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on education of generations in history

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This article is an attempt to bring children and youth to the forefront of debates on public education during war as actors of both education and its future. To do so, it relies on theoretical reflections on generations in history, especially pertaining to generational gap, conflict, and social change as produced intergenerationally. These primarily theoretical ponderings are grounded in the war-torn contemporary Ukraine, as well as the student actors of its recent educational reform entitled the New Ukrainian School.

Keywords: education, generation, social change, Ukraine

I here offer no definitive advice on the subject of education during war. My understanding of public education is shaped primarily by my research of childhood experiences and representations in Ukraine during the collapse of the Soviet state and the aftermath of the Chornobyl disaster of 1986, as well as its personal lived experience (as I belong to the generation that was the first to enter public schools with Ukrainian as the language of instruction and a changing curriculum as Ukraine became a sovereign state in August of 1991). State-building is a phenomenon of complex social relations on many levels that children and youth are inevitably part of, especially in education – a social construct that relies on institutionalized intergenerational relations. Thus, my focus here is on intergenerational subjectivity created through education in general and in relation to contemporary Ukraine that is presently at war. My arguments are based on my interdisciplinary studies of generation as a social and historic phenomenon, and theorization of children and youth as actors of experience and knowledge generation.

A “Diagnosis of Our Time”

It has been almost eighty years since Karl Mannheim, a significant authority in the sociology of knowledge and generations argued against thinking of education as “a super-temporal method” of knowledge, a problem articulated in his “Diagnosis of our time: Wartime essays of a sociologist” in 1943. His analysis is based on observations of life in Western Europe and Britain in the midst of WWII, and is directed against fascism, totalitarianism, militarism, and any political system aiming at homogeneity and domination. He reflects on youth’s positionality in a rapidly changing world to emphasise a desperate need for change. Thinking of youth, as he sentimentally suggests, in “terms of complete reciprocity” (Mannheim, 1943, p. 31), attests to the absence of any curriculum adequate in the times of war. The crisis of war disrupts the authority of education in itself and puts young students in a position of contradiction between the everyday life conditions and their requirements.

The emotional dimension of educational processes is acknowledged in the main reform of the

Ukrainian Ministry of Education and Science, the New Ukrainian School, initiated with policy changes in September of 2017. Its goal is described as an attempt to create a school that "is a pleasure for the students to attend, that will give the students not only knowledge but an ability to apply it in everyday life" (*Nova Ukrainska Shkola*). It establishes a change in educational approach and methodology as its main direction, which it derives from recommendations of the European Parliament regarding key educational competencies from 2006. The reform articulates encouragement of students' critical thinking, expression of one's own opinion, and a positive learning environment, based on "a change in approach to the child: respect and attention to the child" (*Nova Ukrainska Shkola*). The Law on Complete Secondary Education (Verkhovna Rada Ukrainy, 2022) encourages respect of student's needs and self-expression. Its recommendations however focus largely on adults – teachers, parents, and administrators. The Law on secondary education outlines some formative principles, including on inclusive education (Article 19, 20), and identifies students as active participants of the learning process, along with teachers, administrators, and parents. Unfortunately, only one rather brief article out of 65 is specifically devoted to students. Article 20 outlines exactly seven provisions related to their rights and benefits such as lunch, learning disability assistance, subsidy or financial assistance and transportation. Intolerance of recruiting students into any religious or "militarized formation outside those sanctioned by the Law" is mentioned (Article 20), alluding to the students' potential participation in lawful militarized formations, a position supported by the definition of patriotism in Article 15 – a kind of "respect" of national culture accompanied by a "conscious obligation to protect sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine in case of such a demand" (Article 15). Neither a definition of "demand" nor "obligation" is offered. Related Article 21 "Students' health" consists of three bare positions, including "formation of hygiene skills" as part of educational process, nutritional guidance, and "annual free medical monitoring." The rigidity of the approach to health is evident and is resembling of sanctioned medical monitoring routine in Soviet educational doctrine, along with its hyperfocus on masculinity and athleticism (Kucherenko, 2011). Thus, although an attempt at a paradigm shift is clear and reflected even in the title of the project, namely, *the New Ukrainian School,* it also contains rudiments of the past not designed to accommodate the growing population of the future. There is a clear disconnect between the intention for a new standard and understanding of how it can be achieved, while the newly conceptualized law is based on recommendations older than a decade at the moment of its ratification. There is also an articulated contradiction of applicability of any knowledge to "the real life," while it refers to the conditions of war.

