



Strauss-Howe Generational Theory

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Introduction

The Strauss-Howe Generational Theory describes a recurring cycle of age cohorts called 'generations' with specific patterns of behaviour that are regarded as intertwined with the history of the United States of America. The millenarian theory inspired some speakers, authors, and bloggers to regard the 2016 election of President Donald Trump as a sign of a major societal transition.

This theory is not linked to any specific religious movement, but it could be seen as an example of secular millenarianism in the USA. It is a popular theory with political figures on the 'alt-right' of America, such as Steve Bannon, the executive chair of Breitbart News. Bannon wrote and directed a film called *Generation Zero* (2010) based on Strauss-Howe Generational Theory. Bannon is an influential figure in the 'alt-right' movement and helped promote Donald Trump's presidential candidacy. After Trump's inauguration, Steve Bannon became White House Chief Strategist for the Trump Administration until August 2017.

The theory is based on the work of William Strauss (1947–2007) an American author, playwright, theatre director, and lecturer. His collaborator Neil Howe (b. 1951) has had a varied career as a consultant and popular historian. Together, they created and developed the theory over many publications, beginning with *Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584 to 2069* (1991).

According to this theory, every 80 years is a crucial 'fourth turning' of generations in American history. The 'fourth turning' is necessarily marked by a crisis that has destroyed the social order and created a new one, after which a new cycle commences. According to contemporary proponents of this theory, we are currently in the (approximately) twenty-year period of 'crisis' which will determine a new social order.

History/Origins

Despite some preceding work on the topic, Strauss and Howe are credited with having popularised the

generational theory in the 1990s. However, theories about cohorts of generations have wide cultural resonance in the twentieth century.

Perhaps the origin of generational theory belongs to Karl Mannheim, in his 1923 essay, 'The Problem of Generations.' Mannheim explained that a generation is a social location that has the potential to affect an individual's consciousness in much the same way as social class or culture does. He argued that generations are especially affected by major historical events. Mannheim, however, did not recognise cycles. Mannheim's theory of generations focuses on the influence of history and social events, which in turn influence generations, who change in response to their social surrounding. Mannheim's theory can be summarised by the idea that people resemble their times more than they resemble their parents (McCrinkle, 2007)

Sociologist Norman Ryder (1965) also focused on cohorts seen as aggregates of individuals who could be viewed as independent variables in social change. However, he also specified that cohorts should be placed within other population parameters, such as geographical location, education, and race. Again, this is something Strauss and Howe do not discuss in detail. A criticism of their work is that it does not adequately consider differences in race, socio-economic class, or other social markers.

Another influence was Morris Massey, who identified the so-called Baby Boomers as the generation born immediately after WWII. A sociologist, Massey argued that our behaviours are driven by our value system and generational groups are likely to share value systems. Therefore, people within a generation are more likely to share what Massey called 'value programming,' and consequently 'value systems.' In contrast, different generation cohorts are more likely to be at odds as they have different 'value programming.' In short, Massey argued that values can be generalised based on generations.

Strauss and Howe credit Arthur Schlesinger Jr, an academic historian at Harvard and the City University of New York, as pioneering the cycle approach to American history. Schlesinger's work on generational cycles appeared in essays before appearing in *The Cycles of American History* (1986). Strauss and Howe also make use of the generational theories developed by José Ortega Y Gasset and Julián Marías, Spanish philosophers who wrote on history as a system and Anthony Esler's *The Human Venture* (2004).

Generational theories are more widely discussed in sociology and history. However, these ideas do not have the same kind of millenarian overtones as Strauss and Howe's theories. In the European context, Pierre Bourdieu, Julius Peterson, and Willhelm Pinder have also been influential.

Perhaps one of the most popular versions of generational theory is Douglas Coupland's novel *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (1991). This novel captured the generational differences of the so-called Baby Boomers and their children - 'Generation X.' Strauss and Howe describe the generation after the Baby Boomers as the '13th Generation,' this being the thirteenth generation since American Independence in 1776.

In popular culture Generation X is followed by Generation Y, the members of which are more commonly termed 'Millennials' - a term coined by Strauss and Howe.

Beliefs

Many descriptions of the human lifespan often include four stages, that of childhood, young adulthood, midlife, and old age. A social generation is a cohort group that shares an age location in history, meaning that members of the generation encounter similar historical events and social influences while in the same phase of life. Hence such people are likely to share common beliefs and behaviours and share a perceived social identity as being part of that generation.

