statement² saying "I want the children to know they were heard loud and clear." She also reiterated her stance for a different climate proposal as well as recommitted to the cause of mitigating the worst effects of climate change, but the sting of that first encounter lingered for many Gen Z climate activists.

What is the value of "being heard" when one is met with dismissal? Did the mere fact that young people spoke to a powerful U.S. Senator, despite the substance of their demands being ignored, move the needle anywhere towards the enactment of the Green New Deal? As Gen Z climate activists continue to make their demands to global leaders heard, they are often both ignored and honored. It is telling that Senator Feinstein was openly hostile in the room with the young activists and then released a statement that acknowledged their voices and passion. What it signals is there is value in honoring the voices of Gen Z activists, but there is also value in not taking Gen Z activist demands to heart. And in crucial ways, appreciation or positive acknowledgement of Gen Z activists can often serve as a covert way of diminishing their actual demands.

There have been numerous examples of Gen Z activists using their digital and political skills to shift political discourse. In 2018, the students of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida rose up to advocate for increased regulations on firearms after a tragic shooting occurred at their school. And Greta Thunberg of Sweden inspired a generation of young climate activists when she began organizing protests to demand increased governmental action on climate. Both of these famous examples show the unique power of Gen Z activists, who often combine the technological skills of digital natives with the moral clarity of newly politicized youth. But beyond their impressive nature, these examples are also evidence that many members of Gen Z are reacting to the realities of the era they were born into. The ever-worsening climate crisis as well as widening inequality and continued racial injustice, alongside increased access to information through the internet, have compelled many members of Gen Z to take action and build collective power.

While Gen Z's activism and influence should not be diminished, it should also not be simplified into a neat story of the youth rising up to save the world. In an important opinion piece for the *New York Times* titled "Gen Z Will Not Save Us", Charlie Warzel³ writes about how narratives of Gen Z activism can simplify complex generational phenomena. While he is not speaking specifically to the youth climate movement, his insights are still relevant:

Just as millennials were clumsily dubbed the avocado-toast-loving, industry-killing generation, the Gen Z stereotype is an equally reductive portrait: a sardonic, nihilist, climate-change-conquering group of social media vigilantes, righteously trolling for social justice (and roasting millennials in the process). Gen Z may just save us all, the theory goes — or at least save us from another four years of Donald Trump.

Warzel³ correctly points out that any simplistic generational narrative, be it positive or negative, is ultimately clumsy. And while this generational portrait of Gen Z as being politically savvy and morally courageous may give hope to some, this narrative is ultimately simplistic and reductive. In addition, this narrative can often be antithetical to the aims of Gen Z activists. If the narrative of Gen Z activists is as simple as "Gen Z activists are already changing the world and will soon solve entrenched political crises," then why should those in power feel compelled to change their policies and practices? In a world where Gen Z activists are mere symbols for future progress and hope, the specific demands that Gen Z activists make to adult leaders today take on less importance.

Comments that enthusiastically sustain the narrative of Gen Z "rising up" are prevalent in contemporary political discourse. A comment made by Jen⁴ from East Lansing, Michigan (who identifies herself as a "teacher at a large public university"), on the *New York Times* website under that same piece by Warzel reads:

Trust me, Gen Z is a spectacular generation. They are active, they are engaged, and they intensely care about the country. They are also angry at the mess that we have handed down to them over the past several decades with climate change, and in 2016 when they watched with horror as we gave them Donald Trump and Mitch McConnell. They watched because they were too young to vote.

This comment and other sweeping expressions of admiration for Gen Z help to sustain a simplistic narrative of Gen Z swooping in to solve complex political issues. Again, if Gen Z is "spectacular" and quickly exerting power, then why should those in positions of influence now feel compelled to change policy now? This narrative makes the rise of Gen Z activists and the execution of their demands seem inevitable. Another example occurred after members of Gen Z staged a protest against President Trump by RSVPing spots at his 2020 rally in Tulsa, which falsely inflated the number of attendees and led to low turnout.⁵ Steve Schmidt, who worked for President George W. Bush and helped found the Lincoln Project, a prominent anti-Trump organization, tweeted the following⁶ after former President Trump's Tulsa rally:

This is what happened tonight. I'm dead serious when I say this. The teens of America have struck a savage blow against @realDonaldTrump. All across America teens ordered tickets to this event. The fools on the campaign bragged about a million tickets. lol.

