

## Why not call it a generation? Between 'superfluosness' and 'arbitrariness'

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### Abstract

*In the wake of the so-called 'economic and financial crisis' of 2008, new forms of protests have emerged. The debate on how to best describe and analyze these movements is in its infancy. This article discusses whether the concept of 'generation' is useful to this new phenomenon. In doing so, it tracks the development of the concept of generation since the early 1990s. It was either used to track societal change as inspired by small elites, or in order to grasp the way of life of a certain age group of a population. Recent protest movements do not conform to the aforementioned approaches: their basis is too broad and too diverse to be pinpointed; at the same time they are anything but unpolitical. They stand for new forms of politics and new forms of agency.*

**Key words:** Europe, Financial and economic crisis, Generation studies, Generation X, protest movements, subpolitics.

### Wasted Lives: Bauman's concept for post-industrial protest

The election of the new Polish president Andrzej Duda in May 2015 was driven by the fears of an insecure generation, the political scientist Piotr Buras commented.<sup>1</sup> Many of the younger people had already decided that their hopes and dreams would not be fulfilled in Poland and had emigrated, he wrote.<sup>2</sup> This also occurred in other countries that suffered from the so-called 'economic and financial crisis' and the way it was handled – like Greece or Spain – here also a large number of people could not see a way to make a decent living in their home countries and emigrated. The wake of the crisis thus fostered a development that Zygmunt Bauman had described when he found nowadays, "at times of the Generation X"<sup>3</sup>, unemployment would no longer describe an irregular condition. The litmus test of a 'good society', he contends, had once been jobs for all and a productive role in society. Now, he concludes, 'un-employment' and superfluosness were permanent conditions.<sup>4</sup> So what remains for those who are unable to play a productive role in society and who cannot count on being cared for by

<sup>1</sup> P. Buras, 'Und nach dem Lächeln?: Die jungen Wähler in Polen haben die Elite abgestraft und sich für den rechtskonservativen Außenseiter Andrzej Duda als Präsidenten entschieden. Nun steht dem Land eine große Wende bevor', *Die Zeit*, No. 22, 28 May 2015, p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Z. Bauman, *Verworfenes Leben: Die Ausgegrenzten der Moderne*, Bonn: Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung, 2005, p. 20

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

the working population? Demographic data shows what has already been discussed also in academia for many years: large numbers of Polish nationals are working in Ireland or Germany.

This article will not look into these phenomena as such, but rather will consider the ways in which the term 'generation' has been used in this context. In both Buras' and Bauman's examples, the term can be found. In the latter case it not only designates a group of people, but a time span that is taken for granted and not specified further – that of 'Generation X'. But how obvious is it to speak of 'generations' here? Buras and Bauman are exceptions in the public and academic discourse that the paper is to focus on especially – the German –, where the term 'generation' is not often used in the context of recent events in troubled Europe. It is applied neither to movements like 'Occupy' or 'Blockupy', nor the protests against EU and the 'Troika'. It is also rarely used for the revolts in the Arab Spring, although one could argue that protests in Egypt were led by a particular segment of the younger population in urban areas that were asking for a place in society and a perspective in life, just as Bauman described. It will be argued that the concept of 'generation' has lost its applicability with the reception of 'Generation X', which pushed an understanding of 'generation' that is not describing change, but projecting and totalizing experience to the foreground. The following section will consider how useful the term 'generation' can be as a heuristic means for the analysis of recent protest movements in Europe.

## **Generation X and American concepts of 'generation'**

In its original meaning, the 'X' was taken not to stand for 'superfluousness', it was meant to designate arbitrariness. "Generation X. Tales for an accelerated Culture"<sup>5</sup> by Douglas Coupland was first published in 1991. Cultural historian Paul Fussell had subsumed under 'X' all those people, who did not care much for status, power or money – a depiction Coupland considered fitting for his reclusive protagonists.<sup>6</sup> The arbitrary character of this generation, marked by the 'X', is fundamental for a group that does not expect much from life. Coupland's book is a novel-turned sociological account<sup>7</sup>, of which the glossary and encyclopaedia found in the book are remainders. One of the terms to be found there is 'McJob', invented by Coupland to describe a "low-pay, low-dignity, low-benefit, no-future job in the service sector"<sup>8</sup>.

