



Understanding generations: political economy and culture in an ageing society

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Abstract

Sociological understanding of generations can be enhanced by avoiding defining them rigidly as chronological cohorts but rather linking people's accounts of their generational experience with an historically informed political economy. It then becomes possible, for example, to understand the complexity of generational politics. This paper uses data on the 'War Generation' taken from the Exeter Politics of Old Age project to link an empirically based political economy of generational inequality with a cultural sociology of generations. The 'War Generation' recognizes itself and is referred to by others in terms of a common identity. It is also an historical generation; its values, attitudes and, above all, sense of national solidarity and mutual obligation were forged in the direct experience of war. But it is also divided by divergent economic interests in property and pension rights based on the historical experience of the life course by successive groups and this segmentation can be observed in political action. The political culture of the War Generation manifests both continuity and change. Understanding these dynamics requires listening to people constructing their worlds, understanding their full range of historical experiences, and analysing the conditions for their conflicts and their cohesion.

Keywords: Generations; 'War Generation'; political economy of old age, generational cultures

Introduction: what are generations?

The sociology of generations requires a proper integration of a *longue durée* perspective with an understanding of local cultural practice and the reality of unequal life chances. Classic studies of generations include work by Mannheim (1927) and Bourdieu (1993), whose concepts 'entelechy' and 'habitus' are tools for understanding the common, taken for granted understandings which

generations share. There are studies that provide empirical descriptions of some of the social characteristics of different cohorts, the best of these incorporating some historical awareness into their descriptions (Evandrou 1997; Evandrou and Falkingham 2000; Guillaume 2002; Rogler 2002; Bynner 2002). There are also attempts to describe and analyse the cultures of different generations (Pilcher 1998; Blaikie 1999a, b; Gilleard and Higgs 2000) and attempts to define and explain structural inequalities between age groups, cohorts and generations (Irwin 1996; Chauvel 1998 1999; Warren and Hauser 1997; Svyarenko 2002). This paper uses data on the 'War Generation' taken from the Exeter Politics of Old Age project to argue that greater emphasis on contextual fluidity of generational identities rather than a single structure of sequential generations can help link an empirically based political economy of generational inequality with a cultural sociology of generations.

Formal definitions

Neither popular nor academic language is particularly precise in its referents for terms such as 'generation', 'age group' and 'cohort'. A widespread use of 'generation' refers to the succession of parents by children (Hareven 1994). For example, titled aristocrats might call themselves the 'twelfth generation', or the term 'second-generation immigrant' might be used to suggest that there are common social factors to being the child of an immigrant. By analogy, people refer in general terms to elderly people as the 'older generation', implying a threefold model of children, parents and grandparents applied to society. However, 'generation' can also mean a set of people born at the same time, closely analogous to the term 'cohort'.

There are contrasting disciplinary usages; sociology, biology, economics, psychology, anthropology, and other social sciences have a variety of terminologies. 'Cohort' is used in economics, demography and many other disciplines to gloss the succession of groups through a process. For example, mathematical statistics including game theories use 'cohorts' to model mutual interaction of sequential elements (cf. Gunter et al. 1997). In sociology 'cohort' usually refers to sets of people who are born at the same time or are seen as entering the same state simultaneously, for example passing through an educational establishment organized by academic year. Psychology also works with the term 'social convoy' (Levitt 1991; Kahn and Antonucci 1980), which has some of the characteristics of a cohort. By this they mean a set of significant relationships that accompany an individual through the course of his or her life.

The social convoy model states that people age throughout the life course, experiencing the stress of transitions and turning points with a highly selected group of people from whom they derive a basis for self-identity as well as emotional and instrumental support. (Utz et al. 2002: 522)

Pilcher (1994: 490) advocates ‘the use of *generation* when reference is made to kinship relationships and *social generation* when reference is made to any cohort related phenomena’. However, Edmunds and Turner (2002) wish to differentiate chronological generations, by which they mean something close to birth cohorts from social or political generations which have some form of social identity and are participants in historical conflict and change. They point out that some generations are active while others are passive. That is to say, not all historical generations are the same: some become self-aware and are ‘a foundation of modern politics, culture and consciousness’ (Edmunds and Turner 2002: 121). An historical ‘generation’ refers to an identifiable social group that forms on the basis of the historical experience of a particular birth cohort. Social groups coalesce around specific formative historical experiences and adopt distinctive cultural symbols expressive of those experiences. Bengston and Achenbaum (1993: 11) describe this use of ‘generation’ as the ‘European tradition’ and, following Mannheim, suggest as a definition ‘. . . age cohorts who share some elements of identity or group consciousness because they share some common experience in history, and who become part of social movements based on age . . .’.

