ANNIE KRIEGEL

Generational Difference: The History of an Idea

The fateful act of living in and with one's generation completes the drama of human existence.

Martin Heidegger

Un jour, à Göttingue, dans une brasserie, un jeune Vieille-Allemagne me dit qu'il fallait venger dans le sang des Français le supplice de Conradin de Hohenstaufen que vous avez décapité à Naples (au XIII$^{\text{ème}}$ siècle). Vous avez certainement oublié cela depuis longtemps mais pas nous.

Henri Heine

1 *Genesis*

IN THE BEGINNING, it was only the simple recognition of a demographic fact: three generations in a century—this was the average yield of the precarious flow of the stream of human life through the ages. One generation meant the time that sons needed to become fathers. And then, by Littré's definition in 1863, it became the *cohort*—the sum of all men of flesh and blood who make up the abstract thickness of time thus carved out; or else, if time was narrowed to a point (the point of departure, or of arrival), the generation became the promotion—of all those who had, in the same year, passed the same test.

It is only at the turn of this century that the generational rift intrudes into social practice and is transformed from a primitive means of accounting into one of the tools for decoding reality. Simultaneously comes a tendency to shrink the concept of the natural space of a generation. More and more, this space becomes confused with a decade—particularly in the American world, where the division into decades (the twenties, the thirties) seems to compensate for both the enormity of territorial space and the thinness of recorded history.

In traditional societies, whose movement is so slow that they seem in retrospect almost immobile, what purpose could a division into generations serve? Reproducing themselves identically, with the same replacing the same, these societies seemed to follow a cyclical pattern—the yearly cycle of the seasons, and the timeless cycle of the gods. When such societies had to conceptualize discontinuity, a possible rupture of the cycle, they had no way to imagine middle solutions: thought turned at once to Apocalypse. And even when the pace of change increased somewhat, when mankind in its entirety truly entered history, these societies encountered innovation only from time to time; in-

stances of realized potentialities for change were too few and far between. One generation was much too short a time. More substantial units had to be employed; hence, the era (Christian), the epoch (modern, defined in contrast to the ten centuries of the Middle Ages), the century (of Louis the XIV).

By the eighteenth century, the times for which a century was an adequate yardstick came to an end—even Daudet's formula about the "stupid nineteenth century" can only reflect his ill-temper. The century can no longer measure a reality overflowing the boundaries of such a constraining concept.

Once more, we are led back to the decisive turning point of the Enlightenment, and to the revolutions which followed it, in order to examine the new conditions which gave social effect to the generational theme.

First, life expectancy, although more widely varied by social class and shorter than today, nevertheless had become a largely collective reality. Life was no longer an adventure whose evils were so totally individual that one could not think in terms of a life expectancy about the same as one's general age group. Duration, the considerable increase in one's personal chances to survive for a calculable period of time, thus engendered reasons to settle down and form links with others of one's own age range. At the same time, confusion and disorder, sharp disparities in age groups within the family or local community, due to the extreme unevenness in lifetimes, were disappearing. Agnès and her old fogey were a commonplace occurrence when the state of matrimony was so frequently interrupted by the death of one spouse, when it was fully expected that widowers would remarry, and when such remarriage entailed, for women as well as for men, looking to the pool of available single boys and girls for a new mate. The reduction of the age difference between spouses (a difference that today has all but disappeared, even when a second marriage follows a divorce, because of the lack of available prospects of a really different age) thus contributed to the objective creation of age groups, clearly demarcated and separate, because their members are destined to go together through the basic steps of childhood, adolescence, marriage, parenthood. Contemporaneity, once approximate, has become strict.

If the generational fact has emerged as one of the more constraining social parameters, it is also because other attributes that previously nurtured a sense of individual identity have, in modern society, lost some of their structuring significance. The decline of the automatic inheritance of condition, of estate, and of status, which meant that everyone had a perceptible and stable social identity from birth, has led us to search for another principle to help us classify our individual destinies intelligibly. Moreover, since the dynamic sector of the new society not only was supposed to, but, in fact, did rest on selection by a certain type of merit—by ability as one used to say—what could be easier than to evaluate one's personal trajectory, one's career, by comparing it to that of one's friends who started at the same time? In France, for instance, we know well the role played in the formation of political, economic, or cultural elites by *les Annuaires*, in which successive classes of alumni of the Grandes Ecoles carefully list the level of grade achieved by their members on a hierarchical scale. To be happy, to have "succeeded," one must have climbed each step at a given age. To climb it six months earlier than the norm is cause for elation; six months late, a feverish alarm.

This is also probably one of the ways in which the modern state has penetrated social life, to regulate and to legislate it. Obsessed by the thought of rationalizing process in order to maximize the effectiveness of its social investments, the state would not rest until it had fixed, uniformly and compulsorily, the age at which one must enter kindergarten, learn to read, graduate from high school, serve time in the army. This practice is rendered all the more meaningful by the simultaneous and increasing uncertainty of the Catholic Church, whose relationship to modernity is particularly problematic, about the "right age" for receiving successive sacraments, particularly baptism and first communion.

