

## The Concept of Generation

by MARIA OSSOWSKA

The term "generation" is one which frequently appears in postwar sociological books and articles, particularly those which are concerned with numerous recent investigations into the attitudes of the youth in different countries. Like most terms much in use in scientific as well as in everyday language, it is an ambiguous term, and this ambiguity can be felt even in scientific discussions. In view of the importance of this concept, it would seem advisable to register its principal interpretations, to differentiate the biological and cultural criteria used in distinguishing generations and to point out the function of the values involved in its most popular meaning.

1. In the Oxford Dictionary "generation" is defined as a "single step in descent or pedigree." According to this use of the term — based on its etymology (Lat. *generare* — to generate) — parents and children, those who give birth and their offsprings, belong to two different generations. But the fact of begetting and being begotten is not indispensable to the meaning of generation in this sense. My father's and mother's brothers and sisters belong to my parents generation, being begotten by common parents, and a nephew is, where generation is concerned, in the same relation to his uncle as he is to his parents, although his existence is not due to him. Thus biological dependence and a position in a scheme of kinship, going back to a common ancestor, serve here as criteria for including somebody in a given generation. Generations in this sense are often used for bringing order to successive events, although the single steps in descent may be of different lengths in time. According to the New Testament fourteen generations are supposed to separate Abraham from David, fourteen elapsed from David to the Babylonian captivity, and fourteen from the Babylonian captivity to Christ. This way of ordering successive events reminds one of the order brought into history by the reign of kings, in spite of the fact that they can rule a country for a longer or a shorter period. The reign of Henry VIII in England, for example, lasted thirty eight years, while his successor, Edward VI, governed the country for only six years.

As a rule there is a difference of age between two generations, but age is not relevant in this case. An uncle belongs to an older generation than his nephew, although it may happen that the former is younger than the latter. There is no exact coincidence between genealogy and chronology.

2. As one of the principal functions of parents is to transmit their knowledge and the tradition they were brought up to their children, people are inclined to think in terms of generations whenever they have to do with a similar distribution of roles, as for example in the case of a teacher and his pupil. A University professor belongs, according

to this interpretation, to one generation, while the student, who under his guidance, advances step by step in the academic career and is expected to replace him, belongs to the next one. A similar role is played by a master who transmits his skill to his apprentice. Artisans often complain that people belonging to the younger generation are far from mastering their art in the way they did themselves. Here too, generation may denote a "single step in descent," with the difference that the descent or genealogy is not of a biological but of a cultural order.

3. The third meaning of the term "generation," derivates from the first, is, like the first, to be found in dictionaries. According to the meaning, a generation is a "whole body of persons born about the same time, average time in which children are ready to replace parents (reckoned at  $\frac{1}{3}$  of a century or at 30 years of a time measure)." Generations in this sense can be used as conventional time-measure, but because of the continuity of descent, it is impossible in this case to determine the generation to which a given person belongs. Being non-operative this use is rather rare.

4. When we speak of an everlasting conflict between the young and old as a conflict of two generations, we often have in mind not the conflict of parents and children but a conflict of people in two different life-phases, each of them characterized by some common traits. The young are supposed to exert less control over their emotions and to be less inclined to accept compromise, while the old are more cautious and keep in check the tendency of the younger "generation" to excess. This is a meaning of the word "generation" used e. g. by S. N. Eisenstadt in his book *From Generation to Generation*. The author is interested here in age-groups and the criterion of age as a principle of role allocation. Every human being passes through different ages within his lifetime and this biological process of growing up and of aging "becomes a basis for defining human beings, for the formation of mutual relationships and activities, and for the differential allocation of social roles."<sup>1</sup>

This concept of generation is not a historical one, since it enables us to compare age-groups — such as groups of girls before and after sexual maturity, of groups of boys before and after initiation — with analogous groups of the same or of different societies at different times, just as we can compare women in their thirties in the time of Balzac with women of the same age in contemporary European societies. Although age serves here as a criterion in the formation of groups, these groups are not connected with a definite historical date. In societies which have initiation ceremonies which stress symbolically the death of a boy as a child and his rebirth as adult, the boy, after these *rites de passage*, leaves behind him former "generation" and passes to another. Thus by flow of generations we mean here the passage of the same persons through different phases of their biography.

