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The Beach, Young Australians and the challenge to Egalitarianism in the 1960's

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Abstract

During the 1960s, Australians embraced an urbanised, middle-class reality with leisure an integral component of social status. Advertisers, mindful of the demographic over-representation of the baby-boomer generation, sought to identify with potential customers by embracing sun-tanned, healthy, youthful, well-to-do beach goers as a new target demographic. As young Australians internalised advertisers' messages, social stratification based on surfing ability, good looks, wealth and ethnicity became commonplace on Australia's beaches. Representations of the ideal surfer and physically attractive female beach-goers alienated the not-so wealthy, the not-so–good-looking and the less well-informed, but their inability to belong strengthened the image's exclusive appeal. The baby-boomers as teenagers dominated the sixties through their numbers and assertiveness. Consequently, their attitudes and values, notwithstanding their superficiality and social destructiveness in some cases, were usually analysed in admiring terms by the press and the older generation more generally.

Keywords: 1960s, baby boomers, beach, stratification, Australia

In January 1969, the caption accompanying a photograph in the Melbourne *Sun* of a surfer riding a wave proudly boasted:

> Blazing sun. Brown bodies. Rolling Surf. That's the way we like it. Because we're Australian. We wouldn't have it any other way. And there's a bank that's part of this picture too. The National. … As Australian as the first wave at Lorne (*Sun*, 28 January, 1969)

No doubt, the National Bank substituted interstate locations for its Australia-wide advertising campaign. During the 1960s, Australians increasingly embraced an urbanised, middle-class reality and advertisers, mindful of the demographic over-representation of the baby-boomer generation, sought to identify with these potential customers by embracing sun-tanned, healthy, youthful, well-to-do beach goers as their new icons. However, these new representations alienated the not-so young, the not-so wealthy and those who were not of Northern-European or British heritage.

Most Australians, and particularly middle class young Australians, possessed an optimistic outlook on life in the 1960s — or at least the popular press told them that they should. The great depression was a distant memory for older Australians and full-employment was the norm. Opportunities to succeed were unprecedented. Little wonder, that so many believed that they were living in a 'Lucky Country'. David Bean, when writing about Australia for London's *Guardian* in January 1966 stated:
'No question here that youth is not eternal, no fear that the sun will ever cloud over'. He added

> You might call it arrogance if you wanted … ; the Australians themselves would far rather you called it confidence. It's an attitude born of blue skies and smiling suns, of superabundant food and freedom from the tired, tried old tyrannies of the Western World' (*Australian* 14 January 1966).

A writer in a 1969 issue of *Walkabout* stated of 'young Australians':

> They are a product of a country of ... increasing wealth and sophistication, of changing values and new cultural influences. ..... They feel that life is for living. All they have to do to get the best of everything is to work for it — work, that is, within the finely hedonistic framework of sunshine, beaches, beer, sex and plenty of holidays. (*Walkabout* December 1969)

Journalists often associated blue skies and sunshine with the material success that many middle class Australians enjoyed in the 1960s and going to the beach represented the leisure that accompanied this success.

For many Australians, Menzies's departure from the political scene in January 1966 signified the end of an era of stability, order and respect for old age. Australia was to be invigorated with the ideas and influence of a younger generation of politicians, many of whom saw the electoral advantage of embracing the new beach culture and the middle class values that it symbolised. The press introduced the new Prime Minister Harold Holt to Australians as a '007' James Bond Prime Minister. A photograph of him at Portsea beach in scuba gear with his glamorous daughters-in-law in 1966 received front-page coverage in Australian newspapers. The photograph also received worldwide coverage thus reinforcing Australia's image as a youthful nation and the beach as a culturally significant site (Holt, 1968: 161, 208b). A correspondent for the *Australian* wrote in January 1966: Holt as Prime Minister 'has emerged as a quiet, firm man, trim of waist and pleasant in manner, looking a good deal less than fifty-seven' (*Australian,* 29 January 1966). Clearly, looking young was nearly as good as being young. Perhaps, influenced by Holt's surfing and beach-going image, his replacement, John Gorton, participated in a surf carnival at Bondi in November 1968. Newspaper photographs of Gorton rowing a surf-boat in a relay race and running into the waves was obviously a media coup for the Liberal Party (*Sun*, 14 November, 1968).

