

English summary

Between experience and memory

Generations and historiography

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Since the publication of Karl Mannheims seminal essay ‘The Problem of Generations’ (1928), social generations are widely apprehended as communities of action.¹ According to Mannheim, generations base their identity, as well as their worldview on collective experiences that members have undergone in their late youth and early adulthood: from the age of 15 to 25. These ‘formative experiences’ are experiences of specific – often impressive – historical events. Under influence of these historical variable experiences, coevals may develop a shared worldview, a certain ‘generation style’ (‘Entelechie’), which translates itself into future action. This process is first visible in the creation of ‘generation units’. Generation units are more or less organized communities (the German youth movement is Mannheims example) that express the generation style in their action.

The central research question of this master thesis is: *‘To what extent does the sociological concept of generation implicate diachronic and synchronic aspects, and what can we say about the influences of this concept on (Western) historiography?’* To answer this question, I analyzed two works of Dutch historiography that use Mannheims theory as a conceptual framework in their analysis of the past. The first work is *De eindeloze jaren zestig* (1995) by the late Utrecht professor Hans Righart (1954-2001) and the second is *Leidsvrouwen en zaakwaarneemsters* (1998), the PhD thesis of the Amsterdam historian Anneke Ribberink (b. 1950).

Righart uses the generation concept to explain the turmoil of the 1960s from what he calls a ‘double generation crisis’. The pre-war parental generation as well as the youthful ‘protest generation’ suffered an internal crisis in the sixties according to Righart. Growing up during the Great Depression and the Second World War, the pre-war generation was confronted with economic hardship. The affluence of the sixties as well as the changing social structure caused a ‘crisis’ with these formative

¹ See for the English translation: Karl Mannheim, ‘The problem of generations’, in: Idem, *Essays on the sociology of knowledge* (London 1952), 276-332.

experiences. The protest generation was confronted with the same affluence and the new social conditions and sought to find new 'rites of initiation' in society. After a series of confrontations between the two generations, the turmoil came to an end at the end of the decade. Mainly because the protest generation had found an initiation rite in youth culture with pop music as their formative experience, and because the pre-war generation gave in a great deal and adapted to the values defended by the protest generation.

Righart's study raises several questions about the generational concept. First, Righart indirectly states that the pre-war generation left its generation style and formed new values at a much later age than the formative period. The second contradiction with Mannheim is found in Righart's claims about pop music as the formative experience of the protest generation. According to Mannheim, formative experiences are experiences of historical events. Pop music, however, is already an expression of generationalism.

Ribberink, standing in the tradition of Righart, does not focus on the protest generation, but on the preceding 'silent generation' (this characterization was first launched in a *Time* article in 1951).² For the Dutch situation, this generation is called silent, because of their post-war formative experiences of working hard, without complaint, on the rebuilding of war-struck Holland. Ribberink's main thesis is that the characterization of a generation cannot be reduced to the formative period only. The feminist organization Man Woman Society (MVM, founded in 1968) mainly consisted of members of the silent generation that raised their voice when they reached the average age of 35. The action and practise of this generation unit was only indirectly based on its formative period, but more directly based on an experience of much later date, namely the appearance of a younger generation that fought for (and gained) the liberties they did not have in their youth.

With these findings Ribberink confirms Righart's critique of the Mannheimian notion that a 'generational identity' solely rests upon the formative experiences. She shows that the 'generation style' is worked and reworked over again by experiences dating far beyond the formative period. Above all, both Ribberink and Righart have a hard time trying to use the generational concept in an explanatory way. Neither author actually leaves Mannheims conceptual framework, but Ribberink for example is

² 'The younger generation'.

visibly struggling with the fact that the generational concept only gives some premises for the development of the feminist movement MVM, but does not explain it.

The problems that both authors encounter with the application of the generational concept can be reduced to the very nature of Mannheims theory. As a sociologist, Mannheim was primarily concerned with the question of what causes a generation to become a political actor. He formulated the answer in his thesis of the formative experience that could develop concrete generation units. Having found the answer to his question, Mannheim leaves the question of the continuation of a generation open to speculation. We can conclude that Mannheim's theory focuses synchronically on the formation of a generation in the formative period, but neglects the diachronic development of a generation over time. This is not as much an issue for sociology as it is for history. Diachronic development is of crucial importance for history. The only diachronic clue Mannheim gives is that once formed, the generation style remains throughout the life span, but it is exactly this hypothesis that Righart and Ribberink falsified.

What then remains of the formative period? And what remains of the generation theory when the primacy of the formative period is abolished? Clues for a solution are found in research on memory. Research on the autobiographical memory shows a 'reminiscence bump' in exactly the period of life, that Mannheim calls the formative period. At a later age, people tend to remember more and more vividly from this period than from any other period of life. The research does not show any evidence for a connection between the intensity of an historical experience and future behaviour.³

My thesis here is that one should not regard generations as *communities of action*, but as *communities of remembrance*. Of course, generations are no real communities, but *imagined communities*, that base their generational identity on a shared story of the past. Therefore, generations have a narrative identity, to speak with the notion of Paul Ricoeur.⁴

The generational story still starts in the formative period. When a group of coevals undergo a comparable experience in this period, they share a common past as soon as they start exchanging memories of this event. The memories are woven into a shared

³ Schuman and Scott, 'Generations and collective memories', 379.

⁴ Ricoeur, 'Narrative Identity'.

story, of which the plot makes up Mannheims generation style.

The specific 'vision' or 'world view' of the generation is however not diachronically static. As some memories fade away over time and new memories are added, the generational story undergoes constant changes. Even the plot of the story might change. This happens when the plot is no longer accurate and needs revision under the influence of new experiences (as was the case with the pre-war generation after the clash with the protest generation). This is what Ricoeur calls the 'discordant concordance' of a narrative.⁵ A reformulation of the 'space of experience' automatically implies an altered 'horizon of expectation', to borrow

Reinhart Koselleck's illuminating categories.⁶

This approach offers a more dynamic diachronical approach to generations than Mannheim had to offer. It is even possible to thematize the process of cultural transmission along these lines. Maurice Halbwach's distinction between memory and history is of importance here. As Halbwachs notes, memory is limited along generational lines. Memory can reach up to four (familial) generations before we lose touch with the past. It is through the contact with living witnesses of the past that we really 'grasp' it. Generations use 'lieux de mémoire' for the transmission of memories to following generations. According to Pierre Nora, generations are in the end itself realms of memory.⁷ When the witnesses of the past pass away, memories become more and more anonymous. They are either inscribed in cultural memory or are saved from oblivion by historians.

Righart and Ribberink have operated in the shadow zone between memory and history. It is especially Righart's *De eindeloze jaren zestig* that contains more generational memories than historical reconstructions. In the end, these books are itself generational realms of memory.

⁵ Ricoeur, *Time and narrative I*, 42-45.

⁶ Koselleck, "Erfahrungsraum" und "Erwartungshorizont".

⁷ Nora, *Realms of memory I*, chapter 6.