From political to social generations: A critical reappraisal of Mannheim's classical approach

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Abstract

This article addresses the heuristic utility of Karl Mannheim's concept of generation to grasp wider processes of social and generational change. By proposing that there is a theoretical need to move from a strictly political or intellectual to an enlarged social understanding of generations, we shall deal with four key issues in Mannheim's theory. Firstly, we address the understanding of time underpinning not only Mannheim's concept of generations, but also his whole conceptualization of the relationship between knowledge and history. Secondly, we discuss his view of agency as a volitional self-awareness that underlies his concept of generation-units, which is rather too narrow to account for wider and effective generational differences. Thirdly, we critically concentrate on the importance Mannheim gave to youth as the only type of agents that can produce a new worldview and organize it into ideological units that form an intelligentzia. Finally, the question of consciousness as it relates to Mannheim's vision of agency is also debated. With this reappraisal we propose an enlarged conception of generations that have different levels of structuration thereby countering Mannheim's emphasis on political and intellectual self-awareness as a pre-condition for generation formation and change in a particular field. We apply this idea to the whole of the social space, even though different institutional spheres may produce diverse generational differentiations. We do so on the basis that historical dynamics will always translate into

generational actualities, and that these are carried forward by active social agents within their respective structural constraints.

Introduction

The subject of our article is to address the heuristic utility of Karl Mannheim's classical concept of generation in order to grasp processes of social change, particularly the massive transformations that have occurred with regard to agency and identity under the structural conditions of modernity (e.g. Burkitt 1990, Giddens 1991, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). Hence, the much debated 'problem of generations', as formulated by Mannheim ([1927] 1952) in his landmark essay, is at the core of our critical reappraisal. But rather than just proposing a revision, we aim to clarify certain theoretical alternatives that may help to promote a constructive perspective of the generation problem.

As Alwin and McCammon (2003, p. 24) wrote: 'The idea of distinctive generations is (…) a complex one whose existence and effects are not easily documented'. In fact, as we will seek to ascertain, the issue of social change, at least over a significant stretch of time, necessarily implies an approach to the problem of generations. This is so whether we are speaking of historical and cultural generations (Mannheim [1927] 1952), which, as we will see, imply a degree of shared collective subjectivity often consciously perceived, or mere birth cohorts (Ryder 1965, Spitzer 1973, Kertzer 1983), which entail a common historical location and experience but not necessarily self-conscious agency, or, again, even genealogical generations in a line of family descent, which relate to the unavoidable constraints of biological succession, over time, within kinship systems.

In fact, the idea of generational difference has become widely used to document social change from different perspectives, though always involving a close connection between history and the ways in which people live their lives.[1] However, although Mannheim's

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generations have been indispensable tools for discussing social change, from political revolutions to overall life style transformations, his theoretical contribution was used in a number of cases in a more far-reaching sense than originally encompassed.[2] As we will see, it should not be forgotten that Mannheim's main concern was essentially with ideological and political change, rather than overall societal and cultural shifts (or the reduction of the latter to the former). For this reason, we consider that there is still a gap to be bridged in generational analysis.

By proposing that there is a theoretical need to move from a strictly political or intellectual (as favored in Mannheim's work) to an enlarged social understanding of generations, we aim to tie together two crucial elements in the comprehension of social change. On the one hand, it is of the utmost importance to continue to reflect upon the potential and the limits of the concept of 'generation' as a theoretical tool, which, in spite of its complexity and polymorphic and even confusing uses and meanings in the field, might account for social transformations, as it intrinsically refers to the succession of individuals over time. On the other hand, a conceptualization of social generations implies considering a plethora of practices and dispositions, far beyond the limited struggles for political and ideological power waged by engaged minorities. As a result, to grasp such a huge array of generational practices and dispositions, it is necessary to bring in the complex connections between structure and agency.

In our view, the approach to generations remains problematic for three main reasons. The first difficulty reflects a number of theoretical issues, particularly the confused meanings that are inherent to the concept itself, which often raise serious doubts about the heuristic potential of generational analysis to grasp social change. The immediate question that comes to mind is, 'What are we really talking about when speaking of generations?' From Mannheim's perspective, a generation only arises when new answers to massive disruptions

are put forward by an engaged group or several, even opposing, groups. When these new formative principles do not materialize, even in the presence of social change, a generation is not a real generation but rather a mere birth cohort obeying the principles of biological reproduction. As we shall discuss later, this leads not only to a narrow vision of generations and generational change in a society, but also to a theoretical dead-end.

The second concern is related to the ways in which the links between history and individuals may be reconstructed. On the one hand, Mannheim's approach fails to consider generational change as a globally constructed process unless people are sucked into massive, observable social disruption. However, this is hardly the case for most of the historical situations and events, even 'revolutions', that have occurred, and even less so if we speak of extended and hidden structural processes (e.g. Braudel 1958). Furthermore, even if people are united by the sense of a common destiny, this presupposes, in Mannheim's view, a higher level of consciousness by a small part of those people, particularly those engaged in political and ideological movements. As such, when they exist, Mannheim's generations are essentially small generational groups existing within the struggles of specific institutional settings such as politics or the arts. How can we go beyond these political generations and discover the real generational differences that cut across a whole population, that is to say, social generations, without making the latter mere passive recipients of historical determinations, or birth cohorts? On the other hand, more recently, a number of authors have written about other forms of generational unity (see note 2), such as those immanent in folk and pop culture. Problematically, they enlarge the scope of Mannheim's perspective well beyond his theoretical program.

Finally, a third problem challenges the concept's own capacity to give an account of increasingly complex forms of differentiation. Can we really speak of clear-cut generational differences in today's societies? Our emphasis on the need to enlarge the theoretical reach of

the concept precisely reflects our preoccupation with making use of such a perspective in increasingly individualized societies (e.g. Elias [1939–1987] 1991, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002), where the pluralization of individuals' lives and identities is more and more an issue to be addressed.[3] In fact, it is impossible to tackle these historical transformations without making use of the idea of generational change or, on the other hand, without exploring the connections between age identity (as a relative position regarding other age groups and, also, in recollection of one's 'formative years') and the development of a potential generational consciousness (Schuman and Scott 1989, Hepworth 2002). Indeed, the concept of the sharing of a common cultural subjectivity as a condition for generation formation and intergenerational change contains much of the appeal of Mannheim's proposal, as generations become more than descriptive elements of history, mere passive categories, and, instead, are built upon and become the protagonists of historical change itself. Nevertheless, Mannheim's understanding of a cultural consciousness has also provoked a number of well-formulated criticisms that counter this vision of human agency as the basis for the emergence of generational change. In a way, it has been almost impossible to speak of Mannheim's generations without also putting forward a particular conceptualization that reproduces the endless structure/agency dichotomy, with an emphasis on one or the other.

In sum, the concept of generation is – with a certain revision of Mannheim – central both to our thinking of historical time and change and the placing of individuals and their agency in those times and processes of social change. And if generations of individuals are not to be understood as mere passive agents of social transformations, we must consider that their actions and symbolic perceptions do matter, and not just the illuminated consciousness of some (un)happy few. As a result, we need a concept of generations that allows us to think of processes of social change that are not restricted to these small and politically motivated groups (or units, to use Mannheim's somewhat militaristic and militant terminology) but are

more representative of the whole of a society – a concept that can explain how a group of cohorts, as defined by Ryder (1965) or Kertzer (1982, 1983), even if with fuzzy borders, is in fact a social generation with a cultural content.

Though important, the simple sharing of the same historical experiences by a birth cohort may not be enough to explain, or even describe, complex processes of generational differentiation. Moreover, we do not follow Mannheim's reasoning on the constitution of self-conscious generations, even if we do agree that shared collective subjectivities (Domingues 1995) must be incorporated into the analysis if we wish to further our understanding of change. But it would be a misnomer to call them either cohorts or self-conscious generations, as Mannheim proposed, inspired by Marx's view of a 'class for itself'. In either case, the risk of falling into simplistic dichotomies that tend to reify the concept of generation is of paramount importance. Even if we avoid a definition of generation as a necessarily self-conscious project, we still focus on generational differences as culturally based differences that involve agency and embodiment (e.g. Eyerman and Turner 1998) as well as memory and discourse (e.g. Corsten 1999), rather than on simple cohort differences, thus hoping to avoid a common problem in a number of analyses (e.g. Alwin and McCammon 2003, p. 28).

1. The challenge of generational analysis

'Generation' is a notion often used in the social sciences and everyday language alike to locate an individual or group of individuals at a point both in historical time and genealogical succession. However, the concept of 'generation', particularly in its historical assertion as conceptualized by the social sciences, only began to be developed in the first half of the twentieth century (Howe and Strauss 2000). So it is impossible to speak of generations and intergenerational differences without referencing them primarily to time (e.g. Eyerman and Turner 1998, Edmunds and Turner 2002a and 2002b). However, the conceptualization of

time has been a complex endeavor due to its complexity and multidimensional character, which has often set naturalistic and historicist conceptions in opposition (e.g. Pomian 1984, Adam 1990).[4] In the first view, generations just succeed each other in a genealogy, primarily as the result of biological constraints. Conversely, in the second view, as developed by Mannheim, a generation is essentially a historical construct that transcends the biological chronology of life from birth to death.