Strauss and Howe generalise from these ideas to the concept of 'generation identities.' The Strauss-Howe theory emphasises generational archetypes that arise from turnings (pivotal generational events) of that particular era. They theorise that the mood and values of society (focused on the USA) changes according to the characteristics of the dominant generation.

Historical cycles, according to Strauss-Howe, consist of four turnings that repeat for each cycle. Each cycle has thematically similar turnings, which they typify as:

- **The High** (which follows the crisis that ended the previous cycle). This period is typified by strong institutions and social collectivism, and weak individualism.
- **The Awakening.** This period is typified by increasing personal and spiritual autonomy of people. During this period social institutions may be attacked, impeding public progress.
- **The Unravelling.** This period is typified by weak institutions that are distrusted. During this period, individualism is strong and flourishing.
- **The Crisis.** This is an era of destruction, e.g., through war, where institutional life is destroyed. However, as this period ends, institutions will be rebuilt. Society will rediscover the benefits of being part of a collective, and community purpose will take precedence again.

A single historical cycle of 'four turnings' is believed to typically take 80–90 years. Strauss-Howe term this period as a 'Saeculum.' This is a Latin word translated into English as 'century,' but which originally meant the span of a long human life. Its significance to generations and historical change was explored by Neil Howe and William Strauss in [The Fourth Turning](#).

Strauss and Howe argue that within the cycles four-generational archetypes repeat sequentially. They argue that these archetypes, between cycles, share basic attitudes towards family, risk, culture and values, and civic engagement. In *Generations* (1991) these archetypes are identified as idealist, reactive, civic, and adaptive. In *The Fourth Turning* (1997) the terminology has changed to identifying generations as [prophet](#), nomad, hero and artist.

- **Prophet generations** are born near the end of a crisis, during a time of community cohesion and strong social order. Prophets are described as indulged children of a post-crisis era. Prophets are believed to grow up as young crusaders who in middle life become focused on morals and principles.
- **Nomad generations** are born during an awakening, when crusader prophets are attacking the status quo and its institutions. Consequently, Nomads are described as growing up under-protected and

alienated in social chaos. Nomads are believed to grow into pragmatic and resilient adults.

- **Hero generations** are born after an awakening, during an unravelling, when social institutions are weak and individuals have to be self-reliant and pragmatic. They are more protected than the children born during the chaos of an awakening. Heroes are believed to grow up as young optimists, into energetic and over-confident and politically powerful adults.
- **Artist generations** are born after the unravelling, during a crisis, when external dangers recreate a demand for strong social institutions. Artists are believed to be overprotected by parents who are pre-occupied with the dangers of the crisis. Artists grow up into conformists and process orientated yet thoughtful adults.

Strauss and Howe describe the turnings as the seasons of history. They have analysed that every 80-90 years in the history of the United States a national crisis has occurred, while halfway between crises, a cultural awakening has occurred.

The Strauss-Howe Generational Theory—last three saeculum and the turnings for each

| Generation (years) | Type | Birth years | Formative era |
|------------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Revolutionary Saeculum (90) | | | |
| Awakening Generation | Prophet (Idealist) | 1701-1723 (22) | High: Augustan Age of Empire |
| Liberty Generation | Nomad (Reactive) | 1724-1741 (17) | Awakening: Great Awakening |
| Republican Generation | Hero (Civic) | 1742-1766 (24) | Unravelling: French and Indian War |
| Compromise Generation | Artist (Adaptive) | 1767-1791 (24) | Crisis: American Revolution |
| Civil War Saeculum (67) | | | |
| Transcendental Generation | Prophet (Idealist) | 1792-1821 (29) | High: Era of Good Feeling |
| Gilded Generation | Nomad (Reactive) | 1822-1842 (20) | Awakening: Transcendental Awakening |
| | Hero (Civic) | | |
| Progressive Generation | Artist (Adaptive) | 1843-1859 (16) | Crisis: American Civil War |
| Great Power Saeculum (85) | | | |
| Missionary Generation | Prophet (Idealist) | 1860-1882 (22) | High: Reconstruction/Gilded Age |
| Lost Generation | Nomad (Reactive) | 1883-1900 (17) | Awakening: Missionary Awakening |
| G.I. Generation | Hero (Civic) | 1901-1924 (23) | Unravelling: World War I/Prohibition |
| Silent Generation | Artist (Adaptive) | 1925-1942 (17) | Crisis: Great Depression/World War II |
| Millennial Saeculum (69+) | | | |
| Baby Boom Generation | Prophet (Idealist) | 1943-1960 (17) | High: Superpower America |
| Generation X | Nomad (Reactive) | 1961-1981 (20) | Awakening: Consciousness Revolution |

