Generation X: A Critical Sociological Perspective

By Stephen Katz

How did Generation X come by its name, where does it stand in the sociocultural realm, and why do we label generations?

This article is a critical reflection on Generation X, with a focus on the utility of the concept of generation for identifying this group. In the current popular literature, Generation X is usually defined by its demographic location straddling earlier Baby Boom and later Millennial generations. However, the wider construction of Generation X as a social field has received far less attention, perhaps because of the general reluctance in the field of sociology to theorize about generations beyond static descriptive models. In this regard Edmunds and Turner (2002) note, "In the sociology of ageing, generations were interpreted as horizontal slices within the ageing structure," creating narrowly functionalist approaches to aging societies, such as Shmuel N. Eisenstadt's book *From Generation to Generation* (1956). Further, sociological research on social division and inequality, in its emphases on class, gender, region, and ethnicity, tends to overlook generation or relegate it to family studies.

At the same time, social gerontologists prefer the idea of cohort to that of generation, despite the ubiquity of gerontological terms such as "generational equity," "the generation gap," "intergenerational relations," and "generational consciousness." As Bengtson and Putney (2006) say in their work on generational conflict, "We feel it is better to use the term 'cohort' or age group at the macrosocial level, restricting the term 'generation' to placement in family lineage."

Cohorts are generally defined as a group of people born in the same time and place and consequently presumed to have similar aging experiences and life trajectories. Thus, compared to generation, cohort appears to have more of an identifiable character and, as such, has been a central component of life-course research, especially since Glen Elder Jr.'s seminal study of cohorts in *Children of the Great Depression* (1974).

However, as critical writers and practitioners seek explanations for lifelong inequalities between social groups and cohorts, they also find conceptual gaps in the life-course perspective. For instance, the assumption that time-based and age-based experiences are interchangeable in life-course models of cohort trajectories, transitions, pathways, and strategies, can leave

→abstract This article revisits the concept of generation through a critical sociological lens in order to apply its utility to Generation X as a social field. Discussion includes the relationship between Generation X and Baby Boomers, the background to the meaning of Generation X, and the historical and cultural dichotomies that define Generation X. It concludes with a conversation between the author (a Baby Boomer) and a member of Generation X. | **key words**: *Generation X, Baby Boomers, demographic location*

aside the historical conflicts and contingencies of the aging experience (see Dannefer and Kelley-Moore, 2003).

Leonard Cain, an originator of the sociological idea of the life course (Cain, 1964), more recently questioned the consequences of prioritizing cohort phenomena over generational phenomena in social gerontology, noting that the concept of generation affords cohort analysis a dynamic historical dimension that challenges the predictability of the life course (Cain, 2003). Further, "the year of birth alone does not capture the differences in experiences and opportunities and perspectives of rich and poor, majority and minority ethnic groups, rural and urban, and the like" (Cain, 2003). Despite the methodological rigor of cohort demographic analysis, what can be lost is the expansive, radical, and unpredictable nature of generational phenomena. Thus, as is discussed in this article, the generational phenomena associated with Generation X and the forging of its identity through the particular cultural politics of its time invite a critical sociological concept of generation.

Karl Mannheim and Generation as a Social Field

Sociologist Karl Mannheim (1893–1947) is widely credited for outlining a theory of generation in his prescient article, "The Sociological Problem of Generations" (original 1928, [1952], 1998). In contrast to the instrumental treatment of generation in the field of sociology, Mannheim broadened the view of the complex interactions between generational consciousness, identity, and historical location. Unlike later functionalist models of generations, Mannheim argued that while historical location provides the opportunity for a group born at the same time to have similar experiences, generational consciousness cannot be reduced to location. Rather, what Mannheim says is needed to constitute a generation, beyond location, is participation in a "common destiny." Even as various and antagonistic "generational units" may exist within a single generation, they are all bound up with its unfolding.

For Mannheim, generations are also dynamic social foundations because "the transition from generation to generation is a continuous process" and each subsequent generation has "fresh contact" with the legacies of previous generations such that "generations are in a state of constant interaction." Finally, "whether a new *generation style* emerges every year, every thirty, every hundred years, or whether it emerges rhythmically at all, depends entirely on the trigger action of the social and cultural process" (Mannheim, [1952], 1998 [original emphasis]). Thus, some generations realize their potentialities and develop "a distinctive unity of style," while others remain latent.

'The year of birth alone does not capture the differences in experiences and opportunities.'

