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Generation X or Generation † ?

*A Study on some social-literary aspects,
the reception and meaning of generation X*



What are the common features of our generation? Is it worth it to speak about generations, or are they only generalisations? A young philosopher and a literary theorist analyse the book, which provided the topic of the 1999 European Regional Assembly.

GENERATION NOTHING

In 1996 generation X was, under the name of *Generatie NiX* (nothing), a big hype in Holland. The media were full of negative publicity about the generation born between 1960 and 1980. The themes of generation X: nihilism (apathy), post-modernism - a disbelief in progress - and individualism; were in the Netherlands translated as *nix*; which means nothing. The Dutch version of Generation X was Generation Nothing. We were involved in an initiative to create a more realistic image of the younger generation.

Thereby we took the chances we got to give our opinion about the generation that was constantly accusing us of having a total lack of ideas and ideals. We simply were wondering whether this generation, the babyboomers, were entitled to give that much critical remarks about our generation. We felt, in a way, offended, so we published a lot of articles, gave a lot of workshops and interviews and in the end we wrote a book about it.

COUPLAND'S NEOLOGISM

Douglas COUPLAND is a young Canadian author who got *Generation X*, his first book published by St. Martins press in the United States in 1991, because Canadian publishers did not see too much in it. First we shall tell something about the features of the book, then I will tell you something about the story. Generation X is not a story as any other.

The tone is often very critical and cynical. On the surface, some aspects draw immediate attention: at first: in the sideline you will find a dictionary with generation-X-neologism in which a lot of neologism are being explained. Besides explaining the function of the dictionary is, again, criticising society. The lemmata I found will make this clear: McJob, ultra-short-term nostalgia, mid-twenties breakdown, option paralysis, historical over- and underdosing.

A few of these lemmata directly criticise a certain situation or fact in American society in the nineties. *McJob* for instance, directly criticises the future

ences. The population of the countries is also comparable (the size of the Polish market can be an advantage to the Visegrad region). The question that is to be posed is how the cooperation of the Nordic countries can enrich the development of the Visegrad region at its present stage.

It can be asserted that the Nordic countries succeeded in surmounting their historical differences to a great extent. Compared to the situation in 1900, when only two of today's five countries were independent states (Sweden and Denmark), these countries managed to uphold reasonable political and economic relations during the era of state-building of Norway, Finland and Iceland.

Another interesting facet of the Nordic regional cooperation is the fact that in spite of all criticism, the ties between the countries were not eliminated by modern political differences (e.g. Finland's non-alignment policy).

The Nordic identity can also be described as a *translingual* identity, since it includes other than just the dominant North Germanic languages. An interesting aspect of the Nordic cooperation is the practice of *minority* policies. It can be an inspiration for the V 4, if the countries decide that the Nordic model is applicable to their specific conditions.

REGIONALIZATION AS AN ALTERNATIVE

There are certainly a considerable number of agreements and projects that could inspire the Visegrad countries in their development of their regional policy and identity. The mentioned examples represent just an impetus for further consideration. It is noteworthy that also within the framework of ecumenical cooperation in Europe, the Nordic sub-region of WSCF-E was an inspiration for the founders of the Central Europe sub-region, which has been based on the cooperation between the movements of the Visegrad countries so far.

It can be assumed that, if regionalization becomes a strong trend in the globalised world, it is likely to strengthen the position of small countries by forming larger structures that can represent regional interests at the global level. Furthermore it need not be expounded that a global world composed of well-developed regions might be an alternative to a super-power-dominated world of the 20th century.

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prospects that young people have in the employment market. *Ultra-short-term nostalgia* criticises a certain blasé mentality and lemmata like mid-twenties breakdown and option paralysis show that it is sometimes very difficult for young people to do the right thing. Historical under- and overdosing criticises a certain trend in way of acting and thinking: no one knows anymore, what is important. There is nobody around to tell what is wrong or right, and if someone does, do not trust him.

