

# THE TWENTYSOMETHINGS: 'GENERATION MYTHS' REVISITED

By Everett Carl Ladd

Social analysis and commentary has many shortcomings, but few of its chapters are as persistently wrong-headed as those on the generations and generational change. This literature abounds with hyperbole and unsubstantiated leaps from available data. In the process, two interesting questions have been left buried in confusion. (1) Do we see in the US a number of generations which, as a result of contrasting *formative experience*, hold to divergent values? And (2), quite apart from generational experience, what *aging effects* are there in Americans' approach to issues involving their society and polity?

The "twentysomethings" are the latest "generation" to be mythologized. No one has come up with a name which suggests what it is that sets off persons now in their twenties as a distinctive generation. "Twentysomethings" only describes their age.<sup>1</sup> Neil Howe and William Strauss resort to "Thirteeners"—a term based on the dubious conclusion that the cohort is "...the thirteenth generation to know the US flag and the Constitution."<sup>2</sup> For novelist Douglas Coupland, the cohort is known, by an unknown "Generation X," or the "Xers."<sup>3</sup>

Serious magazines unapologetically publish drivel on what purports to be the latest entry in America's generational parade. Thus, in *The Atlantic*, Howe and Strauss tell us that the thirteeners are products of a

*countermood popping up in college towns, in big cities, on Fox and cable TV...It's a tone of physical frenzy and spiritual numbness, a revelry of pop, a pursuit of high-*

*tech, guiltless fun. It's a carnival culture featuring the tangible bottom lines of life—money, bodies, and brains—and the wordless deals with which one can be traded for another. A generation weaned on minimal expectations and gifted in the game of life is now avoiding meaning in a cumbersome society that, as they see it, offers them little.<sup>4</sup>*

These silly assertions are, of course, left entirely unsubstantiated.

## Generation Warfare

Once a generation has been invented, it is immediately sent to battle with one or more of its predecessors. As Howe and Strauss see it, thirteeners are locked in conflict with the baby-boomers.

*The new generation gap of the 1990s...features a smoldering mutual disdain between Americans now reaching mid-life and those born just after them...Thirteeners blame Boomers for much that has gone wrong in their world...About every eighty or ninety years America has experienced this kind of generation gap between self-righteous neopuritans entering mid-life and nomadic survivalists just coming of age.<sup>5</sup>*

This idea has been picked up widely, including by business publications. Earlier this year *Fortune* told its readers that business effectiveness is much threatened by this generational divide as it has invaded the workplace.

*The beef [of the twentysomethings] is that boomers seemed to get the*

*best of everything, from free love to careers, while today's young people get AIDS and McJobs...[T]oday's kids (whose numbers include the author of this story) are up in arms over economic and career prospects that look particularly bleak—with boomers as the targets of their resentments. That makes the workplace center-stage of the twentysomethings' rebellion...<sup>6</sup>*

Not discussed is the fact that this alleged resentment has resisted all survey research efforts to locate it.

Two decades ago, then-Yale Law School professor, Charles Reich, had told the country it faced a full-scale revolution bred of changing generational experience. The revolution, Reich thought, originated not in the political order, but in the culture, though it was certain to transform politics and everything else. At its core was a vastly transformed individualism of which young Americans uniquely partook. It promised, he wrote, "a new and liberated individual."<sup>7</sup>

*Older people learned how to live in a different world; it is really beyond them to imagine themselves living according to the new promises. The most basic limitations of life—the job, the working day, the part one can play in life, the limits of sex, love, and relationships, the limits of knowledge and experience—all vanish, leaving open a life that can be lived without the guideposts of the past. In the world that now exists, a life of surfing is possible, not as an escape from work, a recreation or a phase, but as a life—if one chooses.<sup>7</sup>*

## Boomers Evolve

It wasn't long, of course, before this revolutionary generation was nowhere to be seen. A part of it supposedly sold out as it acquired material possessions, becoming transmogrified into BMW-loving, Chablis-sipping, brie-nibbling, acquisitive Young Urban Professionals. Before they departed, the group enriched American English with its name and adjectives like "yuppyfied."