Mannheim's emphases on cultural transmission, generational consciousness, stylistic expression, and historical dynamics gave the concept of generation a critical space within social thought. While such a space awaits migration into social gerontology, it has been complemented by the sociological work of Pierre Bourdieu (1984; 1993), as well as Chris Gilleard and Paul Higgs, who treat generations as materialized social *fields* of events, practices, discourses, tastes, and values. "Treating generation as a cultural field avoids defining it by reference to membership of a specific cohort" (Gilleard and Higgs, 2005).

For postwar generations, however, the power of consumer culture also created a "post-generational" society that blurred the boundaries between actual generations by extending playful and youthful styles of life and body fashions into increasingly later ages. As I have argued elsewhere, postwar capitalism has been so agile at building ageless pseudo-generational markets

into its cultural expansion, that the pervasive ageist image of growing older without aging has become a marker of successful living (Katz, 2001–2002).

The Baby Boomers and Generation X

In many ways, the social field of Generation X is the product of the Baby Boom Generation, born between 1946 and 1964. This generation is defined by the magnitude of its demographic size relative to its preceding and following generations, and by the special postwar (and Cold War) conditions in Western industrialized countries in which baby boomers matured, characterized by national prosperity, new media and communication networks, affluent consumerism, and rapid social change. The populous Baby Boom Generation created new lifestyles and distinctive tastes that highlighted an extendable and rebellious youth culture (Gilleard and Higgs, 2005) that itself became incorporated into a "midlife industrial complex" (Cohen, 2012).

Certainly, these characteristics of the Baby Boom Generation, along with its sense of historical self-importance, would have been seen by Mannheim as exemplifying a distinctive and potential style that overwhelmed its generational location. However, the vocabulary of Baby Boomers, derived from popular demographic and marketing discourse, neglects the economic inequalities, health challenges, and social heterogeneity of the Baby Boom Generation. The distorted image that all baby boomers are prosperous, healthy, educated, mobile, and politically empowered, has created counter-stereotypes of their perpetuation of widening generational injustice and unethical self-enrichment (Moody, 2008; Bristow, 2015). These stereotypes are evident in alarmist literature with titles such as "Who Destroyed the Economy? The Case Against Baby Boomers" (Tankersley, 2012) and *The Pinch: How the Baby Boomers Took Their Children's Future—and Why They Should Give It Back* (Willetts, 2011).

At the same time, the term "boomers" (as with the terms Generation X and Millennials) fills a linguistic void by providing a public terminology for journalists, marketers, and policy makers to have a conversation about unprecedented demographic phenomena. Along with the appearance of other new language such

as "empty-nesters," "snowbirds," "seniors," "zoomers," etc., the term "boomers" also signals a genuine public interest in post-traditional aging, or what Settersten Jr. and Trauten (2009) call the "great shake-ups" that "seem to be afoot in every period of life, so much so that the whole of human experience feels in flux." As the Baby Boomers enter their later lives and a "Third Age," their retirement also is changing due to the reconfiguration of generational relations, the fragmentation of the workplace, and the uncertainties around transitions in later life (Grenier, 2012; Levin, 2013).

The post-generational commercialized and globalized identities of the Baby Boomer generational field were also linked to a liberating vision of human existence, which forms the background to the constitution of Generation X. Even popular reactions to changing conditions of retirement, such as the *Disrupt Aging* AARP movement in the United States (Jenkins, 2016), seem based on Baby Boomers' confidence in the power of individual choice. The utopian promises of accessible education, social mobility, scientific progress, racial and gender equality, political rebellion, and technological innovation that accompanied the Baby Boomer life course, and spread beyond its location, created compelling expectations for future generations such that they would become forms of pre-destined generational consciousness. Thus, Generation X grew into a lived generational space whose boundaries, experiences, and possibilities had already been extended by the previous generation.

Generation X: A Field of Dichotomies

While its emergence in the shadow of the Baby Boomers and in contradistinction to them became the primary identifying features of Generation X, there is some history to the symbolic label. Members of Generation X, born between 1965 and 1980, were at first called the "post-Baby Boom Generation." However, the term "Generation X" begins with American war photographer Robert Capa who, in a series of photographs of young people who had grown up during World War II, noticed their common (and justified) disillusionment regarding their futures. He called them "Generation X" in his publication of the photographs (1954), using "X" to signify a kind of generational placeholder waiting to be filled in, once the postwar future became more certain (Ulrich, 2003).

'The term "boomers" (as with the terms Generation X and Millennials) fills a linguistic void.'

