The Cycle of Generations

William Strauss and Neil Howe recently published a provocative and controversial book entitled *Generations*, in which they argue that U.S. social history can be understood as a regular progression of four distinct types of generational cohorts (defined in the text), shaped by shared early experiences: “how they were raised as children, what public events they witnessed in adolescence, and what social mission elders gave them as they came of age” (p. 26).

There have been eighteen generations, each roughly 20 to 25 years in length, born in the U.S. since the 1620s. Seven remain alive today, two remnant generations that have mostly died out and five major cohorts:

The **G.I. Generation** was born between 1901 and 1924. Strauss and Howe characterize this cohort as an example of the civic type, which grows up as a protected generation after a period of spiritual awakening (in this case, the fundamentalist and populist ferment of the 1890s). A civic generation “comes of age by overcoming a secular crisis, unites into an heroic and achieving cadre of rising adults, builds institutions as powerful mid-lifers, and later finds itself attacked as elders during the next great awakening” (p. 31). The G.I. Generation “are twentieth century America’s confident, rational problem solvers, the ones who have always known how to get big things done. They were America’s original Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, victorious soldiers, and the builders of rockets, suburbs, and highways. No generation…can match their 30-year hold on the White House. Today’s G.I.s are busy ‘senior citizens’ and ‘mature consumers,’ possessed of boundless civic optimism and a sense of public entitlement, of having earned late-life rewards through early-life heroism” (p. 26).

The **Silent Generation**, born between 1925 and 1942, is an adaptive cohort, as are all generations born following a civic generation. Members of adaptive cohorts “grow up as suffocated children of crisis, come of age as adult-emulating conformists, produce the indecisive mediators of the next awakening, and age into sensitive and other-directed elders.” More specifically, the Silent Generation “arrived too late for World War II combat and too early to feel the heat of the Vietnam draft. They were the unobtrusive children of depression and war, the conformist ‘Lonely Crowd,’ and the youngest-marrying generation in America’s history. They were volunteers for Kennedy’s Peace Corps and divorced parents of multi-child households. Now they are the litigators, arbitrators, and technocrats of a society they have helped make more complex. They give freely to charity, are inclined to see both sides of every issue, and believe in fair process more than final results” (p. 26).

The **Silent Generation**, born between 1925 and 1942, is an adaptive cohort, as are all generations born following a civic generation. Members of adaptive cohorts “grow up as suffocated children of crisis, come of age as adult-emulating conformists, produce the indecisive mediators of the next awakening, and age into sensitive and other-directed elders.” More specifically, the Silent Generation “arrived too late for World War II combat and too early to feel the heat of the Vietnam draft. They were the unobtrusive children of depression and war, the conformist ‘Lonely Crowd,’ and the youngest-marrying generation in America’s history. They were volunteers for Kennedy’s Peace Corps and divorced parents of multi-child households. Now they are the litigators, arbitrators, and technocrats of a society they have helped make more complex. They give freely to charity, are inclined to see both sides of every issue, and believe in fair process more than final results” (p. 26).

Following the Silent Generation is the famous **Baby Boom**, born between 1943 and 1960 and characterized as an idealist cohort. Following on the heels of an adaptive generation, idealists “grow up as indulged youths after a crisis, come of age inspiring an awakening, fragment into narcissistic rising adults, cultivate principles as midlife moralizers, and emerge as visionary elders who ... guide the next crisis” (p. 30). The Boomers “were heirs to a national triumph, born into an era of optimism and hubris. They went on to become the inquisitive students of Sputnik-era grammar schools, flower-child hippies and draft resisters, Jesus freaks and New Age bran-eaters, yuppie singles and (most recently) the leaders of ecological, educational, and drug-prohibition crusades. Boomers are marked by a weak instinct for social discipline combined with a desire to
infuse new values into the institutions they are inheriting. In all spheres of life, they display a bent toward inner absorption, perfectionism, and individual self-esteem” (pp. 26-27).

