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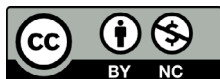
THE EUROPEAN EXPERIENCE

A Multi-Perspective History of Modern Europe, 1500-2000

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6.4.3 Generations and Lifecycles in Contemporary History (ca. 1900–2000)

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Introduction

When we address the question of generations and lifecycles in the twentieth century, we must approach it on at least two levels. We must look at both how these phenomena change throughout the century and how we talk about them. That is, we have to talk about the evolution of the phenomenon and also about its interpretation.

Generations and Lifecycles: A Theoretical Overview

Human life has always been described by lifecycles with reference to the individual and in terms of generations with reference to wider society, but the criteria of division and the characteristics of life-stages varied between different ages and different cultures. Talking about lifecycles and generations in scientific terms, with the aim to describe and better understand society, is a relatively new phenomenon. While the concept of familial generations (and eventual conflicts between them) has been depicted since the time of ancient literature, the concept of social generations took shape only in the nineteenth century. French philosopher Auguste Comte (1798–1857) in his *Cours de philosophie positive* (1830–1842) claimed that social changes had a lot to do with generational changes. The first theory of generations as a sociological issue belongs to Hungarian-German sociologist Karl Mannheim (1893–1947; *Das Problem der Generationen*, 1928) who defined a (social) generation as a group of individuals of similar ages with the common historical experience of important

events within a set period of time. Another influential theory of generations belongs to American historians William Strauss and Neil Howe (*Generations*, 1991), according to whom historical analysis indicates that the values, behaviour, and worldview of successive generations show a certain cyclical pattern, with each repeated cycle lasting over eighty years and consisting of four stages, or "turnings": High, Awakening, Unravelling, and Crisis. During the twentieth century, describing generations and understanding their behaviour was considered to be more and more important. Lifecycle and generational issues became highly thematised in social, familial, and individual aspects. By the end of the century, they had become a key issue for policymakers and business actors. An understanding of generational preferences is now considered crucial for winning votes, expanding consumerism, managing labour markets, and therefore the capacity to foresee social changes in order to succeed in politics and business. Since the last decade of the twentieth century, generational affiliation has been a frequent issue in both public discourse and interpersonal communication.

Looking back over the twentieth century, the following generations are commonly outlined in Europe and the Americas:

- The Lost Generation, also known as the 'Generation of 1914' in Europe (born from 1883 to 1900), including those who fought in the First World War

- The Greatest Generation, also known as the 'G.I. Generation' (born from 1901 to 1927), including the veterans of the Second World War

- The Silent Generation, also known as the 'Lucky Few' (born from 1928 to 1945), who came of age in the post–war era

- Baby boomers (born from 1946 to 1964). The name references the increased birth rates that were related to the end of the Second World War

- Generation X (born from 1965 to 1980), sometimes called the 'latchkey generation' to portray children returning to an empty home because both parents were working or divorced

- Millennials, also known as Generation Y (born between 1981 and 1996). They are the first digital native generation and are familiar with multitasking

- Generation Z (born from 1997 to 2012), also known as Zoomers, the 'true' digital natives or digital integrators.

While local and national variations are numerous, these generational categories can be applied worldwide due to the processes of globalisation. In

Eastern Europe, the baby boomers are often called the 'generation of the 60s', emphasising their high levels of social and political activity during the 1960s. This phenomenon was closely related to the presence of the Iron Curtain in Cold War geopolitics. Another major historical change in Eastern Europe was the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, preceded by the *perestroika* movement that lends its name to the 'perestroika generation'. In every former socialist country, fundamental social changes followed and marked an entire generation.

Youth Culture and Youth Subcultures before the 1960s

At the beginning of the twentieth century, European youth remained divided along gender and class lines. Although girls had better access to education and joined the labour market in increasing numbers, marriage and starting a family were still regarded as an inevitable path to womanhood. On the other hand, even though upper- and middle-class young men were able to experience a sense of generational identity and sometimes develop an autonomous youth culture while attending boarding schools, for most young men from the popular classes, whether in rural or urban settings, the transition to working life often took place just after primary education. However, in most European countries, military service was seen as a necessary rite of passage and a test of manhood.

