

Intergenerationality, for John Frow

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INTERGENERATIONAL INJUSTICE RAISES ‘URGENT AND FRAUGHT’ QUESTIONS FOR JOHN Frow. While the reasons for urgency are, as Frow shows, both clear and compelling, the fraughtness can be harder to unravel. Part of the difficulty involves the concept of generations that sits inside talk of intergenerationality. This is because generations are at best fuzzy and make-shift categories of social analysis. Generations are overgeneralisations. They can often seem crudely schematic, and reductive rather than illuminating as a way of coming to terms with the past or orienting oneself in the present. Dividing ‘populations into successive waves with distinctive characteristics—baby boomers, gen X, gen Y, millennials, and so on—’ is, as Frow notes, ‘descriptively worthless because each age cohort is internally riven by inequalities of power and circumstance’ (Frow, ‘On Intergenerational Justice’ 29). To most people born into a chronological cohort, the bonds of generation mean very little compared to other and cross-cutting categories of identity. Indeed, no generational identity captures the entirety of the cohort to which it lays claim. Frow is too alert to the many and crucial differences obscured by generational labels to be recommending the concept for critical employment in any straightforward sense. And that remains the case even as he mobilises it to examine a question as urgent as intergenerational injustice.

Frow has been sounding methodological notes of warning like this throughout his career. As he and Meaghan Morris observed in 1993 in the Introduction to their

Australian Cultural Studies: A Reader, 'Australian cultural studies... has been acutely aware of the danger of positing imaginary social unities as the explanatory basis for its accounts of cultural texts' (Frow and Morris ix). Australian cultural studies, Frow and Morris went on to note, promotes 'a concept of social identity as mobile, differential and provisional'; it thinks of 'cultures as processes that divide as much as they bring together' (x, ix). Seen from this perspective, the generation is a concept that calls for deconstruction and critique. What divisions are masked by its imaginary social unities? Which covert social and cultural operations might they thereby perform? Whose interests are furthered by framing matters in generational terms?

But if these are questions that Frow and Australian cultural studies have encouraged us to ask, he has equally urged reflexive investigation into both the standpoint from which any such critical inquiry might proceed and the institutional circumstances that enable it. For Frow, critical suspicion of the concepts at hand needs to extend into critical suspicion of the position occupied by the person using them—particularly when that person is you. And here, one might note the reflexive complication staged by the fact that, in Australia, these methodological lessons were ones that tended to be taught generationally. In other words, Australian cultural studies, of which John Frow is at once an exemplary and anomalous representative, was and is as much a generational as a disciplinary or counter-disciplinary formation, intellectual platform or methodological insurrection. For across these latter senses, it always remained the program of Frow's generation: of Meaghan Morris and Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra and Graeme Turner and Ian Hunter and Simon During and Stuart Cunningham and Tony Bennett and Stephen Muecke and Ken Gelder and so on. Generation may be descriptively worthless as a concept. Nonetheless it is one that would seem to describe, however problematically, Frow's intellectual agenda over his distinguished career.

Generation '89

Historians of the generation trace its establishment as a mid-level concept of social theory to Germany in the 1920s—to such as figures as Wilhelm Pinder, Karl Mannheim and Ernst Bloch. They ascribe its emergence as a specifically modern form of collective experience and self-conception to an earlier moment, that of the French Revolution and its aftermath. Writing in *Les Lieux de mémoire*, Pierre Nora described the generation as 'the daughter of democracy and the acceleration of history' (Nora 508). The concept was expressly revolutionary for Nora, for it tied the legitimacy of popular sovereignty to the end of hereditary rule. The abolition of heredity privileges effected a generational breaking of vertical lines of traditional powers. The generation, meanwhile, allowed this project of radical social renewal to be carried out in the name of a newly horizontal mode of

collective solidarity and equality. In short: the French Revolution was a generational thing, and the generation a slogan of 1789.