Corsten (1999: 251–2) neatly summarizes ‘three categories of the topic of generation’. First, he suggests there is generation in terms of succession, from the Greek root ‘genesis’ – fathering, line of descent – which refers to the sequence of generations based on the biological fact of birth. This aspect of generation is connected to the problem of social and cultural reproduction, that is, the succession of people into social roles and cultural reproduction of norms and values over time (cf. Bawin-Legros 2002). The second of Corsten’s categories is that of a set of groups with relationships to each other – inter-generational contracts, generational gaps and conflicts. His third category refers to specific collective identities. Those who have been born and who have been brought up in the same period of time come to a common understanding of their experience –

. . . the concept of historical generations refers to social time. Generations share a picture of ‘their time’ or a script of the drama of their collective development in the course of ‘their’ historical phase. (Corsten 1999: 252)

Concepts of history crucially inform views of ‘generation’. In one sense history is the formative personal experiences of the members of the generation. Generations are constituted as a result of ‘lived through’ history, the product of experience. But it is possible to differentiate the collective memory of that experience used in current interaction from the impact of the events at the time they happened. The history of a generation can be understood as a remembered or imagined symbolic history, the past as a symbol creating meaning in the minds of present generations (Kastenbaum 1997; Hockey and James 2003; Attius-Donfut and Wolff 2003). ‘History’ can further be used in a

sense closer to that of Elias's (1978, 1982) figurations, that is, as an unfolding of a historical process embedded in the consequences of mutually interacting behaviours. In *The Germans* he makes a case for historical sequences of generational interaction leading to violent responses by some (Elias 1996). An argument that a similar social entropy, a parallel unfolding process by which the experiences and relationships established in the 1930s and 40s crisis situation are still working themselves out in the interactions and behaviours of the current older generation, is presented below.

We can formally identify the following components for the Sociological concept of 'generation':

(a) A sequence of collectivities

However, these collectivities can be theorized in many ways: as sets of people defined by entry and exit dates but not a group; a sequence of groups defined around specific historical experiences; a sequence which takes its position from reproduction and succession of parents and offspring; or a sequence which is understood from a social constructionist perspective as emerging from local practices.

(b) The product of time

However, time can be considered in a variety of ways: as simply historical chronology; the experience of social change; part of the realm of collective memory; the current use of the past for contemporary identity; or, after Hareven (1982), individual time, family time and community time.

(c) A set of continuing relationships between the groups through time

These relationships might variously be understood to be: a kinship relationship; a division of social responsibilities and normative roles allocated through a sequence of initiations; an economic or reciprocal relationship; a social structural relationship of group disadvantage; an emergent relationship through the collective response of active self-aware reflexive agents making history as well as experiencing it; or the differential creation of symbols of solidarity and differentiation by successive cohorts.

As the meaning and theoretical grounding of the concept of 'generation' is so diverse, I would propose that the term 'generation' systematically be used with a qualifier (historical, demographic, political, cultural, familial, chronological, etc.) and that 'cohort' be restricted to the use of chronological, observer-defined categories.

Generations and the cultural turn: identity and lifestyle

Recently our understanding of 'generation' has been enhanced by looking at the phenomenon as a cultural construction – a set of symbols, values and

practices which are formed in the generation's early years and endure and develop as it ages. We can identify two elements of the cultural debate: first, that of identity formation and, second, that of lifestyle. Many, taking their lead from Mannheim, see generations as formed by adolescent experiences, particularly through the transition to adulthood in times of turbulent change. Hence the emphasis on socialization within families and by peers into youth cultures. But generations change as they age, and a number of academics, including Riley (1988), Blaikie (1999a) and Corsten (1999), have pointed out the need to understand cultural change within generations as they age. For example, how a generation experiences the transition from work to retirement is not a simple reflection of what was learnt in the transition from child to adult. If generational identity is in some sense fixed by early experience, how do we incorporate change and creativity into the agency of the ageing generation? This problem has both a cultural and a structural dimension. The opportunity structures for retirement have changed historically and with them the life chances of historical generations. The cultural mode of interpretation for these changing life chances do not merely stem from an already established generational culture or 'entelechy', but that mode interpretation is itself subject to change.

Generations share not only their adolescence, but also the other phases of life: adulthood, old age. The idea of 'over ageing' at the stage of adolescence makes it clear that institutionalized age (or life phase) markers force individuals, as the collective of generations, to transform their 'identity'. Thus the collective ageing of a generation also means collective learning. The discursive crystallization of basic intentions and formative principle of articulation in adolescence is followed by stepping collectively into the next life phase. In this next phase the generational modes of life practice adopted have to be reconsidered, with regard to which elements can be kept and which have to be modified. (Corsten 1999: 268)

Thus generations are reflexively constructed – people experiencing, re-evaluating and re-creating the meaning of 'their time' – they are not simply working out a programme set in adolescence (Alwin and Krosnick 1991; Guillaume 2002).