The publication of Coupland's book coincided with popular trends in music and film, so that in its reception, the 'X' was used as a label and turned into a marketing phenomenon – from Coupland himself to the music of Pearl Jam and Nirvana and the movies of Richard Linklater (such as "Slacker" and "Dazed and Confused"). This sell-out of a generation was not new, of course, as Coupland himself stated. "Marketers have known that to pump money out of baby boomers, all they need [to] do is play a Beach Boys song and show a clip from Vietnam. With X, they naively continue to assume that any generation actively enjoys participating in its own selling out.

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<sup>5</sup> D. Coupland, *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture*, 1st ed., New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991

<sup>6</sup> D. Coupland, 'Generation X'd', *Details*, Juni, 1995, <http://coupland.tripod.com/details1.html>, last accessed 07<sup>th</sup> July 2015.

<sup>7</sup> C. Doody, 'X-Plained: The Production and Reception History of Douglas Coupland's 'Generation X'', *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of Canada*, Vol. 49, No. 1, 2011, pp. 5–34, p. 9f., 12f. Doody further explains that in first sketches, Coupland had referred to Billy Idol's punk band of the same name. Only later he had claimed Fussell to be the origin of the title. (ibid., p. 26f.).

<sup>8</sup> Coupland, op. cit., p. 5.

Wrong”<sup>9</sup>. As he had invented and characterized this generation, he saw himself in the position of declaring their cessation. “And now I’m here to say that X is over. I’d like to declare a moratorium on all the noise, because the notion that there now exists a different generation – X, Y, K, whatever – is no longer debatable”<sup>10</sup>.

The irony in Coupland’s undertaking to first proclaim and then terminate a generation was largely ignored. Regardless of his intervention, the ‘Generation X’ as well as the vocabulary found in the encyclopaedia have become a commonplace in popular culture as well as in academia:

- Numerous studies were published that simply took ‘Generation X’ as a given.<sup>11</sup>
- ‘Generation X’ featured prominently in the successful book by William Strauss and Neil Howe, “Generations. The History of America’s Future, 1584 to 2069”. The authors draw circles of life, which run through four different phases: “civic, reactive, idealist, adaptive”. Altogether, they count 18 generations in America’s past, present and future up to 2069.<sup>12</sup> Used that way ‘generation’ merely helps to grasp the happenings in a world that is hard to understand, too complex and diverse to the eyes of many spectators. But such a model is of course inadequate in order to really understand and describe a generation. Any static theory is useless at least in order to identify social and political generations.
- More importantly, ‘Generation X’ has found wider acceptance indirectly through its successor-generation, the ‘Y’ that Strauss and Howe had also labelled ‘Millennials’. ‘Generation Y’ is especially influential in human resources management.<sup>13</sup> The translation of ‘Y’ into ‘Why’ has become common and added an idea of this group as questioning their very existence, role and future.
- The term ‘McJob’ has gained wider acceptance.<sup>14</sup> In 2007 the fast food chain McDonald’s eventually initiated a campaign for a positive connotation of the word. It announced the company has been given the title of employer of the year and comments: “Not bad for a McJob”<sup>15</sup>.

While this reception of ‘Generation X’ was an international phenomenon, it triggered a boom of new ‘generations’ in the German public discourse. Florian Illies’ “Generation Golf” was the most important and influential book here.<sup>16</sup> It was meant as a portrait of Germans who grew up in the non-political 1980s, with television shows like “Sportschau” or “Wetten, dass...” and drove – or longed to drive – a Volkswagen Golf, whose first model was produced from 1974-1983. The book thus carried the proper subtitle “An Inspection”. It turned out to be a big success and was soon followed by the sequel “Generation Golf II”.<sup>17</sup> Illies offered a nostalgic recollection for those who had indeed grown up with the television shows and car mentioned. In the wake of Illies’

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<sup>9</sup> Coupland, op. cit.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> See: N. J. Borges, R. S. Manuel, C. L. Elam and B. J. Jones, ‘Differences in Motives Between Millennial and Generation X Medical Students’, *Medical Education*, Vol. 44, No. 6, 2010, pp. 570–576.