Generations in History

In contemporary globally dominant systems of knowledge and social organization the denial of children's agency is often implicit (Mayall, 2000; Qvortrup, 1995). As a social status, childhood is still defined "as inferior to adulthood," within generational order (Mayall, 2000, p. 248). Schooling is one example of "naturalization" of adult agendas over those of young people (Mayall, 2000, p. 248). Contemporary Euro-American public education, despite local variants, predominantly rests on ideas of Enlightenment and social control that in theoretical terms still draw on principles articulated by Locke and Rousseau, and is firmly rooted in developmentalist psychology (Jenks, 1996; Mayall, 2013). Paternalistic education is inherent to the ideas of Enlightenment (Peters, 2019). Although both Locke and Rousseau bring the rights and freedoms of children to the forefront of public debates after a largely exclusively proprietary relationship governing the political subjectivity of children existent prior to the 17th century, children's collective body remains imagined as molded and shaped according to a certain mode of civilizational knowledge canonized

through education. For instance, Joanne Faulkner (2011, 2020) has demonstrated a number of implications enabling children's exploitation that stem directly from the imperial and patriarchal constraint of innocence ascribed to young bodies. The regimes of control that she unpacks have formed in relation to ideas of Enlightenment and a type of recognition of children as infantile subjects in need of constant guidance. Connected to the organization of state and family, children are initiated into a selective and prescriptive account of the world, which celebrates prevalence of a certain kind of reason, favoring relationality over reciprocity, "culture" over "nature," literacy above communication, linear progress over complexities of materiality of existence, etc. (Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2013). Describing the paradoxical nature of this approach, Jens Qvortrup points out: "Adults agree that children must be educated in freedom and democracy, but society provides for them mostly in terms of control, discipline and management," whereas "schools are generally seen by adults as important to society, but children's contribution to knowledge production is not recognized as valuable" (Qvortrup, 1995, p. 191, quoted in Mayall, 2020). Thus, the relevance that the theorization of social knowledge production still bears has to be understood in the context of both its limitations and its own social location, defined as "a specific range of potential experience" and "a certain characteristic mode of thought and experience," a "historically relevant action" (Mannheim, 1952, p. 291). The study of human experience requires "the historical relevance of action" to be scrutinized and contested.

The generational gap embedded in socio-cultural relations also received significant consideration in anthropology. For example, Margaret Mead's (1970) work *Culture and Commitment* was one of the first attempts at offering a classification and theorization of the generational gap. Mead goes on a quest of searching for an answer posed by a fifteen-year-old boy in 1968, who voiced: "There is a mass confusion in the minds of my generation in trying to find a solution for ourselves and the world as a huge rumble as it swiftly goes by with wars, poverty, prejudice, and the lack of understanding among people and nations…"(Mead, 1970, p. 60). On this search, and drawing on her continuous ethnographic work in Samoa (Mead, 1928), New Guinea (Mead, 1930, 1956) and elsewhere, she develops a classification of cultures based on their idea of the future. Relationship to the future shared by a society manifests itself, among other ways, through intergenerational relations, where young people are conceptualized as actors of change. Accordingly, she coined the concepts of post-figurative, prefigurative, and co-figurative modes of culture, based respectively on a commitment to the past, future, and present.[1] In postfigurative cultures children learn primarily from their elders, in cofigurative cultures both children and adults learn from their peers, and in prefigurative cultures adults are to learn from their children. Thinking of any common future requires participation of youth in decision making and a kind of reciprocity where the elders of society are equally expected to learn from the young as they are to share their own accumulated knowledge.

Mannheim draws a similar conclusion to Mead's and claims that the position that youth occupy in society is based on the nature of society. He remarks that societies with a low change rate where prestige is "with the old" rely mainly on the experience of the eldest members of society (Mannheim, 1943, p. 33). Education in such societies focusses "on the transfer of tradition, their methods of teaching will be reproductive and repetitive" (p. 33), while commitment to youth requires a "will to break with the existing tendencies in society" (p. 35). Education, he underlines, is a way of integration and co-ordination of diverse experience of youth – "the predestined pioneer of any change in society" (p. 35). Crucially, he states, "the most important asset of youth in helping to make a new start in society is that, apart from its greater spirit of adventure, it is not yet completely involved in the *status quo* of the social order" (p. 35). Being an outsider to the *status quo*, brings youth closer to "other groups and individuals who for other reasons live on the fringe of society,

such as oppressed classes, the unattached intellectuals, the poet, the artist," (p. 36). This outsider position, he suggests, is an important factor in cultivating changeability, diversity, creativity, and openness (Mannheim, 1943, p. 36; p. 43).

