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# Generation Gap: Resolving Conflicts Between Generations

*The main problem of my generation in our 20s or 30s, living in Western, Central or Eastern Europe, is the trouble of the aging population and increasing life expectancy. Society is aging rapidly. At least according to the dailies' titles, "Europe is getting old – burden on future generations."*

## Societal Revolution: Age and Experience

Seeing that agents of various health and life insurances knock at our doors, or automatically saved voices speak on our answering machines choosing us for the "special private pension offer," we hardly disagree – we need to think about our retirement funds.

A state-related labour agency thinks along the same lines, sending each young, perhaps first-time, employee a proposal of its pension if she or he keeps on working in the way she or he currently works (at least that happens in "good old Germany").

Longevity is a part of the story which happens to humankind. Francis Fukuyama, in addition to the problems of social security, the tripling of the elderly population and the increase of public expenditures, predicts the emergence of two strange power parties in the world of multiple generations.

One is the power of old women, and the other is the young "super-angry" men, who are progressively taking over the voters' community and destabilizing natural political experience–power hierarchies.

He writes: "The natural tendency of one generation to get out of the way of the up-and-coming one will be replaced by the simulta-

neous existence of three, four, even five generations."[1] The dispute on the aging society goes further into our common-sense lives than the trouble of which generation pays whose rent and how.

The communal dissatisfaction of the current young tax-payer generations about the tax-receiver old-economy boom generations adds criticism to the current discussion on the generation contract, the anxiety of losing the welfare state, and the fearlessness between the generations.

These three categories are the protected notions of the modern, self confident, peaceful and hard-working Western society. The dilemma is that this right Order, this Welfare-state and this Equality between the generations do not work any longer.

One reason for this derives from the global or local market transformation and demographic changes. The global market and longevity are common scapegoats for the grievances of a free global and anxious post-modern world.

For the meantime, let us presume in the smaller scale that the greatest social issue of our time is longevity and all its socio-political penalties, such as less security and less solidarity for all, and less chances for responsibility for all because humanity is growing old.

An old proverb says that any friendship ends when it comes to money. Is the current generation gap between the growing num-

bers of seniors and growing generation of "double income, no kids" the loss of generational friendship? If there is a gap, there is a conflict; and if there is a conflict, it needs resolution.

To resolve the conflict is to think about equality between the parties. But, firstly, it is hard to identify those conflicted parties within that twin picture of the old/young world, in the framework of the conceptually unclear *generation* question, isn't it? Before we talk about the concept of *generation gap* and the *generation conflict*, let us converse about the problem of identity and the complex phenomenon of "generation".

## Four Ways of Talking About Generation

The classical description of the generation by Karl MANNHEIM[2] mainly constructs two problems, the polarisation between the generations and the problem of the relation of a particular generation to the other *ideas* appearing in the society as its formational *consciousness* and collective *mobilisation*.

Historically, the generations defined themselves through the critical *avantgarde* or in the name of pathfinders – a sort of *modernity* finders against the conservative competitors. Somehow there is no politically correct generation formation.

There is no formation of generation apart from historical turnovers or new cultural appearances. Sociologist Zygmunt BAUMAN would describe those challenging, excessive and even *order-violating* manifestations as the guidelines to the modernizing mind of any society.

Therefore, the debate about the modern order helps to identify the plot of the public conflict in the postmodern unordered order.[3] This description of MANNHEIM's is not the only existing description of *generation*.

There are four ways of talking about the term *generation*: the generation used in the context of family and genealogy; the generation used by pedagogy; the generation used by historians; and the generation used in the socio-political context.

The main themes of *family* research distinguish the life-span event: the relationship between the generations in regard to child–parent–grandparent relationships, and the principle of dependency between them.

1 FUKUYAMA Francis, *Our Posthuman Future*. London, 2002. 57–71.

2 MANNHEIM Karl, *Das Problem der Generationen*. In *Kölner Vierjahrshefte für Soziologie*. 1928/7. 157–185, 309–330.
3 BEILHARZ Peter (ed.), *The Bauman Reader*. Oxford, 2001. On *Sociology and Postmodernity* (173–199) and *Ambivalence and Order* (281–297).