<sup>12</sup> W. Strauss and N. Howe, *Generations: The History of America’s Future, 1584 to 2069*, 1st ed., New York: Quill, 1991.

<sup>13</sup> See e.g.: S. Kultalahti and R. Viitala, ‘Generation Y - Challenging Clients for HRM?’, *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, Vol. 30, No. 1, 2015, pp. 101–114.

<sup>14</sup> See e.g.: E. Lakasing, ‘The Rise of the Medical McJob: Why We Should Turn the Clock Back’, *The British Journal of General Practice: the Journal of the Royal College of General Practitioners*, Vol. 59, No. 562, 2009, pp. 380–382.

<sup>15</sup> M. Sweney, ‘Not Bad for a McJob?’, *The Guardian*, 20 April 2006, <http://www.theguardian.com/media/organgrinder/2006/apr/20/post3>, last accessed 07<sup>th</sup> July 2015.

<sup>16</sup> F. Illies, *Generation Golf: Eine Inspektion*, 7th ed., Berlin: Argon, 2000.

<sup>17</sup> F. Illies, *Generation Golf zwei*, 1st ed., München: Goldmann, 2005 The car was produced from 1983-1991.

success, a whole series of bed followers announced new generations: “Generation Berlin” for un-political politicians longing for power and success in Berlin<sup>18</sup>; “Generation Ally” for those who did watch the television series “Ally McBeal”<sup>19</sup> (and were female); the ‘Generation Internship’ for those who were educated very well and still did work as interns or in McJobs instead of finding a real, properly paid job.

In the course of the new debate on the bestselling ‘Generation X’, a concept of ‘generation’ was established in the German context, which collectivised individual experiences and whose markers were taken from the realms of leisure and consumption rather than politics. Given that 20 million regularly watched “Wetten, dass...” and the VW Golf sold 6,72 million times altogether<sup>20</sup>, the potential base for this generation was a rather large one. As briefly elaborated with the example of Strauss’ and Howe’s book, it was based on an understanding that was as common as popular in the US-American context. The ‘baby-boomers’ or the ‘Vietnam generation’ offered identification to millions of Americans. When experiences are totalized and projected on large parts of a society, it is not surprising that generations are taken as a given. Accordingly, often enough the understanding and application of the concept ‘generation’ is not problematized at all in publications.<sup>21</sup> That is even more striking in those texts, where theoretical implications are elaborated on in a detailed manner, just not with regard to the use of ‘generation’.<sup>22</sup> In the German context, another understanding is prevalent. A brief look at the use of the concept here will illustrate that the reception of Coupland’s book and the success of “Generation Golf” can be considered game changers here.

## Generation Golf and non-applicability of Mannheim’s approach

In German academic discourse, Karl Mannheim’s “The Problem of Generations” is the canonical reference.<sup>23</sup> Most books and essays on this problem at least refer to Mannheim’s text or even applied its three-staged model, in various guises. This model briefly summarised is: your date of birth provides for the environment you grow up in, decides which events fall into your lifetime that you are in principal able to experience (‘generational location’). Whether you really do so and in which way you experience them, is another question. And you will probably find out that you experience events the same way others do, group with them and react the same or very similar way. So you may finally be part of a generational unit and provide for and/or accelerate social change. This ‘generational unit’ is what Mannheim is interested in: The connection between ‘generation in actuality’ (*Generationszusammenhang*) and the collective,

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<sup>18</sup> H. Bude, *Generation Berlin*, Berlin: Merve-Verl, 2001.

<sup>19</sup> K. Kullmann, *Generation Ally: Warum es heute so kompliziert ist, eine Frau zu sein*, 4th ed., Frankfurt am Main: Eichborn, 2002.