| | | | |
|-----------------------|-------------------|----------------|--|
| Millennial Generation | Hero (Civic) | 1982–2004 (22) | Unravelling: Culture Wars, Postmodernism |
| Homeland Generation | Artist (Adaptive) | 2005–present | Crisis: Great Recession, War on Terror |

This theory of cycles puts generations in tension, battling for different cultural priorities. Strauss and Howe emphasise this alternation between eras of awakenings and crises, both of which radically alter the social environment. Awakenings are marked by individualism, inward-focused renewal with the focus on values. In contrast crises are marked by an external threat provoking social consensus, and an ethic of personal sacrifice in favour of institutional order and dominance.

Millennial beliefs

Millennialism enters generational theory with the fourth turning. The cycle of turnings eventually lead to crises that destroy the status quo. After this a rebuilding is necessary to create a new beginning. Strauss-Howe theory sees 'fourth turnings' as challenging, but necessary stages. Through crisis is created national unity and a spirit of self-sacrifice for the greater good.

Some influenced by this theory believe we are currently in a crisis, perhaps at the beginning stages of a global conflict. This crisis is perceived by the undermining of Judeo-Christian values in American and Europe. The forces of secularism and Islam are perceived as threatening the underpinnings of moral order. For some, a war with Islamic extremists is believed to be inevitable. This is believed to be the crisis through which a new moral order and cultural renewal can emerge. The 'War on Terror' is believed to be part of the current 'Crisis' or 'Fourth Turning'.

This 'clash of civilisations' worldview (Huntington 1996) is seen most prominently in the religious beliefs of Steve Bannon, formerly White House Chief Strategist. His public statements suggest the current time is a potentially a cataclysmic end to 'Western civilisation' because of the evils of Islam, state-regulation of capitalism, and secularism (Steve Bannon, [2014](#)).

A belief that the current Millennial generation is fighting existential threats to 'Western civilisation' is central to 'alt-right ideology'. It is an ideology that is promulgated strongly on Bannon's website, *Breitbart News*.

Steve Bannon's application of Strauss-Howe Generational Theory is particularly millenarian.

Urban (2017) suggests Bannon's theology is not a coherent system of thought but a hybrid *bricolage* of different ideas. It is an economic, religious, and historical narrative of a dramatic transition period of the 'fourth turning,' marked by inevitable war of 'the West' and Islam in a struggle for survival.

Bannon has characterised opponents of the United States—from Bolshevism and the Soviet Union to Islam—as ‘the Beast’ in reference to the book of Revelation. Therefore, Islam is the latest threat in a long line of threats against America. It is the threat for this generation, who are currently facing a great crisis or ‘fourth turning’, and the possible collapse of the ‘Judeo-Christian West.’ In this worldview, a violent, radical transformation is inevitable.

Bannon argues for the reassertion of what he considers ‘traditional values’ over Islamic extremism and secularism. He creates a good versus evil narrative through opposing ‘the West’ against its enemies. Islam is depicted as inherently violent, with claims that the destruction of ‘the West’ is part of Islamic scripture. According to Bannon, immigration is an invasion, and he likens it to the Book of Revelation’s ‘camp of saints’ through references to an anti-immigration French novel of the same name published in 1973 (Blumenthal, 2017). Bannon also presents an idea of an economy based on ‘enlightened capitalism’ that is being weakened by secularism and state regulation. Christians are urged to band together as a new ‘church militant’ to defend themselves and ‘Western civilisation’ from these enemies (Guilford and Sonnad, 2017 and Fedder, 2016).

In Bannon’s production of *Generation Zero* (2010), the roots of the 2008 banking crisis and subsequent economic downturn are traced to the American social revolution of the 1960s. The 1960s are characterised as a narcissistic revolution of hippies—a generation, the Baby Boomers, who were spoilt by their parents. It is this attitude that, it is claimed, led to the irresponsible behaviour and risk-taking that led to the global financial meltdown. The spoilt Baby Boomers are described as the ruling elites who acted without moral guidance or ethics. These attitudes and events have heralded the current ‘fourth turning’ crisis.