One generation develops from child dependency on the parent through socialization, individualization, contact inside and outside the parent's house, and leaving of the parent's house. Then come the family life of her or his own, the decision for or against children, and the contacts with other generations and their problems during the steps of any *curriculum vitæ*.

The new conflict of those relations appears, for example, through bondless and unclear roles of new families: families with no kids, families with no grandparents, bi-national families, and so on.

*Pedagogy* speaks about generation in the context of learning situations: the generation of teachers and the generation of students maintaining and producing further norms, knowledge and cultural, economical and social inheritance. The new conflict appears, for example, in the final understanding that the learning process is a life-long process and not predominantly a matter of age.

*Historians* use generation in the context of groups with specific orientation and action, as social movements and generations of historical events and of historical weight. The new conflict comes within, for example, ungrouped powerless groups with less emphasis on change.

*Political* language talks about the generation schematizing welfare structures and characterizing the main protagonist of the generational relationship, social security of solidarity principles and the conflicts within.

Following along those lines, some sociologists like to speak about *generational cohorts* or the *generation unit*[4], instead of the *generation*. Unit or cohort comprises a combination of factors and includes the ambivalence of the four different ways of the relationship between generation theory and praxis, taking into account the existence of multigenerational bonds.

Those conceptual differences and variety of applications of the word *generation* appear in the question: what is my generation unit in a special situation and what is it really and essentially[5].

4 Some social demographers, scientists who study the effects of population on society, use the term "cohort" to refer to people born in the same general time span who share key life experiences. Members of cohorts who come of age in lean times or war years tend to think and act differently than those born and raised in peace and abundance.

5 From Hans Lösch's discussion with Klaus Roth and Heiner Keupp on identity as a matter of negotiation, which says that the process of identification comes from two questions: who are you really and who are you in a particular situation. He emphasises that multiple identities lay not in a person as a multiple personality, but in a person's ability to sustain different features of identification for her or his use in a certain life and background situation. In *Baustelle Identität. Zu Sanierungsarbeiten an einem beschädigten Konstrukt, Dokumentation einer Fachtagung*. München, 2001.

This process of identification Emanuel Levinas calls a "difficult freedom" between who you are *already* and who you are *still*.[6]

## Naming of Generations and the Problem of Identity

We know how theorists describe their goals in using the term *generation*. How clearly can we now identify our own generation unit? Identity is the lens through which we view conflict reasoning and conflict resolution. Identity is the open project of choice of each individual related to the sum of collectivity. There are some helpful notions for the formation of our belonging to any of the generations.

The first, mentioned before, is our relationship to *order*; second our relationship to *change vs. continuation*; third, our relationship to *self and other*[7]; fourth, our notification of the question of *relationship* between generations; and fifth, our understanding of *resources for human development* and their costs to other generations.

All these perceptual conditions help to deconstruct the features of given or subscribed generation naming. Power and interests direct some naming, but some names are earned. The most profound problem of identification is in the answer to the questions: What changed your life? Which event played the most meaningful role and left the clearest mark on our lives?

The Germans have been imprinted from the '90s, then the late '60s or World War II, and so are grouped into historically clear distinguished three-generation units. But not all German inhabitants of those years had those characteristic experiences in those units, and some even created different relationships towards those moods and events.

So, at least according to the five previously mentioned notions, there should already be at least 15 possible identified generation units – double, if taking into account names both from the people themselves and from outside observers.

But the complexity of each generation unit speaks about the immense identity fights outside of known dualisms, of old and young (eg. post-World War II and post-Berlin Wall) or conservative and radical (economic miracle and post-Cold War), relating to a two-fold contradiction, like of *order* and of *new order*.

Generations are likely named using false images and perceptions, involving a certain mobilization of particular interests, with

6 More in Hand Sean (ed.), *The Levinas Reader*. Oxford, 1989. 263–266.

7 Kohli Martin, *Generationen in der Gesellschaft*. Berlin 2003.

a grain of prejudice, stereotype and discrimination. But most names of generations are unknown, like Generation Xs or Generation Ys – these are the complexes of our identity which we cannot describe within the relationship of one family, of one certain event or lifespan.

