How do young Israelis and Germans communicate about National Socialism and the Holocaust? In this collection of essays, authors from both societies elaborate on the past, their present and, respectively, their identity. They ponder various switches of track through German-Israeli exchange as well as social and political realities in both countries. By highlighting marginalised memories such as Palestinian and migrant ones, they challenge monolithic national memory discourses. Altogether, a trans-national memory discourse emerges – albeit a dissonant and highly subjective one, truthfully reflecting some of the fragmentations that actually exist in both societies. With contributions by, among others, Yael Barda, Sayed Kashua, Claudia Liebelt and Massimo Perinelli.

Charlotte Misselwitz is freelancing for newspapers and radio stations, focussing on liminal spaces between Israel, Palestine, Russia and Germany.
Cornelia Siebeck is a historian and publicist, focussing on public memory in Germany, Israel and other places.

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Auschwitz, ich hörte du bist jetzt in Mode.
Nette Leute sprechen von dir respektierlich.
Bald werden sie dich ganz polstern, Blätter Papier
Wie reiner Schnee wird es rascheln in dir.
Alles wird dann so weiss, nur die gedruckten Buchstaben,
Scharen in Marschtempo, mit hocherhobener Hand.

Auschwitz, I hear you have become trendy.
Nice people speak of you with respect.
Soon they will pad you leaves of paper all over,
All will rustle within you like the purest snow
Everything will be so very white, only printed letters
Will march on, pacing columns with elevated hands.
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CHARLOTTE MISSELWITZ
Introduction

CHARLOTTE MISSELWITZ AND CORNELIA SIEBECK

In Israel and Germany we still live, one way or another, in the aftermath of the Nazi past and the Holocaust. Consequently, this book gathers young authors from both societies who reflect on how their perceptions of the past influence their present – and vice versa. They deal with this reciprocal relationship from very different angles. While none of them claims to speak for any "national collective", they all write from a subjective perspective, pondering their own experiences and life worlds. By embracing various positions within – and beyond – German and Israeli mainstream discourses, the book mirrors some of the actual fragmentations that exist in both societies. Added together, a transnational memory discourse emerges, exhibiting multiple tensions between memory and the present, both within German and Israeli society and in between them. Gathering various and at times controversial positions, it is a discourse that sounds dissonant. This dissonance, however, is the very message of this book.

It reflects the very reality of today’s German-Israeli exchanges in the widest sense of this phenomenon. Within the past two decades, there have been countless exchange-projects, organized by schools, universities and memorial sites, or within the framework of German-Israeli municipal partnerships. Moreover, young Germans and Israelis do the individual “exchange". Hence, a growing number of Israelis live in Germany, especially in Berlin, studying or working. On the other hand, numerous Germans equipped with grants for research, journalism or other professional activities reside in Israel for a while. German civil servants do not only take care of Holocaust survivors in Israel, but also engage in Israeli educational institutions or organizations fostering social and minority rights. Not least, there is a vivid exchange between political and social activists from both countries. So inevitably, these multiple forms of German-Israeli exchange render a permanent encounter of different narratives and positions.
This book too, originates in exchange-projects between young adults, exploring the influences of the past on the present in both societies: *Beyond Memory – The Significance of the Nazi-Past and the Holocaust for the Younger Generations in Germany and Israel* (2004/2005) brought together young academics, educationalists as well as journalists to discuss remembrance cultures in both countries. In *AltNeuland – Third Generation Practice in Educational Work and Social Activism* (2006), young professionals and social activists from Israel and Germany (including participants with a migrant background and Palestinians with Israeli citizenship) dealt with remembrance politics and social and political issues in both countries.

As both projects debated the suggested notion of a “third generation” and raised many questions regarding “collective memory”, the contributors to this book were invited to further elaborate on some of these issues. Hence, under the headline *Exchanging the “Third Generation”*, the very notion of a “third generation” is being challenged: does it not homogenize diverse approaches towards the past, not only between Germans and Israelis, but also among them? For example, there seem to be different results depending on whether in the context of organized exchange, participants conceptualize themselves in terms of differences – e.g. as “Germans” vs. “Israelis” dealing with the past – or rather as young people with shared concerns in the present. No certain formula exists about how the Holocaust should be dealt with in the context of German-Israeli exchanges, and how we define ourselves not only in relation to the historic event, but also in relation to the “other”.

