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Thinking Generations

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Abstract

Often, and increasingly, social and political life is narrated using the concept of generation. This article looks at contemporary expressions of ‘generationalism’ in British public life. It identifies the salient themes which emerge, links these to the social and political contexts in which these ideas are produced, and examines the points where they are vulnerable to critique. Bridging science and normativity, the generational view offers a convenient master-narrative for a variety of political orientations – yet one whose democratic credentials are doubtful.¹

Keywords: generations; generationalism; politics; identity; ideology

Today’s social problems are the problems of *generations*. This seems to be the view of a range of politicians, journalists and public intellectuals in present-day Britain. Terms such as the ‘baby boomers’ and the ‘jilted generation’ are common in public debate, while problems of debt, access to higher education, housing, pensions, and the health of the environment are all routinely denominated in age-aware terms (Willetts 2010; Miliband 2011; Howker and Malik 2010a; Beckett 2010). ‘Generationalism’ – the systematic appeal to the concept of generation in narrating the social and political (Wohl 1979) – seems to be in vogue. This popularity deserves scrutiny, for the reality of generations is anything but self-evident. Beyond the family setting, the generational idea seems subjective and a touch poetic. Its boundaries can appear arbitrary: ‘there’s a generation born every second’, one is tempted to protest (Spitzer 1973: 1355). Why depict the world in such elusive terms?

This article investigates contemporary applications of the generational concept in British public life. Informed by the sociology of categorization (Bourdieu 1991; Brubaker 2004; Brubaker and Cooper 2000), it explores the nature, origins and implications of this way of thinking about today’s society, elucidating the distinctive significance of the generational *principle of division* (Bourdieu 1991: 233). The article begins with a sociological overview, augmented with historical research on past moments of generational awareness (Wohl 1979; Kriegel 1978). It proceeds to examine the key themes in today’s generationalism, showing how generations are presented with several recurrent motifs: as ways to explain historical change, as ways to periodise it, as sources of

community; as ways to identify injustice; and as an axis of conflict and impending crisis. These themes echo those of generationalisms past, though with a number of distinctive elements – principally a heightened sense of pessimism and foreboding.

The third section seeks explanations for the popularity of generational thinking. It locates its general appeal in a series of macro-social developments producing a sense of temporal rupture, amongst them the economic crisis that broke in 2008, while linking the details of particular varieties to the opportunities they hold for ideological traditions of both Left and Right. The generational scheme, it is argued, shows signs of being an emergent master-narrative on which actors of quite different persuasion converge as they seek to reshape prevalent conceptions of obligation, collective action and community.

The final section examines how adequately the generational view can live up to its political promise. It looks at the image of society such thinking evokes, noting some of the tensions to which it is subject. Highlighted are the ways generationalism jars with standard notions of democracy. Whereas the latter is widely said to hinge on a pluralist ethos, equality of political status, and the reasoned evaluation of preferences, generationalism has a tendency to put these in question. It can mask diversity, marginalize individuals, and evoke a deterministic conception of human agency. Herein lie some of its limitations as a leading register of political discourse.

Emergence of a principle of social division

1. Generationalism in sociological and historical perspective

To depict the world in generational terms is to pursue one variant of a more general process of social categorization. Sociologists and historians of an interpretivist orientation have long studied how actors render the world intelligible by organising it as a series of collectivities (Brubaker 2004). In illuminating discussions of regional identity and class, Pierre Bourdieu sought to express the variety of principles by which reality can be descriptively arranged (Bourdieu 1991: chs. 10, 11). Social objects, he suggested, permit representation in diverse ways (Bourdieu 1991: 234; cf. Schwartz 1997: 145ff.). Where some see bounded ethnic groups, others see cross-cutting classes.

Emphatically, Bourdieu did not believe this variety was unconstrained: the structure of the material world, and the location of observers within it, meant some representations were more viable than others.² But always of crucial sociological interest would be the means by which objective facts came to be intersubjectively appraised – how ‘classes on paper’, as he described them, did or did not achieve social recognition, and how the recognition of some could exclude the recognition of others.

Like dissection of the world with the categories of class or ethnos, its division along generational lines can be pursued in various guises. It can be done strictly for analytical purposes by those who, as disinterested observers, seek to understand and explain the world. For the social scientist, empirical concerns to mirror reality or actors’ definitions thereof will be paramount in guiding the principles of division (Gil-White 1999). Alternatively, classification can be pursued with practical intent, by those seeking to *change* the world, guiding perception of it in a certain direction, or – less concertedly – those seeking to navigate the world as they find it. In these everyday settings, social categories can become central to symbolic struggles to impose and legitimize a vision of reality, and to make and unmake social groupings (Bourdieu 1991: 220ff., 236; Brubaker 2004: 10).

The concept of generation thus resembles many of the key terms of social description in being both a category of analysis *and* practice (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 4–5; Bourdieu 1991: 233–4; Roseman 1995: 5; Jureit 2010: 2). To examine a principle of division in public discourse, as this article does for generation, is principally to study a category of practice. It is to study the rise, beyond purely scientific circles, of an insistent emphasis on the reality and significance of generations – an ism in the ontological sense, yet irreducible to a single political programme. That the interface between the analytical and practical forms a continuum – the scientist may be moved by concerns beyond knowledge-accumulation, and the practitioner influenced by scholarship – means one must also be attentive to their interplay.

Depictions of the world in generational terms, for analytical or practical purposes, are a relatively modern phenomenon. While a concept of generation can be found in ancient and early Christian thought (Nash 1978; Burnett 2010), like much of today’s political vocabulary – including

competing principles such as class and nationhood – its contemporary prominence is best traced to the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Following historians of the generational concept (Kriegel 1978; Wohl 1979; Parnes, Vedder and Willer 2008), several factors dating to this period need emphasis. First, the dislocations brought by democratization and industrialization seem to have prompted the search for new metrics of social change, ones able to mark the passage of time more precisely than the century or epoch, and more inclusively than the royal dynasty. Unlike the cyclical change of traditional time, these developments were experienced as progressive, and needed narration in a language capturing novelty at each stage. That they were widely celebrated in youth's name – 'the standardbearers of the future in the present' (Wohl 1979: 204) – introduced an age dimension conducive to the generational scheme. Second, these changes bred the weakening of attachments to lord and parish. Just as they paved the way for the new language of class, so they facilitated the equally de-parochializing notion of generation (Wohl 1979: 207). Moreover, third, these developments brought changes in societal structure (Kriegel 1978): mortality rates declined, enabling individuals to imagine their fate as a predictable trajectory shared with peers; spouses became closer in age, producing age-groups within the family; and rapid technological change sharpened skill differences between young and old. The rise of evolutionary theory consolidated the appeal of generationalism's organic overtones (Burnett 2010: 27ff.). None of these changes, of course, made it a necessary idea: they were enabling factors made decisive by the input of thinkers and agitators.

Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe saw many instances of generationalism in public life. Mazzini's *Giovine Italia* movement of the 1830s–40s cast Italian unification as a matter of generational revolt, spawning equivalent projects across the continent as well as a pan-European movement (Mack Smith 1996: 5ff.). In the German Confederation, a coterminous movement adopted the generational category for its critique of conservative institutions ('Young Germany': Roseman 1995: 11ff.), as did the Romantic turn-of-the-century *Jugendbewegung* and its offshoots in Weimar Germany (Braungart 1984). In Spain, Ortega Y Gasset devoted the early 1900s to building generational feeling among his youthful compatriots, making speeches to crowds in Madrid in

support of a project of national modernisation (Wohl 1979: 129ff.). In one form or another, enthusiasm for the generational principle has recurred in modern-European political culture.

Yet it has not been of a constant level. Landmark events have commonly been the cue to heightened generational awareness. Its rise in the 1920s/30s has been linked to the effects of World War One in accentuating time-based social differentiation, producing a separation between those who experienced conflict first-hand and those who knew only the postwar settlement. War gave credence to the dividing lines earlier movements sought to articulate (Wohl 1979: 222; cf. Parnes, Vedder and Willer 2008: 231). The events of the Great Depression would have similar effect. Generational consciousness and social trauma have tended to go hand-in-hand (Edmunds and Turner 2002b: 7).

2. Generationalism in the present

That social turbulence may spur generationalism is an idea we shall return to. Just as the events of 1968 popularised such terms as ‘the sixties generation’, and those of 1989 that of a ‘post-communist generation’, so the post-2008 financial crisis seems an important stimulus today. But before investigating the character and origins of contemporary generationalism, let us say more on the extent of it. Who is invoking the generational principle in Britain today? In many respects it is a diverse set of speakers.³ Generationalism can be found amongst those of Left and Right, the young and old, and in decision-making as well as media circles. In class and regional terms, it is a narrower set – generally the urban middle-classes, as has historically been true (Wohl 1979: 4; Roseman 1995: 14) – and it remains to be seen how far these ideas have broader resonance. On balance though, the generational idiom is in no sense the preserve of a homogenous group.