Baby-boomers next appeared in a very different guise, that of the downtrodden. The idea here was that people born in the big birth cohorts from the end of World War II through the early 1960s had to compete with a crowd for most things that were consequential, especially jobs. The argument then added the twist that the US economy was in long-term structural decline. It could not compensate for the downward pressure exerted on entry-level salaries or for the loss of high-paying jobs to foreign competition. In this setting, economist Lester Thurow assured us, "the baby-boom generation stands most at risk."

*[They] will have to cope with the economic failure of low productivity growth over their entire working lifetimes and at the end will find a noticeably lower American standard of living than that found abroad....*<sup>8</sup>

Like other generation myths, this one which saw baby-boomers suffocating as the American middle class declined, grabbed headlines before it disappeared.

But the boomers had yet other roles to play. Writing in *American Demographics*, Cheryl Russell laid on them blame for most of what's wrong in the contemporary United States.

*Everyone can cite what is wrong—divorce, crime, drug abuse, obsessive materialism, a lack of duty and commitment, and an unwillingness to sacrifice for the public good. Everyone also seems to know when things started to unravel—about three decades ago....The core rea-*

*son for the upheaval in American society lies in the maturation of the enormous baby-boom generation. It's more than a coincidence that America's social fabric began to tear just as the baby-boom generation... came of age in the late 1960s.*<sup>9</sup>

The US did experience important social changes in the late 1950s and 1960s, which included shifts in values. And surely, many of these developments influenced and are reflected in the 72 million people born between 1946 through 1963. What's at issue is Russell's insistence that boomers' attitudes and values are profoundly different from those of older Americans. I have examined similar arguments before and found them greatly overstated.<sup>10</sup> In the pages that follow this article, in the Public Opinion and Demographic Report (POR, pp. 88-96), we review recent data and reach the same conclusion. Neither the boomers nor the thirteeners are "profoundly different" generations.

One of Cheryl Russell's silliest claims involves the supposed source of the boomers' generational distinctiveness. She concludes that "at the root of these differences is a strong sense of individualism instilled in baby-boomers by their parents."<sup>11</sup> Individualism and its elaboration do lie at the very core of America's sociopolitical ideology and drive much of what is distinctive in national life today—as for the past two centuries.<sup>12</sup> In his classic account of America's social origins and development, written when Andrew Jackson was in the White House, Alexis de Tocqueville saw individualism as the horse America was bound for good and ill to ride throughout its history.<sup>13</sup> Surely baby-boomers were given a strong sense of individualism by their parents, as the latter were by theirs, and so on back across the thirteen generations.

Not all commentators have signed on to such generational hyperbole. Alexander Star, for example, recently ridiculed the idea that "the generation that came of age in the age of Reagan has finally crafted a distinct identity."<sup>14</sup> Sue Gardner performed this same service in reviewing

Howe's and Strauss's latest book, *Thirteenth Gen*.<sup>15</sup> And, a few serious investigations, such as Paul Light's *Baby-Boomers*, have depth and balance.<sup>16</sup> Unfortunately, the more thoughtful accounts have been lost in a sea of baseless assertions.

