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Should a theory of generations that was developed in a post war period (Europe after World War I), and reborn in another post-war period (this time World War II and Vietnam) have anything to say about a generation that has not experienced such a confluence of historical events? This is, more or less, the central organizing theme of *After the Boom: The Politics of Generation X.* In evaluating the contributions this book makes to the empirical and theoretical study of generations, it may be helpful to review briefly the social history of our recent interest in the theme.

We have a substantial corpus of definitional and analytic literature related to the concept of generation. We have volumes of empirical analysis about the nature of generational differences. That literature, however, is from the 1970s and reflects the American, and international, concern for the protest-era politics of youth in the era of the civil rights and anti-war movements. These movements were relatively well-defined in historical terms, spanning the period from roughly 1960 (the first sit-in to gain widespread national attention) to the early 1970s (corresponding to the end of American involvement in the Vietnam war). These two movements had their maximum political overlap in the period from 1965 to the early 1970s, corresponding to the period from the passage of the Civil Rights Act to the war's end. The confluence of the two movements was in large measure due to the fact that African-Americans were more likely to serve, and die, in Vietnam. This historical convergence linked, however uneasily at times, two major movements that engaged the particular attention of American youth.

These "master" movements, which had a fairly clear-cut historical demarcation, were attended by other historical occurrences that affected youth in a highly-charged way. Young males were subject to mandatory military conscription (again, until the early 1970s), and all youths between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one were denied the right to vote until 1972. This combination of military conscription and voting controversy fueled a generational impact that was intense and of deep existential significance. Young people were not only ideologically engaged; they were deeply threatened by tangible risks.

At about the same time, there were other developments that were not as precisely marked by historical dates, but were nevertheless dramatic in their effects on the generation of the 1960s and 1970s. Within and without the civil rights and anti-war movements, there was an increasingly assertive and differentiated women's movement. By the mid-to-late 1960s, the ready availability of oral contraceptives ("the pill") altered the politics of procreation and gender roles.

Why is any of this important to our current thinking about generational politics? Simply enough, it is because we must seriously question whether the concept of generation, born in a post-war (1920s Europe) and reborn in a time of significant transition, has anything to offer in the current analysis of political consciousness. The last great interest (at least among political scientists) resulted from the historical confluence of specific events and cultural change in the 1960s and 1970s that 1) was historically unusual–perhaps unique–in post-war history, 2) spawned a renewed interest in American and international scholarship in the concept of "generation," and 3) has not been repeated since. The transformations of the 1970s produced an intense concern in the United States and Western Europe for the politics of youth and for the differences that separated the generations (there was widespread anxiety about what eighteen- to twenty-one-year-olds would do when, in 1972, they got the vote). These developments produced their own fashions in academics. The first was a rebirth of

attention to Karl Mannheim's theory of generations; the second was, arguably, the theory of "post-materialism." Though these two theories are vastly difference in their scope, both were products of post-war scholarship. This is, I think, significant for understanding the current discussion of "Generation X."

The label "Generation X" emerged from our post-1970s desire to think that generation continues to be important. What is lacking, however, is the richness and intensity of formative experience that make "generation" a meaningful concept. But we cannot let go of the term, perhaps because the journalists and marketing specialists will not. It provides a soothing handle on the complex behavior of oncoming birth cohorts, and we found the notion of generation to be helpful in analyzing the post-war generations (e.g., the "Protest" and the "Baby Boom" generations). But what seems to be lacking are the epoch-defining events that focus and polarize young members of the society.

This not to say that contemporary youth do not have significant struggles in achieving their sexual and political identity; these remain central tasks for them, as for generations before them. But those battles are carried out on an individual basis; they do not require the mobilization of an entire age cohort, and they certainly do not require a mass movement. Generation X has not been excluded from voting (eighteen-year-olds got the vote in their parents' day!), oral contraception predates their own existence for the most part, they are not subject to the draft, and no major war or movement can, in fact, "move" them.

Why then speak of them as a "generation" at all? Most political definitions require, or at least assume, that there are events of an intense and wide-experienced nature that affect a birth cohort. These events become part of the common experience of a cohort; there is a consciousness that this shared history engaged their effort and affected their existence. But for Generation X, there has been no war (or its economic equivalent, a "Great Depression").

The authors in the volume provide a sensible reason for revisiting the concept of generation. Journalists and the general public have stolen the march from academics, inventing and spreading a notion of a distinctive generation (named, somewhat inconclusively, "X"). But there is scant evidence that this label has any *political* meaning. Therefore, the authors ask whether it is really a political generation and, if so, what is distinctive about it. This is an empirical question. Once it has been examined (with mixed to negative results), the authors explicitly or implicitly pose a fascinating and important theoretical question: if the generation is *not* distinct in its political orientations, 1) should we conclude that it is not a political generation at all, or 2) should we rethink what we mean by "generation"?