The following sections present several texts for closer analysis. Their selection is designed to probe this diversity, as well as to reflect key positions of influence. Amongst the best-known is *The Pinch: How the Baby Boomers Stole Their Children’s Future – and How they can Give it Back*, by David Willetts MP (2010). The book was widely discussed in the media, no doubt buoyed by his reputation as the leading intellectual of the British Conservatives and his likely influence on the

incoming Conservative-led government. This and his related works are intellectual in style and offer sophisticated backing for their claims (Willetts 2010, 2005, 2006, 2007). Amongst the many publications foregrounding generations to have recently appeared, several are equally substantial, including two books by political journalists (Beckett 2010; Howker and Malik 2010a) and an essay collection featuring young authors linked to universities and political associations (*Radical Future*: Little 2010). Others are more colloquial in style, including journalist Neil Boorman's pamphlet *It's All Their Fault: A Manifesto* (2010), and Anne McElvoy's BBC Radio 4 programme 'The Jam Generation', charting 'the growing influence of children of the 1980s in politics' (2011; cf. 2008). Then there are the statements of leading politicians, including Chancellor George Osborne (Osborne 2010) and Labour leader Ed Miliband (Miliband 2011).⁴ Less prominent, but drawn on by several, are a range of technical and academic discourses in economics and philosophy likewise adopting the generational view.

The recurrence of cross-references is one reason to examine these texts together. Others include their shared reliance on generation as the organising concept,⁵ and their similarity in the issues they discuss – notably debt, higher education, housing, pensions, welfare, and (sporadically) environmental protection. They are distinguished also by being texts underpinned by institutional authority, be it political or media-based. Willetts and Osborne are serving Ministers, Miliband the leader of the opposition. The journalists have all published in leading newspapers or had their work reviewed there. This is important, as the ability to promote a favoured principle of division – to name generations and characterise them – is likely to be strongest for those enjoying such authority (Bourdieu 1991: 223, 238–9). To focus on their efforts is to focus on some of those most relevant to shaping public debate.⁶ Note also this outpouring of generation-aware texts has itself been a topic of media discussion, producing further interlinkages (cf. Bunting 2010; Hari 2010; Rawnsley 2011; Sewell 2011; Sieghart 2011; Walker 2010; BBC 2010). In what follows we approach this material as a single corpus. Differences of theme and emphasis naturally emerge in the analysis, but these are examined mainly as (ideo)logical variations rather than variations between individual speakers. The

intention is thereby to go beyond narrow commentary to a deeper discussion of the ideational framework with which authors are engaging.

As the preceding remarks suggest, the article examines *generationalism* rather than generations as such. It is not our goal to formulate criteria for assessing their reality, their conditions of emergence, or the qualities of a particular generation. A rich sociology exists on such questions (Eisenstadt 1964; Eyerman and Turner 1998; Edmunds and Turner 2002a, b; Burnett 2010). We focus instead on appeals to generation in public discussion, remaining broadly agnostic on their validity – just as the student of nationalism can remain agnostic on the nationalist ontology. To reiterate, it is as categories of *practice* we approach them. Certainly, generationalism may sometimes appear in conjunction with the social formations it purports to describe; it may also *produce* these (‘generationalism before generations’, as it were), but neither outcome is certain. Our focus is on ideas, in other words – though it is not purely discursive, for we shall attend to the context these emerge in.

Is generationalism today a specifically British phenomenon? It has long-standing visibility in the USA, where the idea of the founding moment seems to invite efforts to count back to ‘the beginning’ (Keller 1978; Howe and Strauss 1991). The evocation of the ‘baby-boomers’ as a significant group has been a feature since the 1980s, especially in social-security debates (Binstock 2010; cf. below). The generational frame has also been prominent in Germany, regularly invoked in the context of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (Parnes, Vedder and Willer 2008: 280ff), and the subject of renewed study today following the popularisation of age-related categories such as ‘Generation Golf’ (Weigel 2008, 2006; Jureit and Wildt 2005). Generation-talk seems widespread, and one could attempt an equivalent analysis for many western countries today.

Central themes in contemporary generationalism

What and who constitutes a generation for today’s generationalists? Let us begin with definitional issues. A point of convergence for the authors discussed is that generations can be approached empirically. They are social objects, things which can be identified in the particular instance and

perhaps named, not just alluded to in general form. Some authors mix concrete references with more figurative notions of the unborn, but none argues generations must *always* be considered in the abstract.

Beyond this basic methodological convergence, one finds disagreement on the form they take. Crucial is a distinction between naturalist and culturalist understandings, familiar to any student of the concept of generation. To briefly recall, a naturalist conception puts emphasis on material factors such as birth-dates, and was the main conception for much of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Many sought to derive pulse-like rhythms of social change from the time it took newborns to reach adulthood, or saw generations as rooted in demographic trends (Jaeger 1985: 277). In contrast, Karl Mannheim, one of the major theorists of the concept, argued a more complete understanding must make reference to interpretive features, in particular shared experiences (Mannheim, 1952: 381, 388–9). This culturalist conception has been influential in scholarship: consider Wohl’s definition of generation as ‘a magnetic field at the centre of which lies an experience or a series of experiences’ (Wohl 1979: 210).⁷ Yet the link to naturalistic data has never been severed, and the concept we have inherited retains the ambiguity, being susceptible either to a more materialist reading emphasising the primacy of demographic facts (the generation as birth-defined cohort) or a more culturalist reading (the generation as marked by events) (Jaeger 1985; Kerzter 1983; Spitzer 1973; Rintala 1963; Corsten 1999).

Some of our texts are decidedly naturalistic, defining the ‘baby-boomers’ demographically according to two postwar birth spikes (Willetts 2010: xv–xxii, 53). Willetts’ argument for the ascendancy of the boomers focuses on numbers, principally the advantages of belonging to a large cohort (the ability to dominate state and market). Others, while granting the centrality of the ‘boomers’, define them differently: the journalist Beckett conceives them as those born in the ten, not twenty, years after 1945, and ties them more closely to cultural developments, including postwar austerity and conservatism. Boorman, who makes sweeping condemnations of ‘the boomers’, picks the longer time-range, but with an emphasis on their moral failings rather than structural characteristics. That these authors disagree on the date-range underlines the interpretative character

even of naturalistic definitions. The ‘jilted generation’ of which Howker and Malik (and later Miliband) speak is defined less by numerical data than shared experiences and cultural reference-points. The authors describe them also as the ‘post-79 generation’ (Howker and Malik 2010a: 3), i.e. those having to pay university tuition fees. There is no consensus, one quickly learns, on who’s who in the generational scheme. Variations occur even in the single text: much of *Jilted Generation* speaks merely of ‘young people’ generally, a phrase which – like Willetts’ ‘younger generation’ – suggests the difficulty of naming them. Moreover, the phrase conjures an age-cohort. That these authors wish to dress their concerns in the generational lingo more than their arguments require is a point we shall return to.

Historically, generationalists have differentiated themselves not just by the importance they accord naturalistic features but by the inclusivity of the generations they evoke (Jaeger 1985). Generations can be imagined in domain-specific fashion – e.g. generations of artists – or expansively – e.g. those of a country or humanity generally. With some exceptions (e.g. ‘Jam generation’, a phenomenon of the political class), our texts converge on expansive definitions. Bar the occasional qualification, ‘baby-boomers’ are cast as *all* those of a certain age, and the ‘jilted generation’ as *all* those reaching maturity. They are mass rather than elite phenomena. Inclusive formulations are perhaps typically late-modern: Burnett speaks of the twentieth-century ‘democratization’ of generations (2010: 58ff.). Certainly there is no lack of ambition in these deployments of the generational idea: it is being used for grand effect.

We see this clearly as we examine the salient themes recurring. Let us focus on five, all of which appear in multiple texts, and which capture the main currents of contemporary generationalism. Rather than a logical unity, they present a collage of overlapping ideas whose significance is further developed in subsequent sections.