Similar to Jen's comment,⁴ Schmidt's hyperbolic statement furthers the caricatured ideal of Gen Z political heroism. The use of a phrase such as "savage blow" can be attributed to the type of extreme language that is normalized on Twitter. But such hyperbolic language also helps to sustain a simplistic and hopeful narrative about Gen Z activism. Assigning such significance to this one action executed by members of Gen Z furthers the notion that Gen Z is already well on its way to solving complex political crises. And while this idea signals faith in the capabilities of Gen Z activists, it also puts an undue burden on Gen Z activists to solve complex social problems. That burden is both unfair and ineffective. Gen Z inherited the climate crisis (as well as many other crises), and thus Gen Z should not be expected to solve it alone. Also, Gen Z is still quite young and few members of Gen Z are in positions of significant power or influence. Thus, it is members of older generations who have a greater ability to implement policy changes today. Lastly, what these comments show us is that on issues as different as climate change and the rise of former President Trump, Gen Z activists have become a symbol of youth rebellion, here to stop seemingly unstoppable forces.

Being seen as a beacon of hope is quite different from being truly listened to, though. Climate activist Thunberg articulated the difference clearly in her 2019 address to the UN⁷:

I should be back in school on the other side of the ocean. Yet you all come to us young people for hope? How dare you . . . You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words . . . You say you hear us and that you understand the urgency. But no matter how sad and angry I am, I do not want to believe that. Because if you really understood the situation and still kept on failing to act, then you would be evil.

Thunberg's striking comment serves as a powerful rebuke of the heroic Gen Z activist narrative. She is refusing to take part in a narrative that makes those in power feel better about the state of the climate crisis, and she refuses to take pride in the fact that she gives some people "hope." Senator Feinstein stated that "the children...were heard" after her encounter with the young Sunrise activists, but Thunberg makes clear that "being heard" is not the goal for Gen Z climate activists. The goal is for those in positions of power and influence today to enact bold climate policy. Any statement that thanks Gen Z activists for the mere existence of their activism avoids answering the hard question of what one should do in response to Gen Z activist demands. Such statements also contribute to the emotional experience that Thunberg relays in her comments. Thunberg makes it clear that being praised for giving others hope can be deeply unsettling. She does not want to spread hope. She wants real action on the part of those who hold positions of power and influence.

Those who make comments about the power and meaning of Gen Z activism as a phenomenon also ignore the fact that the wider significance of Gen Z activism is still

unclear. There is no straightforward story of youth rebellion to tell. Warzel³ speaks to this clearly in his piece:

Generation Z is disillusioned by a country and its myriad institutions whose moral arc seems to bend toward corruption and stagnation. It is also, like any generation, not monolithic. And the way that its justified disillusion will play politically, culturally and socially is unknown.

There is little wisdom, predictive confidence, or even hope to be gained from Gen Z activism and outrage in response to inaction on climate change and other pressing crises. There is no telling how the current activist energy among certain factions of Gen Z will shift in the future. Sustaining the narrative that “the kids are rising up” does little to move Gen Z activist movement goals. In fact, it sustains the narrative that someday soon, Gen Z will change the world and fix society’s entrenched social and political problems. And this puts the onus of enacting change onto Gen Z.

Those who seek to engage Gen Z climate activists should begin by engaging with the substance of their arguments, not their identity as young people, nor the hopeful feelings that their activism inspires within them. And those who engage them must realize that simplistic generational narratives are deeply unhelpful. Finally, they must realize that this narrative can be emotionally troubling for Gen Z activists, who do the hard work of activism to enact change and not to give members of older generations hope. This is especially true for Gen Z climate activists, who not only are engaged with an incredibly complex, terrifying topic, but are also racing against science and time. With each passing year, the possibility of avoiding an irreversibly warmer planet becomes more difficult, and thus there is little time for distant hope. Action is needed now, and it must be done by those who have the capability to implement change today.

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