## Is There Such a Thing As a "Generation?"

There is a deeper basic confusion which stems from a failure to distinguish between generational experiences on the one hand and effects of aging on the other.<sup>17</sup> Analysis focusing on political generations gained prominence in the 1930s, in the works of Karl Mannheim, Sigmund Neumann, and Rudolf Heberle. Individuals gain a frame of reference, these authors argued, from decisive events of the time when they reached political consciousness—usually in their late teens or early twenties. Some values sometimes get fixed, affecting the cohort's future behavior. In other words, *under certain conditions, decisive formative events transform an age cohort into a generation*.<sup>18</sup>

These accounts did not suggest that all people in an age cohort are similarly affected or react identically to key political happenings. Mannheim wrote, for example, of "generation units," groups within an age stratum who hold to alternative and often conflicting values. More recently, Bennett Berger noted that "it is essential, when using the concept of the generation in a cultural sense, to specify generations of what, because it is only in a demographic sense that people in the same-age group constitute a homogeneous unit."<sup>19</sup> One would expect that wealthy and poor young people, factory workers and college students, blacks and whites, would not experience events in the same way.

This noted, the idea of generations posits that, whatever the specific generational unit, under some circumstances distinctive social and political values—products of distinctive events in a group's formative years—get drilled into its members and persist through the years, even as the cohort ages.

## Age Effects

The argument involving effects of aging leads to very different conclusions. For various reasons, social and psychological, individuals as they grow older tend to move attitudinally toward more "moderate" positions. Actions which society may define as deviant—delinquent, Bohemian, or radical, for example—seem often largely youth phenomena.<sup>20</sup> The idea that aging leads people away from extremes toward more qualified and restrained positions was advanced by Aristotle in his *Rhetoric* more than 2000 years ago:

*Young men have strong passions, and tend to gratify them indiscriminately....They are hot-tempered and quick-tempered...owing to their love of honor they cannot bear being slighted, and are indignant if they imagine themselves unfairly treated....They have exalted notions, because they have not yet been humbled by life or learnt its necessary limitations....They think they know everything and are always quite sure about it; this, in fact, is why they overdo everything.*

In marked contrast to these characteristics of the young, Aristotle went on, are the more ambivalent, restricted views of the elderly:

*They have lived many years; they have often been taken in, and often made mistakes; and life on the whole is a bad business. The result is that they are sure about nothing and under-do everything....They guide their lives too much by considerations of what is useful and too little by what is noble—for the useful is what is good for oneself and the noble what is good absolutely....They lack confidence in the future; partly through experience—for most things go wrong, or anyway worse than one expects.<sup>21</sup>*

The German theorist Max Weber made a similar distinction when he argued that young people are more inclined to the

"ethic of ultimate ends," older people to the "ethic of responsibility."<sup>22</sup>

Many differences in social outlook among age groups stem not from persisting, determinative generational experiences, but simply from age. As people grow older, they assume new social statuses and responsibilities, acquire different interests, experience changing needs. If young people today differ from their elders in essentially the same way—with regard to certain values and attitudes—as the young have often differed from their elders in the past, we are looking at age effects, not generational differences.

Both age and generation factors may be present at the same time, of course. The analyst must sort them out. It's one thing if a cohort of young people take on distinctive attitudes toward work as a result of a distinctive generational experience; such attitudes are likely to persist. It's something quite different if the youth have certain outlooks on work stemming from the social and psychological facts of their being young; these will change as they grow older.

### The Data: Generations Hard to Find

Survey findings point to one conclusion above all others: Generational effects are weak in most areas of social and political outlook. The common claim, that a new age group is experiencing unusual and consequential frustrations or dissatisfactions, is a case in point. The boomers were supposedly frustrated because they had to contend with so many others in their huge cohort for a shrinking supply of good jobs. Now, it's the twentysomethings who are seen as distinctively dissatisfied because, as a recent Roper Organization report put it, "they are coming of age in an era of reduced opportunity....They are financially strapped, unhappy with work, disillusioned by leaders, and anxious about the future."<sup>23</sup>

Undoubtedly, there are many troubled and disappointed young people—as there are middle-aged and older people. But, the data show, there just aren't any large

patterned differences involving mood, confidence, and satisfaction among the various age strata (POR, p. 88). In our 1986 review of the data, we reached this same conclusion. If anything, the young then—as now—often were a bit more optimistic about their own and the country's future than were the elderly.<sup>24</sup> This is consistent with Aristotle's assessment, of course, but not with the latter-day "generational angst" arguments.