1. The first is a scientific one: generations are evoked as *historical explanations*, social facts influencing history’s course. Defined demographically or culturally, they are presented as causally significant. In Beckett’s account, generations matter because recent political trends have their origins in the shared experiences of those growing up in the 1950s: the two leaders of

New Labour in government, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, are cast as Britain's two baby-boomer PMs, and the perceived directionlessness of their government linked to the pseudo-radicalism of the 1960s milieu they matured in and the disciplinarian schooling they were reacting against. These factors differentiated them from the 'war babies' of an earlier (Old) Labour generation, Neil Kinnock and John Smith (Beckett 2010: 159). Generations matter because the tendencies shaping them can explain later developments: they are one of the mechanisms by which the past leaves its legacy. Willetts' is equally clear on the status of generations as drivers of change (Willetts 2010: 83):

Be it the effects of globalisation on wages, the shift to lower inflation, the impact of improved life expectancy, or the house price boom, the baby boomers seem to have had all the luck. Or is there more to it than that? Being a big generation gives you a lot of power. Your large cohort will dominate marketplaces. You will be kings and queens amongst consumers. Elections will be pitched to you. In fact your values and tastes will shape the world around you – you will be able to spend your life in a generational bubble, always outvoting and outspending the generations before and after you. That is what it means to be a baby boomer

There is an ambiguity here characteristic of the text: were the boomers just lucky, or did they engineer their luck? Either way, their impact is clear: they and their preferences have 'shaped' the country's cultural and political landscape (cf. Willetts 2010: 67). They are facts of *primary* significance (Jaeger 1985), not just the product of wider forces.

2. Not all uses of the generational concept to evoke an historical context have explanatory intent. A second trope is their deployment for *periodization* purposes, locating phenomena in a larger timescape. The 'Jam Generation' refers to MPs coming of age in the heyday of the 1980s rock group *The Jam*, the appellation inspired by Conservative leader David Cameron's declared liking for their music (McElvoy 2008).⁸ Rather than to emphasize the music's influence on their politics, the purpose is seemingly to delineate a collective and evoke the *Zeitgeist* it belongs to. It is a way of *ordering* history, putting a face on an otherwise faceless past or present, and casting the momentary as momentous.⁹ Such moves may be accompanied by an emphasis on catharsis and renewal – the 'Jam Generation' are taking over the reins of party and government from the boomers, clearing out the old and ushering in the new. Alternatively, the emphasis may

be on decline – a sub-theme in Beckett’s account is how far Britain and Labour have fallen since the days of the postwar welfare settlement. In each case, generations are here *expressive* of change rather than determinative of it.

3. A third theme sees generations as a source of *community*. Just as territorial location may act as a focal-point for feelings of belonging, so temporal location may be thought to do the same. Several texts play on the idea: the ‘jilted generation’, besides being another musical reference (to an album by *The Prodigy*), is an idea targeted at an age-group to encourage them to locate their experiences in a collective frame: ‘you are not alone’ are the book’s final words (Howker and Malik 2010a: 223). As we shall see, efforts to evoke collective subjecthood may be efforts to mobilize.

The generational idea can also be used to suggest connectedness *across* periods. It brings with it a family metaphor: the idea of society as the kin group writ large.¹⁰ Several texts cast the relationship between generations as that between parents and children (e.g. Boorman 2010: 6). Aside from the theme of conflict we shall come to, such references evoke links between one cohort and the next (in a way ‘cohort’ itself does not) and of the larger whole to which each belongs. Here is Miliband on ‘the promise of Britain’:

My belief [is] that we can and must create a better life for the next generation. My concern, like millions of others, is that for the first time for more than a century, the next generation will struggle to do better than the last. In the past we took it for granted that if we worked hard, if our children worked hard, they would be more prosperous, and have greater opportunities. But the last few decades have begun to show that the promise to the next generation, the promise to our children, what I call the promise of Britain, cannot now be taken for granted. Today I want to set out the scale of the problem as I see it, and why it matters – not just to those affected, but for the whole country. And how I see it as the duty of my generation of politicians to answer this challenge. As a parent, like all parents, I judge myself on the opportunities my children will have – and the happiness that can provide. As Prime Minister, I will judge the next Labour government on the opportunities that Britain can provide for all of the next generation.

The family metaphor is prominent, conjuring links between the domestic world and the country at large. Our children are ‘ours’ both directly and figuratively. Whereas to talk about ‘the present and future’ would be abstract, talking about ‘us’ and ‘our children’ is homely. Note the *völkisch* implications – the country as a series of kin-like generations. The image resembles certain ideas of nationhood, evoking a larger structure within which the parts are arranged.

Distinctively, it evokes the relation of the present to the future as well as the past, and hints at both continuity and change.

4. A fourth theme sees generations as a means to identify *injustice*. Some of our writers – notably Willetts – explicitly draw on philosophical debates on intergenerational justice; most have normative points to make. Generation here functions as a way to imagine cross-age and cross-temporal obligations, highlighting the moral embeddedness of an age-related group to others in the present, or of the living to those of past and future (cf. Miliband). It can evoke the culpable and the deserving. Several texts contain ideas of sacrifice and neglect: whether due to concerted selfishness or ill-judged decisions, the baby-boomers have concentrated wealth in their hands and produced a ‘jilted’ youth. ‘Generation’ acts as an amplifier, highlighting how the injustice afflicts many. For Howker and Malik, for whom generations are effects rather than causes, the problems of the young must be recognized as societal injustices rather than sectoral grievances.

The generational idea functions to broaden our conception of the public good:

this book isn't really about us [the young]. It's not just about one dissatisfied group in society, a whinge by one generation about another. That would be wrong. This book is about our country's future and our need to safeguard it from those who thought that today was more important than tomorrow ...' (Howker and Malik 2010a: 223; cf. Howker and Malik 2010b).

Generationalism thus acts as a moral language with which to identify injustice and seek its rectification.

5. Our final theme is the related one of social division: generation as an *axis of conflict and impending crisis*. As we have seen, one encounters the idea that more than one generation is alive simultaneously.¹¹ Specifically, a division between the ‘boomers’ and today’s young is widely observed. Underpinning this is the suggestion the boomers have skewed the economy in their favour, whether by building an unsustainable welfare state or by failing to make the sacrifices necessary to maintain it. Beckett, who highlights negligence, concludes ‘there is a generation war emerging. Wealth is being sucked up the age ladder, and the young have to struggle harder than they did before’ (Beckett 2010: xv, 190ff). Willetts, whose assessment of

the welfare state is more negative, likewise sees conflict approaching: ‘if the younger generation feel they have had a raw deal they will not protect the boomers in their old age. It is the contract between the generations which binds these two interests together’ (2010: xx). Even Howker and Malik, who argue the challenges facing today’s youth derive less from a guilty generation than ‘British society more generally’ (2010a: 4, 145–6), consider conflict a likely prospect (2010a: 15). Such a clash chimes with the family connotations noted: if the parent–child relation is generally pictured as founded on responsibility and love, a familiar counter-theme involves conflict and rebellion. Boorman’s text plays on this, albeit reversing the typical roles, such that it is the responsible young versus their irresponsible, spendthrift parents.

One way this notion of conflict is elaborated is by evoking baby-boomers as an interest-group able to shape elections to its advantage through lobbying and bloc-voting. Sometimes this is presented as an empirical fact, sometimes as a belief politicians hold, real in its consequences if not in its premises. As Little puts it (2010: 8), in a sentence readable both ways, ‘our problem is that Britain’s young people are demographically cut off from a political class that focuses on the most electorally significant group: middle-aged, middle-class, middle England’ (cf. Howker and Malik 2010a: 155ff.; Willetts 2010: 250). Insofar as some authors wish to *produce* generational conflict – Boorman’s piece features ‘Manifesto’ in the title (see also Penny 2010a) – the suggestion is if the young become conscious of their situation they may tackle the boomers head-on. Through generational conflict, then, lies the route to the redress of generational injustices.

Five themes can thus be identified: generations as historical explanations; as ways to catalogue time; as sources of community; as ways to identify injustice; and as an axis of conflict and impending crisis. Several resemble the themes found in earlier expressions of generationalism. The idea of unjust suffering concentrated on a single generation, and its conflictual relationship with elders, is a familiar one, played out in the 1930s following the Great Depression (Wohl 1979: 206), or after World War 1 in discussions of a lost generation sacrificed at the front (Wohl 1979: 205; Parnes, Vedder and Willer 2008: 232ff.). In Kriegel’s confident words, ‘all successive generations resemble

each other in their laments as in their triumphs. Is there even one which, in times of depression, has not called itself a lost generation?' (Kriegel 1978: 34). On themes of justice and conflict, there seems to be consistency with generationalisms past.

