

Why the idea of 'generation' needs to be articulated more carefully in politics



Ben Little and **Alison Winch** explain the different meanings of generation in political culture and highlight the tension that exists between them. They argue that a successful application of the concept is able to mark both continuity and difference, turning the power of conservative thought to radical ends.

In mainstream political culture, one of the most frequently recurring – and loaded – media archetypes is the battle between Baby Boomers and Millennials, who tussle in the homes and streets of Britain, pitching tuition fees against triple-locked pensions and free bus passes against impossible house prices. These stories have intensified since the financial crash, partly because it has had differential economic effects on specific age cohorts, but cultural differences centred on generation have also played a significant role. Generation is thus a pivotal and structuring concept in contemporary politics, but not enough attention is paid to the way in which it operates ideologically.



The contemporary discourse is a recent manifestation of a recurring social theme that was most famously theorised by German sociologist Karl Mannheim in the 1920s. Mannheim argued that generations are distinct social units formed by the historical, cultural and technological changes that occur at key times in people's lives. Since we live in a time of crisis and change, Mannheim helps to explain why generation is currently emerging as a topic of debate.

But this is not the only way generation is used. In the 2017 general election, Theresa May made use of a different understanding of generation, one that ties the word to a patriarchal conservatism that places special importance on inheritance (an irony perhaps given her party's disastrous dementia tax proposal). May's adoption of the language of generation was rooted in a conservatism inspired by Edmund Burke, and right at the heart of the [Tory manifesto](#) was the Whig politician's idea of a generational social contract as:

a partnership between those who are living, those who have lived before us, and those who are yet to be born.

These two approaches to generation have framed scholarly understandings. Many commentators point to two distinct uses of the term: on the one hand, there is the *biological or familial* understanding of generation (lineage, family trees and so on can be seen through this perspective); and, on the other hand, it can be understood dynamically, as a *social and historical* term, which means that it can be a signifier of social rupture and cultural difference between generations.

While academics may seek to separate out these two understandings, common-sense discourse makes no such explicit division. People usually engage with the idea at both the social and familial levels without distinction. Indeed, what marks generation's explanatory power in dominant discourses is precisely its ability to obscure and collapse the differences between the family and social spheres. And this gives the term more power: to hide differences in class, race, gender, sexuality, and place in a meta-narrative that reduces the social to familial terms.

This is not a new phenomenon, indeed using the metaphor of the family to bind people to the state was Burke's very intention, as he tried to quell enthusiasm in England for the French revolution:

In this choice of inheritance we have given our frame of polity the image of a relation of blood; binding up the constitution of our country with our dearest domestic ties; adopting our fundamental laws into the bosom of our family affections; keeping inseparable and cherishing the warmth of all their combined and mutually reflected charities, our state, our hearths, our sepulchres and our altars.
(*Reflection on the Revolution in France 1790*)

In doing so, he founded modern conservatism. Looking at this now, one might think that such a politics would sit in uneasy relation with the radicalism of Thatcherite neoliberalism, with the short time frames and creative destruction of market fundamentalism. But it's not the case. The two are bound by a patriarchal logic which adjusts for any dissonance.

For neoliberal guru Milton Friedman, the basic productive unit was the 'family' or household, and he saw it as unacceptable state intervention to obstruct the transmission of accumulated wealth from fathers to children. It is this valorisation of the family and its endurance through generations that makes possible a link between neoliberal economics and social-contract conservatism – the family plays a central role in reflecting and reproducing the patriarchal order in both these ideologies. It is the concept of generation that enables the link to happen.

For the way the family and its reproduction is imagined in contemporary conservative political culture tends to the traditional and the patriarchal. The ghost of Aristotle, for whom the ultimate purpose of man was to make more men – 'it takes a man to make a man', or, as some translate it: 'it takes a man to generate a man' – still lingers. And patriarchy is taken for granted in the traditional Christian account of social reproduction. The old testament is full of 'x begat y' and the importance of patrilineal authority, and this theme continues in the new. Thomas Aquinas, discussing Aristotle, states: 'In human generation, the mother provides the matter of the body which, however, is still unformed, and receives its form only by means of the power which is contained in the father's seed'. Even into the enlightenment there has been a 'natural' rather than 'cultural' approach to generation: there has always been the idea that there is a biological order to things, that the links between family, social reproduction and the organisation of society are somehow pre-ordained and enduring.

Because of this long philosophical history – internalised in our shared cultural wisdom – common sense 'generationalism' (as Jonathan White [calls it](#)) is able to operate as an unquestioned public discourse, and this has powerful and exclusionary effects. How can you participate in a generational politics that centres patrilineal logics if you are not involved (for whatever reason) in biological reproduction – or are operating outside heteronormative understandings of family? How can you identify with an understanding of history that emphasises a smooth progress from one generation to another if you are a new participant in a society, particularly if you have been brought there under circumstances of distress, or if your ancestors were slaves and the legacy of that history persists? How can you conceptualise this progress if it simply doesn't reach your social and/or economic location, or if your relative socio-economic status was in crisis and retreat long before the financial crash – as is the case for many established working-class communities?

Whether we academics would describe any given use of generation as Burkean or Mannheimian often doesn't matter, mainstream generational discourses are able to capture people in subordinate subject positions and draw them consensually into a dominant common sense; and in doing so they maintain that subordination to patriarchal and familial norms. It's been argued that generation is a primary metaphor for the human experience of temporality: it's the long beat of history one life at a time, as against the metronomic pace of the daily factory bell. But it also comes packed with all the baggage that can be conceptually packed in it by dominant structures of thought.

That said, we don't want to argue that the concept of generation cannot be used for radical social ends. Indeed, intergenerational collectivity is crucial for political change. Nevertheless, discourses of generation need to be articulated with care due to the ideological freight they carry. Jeremy Corbyn's attempts to do so during the 2017 general election – with the idea that education is a “gift between generations” – were positive, but still struggling to escape a Burkean shadow. Even more positive perhaps was the emergence of Generation Grime, who seem to be drawing on the experiences of Black Lives Matter activists in the US. Many BLM activists locate their politics generationally, in relation to – but also distinct from – previous black feminist and black liberation movements. These appropriations of generational language work with the common-sense understandings of the term, by marking both continuity with the past and difference in the present and turn the power of conservative thought to radical ends.

Note: This blog is adapted from the first instalment of the new Critical Terms series from Soundings: A Journal of Politics and Culture. The full article is available [here](#) and the framing statement for the series is [here](#).

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