The next iteration of "Generation X" appeared independently in a small book by the same name, written in 1964 by the British journalists Jane Deverson and Charles Hamblett. In 1963, Deverson was sent by *Woman's Own Magazine* to interview "mod" and "rocker" teenagers about growing up in postwar Britain. Teaming with Hamblett, Deverson published *Generation X* in 1965 (after it was rejected by *Woman's Own Magazine* for being too forthright about the rebellious youth culture). Again, the title was intentional to indicate the disaffection and alienation of a new generation. As Deverson says, "It was partly X as in the unknown—teenagers were a mystery. It was also so shocking at the time, like an X film—because the book interviews pulled no punches" (*BBC Magazine*, 2014).

Hence, before Generation X as we have come to know it was born, its symbolic meaning had been articulated—lost, unknown, disaffected, cynical. In these ways, Generation X was redolent of the misgivings of modern youth itself, evoking the characteristics of risk and crisis identified by American psychologist G. Stanley Hall (1844–1924) in his encyclopedic volumes, *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion and Education* (1904), which invented the idea of adolescence as a troubled time of delinquent thrill-seeking and emotional vulnerability.

However, it was Canadian author Douglas Coupland's book, *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (1991), which set and sealed the term "Generation X" into public culture. While Coupland drew upon a punk image of blankness for his notion of "X" (Generation X was the name of Billy Idol's punk band in 1976), he also wrote a compassionate and empathetic story that countered growing negative attributes defining Generation X and being made popular by films such as Richard Linklater's *Slacker* (1991). Coupland's fiction exposed the conflicts and dichotomies of Generation X that, unlike the Baby Boom Generation before it and the Millennials who followed, were unique to this generation and created the "common destiny" (in Mannheim's terms) that united the generation's disparate identities.

In his foreword to *Generation X Goes Global: Mapping a Youth Culture in Motion* (Henseler, 2013), Dan Leidl (2013) writes that the experience of Generation X is one of irony: "We have given our lives to institutions and ideals that now seem like nothing more than imaginative musings, creative concoctions of hopeful days we may never see." In the United States, the centrality of television boosted idealistic images of happy families, while a rich education system promoted prosperous futures. Neither lived up to their promises, and while Generation Xers often are blamed for their failures, it was no fault of their own that they grew up in a time of collapsing of school systems and amid what Leidl calls "the death of family" (Leidl, 2013). As John Ulrich writes about Generation X: "It foregrounds and problematizes the dichotomy between alternative and mainstream cultural formations, between authentic and inauthentic identities, between cynical and idealistic attitudes" (Ulrich, 2003).

Generation X also bridged pre-digital and digital cultures, liberal and neo-conservative political swings, material abundance and economic hardship, social engagement and cynical withdrawal, and class-based and non–class-based radicalism (e.g., environmental issues, LGBT rights). The dichotomies and ironies associated with Generation X are such that Ted Halstead concludes his article, "A Politics for Generation X," published in *The Atlantic Monthly* (and written the year before George W. Bush won the 2000 American presidential election), with the following prediction:

> *When history books are written at the end of the twenty-first century, it is unlikely that the post–Baby boom generation will still be referred to as a nondescript 'X.' One way or another, this generation will be judged and labeled by its legacy. Today's young adults will be remembered either as a late-blooming generation that ultimately helped to revive American democracy by coalescing around a bold new political program and bringing the rest of the nation along with them, or as another generation that stood by as our democracy and society suffered a low decline* (Halstead, 1999).

'The Baby Boomer–Millennial bond also adds a meaningful layer to the symbolic reputation of Generation X as displaced.'

These cultural politics and dichotomies that formed the field of Generation X have resulted in three important experiences for its members. First, as with the characters in Coupland's novel, Gen Xers have created a new sensibility around living in smaller sustainable ways in more peripheral spaces and more cognizant of its diverse gender, ethnic, and racial groupings, both as part of rejecting mainstream (and Baby Boomer) cultural expectations for achievement and accumulation and because of struggling in an increasingly exploitative and degraded labor environment of "McJobs" (Coupland's phrase), about which sociologist George Ritzer wrote in his book, *The McDonaldization of Society: An Investigation into the Changing Character of Contemporary Social Life* (1993).

This sensibility, according to Henseler, is directly connected to the global and often unacknowledged impact Generation X has had on expanding alternative perspectives to late capitalism (Henseler, 2013). As she claims, there are now many "X" identities around the world at all ages that embody Generation X activism, such that Generation X refers to "a worldview, consciousness, or spirit that transcends time." Again, as Mannheim intuited, generational location and consciousness form a complex relationship within a generational field that requires critical thinking.