Yet Kriegel refers also to 'triumphs', and of these we have heard little. Themes of accomplishment are largely absent.¹² The young are described mainly as victims, the aged as a problem, and the 'boomers' precisely so as to puncture certain positive associations (e.g. as '68ers' campaigning for liberty). In describing portrayals of the 'generation of 1914', Wohl highlights the themes of 'uniqueness, loss, sacrifice, and mission' (1979: 39). While the first three have echoes today, the idea of a mission sounds alien. There is nothing heroic or world-historical about the generations evoked in today's discourse, and it is not by their projects they are defined.¹³ Generation-talk today typically does not cast the young as the motor of change or the vanguard of progress. Indeed, it struggles to name them, referring frequently simply to their youth. They have modest ambitions – they want to get on in life. They are cast as wading into an uncertain, but certainly dangerous, future: their ingenuousness prolonged by their being deprived the symbols of adulthood. Someday they will rebel, but few signs are yet observed. Where agency is evoked, it is ascribed to yesterday's generations: the boomers had it, as the explanatory motif, the willingness to castigate them, and the ease of naming them suggest (albeit agency of a limited kind – cf. our final section). But the generations of the present and future are cast mainly as objects rather than subjects. Contemporary generationalism tends to express the sovereignty of the past over the present.

Perhaps there is another specificity of today's variety, which we may describe as its relation to the 'decisive moment'. A sense of foreboding pervades these texts. The full significance of generational facts is yet to manifest, the final reckoning still to come. Willetts tells us 'the real pension crisis has not yet happened though it is rolling towards us with horrible inevitability', with the decisive moment when 'the real battle over resources begins' projected into the future, sometime 'over the next decades' (2010: 247). Howker and Malik advise 'something might be about to go horribly wrong' (2010a: 9); 'slowly, sombrely, inevitably, the storm is gathering pace' (2010a: 15). Boorman can put a figure on it: '650 days. That's roughly how long we've got until a time bomb

goes off in this country [when the boomers begin entering retirement]’ (2010: 2). Beyond a feel for the dramatic – as all horror-film-makers know, things are scariest when close but as yet unseen – one may read this partly as a bid for credibility. Today’s generationalism – unlike those that rode on the back of a mass movement (‘Young Italy’, the ‘Young Turks’) – must cope with the low visibility of much it describes, be it age-related impoverishment, collective identity, future degradation or conflict. By pushing the decisive moment back, scepticism about their reality can be alleviated. At the same time, the move expresses a conscious effort to widen the temporal horizon and incorporate what lies ahead into the generational scheme. Today’s generationalism is strongly oriented to the future – even if that future is considered a linear extension of the past.

On the popularity of generational narratives

How should one explain the appeal of generational thinking? At least two kinds of account are possible. One focuses on structural factors – those irreducible to individual goals – which create an inviting context for such thinking. These, and the cultural frameworks through which they are experienced, act as enabling conditions for the exercise of individual initiative (Sewell 1992). They are not directly causal, any more than a well located hill by a river was ever responsible for the founding of a town. But they can give general insight into questions of where and why. Another type of account focuses on the political context these narratives emerge in, directing attention to the ends they serve. While precise intentions are difficult to attach to individuals, who may have compound and idiosyncratic motivations, examining these contexts usefully illuminates how generation-talk fits with different kinds of political orientation.¹⁴ Let us consider these two approaches in turn.

1. Conducive social conditions

We have anticipated some of the macro factors likely to heighten sensitivity to generational thinking. Society’s relationship to technology is one: advances in capacity are likely to heighten awareness of time’s passing. What was true of mechanisation in the nineteenth century – the appearance of the

train, car and plane (Kriegel 1978) – is likely to hold true of digitalization in the twenty-first. The arrival in successive waves of the personal computer, internet and mobile phone, and the related software innovations, have plausibly contributed to a cultural inclination to periodize, a fascination with aging and the passing of time. The concept of generation brings change into relief; phrases such as ‘digital generation’ abound. To this we may add another point foreshadowed earlier concerning the relative appeal of alternative forms of identification. It is commonly said the late twentieth century exhibited a weakening of class-based attachments. An emphasis on generation may suggest a felt need to find new ways to narrate the social when alternative metrics no longer apply (Corsten 1999; Roseman 1995: 4; Edmunds and Turner 2002b: 2–3). Whether the generational idea has greater public resonance than the categories it is said to supersede is unclear, but as a narrative device it appears in tune with the times – as generationists themselves affirm (Willettts 2007).

Today’s generationalism is arguably fostered also by commercial trends. Categories such as the ‘boomers’ or ‘68-ers’ have been widely used to sell consumer goods, creating and targeting niche markets (Edmunds and Turner 2002a: 4). Generation-talk offers a way to elevate the status of a product: the 1960s ‘Pepsi Generation’ advertising campaign pioneered a marketing model whereby consumers are enticed not just with the qualities of the product but the associated lifestyle (Frank 1998). The generational concept is one way to suggest a product liable to be considered frivolous, ephemeral or too costly is actually part of something more valuable. (‘Inspire a Generation’, read the motto of the London 2012 Olympic Games.) The political narratives examined can be seen as replicating this pattern of ‘banal generationalism’, perhaps for similar commercial motives – e.g. publishers or editors pushing the packaging because it sells, dramatizing otherwise dry topics and assisting in the targeting of a readership. Generationalism may be one of the many ways politics increasingly resembles a marketing exercise. Plainly it is not *just* an advertising phenomenon – many of our selected texts are produced and reproduced in non-commercial settings (e.g. on blogs) – but this forms a favourable climate.

Beyond such general factors, one obvious candidate explanation for generationalism's popularity is the realist one that certain material facts demand this perspective be taken. This argument, a familiar one in contemporary sociology (Thomson 1996; Edmunds and Turner 2002b: 3), is present in several of these texts, particularly the naturalistic ones.¹⁵ The year 2011–12 was long heralded as when the 'boomers' would enter retirement, putting unprecedented strain on public finances. Generational thought can be seen as an effort to talk coherently about pressing demands of this kind. Howker and Malik argue new words are needed if public discourse is to take future-oriented concerns seriously (2010a: 204): their book advances the generational concept as one. Climate change may be considered another material factor forcing the agenda. While these texts generally say little on the topic, notions of sustainability are drawn on occasionally, and the influence of developments in environmental economics (notably promoted in Britain by the 2006 Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change) is acknowledged. Generation-talk may thus be seen as inspired by pressing real-world concerns, and by the fear people under-value these concerns.

The significance of such material factors is not to be denied: demographic change and newly emerging challenges provide evident opportunities for generationalism. As Bourdieu would have put it, they are the occasion for the emergence of 'generations on paper', i.e. phenomena which may be logically inferred from scientific observation (Bourdieu 1991: 231). Yet such facts do not yield determinate interpretation: they are inevitably entwined with further factors whose relative significance the interpreter must decide. It is worth emphasizing the selectivity with which our authors choose those conducive to generational thinking. There are, for instance, intra-generational cleavages at least as important as intergenerational ones (Kohli 2006). There are also numerous parallel trends which sit badly with generational thinking: declining marriage rates and increasing divorce rates blur the boundaries of the family unit and put the separability of age-groups in question. (Several of our generationalists may be more interested in nuclear families, but if so they are not moved exclusively by empirical concerns.) For analytical purposes, what distinguishes the best forms of generational account is exactly the attention given to the *diversity* of ways time-related facts become meaningful and consequential as they combine with cross-cutting factors (Vincent

2005: 595–6; cf. below). There can be no direct move from demographic realities to generational thinking. Note also that the force of material facts, even when these are relatively unambiguous, depends significantly on how they are narrativised. Generationalism is not the only way to evoke a cross-temporal perspective: successors, future people, the future of the state, society or humanity, are formulations achieving something similar, albeit with different connotations. One does not need to be a generationalist to take the larger view.

The significance of *events* inevitably needs consideration when charting generationalism's rise. The financial crisis breaking in 2008 has the characteristics of a landmark event cleaving past and present, potentially building generational consciousness in the way some have seen September 11th 2001 as giving birth to a 'September generation' (Edmunds and Turner 2002a; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2009). Not only does the crisis seem likely to affect certain age-groups in particular (e.g. through youth unemployment), but it heralds a series of political decisions of long-term consequence. Whether or not 2008 genuinely has the status of a world-historical event is immaterial: it is enough that it presents itself as one to those who cannot be sure. Admittedly, Willetts has been speaking on intergenerational themes since at least 2005, so the crisis must be considered opportunity as much as cause. Indeed, one must question whether generationalism and 'the event' are easily separated, for the latter – particularly one that is ongoing and poorly understood – is an ambiguous phenomenon partly constituted exactly by such interpretative moves as the former. But note also that 2010 was UK General Election year, when a change of government was widely anticipated. As a predictable event, easily distilled to a dramatic moment, it is likely to have been influential in the long-term planning of texts. This political rupture, amplified by the socio-economic one, was surely an important contributor to the generationalist turn. As in other epochs (Wohl 1979: 222), such events lend urgency to narratives already in preparation.