<sup>20</sup> Handelsblatt, ‘Absatz des VW Golf im Zeitraum der Jahre 1974 bis 2012 nach Modell (in Millionen)’, <http://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/240184/umfrage/absatz-des-vw-golf-nach-modell/>, last accessed 8<sup>th</sup> July 2015.

<sup>21</sup> J. Bailey, *Parenting in England, 1760-1830: Emotion, Identity, and Generation*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012; B. Dolinar, *The Black Cultural Front: Black Writers and Artists of the Depression Generation*, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012; S. N. Elkholy, *The Philosophy of the Beats*, Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2012; I. E. Kolchinsky, *The Revival of the Russian Literary Avantgarde. The Thaw Generation and Beyond*, München: Verlag Otto Sagner, 2012; J. Shail and M. Shettle, *Students at War: The Lost Generation of Battersea Polytechnic, 1914 - 1918*, Guildford: Univ. of Surrey, 2011.

<sup>22</sup> N. M. Grace and J. Skerl (eds.), *The Transnational Beat Generation: [Beat Generation Symposium Held at the Columbia College Chicago in the October 2008]*, 1st ed., New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

<sup>23</sup> K. Mannheim, ‘Das Problem der Generationen’ in K. Mannheim (ed.), *Wissenssoziologie: Auswahl aus dem Werk*, Neuwied et al.: Luchterhand, 1970, pp. 509–565.

high-cultural achievements and resonations, which he locates on the level of collectivized and polarizing generational units.<sup>24</sup> Mannheim speaks of an “inherent tendency” that leads from the experiences made to the formation of generational units<sup>25</sup>, a potentiality, which can evolve further or be pushed aside by other forces or simply be modified.<sup>26</sup> Although Mannheim argues against a linear conception of progress<sup>27</sup>, what is crucial here is that Mannheim is solely interested in the formation of cultural elites and thus a form of cultural hegemony.

Comparing American and German generation studies, this difference, which is less obvious when comparing approaches on disciplinary grounds, immediately springs into the foreground: the emphasis on the role of generational units in cultural change on the one hand, and the emphasis on seemingly shared experience on the other. As a result, we have a body of research on relatively small groups on the basis of Karl Mannheim’s approach, who gained political and/or societal relevance, which needs to be analysed further. The research interest here was not in “some youth cohorts, which regularly ripple on the surface of society”<sup>28</sup>. Instead, it was aimed at a “concept for an understanding of hegemonial sentiments by applying generational aspects” and not at a “general understanding of generational phenomena”<sup>29</sup>. Although Mannheim himself did not use war as an example, his text was written under the influence of the First World War. Maybe that is why those drawing upon his theory call for an important event to happen that really makes a difference and is of broad interest. Wars do affect peoples’ lives in terrible and lasting ways, of course, and the Generation of 1968 is much written-about and regularly being re-enacted, re-assured of its importance. For those scholars drawing upon Mannheim what happened after World War II and certainly after the fading of the ‘revolution of 1968’ was of less interest.<sup>30</sup> They began to speak of “post-heroic generations” and asked if the era of paradigmatic generations was over now.<sup>31</sup>

If we look at the ‘Generation X’ again, it seems obvious that nothing would be more unappealing to those who identify with the term than to present themselves (and act like) the cultural elites. Its personnel lack any project, any sense in life and a lot of self-esteem. So the ways in which to apply Mannheim’s theory – identify certain social groups and attribute change and innovation to them – seems of limited use for them.

Another important aspect of Mannheim’s understanding of ‘generation’ was in dispute. The ‘68ers’ came to be understood as the last political generation in Germany. As Navid Kermani noted, its members’ political consciousness had developed in the face of the crimes of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He went as far as to state this generation had been the last one that thought of more than subsidies for the agrarian sector when

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<sup>24</sup> L. Niethammer, ‘Generation und Geist: Eine Station auf Karl Mannheims Weg zur Wissenssoziologie’ in R. Schmidt (ed.), *Systemumbruch und Generationswechsel: Gesellschaftliche Entwicklungen nach dem Systemumbruch*, 2003, pp. 19–32, p. 28.