Second, as Generation X matured during the 1980s and early 1990s, there was an intense commercial interest in defining it as a lucrative consumer market: X-fashion, X-music, X-sport and X-media became invented as new and edgy products, mostly emanating in the American Northwest. As Karen Ritchie's book, *Marketing To Generation X* (1995), made clear, marketers would have to adapt to entirely new sensibilities of style and taste in order to understand Generation X consumerism. Perhaps the most obvious of these was the rock industry's creation of "grunge" music, headlined by the band Nirvana and its iconic leader Kurt Cobain, whose second album, *Nevermind*, became one of the greatest-selling albums of 1991, despite Cobain's refusal to be a marketable entity.

Third, as the Millennials mature into adulthood, Generation X is identifying itself as sandwiched between Millennials and Baby Boomers, with the resulting relocation creating further identity problems. In her telling new book, *Now We Are 40: Whatever Happened to Generation X?* (2017), Tiffanie Darke complains that her generation, and its struggles and accomplishments, are being forgotten as the public focus shifts to the supposedly digitally obsessed Millennials, the baby boomers' offspring to whom retiring baby boomers are turning (and fretting about) as their replacements in the labor market. The Baby Boomer–Millennial bond also adds a meaningful layer to the symbolic reputation of Generation X as displaced, only here it is being displaced between two generations, each with greater public visibility and self-defining styles.

While Darke thinks Generation X has an important role in bridging the two straddled generations, especially through its expertise in promoting cultural tolerance and social justice, the fear of being left behind only enhances a long-standing identity that has marked Generation X as "X" since its inception.

Conclusion: A Gen Xer's View

As argued in this article, I think of Generation X as a generation framed by its historical background and location and within a field of generational life crosscut by sociocultural and intergenerational forces. The exploration of this field benefits from a critical understanding of generation itself, one that goes back to Mannheim's work and continues to enrich sociological and gerontological research on the intergenerational continuities of society.

But I wish to conclude on a more personal note, because I am a Baby Boomer whose knowledge of what it means to be a member of Generation X is only imagined. Thus, I asked a Generation X family member to talk to me about her experience, specifically in relation to my generation and then in relation to the Millennials.

She replied:

> *I think we very much felt in their [the Baby Boomers'] shadow—that our music was crap compared to theirs, that we weren't as iconoclastic or innovative or brave or revolutionary as they were, that they did 'youth' right in the 1960s and we would never measure up nor hear the end of it. The tech decade of the 1990s may have been the first time we really felt we had a positive identity of our own, instead of being the inferior shadow of the [Baby] Boomers.*
>
> *The biggest difference is that Gen X had one foot in the non-digital age. My generation went from vinyl to cassette tapes to CDs*

over the course of our adolescence. We had a good bit of early life before the Internet, but were probably its most gung-ho early adopters in our first decade of employment. I think we would define Millennials as the first generation not to know life without the Internet . . . I have a lot of sympathy for Millennials who feel they are being analyzed, criticized, pre-judged, and blamed for ruining everything.

Looking back at her own life, she added:

I do occasionally feel grateful for having grown up in a weird, in-between generation for whom there seemed to be low expectations, and who mostly got left alone to make stuff up for ourselves. The term 'latchkey kids' was used for those of us with divorced parents and working mothers, but it felt even wider than that . . . I'm kind of glad to have enjoyed a childhood of cultural scarcity, when the pre-VCR gaps between episodes of a favorite TV show or issues of a comic meant you had time to re-enact and speculate. But I'm equally sorry that our generation has kind of strip-mined that underworld, and that everything is now instantly exploitable by an insatiable entertainment ecosystem with lightning reflexes and no shame.

We did feel like we had imbibed the civil rights, and feminist and gay rights changes from our earliest experience, and were able to try putting the theory into practice with less of the self-consciousness of a generation for whom these were very definitely changes. To those of us who had been carefully and deliberately educated in those traditions, they could seem like self-evident truths, solid gains we might be able to take for granted, a reality that was ours to build on. I think Gen X liberals felt a special pride and ownership in the legalization of gay marriage and the election of the first black president—and now feel a particular horror that it might all be getting dismantled in a way we never foresaw.

I am very thankful for this conversation, as it brings to life what Generation X means through memory, reflection, and narrative. We need many more such conversations to round out the critical potential of generation as a central concept for understanding not only the sociology of aging, but also our experiences of it in humanistic, intelligible, caring, and intergenerational ways.

Stephen Katz, Ph.D., is professor emeritus in the Department of Sociology at Trent University in Peterborough, Canada. He can be contacted at SKatz@Trentu.ca.

References

BBC Magazine. 2014. "The Original Generation X." March 1. www.bbc.com/news/magazine-26339959. Retrieved July 18, 2017.

Bengtson, V. L., and Putney, N. M. 2006. "Future 'Conflicts' Across Generations and Cohorts." In J. A. Vincent, C. R. Phillipson, and M. Downs, eds., *The Futures of Old Age*. London, UK: Sage.

