

History by Generations

Generational Dynamics in Modern History

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Conference at the GHI

Co-sponsored by the GHI and the graduate program "Generations in Modern History," University of Göttingen

Conveners: Hartmut Berghoff (GHI), Uffa Jensen (University of Göttingen), Christina Lubinski (GHI), and Bernd Weisbrod (University of Göttingen). Participants: Astrid Baerwolf (University of Göttingen), Volker Benkert (Arizona State), Olof Brunninge (Jönköping International Business School), Elwood Carlson (Florida State), Sarah E. Chinn (Hunter College, CUNY), Karl H. Füssl (Technical University of Berlin), Gary Cross (Pennsylvania State), Kirsten Gerland (Göttingen), Hope M. Harrison (George Washington University), Jochen Hung (Institute of Germanic & Romance Studies, London), Jan Logemann (GHI), Ondřej Matějka (Institute of Contemporary History, Prague), Daniel Morat (Free University of Berlin), Maria Fernandez Moya (University of Barcelona), Lutz Niethammer (University of Jena), Miriam Rürup (GHI), Dirk Schumann (Göttingen), Judith Szapor (McGill University), Anna von der Goltz (Oxford), and several other members of the Göttingen graduate program "Generations in Modern History." Johanna Brumberg (University of Göttingen), Uffa Jensen (University of Göttingen), and Georg Kamphausen (University of Bayreuth) submitted papers but could not attend because of circumstances beyond their control.

Conference Report

The concept of generations has featured prominently on both sides of the Atlantic in recent years, be it in popular culture or academic studies. Indeed, it is on course to become a firmly established category of social analysis alongside those of class, gender, and ethnicity. Given the frequent political ruptures in twentieth-century German history, historians of modern Germany, perhaps more than others, have focused on specific events - such as 1945 or 1968 - as centers of gravity around which the experiences of particular generational groupings coalesced. Age-related affinities and life chances have fascinated U.S. scholars just as much, albeit in subtly different ways. Twentieth-century U.S. history witnessed the rise of the baby boomers and the labeling of a somewhat intangible Generation X. The conference brought together established and younger scholars from the United States, Germany, Canada, the United Kingdom, the Czech Republic, Spain, and Sweden to explore the challenges of writing "History by Generations" from a transatlantic and interdisciplinary perspective.

The event commenced with Elwood Carlson's keynote lecture on "Generations as Demographic Category." While the Göttingen School - one of the event's sponsors - has paid particular attention to self-conscious generational discourse and generation-building, Carlson's wide-ranging lecture stressed the power of sheer numbers. Some groups were more "generational than others," he conceded, and one of the crucial challenges scholars faced remained explaining the conditions that lead subgroups of people to define themselves in generational terms. While he concurred that there was "more to destiny than demography," he highlighted the impact of the "generation in itself," whose underlying "mechanical solidarity" (Durkheim) created significant and lasting differences in the life experiences of its members. Carlson illustrated his arguments by drawing on seven distinct generations in twentieth-century U.S. history and paid particular attention to a group he termed the "Lucky Few." Born between 1929 and 1945, their life chances and experiences were shaped profoundly by the fact that their generation was smaller than those that preceded and followed them. While the Lucky Few have not self-consciously identified themselves as a generation with unique experiences, Carlson portrayed them as a coherent social group with similar long-term experiences.

The conference's first panel, "Generation and Intellectuals" departed from Carlson's demographic focus. Daniel Morat's paper investigated the role of intellectuals as "generationalists" (Robert Wohl) in Germany and France between 1900 and 1930. Morat historicized the concept of generation by showing that it served intellectuals as a category of social analysis, self-description, and mobilization. His analysis focused on Henri Massis's and Alfred de Tarde's *Les jeunes gens d'aujourd'hui* (1913) and Franz Matzke's *Jugend bekennt sich: So sind wir!* (1930) as literary acts of generation-building. The authors of both texts, he argued, were part of a particular type of manifesto generation that helped to position specific male, middle-class, intellectual groups within the literary and political realm in France and Germany. Based on recent approaches to the history of emotions, Uffa Jensen's paper (read by Miriam Rürup) on the interwar German youth movement re-interpreted Karl Mannheim's influential theory of generations. Arguing that the emotional content of Mannheim's work had been ignored, Jensen stressed that emotions are the glue that binds generations together, producing specific emotional styles and communities. Different sections of the interwar youth movement did not just differ in their political views, but also in their emotional styles. There was a "conduct code of heat" that rivalled the "conduct code of cool" (H. Lethen), he suggested. Bernd Weisbrod's commentary built on Jensen's interpretation of generations as emotional communities by stressing the performative element in producing and sustaining generational ties. Weisbrod favored the idea of generational belonging over notions of stable generational identities and argued that the continued performance of generational belonging was central to making a generation and to ensuring its binding force over time.