A daughter of democracy, then, but equally of 'the acceleration of history'. Goethe noted in 1811 in *Poetry and Truth* that 'any person born ten years earlier or later would have been quite a different being, both as regards his own culture and his influence on others' (Goethe vii). The shared experience of like-aged contemporaries emerged as a way to understand and articulate a new sense of collective identity at a time when traditional social roles were being destabilised by unprecedentedly rapid historical upheavals. Different age cohorts perceived the accelerating changes that characterised the epoch in formatively different ways. Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, but to be young, we are told, was a higher state altogether. It felt different, and that generational difference was felt to matter. And it did matter: as Nora remarks, delegates to the National Convention were remarkably young, with an average age of 26.

Alongside revolution, the avantgarde logic of aesthetic Romanticism provides another instance of generational relations emerging in this moment as a new mechanism of historical temporalisation. Much of the point in being a Romantic poet was to break with tradition and write differently from your literary fathers. Other kinds of evidence can be found in the philological record. Only in the late eighteenth century, for example, was the term *Generation* vernacularised in German. Generation could then act as a revolutionary slogan in the 1790s in part because it was equally a structure of feeling. It was a metaphor, and more than a metaphor, that gave shape to the newly acute problem of comprehending the experience of rapid social transformation.

The Revolutionary Politics of Life

For Thomas Paine, generation was the name of a revolutionary politics of the living. The final sentence of the Declaration of Rights he drafted with Condorcet in 1793 read: 'A generation has no right to subject a future generation to its laws; and all heredity in offices is absurd and tyrannical' (Paine, *The Writings of Thomas Paine Volume 3* 131). Every generation was entirely sovereign:

Every age and generation is, and must be, (as a matter of right,) as free to act for itself in all cases, as the age and generation that preceded it. The vanity and presumption of governing beyond the grave is the most ridiculous and insolent of all tyrannies. Man has no property in man, neither has one generation a property in the generations that are to follow. (263)

The right of every generation to choose for itself was the right of the living to be free from the dictates of the dead. Understood generationally, revolution meant emancipation from the dead hand of history, that 'most ridiculous and insolent' of tyrannies. Paine's central contention in his *The Rights of Man* of 1791, he wrote, was 'for the rights of the *living*, and against their being willed away, and controlled and contracted for, by the manuscript authority of the dead' (*The Writings of Thomas Paine Volume 2* 278). It was on these grounds that inherited political forms could appear as contrary to natural right as slavery.

Thomas Jefferson argued along similar lines in correspondence with James Maddison. 'The earth belongs always to the living generation', Jefferson insisted: to the dead must be attributed neither powers nor rights over how those alive might choose to organise their affairs (Jefferson 179). Jefferson fixed the span of a natural generation at 19 years, which thereby marked for him the term limit of any political dispensation. Not only did all national debts need to be discharged within 19 years, but all laws also carried the same use-by date: 'Every constitution, then, and every law, naturally expires at the end of 19 years. If it be enforced longer, it is an act of force and not of right' (179). Jefferson's self-destructive constitution formalised a principle of reciprocity that was also at work, albeit more implicit, within revolutionary notions of generationality much more generally. Breaking generationally with the past was seen to entail obligations owed to future generations too. Just as the living must not be subject to the dictates of the dead, so too they must exercise no jurisdiction over generations to come.

The Conservative Politics of the Dead

At the end of the eighteenth century, modern politics divided on the question of generations. The debate about whether the generations of the dead and the unborn were part of society shaped the reorganisation of political oppositions into left and right, progressives and conservatives. In the Revolution controversy that dominated English political discourse in the 1790s, Paine and other revolutionaries asserted the natural right of generational freedom. It was 'by the law of nature', Jefferson wrote, that 'one generation is to another as one independent nation is to another' (Jefferson 178). Revolution meant breaking with the past and breaking the past's power over the present. It mobilised generation as a rupture in historical continuity. Edmund Burke and other conservatives conversely asserted a model of society as a transtemporal community. In place of Paine's necrotyrants, the dead were figured here as benevolent tutelary presences. And rather than being antagonistic, as the revolutionaries claimed, intergenerational relations were in fact essential to the continued existence of national community. For Burke, to treat generations as self-contained and autonomous, cut free from ties of historical continuity and obligation, was to atomise society. 'Our political system,' Burke declaimed, had 'the mode of

existence decreed to a permanent body of transitory parts' (Burke 35). Without intergenerational institutions, society would dissolve into its transitory and ephemeral elements and so pass from existence. Society, properly understood, was 'a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born' (Burke 101).