If we name a generation, we already create an injustice. More to the point, generation is a social construct, helping to talk about on-going socio-political changes and to resolve the conflict within multiple statements, relevant experiences, social declarations and life prospects, through qualitative empirical data. This knowledge depends on the relationship between the plurality of named generation units and their identifications and anti-identifications in their ambivalent forms.

## Metaphor of Generation: Emotion of Ambivalent Meaning

Researchers designate the generation metaphor as the emotion of characteristic conflicts between age groups, between historical movements and ideas, and between didactic learning roles within each part of developing society.

An example of an emotion between conflicting parties appears in the form of perception difference. The metaphor of generation can be applied to something it does not literally denote. Some usage carries the analogy of *ascribed identities* and some the analogy of *assumed identities*.

There are negative descriptions of observers, such as, eg., the description of "Generation *Homo Sovieticus*," meaning former citizens of the Soviet Union and certain characteristic features, ranging from a serious judgmental tendency to bribery to the funnier habit of buying goods in great quantities, in case a friend might need it.

And there are positive descriptions of historical observation, related to action and movement for rights and peace, naming the generation of the Vietnam War. And there is the famous post-war "Lost Generation," the most literary creative writers' generation, opposed to the pop-æsthetic consumer culture "Generation Golf"[8] (related to the cheap car for all as a statement).

As we speak, there are new kinds of generations determining themselves. The Asian computer specialists assume a virtual digital gap between "Generation C" (cyber generation) or "Nexters" (Generation Net) and the "Lost Generation" (pre-internet generation).

The access to information and international trends in fashion, lifestyle and ideas increases exponentially and creates a metaphorical gap between businesses. This lost generation is living in a "warfare state," which means that they are trapped in intra-state and inter-state conflicts.

These conflicts are class, ethnic, religious, regional and nationalistic "wars". This generation runs the risk of being cannon fodder for the military, the militias, authoritarian mass movements, cults and mobs.[9]

More *bona fide* is the generation of "Keinen Bock" (meaning "moodless" generation), youngsters lost on the street, industrially developed but living outside any conventional wealth, a generation of bored and ironic individuals of the new Europe.

They are the "Generation X" of the educated youth emigrating to Western Europe, leaving Central and Eastern Europe without any particular goals and particular plans, tending towards a negative perception of their own countries and the host community's life, without developing any bonds.

Where do we all belong? Intercultural studies show that the conflict is in the formation of this identity. The question is, who describes that: historical distance, our parents, effects of migration, achievements, and finally us ourselves.

If we need pages to describe ourselves, what does "Generation *Homo Sovieticus*" or "Lost Generation" describe? It shows how easy it is to misuse those terms and names, forgetting the implicit metaphor.

We seldom know where we belong, so how can we be defined in opposition to anyone else? Do we really have a generation of order (old) and the metaphoric generation of a new order or disorder (young)? Isn't that too general and too broad to say? So what are the generation gap and its conflict?

## Examples of Generation Conflict

The word "generation gap" appears in literature as a mystified term. It is mystified in the demonstration of distance and indifference to the unknown. For example, the 1980s book, *Wir Kinder vom Bahnhof Zoo* by Christiane F. (written by Kai Hermann and

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8 According to the book *Generation Golf* by Illies Florian, similar to the *Tristesse Royale* by Kracht Christian.

9 According to the Summary of the Conference: Decision Makers 2010.Building Sustainability in a Globalized World in Hong Kong 2000. In http://www.cap-info.de/triangle/events/hongkong/wg3.html

Horst Rieck) won cult status for exposing the realities of drug kids and their dreams in the underground "abnormal" reality.

The shocking example of the gap between drug kids and their helpless parents is the drastic documentation of this unneeded mystification of unresolved generation conflict. From the cult status of youth cultures to the defective parents' generation, there is an ongoing balanced conflict of *losers and winners* depending on each other.

According to François Höpflinger, generation conflict can be resolved by unfolding the interdependency model.[10] The negative interdependency (conflict) stands against the positive interdependency (solidarity).