Indeed, the concern with time and, inherently, with the succession of generations over time has left its mark on sociological thinking, and has done so since the very beginning. It has reflected the main preoccupation with social change under the conditions of modernity, a preoccupation that was indelibly present in the approaches of classical authors such as (among many others)[5] Comte and Durkheim, on the one hand, and Dilthey and Weber, on the other. Countering the positivist view of time as an external and natural force, the vision of generations as social constructs can, in effect, be found in a number of theoretical approaches [6] besides that of Mannheim, even if its use is sometimes unclear and polemic and has given way to the more operative concept of birth cohort (Ryder 1965, Kertzer 1983). From a different theoretical perspective, Eisenstadt's functionalist approach to generations in his classic From Generation to Generation (Eisenstadt 1956) is still today a preeminent analysis of how generations are built differently in traditional and modern societies and how youth cultures, as symbols of intergenerational change and even rebellion, have emerged in the latter.[7] In fact, as Eyerman and Turner (1998) point out, the concept of generation has been routinely and profusely used in the study of youth cultures.

Nonetheless, the analytical ground for studying generations and intergenerational change in contemporary sociological theorization remains a poorly developed domain (Pilcher 1994, Eyerman and Turner 1998, Edmunds and Turner 2005), in spite of the groundbreaking advances made in the last few decades. These have sought to articulate

historical time and individual life in more complex manners, in an attempt to overcome the reductionism of the cohort concept and thus bring culture back into the analysis (e.g. Edmunds and Turner 2005). Another important development can be found, for instance, in life course theories (Elder, Johnson and Crosnoe 2003). They have sought, on the one hand, to overturn the old conceptions of an organized and linear life cycle, which allegedly imposed prefabricated and rather immobile roles upon individuals, and, on the other, have attempted to assess the impact of historical change on the majority of individuals in a given society. Furthermore, as Edmunds and Turner (2003) claim, given the relative erosion of a strong class theory, there has been a recent increase in sociologists' interest in generations as a key aspect in the examination of social stratification processes other than social class. The truth is that the concept of generation, whether it refers to a birth cohort, a genealogical position in a family lineage or a self-conscious cultural or political movement, is everything but simple or even consensual, perhaps because it embraces a wide range of meanings and angles of analysis (e.g. Corsten 1999). Undoubtedly, the conceptualization of age and time has been the object of a myriad of theoretical approaches, which have often highlighted the complex and hazy character of the so commonly used term 'generation' (e.g. Adam 1990, Pilcher 1994).

The difficulties surrounding the concept increase even further when the analysis is not centered on birth cohorts and their succession over time but rather historical generations in the sense Mannheim gave the term (Alwin and McCammon 2003 and 2007). As Pilcher (1994) also notes, Mannheim's contribution represents an undervalued and often disregarded legacy, though his approach, unlike the highly operative cohort approach (see below), poses the problem of not having an empirical model or guidelines that could help us deal with generations in real settings (Pilcher 1994, p. 492). That is, at least, with regard to generational change outside the particular fields of political and ideological struggle, to which Mannheim gave primacy when dealing with the problem of generations (e.g. Kettler, Loader and Meja

2008). To a great extent, the limitations of Mannheim's conceptualization of time, built upon Dilthey's ([1910] 2010) notion of an internal time which ought to supersede the notion of time as an external force to human agency, derive, as we will argue, from his own conceptualization of generations in the context of his sociological edifice, in which the exercise of tying together locations and structures of knowledge was center-stage (Kettler et al. 2008). The concept of a worldview (Weltanschauung), which Mannheim also borrowed from Dilthey, is a cornerstone insofar as it identifies a 'sense of life', which, though common to a given epoch, may be distinct in different cultural fields such as the arts or politics.[8] The latter was Mannheim's own object of research as shown by his empirical study on generations and conservatism (Mannheim [1925] 1986). Influenced by Max Weber's ([1924] 1946) analysis of social stratification in terms of class, status and party, Mannheim showed that conservatism was the characteristic of a social class in decline, in opposition to the rise of the modern industrial capitalist project. The same logic applies to generations and intergenerational change (Edmunds and Turner 2002a). Mainly interested in connecting worldviews with historical locations, of which a generation is a prime example other than class, Mannheim guided himself to what he calls the 'structural analyses' of cultural phenomena.

Mannheim's oeuvre reveals, in fact, an acute awareness of the progressive fragmentation of time. His recognition of pluralized time led him to conceptualize the existence of multiple time-space continuums, rather than cultural homogeneity. In specific historical contexts, time and space are inseparable, and only through such an insightful coupling could a true account be given of cultural differentiation (Kettler et al. 2008, p. 24). For him, a sociological approach to time should conceive it as dynamical and even hierarchical, as opposed to the positivist chronological view. Indeed, for Mannheim, intergenerational change, that is, the relations between past and present, can only be

understood if mediated by the structures of meaning through which the interpretation of historical conditions and events generates a differential in the amount and velocity of change. In other words, there are always plural sites of experience, which bring about different worldviews, even if these views are more related to space-time locations than to the embodied experience and agency of individuals. Individual experience was, for instance, more important in Georg Simmel's theorization of the conditions of modernity, as he so well argued in his theory of social circles (Simmel [1908] 1989). Nonetheless, Mannheim's theorization makes a few important advances in conceptualizing the relationship between location and culture. He seeks to avoid the trap of reification. In this line of reasoning, one very important aspect of his theory of generations is indebted to Pinder's ([1926] 1961) principle of the 'non-contemporaneity of the contemporaneous', as 'the epitome of objections to conceptions of history as a succession of self-contained and uniform "spirits of the age" (Zeitgeiste)' (Kettler et al. 2008, p. 24). Notwithstanding, Mannheim's attempt at not reifying generational worldviews is mitigated to a certain extent by his notion of 'entelechy' (Entelechie), or 'creatively willed generational worldviews' (Kettler et al., 2008, p. 24), which we shall discuss further in the coming sections.

In sum, if we really want to examine the heuristic capacity of generational analysis with regard to its potential to explain different patterns of attitudes and practices beyond the mere description of macro-social change or the organization of ideological and political struggles, we must overcome a volitional conceptualization of generational identity.

In the section that follows, we will briefly describe Mannheim's concept of 'generation'.

2. Mannheim's sociological problem of generations

As already hinted, the enormous complexity of generations was well recognized by Mannheim insofar as, from the outset in his approach to the problem, there was a clear-cut division of the concept into a number of different definitions that might be mobilized for generational analysis. In this way, Mannheim endowed us with a tripartite presentation of a generation.

First of all, a generation is a location (Generationslagerung) in the historical process. As he wrote (Mannheim [1927] 1952, p. 290), '... the unity of a generation is constituted essentially by a similarity of location of a number of individuals within a social whole.' Though the location is partially based on the biological factors of life, from birth to death, it is not, in any way, reducible to a linear biological succession but rather implies a positioning in history. The notion of location shares a degree of similarity with that of a birth cohort – though this is usually more of an objectivist notion where time is external – but, in itself, it is clearly insufficient to fully grasp the notion of a social generation. Consequently, as Mannheim ([1927] 1952, p. 291) clearly claimed: '... belonging to the same generation or age group (...) endow the individuals sharing in them with a common location in the social and historical process, and thereby limits them to a specific range of potential experience, predisposing them for a certain characteristic mode of thought and experience, and a characteristic type of historical relevant action.' However, a location is not merely defined by time, but by time and space, as mentioned above. In this sense, the Germans and Chinese born in the same year do not share the same location. Moreover, German peasants and German urban intellectuals do not share the same location, either. Time is therefore necessarily filtered by space.

But more than a location, a generation is also an actuality (Generationszusammenhang), which shares an integrated combination of historical responses to its location. So the location, and the historical conditions associated with it, in which

individuals are socialized, functions as a structure of opportunities which might be translated into a real generation, an actuality sharing a similar 'mental order', that is to say, a common culture. Without the formation of a generational awareness or consciousness, a generational location represents no more than a passive category, from which no break with the past or novel forms of knowledge and action can emerge. The mere exposure to the same historical context, in Mannheim's terms 'die Generationslagerung', is not enough to characterize a generation. Quoting Mannheim ([1927] 1952, p. 303) once more, it is clear that a generation as an actuality emerges 'only where a concrete bond is created between members of a generation by their being exposed to the social and intellectual symptoms of a process of dynamic de-stabilization'. Only then can people, particularly the emerging younger generation, share a common entelechy, a term borrowed from Pinder ([1926] 1961), which Mannheim now gives a particular ground of analysis. When Mannheim wrote about generations, emphasizing the role of youth, he was well aware of the angst faced by German youth in the wake of World War I, not only in response to trench warfare but also the poverty and shame associated with the German defeat.

Finally, within an actual generation there are generation units (Generationseinheiten), which express their particular location through articulated structures of knowledge and explicit consciousness. A generation unit self-consciously mobilizes that shared culture for social and political action. But, rather than being homogeneous, a particular generation contains a number of diverse units, notably those exemplified by political parties in conflict and articulated in competing ideologies. The ideological field, as Mannheim conceives it, is plural insofar as different worldviews can be developed as a response to the same historical settings. However, these different and even antagonistic units share the same time-space location, in that their different worldviews are oriented towards each other. They can only be

decoded to the extent that they belong to each other and are representative of the same generational Zeitgeist.