STORY OF STORYTELLING

The story is about three twenty-somethings, Dag, Claire and Andy, who grew up in the post-Fukuyama western society. They have experienced Fukuyama's ending stage of history by means of divorce, Watergate, Ronald REAGAN, yuppies, the Cold War, growing unemployment, recession, crack, nukes, pollution etc. They decide to leave it all behind.

The main characters, so to say, do not care whether the world is in a finishing stadium or whether it is not. In their opinion, everything already has been done, so the best is to do nothing. And nothing means, quit your lousy job, tell your boss the truth (in an aggressive way) and set out for the dessert.

They flee from society to a ghost town somewhere in Canada where they take a McJob for their daily expenses and fill their time with drinking and storytelling. The storytelling is a means they get closer to their personal goals in life, to comprehend and find meaning in their personal lives.

SHOPPING IS NOT CREATING

The book is divided in three parts; the three parts are subdivided in chapters. The first part, the longest one, is the most critical part, in which the characters quit their jobs and do a lot of reflections on the society today. A means to see that it is the most critical and cynical part of the book is by looking at the titles of the chapters: *The sun is your enemy*, *Our parents had more*, *Quit your job*, *Shopping is not creating*, *Dead at 30*, *buried at 70*.

In the second part the main characters flee to a Canadian ghost town where they begin telling each other some stories about their personal lives and in the third part, which is the smallest, they reflect a bit more about life itself and about future.

GENERATIONSPOTTING

The book follows a certain line: in the first part the characters, the surroundings and all events are concrete, in the second part they flee from society and they start telling stories about their lives. In the third part reality has totally disappeared. The storytelling continues but whether they are true or not is not relevant anymore. The characters stop doing concrete things; it would be nice to investigate if they still *exist* in the third part.

COUPLAND's characters criticise work and career prospects; McJob, veal fattening pan; richness in general; car-vandalism; politics; environmental problems, nuclear threats; old people, especially family; feminism in relationships; television and other

media; historical under- and overdosing; shopping; as a lack of creativity. They reflect on almost every aspect of modern society. (Compare this with *Trainspotting*: choose future, choose life, dental insurance, and mind-numbing spirit-crushing game shows.)

CRITICS ON THE CRITICISM

The first reviews on *Generation X* were mostly negative. It is very peculiar that those reviews do not reflect on the criticism on society that the main characters display but that the characters are criticised themselves. Polly SAMSON considers it "deeply nihilistic, the yawnsome threesome has so long in which to do so little that all sorts of minute details become important. The correct sort of retrogressive sunglasses to wear, for example, is as vital to them as the precise dimensions of an H-bomb cloud." That is, indeed, precisely what they do. They are in a stadium in which so much is important, or considered important by the older generation, that nothing is important anymore.

According to a recent webreview, "It is hard to find anything good to say about this book. The plot is almost non-existent, the characters are paralysed with self-consciousness, the monologues wallow in self-analysis, the structure is designed for an MTV attention span and even the cover is trashy."

The cover indeed, is trashy, the plot is not too complicated and the self-analyses the characters display are the main topic. This is the only way to make this book. *Generation X* in an expensive version with a marble white cover would be strange. A complicated plot would not attribute to the main characters point that *less is more* and to the values they discover in the small events, that a story can teach you as much as fighting a war and, on the third critical remark, I would like to pop the question: what is the use of an evaluation of an entire generation without self-analyses? The times are individual. Some reviews go even further. David BOYD, for instance, speaks about a shallow, gimmicky novel about three pathetic yuppies.

Critics, old people, feel offended by the book, they feel offended by young people, characters in a novel, who state that civilisation and all the richness their parents worked so hard for, simply stink. Doing nothing is the general remark, they only complain without raising solutions. But what would you do? Maybe doing nothing is an active, well-considered choice. Maybe there are so many paradoxes that the wisest thing to do is to keep aside.

CRITICS ON THE CRITICS ON THE CRITICS, A MOVEMENT TAKES SHAPE

To simply say that the characters do not do anything, so the book stinks, is too easy. It provoked a few reactions in which the generation conflict became visible. The first reaction was, more or less: "That is right, those spoiled little twigs profited from our wealth, from our education and what do they do? Nothing but complaining! Hanging around, smoking, drinking, and too lazy to take a decent job." It is clear that this reaction got a lot of backups from the grown-



ups. Like in the times of *SENECA*, when the educators complained about the younger generation that they did not have enough virtues.