Fig. 1: Komsomol meeting at the Magnitka plant (1932), CC BY 3.0, Wikimedia, https://commons. wikimedia.org/wiki/File:RIAN_archive_25358_Komsomol_meeting.jpg.

The heavy casualties of the First World War would consequently account for the idea of a 'lost generation' of young men, entertaining a cult of youth in the

interwar period. The 'Roaring Twenties' also saw the rise of new youth cultures, in well-off circles (the so-called 'Bright Young Things') but also more popular groups (swing and jazz fans), as well as new forms of women's emancipation in the form of the co-called 'flappers'. The ideological indoctrination of young people was a central feature of interwar totalitarian regimes, which founded new compulsory youth movements, such as the Hitler Youth in Germany, Balilla in Italy, or Komsomol in the USSR—though eliminating all dissident groups (for example, the 'Edelweiss Pirates' in Germany) was never a complete success.

The Second World War disrupted intergenerational relationships. In Britain, 800,000 children were evacuated from urban areas to escape the Blitz. In Germany, tens of thousands of *Trümmerjugend* (literally, 'rubble youths'), many of them war orphans, resorted to the black market and petty crimes in order to survive. At the beginning of the 1950s most youth movements were on the decline—except in Eastern and Central Europe, for example the Free German Youth in the GDR. Youth delinquency was on the rise and the idea of a 'generational crisis' gained ground. But this should be put into perspective. Firstly, the crisis was not a new topic. As early as the 1920s the rise of youth gangs had been a subject of concern. Moreover, although the post-war youth began to question the responsibilities of older generations for the war—as well as for the nuclear threat and decolonisation in the post-war order—opinion polls showed that most of them identified with their parents' view of society and political beliefs.

Change was nevertheless on the way. In the context of the baby boom, the rise in school leaving ages, and the democratisation of education, the 1950s saw the emergence of a distinct youth culture, cutting across class and gender lines and identified by its own cultural practices and consumption patterns. In a time of affluence and full employment, teenagers experienced an unprecedented increase of their purchasing power, and became a new target for consumer and cultural industries. Clothes (miniskirts), records (rock 'n' roll), radio shows (*Salut les copains* in France, 1959), magazines (*Bravo* in West Germany, 1956), and movies (*The Wild Ones*, 1954; *Rebel Without a Cause*, 1955) were specifically aimed at the new Americanised generation. Youth culture also instigated new uses of space and leisure time. Young people would meet in coffee bars, all the more popular when equipped with a jukebox and pinball machine, or dancing and music venues (like The Marquee in London and the Golf Drouot in Paris), but also at funfairs, amusement piers, stadiums, or more simply in the local square. Young girls, often more strictly monitored than their male counterparts, would develop a specific 'bedroom culture', centred around their current interests—be they fashion or pop idols—and facilitated by the diffusion of new, portable products, including the transistor radio and the

record player. Others nevertheless took an active part in youth subcultures, subverting gender roles and shocking public opinion with open displays of sexual desire—Beatlemania being one example.

In any case, youth culture cannot be discounted as a mere by-product of consumer society. The topic of informal youth groups is closely linked to different definitions of 'subculture'. The Chicago School of urban sociology linked subcultures to concepts such as delinquency, illegality and autonomy. The Birmingham School, or the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, conceptualised informal youth groups as an articulation of class-based resistance against the hegemonic norms of 1960s and 1970s British bourgeois society (Jefferson and Hall, *Resistance through Rituals*, 1993). Throughout Europe, several mostly working-class and partly delinquent youth subcultures—called *blousons noirs* in France, *Halbstarken* in Germany, *teppisti* in Italy, *stilyagi* in the USSR—used music, especially rock 'n' roll, and a bricolage of fashion styles to construct their own identity. In Britain, Teddy Boys got involved in the Notting Hill race riots of 1958, and violent clashes between mods and rockers in seaside resorts sparked a moral panic in 1964–1966.

More political in its expression was the revolt of the intellectual youth, beatniks, or existentialists, against the establishment. In Britain, they joined the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) and became involved in the folk and blues music scene; in France or West Germany, some young jazz fans expressed their support for the civil rights movement. In 1957, in Moscow, the World Festival of Youth and Students, which gathered 34,000 young people from 131 countries engaged against war and imperialism, was used by the USSR to promote a cultural and political thaw. From the mid-1960s onwards, students would play a major role on the European political and cultural stages.