2. *Political dividends*

The preceding interpretations treat generationalism as symptomatic of macro-social developments. Each clarifies some of its general appeal, but has less to say about substance, notably the prominence of the aforementioned themes. A fuller account requires us to examine how generationalism fits

with the political orientations and agendas of those articulating it. Clearly we are not seeking motivations common to all actors, nor ones that need be considered an individual's sole motivation. Individuals may have multiple goals, and efforts to separate and rank these will be speculative. What we must look for is the range of reasons on which actors may draw based on the political context they operate in.¹⁶

i) A licence for economic reform

It follows from our earlier observations that the generational concept is likely to appeal to those looking for social change (Graubard 1978: v). As an idea premised on reality's dynamic character (without which generations are indiscernible), it is a way of consigning some things to the past and heralding the new. It can be a way of making resistance to change seem futile or foolish, and its embrace a sign of wisdom. The generational perspective naturalizes change, a point that will often give it broad appeal.

But it is the desire for a very specific form of change which can be associated with several contemporary adopters (emphatically not all): the recasting and trimming of the welfare state. To understand this we must look first to the USA, where politically-motivated applications of the discourse of 'intergenerational equity' have older pedigree. Efforts to draw generation-based dividing lines regarding the impact of welfare policies have been a familiar practice of critics of redistribution since the 1980s. In its crudest form, this has involved the promulgation of stereotypes of the elderly as 'prosperous, hedonistic, politically powerful, and selfish' (Binstock 2010: 576), in place of more benign images dating to the classical period of Social Security (c. 1930–70s). The 'boomers' are cast as a selfish, decadent generation, their vaguely leftist 1960s ideals as licentious, narcissistic and unsustainable. In more rationalist terms, with echoes of Hirschman's 'perversity thesis' (Hirschman 1991), the argument has been that state transfers funnel wealth from the impoverished young to the comfortable elderly. Organizations such as Americans for Generational Equity (AGE), funded by business groups and Republicans, were instrumental in advancing the idea of zero-sum generational divides in which the aged are a drain on resources (Quadagno 1990; Kohli 2006). Disaggregating the system into winners and losers invites individuals to ask which category

they belong to, something presumably intended to encourage them either to reject institutionalized sharing entirely or to call for a more individualized model whereby gains and losses are spread over the life-course. While AGE did not survive, the legacy of such groups was the public thematisation of generational conflict and its relevance to welfare planning, a theme revitalized in the 1990s as the baby-boomers edged towards retirement (Peterson 1999). References to a well-organized elderly ‘lobby’, as well as the cohort’s voting power, were used to give urgency to these concerns. New methods of representing state expenditure so as to distinguish contributors and beneficiaries in age-related terms – ‘generational accounting’ (Kotlikoff 1992; Kotlikoff and Burns 2012) – have further institutionalized the generational view.¹⁷ Naturally, that support of the elderly may benefit society at large – and that cutting entitlements places a burden on the young, who may need to finance the care of relatives – were ideas less discussed, as was the reality of bloc voting (Arber and Attias-Donfut 2000; Fullerton and Dixon 2010).

This neo-conservative¹⁸ agenda seems clearly present in some of the generationalist texts under consideration, notably those by Willetts (whose book emerged shortly before the Conservatives entered government) and certain think-tanks.¹⁹ In *The Pinch*, the emphasis on demographics and impending conflict communicate that things cannot stay as they are – the pension system particularly. That the welfare state funnels wealth towards the old is a key part of Willetts’ explanatory narrative and the basis for his identification of injustice (2010: 158ff.) There is clear willingness to use the concept of generation to ask ‘who costs what?’, separating the productive and unproductive.²⁰ That the ‘boomers’ are a greedy generation is repeatedly hinted at (2010: xxi, for the image of a ‘selfish giant’). Bloc voting is emphasized (2010: 249, 251). The effect of such ideas, presumably intended, is to suggest state pension provisions are too generous. Things cannot remain as they are: tough choices are necessary. Intergenerational conflict, as we have seen, is repeatedly invoked – not, presumably, so as to foment it, but so as to use the *prospect* of it as a means to nudge people towards the putatively more harmonious world that would be achieved if that fuelling the coming conflict – the welfare state – were restructured. Whereas the explanatory theme is needed to give credibility to the necessity of change, the conflict theme gives it urgency.

But Willetts has more than a scare-story or conspiracy theory to offer. The argument is more sophisticated, for it includes moral appeals, and uses motifs of injustice to speak not just to ‘the young’ but to ‘boomers’ themselves. He wants to suggest the welfare state is the agent of unfair privilege, and that keeping provisions as they are is not just impractical but immoral – indeed, immoral to the degree that anyone advocating this would surely be motivated by self-interest not principle (2010: 250).²¹ Similar is the point made by Chancellor Osborne in his August 2010 City speech: ‘fairness extends across the generations, for what is fair about forcing the next generation to pay for the debts of our generation?’ (Osborne 2010). Herein lies the place of the *justice* theme. By drawing on the philosophy of intergenerational justice, Willetts and colleagues produce a message in tune with liberal conservatism: one which speaks not just the Thatcherite language of ‘no alternatives’ but a language of moral persuasion. Rather than mere necessary hardship, it is commendable sacrifice which is proposed: righteous deferral of gratification for the sake of the young, that most deserving of beneficiaries. Change is thereby presented not just as demographically inevitable, but just.

ii) Cross-cutting divisions assuaged

Let us consider how the generational view squares with other principles of social division, for here is a second important point. Generational analysis is, theoretically, quite compatible with attention to cross-cutting differences of gender, class and ethnos. Indeed, sociology has a rich literature on ‘intersectionality’ (McCall 2005), notwithstanding the complexity this attention to variation entails. Yet in the practical discourse we are examining, a focus on generations tends to come at the *expense* of the consideration of alternative differences. Arguably, moreover, this is no accident: its purpose for some seems exactly to distract from other, more familiar categories of the social – class in particular – so as to set up relatively innocuous targets for public dissatisfaction in a time of socio-economic upheaval. We shall have reason to modify this point shortly, but notions of displacement and euphemization are a good place to begin.²²

An emphasis on generational inequalities implies inequalities within generations are milder. As Willetts puts it (2010: 23), ‘we think of haves and have-nots now. But what if the haves are us

now and the have-nots are our children and grandchildren in the future?’ The thought prompts the conclusion today’s ‘we’ must step back from the petty problems of distribution within the present (cf. Ferguson 2011). Precisely since the future extends indefinitely, it can make the inequalities of the present seem trivial, and concern with them blinkered and narrow.²³ The generational-conflict theme thus functions to blur other divides. And by declaring the coming age as one of generational conflict, the speaker portrays class conflict as an anachronism²⁴ – the generational metric thus serves its *periodization* function.

Notice many of the social problems identified in these texts could potentially have been framed in class terms. Housing is one: several authors suggest today’s young are unable to purchase housing as their parents could. The problem permits formulation as a shrinking of the property-holding class, a diagnosis with quite different implications. It is not just that certain authors wish to avoid class conflict (one imagines this to be so, but there are others, as we shall see, who do not): rather, there may be wider, cultural resistances to such a perspective. To see concentrations of ownership as a class matter would involve families negotiating the idea that children may of a lower class than their parents. It would mean confronting head-on the possibility of downward social mobility.

As well as being a distressing thought in the particular case, such a notion clashes with common understandings of class and social stability. David Cannadine, in a revealing analysis of how class has been conceived in modern Britain, identifies three main ways Britons have entertained the notion theirs is a class-based society: by evoking society as a continuous hierarchy from top to bottom, by evoking a tri-partite division between upper, middle and lower, and by evoking a dichotomous division between the haves and have-nots (Cannadine 1998; cf. Lawrence 2000). While the second and third have periodically found powerful resonance – and while Willetts’ comments above seem designed to rebut such images – it is the first which has tended to dominate, not least because it has generally been the most acceptable to those of established advantage (Cannadine 1998: 167, 38). In this scheme, class is as much a cultural as economic phenomenon. It evokes a ladder of individuals arranged vertically according to numerous small gradations in status,

presumed manifest in such markers as accent, manners, skills, virtues and vices. Such an image has little to say on mobility, certainly not downward: these are largely inherited traits, deeply ingrained and scarcely to be extinguished by mere circumstance (Cannadine 1998: 28). They evoke class as something ‘in’ as much as ‘around’ us. One appeal of the generational narrative is that it protects these ideas in the face of societal upheaval and keenly felt social problems. If the challenge is cast as *inter*-generational decline, the *intra*-generational status of individuals relative to each other on a society-wide class scale can be preserved. The ladder persists: it is simply lowered. In this way the generational narrative allows a euphemisation of the individual’s predicament and the preservation of images of a stable, ordered society.