There have been other reactions. A lot of young people recognised themselves in the characters of *COUPLAND's* book, and especially the dictionary, became a vehicle for political actions. Which is a bit strange because actions are by definition not very nihilistic. Though, by the work of few individuals, supported by a lot of passive people, political actions appeared. Jon

COWAN and
R o b
NELSON,
from *Lead
or leave
published
Revolution X*,
an action book
on thirteen
things to do to
change the world.

Senator Bill
BRADLEY wrote the
preface: "as a former
NBA player I know how
frustrating it can be to sit
on the sideline, on the
sideline you can not score
any points." The senator
argues that if you want to
change the world, you cannot
do it from the sideline, but you
have to join the game and play to
win. This is a typical adult way of
thinking. If life really is a game of
football, which you want to change,
you must not join, because by joining
you cannot change the rules. You can only change a
game if you are not playing the game.

While *Revolution X* proceeds it becomes clear that the revolution they provoke is a direct invitation to join society as repulsive as it is. A concrete suggestion to help the world is to write a statement on your T-shirt. Another reaction was that Generation X has been hyped. Chat-sites appeared, X-baseballcaps were merchandised; it is clear that these are not the things that *COUPLAND's* characters would support.

But what would they support? Assuming that they really want to change society they flee from? A lot of critics about young people in general were launched after *Generation X* appeared. *Revolution X* was one of the answers, but not the only one. *Generation X* made popular again to think in terms of generations. Its result was that some generation-related issues reappeared on the political agenda, some social and political activities experienced a re-birthing, altogether there are a lot fuels for making up theories but in the end generation X remains a collective of individuals.



THE X-FILES OF A GENERATION

Douglas *COUPLAND* took the title "generation X" from a sociologist that did research on different groups and classes in society. By means of his conceptual framework the researcher was not able to really determine the group of individuals in their mid-twenties, that were - as *COUPLAND* states it - "purposefully hiding themselves". So they were mysteriously labelled X - like the unknown washing powder that you cannot really trust.

The only thing, in fact that generation X had in common (beside their age of course) was the fact that they did not have so much in common. Most of them did not grow up in a rigid framework or religious tenet that determined the course of their lives. In their formative period they had been exposed to a televised world, in which so much happened at the same time that it was really hard to find out what had influenced them most: the dramatic reduction of the ozone layer, the divorce of their parents, the end of the cold war or the fact that *Milli Vanilli* had always playbaked their popular performances.

There was no collective record of dramatic events, but instead an enormous variety of individual X-files. There were no collectively shared and expressed values, but many different views on life. And there was no common perspective for the future, only a widely felt awareness that the ideals of the previous generations had failed and the present world is a postmodern, plastic world, where everyone has to create his own truth. So it seems that there are three things, which do not keep this generation X together: postmodernism, nihilism and individualism.

POSTMODERNISM AS BOREDOM

When we define modernism as the belief in the progress of humankind by means of the human and machines, rationality and technology, the characters of generation X are definitely postmodern. They know that modernism has brought the atomic bomb and a lot of ridiculous luxuries, like *semi-disposable* Swedish furniture, and an overstressed, materialistic, polluting society.

The reaction of generation X is the abandoning of one general purpose of humankind, thereby denying the possibility of a universal and superior truth in life. Details become important and higher goal become irrelevant. *COUPLAND's* universe replaces Hegel's project of the phenomenology of the mind: the phenomenology of confusion and boredom. His characters are cynical: irony is their weapon against a reality that they do not understand.

NIHILISM AS CONFUSION

The main critics on Coupland's novel and generation X as a whole are that when you look at reality at that way, you lose your roots, you lose your values, you lose your humanity. True, of course, but nothing new! It is like warning a Christian that if one keeps one's faith, one will risk the chance that one goes to hell if one has just not been good enough in one's life, whereas an atheist is in a better situation since for one there is no God.