When we do see differences among age strata, they often seem products of recurring age effects. For example, Gallup asked its respondents earlier this year which they enjoy more, "the hours when you are on your job, or the hours when you are not on your job?" Fewer people in the 18-29 stratum than among those 45-59 said "on the job." When Gallup asked this same question in 1955, it got the same basic pattern: Only 30% of those 21-29 years said they enjoyed their on-the-job hours more, compared to 47% of those 45-59 and 61% of those 60 years and older (POR, p. 89). This attests, presumably, not to generational experience, but to such things as young people typically having less interesting jobs—having just begun to work their way through their careers—and, as well, having more things they want to do off the job.

It's the same story with many social values and cultural predispositions. We often find either no significant difference separating the age groups, or find differences largely accounted for by factors relating to age itself. Religion is a good case in point.

The country's religious life is often seen caught up in generational shifts. The Sixties generation, for example, was supposed to be notably irreligious. But when we ask people about various elements of religious belief—whether they believe in God, or in the idea of heaven—we find no significant differences separating the young, the middle-aged, and the old. There haven't been significant age differences on such elements of belief at any point in the span for which we have survey data. Americans have been, and remain, a "religious people."

When we turn to such issues as the perceived importance of religion in one's own life, and the related matter of religious observance, however, we find very large age differences. Young people attend church less, are less inclined to describe religion as important in their own lives, etc. But surveys in earlier periods mostly found the same thing. People in their late teens and twenties typically have been less regular church goers than those with growing families and those whose age gives them a vivid sense of their own mortality (POR, p. 91). We are now seeing stories of boomers returning to church as they try to respond to the spiritual and emotional needs of their children. The accounts I have seen fail to note that similar responses, pegged not to special generational experience but to the basic life cycle itself, can be found at many earlier times as well.

Other data which we couldn't present in the POR for reasons of space, show the same lack of generational differences. Is the "work ethic" eroding as new generations appear on the scene? If it is, one can't tell it from surveys. These data don't show the work ethic stronger among older groups than among the young. Neither do loyalty to and satisfaction with one's company seem to vary with age. The reasons people give for working—the cultural and social factors as well as the monetary ones—don't differ much from one group to another.

Opinions on questions involving crime and what we should do about it for the most part show minimal differences by age. For example, the General Social Surveys taken by the National Opinion Research Center from 1990-93 have found extraordinary consistency on capital punishment across the age cohorts: 73% of those under 30 said they favored capital punishment for "persons convicted of murder," compared to 72% of those 30-44 years of age, 72% of those 45-59, and 72% of persons 60 years and older. Requiring that people obtain police permits before buying a gun was endorsed by 83% of those 18-29, 80% in the 30-44 age bracket, 79% of 45-59 year olds, and by 80% of those 60 and over.

## Changing Our Minds

It's with questions on which the society is in the process of changing its mind where one does find significant age differences in social outlook. There aren't nearly as many of these as is sometimes thought. But there are a number of important ones—involving sexual norms, for example, and gender relationships—where over the last 50 years or so attitudes have been liberalizing. At any point on these issues, the young are likely to be socialized as to the appropriate norms differently than were their elders.

Where the big age change takes place varies. Sometimes we see a steady progression toward more "liberal" views from the oldest cohort to the youngest: These are matters where the liberalization process is still going on. In other cases, the big change occurred sometime in the past, and we are more or less at a plateau—people 18-29 years of age not differing much, for example, from those in their 30s and early 40s. As we see from the data presented on POR pages 92-93, in areas where the society is changing its mind about what it thinks the proper standard should be, there are often large generational differences, although the lines separating generations are not constant from one question to another.

