
The Pseudo-Problem of Generations

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The generation is a crappy unit of social analysis. It's fine for loosely pointing out or making fun of an age cohort, but as a political or economic category, it's a terrible substitute for what we're really trying to get at, namely *history* and our relation to it. Understood as identity, generations lapse into a sort of social astrology—which I realize, here in Los Angeles, isn't the jab it's intended to be. However, like astrology or the political compass, generational categories are given to a glibness that makes them better suited for some things rather than others. The first and by far the best is for making memes. Everyone loves razzing Dad for not knowing how to open an attachment. Everyone loves teasing the young for inhabiting a futureless world foreclosed by disaster, debt, and dissipating opportunities. The meme's use of generations is ideal because memes operate at a higher order of truth. It isn't meant literally as it is in, say, in thinkpieces, in the production of copy and headlines, in the daily cascade of articles contrasting Boomers and Millennials, in which the author rediscovers anew that younger people are more adept with new technologies and customs, and that older, more financially secure people are less inclined to radical change. This bad generativity is also a competitive advantage in another field: marketing, which I think of as the origin of most our current "generational theory," beginning with the coincidence of a demographic baby boom with a post-war shift to consumption. Generations constitute a target demographic, whether for political or consumer advertising, and to the degree that the term has any value, it's as a rhetorical device.

Note that what both marketing and the news cycle share is a preoccupation with the Eternal Present, or put another way, an indifference or even aversion to history—making their preferred terms a weird choice for thinking through social or historical change. It's true that we can make out some vague patterns throughout history that correspond to generational differences, but these are little more than the predictable cycles of age imposed upon the dynamic processes of history. These dynamic processes—*these* are the really difficult parts of the equation, and

they're only obscured by the trivial arithmetic of generations. What is a Boomer like, for example? It depends. Whatever we can say about them, a Boomer in 1969 is very different than a Boomer in 2019, and this difference will be explained by age and history not by any persisting quality of the Boomers themselves. What can we say then about the difference between the young Boomer and the young Millennial? Here, age has been dropped from the equation, and we see it for what it truly is: a purely historical question. In other words: *social change explains generations; generations don't explain social change*. But that hasn't stopped people from trying, and at its worst, you end up with something like the clownish "generational theory" of William Strauss and Neil Howe, who coauthored several works, such as *The Fourth Turning* and *Millennials Rising*, claiming to explain history in terms of generational cycles within lifecycles (or "saecula") that repeat with enough coherence to even allow for historical prophecy. Here, enjoy a sample, from *Millennials Rising*:

"Have they given up on progress? No. Today's kids believe in the future and see themselves as its cutting edge. They show a fascination for, and mastery of, new technologies—which explains why math and science scores are rising faster than verbal scores. Teens rank "scientists" and "young people" as the two groups that will cause "most changes for the better in the future." Nearly three in four 8- to 12-year-olds use computers, outdistancing older teens and adults alike... So, on balance, who are these kids, and what can one say about their generation? Sure, they're brash and bold, given to unseemly bursts of temper and cockiness and ambition, as though the world is being handed to them and all they have to do is grab it. Then again, they're doing a fine (and largely unreported) job coping confidently and high-spiritedly with a demoralizing youth culture not of their own making. Nearly all of today's teen negatives are residues of trends launched by Boomers and apexed by Gen Xers. Conversely, nearly all of today's teen positives are new trends, unique to Millennials, with much of the initiative coming from them."

I know what you're probably thinking: what incredible findings. *Kids fascinated with new technologies? Cocky, ambitious young people the cause of future change? Who would've guessed?* Strauss and Howe are— little surprise— rarely supported by historians or sociologists, but seem to have made an impact in the wider world, particularly in messianic conservative circles that include both evangelical Christians and the non-evangelical Steven Bannon. This isn't necessarily a condemnation in itself; even good science can be appropriated by bad political actors. Just ask Charles Darwin. But the conservative temperament certainly does pair well with Strauss and Howe, in so far as they explain away the dynamism and contingency of history with something as familial and cyclical as the generation.

To be fair, the generational unit has occupied some notable sociological minds, such as Karl Mannheim in *"The Problem of Generations"* (1928). From the jump, Mannheim explicitly disavows the kind of generational thinking found in Strauss and Howe, which cherry-picks and jumbles together the biological with the social and historical in order to cook up a "sort of sociology of chronological tables (*Geschichtstabellensoziologie*), which uses its bird's-eye perspective to 'discover' fictitious generation movements to correspond." Mannheim likewise denies that each generation could be "characterized" in that the way Strauss and Howe chart out. Rather they had to be understood through their contradictions, in the way that, closer to his day, "*both the romantic-conservative and the liberal-rationalist youth belonged to the same actual generation, romantic-conservatism and liberal-rationalism were merely two polar forms of the intellectual and social response to an historical stimulus experienced by all in common.*" For Mannheim, a generation isn't defined by characteristics, mentalities, or unitary *Zeitgeists*, but by a common experience that elicits problematizations and polar reactions— as well as a shared recognition of that commonality that brings us to say "those of my generation." Mannheim proceeds from the true-enough thesis that historical events and conditions make a shared impression on us, especially on the young, whose "elasticity of mind" not only makes them more impressionable but also more receptive to the potentialities in shifting historical conditions. However, even at Mannheim's best— the best we have in terms of a theory of generations— it still falls apart under any genuine scrutiny or any time we make it anything other than shorthand for an age cohort.