It is not fair or intelligent, however, to blame confused people for their confusion. The book *Generation X* is a book about reflection, rather than denial of values. This is in contrast with the baby boomers, who carried out collective and revolutionary values in the sixties, without reflecting those values or their consequences too much. Generation X does not promote big words and vague values, but are nonetheless actively looking for meaning and words to express what is valuable.

INDIVIDUALISM AS PARADOX

In Monty Python's *Life of Brian* the following scene occurs: "You've got to think for yourselves, you're all individuals!" "Yes! We're all individuals!" "You're all different!" "Yes, we're all different!" "I'm not!!" And then this dissident gets paradoxically beaten up because he does not want to be different. There is something really tricky about individuality.

To be an *individual* means to be non-dividable, one, responsible for your own personality and choices, capable of relating to other individuals and putting yourself in a position in the society. Since the moment we had to make our first choices, our parents have taught us to be independent, critical and responsible. We were not raised with irrational authority, but with the imperatives *be yourself, do your best and choose your way*.

That sounds so great, but it becomes a little difficult if you do not know who you are, what you are good at and what the hell you actually want to do with your life. We are led to the conclusion that your individuality is constructed, not by yourself, but by unknown forces that make you choose and choose and choose. Finally, many young people choose not to choose.

HOMO LUDENS: CULTURE, PLAY AND GAME

The characters in *Generation X* are all trying to relate to reality, to create values and to find out who they really are or want to be. They have given up the myths of self-actualisation in a career in the real world, so they found a substitute reality for themselves: storytelling. By telling stories to each other about subjects varying from how they lost their jobs to a possible scenario for doomsday, they recreate the world, as they know it.

Whether the stories are authentic or not, does not really matter. The more important is, whether the story is fascinating, thrilling, intelligent, romantic, in other words, meaningful. The Dutch historian Johan HUIZINGA wrote a book called *Homo Ludens*, in which he tries to determine the playful elements of culture. By that he meant that the appearances of game and

play in societies tell something about how culture evolves, how cultured is played. According to HUIZINGA, culture, with its values, traditions, habits, develops in the play.

The notions of culture, play and game remain relatively vague in his book, but the questions he raises are considered relevant. For example, how does the play element relate to the *serious world*? Or what are the rules of the game? What distinguishes a genuine play from a foul play? HUIZINGA notes that in any case, a game or play is an activity in which people voluntarily engage and that has no other goal than itself. It has a certain set of rules, which constitute a domain that is disconnected from reality.

ECO-PHILOSOPHY

Umberto ECO, who has written a comment on *homo ludens*, notes that the *homo ludens*, the playful human engages in games to test one's culture, to make it explicit, to investigate its values and to explore its structures. Therefore, games and plays have a creative function: culture develops by playing.

ECO emphasises that there is actually an important difference between game and play. A *game* is a matrix of combinations, constituted by rules. It offers the players a certain number of options to act and makes it possible for one to win the game. A *play*, on the contrary, is a representation; a role one plays to express the situation at stake.

To take part in a game is also an act of playing; it means putting oneself in a position where a certain matrix of combinations is realised. *Homo sapiens* used reason to create the world, to constitute its matrix, *homo faber* worked to make the world happen, and *homo ludens* is the appearance of man as a free being, trying to relate to reality and to others.

SIMULATE YOURSELF

Our characters in *Generation X* could be understood as playful. Not because they participate in the game that the world means to them, on the contrary: they have retreated themselves from society, because they do not like the game that is being played by foul players that change the rules for their own benefit. The Xers constitute a substitute reality, a world of stories that serves no other purpose than to find themselves back as actors in the play of the world.

They dramatise their own experiences from the past, they dramatise the present and they dramatise the future. Their aim is to learn from their own dramas, to determine the identity of the characters they have become and to test whether that identity is satisfying. One of the banners in the sidelines of the book is: *simulate yourself*. By playing roles, by telling stories they do simulate themselves. The world from which they fled was plastic, fake and unreal. *Generation X* plays generation X in search for generation Y.

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