There is a further dimension to casting matters of justice and conflict in generational terms. With its overtones of family life and the obligations owed to members of a kin group, generationalism presents itself as an ostensibly desirable discourse of peoplehood (Smith 2003) with which to depict Britain at large. It is a means to evoke community without resorting to the chauvinistic traditions of ethnic nationalism. As we have seen, our speakers generally cast generations in inclusive rather than domain-specific ways: when Willetts and Miliband speak of ‘our’ generational obligations, it is an encompassing ‘we’, sometimes referring to everyone alive, imploring action on behalf of undifferentiated ‘younger’ and ‘future’ generations. Such formulations soften the dividing lines which have conventionally challenged national unity.²⁵ This is one way generationalism’s *community* theme is put to work. Linking the backward and forward gaze, it suggests the continuity of a collective. That the generational scheme has overtones of renewal, sustainability and progress (Miliband again) increases its appeal as an image of society. Of course, generationalism contains resources for universalists too – cosmopolitans may see in it a means to *undermine* national boundaries and evoke global commonalities of experience (Wohl 1979: 3; Edmunds and Turner 2002a, 2005). The generational idiom cannot substantiate any given set of political boundaries – but it can put ethnic and class divisions in softer focus.

iii) A new register of mobilisation?

It would be misleading however to see generationalism as antithetical to class analysis. While some may adopt it to *circumvent* class thinking, others may invoke it to achieve aims consistent with it: i.e. to mobilize in support of an egalitarian agenda. Amongst our selected authors, such a goal may be associated with the *Radical Future* group, Howker and Malik, and Beckett. For these, the concept of generation appears to have potential as a new vocabulary of leftist activity, notwithstanding the quite different intentions of other converts to the concept. We have noted already the occasional appearance of the term ‘manifesto’. Probably few of our authors would self-describe as Marxist: many of the stated goals are less radical (e.g. making home ownership affordable) while others are largely absent in Marxist thought (e.g. environmentalism). Nonetheless, one detects a similarity with old-Left thinking, and sometimes an explicit combination of generational with class analysis (e.g. Beckett 2010: 16; Howker and Malik 2010a: 111, 131). Here we see a quite different articulation of the *conflict*, *justice* and *community* themes. Arguably the generational concept is being adopted as a new language of collectivism, a way to speak to those presumed no longer reachable with class vocabulary. It is a form of *interpellation* (Althusser 1984), a way of naming those who struggle to name themselves and asserting their commonality of experience. It is one of the few instances where a sense of political possibility is projected onto the young. Here is Little in *Radical Future* (2010: 1–10):

A return to an old-left politics or even its language would be alien to many under thirty. Likewise, a politics of youth will get us so far, only to be outgrown and become irrelevant to our middle-aged selves. What this means is that we need to change not just our electoral system and political parties (important as that may be), but change the way we think about politics. We can take the core values of the left – equality, justice, tolerance, democracy – but not its structures or its models. While our generation is as diverse in its political outlook as it is in its demographic makeup, there is an opportunity here to unite under a banner of clear and present need.

For these authors, the concept of generation should not be confused with youth. The latter is inadequate as a category of mobilization, since individuals can hope to outgrow the problems of youth, displacing them onto others. The specificity of *generational* injustices is that they continue to afflict victims even as they age: this is what makes the concept a promising means to inspire structural change. While these accounts generally acknowledge generational identity as weak – a source of exasperation – it is something to be cultivated for the future.

Today's generationalism – with its themes of the generation as a motor of history, metric of time, source of community, dimension of justice, and axis of (future) conflict – offers something to a variety of political perspectives. It offers a narrative for small-state conservatives to present the necessity of welfare restructuring, yet without appealing solely to egotistical impulses. In place of Thatcherite individualism and authoritarianism, it offers a sense of collective identity and the revitalization of social ties; a means to tap the language of justice, fairness and sustainability, yet to avoid the presentation of socio-economic problems in potentially disruptive forms. At the same time it offers leftist figures a way to conjure solidaristic ties and to mobilize against individualism and inequality as conventionally understood without resorting to the language of class. For both centre-left and centre-right, it offers an image of national unity away from the treacherous terrain of ethnic nationalism. Most generally, it offers a means to take distance from the recent past – be it that of the Labour Party, Conservative Party, or the country as a whole – and to suggest the possibility of renewal. Refracted through generationalism, in other words, one sees the recent evolutions of Britain's political landscape, and in the breadth of its appeal one sees the possible emergence of a master-narrative of political discourse.

That the generational idea offers something to both Left and Right may be a source of second-order appeal, for this implies it can be used to address multiple audiences concurrently. There is a post-partisan gesture in Willetts' appeals to the traditions of both Burke and Rawls. This broad appeal is in turn a source of frustration for those who would like to harness the generational idea to a distinctive, adversarial programme. 'The narrative of intergenerational fairness is the natural territory of the British left,' writes Laurie Penny, 'not the conservative right.' The idea has been co-opted by the adversary, something 'real generational activists' must refuse (Penny 2010b).

Stress-points in generationalist thought: on the relation to democratic ideas

Generationalism has come to the fore in a context generally considered democratic, advanced by those who would describe themselves as democratic. Part of its appeal lies in the way it gives form

to that elusive democratic concept of ‘the people’. Yet in the various applications we have examined, certain points of tension with the wider democratic imaginary seem evident. Certain things get hidden in the generational view, notwithstanding its thematic range. In this final section, let us consider more closely how far the generational scheme delivers a self-image of society consistent with democratic ideas of collective self-rule. Let us explore the ‘stress-points’ of generationalism, using this term to suggest weaknesses which are persistent and deep-seated, without implying they are always fatal, and without excluding that it may be necessary on occasion to overlook them.

The suggestion is that while the generational view can play a useful corrective function, raising political awareness of otherwise marginalized concerns, as a lead register of debate it remains problematic for the reasons elaborated. It points to a model of citizenship, and indirectly to practices of citizenship, that clash with certain basic democratic intuitions. The way it frames debates seems not quite ‘democracy-friendly’ (Hirschman 1991: 168). In outlining its limitations from a democratic standpoint, clearly we are approaching ‘generation’ as it appears beyond an academic setting, bound up in activities not exclusively scientific, and before audiences not expected to be moved solely by truth-seeking criteria. To resume the earlier distinction, it is principally as a category of practice rather than analysis that it can be evaluated thus. While scholarship is not immune to practical considerations, and there can be no thought of shielding it from appropriation (Bourdieu 1991: 225), its primary criteria of validity, outside fields of explicitly normative enquiry, are generally the logical and empirical. It is when a principle of social division becomes enmeshed in political struggles and amplified to a wider audience that additional criteria of evaluation such as the democratic come into view (Wolfe 1992).

Let us begin with an observation concerning the recognition of plurality. Generationalism, when it takes an historical turn and seeks generations incarnate in the world, tends to downplay the internal diversity of that which it calls a generation. It has a tendency to overlook the disagreements and contradictions marking any temporal slice of society, whether defined by naturalistic or culturalist criteria. Whereas sociologists use the concept of intersectionality to express the wide

diversity of experience within a given social grouping (McCall 2005), those seeking to present a pithy argument for public consumption will generally be inclined to suggest intra-generational differences are minor next to cross-generational ones. The texts we have examined largely homogenize the attributes and experiences of a given generation, generalizing from a partial reality. Often that reality is a middle-class one: in evocations of the tragedy of today's youth, the focus is on those who aspire to middle-class rewards but are denied them.²⁶ Likewise denunciations of the 'boomers' are often denunciations of a select few – those who enjoyed university education without the need to pay fees (when circa 10 per cent went to university); those who could get a mortgage to buy a home (when a minority owned property); those who had the economic and political power to make the decisions castigated today (e.g. on public spending).²⁷ Despite the many references to 'our' and 'your parents', the parents of many of today's young would not have had access to any of these. The face of the boomers tends to be a middle-class face.