Mannheim's tripartite definition of generation – as location, actuality and unit(s) – still provides the elementary conceptual tools to approach the problem from a multidimensional perspective. Indeed, rather than reifying age-groups as concrete groups or automatically generated cultural units stemming from structural conditions, only because they are members of the same cohort (Corsten 1999), Mannheim calls our attention to the complex processes that transform a generation as a historical location into a real generation that shares a common destiny and structure of knowledge. Moreover, he enables us to dismember a specific generation into diverse and even antagonistic generation-units, which may represent different subjective and reflexively organized political reactions to the same historical conditions and events. As he states (Mannheim [1927] 1952, p. 306), 'Within this community of people with a common destiny there can then arise particular generation-units. These are characterized by the fact that they do not merely involve a loose participation by a number of individuals in a pattern of events shared by all alike though interpreted by the different individuals differently, but an identity of responses, a certain affinity in the way in which all move with and are formed by their common experiences.'

In sum, a generation that is able to fulfill its potential for social change must integrate at least one or, most often, several generation-units, each one representing a particular but somehow interconnected vision of the generational Zeitgeist. In this train of thought, generational units may become concrete groups, for instance, the 1968 student movement, to mention a brief but illustrative example (Kriegel 1978). In this case, individuals were united not only by structural historical commonalities (a location), but by a common culture and worldview (an actuality), which impelled them to engage collectively in transforming agency, as a unit opposed to others.

However, though representing a theoretical challenge by itself, the comprehension of Mannheim's approach to the 'problem of generations' remains limited if it is not linked to his wider sociological project, which he developed in a particular historical and intellectual environment in which he personally suffered the influence of world-shaking historical events (Wolff 1971). Mannheim's biography, one of intellectual and geographical migration, reflects the disruptions and crises of the first half of the twentieth century in Europe, falling into three main phases: the Hungarian (until 1919), the German (1919-1933), and the British (1933-1947). In a certain way, each period represents a complex weaving of historical events and innumerable intellectual influences.[9] From his entry to academia, under the influence of Georg Simmel and György Lukács, to his German period, when he worked with Alfred Weber (brother of Max Weber, who was also a major influence on him), and finally to the forced exile to Britain in 1933, to escape the rise of National Socialism, his writings reflect different sources of inspiration (in particular, German historicism, Marxism, phenomenology and Anglo-American pragmatism), though he maintained a degree of coherence and commitment to his intellectual project. Investigation into the roots of culture was, in short, the core of his own intellectual project, which was directed from an early stage towards a sociology of knowledge. In what is perhaps his most famous contribution, Ideology and Utopia, he contended that the term ideology ought to be reformulated and broadened in order to give account of the complexity of the structures of knowledge (Mannheim [1929] 1936). In fact, 'The problem of generations', which constitutes our main object of analysis, was written in 1927 in Weimar Germany, two years before the publication of Ideology and Utopia. As Mannheim had, at this time, already lived through numerous hiatus events – such as the Russian Revolution and WWI – that created their own generational conflicts, it is not strange that he took an interest in the problem of generations. In fact, from the beginning of his intellectual itinerary, he was particularly concerned with the social processes that underlie

knowledge production, one of which is related to generations. However, competition and economic ambition were not ignored by Mannheim, as became quite clear in <u>Ideology and Utopia</u> (Wolff 1971). Above all, he was concerned with the interpretation of intellectual phenomena (<u>Interpretation der geistigen Gebilde</u>), and along the road this marked all his writings as the main problem.

Mannheim's approach to generations, however, synthesizes key elements of his thought. In fact, his analysis of generations is central to the discussion of different conceptions of time, focusing directly on the split between objective and subjective as well as unitary and plural conceptualizations of the <u>Zeitgeist</u>. However, these opposing visions of historical time are also center-stage in his understanding of culture and ideology as linked to consciousness, which we will discuss further on. Nonetheless, describing his approach to the problem of generations without also considering his major intellectual battles, namely with Marx and Marxism, would be misleading. Particularly, as we will argue, because many of his theoretical shortcomings derive from his relative inability to effectively go beyond the terms of the debate imposed by Marx and his followers (such as Lukács [1920] 1968). Indeed, his view of generations can be interpreted as a criticism of Marxism, which he considered extremely deterministic, as Edmunds and Turner (2002b, p. 4) note. Mannheim was interested in the role of generations as agents of social change, who were not linearly determined by the economic structures of society. However, though granting an autonomous role to culture – a role that Gramsci ([1947] 1979), for instance, would develop later – Mannheim never fully escapes the Marxist worldview, even if he replaces economics with culture and social classes with generations.

Such a definition of generations poses several problems, which we will address in the next section. As we will claim, many of these problems are indissociable from Mannheim's conception of ideology (e.g. Freeden 2003).

3. The problems with Mannheim's problem of generations

Mannheim's theory of generations raises a number of critical issues that can best be dealt with in four parts. The first relates to the understanding of time underpinning not only his concept of generations, but also his whole conceptualization of the relationship between knowledge and history. Mannheim's understanding of time, while trying to resolve previous discussions that radically contrasted an externalist and objectivist view with an internalist and subjectivist one, produced a paradoxical duality in his causal explanation of the emergence of generations. Moreover, at the same time, it promoted volitional agency as the decisive and creative factor of true generations, and, in so doing, gave final preponderance to internal time. The second problem in Mannheim resides precisely in his view of agency. If agency is, in the final analysis, a volitional self-awareness, then all forms of agency other than conscious intellectuality are excluded, particularly since Mannheim considers ideological struggles as the main arena for generational differentiation. This is the rationale for his concept of generation-units (small, organized, ideological and engaged groups) as the only true generations – a concept that is rather too narrow and limited, we argue, to account for wider and effective generational differences. The third problem relates to his conception of the only type of agents that can, then, produce a new generational worldview – the youth, organized into ideological units. The fourth and final issue is the important question of consciousness. The centrality given to internal time, which provokes an intellectualist characterization of innovative agency, even if triggered by external factors that awake a free consciousness,

steers Mannheim into a self-aware view of generations (more precisely, generation-units), and the exaltation of the <u>intelligentzia</u>.

3.1. The problem of time

Various concepts have been developed to deal with the succession of individuals over time. In fact, one of the main sources of confusion in generational analysis is the interchangeability, even conflation, with which these different concepts are used in the analysis of social change.

At least four distinct meanings need to be advanced (e.g. Kertzer 1983, p. 126). In the first place, a generation denotes a position in a family lineage, thereby referring to the biological rhythm of generational succession in a line of kinship descent. A second way of viewing generations is through a life-stage perspective linked to age-groups, which differs from the word's usage as a concept related with historical change. As Kertzer (1983, p. 127) exemplifies, 'In its life-stage usage, we find such expressions as the "college generation"'. A third meaning is, of course, related to historical locations, or generations as birth cohorts. Finally, following Mannheim, a generation also involves a degree of historical participation guided by self-awareness, or at least some sort of collective cultural subjectivity (e.g. Domingues 1995). As Alwin and McCammon (2007) note, all these notions have been found useful. In fact, even though Kertzer (1983, p. 143) advises that these different meanings should be distinguished as they refer to specific processes, he recognizes that generational phenomena, taken as a whole, articulate these different levels. A number of authors have, indeed, realized that dealing with generations brings different layers of internal and external time into play. However, even if this is the case, the fact is that reconciliation is difficult and often leads to precedence being given to one term over another.

These difficulties are clearly evident in Ortega y Gasset's (1933) proposal. As the author says, 'If the essence of each generation is a particular type of sensibility, an organic capacity for certain deeply-rooted directions of thought, this means that each generation has its special vocation, its historical mission. It is under the strictest compulsion to develop those tiny seeds and to give the existence of its environment a form corresponding to the pattern of its own spontaneity' (Ortega y Gasset 1933, p. 19). Similarly to Mannheim, Ortega initially defines a real generation by its internal time, although, rather than narrowing this 'sensibility' to particular groups or units, generations are granted a more transversal social character. However, at another point, Ortega seeks to make this notion more operative and ultimately falls into a rather arbitrary definition of age-groups: it conveys a linear vision of the life cycle, where agency is particularly linked to political participation and intergenerational conflict, only occurring in certain periods of individuals' lives (namely from the age of 30 to 45). This arbitrariness was strongly criticized by Ortega's disciple, Julián Marías ([1949] 1970), who went back to his first insight of generations as a social construction, and, without completely abandoning Ortega's age-groups, stressed the central role of a kind of reflexive clairvoyance, played by a small group of individuals, or even just one individual, in grasping and living the Zeitgeist (Spitzer 1973, p. 1357). In a way, returning to Hegel and his conceptualization of the role of the hero, the one who seizes the convolutions of the spirit beforehand.