For Burke, the freedoms claimed by revolution were then specifically immoral: the generations of the living were 'not morally at liberty, at their pleasure, and on their speculations of a contingent improvement, wholly to separate and tear asunder the bands of their subordinate community, and to dissolve it into an unsocial, uncivil, unconnected chaos of elementary principles' (Burke 101). Revolutionary generationality was also self-destructive, for by disrupting historical continuity it eroded the background conditions of knowledge that made reflectively coordinated social action possible in the first place—an argument later picked up from Burke by Hans-Georg Gadamer. As Frow writes, Gadamer understood tradition as 'a conversation across time between two autonomous "thous", a conversation between fully present, fully constituted subjects on the basis of their equality' ('On Intergenerational Justice' 29-30). But of course it was never truly equal. Burke's primary model for intergenerational handover was inheritance in landed property. Not all the dead got a voice in the grand intergenerational partnership. As David McAllister has noted, Burkean intergenerationality treated 'the elite dead' as 'our common ancestors in a way that erases past dissent from the historical record' (McAllister 21). Intergenerationality thereby 'simply reinscribes existing social relations as eternal verities' (22).

It is for reasons like this that Frow counterposes the revolutionary historical thinking of Walter Benjamin to Gadamer's conservative notion of tradition—Benjamin, 'for whom tradition is a matter of political work on a past and present that are radically discontinuous' ('On Intergenerational Justice' 30) Inheritance, tradition, intergenerationality: these are concepts that can only be considered, Frow argues, as 'always ambivalent'; what they name is 'always at once "the locus of possible truth and factual agreement" and "the locus of factual untruth and of persistent violence"' (29). Our generational inheritance from 1789—which comes to us from Frow, from Benjamin and Gadamer, from Paine and Burke—includes this split vision, fissured by the generational division of modern politics. The generational conflicts of the 1790s still echo today, and these divisions continue to mark ambivalences in our vocabularies of cultural understanding. Frow's insistence on the radical freedom of generations to come—their right to conditions of life undamaged by the dead, by us—runs back to the revolutionary 1790s. His insistence on intergenerational justice—responsibilities that pass 'in a chain from present to future and present to past'—likewise traces back to counterrevolutionary arguments from the same period (35). The conflicted generational politics of tradition might then be seen as itself a conflictual element

of our tradition. But Frow's crossing of the generational divide might also be taken to signal a larger-scale disorganisation of political schemas in our current moment.

Gen Eco, Generically

One complexity confronted in Frow's intervention is that the central problem it addresses—'the poisoned legacy that my generation is handing on to as many of the following generations as will live to deal with it': that is to say, in a phrase, climate change—is one we seem theoretically ill-equipped to resolve ('On Intergenerational Justice' 25). Indeed, the impulse to rethink intergenerationality, to which Frow's essay testifies, arguably reflects a thorough-going scrambling of our existing codes of political argument and organisation: just one of the general disorientations occasioned by climate change. Even Burke is turning eco now, claimed recently by Katey Castellano as a 'proto-ecological' thinker and as the originator of 'a strand of Romantic political conservatism... committed to environmental conservation' (Castellano 1). Fundamental realignments appear in process even as politics still runs normatively left and right.