Generationalism spreads difference across time while tending to eliminate it in any given tranche. That the connotations are middle-class is contingent of course. Generationalism need not be about gentrification. But in all cases there will be the tendency to homogenise, generalizing the experiences of some over others (Kriegel 1978: 29). Sensitivity to plurality is likely to be undermined. Moreover, significant power issues arise. The generational idea invites claims to have identified the face or voice of a generation,²⁸ partly because the family metaphor implies generations can be distilled to a handful of individuals (cf. Hazlett 1998: 202). An important question becomes who gets to name the generation and define its characteristics. Any such move is likely to provoke resistance from those who reject association with the dominant group image, or who feel it creates artificial distance between themselves and others. And as it leads to the marginalization of certain experiences, justice claims resting on the intergenerational view are always vulnerable to counter-claims that they perform or tolerate injustices *intra*-generationally.

To be sure, the tendency to conceal in-group diversity is true of any collective concept, including nation, class, gender and ethnos. All such categories risk projecting undue uniformity onto the social world, and political claims thus denominated are potentially repressive of certain

individuals even while empowering for others. Democratic politics involves the ongoing reconciliation of the countervailing demands both to recognise such boundaries and overlook them (Benhabib 1996; Phillips 2007; Wolfe 1992), and as with these other categories there may be occasions when claims are justifiably framed generationally – perhaps especially when the category is meaningful to those it would describe. Eradicating social categories from the political sphere altogether, though a coherent goal as feminist debates have shown (McCall 2005), arguably merely serves the status quo (Phillips 2007: 15–6). But such categories need careful handling, and it is worth noting how generation as currently used is particularly demanding as regards conformity, since in many renditions it denies members the possibility of exit. In most modern conceptions, the dissident can leave the nation, the rich person can renounce her possessions²⁹, and the person dissatisfied with conventional gender identities can explore hybrids. Generation, however, seems more akin to race or, in its more exoticised portrayals, culture (Phillips 2007: 128): notwithstanding the objective fuzziness of its boundaries, individuals are cast as sealed within a social location they could not have chosen.³⁰ The boundaries are cast as impermeable. For this reason those assigned to them are especially powerless before whatever public connotations that category may acquire, and limited in their ability to take distance from claims made on their behalf. Where a category excludes the possibility of exit, the burdens of the homogeneity it imputes are of added weight, and the danger it marginalises cross-cutting interests accentuated.

Mannheim's response to the diversity problem, as someone approaching generation mainly as a category of analysis and with every reason for nuance, was to develop the notion of 'generational units'. These were to be understood as sub-denominations differing in make-up, character and opinion, possibly in a relation of adversarialism, and ultimately bound only by shared problems and conflicts (Mannheim 1952: 398). A shift from identity of attributes or consciousness towards commonality of reference-points is generally wise, and allows generations to be treated as the site of competing tendencies (cf. Vincent 2005; Klatch 1999). With some exceptions, however, this move is not made in the present texts, where generation appears mainly as a category of practice, with the simplifications presumed necessary for wider appeal.³¹ Generations are cast

expansively, with the expectation that attributes are widely shared. By applying the generational principle thus, these texts obscure the differences tied to competing principles.

A second point concerns political equality. By spreading difference across time and negating it within each slice, the generational perspective evokes a vertical ordering of society. Its scheme suggests layers resting on each other – perhaps some wider than others (when a cohort is large), and some thicker than others (when a longer time-range suits), but always broadly in the same structural arrangement. Vertical orderings, as the anthropologists remind, generally carry overtones of *hierarchy*, for there is a human tendency to associate things in an elevated position with higher worth (Laponce 1981). Whereas a lateral ordering – e.g. the Left-Right political axis – implies a kind of equality, a vertical one generally does not. Here lies one of the symbolic origins of the association between generational position and authority. It is ambiguous, of course, which generation stands over which. If the scale is calibrated such that the oldest are above, one has symbolic underpinning for the respect of elders. Inverted, it can suggest the superiority of the new over the old, vitality over decay, innocence over decadence. The generational scheme permits a variety of vertical orderings, but all seem to involve the ranking of layers. The risk is that this accords a subordinate role to large sections of society. Generationalism seems to imply an unequal distribution of authority, something at odds with the basic democratic idea of political parity (Lukes 2003).

A third major tendency that comes through in our study is generationalism's propensity to social determinism. The concerns long raised of class-based accounts of politics (Weber 1978: 929ff.) apply equally to generation-based ones. This is clearest in the naturalistic versions. Willetts' text is determinist in more than one way – his endorsement of socio-biological approaches to society (2010: 101) is not a necessary corollary of his generationalism – but the tendency to treat cohort size as trumping political initiative is typical of the demographic approach. Naturalistic facts are decisive: 'it is not that some generations are good and others bad; it is that some are big and others are small' (Willetts 2010: xvii). In a surprising echo of Marxist class analysis, Willetts mixes calls to action with a strongly pre-determined notion of the form it should take. The conception of

political agency is a limited one: we have the option either to do what needs to be done or to postpone the inevitable. That there is some kind of choice means moral arguments can be applied (Willetts 2010: xxi), yet the choice is a narrow one. The more culturalist forms of generationalism are generally less determinist. Beckett emphasizes what Atlee's Britain achieved under conditions of postwar bankruptcy, highlighting what political will can produce (2010: 180). Yet although the determining impact of demographics and economics is rejected, generations are nonetheless cast as heavily shaped by their cultural circumstances and the imprint received at a critical age.³² Insofar as the generational idea in its cultural form requires people display stability of disposition (Rintala 1963), this militates against imputations of agency – just as cultural difference generally is widely invoked in ways that diminish autonomy (Phillips 2007: 10, 127–8). Least deterministic are those approaches focusing neither on demographics nor dispositions but *experiences*. Howker and Malik's call for more ideals and less strategic calculation in politics is in many respects galvanizing. Yet even here there is a tendency to cast the young as victims rather than agents: it is Britain's leaders, not its generations, who have choices to make, and the interests of those to come are necessarily defined from today's perspective rather than their own.

That generationalism should have a determinist thrust may seem paradoxical, since it appears to have a visibly agential element too. It suggests collective protagonists bestriding the stage of history. This, however, is typically a mechanistic notion of agency in which the social trumps the political. Political choices and behaviour become largely a function of social structures and the biographical features of individuals that narrow their mental horizons. In a variant of what Brubaker calls 'groupism' (Brubaker 2004), generationalism casts humans as the bearers of demographic facts or unchosen opinions imprinted by time. If there is agency, it is in no sense a *reflexive* agency, one that allows choice, debate and persuasion concerning its exercise. In Wohl's summary of an earlier variety, 'it demoted the mind and called into question its autonomy by explaining ideas as the direct and unmediated product of experience' (1979: 236).³³ Of course, this is where its appeal lies for some of those adopting it as a category of practice. If social facts are all-powerful, one can use them as the basis for far-reaching explanations and cultural diagnoses that soar over historical detail.

Furthermore – a specificity of generationalism – one has added confidence in one’s predictive capacity, since much of what needs to be known about the inclinations of adults over the coming decades seems identifiable in the experiences of the living. Half-formed tendencies can be identified as ‘time-bombs’, and if not forestalled than adapted to. A world of determinative social facts appears calculable. But this effect comes at the price of taking a dim view of the reflexive agency of those today and to come. It is the promised land of technocratic administration, and a democratic dystopia.

Ultimately one detects a tension in the ideas we have examined. Today’s generationalism – most clearly in the sophisticated form developed by Willetts, but also more generally – is an unsteady compromise between scientific-historical thinking on the one hand and normative, consciousness-raising thinking on the other. It seeks to describe reality, but also, more practically, to inspire a response. Generationalism tends to be most empirically plausible, and most consistent with political pluralism, when it avoids projecting homogeneity of action and intent onto large numbers of people and instead attends to the diversity of impulses *within* timeframes. This is also when it is least deterministic. A generationalism confined to highlighting the significance of temporal factors in units of modest size defined by shared goals and interpretations, be they organizations or movements, could make testable claims and raise awareness of genuine social constraints – much more so than one which seeks truths at a society-wide level and risks lapsing into caricature (Jaeger 1985: 288). It would also be least in tension with democratic ideas. But a generationalism seeking to raise ethical concerns, and to make the future governable in the present, necessarily has a generalizing impulse, leading it to evoke much larger formations. This is done most consistently by stepping back from historical time and using abstract notions such as ‘future generations’, as debates in the philosophy of intergenerational justice tend to. Yet de-historicizing the concept of generation reduces the immediacy and accessibility of the message. Generationalism as found in today’s public discourse satisfies the generalizing impulse by evoking large but fairly specified generations – images like ‘the boomers’, which are provocative yet suggest a modicum of realism. The master-

narrative thereby produced seems a weakly democratic one, caught between the desire to empiricize generations and the desire to think on the grand scale.