The war has disrupted institutionalized education all across Ukraine, which is reflected in the Law on Complete Secondary Education in a temporary suspension of some curriculum scheduling (Verkhovna Rada Ukrainy, 2022, Article 10) and regulations (Article 12), etc. Yet, in social sciences, destabilisation and disruption has been associated not exclusively with destruction. Time of drastic social upheavals has been conceptualized as opportunity for re-configuration of social relations. Moreover, disturbance or destabilization has been argued to be a phenomenological quality of generational succession. Pierre Nora (1996) traces the genealogy of the concept of generation in French political thought through its many connections to the phenomenon of revolution and state reformation. In French history of ideas, the concept of generation has been linked to the "revolutionary explorations of the link between the end of hereditary rule and the legitimacy of representative government" (Nora, 1996, p. 501). Found at the roots of the French Republic, the generation appears in the Declaration of the Rights of Man of 1793, Article 30, as a temporal governing body, which "has no right to subject any future generation to its laws" (Nora, 1996, p. 502). The Revolution, underlines Nora, was "intrinsically generational," marked by the time when youth ruptured the *status quo* of political elite, suddenly lowering its average age: from that of forty for the Constituency Assembly members to twenty-six of deputies of the Legislative Assembly (Nora, 1996, p. 502).

Nora goes as far as to conceptualize a generation as a generative action of memory, and a place of memory, *lieu de memoire* (Nora, 1996, p. 500). The construction of (social) memory, he states, is a notion of self-affirmation of a generation and a result of retrospective explanatory power, a creation of existence in time, and a special relationship with time – generations are largely defined by their relations with time. For Nora, the French Revolution is an example of "the reversal of time" and "eschatology of rupture" brought about by a rapid social change. The negotiation of historical relevance of lived experience is very much an intergenerational process. Generation is a practice of continuous emergence out of the experience of collectivity, an act of internalization of a historical (spatiotemporal) position (Nora, 1996, p. 522).

Optimistic Conclusion: Children and Time

Just as adults, youngsters have complex relations with time, conceptualized as temporality – experienced or embodied time that constitutes "textures of children's everyday lives" (Moss, 2011, p. 39; Neale & Flowerdew, 2003, p. 192), a crucial aspect for studying the social production of spacetime. Dorothy Moss conceptualized this production in relation to social memory and its influence on childhood. She explained that while social arrangements are largely shaped by the past, they are "lived in the present and the way they are lived has implications for the future" (Moss, 2011, p. 39). All members of society experience social change at different paces, while their resilience to it evolves through bonds around its experience.

When Mead talks about cultures affected by social change, she observes a correlation between the expression of the youngsters' agency and social sustainability. A "synchronized" society, she says, is one with a sustainable sense of intergenerational continuity (Mead, 1970, p. 2). When knowledge systems are disrupted, cultural sustainability entails development of a sense of what she calls a "changing continuity" (p. 2). This needs to be emphasized – a sense of changing continuity is a

collective action of processing common experience of change and disruption; a sense of solidarity and reciprocity before the unknown and uncertain is what needs to be continuously exercised in order for what we imagine as history to take shape. Synchronicity is a familiar idea to western thought, largely popularized by Jung (2011). Originated in the eastern philosophies, it is a phenomenon combining the idea of simultaneity and the generation of meaning – a "meaningful coincidence" (Jung, 2011, p. 104) based on interpersonal or rather social interaction.

What is there to come out of a collective experience of war? Theoretically, and amongst many things, — a change in *status quo*, in knowledge, in memory, and in history. The realization of such a change will inevitably largely rely on the youth in this present moment in time. Thinking about youth requires thinking about the future, and vice versa, while thinking about youth during the war requires envisioning a common future after the war. Education during the war requires reflection on the kind of commitment that Mead asks about – to what past, present, or future can the young commit themselves (Mead, 1970, p. xi)? To find an answer to this question inevitably requires consideration of the perspective that the youth themselves may have to offer, and thus, a central goal of education is to facilitate the engagement of youth and their commitment to their own future. Youth activism is something both Mannheim and Mead advocate for while considering an expression of a dynamic society that seeks to mobilize its resources during social change or even war, as it is in Mannheim's (1943) writing. It is the provisions of Article 28 of the contemporary Ukrainian law on education *On students' self–governance* that become crucially important for encouraging students' participation in governing their own educational process at different levels. However, it is only in an intergenerational relation of cooperation that such synchronicity can be achieved.

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1. In a bibliographical note in *Culture and Commitment* (1970, p. 80) Mead reveals that her investigations of this subject started as early as 1920, and it was in the late 1950s that she began to publish her ideas about how young people's thinking influences ideas of their elders. In 1961, she used the terms prefigurative, cofigurative, and postfigurative.