Bourdieu, P. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Bourdieu, P. 1993. " 'Youth' Is Just a Word." In P. Bourdieu, *Sociology in Question*. London, UK: Sage.

Bristow, J. 2015. *Baby Boomers and Generational Conflict*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Cain, L. D. 1964. "Life Course and Social Structure." In R. E. L. Faris, ed., *Handbook of Modern Sociology*. Chicago: Rand McNally.

Cain, L. D. 2003. "Age-related Phenomena: The Interplay of the Ameliorative and the Scientific." In R. A. Settersten Jr., ed., *Invitation to the Life Course: Toward New Understandings of Later Life*. Amityville, NY: Baywood Publishing.

Capa, R. 1954. "Generation X." *DU Magazine*, January.

Cohen, P. 2012. *In Our Prime: The Invention of Middle Age*. New York: Scribner.

Coupland, D. 1991. *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin.

Dannefer, D., and Kelley-Moore, J. A. 2009. "Theorizing the Life Course: New Twists in the Paths." In V. Bengston, D. Gans, N. M. Putney, and M. Silverstein, eds., *Handbook of Theories of Aging* (2nd ed.). New York: Springer.

Darke, T. 2017. *Now We Are 40: Whatever Happened to Generation X?* Toronto, CAN: Harper Collins.

Deverson, J., and Hamblett, C. 1965. *Generation X*. London, UK: Tandem Books.

Edmunds, J., and Turner, B. S. 2002. *Generations, Culture and Society*. Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.

Eisenstadt, S. N. 1956. *From Generation to Generation: Age Groups and Social Structure*. New York: Free Press.

Elder Jr., G. H. 1974. *Children of the Great Depression*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Gilleard, C., and Higgs, P. 2005. *Contexts of Ageing: Class, Cohort and Community*. Cambridge, MA: Polity.

Grenier, A. 2012. *Transitions and the Lifecourse: Challenging the Constructions of 'Growing Old.'* Bristol, UK: The Policy Press.

Hall, G. S. 1904. *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion and Education*. New York: D. Appleton & Co.

Halstead, T. 1999. "A Politics for Generation X." *The Atlantic Monthly* August: 33–42.

Henseler, C. 2013. "Introduction." In C. Henseler, ed., *Generation X Goes Global: Mapping a Youth Culture in Motion*. London, UK: Routledge.

Jenkins, J. A. 2016. *Disrupt Aging: A Bold New Path to Living Your Best Life at Every Age*. Philadelphia, PA: Perseus Books.

Katz, S. 2001–2002. "Growing Older Without Aging? Positive Aging, Anti-ageism, and Anti-aging." *Generations* 25(4): 27–32.

Leidl, D. 2013. "Foreword: American X: The Ironic History of a Generation." In C. Henseler, ed., *Generation X Goes Global: Mapping a Youth Culture in Motion*. London, UK: Routledge.

Levin, J. 2013. *Blurring the Boundaries: The Declining Significance of Age*. New York: Routledge.

Linklater, R. 1991. *Slacker*. Austin, TX: Detour Filmproduction.

Mannheim, K. [1952]; 1998. "The Sociological Problem of Generations." In P. Kecskemeti, ed., *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge*. London, UK: Taylor & Francis.

Moody, H. R. 2008. "Aging America and the Boomer Wars." *The Gerontologist* 48(6): 839–44.

Ritchie, K. 1995. *Marketing to Generation X*. New York: The Free Press.

Ritzer, G. 1993. *The McDonaldization of Society: An Investigation into the Changing Character of Contemporary Social Life*. Newbury Park, CA: Pine Forge Press.

Settersten Jr., R. A., and Trauten, M. E. 2009. "The New Terrain of Old Age: Hallmarks, Freedoms, and Risks." In V. L. Bengtson, D. Gans, N. M. Putney, and M. Silverstein, eds., *Handbook of Theories of Aging* (2nd ed.). New York: Springer.

Tankersley, J. 2012. "Who Destroyed the Economy? The Case Against the Baby Boomers." *The Atlantic*, October 5. theatln.tc/2ws Y73p. Retrieved February 12, 2015.

Ulrich, J. M. 2003. "Generation X: A (Sub)Cultural Genealogy." In J. M. Ulrich and A. L. Harris eds., *GenXegesis: Essays on Alternative Youth (Sub)Culture*. Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press.

Willetts, D. 2011. *The Pinch: How the Baby Boomers Took Their Children's Future—and Why They Should Give It Back*, London, UK: Atlantic Books.

Copyright of Generations is the property of American Society on Aging and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.