Notwithstanding the complex interactions between these levels of analysis, our discussion is focused on the concept of social generation, and not on genealogical succession or age-groups. In this line of reasoning, the main difference is, of course, between a cohort concept and a generation concept, each of which convokes a different perspective of time and, as such, of the criteria used to demarcate the boundaries of these human groups or categories. Mannheim's response, finally, was to somehow accentuate the importance of

internal time, which was in fact the main reason for his making units the real generation. In a way, we can consider this a subjectivist, though not individualistic, solution, even if structural locations cannot be dismissed as also being a key part of the equation. However, unlike Marx's structural definition of class, generational self-awareness is not a matter of de-alienation and the realization of a predetermined historical, objectivist and unitary destiny, but a creative response resulting in multiple meanings (or ideological positions) in the face of the same destabilized structural conditions. Given the problems arising from such a stance, in particular the leap into an almost clairvoyant self-awareness, which was a pre-condition for a generation to exist, others have tried to go back to a more objectivist notion, such as the concept of a cohort.

This concept was presented as a way out for the theoretical difficulties with Mannheim's notion of generation, especially considering the problem of establishing limits between different generations, which can be rather fuzzy. However, it does not help us understand more complex social processes. The main problem with the cohort approach is that the simple acknowledgment of cohort effects does not automatically imply the existence of social generations as a historical and cultural construct. As White (1992) stressed, cohorts should only be interpreted as generations when they subjectively show enough coherence and can therefore become actors in their own time. Likewise, as Cavalli (2004, p. 159) notes, 'It is impossible to establish a priori how long a generation is going to last or how many cohorts it includes.' This results from the fact that generations, in Mannheim's perspective, are always the consequence of major historical discontinuities whose rhythm and sequence can be quite variable. In short, as Alwin and McCammon (2003, p. 41) point out, 'Unlike cohorts, Generations do not enjoy a fixed metric that easily lends itself to statistical analysis', and, as a result, intergenerational differences are not only more qualitative (a specific historical subjectivity) than quantitative (being born on a given date), but also their frontiers are not

identifiable outside a specific context or a specific analytical perspective. Generations depend upon and vary according to the particular realm of social reality being examined, while 'cohorts' can easily be applied to almost any of the different social contexts, albeit at the risk of the de-contextualization of social phenomena.

Though critical of cohort approaches, we by no means claim that the cohort concept is useless. On the contrary, a cohort approach can be quite effective when the research problem involves, for example, comparing the same age-groups in different social locations or over a certain time span, though, from this perspective, the comparison is really between different contexts rather than different generations. The comparison between cohorts is also a more descriptive task, while the concept of generation can serve better to capture, and even explain, social change in a given social context since, contrary to cohorts, generations are built upon social change itself.

Another important critical point regarding cohorts relates to their apparently greater objectivity compared to the blurriness of generations – at least at the edges, even if the center may be clearer (Rosow 1978) – when it comes to distinguishing the marking events that are relevant from those that are not. However, a thorough examination of the conceptualization of a cohort may suggest a different interpretation. If, as Ryder (1965, p. 845) states, 'a cohort may be defined as the aggregate of individuals who experienced the same event within the same time interval', then any event may create a cohort. As a result, three main problems arise with this approach. On the one hand, we may question the accuracy of the criteria for taking, for example, birth years as the units for defining a given cohort. Why not use decades or even a specific month of a given year instead? On the other hand, cohorts can be devised on the basis of an enormous variety of events, which only with difficulty would be comparable (e.g. birth, marriage, migration, and so forth), and are not, in a number of cases, significantly linked to the flow of history. Finally, on yet another critical note, events other

than birth may not usually correspond to birth cohorts, but rather conflate different age-groups – in the sense of those born at the same time – with life course transitions: for instance, among those who marry in the same year some may be in their twenties while others are already in their seventies. Accordingly, we can argue that this comfortable statistical objectivity is not as accurate as it may seem at first glance. Some authors (e.g. Tindale and Marshall 1980, among others) have tried to resolve this conundrum by accentuating the historical basis of cohorts. Yet, when defined as historical, cohorts are as dependent on contextual references as social generations are. They thus raise the same comparative problems, in spite of their apparent objectivism, which tends to leave out the cultural dimension of generational commonalities. But these problems are also the underlying reason why other writers, such as Ryder (1965), advocate restricting the analysis to kinship and genealogical generations.

The potential fragmentation of generational analysis into a myriad of different age cohorts is undoubtedly one of the main reasons for not giving up the construction of a full generational perspective, even if there are major difficulties in working with the concept. Among these problems, we must emphasize that, in giving an ascendant role to historical discontinuities in socio-cultural change, we will then have moments where no generation rises from its historical location, that is, if we can accept that no crucial events occur during a certain time span and continuity prevails. We can, however, argue that continuity and reproduction are substantial social phenomena made up of a plethora of significant events that have a lasting impact on peoples' lives and worldviews. In this train of thought, we argue against the idea of an 'invisible' or 'silent' generation (Cavalli 2004, p. 159), if these concepts imply collective and individual subjects that are not agents of social relations, but rather passive objects of an unchanging history, deprived of reflexive subjectivity. In brief, countering Mannheim, there cannot be an absence of generational phenomena in an enlarged

sociological perspective, because there is never an absence of social agency or agents, even if they are objectified and constrained to acquiesce.

Whether or not the focus is on discontinuity, the question remains: what are the criteria used not only to aggregate cohorts into an effective generational collective, but also to point out that a group of cohorts is a real generation while others are not. Overall, Mannheim's response is one of duality, even if, as we stressed above, he tries to emphasize the importance of internal time.

According to Mannheim, generations can be almost sporadic episodes in history, because they are dependent on massive social change. When there is stability, we only have cohorts. Secondly, these generational locations only become generational actualities when social change is massive enough to create a dichotomy in terms of consciousness. In fact, though Mannheim attributes less relevance to external time than internal time, it is still external factors that trigger the actual possibility of participating in a common destiny. Through this, a sense of self-aware generational belonging emerges, which can then produce generation units. However, if we follow this rationale, we will be denying that consciousness is obviously possible in times of 'stagnation'. Awareness driven by ideological and political agency is a phenomenon of a different type, even if massive disruption can engender rejection of what was, in favor of what may be.

The problem of time in Mannheim, given this duality and the fact that he ascribes final causality to internal time – insofar as external events must be filtered and creatively interpreted through consciousness – is that it leads to the construction of meaning, ideological reflexivity, by the only ones able, in his view, to bring about new responses to the world: youth units. So these become the only real active agents of social change inasmuch as they are conceptualized as potential units with new clear-cut political programs.

3.2. The problem of agency

Mannheim's duality in relation to time is well reflected in the use of the concept of generational unit(s), a position that, in our view, constitutes another major problem with his approach. As we will argue, even if this dimension of the concept of generation is sometimes useful (particularly in an analysis of political and organizational fields), it leads to a rather empty vision of generations and intergenerational change, in the great majority of cases. For two main reasons: it excludes almost everyone from agency and implies a degree of self-awareness that surpasses the reflexivity and the structures of meaning of that majority. The inability, in Mannheim, to conceptualize agency in more complex ways is therefore closely connected with his vision of a real generation as generational units, always self-aware and ideologically engaged.

This leads to an important query: is the concept of units useful? In answering this question, we argue that we must consider two different aspects, insofar as generational analysis greatly depends on the object of inquiry. On the one hand, without doubt, generation units can be a very useful concept to account for intra-generational differences, particularly when the focus is on the political, ideological, and artistic, or on any tangible social groupings and movements. Adding to Mannheim's own research, a number of authors (e.g. Braungart 1976, Dunham 1998) have proved the relative utility of the concept for analyzing more or less organized groups and social movements, which nonetheless always represent, we reemphasize, a minority of the population. On the other hand, a number of difficulties arise with this concept. An important argument lies precisely in the fact that this notion is too narrow to account for wider generational phenomena. If, in the end, a generation is a unit or several units, then the rest represents rather an empty category. A good example of this problem can be found in the study carried out by Whalen and Flacks (1989). The authors used Mannheim's concept of generation to explore the extent to which members of the 'sixties

generation' identified with the era and concluded that the levels of identification varied according to a number of factors. The truth is that not all members of the 'sixties cohort' (we use the term cohort deliberately) identified with the 'revolutionary' political and cultural icons of the decade. Quite the opposite, most people just carried on living their lives, even if these references were, to a greater or lesser extent, embodied as markers of the time. That is to say, if those who lived through the sixties form a certain actuality – in the sense that, in most cases, people are not unfamiliar with these markers, constructed a posteriori as icons of the era – only a small proportion of them had committed itself, was proactive or even explicitly defended the ideals of political, sexual and artistic liberation of the decade. An additional issue thus relates to the fact that, in most cases, the portrait of a generation is built, only a posteriori, upon the memories of the few, and selectively projects certain markers to the detriment of others. For example, the importance given to the 1968 student liberation movement (labeled by Kriegel [1978] as the generation of 1968) tends to overlook the conservatism of the majority, even among the students. We can agree that these events play a role beyond the mere labeling of a given epoch and help to construct a shared subjectivity (e.g. Domingues 1995), which may be interpreted as an actuality in Mannheim's definition, even though it takes much more than just a few engaged units to make a generation.