The most well-known examples of the so-called *generational conflict* are: the discussion around *generational contract*; the question of segregation between the generations; and the question of ambivalence in generational relationships.

*Contract between the generations* looks like a legal term at first sight. It is very often used to claim generational equality. Enforcing this contract should fulfil the zero sum method. The problem is that such a contract does not exist in any jurisdiction. There is no identified person, group or generation, which has signed any similar contract.[11]

The argument for such a financial security (pension) cannot be claimed on legal grounds for additional reasons: there is not a determined year of birth which could be given as a "year of generation," delineating who is lucky enough to get this promise fulfilled. The other question is: which year of birth should pay for it?

Therefore the contract between generations is just a suggestion for volunteer generational solidarity in the growing competition between generational units having different claims to different needs. The solution is that the contract between generations does not exist; therefore we should talk about the solidarity possibilities.

*Segregation* appears for the reason that more and more generation units live independently from each other and therefore become less aware of each other's needs, despite the fact that they have different needs.

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10 Höpflinger Francois, *Generationenfrage- Konzepte, theoretische Ansätze und Beobachtungen zu Generationenbeziehung in späteren Lebensphasen.* Lausanne, 1999. 20–21.
11 Richter Ingo, *Ist der sogenannte Generationenvertrag ein Vertrag im Rechtssinne? Pacta sunt servanda, rebus sic stantibus.* In Liebau Eckert (ed.), *Das Generationenverhältnis. Über das Zusammenleben in Familie und Gesellschaft.* Weinheim, 1997. 77–87.

For example, in the family situation, grandparents beware "intimacy from distance" to their grandchildren, but less concern is given to the problem of "sandwich families," where the middle generation is socially obliged to take care of the young and the old.

In this changing situation, the state plays the role of solidarity bringer, as in the family life the unwritten sharing mood still rules. The difficulty on one side is that on the level of family there is a generational peace, but on a broader level there is injustice. There the state takes over the tensions.

It is a problem of equal integration and of different needs. Each group lives in its own world and there is little sharing. The problem is that it goes on in dynamic change. Those who are young are becoming older, those who are students are changing into teachers, and those who made their history in the '90s are not likely making history in the 2020s.

The solution is that segregation is a risk, undertaken in an attempt to fulfil needs. Different norms of life cannot be thrown into one pot, but they can be in dialogue. Segregation is a natural process, but it should not be forgotten that it is dynamic.

*The ambivalent relations between the generational units* are viewed with the understanding that status, roles and norms of any group are relative in time and space. In any decision, society must balance norms which continue and norms which society itself changes. It is hard to believe, but our grandparents never discoursed about individual human rights.

They addressed moral taboos and the law of common good. This relationship between generations is naturally in conflict with each other and hardly can reach a zero sum resolution, because it changes in perception and importance.

The solution is that relationships between generations are predestined to be incompatible; hence there is a need of guidelines regarding solidarity principles and social exchange in common abilities and goods, and less talk about the unresolved cycle of clashing for resources.

## Does the Generation Gap Really Exist?

Most conflicts of generational communication come from the tension between needs and rights that are incompatible. Norms and needs are different for each generation and even more so for each person.

Our times are the product of individualism. It is natural for a person to take on the personified role of "victim" if she or he has difficulties and a reason to fight for some legitimate goals and a shortened life-span.

These differences are the differences in the proposed solution and the reasoning of the problem. The conflict scenarios mentioned before and anxieties related to them show not only the complexity of the generation unit, but also the emotions behind it.

The unclear multiple goals of education, planning future politics, controlling demographics and interests of each group are the mirrors of the generational relationship. The connotation of the generation gap points out the conflict.

It would be easier to say that generation conflict is everything and nothing. It means that the generation gap does not exist. The myth of the generation gap cannot exist if we take into account that it changes each moment we change parties, interest or age.

The fact that we often find ourselves confusing the use of generational relationship in different contexts speaks of the conflict we create. The goal of pedagogy is to speak of the "anti-generation gap" as a metaphor for the learning experience and the principle of exchanging wisdom in importance.

