

‘Clueless’ and ‘Saved by the Bell’ Are How We Got Trump

How '90s pop culture convinced a generation of would-be earnest activists that caring was uncool.

Lindy West, Oct. 26, 2019

I remember sitting in physics class on the first day of the World Trade Organization protests in Seattle in 1999. I was a senior, still 17, and we'd been hearing for weeks that a *huge* and *bad* anarchist riot was coming to destroy our town, with tanks and bricks and garbage fires and naked bicyclists and people dressed as turtles. *Turtles!* The Gap was on high alert!

My understanding, at the time, was that activist types were mad about globalization, which, as I understood it, was something to do with money, which I assumed was morally neutral (incorrect), sweatshop labor, which I recognized as bad, and the killing of sea turtles, very bad. Inasmuch as I could formulate an opinion on something that I did not understand, I was on the side of the hippies, even the Gap smashers probably. I was certainly not on the side of the cops. At least I knew that much.

But I remember, on that day, a procession of protesters barreling down the hall outside my physics class, yelling and waving signs, trying to entice other kids to march downtown and join the throng. My classmates and I looked at one another, yearning to be one of those kids who isn't scared of sincerity, of action, of authority. To be the kind of smart, engaged young person who actually understood things about the globe.

Only one kid in the class grabbed his bag and walked out. I remember feeling, with innate certainty, that he was a different kind of person from me.

In the 1990s, activism — particularly student activism — was stigmatized as tedious, silly, self-important and, most damningly, ineffectual. Student activism was Paul Rudd smirking behind designer sunglasses in the 1995 movie “Clueless”: “I’m going to a Tree People meeting. We might get Marky Mark to plant a celebrity tree.” [...]

If you were very, very cool in the early to mid-'90s, you could pull off a Beastie Boys “Free Tibet” bumper sticker or quote Rage Against the Machine in your social studies paper, but for your middle-of-the-road fat white dorks? The safest path was to say all the right things about freedom and equality while rolling your eyes at the try-hards.

I want to be very clear that I’m not talking about kids of marginalized identities or communities who have never for one second had the luxury to choose whether to fight or not. I’m talking about the mediocre white kids, the comfortable kids, the suburban kids.

If you were a privileged white kid in the '90s who could feel a moral pull to fight for something but didn't know where to start, looking to the media for inspiration was a dry, dry well. We had the joyless ecofeminists Lisa Simpson and Darlene from “Roseanne.” We had Wendy Testaburger, who spent a significant bulk of her screen time on “South Park” being vomited on by Stan.

Kat from “10 Things I Hate About You” is a rabid feminist until she’s cured by getting a boyfriend. Topanga’s feminism on “Boy Meets World” was often a punch line. On “Saved by the Bell,” Jessie Spano was relentlessly mocked for calling out Slater’s chauvinism. It was a running gag for the entire series.

[...] I did not go to the W.T.O. protest partly because my mom told me I couldn't and partly because I didn't understand it, but primarily because I'd been taught that when ordinary people, *especially* young people, try to do activism, they look stupid.

But things are different now.

One recent afternoon, my stepdaughter, who is neither mediocre nor white, paused while passing through the living room and asked, "Are you guys busy tomorrow night?"

"Probably," my husband said. "Why?"

"Oh, you know how I'm in the Art of Resistance and Resilience Club? We're finally unveiling our Black Panthers mural. Bobby Seale is going to be there, and I'm giving a speech. Well, actually, it's more of a poem. You guys can come if you want to." Shrug, bye.

We canceled our plans.

The mural is spectacular, at the intersection of the two major roads that carry drivers from fully gentrified central Seattle to quickly gentrifying south Seattle. Images of Black Panthers distributing food and registering black voters stretch 40 feet along the sidewalk outside the high school, which is 93 percent kids of color.

Activism comes so naturally to my girls. They are native to it. They are not afraid of sincerity. They're at every protest, ones I haven't even heard about.

Sure, there's a concomitant swell among young people on the right, of conservative kids encouraged by Trumpism to memeify cruelty, roast Priuses, and trigger the libs with their MAGA hats. But this generation wasn't fed activism as a punch line the way I was, and as Donald Trump emboldens conservative teenagers, my daughters and their friends aren't cowed — they're galvanized.

Think of 16-year-old Greta Thunberg, whose stone-faced protest outside the Swedish Parliament in 2018 inspired student strikes in more than a dozen countries and made her a global voice on climate change.

Think of the Parkland school shooting survivors, who, in the thick of unimaginable trauma, rejected the typical thoughts, prayers and shrugs from their government and helped pass 67 new gun laws in 2018.

Those kids were born after Sept. 11 into a fractured place. They didn't get any quiet years, I guess, when, in many communities (not all, of course) the end of the world felt abstract and far away. Young people are here and strong and smart and fierce, and they do not intend to die. As Ms. Thunberg noted in her blistering address to the United Nations last month, it is not their job to save us — we are the parents — but may they inspire us to help them save themselves. I feel afraid in this moment, but I do not feel hopeless.

In the auditorium, my stepdaughter took the mic. "We are tired of the fact that we still have to fight," she chanted, "for what the white man gets to call his inalienable rights. And it's not how we fight, it's that we dare to." She took a deep breath. "So we, as a people, will keep fighting, whether it's peaceful or scary, until we reach justice by whatever means necessary."

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