The Empirical Question: Is Generation X Different?

Most of the chapters in the book draw upon the notion of generation that is inherited from Mannheim (The introduction by Bennett, Craig and Rademacher, the chapter by Bennett and Rademacher, Craig and Halfacre, and the chapter by Dennis and Owen are the most explicit in reviewing the concept). There are, to be sure, variations in the way Mannheim might be interpreted and "modernized," but the central element in the theory can be reduced to the nexus between 1) a youthful and receptive age cohort and 2) an intensely-experienced epoch (defined by a major event of cluster of events). Where this nexus does not exist, it is difficult to speak of a "generation" in Mannheim's sense. And this, of course, is the empirical question. If a cohort, or set of cohorts, does not experience a common set of events with unusual intensity, it is unlikely to develop a common consciousness or set of attitudes. It will lack a common reference point (such as the Vietnam war or the Great Depression) and fail the definition of *political* generation.

So here we have the question: Is the elusive and perhaps mythical Generation X a *political* generation? A related question is: If it is not a political generation in the sense of Mannheim, should we shelve the term until a proper political generation comes along, or should we redefine the term to account for the situation where the cohort-epoch nexus is lacking?

Deciding first on the "cohort" part of the definition seemed to vex the authors from the start. It is always difficult to operationally define a generation; that is, to choose the birth cohorts that are to be included. The various authors in this volume show a happy diversity in their differences in this question. Cohorts included in one chapter may not be included in another. Even the labels the authors use to designate the generations vary somewhat. Generation X is generally defined as those born in or after 1961, 1963, 1964, or 1965; the most different case is he chapter by Martinez which deals with Canada's Generation X (born in 1972 or later).

What is more bewildering and probably more serious is the diversity among definitions of *other* generations– the ones to be contrasted with Generation X. Here we see

little consistency in labeling. This is exasperating when we find a repeated claim that the Baby Boom generation is the "parent" generation; this can be only conditionally true, however, since the age of parents is notoriously diverse and the parental "generation" may span as much as thirty years. Furthermore, there is no clear way to equate the generations from one study to another because the definitions are so diverse.

This definitional problem is ameliorated by the fact that, when all the data are in, there is very little difference between the Generation X'ers and the Baby Boomers. Oddly, there has emerged a tendency to see the X'ers as a reaction to the Boomers, but this implicit generational conflict has no apparent political consequence. It is easy enough to find expressions of Generation X'ers resentment of the Boomers for using up the jobs and the environment (the book provides us with some), but there are only modest differences. The X'ers are more politically agnostic and uncommitted, but not obviously more or less racist, or liberal, or economically conservative, or even socially liberal/conservative. They are not obviously more "selfish," (journalistic wisdom aside), or consumerist, or internationalist or committed to social causes. What is remarkable is their similarity to the "Boomers" in their absence of commitment to the classic "master narratives" of economics and politics. Not affected by great wars or great causes, both the Boomers and the X'ers show the same distrust and contact anxiety vis-a-vis the national public sphere that has been chronicled since the mid-1960's.

Each succeeding generation is more politically apathetic than the one preceding it, and the X'ers are less politically informed, less likely to attend to political matters in the media (including computerized sources), and they are less participatory than earlier generations (Bennett and Rademacher). The X'ers are somewhat less enthusiastic about political parties and more likely to imagine a world without them (Dennis and Owen); they simply care less about these conventional institutions of political life than any preceding generation. But the evidence is mixed: Owen finds that Generation X'ers are apparently no more cynical, nor more disaffected from political institutions than older citizens; they are not more distrustful than their elders about government, nor more likely to believe that government is unresponsive to their needs. They do appear to be less overtly patriotic and imbued with national pride, but that may (or may not) be a life-cycle effect. The one author who claims to have found a distressing difference is Hill, who finds the X'ers to be an "atavistic, even slightly reactionary group" on racial matters (p. 123). In this one area, one might imagine the younger generation as a potential repository for racial reaction. Hill implies that a dark potential is there. It may be, but a "potential" must be activated by a political dynamic and we can only speculate about how the X'ers (or for that matter other citizens) would react to an intense racial debate in the United States. The hint of a static difference is disposition is no clue to the politics that might ultimately be set in motion.

Theory and the Problem of Explanation

We lack an explanatory model for these generally modest findings. Their weakness is not due to deficiencies in research design or the skill of the investigators, but to the fact that Generation X is not very distinct in a *political* sense. What differences exist may even turn out in time to be due to life-cycle effects; the X'ers may, in others words, warm to the political system as they age (advancing from apathetic to lukewarm, like the Boomers). Or, they may really be (somewhat) different and continue to be so. How would we know, and what theories might be adduced as explanation? Various authors point to broad social trends that might offer an explanation–the increasing differentiation and fractionation of media (e.g., through the multiplicity of cable television channels and other specialized sources), progressive reduction in the power of conventional socializing institutions (e.g., family, school), pervasive negative images of politics in the media, trivialization and denigration of politics as a continuing public scandal, and a variety of other arguments that might be lumped under the rubric of "post-modern" differentiation (e.g., the loss of master ideological narratives and the decay of unifying themes in public life).