Lastly, it must be recognized that the advent of division by generations comes not just by the high probability that each of us may live a "whole" life, nor even by the transformation of the most dynamic sector of society from a roughly hierarchical *fact* of status to a network of hierarchical *paths*, though restricted by the differences of wealth or prestige. This change is also a result of the fact that in the past two centuries the problem of the succession of age groups has become a key question. This succession, while it remains in part the replacing of same by same, is more and more the replacing of same by other, by displacement or by innovative addition. The distance between age groups then is no longer simply a passage of time, filled by nothing except the passage of life itself and its ability to produce in turn new life, but a sum of changes which impose singularity on a generation by its mores and behavior. A generation is now defined as the generation of electricity, of television, or of blue jeans.

And at the same time, the birth of generational difference is coupled with another birth: that of the intelligentsia, insofar as the latter marks the intersection of two distinct groups which, in fact, are both producers as well as consumers of change—intellectuals and revolutionaries. We must recall here that, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, slogans and programs in which key words refer to age enter the political vocabulary for the first time: "Young Italy," "Young Germany," "Young Europe." Only a little earlier, in Germany, the spiritual climate and its devotees—intellectual, artistic and literary—were divided by, incarnated in, and imbued with the idea of generational succession and generational conflict: the generation of *Sturm und Drang*, the romantic generation. And meanwhile, from about 1825 onward with the Decembrists, and then about every twenty years—1840, 1860, 1880—Russia registered its moods and its changes of course through the dialogue, often brutal and sometimes frightful, of Fathers and Sons.

II *Connotations*

It is well known that Mannheim was the first thinker who attempted to integrate the generational theme into a theory of social function in which other types of conflict relationships—notably class struggle—were seen as the driving force of progress. Robert Wohl, in a fascinating study,[1] has since examined in great detail the emergence, just before the First World War, not only of the generational fact itself, but of the awareness of its importance that writers, men of letters, and essayists in the different European cultures manifested at about the same time.

Yet, whether it takes the form of a static situation—the existence and coexistence of distinct generations; or whether it takes the form of conflict—intragenerational or intergenerational struggle; it seems to have been impossible to extricate the very concept of generation from the web of connotations that obscured it.

FIRST CONNOTATION: GENERATION OR YOUNG GENERATION?

In traditional societies, the only truly meaningful age discontinuity was that which isolated the elders. Still they did not yet represent an age grouping (after all, the sad "retirement" of today is not comprised of the *elders*, but rather of the *old*). The elders then were happy members of society. Far from embodying the frightful threat of physical and mental decline (old age as "shipwreck"), they finally had reached harmony, wisdom, and even triumphant fecundity. Philémon and Baucis for harmony, Abraham and Sarah for fecundity; these couples are smiling (the former) and laughing (the latter), proclaiming the privileges of grand old age.

We must wait until the nineteenth century to observe, in Europe, the reversal of sensibilities through which a generation became not so much men who shared the same age as men who shared youth.

At this point, the mechanisms and social supports that, in the nineteenth century, contributed to the elaboration of an ideology of youth are becoming better understood—how youth came to be seen as a period of time at once ephemeral, specific, and privileged.

The fact is that such an ideology arose first of all out of new conditions. The development of industrial society both demanded and allowed a space of time between childhood (freed of economic obligations) and adulthood (the time to settle down into marriage and work)—a kind of interlude devoted to apprenticeships, whose economic consequences could be deferred, and which therefore had to be supported by family or society.

In a rather paradoxical way, the increasing differentiation and complexity of professions, trades, and technology within the process of industrialization swelled the ranks of those considered young—apprentices and students—even at a time when the age groups between fifteen and twenty-five were in overall decline.

It is therefore not surprising that it was students, including those going to the Grandes Ecoles—young gentlemen—who offered the first model of "Bohemian life," a life-style appropriate for an interclass group. The women the students had as their mates were not students, except, after 1880, in the Jude Russian student circles; they were wage workers from the popular classes, the "Mimi Pinsons"—seamstresses, laundry women, milliners. Yet they were one-generation group, as the song points out:

> And hurray for students, mother!
> Hurray for the students,
> They have women, but they don't have children.

Within this framework, the school and the conscription army were institutions which measured time (either time largely defined as the duration of studies or of military service, or internal time, broken down into classes, terms, or years crowned and blessed by final examinations); these institutions greatly contributed to a division of their population founded in time.