Neither Mannheim (1952), Turner (1998) nor Edmunds and Turner (2002) argues that every generation develops an original and distinctive consciousness, although there is this potential inherent in any generation. Pilcher citing Mannheim (1952) suggests that:

it is likely that the frequency with which a generation's potential is realized is 'closely connected with the tempo of change' (1952: 309), with the 'trigger action of the social and cultural process' (1952: 310) . . . In times of accelerated social change, however, when normality is disrupted, the 'new brooms'

have even greater opportunity and access than the natural, gradual change over of generations allows. (Pilcher 1994: 491)

As will be illustrated below, rapid change in society means that people with quite close dates of birth may well have distinct sets of experience; the social distance represented by the 'generation gap' needs to be examined and established empirically in specific contexts. Which bit of common experience is given what symbolic significance is constantly revised as the generation ages. This cultural approach to generation emphasizes the role of cultural learning and of memory through the life course in the construction of self-aware generations. Gubrium and Holstein (1995) amongst others (cf. Kastenbaum 1997; Becker 1997; Coleman, Ivani-Chalian, and Robinson 1998) use rich qualitative accounts to illustrate the diversity of old age and help understand how people create accounts of their life-courses within everyday life. The richness of such studies are a useful antidote to both dehumanized social structural accounts of generations and simplistic views of generations as culture learnt in adolescence. As with other statuses, generations are fluid – boundaries solidify and relax, are appropriate in different contexts and not in others, and are nested into broader and narrower categories. These contexts are not simply the broad historical times of change identified by Mannheim or Turner but local and specific and emergent from personal biography and family and community situation. Thus defining a generation as twenty-five years (after Mannheim) can be unhelpful. The perspective presented here emphasizes that generational identities are contingent on specific social situations in which they become meaningful and not tied to a biological rhythm.

It is also necessary to examine the process by which some cultural elements solidify a generation despite other cleavages such as gender or class. Gilleard argues:

Treating a generation as a cultural field in which social agents participate to varying degrees dependent upon their structural location within society offers more scope to understand some of the secular changes in health and well-being . . . It is an empirical task to determine which elements within a generational habitus spread more easily than others across groups defined by age, class or gender. (Gilleard 2004: 117)

Men and women experienced World War II differently but nevertheless have a common identity as the 'War Generation' (Rogler 2002). Exploration of the collective actions of generations can reveal how they are segmented by other social identities and how generational identities become salient in some circumstances and not others.

In popular discourse, generations are frequently about youth lifestyles, particularly in terms of popular music and fashion. Although they stress issues of

conflict and specifically disavow 'social constructionist' approaches (Edmunds and Turner 2002: 16), Turner (1998) starts with a definition initially in cultural terms:

I shall define 'generation' as a cohort of persons passing through time who come to share a common habitus and lifestyle. Generations are often defined culturally by sharing a 'traumatic event' (war-time experience, civil war or natural catastrophe), collective rituals and memories such as Woodstock), and adversarial political mentors (Wyatt 1993). These cultural definitions of generation are the product of twentieth-century social movements which are seen in terms of generational responses (for example The Beat Generation or the Blank Generation) through cult figures such as William Burroughs, Bob Dylan and Mick Jagger. (Turner 1998: 302)

Gilleard and Higgs (2000, 2002) and Blaikie (1999b) amongst others draw attention to the changing lifestyles of older people in a postmodern world, particularly focusing on issues around consumption. The arguments about increasing cultural diversity in old age and new models of the Third Age are predicated on increased prosperity post-retirement.

Orthodox social gerontology has treated later life as if it were constituted by inventories of social need and social exclusion. This is not how older people live and experience their lives. The growth of retirement as a third age – a potential crown of life – has been constructed primarily in terms of leisure and self-fulfilment. While these practices may be most fully enacted by a relatively small section of the population of older people, culturally this group represents the aspirations of many whether or not they are able to realise such a lifestyle. (Gilleard and Higgs 2000: 23)

Important as the cultural constructionist perspective is, there is a danger of neglecting the empirical evidence that older people in Britain remain consistently amongst the poorest in the community. The work of both Phillipson and Walker in the UK and others in the USA have shown the extent of the deprivation and social exclusion experienced by older people (Phillipson and Walker 1986; Walker 1990; Quadagno and Street 1995; Estes 1979; Estes et al. 1984; Estes, Linkins and Binney 1995, Estes 2001; Phillipson 1998). There is considerable evidence to show that inequalities experienced during the life course are reflected in greater measure in an unequal old age (Vincent 1995; Arber and Ginn 1995). The material circumstances of older people are profoundly affected by their ability to earn during their working lives, but people, including older people, can construct distinctive lifestyles out of very limited resources (cf. Stephens 1976; Myerhof 1978). A cultural constructionist account of generations is necessary but must be integrated into a political economy context.

Recapturing a political economy of generations

On one level, generations exist because people believe them to exist and act accordingly. However, different historical generations also have had greater or lesser opportunities for economic success, social mobility, migration, personal security, marriage and family development.