<sup>25</sup> Mannheim, op. cit., p. 528.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., S. 542. Es bedarf einer Generationsentelechie, eines Generationsimpulses, um die Bewegung anzustoßen. (Ibid., pp. 550-553).

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 544.

<sup>28</sup> Niethammer, op. cit., p. 30. Translated by author.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 30f. Translated by author.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 32; L. Niethammer, ‘Sind Generationen identisch?’ in J. Reulecke (ed.), *Generationalität und Lebensgeschichte im 20. Jahrhundert*, München: Oldenbourg, 2009, pp. 1–16, p. 14.

thinking of Europe.<sup>32</sup> Every ‘generation’ that followed the ‘68ers’ ran with the addendum ‘so-called’ and under the label ‘post-political’<sup>33</sup>. Their relevance was in the fields of ‘leisure’ and ‘fun’, and was therefore as random as politically irrelevant to generation studies. Younger authors included answers to their categorization already in their primary texts and thereby confirmed their own disinterest:

The claim of lacking political interests soon did not bother us much. We did not believe for a second that our parents rather discussed the Cuba crisis instead of cruising around yobbishly.

Politics was a double-sided issue for us then, and we really did not know how to counter the accusation of lacking any interest. Radicalism was something we left to the RAF [Rote Armee Fraktion, L.K.]<sup>34</sup>.

## A new political generation?

A ‘generation’ is never a given. It is always called into existence by somebody for a certain reason. Indeed, as was rightly held, it is not important whether something really is unprecedented but rather if one is willing to regard it that way.<sup>35</sup> Every generational theory has to be incomplete if it fails to take into account the most important question; namely why the term ‘generation’ is being used and why certain experiences are being declared important. In German generation studies, the term ‘*Generationenrede*’ has been widely used in recent years.<sup>36</sup> Influenced by Foucault’s ‘discourse’, the term captures how a generation is constructed by those who claim to form a generation as well as those that are talked about as generation.

The example of the ‘Generation Golf’ has shown that concepts in popular and academic discourse were not compatible. Reactions in academia spanned from disinterest to disdain. But if we take the ‘Generation X’ as the blueprint for new generations and approach it not via its reception as Illies does, but undertake another closer reading of Coupland’s ‘Generation X’, we can understand this group as a political generation and thus will return to Zygmunt Bauman’s usage of the term.

To start with, there are two main differences: Firstly, what we find is that Bauman uses a term, ‘Generation X’, which originally described a different phenomenon – arbitrariness instead of superfluousness. Secondly, it does make a big difference whether one is not interested in – nor longs for – a certain status, or whether one is in no position to play a sufficiently productive role in society. To the contrary, it might be that a person is not interested in pursuing a career because no perspective seems worthwhile or reachable. We can hold that Coupland’s characters might not be interested in status and career opportunities, because apart from ‘McJobs’, they do not

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<sup>32</sup> N. Kermani, ‘Europas Realisten’ in U. Beck (ed.), *Generation Global: Ein Crashkurs*, 1st ed., Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2007, pp. 227–235, p. 234.

<sup>33</sup> D. Bebnowski, *Generation und Geltung: Von den "45ern" zur "Generation Praktikum" - übersehene und etablierte Generationen im Vergleich*, Bielefeld: Transcript Verl., 2012.

<sup>34</sup> „Der Vorwurf des mangelnden Politikinteresses ließ uns schon bald ziemlich kalt. Wir glaubten nicht im Ernst daran, dass unsere Eltern im Teenageralter lieber über die Kuba-Krise diskutiert hatten, anstatt halb Stark durch die Gegend zu flitzen.

Politik war sowieso eine zwiespältige Angelegenheit damals, und uns fiel partout nicht ein, wie wir auf den Null-Bock-Vorwurf hätten reagieren können. Für Radikalität war die RAF zuständig.“ Kullmann, op. cit., p. 29.

<sup>35</sup> B. Giesen, ‘Generation und Trauma’ in J. Reulecke (ed.), *Generationalität und Lebensgeschichte im 20. Jahrhundert*, München: Oldenbourg, 2009, pp. 59–69, p. 61.