But virtually none of the chapters set out to test such theories. Rather, they resort to them in a more or less post-hoc manner where the "generation" hypothesis has failed. This is not in itself a weakness of the book; it is a reflection of the empirical state of affairs: if the central feature of Mannheim's political generation is lacking–the cohort-nexus–then it is unlikely that a biological or social generation will achieve political distinctness. On the contrary, a set of cohorts is likely to continue the tradition of distance, apathy and unconcern about politics. Virtually by definition, the absence of focal, integrating political events means that there will be no new master narratives or signal events to focus the consciousness of a generation.

In short, the evidence is that Generation X is a biological and social generation (of course), but not a po-

litical one. The various chapters in this book have done a highly serviceable job in demonstrating that the statement by Craig and Halfacre might stand for the book as a whole: "one searches in vain for any sort of clear-cut generational pattern" (p. 74). This statement is echoed almost verbatim by Owen who also finds no "clear-cut generational pattern" (p. 96).

Some Methodological Issues

One might quibble about this or that statistical test or graphic display, but on the whole the studies employ solid and readily-interpretable techniques. Because some of the intergenerational differences are so modest, there may have a mild tendency for the authors to stretch the interpretation from time to time. But none of these issues is a serious problem. In other cases, the variables available to the authors may have been ill-suited to the intent of the analysis, but this is a common problem with secondary analysis of data generally gathered for other purposes (in Hill's discussion of racial stereotypes, the problem may be a bit greater, though, since his best measures of "racism" are whether respondents attribute violence to various minority groups; his conclusions deserve better measures).

But the most important and troublesome methodological issue is that there are virtually no minorities in the analyses. This is no doubt attributable to the limitations of secondary analysis, but it is a problem that is pernicious if casual readers of the book are not sufficiently aware of this limitation. Virtually none of the authors had sufficient minorities to allow any meaningful conclusions about Latino, or African American, or Asian Generation X'ers. This is a common problem in general population surveys that do not specifically oversample minorities; these studies did not. The result is an analysis of "Generation X" as if it consisted only of white youth born in the early- to mid-1960s.

To be sure, there is a radical contagion of styles across ethnic groups in the United States. This produces a superficial uniformity in the appearance of many youth whose fashion and cultural preferences do not fit any particular mold. But this should not lull us into believing that race and class have been transcended in the system of privilege in the United States. No author in this book even remotely implies this, but the reader should be warned that Generation X in the book stands operationally for white youth (only). The only minor exception is the Martinez chapter, which is a non-United States sample and contains francophone as well as anglophone Canadians.

Theoretical Issues

The book poses an important theoretical question: Is "generation" still a useful concept? The usual analytic strategy in a generational analysis is to define a generation by the events that are believed to make out of a cohort a *political* generation. In the United States the usual demarcations are the Great Depression, World War II, the Cold War and the Vietnam War. In Western Europe, some variation on these events is often used, though in Germany future analyses are likely to include the "unification generation." In central Europe, the youth cohorts that experienced the transition from state socialism will be watched for any signs of political uniqueness. But in the contemporary United States, there is no event that qualifies as a central, integrating focus. Even the Gulf War hardly qualifies because it was fought with a professional (volunteer) military; youth in general were not subject to universal conscription and mortal risk.

Against this background, it may seem unusual to worry about Generation X at all. It is defined by its being "not-of-the-Baby-Boom-generation," not by any signal event(s) that called it into political consciousness. The authors of the studies in this book have therefore reversed the logic of the typical Mannheim-derived analysis and taken as a departure point the popular, often journalistic, definition of a generation; they then tried to discover whether it qualified as a *political* generation. This is a perfectable viable strategy, and it is not unfair to say that their findings, on the whole, suggest that the journalistic definition of Generation X does not have much obvious political consequence. This is a fascinating finding and well worth the effort; it also chastens us gainst any facile adoption of popular definitions that have no substantial empirical basis. After this book, political scientists should be wary of using the term *Generation X* for political analysis. But all of this leaves us with a question about the term "generation" itself. Can it be that it is only meaningful in situations of significant and concentrated social stress? Or could it be that a biological and social generation is subject to more subtle pressures and that our analytic task is to discover what those pressures are? This is the reverse of the typical Mannheim-derived analysis, but it might be an entirely valid one. The book is valuable in formulating this question, though the authors could only speculate on possible answers. One way to show gratitude for the interesting theoretical issues the authors have opened up might be to suggest some questions and comments that are stimulated by the book.