To this cultural dimension, we must add the notion that ‘generation’ also refers to a cohort which has a strategic temporal location to a set of resources as a consequence of historical accident and the exclusionary practice of social closure . . . Individual access to these resources requires a generational identity and solidarity organized around exclusionary practices which continue to secure these advantages against subsequent generations . . . These generations stay on top by organizing a concerted approach to successful marriage patterns, reproduction, employment and inheritance strategies. (Turner 1998: 302)

Turner’s account of generations emphasizes their role in an unequal society and that their interests can be revealed by their active participation in conflict.

The development of retirement legislation was an effect of industrialization and the so-called ‘institutionalization of the life course’, but it is also a product of generational conflicts, because increasing life-expectancy, other things being equal, necessarily constrains the availability of work for younger workers. Given this conflict of interest between young and old, within the setting of an impersonal, highly differentiated society with the emphasis on young and new occupations, older people are eventually pushed out of the labour market. In the modern world this has led to the phenomenon which is known as retirement. (Cowgill 1974: 130). (Turner 1998: 303)

In his debate with Irwin (1996), Turner (1998) emphasized that the generations are historical and collective phenomena, not an individual phenomenon amenable to analysis through personal-opinion data (cf. Hamil-Luker 2001). His account suggests that twentieth-century generations have conflicting interests regarding retirement, pensions and the labour market; and indeed these can be identified in studies of the structure of opportunity experienced by different cohorts. Early retirement in particular has these conflictual qualities:

Compulsory retirement provides employers with a mechanism for shedding labour which appears to be neutral, impersonal and fair. . . . Irwin’s claim (1996: 79) that conflict theory exaggerates the existence of ‘shared interests on the basis of cohort experience’ seriously underestimates the importance

of generation as a feature of social stratification and the function of retirement legislation in shaping those common experiences. (Turner 1998: 303)

Generations may use lifestyle as a basis for a common sense of identity but may also have developed collective economic interests. When this happens, generations may take on a more class-like character and it becomes possible to see more clearly their role in social conflict and social change. What is required is a more subtle account of class and generation. Generations, like classes, genders and ethnic groups, form part of the stratification system. They are like these other identities, simultaneously cultural, social and economic phenomena. Generations could be accommodated in the social distance model of group formation/stratification (Bottero and Prandy 2003), each generation having its own *habitus* which facilitates intra-generational interaction and intimacy. However, generations do have common economic interests as a result of their social location; this is underplayed in the social distance account, and in many exclusively cultural accounts of generations.

The French have made a strong contribution to the empirical study of historical generations. Their research demonstrates that observable cohort differences in life chances are indicative of class-like differences between generations (Cribier 1989; Loriaux 2000). Chauvel (1998, 1999) has developed an argument, backed by considerable empirical evidence, on generational disadvantages in employment opportunities and social mobility for those who in Britain would be called 'Thatcher's children' and are sometimes referred to as 'Generation X'. Chauvel (1998) suggests that economic interests around access to jobs and opportunities, and the benefits of progress, create class-like features for the increasingly marginalized upcoming generations. His empirical data are drawn from the second half of the twentieth century in the USA and France. He uses the French view of the '*Trente Glorieuses*', 1945–75, to suggest that during this historical period of economic growth, views of class interest were undermined and replaced with ideas of *embourgeoisement*. However, he suggests that these views about the end of class are related to generationally specific experiences. Changes in occupational structures in the 1960s and 70s greatly increased the numbers of younger people in the ranks of the professional and executive classes but the subsequent cohorts of young people entering the job market had greatly reduced opportunities for career advancement. These changes led to a mismatch between opportunity and expectation, and a decline in the possibility of the service class ensuring that their children retained their class position (Chauvel 1999: 8).

Chauvel (1999) argues that in effect there is a dominant ideology based on a postwar generation for whom the ideas of social progress remain a reality and who are, in age terms, also those in the 'prime' of economic and social life. The contrasting experiences of other generations are expressed (or suppressed) through dominant discourses that articulate the interests of groups

which simultaneously have class and generational aspects. Those in their prime of life are constructed as diligent and upwardly mobile in contrast to the shiftless, work-shy young (cf. Ruddick 2003). The logic of Chauvel's position suggests he would also see the construction of the older generation as a welfare burden, as an ideological phenomenon related to the power and interests of a generational elite in its prime.

Is it possible to link a qualitative, constructionist approach to the generational experience with large data sets containing individual opinions and reports of material standards of specific cohorts? Rather than working with generational categories derived by external observers looking at history, we should endeavour to draw on history as the active ingredient in collective memory used in current social relationships. In this way stratification (or at least 'groupness') of generations is observable through not merely conflict but wider interactions of inclusion, exclusion and social distance. Generations are not exclusive groups – generation processes produce multiple overlapping identities, some of which become more salient with the passing of time. But it is possible to identify the interplay between macro social/historical processes and personal life courses of individuals through appropriate data sets. Thus the collective symbols of the 'War Generation' in Britain and their collective action to assert their 'rights' can be contextualized by evidence from survey data on the opinions and lifestyles of different cohorts. Qualitative data on the meaning of the 'War Generation' can be linked to survey evidence of economic diversity amongst retired people, related to specific historical conflicts over pension and property rights, while collective action in the form of older people's voting behaviour can be contextualized by the plurality of the 'War Generations' experience.