Most baby-boomers were uniquely fortunate, even as children in the 1950s. Stable families, a relatively benevolent government, an abundance of employment opportunities, the achievement of suburban home ownership complete with an FJ Holden in the garage, are commonly depicted images of the era. Well-behaved children, preferably bathed, and listening to the radio or watching television, before scampering off to bed, completed this idealised representation. During the sixties, an under-canvas or caravan beach holiday was an additional benefit middle-class baby boomers enjoyed, but popular culture later mythologised this as an experience shared by most Australians including the children of working class parents. As Robert Drew suggests 'Australians make or break romances at the beach, they marry and take honeymoons at the beach, they go on holidays with their children to the beach, and in vast numbers they retire by the sea'. But Drew was merely commenting upon the importance of the beach for middle class Australians (Huntsman, 2001: 2).

In 1997 Mark Davis lamented that the baby boomer generation and their immediate precursors had captured the cultural agenda. His concern was with the present, but the baby boomers have always been, in popular mythology, a self-important generation (Davis, 1997: 100). Writers such as Richard Walsh recognised the youthful baby-boomers' sense of self-importance. In 1968, he stated 'At first impression Australia is a young person's paradise … Youth in Australia is beginning to make its presence felt' (Walsh, 1968: 210). In 1966, nineteen-year-old Lee Patterson shared this view when stating:

> Don't knock it Dad. Or even you, Mum. We, the teenagers, are the key to Australia' economic prosperity … . We dominate and influence a large majority of adult fashions, tastes, goods, songs, movies, and TV. … Our buying habits and tastes have forced … businessmen and manufacturers to concentrate on us. Their market surveys show … that as much as 40 percent of the total spending in Australia each year is done by the teens and 20s (*Everybody's*, 20 July 1966)

In June 1970, the *Age* reinforced this opinion when stating that the baby boomers were

> The healthiest, richest, most mobile, most numerous, best-educated, most vocal, most powerful, most critical and most expressive adolescent generation ever produced (*Age*, 19 June 1970).

Commercial Radio and television stations recognised the buying-power of the affluent young, leaving working-class baby-boomers resentful and alienated by the promotions. Teenage television programmes such as *Sing, Sing Sing*, *Bandstand*, and later, *Komotion* offered suitable vehicles for soft drink, denim jeans, toothpaste and hair shampoo advertisements that specifically targeted teenagers and often projected the beach as a backdrop. Some of the most popular stations actually visited the beaches. In January 1968, 3KZ 'buzzed around in beach buggies' and 3DB's cabin cruiser prowled around off shore. The mobile units of the two biggest top forty stations, 3UZ and 3AK travelled around the Bellarine Peninsula and then swapped to the Mornington Peninsula. Reviewer Ian Livingston considered the 3AK broadcasting the most successful because of the unrehearsed nature of the programming and the urgency of Lionel Yorke's plea — 'come and see us on the beach at Frankston now' (*Sun*, 15 January 1968). Sydney's 2SM particularly promoted an image of surfing. An advertisement promoting DJ 'Good Guy Murph the Surf' stated:

> Hear 'good Guy' Tony Murphy each Saturday with the swingest music, surfing results, up to the minute surfing news and on the spot give-aways from Palm Beach to Cronulla … each weekend throughout the summer. Join the beach parade with Murph the Surf this summer on radio au-go-go. (Cockington, 1992: 235)