Moreover, the school and the army, by initiating pupils and recruits in the most recent scientific discoveries, in the latest technical inventions, in the most modern works of art, reinforced the two virtues which have been considered as the very essence of youth: its *purity*, which stemmed above all from protection against the contaminating influence of money since, even if poor, youth was not expected to make money its concern, and its *enthusiasm*, which stemmed from freedom from any routine or repetitive tasks since youth had no role other than to acquire knowledge.

By the same token, the school and the army bestowed upon the sons knowledge to which the fathers had not had access: the effects of this reversal have gradually come to upset all relationships between familial strata. No longer is familiarity with the world and its ways the privileged prerogative of adulthood; on the contrary, adulthood has come to mean increasing banishment into a status of stranger to modernity.

However, neither the school nor the army were truly new institutions, except insofar as they now involved an important proportion, or even the totality, of the age group they mobilized and enrolled. In order to manifest its congruence with youth itself, the ideology of youth had to produce an institutional form exclusively its own inspiration. Thus arose the *youth movement*—archetypically represented by the German and Austrian *Ingendbewegung*, foreshadowing a great but suspect destiny. Whether patterned on a military model, eventually adapted to colonial war (from the military man to the militant, from the scout to the boy scout), or whether modeled on educational forms adapted to after-school or extracurricular activities (from schooling to education)—youth organizations are a new form in associative life, since they are based on the segregation of one segment of the age pyramid. As they multiplied, either as specialized appendages organically linked to adult bodies in each spiritual, cultural, or political family, or as radically independent organs able to focus the innovative zeal—even in time the rebellious or revolutionary zeal—of those soon expected to "enter a career," youth movements contributed to the consolidation of "generational consciousness."

Youth movements were particularly well suited to this task because they had to define their particular place among the various movements which, at the turn of the century, represented the *social* movements for which the labor movement, in its cooperative, unionist, and political forms, was the model and the federator. It became obvious that since the social movements in general aimed at leading a general process of emancipation or, later, of liberation—with the labor movement dedicated to the emancipation of wage-earners, with nationalist movements dedicated to the liberation of oppressed nationalities and the creation of independent national states, with feminist movements and minority movements of all kinds—youth movements had as their purpose the emancipation of those called the young. Such an emancipation has as its adversary, to define it roughly and abstractly, the whole of established society. In these conditions, youth movements, while they essentially drew their membership from the middle social strata, aligned themselves almost automatically with the forces

of protest and revolution. The latter did not necessarily benefit from this alignment. Young people—among whom students or those who resembled them held on to positions of leadership—served, albeit not always knowingly, as vehicles for the ideas, the values, and the interests of the middle class strata from which they came. Moreover, even if they intended to take on society in general in its oppressive and decadent aspects, they were inevitably drawn into the pitfall of equating the daily incarnation of the enemy with, simply, adults. It is not by chance that in nearly all countries of Western Europe socialist youth movements ended up substituting for the distant figure of Capital the very present figure of the adult Party as the target of their attacks and protests.

SECOND CONNOTATION: FROM AGE COMMUNITY TO COMMUNITY OF SENIORITY

Age is only a countable objective datum; seniority is the result of steps at least partly voluntary. It implies joining, personal affiliation. The date of birth is mere fate; but the date of entry into any sort of institution, particularly if the latter is meant to give a meaning to life, or even to transform it, represents the choice of one's destiny. No one can escape the reality of belonging to an age group. It is a fact established once and for all, but it yields little meaning, being absolutely general and passive. Seniority, on the other hand, forces us to look back to a significant selection between alternatives, choices the person had to make. It is worth noting that in communist terminology there are no *old* people but only *seniors*, as though every person, even without particular commitment or claim to fame, deserves by the evening of life the final and modest reward of seniority.

It is all the more true that seniority binds generational communities more strongly than age because of the fact that, since the nineteenth century, both social and geographical mobility have vastly increased. Whole societies built upon successive waves of immigration, as in American or Israeli society, have based at least one of their internal hierarchies—and certainly not the least operational—on the date of arrival in the country, either that of the individual or that of his lineage or group. Within global societies apparently tied to the soil for a long time, microsocieties of immigrants—from one continent to another, from countryside to city, from old town to new town, from one occupation to another, from one corporation to another—define and organize themselves according to the wanderings of their members.

One of the most curious manifestations of the advantage of seniority over age is the compensation which seems to operate between the different types of mobility: while long-distance geographical mobility increases, the mobility of the labor force, once it is integrated into a given enterprise, regresses considerably. It is as though after a few necessary experiments early in professional life, the norm becomes to "dig one's heels in," to stay put. Membership, no longer in a craft or a trade, but in a corporation, is so laden with meaning that even the labor union press, when addressing its workers, uses the corporate name of the employer to signify their unity as workers: they are called "les Lip," "les Michelin," "les Boussac." What would the proletarians of the Belle Epoque have thought of that: they who held that the pride of the worker meant that he should hand in his resignation, if not every other day, at least as often as he saw fit, to show that "men are free in a Republic"; they who would never have accepted the loss of their individual identities (much less the nickname given to them by their workmates) in favor of such a collective identity, and the boss's at that!