Generation as a location of conflict and action: the 'War Generation'

In the following section the 'War Generation' will be used as an example to illustrate the processes by which specific set of older people in Britain have developed both some common and some divergent identities and material interests and manifest them in collective action. The data are derived from a research project based at Exeter University on the 'politics of old age'.¹

Members of the British 'War Generation' are those who lived through the events of 1939–45. They have a set of personal experiences of those historic events and conflicts that mark them as having something in common (Rogler 2002). This experience serves to authenticate themselves to each other and to other generations. Both young and old use the Second World War as a reference point, a significant break in history, and this can be illustrated from the qualitative data from the study. For example, a female pensioner from Hackney said: 'After the war we got education, our kids went to school, . . .'.

Similarly both Jack Jones (Pensioners Leader) and Jeff Rooker (Pensions Minister) in interviews used explicit before and after ‘the War’ contrasts to locate change in the politics of pensions. Not only was the war seen to change things, but participation in the national effort in the war gave members of that generation a special place in society. A 70-year-old Devon woman said, in reply to a postal questionnaire on Health and Social Services: ‘We, the elderly, have had our lives altered by the loss of husbands, in *war* and peace; we paid for all this care, and really should be a *form* of priority’ (Vincent 1999).

A pensioner from Wales explained the origins of his activism as follows:

during the war I was seconded to the Royal Indian Engineers . . . and I fought the Japs in Burma . . . When we celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the ending of the Japanese war the celebrations were organized by the Royal Engineers Association and the British Legion, and it turned out that I was the only one who was a member of both organizations who had actually served in Burma. So I attended the celebrations, and afterwards there was a reception in the British Legion club, and my wife and I were there wearing our gongs of course, my wife wearing the Africa Star, having served in the North Africa campaign, so we went in and had a couple of drinks, and then walked into the conference hall where free food was on offer, and there sitting around this large room were men and women all wearing their gongs proving that they had served their country, and very few of them were having a drink and I thought, ‘I wonder if they know there’s a bar’, and I said ‘You can have a drink’ to someone, and the answer came back, ‘We’d like to but we bloody well can’t afford to!’ Well, that shook me – rocked me – men and women who had served their country, risked their lives, and now in their old age couldn’t afford to buy a pint of beer in the Royal British Legion club in Monmouthshire, which sells beer at a remarkably cheap price . . . and it made me think.

These examples, and many others from interviews and focus groups illustrate that members of the ‘War Generation’ may disagree about the significance of the experience and highlight different aspects, but they are able to tell of their experiences in a way that authenticates membership of that generation.

In the study other generations could be observed also to acknowledge their special status. A group of young women expressed mixed views of the elderly but accepted the special status WWII gave them:

No not many that are [nasty] but they get pissed off with the noise and things like that, but you know it’s just sad really because they have all fought for us a lot of them. (23-year-old woman in focus group)

While Bruce Kent (a peace activist) said in an interview about pensioners political options said:

Pensioners for Peace . . . were a very important force. They were rather like the ex-services CND. You can be rude about young people with long hair but you can't be rude about pensioners who fought in the Second World War and all that. So they were very credible. . . .

Thus we can establish the reality of the 'War Generation' as self-aware, recognized by others and still clearly having an impact on the rest of society, because people demonstrably talk and act in such terms in specific appropriate times and locations.

A divided generation

The 'War Generation' not only has common experience of conflict but is also segmented by age-group inequalities and lifestyle differences. They did not all experience the conflict firsthand and they experienced it at different life stages depending on their age. There is no one with firsthand memories of the war who has a birth date after approximately 1942, and there are no British ex-forces combatants born after 1928. The life-experience differences of those who were adults in the war and those who were children, multiplied in the postwar period. Successive cohorts can be identified amongst older people of the 'War Generation' based on their access to housing, work and pensions. Evandrou and Falkingham (2000: 34) report that 'by age 60 only 53% of the 1931–5 cohort remained in employment compared to 83% of the 1916–20 cohort at the same age'. The later group retired earlier and in better circumstances. Current prosperity in early old age is built around occupational pensions and owner-occupied housing (Mann 2001). The 2001/2 General Household Survey (ONS 2003) indicated that nearly 47.3 per cent of 65–69-year-olds were both owner-occupiers and that they, or their spouses, were in receipt of an occupational pension. These are people who were children during World War II. However, the equivalent figure for those aged 85 and over is only 26 per cent. This oldest group would have been young adults through the war. Major divisions within the 'War Generation' have been created by historical differences in housing and pension rights.