Secondly, it should be acknowledged that units, as opposing terms within the same Zeitgeist, are too restricted to narrow ideological and political fields of battle, where small, almost formal, organized groups attempt to promote explicit political programs. The narrowness of the concept and the thin parcel of reality covered are important problems when we operate with generations. We may recall that the most common labels used to identify generations – the post-war generation, the baby-boom generation, the sixties generation, the 9/11 generation – go far beyond Mannheim's perspective and are often too broad to take account of either the conflicting worldviews of different units or the whole generational

reality of a larger population. Going back to our critical discussion of generational units, we should stress that, if ideological struggles alone are taken as defining events, actualities can easily be forgotten or even reduced to their hypothetical or potential generational units, to use Mannheim's terms. In many cases, it is necessary to see how certain groundbreaking events – or political movements catalyzed by these events – provoke the crystallization of already existing attitudinal dispositions which tend to last beyond that specific moment in history. Let us focus, for instance, on the 1969 Stonewall riots, which many consider the moment that the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual/transgender) movement was born (Carter 2004). Though an event such as this may be transformed into a generational marker in identity construction, it not only represents a historical moment of disruption, but also a whole dynamic process based on what Braudel (1958) calls the '<u>longue durée</u>'. Like many other events, the Stonewall riots triggered a new societal and cultural dynamic, though it was only afterwards that this initial break was reflected in various opposing ideological units and was therefore imprinted on the collective memory (Alexander 2004).

The LGBT movement can serve as an example of yet another analytical difficulty. Even in strictly political terms, the idea of a unit can be problematic on the level of splitting up a social generation, insofar as many of the groups involved are inter-generational. This is the case of the LGBT movement, to mention only this example. In a way, today's social reality may suggest a kind of inversion of Pinder's principle, on which Mannheim built his theory of the stratification of experience, pointing out the importance of the agency of youth. We can accept that units are dependent on generational conflict, but this conflict is evident in certain organizational and institutional settings, rather than across the board, in a given society. In this line of reasoning, there can also be a 'contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous', insofar as individuals of very different ages can be engaged in the same political and ideological struggle and thereby share a fairly similar worldview. As many have

argued, in today's world the openness of modernity to the struggles for recognition and redistribution (e.g. Honneth and Fraser 2003) is a dynamic process stemming from long-lasting battles and sequences of events, yet it involves people from different age-groups and is hardly reducible to the generational opposition between the old and the young. This is so even if we can agree that the experience of political and ideological engagement may be marked by the principle of the stratification of experience. The problem is that this stratification of experience underlies the key principle by which a generation is held together. For Mannheim, the stratification of the experience of older generations cannot be the same as that of younger generations, though they share the same historical environment. It is therefore the sharing of the same formative years in a given historical environment that forms a generational consciousness. The transmission of a cultural heritage is always a reflexive and interactive process, but, even so, a sense of a common destiny, or a common cause, can only arise among those who have lived through the same formative experiences.

In a re-evaluation of Mannheim's problem of generations, Demartini (1985) presented solid arguments on this topic. Countering Mannheim's view of youth as the leading agent of political innovation, the author concluded that political socialization can, in effect, serve as a catalyst in tying together different generations. This insightful conclusion led Demartini to advocate a revision of the concept of unit insofar as it is unhelpful and misleading in the case of any analysis of intergenerational relationships among participants in social and political movements.

We may, therefore, argue that the key problem with Mannheim's view of units as the real generation stems from a poor conceptualization of agency, where only intellectual knowledge allows for individuality: that is, agency. It is necessary, then, to build the analysis upon a more complex version of agency, one that neither falls into agencialism nor structuralism; nor, again, into an intellectual-centric fallacy whereby only intellectuals are

capable of liberating thinking (e.g. Bourdieu 1997). The concept of actuality is, in this line of reasoning, much more operative and should not be discarded, all the more so because there can be no locations without actualities, according to our argument. At least, that is, when mobilizing a perspective on structure and agency that attempts to avoid the classical dichotomy still pervading generational analysis.

Of course, this is not a new issue. A number of authors and sociological theorizations have tackled the problem, though from different perspectives. But all of them – among which we will concentrate on three of the most important – have intended to bring wider forms of agency back into the approach to generations.

A very significant contribution is, of course, life course theory. From this perspective, historical changes can also be displayed from a biographical standpoint, which allows us to recognize the generational location as a regularity, in addition to the singularities that, alongside class or gender, produce intra-generational differences. In a way, one of the weak points in Mannheim's theorization lies in the lack of a conceptualization of biographical events as other major motors of change, as the vast bibliography on the issue of biographical analysis has demonstrated. In the life course perspective, time is considered from three analytical angles: first, the historical time of generations as a structural location; second, the biographical singularity of every individual's trajectory; third, the links between lives, with an examination of the ways in which different individual biographies are interconnected and influence each other (Heinz and Kruger 2001, Elder, Johnson and Crosnoe 2003). This approach allows us to draw on the real lives of individuals and, in this way, grasp how different patterns of agency and meaning may emerge in a specific generation without necessarily corresponding to or being led by diverse generation units operating in a number of institutional fields.

A second approach to the problem of agency can be found in Corsten's (1999) proposal, which emphasizes the importance of discourses for generation formation. From his perspective, firmly based on the cultural and discursive turn in the social sciences, direct interaction is not the most relevant element in the dynamics of generations. The main question is rather one of accessing a generation's socio-cognitive background as a result of the complex intermingling of times (biographical, historical, and generational), which produces specific generational semantics in certain social circles and networks.

Yet another central contribution to this debate can be found in Eyerman and Turner's (1998) proposal. The authors redefine Mannheim's original definition by means of Bourdieu's notion of habitus (Bourdieu 1980), in order to facilitate the comparative study of generations. In this sense, a generation is a cohort of persons who share a common habitus, hexis and culture. This is particularly activated in specific and competitive social fields, where younger generations must compete with older ones for scarce resources (ranging from the material to the symbolic), which are generally in the hands of the latter group. But even in the wider social space, alongside other structural differentiation processes such as class and gender, these phenomena occur, and tend to provide generations – Eyerman and Turner rightly contend – with a collective memory that not only gives them identity, but also serves as an integrating factor that reinforces that identity over time.

3.3. The problem of agents

The more complex visions of agency briefly described above allow us to rethink generations and generational agents far beyond the category of youth. For Mannheim, this category was almost the sole bearer of change on account of the importance granted to the stratification of experience, in which the formative years represented the acme of

socialization. As a result, only youth could really embody the essence of a potentially new Zeitgeist.

We do not deny that youth and the entry into adulthood are key stages in life and key moments of transition in which central models of agency are formed, thereby representing a privileged set for observing the interplay of different analytical times (historical, relational, individual). As many have argued since Mannheim (1943) and Parsons (1942 and [1963] 1999), the move from adolescence to adulthood, even if increasingly mediated by the prolonged life stage of youth, is a compelling factor in defining more stable behavioral and identity schemes. Class position and gender identity, to mention two of the main structural coordinates, also tend to acquire more stable features in accordance with a process of crystallization that is also performatively and normatively inscribed in the self. Most importantly, following Eyerman and Turner's (1998) redefinition of Mannheim's concept of generations on the basis of Bourdieu's habitus, the transition to adulthood tends to function as a dispositional stabilizer in the course of the individual life span. This clearly does not mean that the transition to adulthood exhausts the potential for change in the structural locations of individuals, or in their subjectivities, whether we speak of a generation as an actuality (Mannheim [1927] 1952), of gender dispositions (West and Zimmerman 1987) or of adulthood models (Pilcher 1994).

However, in accentuating the role of historical disruption in the formation of generations, Mannheim ultimately gives excessive importance to youth responses, as if the youth, or even a small part of it, were the only actor exercising agency.

The emphasis on youth is still well reflected in contemporary debates but the problem of youth is certainly not new. In 1943, Mannheim wrote about the problem of youth in modern societies, expressing his concern with the role of young people as a motor for social change. As he noted (Mannheim 1943, p. 33), 'in contrast to these static or slowly changing

societies, the dynamic societies which want to make a new start, whatever their social or political philosophy may be, will rely mainly upon the cooperation of youth'. On the other hand, from a functionalist standpoint, youth was also a concern of Parsons ([1963] 1999), who reasoned about youth cultures and the integration of the youth in post-war American society. Similarly, Eisenstadt (1956) described the very process through which youth emerged as a life-stage and a culture, alongside the decline of traditional kinship systems. Whether the focus is on change or integration, youth has progressively become, to the present day, flourishing subject matter for analysis.

Mannheim's pioneering emphasis raises a few critical problems, though he was well aware of the growing complexification of social processes and forms of self-reflexivity, resulting, in modernity, from the differentiation of social communities. As he notes (Mannheim [1930] 2001, p. 4), it was important to capture the differences between traditional, primitive societies, where meanings were less ambiguous, and modern societies, where ambiguity evolves and allows an opening-up to the ideal of self-transformation.