The shift from age to seniority as the cement of generational unity can finally be captured in the move from the term *jeune classe* to the expression *young generation*. Today, jeune classe is an antiquated expression, evoking nostalgia. Yet, it was a cruel expression when it described the enrollment of the conscripted, the *drafted*, those drafted into the war. Veterans of the First World War were still defined by the class to which they belonged: it had been bad luck to be in the class of 1914 or 1915. And when a republican grade-school teacher would summon his pupils by clapping his hands and calling out, "Come on, the Jeune Classe!" the "blue line of the Vosges" could be seen in his eyes, because his students were also "the soldiers of Revenge." In the thirties of the Popular Front, the call to the "young generation" rang more peaceful; the appeal was to *the union of the young generation*, which could show the way and complete the union of the working class and of the masses.

THIRD CONNOTATION: GENERATION—MASS OR COLLECTION OF CHOSEN TYPICAL INDIVIDUALS?

In theory, a generation could only be the sum of all those who reach the same age or the same seniority at the same time; thus the concept of generation should be biased toward the mass, individualized only by age or by seniority. In fact, things are quite different. The concept of generation is fundamentally elitist. In social practice, it does not refer to an interval of time, but to an energy field that provides a framework for one or several experiences held to be crucial and worth remembering. A generation is only constituted when a system of references has retrospectively been set up and accepted as a system of collective identification. From the plurality of undertakings which may have aroused the interest and held the attention of members of the same potential generation, only one or two undertakings have a chance to be selected a posteriori, and their protagonists chosen to represent their contemporaries. To speak of the generation of the Résistance in France or of that of the Independence in Algeria is—unlike that of the *alioth* in Israel—neither to speak only of the résistance fighters, who were in limited numbers, nor to generalize excessively and imply that everyone in France was a "résistant" and everyone in Algeria a "patriot." Rather, it is to consider that the label for general use has been imprinted by an elite, which has imposed its model. The issue of whether the *gauchistes* of the sixties are entitled to embody a generation has been much disputed, because in real numbers (even for all tendencies taken together) they were so few—representing less than 5 percent, it seems, even within the most favorable of groups, the students. But the legitimacy of paradigmatic representation has no quantitative basis. It stems purely from the ability to achieve recognition by providing the maximum differentiating identity.

Under these conditions, the generational rift appears to be an intermediate structuring mechanism between the macro-group, the total age group, and the

subgroups, too numerous, dispersed and transient, like bands—particularly bands of youths. Certainly, nothing can completely take away the arbitrary and even manipulative aspect built into the definition of each particular generation. The history of literature is full of such excesses, which consist in the very subjective presentation of the whole creative output of a period as belonging to one given school. For instance, the writers of the period immediately following the First World War are collectively referred to as "the generation of the surrealists"; this is all very well, as long as one remembers that the two geniuses of that time, Proust and Kafka, had nothing to do with surrealism.

III *Effectiveness*

If, despite the uncertainties suggested by these diverse connotations, we resort inevitably to the use of the generational theme, it is because it is undeniably effective.

In a society fascinated by the search for a way to eradicate inequalities, intergenerational inequalities actually appear likely to threaten the progress made in the area of social inequalities. The equalization of income, of status, of interests may conceivably be brought nearer by global yet differentiated policies. Even the equality of opportunities within a given generation may be increased through certain measures—though it is as yet unclear whether such measures may not have extremely unfortunate side effects. The current debate on the means used to fight race and sex discrimination through quotas—themselves inversely discriminatory—illustrates the difficulty in resolving the abstract universalism of law, equal for all and thereby a principal condition of democracy, with the concrete uniqueness of actual equality, which presupposes taking into consideration initial inequalities.

But this difficulty is slight compared to the intergenerational inequalities resulting from the irregularities of the demographic flow. All Western countries are dominated today by the very long-range effects of the alternate weighting and unweighting, since the beginning of this century, of small classes—classes depleted by historical cataclysms such as wars or revolutions—and of full classes—classes left intact by historical circumstance.

In a medium-size country like France, the relatively sharp changes from the small classes of the early twentieth century, to those brutally deprived of their male members by the First World War, to the even more depleted classes of the interwar period, to the fuller classes since 1935, to the very full ones from 1945 to the early 1960s, and finally again to smaller classes since 1964, and even smaller since 1973—these changes have produced successive generations whose destiny has been partially formed and unified by their weight in relation to the preceding and following generations.

For those belonging to the classes of the immediate post-World War I period, the massacre of the young officers who had graduated in the classes of 1912, 1913, and 1914 meant that countless positions, jobs, and roles had become vacant in all spheres of society; this led to an ephemeral but marked shift to a more youthful establishment; hence, the Roaring Twenties.