<sup>36</sup> See e.g. R. Winter, *Generation als Strategie: Zwei Autorengruppen im literarischen Feld der 1920er Jahre: ein deutsch-französischer Vergleich*, Göttingen: Wallstein, 2012.

see any for themselves. His later novel “Microserfs”<sup>37</sup> – whose German title “Mikrosklaven” (“Microslaves”) is even more explicit – portrays a group of people working for a large software company. They are unhappy with their jobs and feel powerless in the face of Microsoft. After much deliberation, however, the main protagonist decides to start his own business and in a cross-generational effort employs his father who was let off because he was considered too old. What does appear to be the stereotypical American Dream-like idea of a career you create for yourself is in fact a subversive act in which an abnormal career is pursued.

Not only in his novels, also in contributions to newspapers and magazines did Coupland aim to identify the markers of the ‘Generation X’. He compiled charts contrasting Warhol’s ‘Factory’ to Clinton’s White House<sup>38</sup> or assembled words that “Can Only Be Used 100% Ironically”, such as “entertainer” or “family values”<sup>39</sup>. In the face of the millennium-hysteria, one of these charts even listed the advantages of the apocalypse: “All boredom would end”, he predicts as well as an “explosion of fun”<sup>40</sup>. But when the apocalypse finally does happen in the Coupland-universe, in his 1998 novel “Girlfriend in a Coma”, it turns out to be very boring endeavour as well: People just fall asleep. Boring as it is, though, it does provide for a radical new beginning. Despite their declared disinterest in doing so, the group of protagonists are the chosen ones to direct this new start.<sup>41</sup> So there is a glimpse of hope for a new beginning, although in the protagonists’ state of major disorientation, this group of characters necessarily has to stay without a specific project. In times of ‘accelerating culture’ – the subtitle of “Generation X” –, falling asleep and doing nothing might be the entire program needed to start with. Even more so, it might be the only perspective the personnel can develop. This is the most important difference between Mannheim and Coupland: Where Mannheim’s ‘generational unit’ is the driver of social change, Coupland’s personnel struggles to keep pace with an accelerated culture that is happening independent of them.

We can thus understand Coupland’s ‘Generation X’ as a generation of Second Modernity, in which cultural changes always transcend those who contribute to, but never control them. Here, we find a hint as to why Bauman has discovered the term ‘Generation X’: it is close to his concept of modernity. The ‘Xers’, Bauman says, have made experiences that differentiated them sharply from their predecessors, as they lost both self-esteem and a purpose in life in very general terms.<sup>42</sup> The generational markers here would be ‘loss’ and ‘fear’ rather than ‘expectation’. He has reiterated his findings at the “re:publica” in Berlin, a conference on internet and society, in August 2015. While the fear of an interfering state had been the nightmare of his generation, he said, it had now been replaced by the fear of being incapable of securing yourself a place in society. “The fear of exclusion is the dominant fear of our time. We are not rebelling against overbearing state; we are today rebelling against being neglected,

<sup>37</sup> D. Coupland, *Microserfs*, 1st ed., New York: ReganBooks, 1995.

<sup>38</sup> D. Coupland, ‘Pop! Goes Washington’, *The New Republic*, Vol. 208, 1/2, 1 February 1993, p. 16.

<sup>39</sup> D. Coupland, ‘The Irony Board: A Survey Of Words That Can Only Be Used 100% Ironically’, *The New Republic*, Vol. 207, No. 19, 2 November 1992, p. 12 See also: D. Coupland, ‘The Irony Board II’, *The New Republic*, Vol. 208, No. 3, 18 January 1993, p. 11.

<sup>40</sup> D. Coupland, ‘Millennium Chart’, *The New Republic*, Vol. 208, No. 13, 29 March 1993, p. 12.

<sup>41</sup> D. Coupland, *Girlfriend in a Coma*, 1st ed., New York, NY: ReganBooks, 1998.