## Political Generations

Party identification is an area where generational differences are really quite prominent. I've examined Gallup survey data from various points in time, from the 1940s up to the present. In every instance, people who came of age politically when the country was in the throes of the Great Depression and Franklin Roosevelt was dominating the national political scene, have been the Democrats' best cohort. For example, Gallup surveys conducted from April through July 1952 showed the Democrats enjoying party ID margins over the Republicans of between 18 and 26 points among the Depression generation, while their lead was only 2 to 8 points among those who came of age from the early years of this century through the 1920s. The Republicans actually enjoyed plural-

ity support among those who reached voting age in the late 19th century.<sup>25</sup>

By the 1980s, surveys were showing that the very youngest voters—who came of age politically in the late Carter years and during Ronald Reagan's presidency—were the Republicans' best group. This was a sharp break from the long New Deal and immediate post-New Deal experience, where the Democrats were successful in attracting new voters. According to Gallup surveys taken from October 1991 through May 1982, Democrats still had substantial margins (of between 7 and 12 percentage points) among people of the New Deal generation, but the Republicans had the lead in party identification among the young: a 15-percentage point lead, for example, among those who reached voting age between 1978 and 1981, a 13-point margin for those who came of voting age from 1982 through 1985, and an 18-point edge for those who turned 18 between 1986 and 1989.<sup>26</sup> In the 1993 Gallup surveys, which we present on POR page 94, this same age pattern obtains. Persons now in their 70s, who came of age politically during the 1930s, are the Democrats' best age group, while the Republicans do their comparative best among the young.

In a great many areas of political outlook, though, age groups don't differ much. For example, on most questions of public spending—are we spending enough on the nation's health, military, etc.—age differences are modest or nonexistent. In only a few cases are they substantial: Spending on the environment is one of the latter. Degrees of satisfaction and dissatisfaction with governmental performance don't differ much, or with any regularity of pattern, across the age cohorts (POR, p. 95).

One type of question on government's role does yield large differences between the youngest voters and their elders. When the *Los Angeles Times* asked in 1993 whether its respondents "favor smaller government with fewer services, or larger government with many services," a strikingly high 52% of those 18-29 gave the "more government" response, compared

to just 27% of those 30-44 years of age, 21% in the 45-59 bracket, and 19% of those 60 years and older (POR, p. 96). Other versions of this question consistently get similar results. Are the young signalling that—despite still being a relatively good group for the Republicans—they are distinctively inclined to more activist government, as a result of some generational experience? Or, rather, are we seeing something that may result simply from age: Young people typically paying less in taxes and feeling less burdened by them than groups further along in their careers; or young people, following Aristotle's argument, more inclined as a general rule to back "action?"

### Generations: A Real, But Limited, Factor

Some questions remain, but on most matters relating to generations survey data give clear and decisive answers. The twentysomethings are just young men and women, not a generation in any substantial social and political sense. The same is true of the boomers before them, and of boomers now in their middle years.

Where the society is changing its mind sharply about something, as it has on certain social issues over the last several decades, those socialized at a time when the newer values were taking shape are more likely to reflect them, and real generational differences are to be found.

For the most part, though, Americans evince great constancy in underlying national values, which express themselves across all age strata. When they do differ by age, it's most often in ways dictated by the recurring age cycle. Claims of sharp generational differences and conflict may make good copy, but they are rarely justified. A word to the wise, from social science to advertising: Beware of generation myths.

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Time magazine was apparently the first to

"discover" the "twentysomething generation." *Time*, July 16, 1990, pp. 56-61. Among recent accounts to use the term, see Michael Lee Cohen, *The Twenty-Something American Dream: A Cross-Country Quest for a Generation* (New York: Dutton, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> Neil Howe and William Strauss, "The New Generation Gap," *The Atlantic*, December 1992, p. 70; and idem, *Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584 to 2069* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1991), especially pp. 317-34; idem, *Thirteenth Gen.: Abort, Retry, Ignore, Fail?* (New York: Vintage, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> Douglas Coupland, *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> Howe and Strauss, *The Atlantic*, p. 70.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 70-71.