For those belonging to a smaller class when, after World War II, the education and care of the baby-boom children created vast personnel needs, the demand represented a collective good fortune for their generation—born at the turn of the thirties—and substantially repaid them for the hardships of their childhood and adolescence.

On the other hand, the full classes born in the fifties, today reaching the age of responsibility, find themselves, after an adolescence generally protected from hunger and great hardships, caught between the preceding classes, smaller but by now firmly entrenched and benefiting from a longer life expectancy, and the new smaller classes which follow them, and who require no more than the replacement of present equipment and institutions.

These are major demographic facts whose importance is coming to be correctly weighed and generally taken into account in the choice and direction of professions. Thus, in the sixties, the teaching profession attracted, all at the same time, persons of the same age, whose simultaneous aging is beginning to create serious problems, particularly that of promotion into the few desirable positions—which of course gives rise to constant competition between the aging applicants. Of course, this fact could not by itself explain the overall allegiance of teachers to political options on the left and extreme left of the political spectrum; however, it may be one factor which contributes to the persistence of this allegiance.

These major demographic facts bear equally on the evolution of mentality and mores. For instance, the appearance of a new type of woman—the *garçonne* of the twenties, with her short hair and freed waist—is best understood as linked to the massive entry of women into the industrial-labor force caused by their becoming heads of household as wives of enlisted men or as war widows. Even if peace, and the homecoming of soldiers, brought many of these women back home, their return did not turn back the clock. Women have learned that they should prepare their daughters to be able to raise a family single-handedly (hence the expansion of women's education), and that in any case the prosperity of the household is greatly increased when the woman, instead of restricting herself to domestic tasks, diverts some of her energy away from motherhood toward an economically rewarding occupation. Inhabitants of the working class districts of a city like Paris remember that the first beauty salons for women opened in 1916-1917, at a time when women were working in the war industries in large numbers.

The influence of the reversal of the age differential between spouses on the pace of the evolution of mores, and the role it played in the emergence of a new type of young couple within which the demarcation between masculine and feminine roles began to blur, is perhaps less well understood. This reversal in age differential came about because a significant number of women from the doubly depleted class of the Second World War had to look for their spouses in the fuller classes that followed them, and thus they married men younger than themselves.

Not only do intergenerational inequalities make a case for the effectiveness of the concept of generation, generational consistencies do also. Here, one should cite the data from public opinion polls and electoral analyses, but such data are well known. The age variable is perhaps not the one which produces the largest differences, but it is never negligible in any area.

However, I would prefer to emphasize the effectiveness of the concept of

generation in a field which belongs to it exclusively; I have in mind the creation of a collective memory and the building of a tradition.

It is no accident that the generational dimension seems best adapted to a contemporary history. For one thing, history now unfolds itself globally, although it springs from unevenly developed sectors, situated at unequal distances from the most active centers and foci, and operating with different value systems. This creates encounters, violent or peaceful, interpenetrations, submersions, persisting patterns of all kinds. All these phenomena trace lines of fracture and discontinuity manifested by expansions, regressions, start-ups, catching-ups, blockages, and a whole gamut of mixtures. From all these new events, the protagonists and their contemporaries have drawn part of their own identity as well as the collective experience which makes them a generation, such as the generation of "awakenings" or that of "Independences."

On the other hand, elements of change now prevail over the slow, heavy movements of classical history. Since the eighteenth century, history has been characterized by a breathless succession of revolutions and restorations of all kinds: demographic, technical, economic, cultural, religious, social, political. Three types of events have especially provided the major milestones between which generations have been sacrificed: war, depression, and revolution. From that point of view, World War I has been the ultimate event: it broke world history in two and, of course, not only European history. It should not be surprising that it provided the framework on which a generation emerged, a generation officially proclaimed to be the "Génération du Feu."

Paradoxically, however, we may wonder whether, since 1945 and thus for more than thirty years, it is not rather the absence of a universal event likely to unify the memory of the whole of humanity that has given the search for generational identity its almost desperate character. No writer of memoirs, no chronicler, no autobiographer seized by the furious desire to reduce reality to the world of the "I" can resist the temptation to justify his undertaking by making it appear collective, and to introduce his subject by stating that "to belong to the generation that . . ."

An event in fact as limited as May 1968 in Paris has, a decade later, been subjected to an exegesis which inevitably had to start off by situating itself in relation to the "generation of 1968": a generation which, incidentally, had at the time chosen its own models, its heroes and its titles from the "generation of the Résistance," even speaking of a "New Résistance," although never truly spelling out what and whom this New Résistance was fighting, except in a metaphorical way.