We can start by arguing that Mannheim's vision of socialization was far too simplistic (as demonstrated by life course theory, for instance), as if there were a thick barrier between primary and secondary socialization (e.g. Berger and Luckmann 1966). In contrast, recent contributions, such as that of Lahire (2010) in discussing Bourdieu, have quite rightly argued in favor of plurality and the continuous impact of life experiences on the re-forming of an individual's habitus. At any moment, new dispositions may arise from the continuous embodiment of new formative experiences, which can indeed lead individuals to make changes in their lives, selves and identities. From yet another viewpoint, the emphasis on the importance of events and sequences of events over time has stressed the vital role of biographical analysis (Abbott 2001) if we really want to achieve a thorough examination of

the time dimension inherent to societal processes. Restricting the analytical focus to early life socialization, though relatively important, might also obfuscate the weight of later experiences in the formation of both worldviews and the potential agency that they can trigger.

Secondly, we must also say that Mannheim's approach still contains a fairly linear view of the life cycle, which we can also find in a few of his contemporary analysts. In spite of the fact that a growing role is granted to the idea of age-related flexibilization and pluralization, the seeds of reification remain a serious problem, which led Bourdieu (1990) to state that 'youth is just a word', that is to say, a constructed and institutionalized category that often conceals the diversity existing within it. If the notion of youth, along with all age-categories, has changed over time (a person of 30 was almost on the threshold of middle age in 1900), in today's western societies this is an even more challenging issue, as there is visible erosion of the previously more linear frontiers between the different stages of the life cycle, as has been pointed out so well by life course theorists.

In fact, one of the central processes of contemporary societies has been the growing flexibilization of individual biographies and identities, a topic that has pushed the discussion on time, generations and social change to the front line of theoretical developments. The transition from a phase of 'organized modernity', as Peter Wagner (1994) calls it, to a new period marked by the detraditionalization (Heelas 1996) of the old linear life cycles has undoubtedly nourished the debate around the pluralization of present-day life courses (Giddens 1991, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002, Bauman 2001). The strongly institutionalized life-course regimes prevailing under industrialized modernity (Hareven 1982), which were closely linked with almost predetermined identities, have given way to the growing individualization of life paths.[10] This forces individuals, to an ever greater extent, to

face challenges related to the construction of malleable and plural life courses, often organized in the form of 'patchwork biographies' (Beck 2000, p. 170) and plural selves.

In this line of reasoning, although youth has not surrendered any of its center-stage role as a specific age-group, which, for many reasons, remains of major importance in defining new forms of agency, a growing number of authors have called our attention to the fluidization of generational identities as a result of the 'postmodernization of culture' (e.g. Eyerman and Turner 1998). In spite of the institutional codification of age in present-day societies (Kohli 2007), being young and being old have also become more individualized categories of belonging, often performed through a self-presentation that masks biological age through fashion and beauty treatments, a certain body hexis, and consumer habits and life styles (Featherstone 1991). As plurality itself has developed into a dominant norm (see note 3), almost hegemonic in the Durkheimian sense, the construction of the self and the acceptance of the other as different cannot be linear endeavors, but must rather be the subject of a certain plasticity and even normative confusion. The rising number of terms to handle the plurality of the self makes our point quite evident, as initially stated. Even within a structural system, as Lévi-Strauss (1966) noted, individuals are 'bricoleurs'. They mix references with a certain freedom, thus creating a correlated degree of fuzziness. Even more so, we add, because the fluidization of generational identities implies not only the blurring of age differences, but also the fact that these differences are often attributed the same cultural and normative value. If, for the past, generational identities – at least to a certain extent – could more easily be portrayed as virtually monolithic or simply fragmented along clear-cut lines of differentiation (class, gender, ethnicity), the younger generation tends to be presented these days as the bearer of an explosion of references that cannot be compared to the simple dividing lines of earlier historical periods, complex though they may have been (as Eisenstadt [1956] had already pointed out).

Therefore, in accordance with the idea that in modernity an ongoing transition from more simple to more complex identities is taking place (as a result of social differentiation and individualization processes), how can we explain the expanding diversity of models, norms and life courses not only among younger people but also within other age groups that should not be neglected, and at the same time prove the importance of studying the young as the carriers of specific youth cultures in contrast to former generations? The task that this apparently simple question involves is by no means easy. It demands a subsequent but central question: can we speak of young people as a generation marked by a number of historical and cultural commonalities? Mannheim's answer presupposes, quite obviously, the emergence of a common consciousness. Our own must necessarily bring a broader perspective of worldviews and agency into play, but let us, for now, address the last major critical issue in Mannheim's approach: the problem of consciousness. As we will argue, even though Mannheim rejected Marxist views, the problem of how a generation – or younger generation units, to be more precise – can form a consciousness poses similar difficulties to those inherent to the process of the transformation of a <u>class in itself</u> to a <u>class for itself</u>.

3.4. The problem of consciousness

As we know, Mannheim conceptualized generations as communities linked to history. In this sense, generations – as locations – presented an alternative to Marx's historical materialism, even if Mannheim's approach can be considered as profoundly indebted to Marx. In effect, a generation as a historical location is quite analogical to a class location and, as in Marx, it presupposes, as a pre-condition for social change to take place, the same passage from a class (a generation) in itself to a class (a generation) for itself (Domingues 1995). Although the author was rather critical of the Marxist legacy and attached greater value to culture and its plurality of ideologies (Kettler et al. 2008), generations, like social

classes, may form units organized through the sharing not only of common experiences, but also, most importantly, a common reflexivity. In fact, in Mannheim's theorization, collective or generational unity was the last phase in a process in which individual and collective biographies interacted within a common historical context (Mannheim [1927] 1952, p. 291) However, differently from Marx, for Mannheim, a generation can then be constituted by very different 'generation units', in accordance with their particular experience of historical time and, most of all, due to the diverse forms of generational awareness (Mannheim [1927] 1952, p. 304). The realization of a generation through a number of units is produced above all by the consciousness of its members. However, in most cases, individuals are not completely aware of their generational inclusion: they are simply a generation in itself that fails to fulfill its potential for historical agency. For Mannheim, in this matter, generation is quite similar to social class. Individuals share similar life conditions, from a structural standpoint, though a generation and Marx's class point to different kinds of social locations and different forms of envisaging both the formation of consciousness and the ways in which a person moves from awareness to action and a political and ideological struggle.

Although deeply concerned with ideology, a concept that he borrows from Marx and attempts to revise, and the affinities between this and social group locations – in this case, generations – Mannheim diverges from Marx in two important aspects, which it is important to highlight (Kettler et al. 2008, p. 5). The first (and almost obvious) difference is that, under the influence of Max Weber's ([1924] 1946) work, Mannheim foresees locations other than class as fertile ground for ideologies to flourish. Furthermore, ideologies do not cover economic interests alone, as Marx claimed, but are rather the expression of multiple opposing standpoints in relation to the world, originating from different, though more complex, social locations. Alongside class, generation and even gender are a key element in the processes through which struggles for power may be understood. Secondly, and perhaps more

importantly, Mannheim rejects the historical determinism proposed by Marx and Lukács, where class consciousness is linked to its teleological destiny in shaping history itself. In fact, Mannheim clearly rejects the idea of a strict causal link between a certain location and a certain worldview. On the contrary, he argues in favor of a wider range of possibilities for meaning to emerge, considering that individuals with a similar location may in fact have quite different visions of their own time and space, even if there is a demonstrable connection between material locations and cultural views (Mannheim ([1929] 1936). All in all, for Mannheim, social change still depends on conflict, but conflict is, rather, a cultural phenomenon. This claim is closely related to his insistence on rejecting the Enlightenment idea of a foundational truth in favor of a linguistically structured life-world, which can contain and promote different worldviews, that is, different 'truths'. This premise led many to accuse Mannheim of relativism and misguided utopianism in his conceptualization of ideology and political practice (e.g. Horkheimer [1930] 1995, Lukács [1954] 1981, Adorno [1955] 1983).

However, returning to our main contention in this section, we must say that the solid argument in favor of consciousness and the role of intellectuals in social processes as the main holders of knowledge betrays Mannheim's inability to overcome some of Marxism's central tenets, particularly the duality attributed to consciousness. Furthermore, the emphasis on young intellectuals clearly points to the prevalence of the notion of the intelligentzia in Mannheim: to a great extent, only engaged intellectual social groups fulfill the potential for social transformation inherent to a specific generation location. In a way, this notion brings Mannheim close to Gramsci in the latter's project to award culture and ideology a key role,[11] even if Mannheim's intellectuals are of a different nature from those envisaged by Gramsci ([1947] 1979) as 'organic intellectuals', as Norberto Bobbio (2001) notably recognizes. For Gramsci, these collective intellectuals are directly linked to the party, while, in Mannheim's

view, intellectuals are detached from direct political struggle. Instead, their main role is to interpret contradictory positions and supply a modern scheme for decoding the ideologies resulting from particular locations in the time-space continuum. Nonetheless, the key function of ideology and intellectuals in Mannheim's theoretical edifice deserves attention, if we really want to revise the concept of a social generation. For the role of intellectuals is absolutely central to Mannheim's reasoning, even if, as Kettler et al. (2008, p. 2) state, 'A central feature of Karl Mannheim's analysis of modern intellectuals is the recognition of their versatility'. In books such as Ideology and Utopia and Essays on the Sociology of Culture this aspect was quite clear, though it still raises a few important problems.