<sup>6</sup> Suncel Ratan, "Why Busters Hate Boomers," *Fortune*, October 4, 1993, p. 57.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Reich set this idea forth in the *New Yorker*, "The Greening of America," September 26, 1970, pp. 42-111. The book followed: *The Greening of America* (New York: Random House, 1970). The above quotations are from the book, pp. 218-19.

<sup>8</sup> Lester C. Thurow, *The Zero-Sum Solution* (New York, Simon and Shuster, 1985), p. 66. For further commentary along this line, see Bob Kuttner, "The Declining Middle," *The Atlantic*, July 1983, pp. 60-72; and Frank S. Levy and Richard C. Michel, "The Economic Future of the Baby Boom," a report prepared by the Urban Institute for the Joint Economic Committee of the US Congress, December 1985.

<sup>9</sup> Cheryl Russell, "The Master Trend," *American Demographics*, October 1993, pp. 28, 30. See, too, by Russell, *The Master Trend: How the Baby-Boom is Remaking America* (New York: Plenum Publishing, 1993).

<sup>10</sup> Ladd, "Generation Myths," *Public Opinion*, November/December 1986, pp. 10-15, 30-40, 56-57.

<sup>11</sup> Russell, "The Master Trend," p. 30.

<sup>12</sup> Ladd, *Ideology in America: Change and Response in a City, a Suburb, and a Small Town* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1972); idem, "The American Ideology: An Exploration of Origins, Meaning and Role of 'American Values,'" paper presented at the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research conference on The New Global Popular Culture (Washington, DC, March 1992); and idem, "Change and Con-

tinuity in American Values in the '90s," based on a lecture presented to the Institute for Public Relations Research and Education, New York, October 13, 1993, subsequently published by the Institute, Sarasota, Florida, 1993.

<sup>13</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Vintage Books edition, 1959).

<sup>14</sup> Alexander Star, "The Twentysomething Myth," *The New Republic*, January 4, 1993, p. 22.

<sup>15</sup> Sue Gardner, review of Howe and Strauss, *Thirteenth Gen.*, in the *Toronto Star*, May 15, 1993.

<sup>16</sup> Paul C. Light, *Baby-Boomers* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1988).

<sup>17</sup> John Crittenden discussed this in "Aging and Party Affiliation," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Winter 1962, pp. 648-57. Seymour Martin Lipset and I did, as well, in "College Generations—from the 1930s to the 1960s," *The Public Interest*, Fall 1971, pp. 99-113.

<sup>18</sup> See Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1936); idem, "The Sociological Problem of Generations," in his *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1952); Sigmund Neuman, "The Conflict of Generations in Contemporary Europe," *Vital Speeches*, August 1939, pp. 623-28; idem, *Permanent Revolution* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1942); and Rudolf Heberle, *Social Movements* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1951).

<sup>19</sup> Bennett Berger, "How Long is a Generation?," in his *Looking for America* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971).

<sup>20</sup> See David Matza, "Subterranean Traditions of Youth," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, November 1961, pp. 102-118.

<sup>21</sup> Aristotle, *The Rhetoric*, in Richard McKeon (ed.), *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941), pp. 1403-6.

<sup>22</sup> Max Weber, in H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds.), from *Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), pp. 120-28.

<sup>23</sup> "Twentysomething Americans," *The Public Pulse*, The Roper Organization, July 1993, p. 1.

<sup>24</sup> *Public Opinion*, November/December 1986, pp. 38-40.

<sup>25</sup> See my article, "Alignment and Realignment: Where Are All the Voters Going?," *The Ladd Report #3* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1986), pp. 10-14.

<sup>26</sup> Ladd, *The American Polity* (New York: W. W. Norton, 5th edition, 1993), pp. 357-360.

Everett Ladd is a member of the  
"Silent Generation"