Gen—as in *gen X*, *gen Y* and now perhaps *gen eco*—is, as many theorists have observed, a powerful morphological element that projects a dense semantic atmosphere. It is the *gen* of generation, of gender, oxygen and generosity, of genome and generality, genius and genitals, of Gentile, gentry and genocide, and of genre. *Gen* is a mobile, transversal operator: *Gents* is a sign meaning 'men only'; its Proto-Indo-European root apparently referred to giving birth. When Frow wrote in his book *Genre* of 2006 that genres 'actively generate and shape knowledge of the world', his claim leant on these morphological undercurrents linking genres to generation (Frow, *Genre* 2). Genres, a little like generations, were seen by Frow to offer ways of knowing and a world to know. They were epistemically generative. And what they generated, in part, was a knowledge of limits. As he famously wrote in the final sentence of that book, through using genres 'we encounter the limits of our world' (Frow, *Genre* 144). The name Frow now gives to the encounter with wordly limits is intergenerational climate change.

Frow's essay opens by identifying gothic as a specifically generational genre. 'One of the tropes', he notes, 'that runs through many Victorian novels—those of Dickens, of Wilkie Collins, of Sheridan le Fanu, and many others—is the plot device of a will that controls the lives of the heirs, frequently through a codicil that has been kept secret or suppressed and that endangers the life of the one who inherits' (24). It is a device first established in the gothic novels of the 1790s, where, as Frow writes, it thematised 'the grip of the old and the dead upon the young' (24). It was, in other words, a fictional reworking of contemporary revolutionary demands for generational liberation. Other genres from the same period might likewise be thought to echo positions within those generational debates. The

Bildungsroman, for instance, as the romance of the open future, might be understood as a utopia of generational emancipation. Whereas gothic examined the political entrapment of the generation of the living by the dead, the *Bildungsroman* explored the situation of a present generation facing an indeterminate future. The historical novel, meanwhile, coached generational readerships to see themselves as historical agents (Lukács). The marriage plot narrativised social negotiations of generational inheritance with generational renewal. Then there is the genre of feminist science fiction—of novels that think back through Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man* to unsettle any stable conception of human generation: examples closer to Frow’s generation would include Octavia Butler’s *Patternist* series and her *Lilith’s Brood* sequence, the *Heinish* novels of Ursula Le Guin and the *MaddAdam* trilogy of Margaret Atwood. Here the folded, sedimented and citational nature of cultural intergenerationality is itself enfolded transversally with speculative reproductive understandings of sexuality, epigenesis and evolution. For all its recent currency, this, like the gothic, the *Bildungsroman* and the historical novel, remains a genre ascribable in its emergence to the turbulent reconfiguration of generationality taking place at the end of eighteenth century. Its currency suggests it complicates that inherited schema in ways which bear, urgent and fraught, on the generational present.

Revolutionary assertions of generationality as a natural right always drew strength from generation’s underlying links to sexual reproduction and natality. Revolutionary generationality was equally always a political program of designing a new social order. For conservatives, processes of generational transfer and exchange were likewise at once natural and political. Already by the 1790s, Burke’s rhetoric was being criticised for naturalising political hierarchies and sliding illegitimately between disjunct discursive domains. Across the political divide—a divide it actuated—generation intertwined biological with social processes of inheritance. It lay at an interface of the natural and the cultural, the familial and the societal, binding biological contingencies to sociohistorical developments. It was then a biopolitical concept. Remobilised in a time of climate change, it is potentially an Anthropocene one. Its well-known inadequacies as a category of social analysis—its fuzziness, its messiness—might even be attributed precisely to its mixing of disjunct discourses and its hybrid presentations of social change as a family romance, characteristics which now render it of such urgent value and make it so unavoidable in our contemporary moment. Transgenerationality, in clinical psychology, is a name for the handing on of trauma. Were we to seek generic examples of Anthropocene generationality (inter-, trans-)—texts that might help in actively generating critical knowledge of this limited world being handed on traumatically, as a poisoned legacy, across generations—it will likely be to this final genre, of feminist science fiction, that we should turn. The lessons of Frow and his generation will prove indispensable, if perhaps also insufficient, in reading them.

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