This rather artificial insistence on dates which may rather quickly lose their meaning and their resonance still has one advantage: it allows us to outline the three segments which any event, limited as it may be, produces as soon as it has become a "knot," that is, a point of origin and of reference for a generation. A first segment, the narrowest, remains faithful to the event in its literal segregation. Struck by the event as by lightning, this group will rearrange the rest of its life according to what it feels it has immutably learned at that time. A second segment, a little larger, will retain the event's imprint, will turn it into a personal object of nostalgia, of anniversary celebration, of thought or of knowledge

but will cease to define itself in relation to it. We can find this group, enriched and matured by the experience, integrated into the best adapted strata of the larger society. Finally a third segment, the biggest, has retained practically nothing from the event and has become woven into the uniform texture of the social fabric.

IV *Wear*

This proliferation of the generational idea and its vulgarizing, are they not in the end signs of some sort of premature wear? Do we not mistake for a new generation what is in fact only a *new wave*, easily recognized when it is emerging, but basically destined to be covered by the next wave and to disappear very quickly into the human ocean?

Let us examine, for instance, what is really meant by the cliché of the impossibility of intergenerational communication. On the one hand, it is true that we feel that each generation can only speak to and for itself. Those who were, for a season, called the New Philosophers were not revealing anything previously unknown about the germs of barbarism bred by the Soviet socialist system; however, they were saying it in their time, in their turn, and for a generation which, according to some, had at first accepted the idea that socialism deserved to be the end of history.

Nothing is ever said once and for all. Nothing is ever learned beyond the need for relearning. Experience is not transmissible, and the worst consequence of death is that it annihilates in one blow this form of primitive accumulation—acquired culture. But what of it! This sort of catching up which each generation in fact has to do for itself, and which thus forces it to speak to itself, to teach itself, does not do away with the general discourse which is that of a whole society, not of one generation. In this discourse, the voices which are blended, which answer each other or struggle against each other, do not represent generations, but spirited "families." Yet, there is indeed a manner of speaking and of writing which comes recognizably from a generation which learned Latin and Greek, in which one rubbed shoulders with "good authors" and the noble rhythms of their prose, and another manner that tells of a generation that learned to read with "modern teaching methods" and phonetic spelling, and whose easy-going styles of thought and of dress match their sloppy style of comic-strip writing. And so what! The way in which things are expressed is worth something, but it is not everything. In the end, anyone who likes to read will read authors from all generations—though some will be better liked than others—because, while generations may differ about second-rate authors which are peculiarly their own, they unite and agree on which minds and works truly capture their time. For the thirties and forties who else but Céline—alas—could be hailed as the common writer of genius?

The point is that it takes time and distance to appreciate and discern what is really a break from that which only appears, episodically, to be a break. We may think we are observing the spirit of a generation when we are only witnessing a fashion—a fashion so impertinent that it denies having any purpose except that of giving a charming disguise to what is—and would be even more were it

not for its adornments—a vale of tears. Is it worth reminding the reader of the grotesque sociological musings on the relation between miniskirts and women's liberation?

Generational specificity is itself a fiction: in truth, 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? From Barrès to Remarque, from Remarque to Hemingway, disenchantment has the same ring of bitterness or of anger.

At one time, there were attempts to test out the validity of the generational theory by envisaging it, not at the level of one generation only, but as a series made up of three successive generations. According to anthropologists and sociologists, this represented the total time and the stages necessary for an immigrant community to become assimilated and blended into its new society, whether or not it had enriched the latter with traditions from the old country. This "trigenerational" view was in fact spontaneously systematized as early as 1840 when an observer named Ben Levi wrote in the *Archives Israélites*, which were published in Paris:

> The Grandfather believes, the father doubts and the son denies. The grandfather prays in Hebrew, the father reads the prayer in French, and the son does not pray at all. The grandfather observes all festivals, the father only observes Yom Kippur, the son does not observe any. The grandfather is still a Jew, the father has become an Israelite, and the son is simply a deist . . . unless he is an atheist, a Fourrierist, or a Saint-Simonist.[2]

As it happens, the first problem is that the time and type of acculturation and assimilation seem to vary considerably between different immigrant groups and different societies. A young French historian, J. P. Brunet, has studied in great detail the formation of the population of a fairly large city in the greater Paris suburbs,[3] Saint-Denis, which had only 22,051 inhabitants in 1861, before industrialization, had 71,759 by 1911. By 1891, barely 20 percent of the city's population was native-born. For most people from the provinces (from Northern France, Alsace and Lorraine, from the Massif Central, Burgundy and the Nivernais), and for most foreigners (Belgians, Germans, Swiss, or even English), integration is almost immediate since, from the first generation on, they intermarry without taking into account their place of origin: what counts is that they live in Saint-Denis. There are two important exceptions to this rule: for those from the provinces, migrants from Brittany; and for foreigners, Italians and Jews, who for the most part maintain the practices of endogamous marriage and grouped residency.