5. In his book *Die Skeptische Generation*, H. Schelsky includes in the *skeptische Generation* Germans who were young in the decade

<sup>1</sup> S. N. Eisenstadt, *From Generation to Generation. Age-groups and Social Structure*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul 1956, p. 21.

between 1945—55.<sup>2</sup> This generation is opposed to the *politische Generation* constituted by boys and girls who were young between 1920 and 1945. By "young" the author means "from 14 to 25 years of age."<sup>3</sup> While the generation young within the year limits 1920 to 1945 was very interested in ideology and politics and played an active part in the political activities of the adults, as did e. g. the *Hitlerjugend*, the sceptical generation is disillusionized, distrustful, denouncing lofty ideals, bereft of any revolutionary spirit, aiming at security first, concerned with personal problems and family life.

In opposition to the previous sense of the word, this concept of generation is a *historical* one. A generation is here contained within definite historical limits. Whoever belongs to a generation in this sense, belongs to it for life and cannot in the course of time pass automatically "from generation to generation." The fact of being 20 between 1920 and 1945 is unalterable. This last concept of generation is widely used. A generation is here first of all a group of people characterized by certain common attitudes, and by a hierarchy of values shared by all members of the group. This community of attitudes and of values is due to important common experiences which have contributed to the formation of personality. Thus for Schelsky the sceptical generation is composed of people who experienced the last war and its consequences in their childhood or adolescence — a period of high receptivity. Here common attitudes are the facts which first strike the observer, while approximate age limits are drawn afterwards so as to include the historical events which are supposed to explain the observed cultural similarities.<sup>4</sup>

Sometimes these age limits are very vague. This is so, for example in the case of the so-called beat generation in America. Jack Kerouac — one of its leading writers is now in his forties, while his admirers are often still adolescents. People speak without any precise reference to age about the generation which in Germany experienced hitlerism, as apposed to the generation for which hitlerism was a past event. Homogeneity of age is in all these cases not essential for being included into one group, as cultural similarities, determined by common experience, constitute the main criterion for including somebody into one generation or another. In a changing reality generations thus conceived may succeed one another at great speed. Young people who played an

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<sup>2</sup> *Die in dem Jahrzehnt zwischen 1945 und 1955 in die Jugendphase tretende Generation*, in: H. Schelsky, *Die Skeptische Generation*, Berlin, Diederichs Verlag 1958, p. 87.

<sup>3</sup> "Was hier als 'Generation' bezeichnet wird, ist jeweilig ein recht verschiedener Teil der gesamten Bevölkerungsjahrgänge zwischen 14 und 25 Jahren", op. cit., p. 94.

<sup>4</sup> The sense of the word "generation" now discussed is the main one to be found in Schelsky's book. But he sometimes returns to the first interpretation. Thus e.g. in Chapter VI of Part II he deals with tensions and conflicts between generations, in family life, having in mind tensions between parents and children [*Familiäre Autorität und Generation spannung*].

active part at the time of the "Polish October" in 1956 consider themselves as belonging to a generation different from that to which, in their opinion, belong their colleagues, younger by two or three years, who did not share that experience. The same holds true of people who took part in the Warsaw Insurrection of 1944 as opposed to the "generation" who did not.

This very common use of the term "generation" is of particular interest to the student of values of a given group, as opinions concerning one's adherence to a given generation reveal what people consider most important in their biographies. I remember A. Huxley saying in one of his essays that he counts as belonging to his generation people who attended the first performance of Debussy's *Pelléas and Mélisande* at the Opéra Comique, in 1902. The choice of this criterion is symptomatic of the role of music in Huxley's hierarchy of values. Whoever, studying a generation, finds as a result of his inquiry some values accepted in common by people belonging to that generation, must ask himself whether he did not use the term "generation" in a sense which made his results known in advance, i.e., whether people belonging, according to him, to one generation were not selected by tacit reference to some common attitudes determined by common historical events.

The five senses of the term "generation" enumerated above probably do not exhaust all the possible interpretations, but seem to be the most important ones. The third is rather of little use as we have more precise time-measures at our disposal. As to the fourth, in this case — it would seem advisable to replace the word "generation" by "age-group." Thus we are left with three possibilities: 1) generation as a single step in a biological genealogy, 2) generation as a single step in a cultural genealogy and 3) generation as a group of people with similar attitudes due to some common historical experiences. These interpretations are not mutually exclusive. Parents and children (two generations in the first sense) are usually, although not necessarily, those who transmit tradition on the one hand and those who inherit it on the other, thus belonging to two different generations in the second sense. Parents and children have often very different life experiences which can make out of them two generations in the fifth sense. But the fact that this connection is by no means necessary is an argument in favour of the distinctions we have tried to establish above.