This cohort difference in access to private property in terms of housing and pensions is not a simple age phenomenon. It is a complex generational phenomenon built on the economic and political circumstances through which these cohorts lived. For example, in Britain, historical changes in housing and property ownership have given people of different chronological generations different entitlements and assets. Those cohorts reaching retirement in the 1990s were the first in which a substantial proportion had property rights derived from a lifetime of paying a mortgage (Saunders 1990). Significant tax advantages to owner-occupation have been present in the UK for most of the

postwar period. Earnings-related pensions and state-sponsored occupational pension schemes were introduced by Labour governments in the 1960s and 1970s. The Thatcher government gave the right to buy to council tenants along with financial incentives to owner-occupation. They also decoupled the state pension from average earnings, which over time has led to its value falling substantially, to the relative disadvantage of the oldest pensioners who have fewer other sources of income.

The tax-based subsidies for property ownership and enormous inflation in house prices have created generationally based conflicts of interest between property-owning and property-less generations. House price inflation, peaking strongly in 1973, 1980 and 1989 (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister 2004), has given home-owners very substantial capital gains, gains which have fallen, because of their historical location, to the younger segment of the ‘War Generation’ in much greater proportion than to the older segment. Conflicts have also arisen over the rights of property-owning generations with regard to claims from the state to place a charge those property assets to pay for residential care in old age, a service that was formerly available free from the state.

People who have always worked hard and tried to save, should *not* have to ‘sell’ their homes and all possessions to cover any long term care – it is grossly unfair to normal families to be penalised for working hard all their lives. (Devon respondent, Vincent 1999)

These differences of interest in private property, earnings-related pensions and means-tested benefits are evident in the political activity of the ‘War Generation’ and specifically in the ‘poll tax’ protest.

In February 2004, Miss Elizabeth Winkfield, an 83-year-old pensioner from North Devon who refused to pay her Council Tax, was summoned before the Barnstaple magistrates. This was part of a concerted campaign of civil disobedience by pensioner groups in Devon and across England against the local authority Council Tax (known polemically as the ‘Poll Tax’) – a tax which they saw as unfair, with increases falling unfairly on pensioners with fixed incomes. In practice the protest was less about absolute poverty (as means-tested benefits paid the Council Tax for the poorest) than about the interests of older property-owners who are in a situation of relative cash-poverty in comparison to their capital assets. Indeed, in sharp contrast to the left and trade-union base of the more traditional pensioners’ groups such as the National Pensioners Convention, Elizabeth Winkfield’s protest was orchestrated by the United Kingdom Independence Party and she was clear that she was protesting against the ‘Poll Tax’ and the EU bureaucracy, reportedly saying, ‘. . . millions go to the EU and they make us pay for it’, and that she was not paying because ‘there is so much waste in the councils and they are sending money

to the SW Regional Assembly and the EU, without telling anyone. Our money is going to the French and others whilst we are told there isn't enough money to do things here.²

How are we to contextualize the protest of Miss Winkfield and others like her? We can observe how the publicity was orchestrated by Max Clifford, and the painful ageist stereotyping within the media's coverage,³ but to what extent does it help to consider this action as rooted in a specific political generation? The 'Poll Tax' protesters use a rhetoric which legitimizes their actions by reference to the sacrifice that the 'War Generation' made to protect 'our' liberty. Thus their argument is that this unfair tax on the generation which made that sacrifice must be resisted as must the erosion of 'our' liberties through the EU by foreigners who in our experience of history have always caused us trouble.

Miss Winkfield is not alone in her attitude to the EU. The 'War Generation' seems to have specific attitudes towards Europe. Older people are generally more Eurosceptic than are the younger age groups. This sentiment is demonstrated by opinion data collected by the EU's own Eurobarometer survey (1997). Only 35 per cent of those over the age of 60 thought EU membership was a 'good thing for the country', compared to 64 per cent of those aged 60 or below. Interviews with Ministers and ex-Ministers and with electoral strategists from the political parties illustrate their view that Europe is a strong issue for older people (Vincent, Paterson and Wale 2001: 140–1). These attitudes did not arrive with age; they are a feature of the 'War Generation'. They reflect the experience of people who have lived through the war, and tend to interpret any relationship to France or Germany through the context of the European conflicts in the first half of the last century (National Centre for Social Research 2000; Vincent, Paterson and Wale 2001). The formation of a generational set of approaches to continental nations forged during World War II informs the contemporary attitudes of that generation on issues such as the economic and political relationships of the UK to the EU.

Understanding the 'Poll Tax' protest by pensioner groups therefore requires an understanding both of the generationally specific culture of national identity formed within the 'War Generation' and of the political economy which has segmented the interests in property, pensions and benefits of contemporary older people.