<sup>42</sup> Bauman, op. cit., p. 18f. Was in „Generation Ally“ über die Arbeitsbedingungen von steht, deckt sich mit den Merkmalen der „Generation Praktikum“: „Viel schlimmer als Unter- oder Überforderung war jedoch Überflüssigkeit. Sie trat ein, wenn wir keinen Ansprechpartner hatten [...]“ – Kullmann, op. cit., p. 54.

against being ignored”, he said.<sup>43</sup> What Bauman describes is thus a shift of attention and agency to an individual level, while at the same time the sphere of traditional politics is left to very specific actors. It is not a coincidence that Bauman refers to a concept of individualization by Ulrich Beck, who has elaborated on it in the context of what he calls “reflexive modernization”.<sup>44</sup> Beck describes reflexive modernization as something that must be “analytically distinguished from the conventional categories of social change – crisis, social transformation and revolutions”<sup>45</sup>. Beck holds that there “will not be a revolution but there will be a new society”<sup>46</sup>. How then do we have to imagine social change to happen? Who are its drivers? What we find in both Beck’s and Bauman’s texts is an agency that shifts the parameters of traditional political sociology to another level, that of ‘sub-politics’. Here, individual or collective agents outside politics are included in processes from below.<sup>47</sup> Mary Kaldor and Sabine Selchow have referred to that phenomenon as “sub-terranean politics”, “use the term ‘subterranean politics’ because other more conventional concepts like civil society and social movements trigger pre-conceived notions of what we are talking about” and they “refer to phenomena that are not usually visible in mainstream debates.”<sup>48</sup> The term ‘civil society’ presupposed NGOs and trade unions, the term ‘social movements’ “a particular form of activism”<sup>49</sup>. On the basis of seven studies analysing national and European protests movements that were undertaken as part of their project, the authors observe a “deep disappointment with the political system”<sup>50</sup> and the practice of an approach to politics derived from the protestors’ own actions and ideas of participation.<sup>51</sup> Claiming public space has to be seen as important not only symbolically.<sup>52</sup> Finally, Kaldor and Selchow observe that “[p]roblems are solved by the group as a whole, without hierarchies or leaders”<sup>53</sup>. It can thus be concluded that indeed these new forms of protests understand politics, participation and agency in a way that is not easily described with existing concepts and theories.

## Conclusions

What has to be concluded at this stage is that Bauman uses the concept of generation as a means to grasp the supposed common experience of larger parts of society. His ‘Generation X’ simply consists of the young people of today, whose experiences he differentiates from those of his own (biological) generation. We have also seen that agency is understood in a non-heroic way by Bauman and Beck, and social change as an activity that is just as much driven by traditional agents as the result of past actions and events that simply have to be coped with.<sup>54</sup> When Beck now holds that we simply “look for the political in the wrong place, on the wrong floors and on the wrong pages

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<sup>43</sup> Z. Bauman, ‘From Privacy to Publicity: The Changing Mode of Being-in-the-World’, <https://re-publica.de/session/privacy-publicity-changing-mode-being-world>, last accessed 8<sup>th</sup> July 2015.

<sup>44</sup> U. Beck, ‘The Reinvention of Politics: Towards a Theory of Reflexive Modernization’ in U. Beck, A. Giddens and S. Lash (eds.), *Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order*, Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1994, pp. 1–55, p. 2–6.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22f.

<sup>48</sup> M. Kaldor, S. Selchow, S. Deel and T. Murray-Leach, *The ‘bubbling Up’ of Subterranean Politics in Europe*, London: London School of Economics and Political Science, 2012, p. 2.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>52</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>54</sup> See Beck, *op. cit.*, p. 4.



of the newspapers”<sup>55</sup>, we are led back to Douglas Coupland’s narrative universe. Protagonists here are starting a new business in the shadow of Microsoft; struggle to find some sense of purpose in life; or are even faced to with the challenge to rebuild society after a natural disaster.

In generation studies there are competing approaches to whether a ‘totalizing historic event’ would be needed in order to sponsor new generations. We have to concede that the apocalypse would be the extreme form of such an event. Some scholars bluntly denied it was necessary,<sup>56</sup> others held that although these “deep polarizing repercussions” obviously were nothing to be wished for, generational units might form in their course.<sup>57</sup> Moving to the ‘real world’, the question arises whether the ‘economic and financial crisis’ does not constitute such a polarizing event – and whether not to revive the concept?