Bannon’s use of Strauss-Howe Generational Theory echoes the narrative of the Last Battle against the Anti-Christ in the book of Revelation. In this narrative, history is guided by divine will and America is God’s agent on earth.

Despite the tone of the documentary being alarmist and apocalyptic, it is not defeatist. Bannon is clearly impressed with the young generation. There is hope that there will be a better world after the crisis. Yet there appears no doubt that the current crisis will continue to develop and bring about the downfall of society as we know it.

Practices

It appears that there is a healthy market for grand theories of generational difference and archetypical identities. Howe and Strauss founded a consulting firm, LifeCourse Associates, and have made a living out of generalising and profiling based on their historical analysis and generational assessments. LifeCourse Associates has been a consultant for brands such as Nike, Cartoon Network, Viacom and the Ford Motor Company, for several US Universities, and for the US Army.

This is part of a more general trend reflecting the popularity of generational theory and future-planning. There are now many other consultancy and marketing firms who offer speakers, talks, training packages and management consultancy based on generational theories. As one example, Tomorrow Today is a

consultancy centre that uses theories of generations and a current period of crisis in their publicity (Tomorrow Today, [2017](#) and Van Leeuwen, [2017](#)).

Controversies

Generational theory is contentious. It is based on grand generalisations. Each generation is typified as an archetype, leaving little room for dissent and diversity within generations. It not only analyses the past but seeks to explain the present and predict how the future is most likely to unfold.

The sociologist who developed cohort theory, Norman Ryder (1965) was particularly critical of those who over-generalise from cohorts. He argued that 'The fact that social change produces inter-cohort differentiation and thus contributes to inter-generational conflict ... cannot justify a theory that social change is produced by that conflict' (Ryder in Onion, [2015](#)). Ryder argued for very specific perimeters for making cohort-based generalisations, taking into account the specifics of geographical location, education, gender, race, occupations, etc., as a way of more rigorously defining a cohort and its characteristics.

Many have criticised the timing of Strauss-Howe generational boundaries as being too culturally specific, and only considering American history. However, there are some who have applied the theory to other countries and have recognised similar patterns of awakenings and crises (e.g. see Xenakis, [2010](#) and Codrington, [2008](#)). Critics of Strauss-Howe Theory also argue that there is a lack of rigorous empirical evidence for the claims, and real differences within the American population (such as race or socio-economic inequality) are glossed over. Additionally, critics argue that descriptions of the Millennial and Homeland generations is predictive, hence lacking in data.

The popularity of generational theory with those associated with the government of Donald Trump in the United States has caused concerns. Those who are sceptical of Strauss-Howe Generational Theory and its interpretations have worried that these ideas have had 'unjustified' influence on United States governmental policy.

Wider influence of Strauss-Howe-based millennial and generational ideas on the government of the United States can be seen through the association of [Citizens United](#), a Political Action Committee founded in 1988. Citizens United Productions has produced 25 full-length documentaries including Bannon's *Generation Zero - The Inconceivable Truth* ([2010](#)) but also films explicitly promoting Republican politicians such as *Ronald Regan: Rendezvous with Destiny* ([2009](#)) and 'Tea Party Movement' ideals such as *Fire From The Heartland: The Awakening of the Conservative Woman* ([2010](#)). The former president of Citizens United Productions, David Bossie left the organisation to be deputy manager of Donald Trump's presidential campaign, before moving to Fox News.

More generally, Citizens United aims to reassert what they consider to be 'traditional American values' of limited government, national sovereignty and strong families. It is widely known for being the plaintiff in *Citizens United vs the Federal Election Commission* (2010). This is the United States Supreme Court ruling that corporations are individuals with First Amendment rights. The result was a massive influx of corporate financing into American elections.

Strauss-Howe generational narrative can be used to justify military conflicts with Muslim-majority countries, bans on the entry of Muslims to the US, and domestic oppression of Muslim-Americans. While the influence of Bannon's interpretation of these theories has already been discussed, Donald Trump's placement of Bannon on the United States' National Security Council was unusual for introducing a political operative with no military experience into the highest-level security briefings in the United States government. In the context of these beliefs, critics of these theories question the evidence-base upon which decision in these areas of policy might be made.

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