Indeed, the figure of the intellectual symbolized Mannheim's effort to achieve a synthesis between different forms of thought (from Marx and Weber to American Pragmatism), as he moved away from materialistic determinism. The independence of intellectuals from class interests, or other constraints to free thinking, was thus central to the author's analysis, though a certain importance was granted to historical locations. Refusing the Hegelian idealist tradition, Mannheim considered that an analysis of the history of ideas should be tied together with history itself. As a consequence, the production of knowledge is not an independent enterprise. However, under the conditions of modernity, as Mannheim (1956) also noted, the production of knowledge is an increasingly conscious process. As he claims, the times were of conscious self-existence. In his own words (Mannheim 1956, p. 96): 'Our age is characterized not only by a growing self-awareness but also by our capacity to determine the concrete nature of this consciousness: we live in a time of conscious social existence.' In this line of reasoning, intellectuals were the main source of a new possibility for independent and critical knowledge to emerge in a world facing an ideological crisis.

However, for Mannheim, it was precisely that time of crisis that promoted the proliferation of ideologies and made it impossible to connect them to a single source, location

or theoretical tradition, as in Marx's theory of historical materialism. He wanted to recognize the relativistic character of all worldviews in order to transcend them. As he says (Mannheim 1956, p. 20): 'Inasmuch as society is the common frame of interaction, ideation, and communication, the sociology of the mind is the study of mental functions in the context of action. It is from this approach that we must expect one of the possible answers to the needed synthesis.'

This synthesis was the task of intellectuals. In his Essays on the Sociology of Culture, Mannheim seeks to provide a typology of the intelligentzia within the dynamics of history. In those modern times there was a new role and a new meaning for the intelligentzia as the result of a qualitative leap in the form itself of the intelligentzia. The combination of the free market and a new system of education would allow new intellectuals to emerge. The Mannheimian notion of intelligentzia is indebted to Alfred Weber's concept of 'relatively uncommitted intelligentzia' *(relativ freischwebende Intelligenz)* (Mannheim 1956, p. 106). As Mannheim (1956, p. 106) wrote, 'The epithet "relative" was no empty word. The expression simply alluded to the well-established fact that intellectuals do not react to given issues as cohesively as for example employees and workers do. Even these show, from case to case, variations in their responses to given issues; still more do the so-called middle classes, and least uniform is the political behaviour of the intelligentsia.'

However, the idea of the uncommitted intellectual does not completely exclude interests, such as those of a class. In modern societies the fact that intellectuals are recruited from different social classes puts them in a particular (and privileged) position. So a new class or group emerges, detached from economic processes. For this reason, modern intellectuals, as the repositories of knowledge, are quite a heterogeneous group, guided by a sense of modern individualism and autonomous judgment. The configuration of the modern intelligentzia reflects political direction and action, where values still play a key role.

Nevertheless, even if intellectuals advance and debate their particular views of the world, thus revealing their class engagement, they do it from another platform, where the individual will is more important. The task placed upon their shoulders is by no means easy, as Mannheim himself recognizes. As he wrote (Mannheim 1956, p. 92), 'But as he ventures beyond the area of an established world-view he faces at each turn the perennial problem: how can he who knows about his own conditional existence reach and carry out unconditional decisions?' It was precisely this extreme and necessarily clairvoyant detachment of the intellectual that led Horkheimer ([1930] 1995, p. 141) to accuse Mannheim of interpreting all intellectual standpoints 'sub specie aeternitatis' (made from the perspective of the eternal), on the way to the attainment of eternal truth. Horkheimer claims, then, that, by succumbing to a metaphysical view of the intelligentzia, Mannheim ends up by reproducing a great deal of the Enlightenment's conception of a universal truth, which he fought to leave behind. Free-floating intellectuals are in a way quite a Utopian idea, which hardly fits social reality (Woldring 1986). It was, however, these intellectuals who best represented what Mannheim considered a real generation.

For a number of reasons, among which the one mentioned above is of the utmost importance, Mannheim's approach to generations is not enough to disentangle contemporary processes related to age and social change. On the one hand, he is too strongly attached to a number of key tenets in Marx's analysis of social classes, which cannot be transposed into generational analysis. A generation cannot be reduced to units commanded by free intellectuals, plural though they may be. Even on the basis of such a perspective the connections between intellectuals and their worldviews should be complexified, namely through an analysis that includes power and ideological domination, and therefore the production of non-coercive hegemony, now in the Gramscian sense, as the main dimensions of the cultural production of generational identities.

However, that is not the object of this text. Much more important, in our view, is to argue for an enlarged notion of generation, and thus seek to overcome one of the main operative problems in the field. If, as we consider, it is important to start with Mannheim, it must be acknowledged that, though a culturalist, he does not go beyond either a strict structural level of the analysis or voluntaristic forms of conscious agency, particularly that of politically engaged youth groups. Having said that, we should add that this ideal hardly fits the role of youth groups in present-day societies. This role has not only become wider in its reach – a good example is the use of Mannheim's approach in order to disentangle the role played, for instance, by artistic groups, namely those aiming at political criticism and intervention[12] – but also fuzzier in its frontiers both in time and space, as the processes of globalization (and its technological devices, such as the internet or mass-media) lead researchers to think of global generations (e.g. Edmunds and Turner 2005).

Discussion and conclusion

Our main aim in this article was to critically reassess Mannheim's theory of generations, in order to develop some of the potentially productive analytical paths that might help us to further the construction of a generational perspective that could operate with larger parcels of the population and in other fields than the political and the intellectual. We recognize Mannheim's inescapable and foundational contribution, as well as the centrality of a wider generational analysis. As we have argued, despite the many difficulties inherent to the concept, generation cannot be reduced to other conceptual substitutes, such as cohort, age-group or genealogical generation. As a result, there is an increasing need to overcome the limitations and theoretical 'dead-ends' in Mannheim's work. Even more so because a great part of the research done using his conceptual framework does in fact aim at and generate types of generational phenomena well beyond the scope of his reasoning. The proliferation of

generational labels such as the 'baby boom generation', 'sixties generation', 'Woodstock generation' or 'millennium generation' are just a few examples of this trend.

We have discussed four of the main points of criticism regarding Mannheim's theory: time, agency, agents and consciousness. In this final section, we would like to go back to the problem of time, which, in our view, is perhaps the most fundamental problem to be addressed. In reviewing his conceptualization of time, which results in a complex and ambiguous duality between external and internal time, as well as his subsequent emphasis on internal time (from which the free-floating intellectual emerges, with all the consequences discussed above), we believe that, to a great extent, all the other issues are brought into play. Our claim is based on the fact that this duality reproduces the classical dichotomy between structure and agency. Once again, the problem recaptures the unending fracture within the social sciences.

It is necessary to adopt a theoretical framework that does not set the internal and external in opposition. It should be in line with both the contributions of Pierre Bourdieu (as Eyerman and Turner [1998] have argued) and their complexification as developed by Lahire (2010). It should also be coupled with the intricacies uncovered by life course perspectives on the relationship between biographies and historical dynamics. If generations often blend into each other diffusely, then we have to observe not only the continual historical change (in its disruptions or continuities, and even more importantly its gradualisms) but also the subtle and complex alterations of generational habitus. A generation is not created by an event, but by multiple series of entangled events, that is, a historical dynamic. It is this historical dynamic and its embodiment and transformation through agency that makes a generation much more than a cohort. This approach does not fall into externalism, we believe, on account of a non-reductionist and non-dichotomical conceptualization of the structure-agency relationship, even though it may prove a difficult operational endeavor to identify empirical generations. It

may be argued that if historical disruption is not the decisive factor that unleashes generational difference and self awareness, this will lead to a vision where generations are diluted. However, we can object to this reasoning on two fronts.

Firstly, we argue that long-term dynamics have more impact than single disruptive events. These are not experienced by everybody in the same manner, and are sometimes quite localized: in certain social groups and in certain social fields or institutional settings. Of course, even though some of these events may disrupt other social spaces, even to the point of becoming almost across-the-board societal events, we argue that such 'events' are in fact processes, though they may be labeled as events that affect collective memory and serve as time-markers (even conscious markers of explicit generational differentiation). Nevertheless, these ideological labels refer to realities that have sometimes hardly been lived by many.

Secondly, we do not deny that disruptive processes may accelerate inter-generational differentiation. What we argue is that we should not single out certain events to the detriment of others, taking the part for the whole, since this selection may either ignore the majority of the population or exaggerate the inter-generational difference within a minority. As a result, we argue that there are always generational actualities, to use Mannheim's terminology, arising from and participating in the dynamics of history, and these actualities are true and real generations.

Though, in this perspective, the frontiers between generations may be fuzzy – and even difficult to reconstruct, thus mirroring reality, the concept of cohort lacks the essential ingredients of agency and culture. If cohorts can always be found and statistically deployed, generations are always a social reality, insofar as there are no agents without agency or time periods without culture and worldviews, which every individual possesses. It is not only a matter of shared collective subjectivities, which were emphasized in the systemic view put forward by Domingues (1995) and are of great importance to the formation of collective

memories, but also a question of focusing on generational habitus (linking structure and agency) and the impact of biographies on the diversification of generational trajectories and identities.