The second panel, moderated by Jan Logemann, tackled the relationship of "Generation and Migration." Karl H. Füssl investigated the role that generational models played in shaping the recommendations that social scientists put forward in the early 1940s for a U.S. cultural policy towards Germany. Scholars such Margaret Mead, Talcott Parsons, and Erik Erikson, who were all closely involved in the U.S. Council for Intercultural Relations, contended that the supposed deficiencies of the German "character structure" were not inherited but the product of a flawed

socialization process that promoted submissive behavior and authoritarian tendencies. These arguments, Füssl argued, did much to bring about the adoption of a re-education policy towards Germany. Next, Sarah E. Chinn questioned the common assumption that a "generation gap" first surfaced in the United States in the 1960s. The concept may have been invented to describe the alienation of the baby boomers from their parents, but the phenomenon had first emerged at the turn of the century. At this point, however, the gap was widest among working-class immigrants and their children. Conflicts erupted between "Americanized" children and their "greenhorn" parents—a phenomenon that was also gendered. The conflicts were often most marked between mothers and daughters, because female employment created a gap between the homosocial world of the mothers and that of their daughters, who separated work and leisure time.

The third panel, chaired by Christina Lubinski, turned to business history to explore "Generation and the Family Firm." Maria Fernandez Moya compared intergenerational transmission practices in the Spanish publishing family firms Salvat and Seix Barral between 1900 and 2008. Her paper examined the strategies that enabled these firms to create intergenerational continuity by confirming, and at times contesting, their business and family histories and analyzed the factors that influenced their capacity to adapt to the rapidly changing economic and political environment of twentieth-century Spain. While the Salvat family was always careful to stay out of politics, Carlos Barral's involvement in left-wing politics meant that he eventually left to set up his own company in 1970. The following paper, by Olof Brunninge, introduced the audience to the case of the Swedish pulp and paper firm MoDo between 1872 and 1990. Drawing on the concepts of "familiness" and "family business identity," which are slowly gaining ground in business studies, Brunninge argued that MoDo created a sustainable competitive advantage by being a family firm. While the drawbacks of being a family firm dominated the scholarly literature for a long time, more recent studies have focused on the positive assets that a generational heritage creates. Family firm identity creates a bridge between past, present, and future generations of owners.

The final panel of the day turned to "Generations and Consumption." Gary Cross argued that generational identities may be shaped by political, military, or economic events, but in the twentieth century were also increasingly influenced by consumption. U.S. consumer identities were established earlier than in other countries and political identities declined with consumerism. At a time when old community ties were disappearing, consumer products offered age-based peer groups ways of identifying themselves. The resulting communities of consumption, Cross argued, hold onto their identities deep into the aging process. Reminiscing about formative consumer experiences creates emotional associations and is a vital element of generation-building. Similar themes were shared by the next paper, Dirk Schumann's alternative reading of four German political generations by looking at them in cultural rather than political terms. Building on Habbo Knoch's idea of images as "emotional containers," Schumann argued that the so-called war youth generation was affected not only by wartime violence but also by the new visual experience of going to the cinema and being otherwise surrounded by image-based advertisements and war propaganda. The lively discussion that followed, which Hartmut Berghoff moderated, centered on the question of how visualization and a deep-seated attachment to particular products played out in terms of creating generations. To what extent were products just things that people bought rather than formative markers of

generational identity? Was the "1965 Ford guy" a useful category for understanding a particular U.S. generation? While the discussion produced no final answers and revealed tangible differences between German and U.S. scholarship, the call to shift the focus away from those who shout the loudest was generally welcomed.

The following morning saw a return to interwar Germany. Understanding generation-building as a communicative process, Jochen Hung analyzed the generational public sphere of the Weimar Republic. The newspaper *Tempo* - his case study - was published by the left-liberal Ullstein publishing house between 1928 and 1933 to attract urban white-collar workers around the age of thirty who wanted to help create a new democratic Germany. While the notion of generation in Weimar is traditionally associated with the anti-republican struggle of the nationalist right, Hung suggested that the Weimar Republic was characterized by a polyphony of competing generational public spheres. The discussion, chaired by Bernd Weisbrod, highlighted the challenges of studying newspaper reception. Did *Tempo*'s positioning in the market allow for conclusions to be drawn about its readers' consciousness?