Collective sentiment, voting behaviour and generation

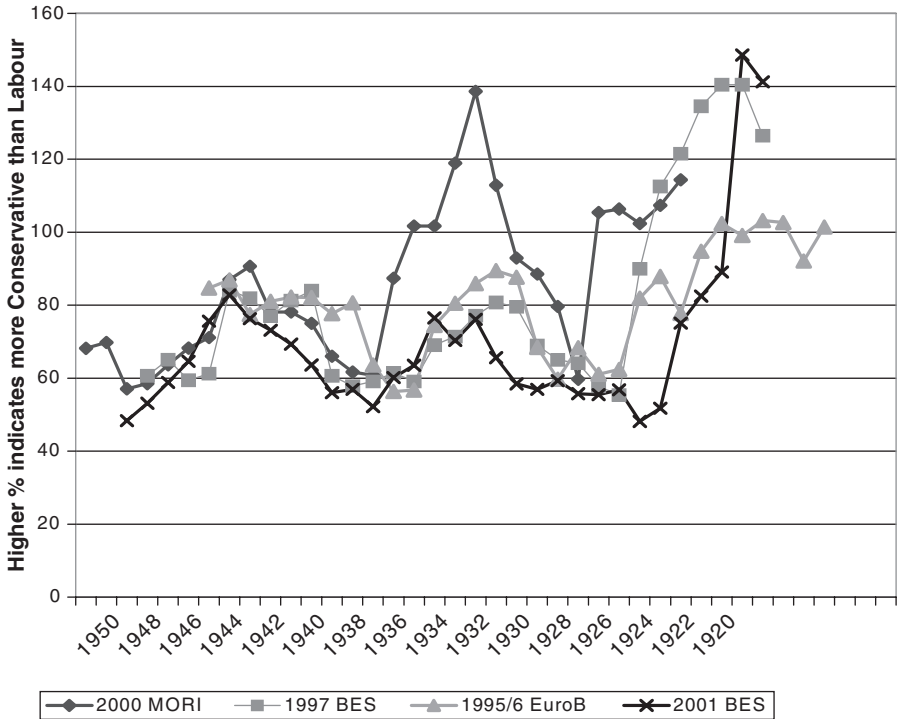
Are these divergent interests bases for political action that can be observed in survey data on voting behaviour? Older people are frequently discussed as an undifferentiated category and the complexity of 'old age' politics, including cross national differences, needs to be fully appreciated (Elman 1995; McManus 1996; Binstock 2000; Vincent, Paterson and Wale 2000, 2001). The

stereotypes that suggest that older people are both Conservative and conservative are no exception (Alwin and Krosnick 1991). Data from the Exeter Politics and Old Age Project 2000 have demonstrated generational diversity within older people's politics (Vincent, Paterson and Wale 2001). We can use MORI polling data from the project to plot the propensity to vote Conservative rather than Labour by date of birth. There are identifiably distinct patterns of voting within the over-60s age group. The graph below uses a five-year moving average to indicate the trends in voter preference by age.⁴ The trend lines indicate the number of respondents expressing a Conservative preference divided by the number expressing a Labour preference as a percentage. While the overall trend shows a tendency which links increasing age with a higher proportion of Conservative voters, between older age groups there is very considerable diversity. In particular there is a set of old people with birth dates around 1930 who have a much stronger propensity to vote Conservative compared to people with birth dates five years earlier and five years later, who are significantly more likely to vote to Labour than other older people. This view contrasts with Park (2000: 14), who downplays cohort effects in voting. However, evidence that there is a phenomenon of political generations can be found in replication of the finding across surveys conducted at different times. We can follow a pseudo-cohort method and trace consistencies as the cohort ages. The following graph presents data from MORI (2000), from the 1997 and 2001 British Election Surveys (Heath et al. 1998; Clark et al. 2003) and from the 1996 Eurobarometer.⁵ Making a suitable adjustment for the age of the relevant cohorts to take account of different survey dates, similar peaks and troughs be found across all four surveys.

One remarkable feature of the data is the narrowness of the cohorts. There are apparently important differences between groups with quite similar birth dates. Can we incorporate this into our understanding of emergent political generations? Older people have a specific sense of national community that was profoundly influenced by the experience of the Second World War. However, while all have a common generational sense of nation, national identity and citizenship, allegiance to different political parties and philosophies is seen by specific political generations as an appropriate way to understand their situation. They express these differences in collective action through the ballot box. The argument is not one of mechanical political socialization; rather, it places a cultural constructionist emphasis on reflexive responses to historical circumstances as the explanation for diversity. Group experience at key points in the group members' lives creates an orientation which colours how issues and events are seen. Party loyalty is something that can be seen to derive from the experience of a lifetime – the opportunity structure society offered this generation.