The connection between location and structures of knowledge must be understood in a wider sense than that of Mannheim. As for social class, we would not say, at the present stage of sociological discussion, that only certain classes or small elites within each class produce and possess culture. Likewise, generations must be approached in the same manner. If generations are to be understood as central differentiation processes in modern societies there can be no individuals without a generation identity or historical periods without generations – in the same way as there are no people or time periods without class. All individuals present a generational identity linked to culture, which is entangled in the practices that they carry out and, as a result, the agency they possess.

If indeed the Mannheimian concept of ideology (Mannheim 1936 [1929]) should be reformulated and enlarged in order to account for the complexity of the structures of knowledge, then we must not reduce ideology to an engaged and combatant worldview put forward by an elite. If we want to avoid this trap, what Mannheim called ideology must be understood, in a broader sense, as culture (Corsten 1999). But, of course, if a generation is such a cultural phenomenon, it also depends on the specific ideological context in which it is brought into being and on the power conflicts that pervade it, whether these struggles are between generations (for the appropriation of certain resources, for instance) or within a generation, where different worldviews collide and concur. These battles, however, are not just those of the political units of a generation – or age-group, to be more precise.

In fact, Mannheim's key concept of unit is excessively narrow. For two main reasons. On the one hand, social conflict is not, primarily, generational conflict and cannot be reduced to just a few specific areas of social life. Conflict is an all-pervading phenomenon, sometimes

generational (inter or intra-generational), though often not. It takes place in a wide array of social spaces, not just the political or intellectual fields. On the other hand, even if we take the concept of unit as a useful tool in the analysis of individual agency, we believe that it is more operative to make it less important than the notion of actuality, thus inverting Mannheim's hierarchical formulation of the scheme of generations. One important reason that might be given for this is, of course, that culture is more diffuse than Mannheim suggested. But, more importantly, we need to rethink the role of intra-generational differences and the increasing opportunities for individuals to participate in a large array of units, or rather, social circles, which are not necessarily generational units or even crystallized ones. Otherwise, the idea of a generation unit as defined by Mannheim can erode the notion itself of a generation.

Nevertheless, if units are not always clear-cut, that does not necessarily mean that generations need be. As said before, not only may generations often be a fuzzy and imprecise reality but, most importantly, they can have different borders, levels of structuration and meanings in different social spaces. A generation may be more tangible, in a sense 'harder', in the political space than, for instance, in the arena of life styles and musical preferences. Or the other way around. Such details depend on specific historical dynamics. For a very specific and narrow social space, such as contemporary erudite music, particular and singular events will have greater impact. Furthermore, generations will tend to be short-lived. Of course, the wider the social space, the larger and more complex the social dynamics will be. These can be 'softer' generations, inasmuch as they are more open and permeable to change, globalization, or even intergenerational participation. In fact, we must stress that, in our view, the wider the social space for generational differentiation, the fuzzier the social generations will be. For the whole of the social space (that is, a society or a group of integrated societies), generations will necessarily be 'soft', at least in most situations, and perhaps increasingly so in contemporary times. Generational frontiers between age groups seem to be less categorical

with the flow of modernity. Generations will not only have internal differences (or even internal oppositions within a collective communality), but they will also gradually blend into one another, in a kind of clinal distribution.

The definition of the concept of generation depends on the analytical object being addressed. For instance, inter-generational differentiation may not be the same (whether regarding age differences, or the strength of the differences themselves) if we are dealing with artistic styles, political positioning, intimate and family life, values, or even the notions of selfhood and identities.

Consequently, we are proposing that generations have different levels of structuration. But not in the sense Mannheim gave to the subject, with his emphasis on political and intellectual self-awareness. We apply this idea to the whole of the social space, not only a particular field, even though different institutional spheres may produce diverse generational differentiations. We do so on the basis that historical dynamics will always translate into generational actualities, and that these are carried forward by active social agents within their respective structural constraints.

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1   In giving priority to the links between history and biographies, a useful and insightful study is Elder's <u>The Children of the Great Depression</u>, published in 1974. However, a wide number of studies concentrated on generational differences, highlighting the 'revolutionary' markers that can be considered to constitute a generation, insofar as they flag moments of massive historical disruption. See, for instance, the research carried out by Wohl (1979) on the First World War or Giesen (2004) on the connection between the trauma of the holocaust and the construction of the German national identity.

2   In fact, there has been a profusion of labels to catalog generations, which are more media-constructed on the basis of the emerging trends in music, life styles or technology than related to episodes of political and historical disruption. Furthermore, these labels normally tend to 'homogenize' a certain age-group, independently of any kind of self-awareness shared by the members of that age-group. Expressions such as the sixties generation, the punk generation, the X-generation, the millennium generation are terms often used by researchers to highlight social change, from a variety of angles (Frith 2005, p. 145). See, for instance, among other examples, Jones (1980) on the baby boom generation or Howe and Strauss (2000) on the rise of the millennium generation.

3   We may consider the issue of the pluralization of identities, starting with the fragmented perception of it discussed by Georg Simmel. As he noted (Simmel [1908] 1989), identities will be more fragmentary the more individuals are included in different social circles. For him, it was precisely through the juxtaposition of fragmentary and even contradictory realities that modern individuality became an 'adventurous' and freer enterprise, almost impossible to fully apprehend. Under the conditions of modernity, the universality of identities could not be encompassed by any general theoretical framework. Individuality should, in turn, be investigated through the multiple forms of social interactions. A century after Simmel's insights, the proliferation of concepts related to the transformation of contemporary social identities, which have become liquid (Bauman 2004), fragmented (Craib 1998), reflexive (Giddens 1991), or patchwork-based (Beck 2000), is definitely a sign of the times.

4   On this matter, Giddens (1979, pp. 198-99) makes the important distinction between history and historicity. According to him, the latter is a reflection of the progressive movement into a growing historical reflexivity that characterizes modern societies. Every society has a history, but not a reflexive historicity capable of exerting transforming effects over history itself. In a similar train of thought Lévy-Strauss (1958) distinguishes between 'reversible time', the atemporal and stable time of traditional societies, and the discursive historicity of modern societies. Elias' (1989)

conceptualization of the complexification of temporal concepts into increasingly abstract and detached forms in modern societies is another example of this concern with time and reflexivity.

5   From the outset there has been quite a striking difference between positivist approaches – e.g. Comte (1864), who, in spite of proposing that social change was determined by generational conflict and in particular the conflict between successive generations, had a rather quantitative and linear vision of time and generational succession, as preceding from biological constraints – and qualitative approaches of time and generation as a subjectively lived process, only capable of being interpreted historically (Dilthey (2010 [1910]), for example). This difference has left an imprint in the forms through which the problem has been approached.

6   In historiography, a good example of the debate generated around the concept of generations can be found, for instance, in the *Annales* historiographical theorizations. The contrasting views of the two founders of the *Annales School* are exemplary. While Lucien Febvre (1929) was in favor of leaving behind such a complex concept, as he clearly contends in an essay on generations written in 1929, claiming that, due to its ambition, generational analysis could only result in a mere parasitic and useless notion, Marc Bloch ([1941] 1999) returns to the concept in 1941. Bloch states that generation is a concept that is increasingly necessary for the study of human vicissitudes.

7   In the introduction to the 1971 edition of the book, the author maintains his thesis, namely that 'age groups in general and youth groups in particular tend to arise in conditions of non-familial division of labour' (Eisenstadt 1956, p. X), that is, in societies whose integrative principles are not familistic. Eisenstadt is in fact quite indebted to the functionalist conception of youth cultures formulated by Parsons (1942) in the 1940s. That is not to say that, in this theory, there could not be youth age groups in preceding historical moments. In traditional societies, generational stratification, alongside gender, tended to be one of the main processes of differentiation, given the importance of kinship systems.

8   As Dant (1997, p. 3) acknowledges, 'Culture is, for Mannheim, art, history but above all ideas including political ideas'.

9   For an overview of Mannheim's academic trajectory, see, for example, Kettler, Meja and Stehr (1984).

[10]   The historical changes in life course patterns have been the subject of analysis and typologies. One of the best known proposals was put forward by Mayer (2004), which identifies four different regimes: the traditional family economy model, which conveys a certain absence of regulation in the chronological organization of life; the industrial model, which governed the first half of the 20th century; the Fordist model, which stretched from the post-war period to the 1970s and represented the peak of life-course standardization and institutionalization, with strong economic regulation and the expansion of the welfare state; finally, the post-Fordist or post-industrial model, which is defined by the de-standardization and differentiation of individual life courses. According to Mayer, the ideological basis of this last regime are the new forms of hedonist individualism.

[11]   As Fontana (1993) argues, some parallels may be drawn between Gramsci's theory of hegemony and Mannheim's process of social change as a non-coercive synthesis led by intellectuals, with the aim of reforming existing society both morally and intellectually.

[12]   For instance, Bakari Kitwana has employed Mannheim's framework to analyze the cohort of black Americans born between 1965 and 1984. The author argued that hip-hop largely defines this cohort, the first to come of age in post-segregation America. Hip-hop culture has evolved beyond its original four core elements – graffiti, break dancing, DJing, and rap music – to encompass language, dress, attitude, and political and social activism, which both draw on and distinguish it from the experiences and values of the preceding generation.