Conclusion

Generationalism – the systematic appeal to the concept of generation for narrating the social and political – has been on the rise in British public life. As the first section suggested, as a principle of social division it may be less familiar than those of nation and class, but it has come to the fore periodically in the modern world, often on the tail of landmark events. Today’s adopters – a mix of politicians, journalists and public intellectuals spanning the political spectrum – find various ways to assert the centrality of generations. As the next section showed, generations are invoked as historical explanations, ways to periodize, sources of community, means to identify injustice; and as an axis of conflict and impending crisis. Such themes resemble those in previous moments of generational awareness, although the sense of pessimism and foreboding seems distinctive. As the third section argued, receptivity to the generational idea can partly be attributed to macro-social trends and events which cultivate sensitivity to change. The particular themes developed however are best understood in the context of what generationalism offers established political viewpoints. In particular, to advocates of the small state it offers a means to argue both the necessity and rightness of welfare retrenchment, and to forestall class-related murmurings in a time of ‘austerity’. To the Left it offers a new language of mobilization, and a way to take distance from the compromises of the recent past. To both it offers an attractive story of who ‘we’, as a people, are. The effect is a master-narrative promising a new way to think about obligation, collective action and community. Yet as our final section argued, it is a perspective posing challenges for key democratic ideas concerning pluralism, equality and reflexive agency. Whatever utility generation may have as a category of social analysis, as a category of political practice it comes at a high price. Sometimes that price may be worth paying, but an innocent choice it is not.

The rise of generationalism suggests the ongoing appeal of large, organizing frameworks by which to comprehend society – ideologies in the non-pejorative sense. In a time of insecurity, the

generational scheme offers a means of coping with uncertainty, perhaps even of making the future knowable. In many ways it is meagre comfort, for the future is cast in threatening terms, its generations characterised by suffering and conflict. Yet the suggestion of continuity provides some ontological security, locating today's world in a larger frame.

Whether there is a constituency for the generational view beyond the circles examined is an important secondary question. Will generationalism create new social artefacts? Indeed, will it produce generations, i.e. large numbers of people showing a willingness to identify themselves and others as such? Are our speakers likely to connect with an audience, thereby imprinting themselves on a wider 'social imaginary' (Taylor 2004)? If so, how far will people conform to the behaviour expected of them? What levels of control will they retain over the images cast of them, and what authority will they have to repudiate them? Will the success of political programmes be determined by the support that can be drawn from new social groupings of this kind? Or conversely will generations as self-aware collectives remain the fiction of elites? Is this principle of division destined to remain un-lived and uncherished? While the latter scenario remains distinctly possible, these fictions seem likely to be influential nonetheless, shaping how we think about the past and future, guiding our actions in the present.

¹ I thank audiences at the London School of Economics, Copenhagen, Cardiff and Cork for their useful input on earlier drafts, Lea Ypi for a valuable close reading, and the *Journal's* referees for some excellent comments.

² Sometimes Bourdieu states his position in strongly constructivist terms, sometimes more realist, but both dimensions are generally present: see Bourdieu 1991: 232 for a typical effort to reconcile them (cf. Schwartz 1997: 153ff.).

³ For the texts examined, see the reference list.

⁴ A move towards the institutionalization of generational discourse was the May 2011 establishment of the Intergenerational Foundation, a London think-tank.

⁵ Our inclusive approach identifies generationalism when speakers make systematic reference to 'generation' – even when, on some theoretical readings, the word is being misused (e.g. when generations are elided with cohorts).

⁶ For one indication of how such ideas can spread, see the conservative journalist Matthew Parris recalling his references to Willetts' book at a school graduation ceremony (Parris 2011).

⁷ See also generations as marked by institutions – school, army, youth movement – or individuals, e.g. the 'John Paul II generation', much discussed in Poland and Catholic forums such as the World Youth Day. (Cf. Turner 1998: 302.)

⁸ The songs are generally seen as critical of Thatcher's Britain, and hence mark an ostentatiously surprising, post-partisan choice for a Conservative politician.

⁹ Different in this regard are alternative vocabularies such as 'ages' (e.g. the nuclear age) and 'decades' (e.g. 'the sixties'), which do not evoke a collective subject, referring rather to a temporal context.

¹⁰ Rawls' efforts to conceive intergenerational justice are an influential example of this tendency: it is via the future-oriented concerns of 'heads of household' that the intergenerational view is developed (Rawls 1971).

¹¹ Here is an ambiguity of 'generation': used to denote age-groups, the co-presence of generations is implied; used to denote periods, it may contrast the 'living' with past / or future generations.

¹² By contrast, 1960s generationalism showed a concern to stress the period's historical prestige (Graubard 1978: vi).

¹³ Burnett (2010) makes relevant points (albeit without distinguishing generations and generationalism), contrasting the ‘epic’ generations of the early-twentieth century with the ‘consumption’ generations that followed, the latter defined by tastes and market activity. This distinction is useful, though misses the tragic note in contemporary generationalism: the ‘jilted generation’ and ‘the young’ are defined by their *suffering*, not merely their style preferences.

¹⁴ There is of course the sceptical position that sees generationalism as nothing more than a fashion, i.e. a randomly-formed behavioural pattern reproduced by acts of imitation grounded solely in the desire to conform to the emerging pattern. Little can be said to refute such a perspective, except to note fashions, being senseless, quickly fade, while the texts we are examining straddle at least five years.

¹⁵ Culturalist perspectives such as Beckett’s can equally assert their empiricism, treating as a basic truth that age-groups are imprinted with ideas internalized during formative years. His text is confessedly impressionistic however.

¹⁶ We exclude reasons mainly private in character: e.g. use of a generational narrative because the author claims to be of the generation described, allowing a claim to insight and authority based on ‘insider’ status. Adopting this motif, see Beckett, McElvoy and Howker and Malik.

¹⁷ For a critical analysis of generational accounting and its links to a privatization agenda: Blackburn 2011: 236–9.

¹⁸ As a language of change, it is likely to be uncomfortable to a classical conservative.

¹⁹ E.g. Reform, which has published widely on pensioners and the ‘IPOD generation’. See also opinion pieces by US-based British historian and public intellectual Niall Ferguson (e.g. Ferguson 2011).

²⁰ See Willetts, Radio 4 *Analysis* programme, 21st June 2010: ‘It looks as if the baby boomers are going to be taking out from the welfare state significantly more than they put in. [...] Whereas for the younger generation, they may get out less than they put in.’

²¹ Cf. the echoes of theft in the title *The Pinch*.

²² Though we focus on class, as it is more pertinent to the economic issues speakers raise, similar points could be made concerning ethnoscapes: generationalists seek to reduce the likelihood non-white groups are made scape-goats for such problems as crime and public disorder. ‘Generationalizing’ problems is one way to avoid their racialization.

²³ Note a further advantage of casting oneself as the representative of future generations: those yet-to-be-born are in no position to refuse one’s claims. If one of the dangers for any representative is that their constituency disowns them, or – under more general conditions of a crisis of representation – rejects all such claims, this variant of generationalism promises to circumvent such problems.

²⁴ Cf. Willetts 2007, pushing class into the past: ‘In the old days we used to think of our society as divided by class and economic interests. Now we increasingly worry about divisions based on identity and culture. There is another division, and one which we politicians need to tackle – a clash of generations.’

²⁵ Note again the flexibility of the generational idea: just as it can evoke conflict between co-existing generations, it can evoke the unity of the present and externalise conflicts into the past and future.

²⁶ No doubt this has something to do with these interventions’ intended audience, and that of the media channels, notably the broadsheet press and BBC Radio 4, which pick up on them.

²⁷ See Willetts 2010: 77 for assumptions of property-ownership: ‘The boomers increasingly came to think of their house as not just a place to live but their own personal gold mine which could pay for holidays or cars, or be their pension.’

²⁸ The aforementioned ‘generational activist’ Laurie Penny is a case in point.

²⁹ Note though the mentioned tendency for class to have cultural overtones.

³⁰ If generation is understood as age-group, one can hope to outgrow it. But this is quite different from voluntary exit; besides, in the alternative conception, generations are never outgrown – they age with their members.

³¹ See Beckett 2010: 58, for a rare problematisation of boomer middle-classness; for discussion of intra-generational inequalities and contradictions: Howker and Malik 2010: 11; Little 2010: 23.

³² More brazen is Boorman, who attributes the financial crisis to the vices of those raised in a certain era (2010: 17ff.).

³³ The point recalls criticisms made of Mannheim’s theoretical project as a whole (Shils 1974) and hints at a problem raised by generationalist thought even in its most refined versions.

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