It is possible to typify the contrast between older and younger segments of the 'War Generation's' experience and attitudes as the difference between hot

FIGURE I: Preference for Conservative vs Labour 1995–2001 by age



Source: Author’s analysis of Eurobarometer 1997, Heath et al. 1998, MORI 2000, Clarke et al. 2003

war and the Cold War legacies. Those who experienced the Great Depression and fought Germany are more able to relate to ‘socialism’ or collective solutions for the welfare of the national community. These people are also those who had delayed work and family opportunities, having actively participated in collective action for Britain against Fascism with Russia as an ally. The children of the war saw socialism from the experience of rationing, postwar austerity and the Cold War. The adults came to the benefits of the dramatic growth of the 1950s after a delayed work career, while the war children were more likely to be able to see the ‘You’ve never had it so good’ prosperity in terms of individual achievement. These contrasts within sections of the ‘War Generation’ can also be identified in more recent experience of national crisis. The postwar competition for jobs repeats itself in competition over early retirement and redundancy in the late twentieth century. Those born in 1935, 1930, 1925 and 1920 experienced the 1981/2 de-industrialization employment crisis at ages 46/7, 51/2, 56/7 and 61/2, respectively, and the subsequent 1991 economic crisis at ages 56, 61, 66 and 71. In other words, the 1925 and 1930 cohorts were at greater risk of forced early retirement at a time when earnings-related

pensions were not fully established, while the 1935 group had an opportunity to reach a better pension position, which they could interpret as the result of individual employment success. This contrasting history creates a variety of political generations that have constructed their views on class, the national community and welfare state, and party based on the interests of their group, mediated by their life experience, including the experience of the Second World War.

Conclusion

We can summarize the conclusions of this study of the 'War Generation' in terms of the formal definitions of 'generation' given above: (a) a sequence of collectivities; (b) the product of time; and (c) a set of continuing relationships between the groups through time. The 'War Generation' forms a collectivity; it recognizes itself and is referred to by others in terms of a common identity. It is also an historical generation; its values, attitudes and, above all, sense of national solidarity and mutual obligation were forged in the direct experience of war, which it expresses by continued participation in the electoral process. It also forms part of a set of divergent inter-generational relations divided by interests in control of property and pension rights and this is also expressed through divergent party-political activity. This inter-generational unity and diversity is comprehensible when placed in the context of a knowledge of history, information on the material circumstances of older people and the cultural dynamics of the 'War Generation'. Thus the conjunction of Europe and property taxation in the form of the community charge as the focus of pensioner political action should not surprise us. Once the action is placed in the context of the 'War Generation', the motivating power of such issues becomes apparent.

While many accounts of generations seek to demarcate discrete generations (e.g. MacManus 1996) and give them an exclusive chronological specificity, the evidence above, specifically voting behaviour, suggests that quite narrow age ranges and very specific experiences differentiate and subdivide broader historical generations. Generations are communities of the mind, invented communities. They are not mutually exclusive and their reference points can shift and alter according to context. The common understandings of 'our' time, the learnt ways of understanding the world, are subject to change. Having been a child during the Second World War does not automatically make you a Conservative-voting, right-wing nationalist. However, an appreciation of how the specific generational understanding of the nation's relationship to continental European societies forged through the experience of the Second World War becomes re-translated into a set of attitudes with respect to the contemporary institutions of the European Union helps us understand the salience of this

issue for older people today and why very specific groups of older people express it through specific party allegiance.

This paper argues that generations are emergent cultural phenomena associated with common economic interests and that these interests are manifest in political behaviour. But that these processes are far more subtle and complex than the crude 'war between generations' model derived from the neo-right criticism of the welfare state (Arber and Attias-Donfut 2000; Hamill-Luke 2001). The political culture of the 'War Generation' manifests both continuity and change, understanding these dynamics requires both listening to people constructing their worlds, and understanding to their full range of historical experiences, and analysing the conditions for their conflicts and their cohesion. The study of generations can illuminate the diversity of old age. It can also help refocus sociology on integrating macro-historical themes with the diverse humanity of the people whose changing life-course experience constitutes generational change.

(Date accepted: August 2005)

Notes

1. Documentary sources relating to the 1997 general election and the project in general were collected and analysed as important background material. Over a twelve-month period in 2000–1, interviews were conducted with: politicians from the three major political parties; key figures from the two major charities working on behalf of older people (Age Concern and Help the Aged); and leading activists within the pensioners' movement. Individual interviews were conducted with older people from different age groups and discussion groups were held with both older and younger people. The quotations present here come from that data. Attitudes about the ageing population, derived from these interviews and focus groups were examined in a nation-wide face-to-face survey of 2,087 adults aged 16-plus throughout Great Britain conducted by MORI.

2. For quotes and UKIP involvement see: <http://www.bbcharterreview.org.uk/Responses/organisations/organisations/StopBBCBiasCampaign-1.rtf>

3. On Max Clifford see, 'How an 83-year-old woman became a council tax martyr (with a little help)', *Guardian* 24 February 2004. On ageism, see Teachit, 'The Language of Newspapers', <http://www.teachit.co.uk/pdf/1441.pdf>.

4. The five-year moving trend replicates the fluidity of generational boundaries argued above and does not artificially segment people by giving undue significance to annual chronological categories.

5. The MORI, BES 1997, BES 2001 and Eurobarometer surveys had, respectively, 2,086, 3,615, 2,352 and 6,348 (UK) respondents, of whom, respectively, 521, 1,080, 623 and 1,504 were over 60 years of age at time of survey.

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