We have to assume that ‘generation’ either is applied to larger parts of society or to small units that drive social and cultural change. The emphasis on the unpolitical we find in the examples discussed above is misleading, since it works on the basis of a concept of politics that does not have to apply today, where we are faced with a crisis of agency and the absence of an addressee. Bauman himself offers a logical solution. The present crisis, he holds, was “first and foremost a *crisis of agency* – though ultimately it is a *crisis of territorial sovereignty*.”<sup>58</sup> “Each formally sovereign territorial”, he continues, was faced with “problems originating far beyond the reach of its instruments of political control”<sup>59</sup>. Concepts like ‘sub(terranean)-politics’ allow us to include movements otherwise neglected. Explicitly political movements like those to be found Europe in the wake of the financial crisis then could be seen as reactions by parts of society against measures of a larger scale. The consequences of the crisis in Greece are felt by large parts of society. It may also be understood considering initiatives like ‘We are the 99 Percent’, which by definition only excludes the 1% of the superrich. Movements like ‘Occupy’ or ‘Blockupy’ are more homogenous, but remain vague with respect to possible solutions or alternative scenarios. They offer a platform for a wide range of people in order to that they exchange ideas.<sup>60</sup> Neither totalizing experience nor a too close understanding of generational unit would help here.

While for Bauman and Beck, among others, the EU is considered a laboratory for new forms of sovereignty, citizenship and governance, questions of ‘less’ or ‘more Europe’ as discussed under the influence of the economic crisis most likely will lead to a reshuffling of competences between national state and European level, just as discussed by Habermas and Streeck.<sup>61</sup> Their debate, however, is fundamentally about which kind of society it is that we in envision for Europe. As mentioned above with

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>56</sup> U. Jureit, *Generationenforschung*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006, p. 48.

<sup>57</sup> K. Maase, ‘Farbige Bescheidenheit: Anmerkungen zum postheroischen Generationsverständnis’ in U. Jureit and M. Wildt (eds.), *Generationen: Zur Relevanz eines wissenschaftlichen Grundbegriffs*, Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2005, pp. 220–242, p. 242.

<sup>58</sup> Z. Bauman and C. Bordoni, *State of Crisis*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014, p. 22

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> See quotes by activists: Kaldor et al., op. cit., p. 15.

<sup>61</sup> W. Streeck, *Gekaufte Zeit: Die vertagte Krise des demokratischen Kapitalismus ; Frankfurter Adorno-Vorlesungen 2012*, 4th ed., Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2013; J. Habermas, ‘Demokratie oder Kapitalismus?: Vom Elend der nationalstaatlichen Fragmentierung in einer kapitalistisch integrierten Weltgesellschaft’, *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik*, Vol. 58, No. 5, 2013, pp. 59–70; W. Streeck, ‘Vom DM-Nationalismus zum Euro-Patriotismus?: Eine Replik auf Jürgen Habermas’, *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik*, Vol. 58, No. 9, 2013, pp. 75–92.

regard to the reception of “Generation X”, any ironic use of the term – and be it in a novel – might in fact be taken seriously and lead to an assumption of a ‘generation’ as a given rather than its questioning. Any so-called or alleged generation can be analysed, just not with any theory.<sup>62</sup> Existing theories and uses of ‘generation’ seem of very limited use though. Douglas Coupland described scenarios generations of Second Modernity that have found their resemblance in ‘real life’ and translated into a proper theory. This is no small task, since it means to find a way to describe new forms of politics with their new forms of agency.

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<sup>62</sup> See L. Klein, “Words That Can Only Be Used 100 % Ironically’: Von Den Neuen Generationen Und Alten Theorien’ in C. Frey, T. Kubetzky, K. Latzel, H. Mehrkens and C. F. Weber (eds.), *Sinn geschichten: Kulturhistorische Beiträge für Ute Daniel*, Köln: Böhlau, 2013, pp. 169–177.