The second problem is that in communities which strongly resist absorption, the three generations have long since passed, and the expected assimilation has not been completed. In the case of France, where we know the vast assimilative power of a society and a culture which demand a high degree of unity and centralism in their rules and values, the Jewish community started on its way toward integration or—as it was called in the nineteenth century, its assimilation—190 years ago. This represents at least ten generations, including the three or four living today. And yet, the feeling of belonging to a separate community is much stronger now that it was fifty years ago. Jewish identity is so laden with meaning that it is claimed even as primary identity by the children of mixed marriages; indeed, even the percentage of these intermarriages has declined markedly from the level it had reached immediately after World War II.

Clearly, certain exceptional events may have disrupted what should normally have happened. The Dreyfus Affair, the Holocaust, the massive stream of immigrants first from Eastern Europe and then from North Africa have ensured that forgetting would be impossible. On the other hand, the decline of the nation-state, or its reorganization in relation to other institutional levels, which were becoming newly, or again relevant—the supranational European level, the infranational level of once submerged regions and provinces—has contributed to the fading of the fascination for Jacobin-like Frenchness.

However, one curious fact must be pointed out. The oldest component of the Jewish community in France, the Jews of Alsace-Lorraine who, moreover, had spearheaded the drive for assimilation since the early nineteenth century, are a group whose singular identity and coherence now seem to have reached some kind of "cruising speed." It is as if, as a first stage, contact with the dominant society and culture intoxicated and clearly won over a more or less important fraction of the minority group, depriving it of its most marginal or fragile elements. The central nucleus, if it has resisted and persisted in its own logic (albeit at the price of internal rearrangements) and has retained its vitality, is then capable of maintaining itself as the focus of a lasting experience.

Thus was French Judaism drawn, for example, into a process of secularization which, since the Enlightenment, has penetrated all levels of the *civil* (as opposed to the state and the clerical); of the profane (as opposed to the sacred); of the laity (as opposed to the religious); of agnosticism, of free-thinking, of unbelief (as opposed to all forms and expressions of faith); as well as all shades of liberalism, of the private and individual (as opposed to the public and the collective). Following in the wake of this process, French Judaism was, on the one hand, forced to transform itself into a religion capable of coexisting with other, Christian, persuasions, and, on the other, constrained to give up its religious character. Deep and dangerous as these mutations may be, they still did not mean that the eventual crumbling of French Judaism could be predicted—as later events demonstrated. Other forces for persistence did, as it happened, replace the old disrupted patterns, particularly through the interplay between the religious and the national spheres.

In this way we reach an understanding of what enables a historical phenomenon to endure. Far from being its ability to command the identification of a generation, it is rather its capacity to get successive generations to accommodate to the logical nucleus which, for this particular phenomenon, ensures vitality. This nucleus can tolerate the emergence, within itself, of variants, but cannot withstand that which is truly incompatible with it.

In conclusion, if, on the one hand, the Socialist Party in Spain has a more certain future than the Communist Party, and if the French Communist Party, on the other hand, has a more secure present and future than the Socialist Party, it is because the Spanish Socialist Party and the French Communist Party have been roughly able to pattern their internal generational heirarchy to the genera-

tional distribution of the overall population in their respective countries. The French Socialist Party and the Spanish Communist Party show huge disparities between their own age pyramid and that of their nations.

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[1]Forthcoming. I thank the author, professor of history at UCLA, for having made the manuscript available to me.

[2]Ben Levi, in *Archives Israélites*, 1 (February 1847).

[3]J. P. Brunet, "Une banlieue ouvrière: Saint-Denis, 1890-1939" (Thèse, Doctorat d'Etat, Sorbonne, 1978), book edition forthcoming.

APPENDIX—WHO ARE THE LEADERS OF THE FRENCH COMMUNIST PARTY?

Once again, the question is asked: what really prevents the Communist Party from changing? How can we explain that a party—whose general secretary at the time, Pierre Semard, already called it fifty years ago, not without bitterness, a "flow-through party"—has managed to remain so constant and, one might say, as Stalinist as at the height of Stalinism even though its Stalinism is now sporting the French flag?

As is so often true, one element of the answer to this puzzle can be found in the data. We need only observe the radical difference between the pyramid of the political generations within the mass of party members, and the pyramid of these same political generations within the ruling group of the party.

The date of membership is not available for all members; however, for our purposes we may use as an approximation the report prepared by Claude Poperen, acting in the name of the *commission des mandats*, and given to the most recent Party Congress (the twenty-third, which took place in February 1976). Among the 1,522 delegates to this Congress, who represented the body of party activists, we find:[1]

Number	*Percent*	*Membership date*
77	5.1	1920-1944
184	12.1	1945-1957
328	21.6	1958-1967
475	31.2	1968-1972
458	30.1	1972-1976

Thus over four-fifths (82.9 percent) of delegates had been militants only under the Fifth Republic, and close to two-thirds only during the past ten years.