Take this imprinting hypothesis— our "social remembering," as Mannheim calls the impressions left upon us by events and conditions. Social remembering

is very real, of course, but what does it have to do with the generational measure properly speaking, the timespan between a parent and child? When we think about it, we potentially remember *anything* that we're conscious enough to experience, in some form or another, which would presumably make human longevity a better measure for social memory— possibly longer if we account for the ways memory sediments into our habits and institutions. Such social memory would be especially lifelong for catastrophic events. Ask: what differences should we expect to observe between the grandfathers, fathers, sons, and grandsons who survived the bombing of Hiroshima? I imagine it made a pretty similar *impression* on all of them, and one that wouldn't fade until most of its survivors had died off, some seventy years after. This is where we stand today, which might help explain the recent resurgence of Japanese militarism, just as the current rise of far-right European nationalism might have been possibilized by social amnesia for the horrors of the World Wars. The dead can no longer object.

Or consider another event often used to mark generational differences, September 11th. In the United States, life shifted for every person old enough to read a newspaper. It was the bubble-bursting of a complacent Clintonite era, the end of "post-history"— even for those who never believed in such a thing. It was a sudden social shift, a freshly-dealt set of historical conditions and imaginaries, to which we naturally had varied relations by age, income, ethnicity, religion, geography, education, and ideology. The same goes for the advent of the internet, that other over-used generational sieve. However, this event was an onset rather than a rupture, and this difference in "temporal envelope," to borrow a term from acoustics, is going to affect how it affects us. The young— as the young will do— were quicker to click with its front-end technological and media trends, and the older— as the older will do— quicker to consolidate and control its underlying structures. Everybody was a part of this shift, even your grandmother. Where exactly does the generation, as such, come into play? There's an age gradient in the usage of certain apps or terms, yes, and that gradient is partly explained by technological and media trends in the most "elastic" period of our lives, but how long is this period presumed to last? Depends on how you define our "formative years," I suppose. In terms of culture, we might say our teens and early twenties, bringing the elastic period of life to about ten or fifteen year, rather than the thirty between birth and parenthood. This squares with the pop-historical periodization in terms of decades— for music, fashion, technology, and politics. If we're taking this seriously, we have to add this as a sub-generational unit to get our math to work.

Defenders of generational theory might reply that, in fact, yes, these all matter, that we would witness cycles within cycles—lifetimes, generations, decades, trends. And then on top of this, we'd have to account for how different events and phenomena have different echoes, dampening down through the ages. However, even if we could discern some meaningful regularity to all these cycles within cycles, bear in mind that Ptolemaic astronomers could still successfully predict celestial events while assuming that the Sun circled the Earth. Sometimes, there are just better ways of going about things. Meaning that, even if these cycles within cycles—created by birth, aging and death—can be discerned in historical change, we age and replenish the human population at the constant rate of one year per year. With respect to the pace of historical change, they all sum to zero. Continuing the Copernican metaphor, then, history is our Sun, where we should begin if we want to explain and illuminate those other cycles within cycles.

Say we're not using "generations" to explain or illuminate, though. Say we're trying to rally, trying to put some spin on the direction of historical processes. This is great. When Greta Thunberg decries grown-ups for failing to be faithful stewards of the earth, it's a good trick for guiltig her elders and galvinizing her peers. But that's all it is, a rhetorical device, not an historical analysis and not a compelling moral indictment of one generation versus another—which I'd imagine Greta understands perfectly well. She probably gets that if her generation were born sixty years ago, or a hundred years ago, or a hundred and sixty years ago, in those conditions, under those conceptions, they would have done the exact same thing. Radical voluntarism is essential for strategy and self-direction, including the self-direction of large groups and whatever we-intention is required for social action. However, it does nothing to *explain* the social action of others or previous eras. Here, Mannheim flails. For him, a true generation is not merely a grouping but an *entelechy*, an Aristotelian term that means something like "the manifestation or actualization of a potentiality," like a flower blooming from its seed. Depending on a number of things, the seed might flower proudly, poorly, or not at all. The same is true for the generation, says Mannheim, which explains why for most of history, and for many parts of the world, centuries can pass without one generation rising up to define itself against its predecessors. But what's the hold up? Are young minds any less elastic or impressionable? He speculates that it might have something to do with rate of social change:

"The importance of the acceleration of social change for the realization of the potentialities inherent in a generation location is clearly demonstrated by the fact that largely static or very slowly changing communities like the peasantry display no such phenomenon as new generation units sharply set off from their predecessors by virtue of an individual entelechy proper to them; in such communities, the tempo of change is so gradual that new generations evolve away from their predecessors without any visible break, and all we can see is the purely biological differentiation and affinity based upon difference or identity of age. The quicker the tempo of social and cultural change is, then, the greater are the chances that particular generation location groups will react to changed situations by producing their own entelechy." (pgs. 309-310)

But if the actualization of a generation's *entelechy* depends on the rate or acceleration of social change, that takes us right back to square one: *what causes that social change to accelerate or happen at all?* Yeah, why *was* the sleepy tempo of peasant life and feudal society quickened by cities, nations, industry, capital, upheaval, epidemics, democracy, the modern spirit—to name just a few? That's what we're trying to get at, Mannheim! "*The Problem of Generations*" clears away some pitfalls of the term; it never really tells us what we're supposed to do with it. For his part, Mannheim had hoped to link the large contours of social change to the "inner dialectic" of individual human consciousness—to make history in a way more *personable*, which is exactly what I'd warn against, this reifying and identarian sense of generations as a *team*, rather than just a shadowy pattern cast by the interference of age and historical movement.