The Thirteenth Generation, born between 1961 and 1981, exemplifies the reactive pattern. Like all cohorts following an idealist generation, they “grew up as underprotected and criticized youths during an awakening [and] came of age as alienated risk-takers” (p. 31). If the pattern holds, they will “burn out young before mellowing into mid-life pragmatists and family-oriented conservatives, and age into caustic but undemanding elders” (p. 31). “They were the babies of the 1960s and 1970s, the throwaway children of divorce and poverty, the latchkey kids in experimental classrooms without walls. As college students they have been criticized as dumb. . . . They are the most Republican-leaning youths of the twentieth century” (p. 27). Their worldview is characterized by a “blunt, even cynical realism” (p. 27).

The Millennial Generation consists of today’s children. Strauss and Howe see this cohort’s circumstances as similar to those that shaped the civic style of the G.I. Generation.

At the heart of this whole progression is a series of “‘secular crises’ (threats to national survival and a reordering of public life), and ‘spiritual awakenings’ (social and religious upheavals and a reordering of private life)” (p. 30). Each crisis occurs roughly eighty or ninety years after the last — most recently, the Civil War and the twin challenges of the Great Depression and World War II. Almost precisely halfway between crises, an era of spiritual awakening seems to arise, the most recent being the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s. It is this regular progression of crises and awakenings that gives birth to the cycle of civic-adaptive-idealist-reactive cohorts identified by Strauss and Howe.

The authors point out marked similarities between the present and the years just before World War I, the last time when the sequence of styles among the four youngest cohorts was identical to that of our era. Then as now, “individualism (was) flourishing, confidence in institutions (was) declining, and secular problems (were) deferred. . . . Then as now, frustration was mounting over a supposed loss of community, civility and sense of national direction. Then as now, the nation’s leaders engaged in a diplomatic dither over how to design an interdependent and legalistic new world order while new armies massed and old hatreds festered. Then as now, feminism was gaining serious political power, moralistic attacks were growing against substance abuse, and family life was seen as precious but threatened” (p. 32). Similar patterns can be observed in the 1650s, 1750s, and 1840s. In each of these eras, “powerful and worldly civics [were] passing from the scene, sensitive and process-oriented adaptives [were] entering elderhood, moralizing idealists [were] entering midlife, survivalist reactives [were] coming of age, and a protected new generation of civics [were] just being born” (p. 32).

The real test of this theory is its ability to predict the future. Strauss and Howe note that in the next thirty years, if the pattern holds, the sense of drift and pessimism will intensify, then a crisis will emerge, compelling Americans to unite in the face of perceived public peril (p. 32).

More concretely, “The G.I.s will remain a politically favored generation deep into their old age. Younger generations will admire and start to miss their old civic virtues of community, citizenship and material progress... The Silent Generation will become a new
breed of elder. They will be other-directed, sympathetic to the needs of the disadvantaged, and prone to take the risks and seek the adventures that many will feel have eluded them early in life. The extended family will enjoy a renaissance. In public life, Silent elders will press for compromise solutions. They will deplore the erosion they will see in civil rights, due process, and other social kindnesses they spent a lifetime trying to implant. Boomers will assume control of national politics with the same perfectionism and moral zeal that they are currently bringing to family and community life. They will become contentious moral regulators. They will see a high purpose in what they do. Upon reaching old age, they will see themselves as wise visionaries willing to accept private austerity in return for public authority, and they will summon the nation toward unyielding principle. The 13ers have so far lived a luckless life-cycle, as America’s most economically disadvantaged generation. The hard luck will age with them. When bad news hits, 13ers will sink further into the alienation and pragmatism that has already attracted so much criticism...After burning out young, many a 13er will retreat into — and strengthen — family life. Finally, today’s cute Millennial tots could become the next great cadre of civil doers and builders. Like the child G.I.s of 75 years ago, they will grow up basking in adult praise for their intelligence, obedience and optimism” (p. 32).

Source