This pyramid of what we may call "political generations" (not defined by the age of members, but by their *seniority* in the party), seems at first glance to match roughly the pyramid of political generations within the ruling group.[2]

Thus, if one includes in the ruling group (in a broad sense) the members of the Political Bureau, the regular members of the Central Committee, the substitute members of this same committee, and the members of the Central Com-

mission for Financial Control, we find, in relation to the date at which each of these members joined the above ruling group, a pyramid which looks as follows:

Number	*Percent*	*Date of entry into the ruling group*
4	3.1	1920-1944
19	15.2	1945-1957
36	28.5	1958-1967
42	33.3	1968-1972
25	19.8	1972-1976

The match between the distribution of political generations within the body of members and the ruling group seems to be a satisfactory one, given a natural staggering and the appropriate time needed to go from one to the other:

Date of Membership or Entry into Ruling Group	*Members (percent)*	*Ruling Group (percent)*
1920-1944	5.1	3.1
1945-1957	12.1	15.2
1958-1967	21.6	28.5
1968-1972	31.2	33.3
1972-1976	30.1	19.8

Deceptive illusion. In fact, if we take as a criterion for the generational pyramid of the ruling group, not the date of their entry into that group, but, as for members, their date of membership in the party, the results are quite different:

Date of Membership	*Political Bureau*		*Central Committee (Regular)*		*Central Committee (Substitute)*		*Financial Control Commission*	*Total*	
1920-1944	10	47.6%	29	39.1%	0		3	42	29.3%
1945-1957	8	38.5%	37	50%	11	45.8%	2	58	40%
1958-1967	3	19%	8	10.9%	11	45.8%		41	28.6%
1968-1972	0		0		2	8.3%		2	3.9%
1972-1976	0		0		0			0	

It now strikes the eye immediately that the figures do not correlate:

Date of Membership	*Members (percent)*	*Ruling Group (percent)*
1920-1944	5.1	29.3
1945-1957	12.1	40.0
1958-1967	21.6	28.6
1968-1972	31.2	3.9
1972-1976	30.1	0

Thus, although nearly two-thirds of the members have been in the party for less than ten years, it is only true of 3.9 percent of the ruling group. On the other hand, more than two-thirds of this ruling group joined the party *before* 1958, over twenty years ago. They came to a party which was then the pride of international Stalinism. They must have felt comfortable with it, since they stayed in it. Thus, the renewal of the ruling group has since then been a pseudo-renewal: it only takes place within categories of members who joined when the French Communist Party was the "best French Stalinist." Such is its stable nucleus.

REFERENCES

[1]Cf. *Cahiers du Communisme*, March 1976. The breakdown into the five generations used here is the one employed by the communist author of the report.

[2]All data concerning the membership dates of members of the ruling group as well as the date of their entry into that group were kindly provided by the Secretariat of the Communist Party to Jean Elleinstein, *Le Parti Communist* (Grasset, 1976), pp. 185 ff. The definition of the ruling group is that used by Elleinstein. The computations are mine.

Translated by Elisabeth Hirsch

MATILDA WHITE RILEY

Aging, Social Change, and the Power of Ideas[1]

> Individuals who belong to the same generation, who share the same year of birth, are endowed, to that extent, with a common location in the historical dimension of the social process.
>
> Karl Mannheim[2]

WE KNOW THAT DEATH IS INEVITABLE. And we are widely led to believe that aging over the life course is also inevitable, that the process of growing up and growing old must inexorably follow an immutable pattern. Yet a principal tenet of the sociology of age, a newly emerging scientific specialty,[3] is that aging is not inevitably prescribed, that there is no "pure" process of aging, that the ways in which children enter kindergarten, or adolescents move into adulthood, or older people retire are not preordained. In this view, the life course is not fixed, but widely flexible. It varies with social change—not only with the changing nature of the family, the school, the workplace, the community, but also with changing ideas, values, and beliefs. As each new generation (or cohort)[4] enters the stream of history, the lives of its members are marked by the imprint of social change and in turn leave their own imprint.

The theme of this essay concerns the relationship between the life course and social change. It concerns the dynamic process by which social change molds the course of our lives and by which the course of our collective lives creates social change. The essay touches first upon this theme in general and its intellectual background, then focuses on one aspect of the theme, on the meanings of our lives as we age from birth to death. The meanings we attach to the life course, the theories of aging we espouse, have power over individual lives. For human lives in the aggregate, too, these meanings have power to shape social norms and institutions, to guide social change. According to the well-known dictum of W. I. Thomas, if situations are defined as real, they are real in their consequences. A sociology of age points to the differing life situations that arise with social change, to the differing definitions of these situations by successive cohorts of human beings, and to the consequences of these differing cohort definitions for further social change.

Aging and Social Change: A Sociological Perspective

For the past fifteen years, a number of us have been at work in the sociology of age,[5] formulating and specifying the conceptual scheme that underlies this