The radio broadcasts may have appeared inclusive, but the tabloid newspapers reporting the events invariably focused upon the glamorous young people at the beach. For Melbourne's *Sun* almost any excuse was utilised to insert a photograph of a teenage girl in a bathing suit in its pages. In November 1968, beneath a photograph of a large but empty examination hall and the comment that thousands of Matriculation students would soon be filling the seats was a photograph of 'a girl who can laugh at exams' as she had finished hers. The text continued: 'Glenda Marriott, 19, of Glen Iris is a second year Arts student and she celebrated her release from the need to study by starting her summer suntan at Elwood beach yesterday. A lot of students would like to change places with her today' (*Sun*, 22 November 1968). Three years later, in January 1972, Germain Greer, in Australia to launch her book *The Female Eunuch*, attacked Australian newspapers for presenting 'fantasy women' in advertisements and 'cheesecake' pictures as news items. At a National Press Club luncheon, she condemned the 'image of womanhood perpetuated' by the Australian press (Ross, 1993: 682).

For the elderly, or those with less than perfect physiques, the beach was not a welcoming location. As Art Historian, Juliana Engberg explained in 2001:

> the beach is not a natural place – it's a cultural place. The sea is where you parade culture – it's a stage – it's not a place of neutrality or democracy as some claim. It's a place of high scrutiny – people's behaviour and bodies are scrutinized to a greater or lesser extent. It is a place where we compete for attention - or lack of attention (*Big Picture – The Beach*, 2000).

As newspaper and magazine reports and photographs in the 1960s reveal, physically attractive people enjoyed higher status, than those who were for various, often superficial reasons, less attractive. Australian Poet Les Murray, born in 1938, and therefore aged in his 20s during the 1960s commented, I don't think much of the view that the beach is a place of equality. In fact it's a place of great inequality. In a discussion, in 2000, Murray contemptuously referred to the 'aristocracy of the body' and 'slim svelte Hollywood bodies' on Australian beaches. 'You're being checked out and probably rejected', if you have an imperfect physique, Murray explained. He elaborated upon the lizard-like focus that people on the beach have. They see you, they reject you, they go out of focus 'and you feel a little bit smaller each time', he commented. Murray elaborated 'I step onto the sand 'waiting for the pistol shot of laughter', adding that 'bared body is not equal ever' (*Big Picture*, 2000).

The cult of surfing achieved a high degree of media, and therefore public, acceptance. Its adherents were also more likely to be largely middle or upper class with the finances to afford holidays at the beach. An indication of the media's promotion of surfers could be seen in the theme of a special edition of *Walkabout* in December 1967 that was devoted to 'Australia looks ahead ... in which twelve outstanding Australians talk[ed] about their careers'. One was Midget Farrelly, a world champion surfer, aged twenty-two (*Walkabout*, December 1967). A *Walkabout* article four years previously had commented that for the 'select coterie who surf winter and summer alike … their king [was] 'Midget Farrelly, the [then] current surfboard champion of the World' (*Walkabout*, January 1964).

Teenagers in beach side suburbs conformed to the dictates of surfie fashions. As Craig McGregor related in the 1964 *Walkabout* article about Midget Farrelly, surfing had become a 'cult'. 'Surf records regularly top the hit parades and teenagers who've never been on a surfboard pack out screenings of American surf films' (*Walkabout*, January 1964). By the late 1960s, many male and female surfies wore long hair bleached blonde, caftan style tops or T-shirts, corduroy or denim jeans and leather sandals or thongs. This was not working class attire, and even amongst middle-class teenagers, acceptance was far from assured, with a brutal hierarchy operating in most High Schools. For youths in the Melbourne beachside suburbs of Frankston and Mt Eliza, acceptance was dependent upon a slim build, blond hair and a deep tan. In Brisbane, some surfie school-girls attached small, carved, wooden surfboards to their necklaces. Kathy Lette and Gabrielle Carey, in *Puberty Blues*, set in the early 1970s, vividly describe the scene:

> Sue and I were trying to make it into the ultimate surfie gang at Greenhills. It was special — the prettiest and coolest girls at school and the best surfers on the beach. To graduate into the surfie gang you had to be desired by one of the surfie boys, tell off a teacher, do the Scotch drawback and know all about sex. … You had to be interested in surfing, but not interested enough to surf. .. The surfie boys were brown and broad. The longer and blonder the hair, the better. … The better they surfed, the higher their rank. (Lette, Carey, 1981: 6-7)

Evidence suggests that Australia's beaches in the 1960s were not egalitarian. The distinguishing features of class such as mannerisms, confidence, speech, hue of suntan, hairstyle, model of wristwatch and most importantly the expectation of deference (or alternatively, willingness to adopt a subservient or resentful demeanour) was present on the beach as well as in society more generally. Many surfers also utilized language exclusively. As Craig McGregor noted in 1964, surfers' 'conversation is larded with American slang, they buy the latest American surf magazines and they have, in part, identified themselves with the US teenage cult' (*Walkabout*, January 1964). As Fiske, Hodge and Turner relate: 'Surfers have an exclusive language … that signals subculture membership and excludes outsiders, language that performs the vital function that excludes us from them' (Fiske, Hodge, Turner, 1987: 69).

Furthermore, as Booth explains, 'the final obstacle is that surfing remains incomprehensible and inaccessible … physically and mentally … to many people' (Booth, 2001, p 132)

In 1966, Craig McGregor observed that antagonism existed between surfies and rockers based upon upper class snobbery and working class resentment. McGregor elaborated:

> This is class hostility in action, and the rocker-surfie clash is really a clash of two much broader currents within Australian society: the old bitter, working class tradition with its chip on the shoulder sense of resentment and gang solidarity and the modern, affluent white collar culture which has never had it so good before and is frankly selfish, success conscious and out for a good time. There is no doubt that it is the second current that is becoming the dominant one (McGregor, 1969: 284)

He further stated that 'more significantly, all the mass media and channels of publicity have thrown their weight behind the surfies' (McGregor, 1969, p 285) Douglas Booth agrees with McGregor's analysis. In *Australian Beach Cultures*, Booth explains that in the early 1960s, 'rockers, roamed Sydney's beaches assaulting surfers', with the gangs offering working class youth 'solidarity against the individualism and diffuse styles of consumer capitalism adopted by the middle class' surfies. With a rocker complaining that 'surfers treat us like dirt', Booth includes the surfers' bleached hair and 'fancy shorts' as elements of class difference and he elaborates that 'surfers also gave this class antagonism a distinct spatial dimension by marking the beaches as their territory'. (Booth, 2001: 108).

Just as surfers imposed a hierarchy on beach users, so too did normal society. As Fiske, Hodge and Turner relate:

> The surf beach develops a 'fundamentalist' youth subculture of its own with its own codes and practices that oppose the conventions of more normal society. … In the wider culture's use of the beach, the rituals are highly conventionalised, impregnated with clues to status and community role distinctions. This determines the character given to the individual beaches themselves, encouraging fine discrimination. Not all beaches are the same, not all spots on the same beach are the same (Fiske, Hodge, Turner, 1987: 55-56).

Many beaches in the 1960s reflected class divisions. The prestige of the suburb in which beaches were located was often important. Amongst Melbourne's bay beaches, Brighton was more prestigious than Chelsea and Portsea had a higher status than Rosebud. In Sydney, the rich tended to frequent the northern beaches of Newport, Avalon, Whale Beach and Palm Beach while the workers gravitated to Bondi, Coogee and Maroubra (Pringle, 1978: 198). Furthermore as, Fiske, Hodge and Turner state, several Sydney harbour beaches were difficult to access, with Chinaman's Beach approached via a picnic ground and Camp Cove via a small gateway. Car parking facilities were often limited. The authors add that 'such beaches are known to be exclusive … their placement produces a relatively regulated access … and … are seen as material extensions of an urban community of property owners who 'have' the location of the entrance'. Although writing in 1987, the exclusivity of these beaches was a characteristic during the 1960s. (Fiske, Hodge, Turner, 1987: 56).