Political and Dissident Sub- and Countercultures

During the 1960s, Europe and the US saw the rise of political, mostly dissident, sub- and countercultures, whose activities especially culminated in what is known as the 'global 1968'. During the legendary year of 1968, which in reality stretched from the summer of 1967 to that of 1969, student protests erupted in fifty-six countries worldwide, but particularly Western Europe, Japan, and the US. The movements had comparable aims, addressed comparable social problems, and used comparable methods to do so. Students worldwide protested for more democratic societies, or even a socialist renewal. They demanded a democratisation of universities and more equality and freedom in matters of sexuality and gender. They addressed the problematic pasts of their respective countries and their predecessors, whether fascism or National Socialism in the cases of Italy and Germany, collaboration in the case of France,

colonialism in the case of the United Kingdom, or rampant racism in the case of the United States. The student-run protest movements experimented with new ways of living and loving, alongside new forms of provocative and performative protest, including teach-ins, sit-ins, university occupations, and impromptu political street-plays. To varying degrees in different national contexts, militancy was also discussed and employed. This could range from throwing bags of flour or desserts at police and political representatives, to erecting barricades and hurling stones and Molotov cocktails, or even planting bombs. Closely linked with this global upheaval was the birth of a plethora of interrelated political sub- or countercultures such as the international Hippie movement, the Italian Indiani Metropolitani, the Dutch Provos, or the German Spontis and Gammler. These cultures experimented with new ways of living and relationships, new styles and music, and psychedelic drugs like LSD. They tried to challenge the political and cultural status quo through creative and expressive forms of protest and placed a strong emphasis on self-actualisation, authenticity, and expression.

The political countercultures of the 1960s had a very complicated relationship with consumer culture. On the one hand they were very critical towards it: 1960s political countercultures often perceived mainstream societies as semi-authoritarian, bourgeois, and middle-class, captured by a mindless consumerism that numbed the masses and supressed political dissent. Some German activists who went on to become the founders of the left-wing terrorist Red Army Faction even firebombed two department stores in 1968. On the other hand, these political countercultures built up their own 'alternative' consumer culture, with organic shops, left-wing bookstores, and alternative bars, publishing houses, or fashion brands. Countercultural youths were often decidedly hedonistic in their leisure time and their general outlook on what it meant to be 'authentic'. Finally, the political sub- and countercultures of the 1960s relied on the same relationship with consumer industry as the non-political youth cultures of the 1950s and early 1960s: they used products made by consumer industries, for example fashion, and through a process of bricolage reassembled them in a specific style which to them conveyed a certain dissident political significance or identity. These styles were then perceived as new trends and copied and disseminated further by consumer industries. It was this process that, moreover, extended countercultural movements from the national level to the global level. The availability of countercultural styles through a transnational consumer culture to some extent assisted in the dissemination and stylistic synchronisation of counter- and subcultural movements in the 1960s.

Fig. 2: "Swinging London": Young adults in London's Carnaby Street (1966), Public Domain, Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Londons_Carnaby_Street,_1966.jpg.

The political events of 1968 and the young sub- and countercultural movements that sprang from it are often interpreted as the global eruption of a sharp conflict between the young post-war generation and their elders. The rhetoric of young activists in 1968 ('trust nobody over thirty') and the clearly significant impact of generationality on the events around it seems to verify that assumption, but things were much more complicated. Firstly, 1968 was not an eruption. Rather, it was the multi-layered culmination of specific national conflicts and wider societal transformations that most European societies underwent during the 'long sixties' (circa 1958–1974). As explained earlier in this chapter, 1960s European societies benefitted from unprecedented levels of economic growth, employment, and material wealth, accompanied by European integration and the Cold War *détente*. For most Europeans, basic needs were secured. And instead of material security, they could direct their attention towards political matters that were seen as secondary or even dangerous in times of scarcity and geopolitical conflict, such as imperialism, gender, sexuality, consumerism, or deficient democracy in various institutions. Born into this constellation, the post-war generation was shaped by the duality of affluence on one hand, and the politicisation of European societies on the other. The mindset of the parental generation, however, often lingered on the experiences of wartime scarcity and insecurity. The post-war generation was socialised in 'post-materialistic' values and received a prolonged adolescence; European societies had massively expanded the sector of tertiary education, offering an

unprecedented number of young people an extended phase for activism and self-actualisation between youth and adulthood.