But this goal is not easy to transfer into socio-political discussion, when it comes to hierarchical structures and possibilities for young people to take an equal part in the leading roles, irregardless of the learning principle: the elder and more experienced play the boss.

The fact that the aging population shall receive a "promised" compensation at the expense of the young working father shows how fast generational solidarity in the family can be transferred to the societal level, giving the problem of inflation and restructuring financial shares an argument of a different weight.

For example, it could be an argument to transfer the ecological tax to pension funds instead of using it for the more common good, such as increasing the quality of life by investing it into public transport.

The principle of constant shifting of meanings and interests shows that we become too independent in relation to global issues and less capable of solving local problems in solidarity with each other.

# Equality as a Guide for the Sake of Future Generations

The ideal quality of life for a senior person is that of expecting to live longer and healthier, and expecting to prolong active social or political involvement in the present. The answer of a junior, who desires a similar future, is that there is less working and podium space for all of us now.

Through specialisation, each occupation is getting narrower and harder work is required, while at the same time we put our family life careers at risk if working. The junior says that our lives are too organised and our minds strive for changes in the system, which would benefit from adaptation.

Our social systems are made from experience of seniors for the seniors, keeping the sense of security on the question of insurance. The questioning of the legitimacy of the welfare state and fear of its disappearance is very often confused with the debate on rights and frightening mathematical calculations of future funds available: a demographic economy.

In fact, it has more to do with normative politically formed decisions. Logical possibilities are political choices in: the method of restructuring the population or reduction of the welfare state or birth control or immigration and reform.[12]

Reform is a gradual process of thought about the "future generations". "Old Europe" has a utopian and kind of utilitarian code and is unintentionally extending the old generational conflict of "who supports whom".

I would like to call it the conflict of equality and freedom, which must be put to rest through openly discussed solutions. Equality as standard of "moral economy" reduces tensions for resources. We are condemned to Freedom as a standard of being in interdependency, which is dependency for sharing.

The generation gap is a complex concept of differences between different units of the society. Its use also shows how various conflicts can be filtered in clarifying application and goals of generational units.

It also shows how the generation gap as a mirror of conflict in family day-to-day life may positively and negatively influence a

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12 Leisering Lutz, *Alternde Bevölkerung – veraltender Sozialstaat? Demographischer Wandeln als 'Politik'. Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte, Beilage zur Wochenzeitung "Das Parlament"*. 1996/35.

socio-political mapping of society. And it also shows how the use of the concept "generation" may be manipulated.

Using it as a term to describe relationships in the family (eg. "grandmothers take care of the kids") and justifying modern behavioural culture ("grandmothers and their income should never be taxed"), using the term in fights for moral resources ("grandmothers deserve respect") and at the same time in politics itself ("grandmothers should have the right to free general health treatment"), if it goes on re-discussing the plausible possibilities of the social welfare state (for the sake of grandmothers, the welfare state should be supported).

Generation gap is a sincere word for *describing* uncounted conflicts, but less for *measuring* those conflicts. The principle of equality is the proper direction to modernity and development. The conflicts we call "generational conflicts" (of the generation gap) deserve attention as a mirror for justice and equality studies. Even if this conflict can be demetaphorised, destructured and demoralised, it does exist in all its ungrounded forms.

It is a mirror to the striving for equality: equality as the key for fairness, with utility as the greatest good; priority for individuals and groups in greater need, of creating conditions for all to realize their capabilities; for market fairness, efficient allocation of resources, for reducing the principle of inevitable inequality in the nature of competition; and equality for balanced group and individual representation.

To explain generation conflicts is the same as to make every effort for equality as an ideal possible. Equality is an ideal as it can be planned for "future generations" for those "distant strangers". There is probably no way that the conflict can reach an end, but it should be in a process of constant resolution.

As Emmanuel LEVINAS said, "Freedom is compromised in this balance of accounts in an order where responsibilities correspond exactly to liberties taken, where they compensate for them, where time relaxes and then is tightened again after having allowed a decision in the interval opened up, it could be responsibility for another."

**Suggested Reading**

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