Surf board riding was not an inclusive sport. From an early age, surfies learnt about social stratification based upon surfing ability, good looks, wealth and ethnicity. In *Puberty Blues*, Carey and Lette comment that in the early 1970s at Crunulla, the beach was divided into three main sections— South Cronulla, North Cronulla, and Greenhills. The most skilled surfboard riders and 'the prettiest girls from school' 'hung out' at Greenhills, whereas 'the bad surfboard riders on their 'L' plates, the Italian family groups and the 'uncool' kids from Bankstown (Bankies), swarmed to south Cronulla'. (Lette, Carey, 1981: 1)

In December 1967, *Everybody's* magazine, similarly described the migrants who gravitated to the working-class beach of Bondi in patronising terms:

> On a blazing Sunday, [Bondi] lures 100,000 people to its shores. They swarm like ants on the sand. And they come in all shapes and nationalities. … there is a Momma and a Poppa and the bambinos and salami sandwiches and flasks of warm 'red'. … On weekends, it's hard walking along the sand without treading on someone or finding a space to swim (*Everybody's*, 20 December 1967)

Clearly, many wealthy Anglo Saxon Australians considered their beach etiquette superior to the norms practised by some immigrant groups.

Male surfers frequently discriminated against young women who wished to surf. In 1967, a regular ABC program, *Checkerboard*, investigated the situation. Interviews with young male board riders revealed that they regarded the sport as a masculine activity. Their statements included: 'You see a girl out in the surf and it looks ridiculous'; 'they do develop muscles in the wrong spots and I don't like taking a girl out with arm muscles bigger than myself'; 'I think it's just a men's sport'; 'I don't like girls surfing at all. I reckon they clutter up the water' and 'I think they should involve themselves in more feminine activities' (*Checkerboard*, 1967). Notwithstanding male derision, numbers of females participated in the sport, with journalist, Vince Hayes, writing an article about the 'first class' female board-riders who were members of the Tweed Heads Surf Riders Club in 1970 (*People*, 3 June, 1970). However, articles about surfing in magazines and newspapers commonly depicted photographs of girls on the beach watching male board riders. During May 1970, the world surfing contest took place at Bells Beach, near Torquay, but the newspapers still portrayed females conservatively, with the *Sun* in its coverage printing a full-page photograph of dual world champion surfer, Joyce Hoffman, darning her wetsuit (*Sun*, 1 May 1970). As *Age* reporter and novelist Fiona Capp, reflecting upon the period, commented, 'for a girl to be accepted into a surfie gang, … she had to be interested in surfing but not interested enough to surf' (*Age*, 9 November 2003).

Traditional class-based, racist, sexist values dominated the popular image of the beach in the 1960s. The beach culture that Australians embraced eschewed the egalitarianism that Australians had traditionally valued. The 1967 advertising blurb for the type of beach holiday that was to become increasingly common (amongst those who could afford it), exemplified this desire for luxury and exclusiveness:

> Like to gambol on the Gold Coast? Five TAA Goldcoaster Holidays — from as low as $119. Sunsplash Holiday! Two wonderful weeks at Broadbeach Hotel. Join in the fun with the other guests. Every day with sun, sand and surf. Every night a gay non-stop whirl of parties and cabarets. Make a big splash this holiday. … Also Beachcomber Holidays, Sunseeker Holidays, Vacationland Special, Sands 'n' Sun Holidays (*Sun*, 8 September 1967).

Craig McGregor accurately predicted in 1966 that the baby boomers would 'increase the sophistication of … society … but also accelerate the change-over to opportunist, middle-class values' (McGregor, 1969: 292). Forty years later, the individualism of this 1960s beach-going generation has become mainstream.

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