The next panel, moderated by Anna von der Goltz, turned to arguably the most famous generation of all. "The 68ers as a Generational Construct" examined how ideas of generation emerged during the period so closely associated with notions of generational conflict. Both papers questioned this perception in interesting ways. Johanna Brumberg (who could not attend, but whose paper was read) charted the development of the baby boomers from a purely demographic category used by U.S. social scientists to describe those born between the 1940s and 1960s to a self-referential label employed by commentators and former left-wing activists to describe members of the "sixties generation." Brumberg argued that it was a somewhat elusive term that was limited to the white middle class, which explained much of its success. Ondřej Matějka's *osmašedesátník* denoted an older age group of Czech intellectuals who had fallen in love with communism during the German occupation. He followed the development of this tight-knit group born between 1920 and 1930 from their coming-of-age in the Second World War to their role in present-day Czech politics. Rather than seeing the Prague Spring as a phenomenon akin to the Western youth revolt, Matějka portrayed the Czechoslovakian 1968 as a broader political project of socialist reform. Nevertheless, the notion of generation was central to how the protagonists and their opponents made sense of 1968 and played a crucial role in subsequent Czech memory wars. Both papers reminded everyone that much remains to be discovered about the national processes of generation-building that emerged out of 1968.

The final two panels, chaired by Hope Harrison and Lutz Niethammer, respectively, homed in further on East Central Europe, focusing on "Generation and the Transformation Process" of 1989 and "Post-Communist Generations in Comparative Perspective." While the shared socialization in East Germany and the joint experience of the country's demise suggests a generational disposition among those born between 1967 and 1973, Volker Benkert argued that there was no such thing as a "Generation Exit." Instead, he argued, young people responded to the collapse of the GDR in manifold ways. On the basis of oral history interviews, Benkert identified seven different types of transformation experience, ranging from the "victim" to the "Wendehals" or turncoat. Astrid Baerwolf then turned

to an in-depth analysis of East German models of motherhood. As social institutions and cultural inventions, childhood and parenthood are subject to constant changes, she explained. East German women, in particular, have had to contend with new social risks associated with having children, including the reprivatisation of childcare as well as changing cultural norms since 1989. As a consequence, Baerwolf found that the more practical and strict working mother of the GDR was replaced by the role model of a sensitive, highly involved mother who employs sophisticated psychological and managerial skills to give her children a good childhood. This "professionalization of motherhood" was a key symbol for the transition process in Eastern Germany. Kirsten Gerland compared the generational dynamics in the revolutions of 1989 in the GDR and Poland. In both countries oppositional groups defined themselves in generational terms and developed generation-specific visions of the future in the 1980s. Contrary to the GDR, where no memory generation of 1989 was created afterwards, in Poland numerous biographical narrations illustrate the continued traction of generational self-perceptions. They often portray the establishment of the Third Republic as a generational project and use generational arguments to distinguish themselves from the founders of Solidarity. In the final paper, Judith Szapor examined Hungary's National Association of People's Colleges (NÉKOSZ), which was charged with opening universities to previously underrepresented social strata after 1945. At its peak, this exceptional case of social mobility represented close to 10,000 students, sometimes referred to as the "Generation of Bright Winds," after their college anthem. In a more general sense, the term encompasses the young men and women from working-class or poor-peasant backgrounds who entered universities in the immediate post-war period to become members of the new Communist elite. Although the People's Colleges were politically contested, Szapor argued, as a pedagogical experiment designed to create a new, merit-based and politically engaged generation of Socialist leaders, they were a unique case in the postwar transformation of Soviet-controlled East Central Europe.

In the final roundtable discussion, Bernd Weisbrod, Lutz Niethammer, Gary Cross and Elwood Carlson offered some concluding thoughts on how to bring the diverse findings of the papers together. While the conference had begun with manifesto generations, it concluded with several cases that ought to have functioned as generations in Mannheim's sense, but that never defined themselves in such terms. Hence, the formative experience of a close-knit peer group was not enough to create a generation "for itself." Generation consciousness was clearly on the rise, and there was a magical element to this "last community" (Lutz Niethammer), but there was still no clear-cut link between experience and playing the generation card. Generation should thus be considered an optional resource of mobilization that historical actors - particularly in the political realm - employed as an argument at particular moments for particular purposes. Rather than invoking Mannheim once more, the panel turned to Marx to conclude that: "We make our own generations, but not under the conditions of our own choosing."

Anna von der Goltz (University of Oxford)