Secondly, the lines of conflict between the generations were not as sharp as has often been suggested. Research shows that the families of activists often supported political protest and the goals of their children, making it important to differentiate between familial generational relations and public ones. Public generational relations were often strained during the protests of the long 1968 and afterwards. Left-wing activism even led to conservative electoral backlash, securing the election of conservative parties in Denmark and the US in 1968, or Great Britain in 1970, for example. Despite the backlash, or the explicit radicalism of activists, there was no deep-seated or open hostility between generations. In fact, most Western European countries lowered the voting age to eighteen during the 1970s. Thirdly, the activists who took part in 1968 did not represent their entire generation. Although the degree of working-class activism in the 1968 movements varied from country to country, and was especially high in France and Italy, protests were mainly carried out by highly educated, middle- and upper-class youths. Young, working-class people had a more positive attitude towards the protests than their seniors, but not as positive or supportive an attitude as that among academics.

"Neo-tribes" and Postmodern Subcultures

According to Michel Maffesoli (1988), some of the subcultures of the late-twentieth century could also be understood as a renaissance of tribal social organisation. His "neo-tribes" were often employed in the debates over the early-1990s rave subculture in the United Kingdom. Tribal symbols, rituals, and myths are also often discussed in relation to football hooliganism—and, to a lesser extent, skinhead scenes. However, many of the members of these informal youth groups identified with the symbols, rituals, and overall 'style' of one or more subcultures without necessarily identifying with all of the meanings that were implied. For instance, Czech football support groups of the late 1990s identified themselves by various means: fans could be observed wearing heavy-metal denim jackets and punk-rock t-shirts, combined with skinhead boots. There were also 'normal' fans, who did not display any visible association with a subculture. Skinheads in hooligan gangs often left their Harrington or bomber jackets and Dr Martens boots at home. Instead of Fred Perry or Lonsdale polo shirts, they wore Umbro or Adidas t-shirts and jogging sneakers, adopting a rather 'casual' hooligan style. Nevertheless, hooligan gangs were not composed entirely of skinheads. Their common feature was that they were composed almost entirely of young males between the ages of fifteen and thirty-five, with most participants in their early twenties. Fascist,

racist, and neo-Nazi symbols were sometimes displayed out of pure political conviction—and at other times in order to provoke the police force or society's 'bourgeois ethics'—even if those wearing them did not necessarily identify with the far right. This notion of a "supermarket of styles" and meanings could be closely related to the phenomenon of post-subculture (Polhemus, 1996).

Conclusion

In the twentieth century, European societies experienced a fundamental shift in how generations related to each other and particularly how younger generations expressed themselves through fashion, music and their use of leisure time. The post-war economic and baby booms, accompanied by the democratisation of education and the expansion of consumer culture, enabled the rise of distinct youth cultures in the 1950s. For the first time, youth cultures managed to transcend class and gender lines to a certain extent. All of these dynamics extended well into the 1960s and 1970s, a period in which European societies also witnessed the Cold War *détente* and the rise of post-materialist values. This constellation gave rise to distinctly political sub- and countercultures, each with their own, deeply ambivalent relationship to consumerism and generationality. The 1990s then saw the emergence of neo-tribal subcultures, ranging from ravers to young men provocatively displaying fascist symbols. All of these developments hint at the intimate relationship between media, consumerism, and youth. With the rise of the Internet, new global and local youth cultures have emerged, presenting an line of inquiry for future discussion of this topic.

Discussion questions

1. Why were the 1960s so important in the development of generations and youth cultures in Europe?

2. Describe the differences in the development of youth cultures in Eastern and Western Europe.

3. Do you feel you belong to a specific generation? Why, or why not?

Suggested reading

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Hebdige, Dick, *Subculture. The Meaning of Style* (London & New York: Routledge, 1979).

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