Some Theoretical Comments

1. Contemporary media were once thought to create a "global village" with world-wide integrative symbols and information. It seems just as likely that the media have created so many channels of information that differentiation and encapsulation are also possible. It depends on the viewers and the use to which they put the media. What stands in the way of our understanding is the "levels of analysis" problem: we typically try to explain individual-level political apathy as a result of media differentiation. But this is a hapless, post-hoc strategy; we must measure individual-level media usage–not just frequency, but type and content. It is well-known that the "news" can be obtained through national network affiliates, local stations, the Public Broadcasting System, a variety of newspapers, several versions of national cable news, and Christian and conservative broadcasts that look virtually identical to network news. Our general comments about "media" do not do justice to the diversity available, or to voluntary choices that viewers make in selecting (or not selecting) their sources of political information.

2. Any generation, whether it qualifies as a political generation or not, consists of tremendous cultural and ethnic diversity. The Craig and Bennett volume was not able to do justice to this dimension. The authors were careful workers and aware of this limitation. But it would be deeply misleading if any readers of the book cited its findings without explicitly realizing that the putative Generation X portrayed here is bereft of African American, Latino and other minority groups. For journalists and, above all, the marketing strategists, Generation X may appear simply to be white youth with disposable income, but this is not, even by implication or omission, a defensible research strategy for social scientists.

3. When we are lost for a theory, we often grasp at "socialization." We assume that signs of social decay and disorganization are part of modernity, and that they result from disruptions in the agencies of primary socialization (e.g., family, schools, religion). More often than not, we note this decay on the macro level and cite it as a cause of apathy and political disintegration. Many of the authors in this book cite such disintegration (in the family and other agencies of socialization), but the nature of their data limited all of them to post hoc speculation. A new look at Generation X, or any other generation, means that we need to overcome the limits of secondary analysis and design studies that pay more attention to the specific nature of social learning and identification processes. Although we think that Generation X is the product of these macro-level forces of "modernization," none of the studies in this book was able to draw upon any convincing measurement of these phenomena. That, I should think, would be the next step in determining what makes Generation X so "ungeneration-like."

4. We need to rethink the contemporary relevance of Mannheim's generation theory. As I argued at the outset, Mannheim's notion was born in an epoch of significant transition–a period in which coming generations were not only differentially affected by change, but they also developed a differential consciousness of events. The 1970s were a period of "Mannheim redux," as his concepts again seemed relevant: the epoch, at least in the United States, was one in which radical political discontinuities (civil rights, Vietnam, transformations in gender and procreational roles) seemed to promise a politics of transformation. But what do we do with an epoch like the current one in which there is no apparent confluence of dramatic, defining events? Do we declare Mannheim irrelevant, or broaden our definition of "defining events" to include macro-social change (e.g., "modernization") that are, for the most part, pervasive and undramatic (or dramatic only to historians after the fact)? Do we define Generation X, or any other generation, as one whose political consciousness is defined by its lack of political consciousness? Do we then celebrate this diversity, differentiation, and unpredictability as a defining characteristic? To do so has the aura of verisimilitude, but it wreaks havoc with our simpler theories of social causation. Furthermore, it speaks little good for that staple of political analysis, speculation about "party realignment." Such realignment seems necessarily to be the result of the reorganization of the master narratives of political life (e.g., liberalism-conservatism, labor versus management, left versus right), yet it is precisely those narratives that appear to have lost their hold on Generation X (as on the previous generation as well). It may be that the development of an urban-ethnic underclass (not represented in the Craig/Bennett book) has provided the negative pole of politics in the United States, with the rest of society aligning itself with the center-right. If this is the case, Generation X may be simply a cross-class cohort that is united only in being apolitical and not-underclass. Looking for a common consciousness among the the white respondents represented in the book seems not to be the best strategy for future research. Drawing on what the authors have told us about the white non-poor born in the 1960s, it seems more important to look across racial, ethnic and economic lines (particularly to see what may be expected on both sides of the class divide between the urban underclass and the rest of society). The question

about Generation X that is now the most interesting is not whether its members are committed to political institutions in the United States, but whether those institutions can constructively deal with the cultural and economic diversity represented within those age-cohorts.

5. Lastly, the book shows us that we need to rethink our analytic strategies. Political scientists–particularly those who use national electoral and survey data–are inclined to seek universalistic trends. The theory of electoral alignments implicitly depends on the existence of this universalistic logic to weigh evidence of national party realignment. The classic ideologies of the left and the right also rest on universalistic logic. But several of the authors in this volume raise the possibility that Generation X is not defined by any universalistic event or perspective, but by its particularism. This calls for a revision to Mannheim, or a moratorium on the term *political generation* as applied to this set of birth cohorts.

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