The question about who “we” are and who are the “others” in German-Israeli exchange directly relates to the notion of “collective memory” – or, more precisely, to national discourses of remembrance, telling us where we supposedly come from and what our “collective identity” therefore is. However, as becomes clear in the second chapter *Revisiting National Memory Discourses*, there is significant discomfort both among young Germans and Israelis regarding mainstream memory discourses in Israel and Germany. For example, the Israeli authors wonder about what happens to a rather monolithic “victim” narrative among the Jewish Israeli majority when being confronted with Palestinian perspectives and narratives. Another essay deals with the exclusion of Mizrachi memory – e.g. the Jews who immigrated to Israel from Arab countries – in dominant Zionist discourse, which is a thoroughly European discourse. The German authors, on the other hand, are somewhat wary of the German claim made with pride, to have “learnt from history”, pointing at what in their view is disguised by official memory discourse, and how Holocaust remembrance is being functionalized in German politics. Taken together, the essays in this chapter highlight some of the many gaps in official German and Israeli narratives. Thereby they question unambiguous discourses of “collective memory”, which also means challenging the very
notion of a fixed “collective identity”, whether “German”, “Israel” or otherwise clearly defined.

Obviously, memories are never an end in themselves. It always also points to the present and the future. So the last chapter deals with what we call Travelogues. Looking for future paths between memory and the present, the authors disentangle from national or otherwise particularistic interpretations of the past. Whether depicting migrant discourses in Israel and Germany, Israeli thoughts on Palestine, German impressions of Israel or Israeli perspectives on Germany – each author looks back on a journey within memory and present discourses. They depict their points of departure, affected by familial, national, political or professional influences. They have encountered and (ex)changed perspectives and narratives, thereby permanently re-examining their own position. For none of them has this journey yet come to an end. All authors of this book will continue fathoming potential remembrance spaces in the present. New responsibilities and future memories will always stay ahead. The journey is its own reward.

***

First of all we owe many thanks to the Foundation Remembrance, Responsibility, Future (EVZ) and to ConAct – Coordination of German-Israeli Youth Exchange. They have not only made possible this present publication, but already generously funded the two initial exchange projects Beyond Memory and AltNeuland. Without Action Reconciliation Service for Peace (ASF), specifically their financial coordinator Ronald Stöber, there would have been no administrative body for the project. Furthermore we thank everyone who contributed to realizing this publication – first of all to the authors for patiently enduring a sometimes protracted and controversial editing process via email. Tim J. Gluckman not only supported us with a thorough English proofreading, but also with critical questions and suggestions. Tomer Gardi helped editing some texts, especially the ones that were originally written in Hebrew. Phil C. Langer provided material and moral support in the final stages. Franziska Kast, Peter Carrier, Miriam Deutscher, Meredith Ziebart and Seanna Doolittle helped by translating various essays from Hebrew or German into English.
Exchanging the “Third Generation”
“Talking 'bout My (Third) Generation.”
An Intervention in the Misuse of a Notion

SAMi KHATiB

“Generation”: The Career of a Concept
In postmodern times, the notion of “generation” gained a great deal. Originally introduced to the field of sociology by theoreticians like Wilhelm Dilthey, Karl Mannheim and Marc Bloch, its significance in pop-culture, fiction and popular, academic writing has become almost omnipresent. A brief look at the German and the U.S.A. websites of the company amazon.com proves that the notion of “generation” is used in a wide variety of social domains ranging from the 1968 generation to Douglas Coupland’s famous novel Generation X. In German public discourse, new generations are continuously being shaped, many of them with clear implications for remembrance politics: for example the Flakhelfer Generation, consisting of young men who by the end of World War II were drafted from the Hitlerjugend (Hitler Youth) to defy allied bombing raids; or the Kriegskinder Generation, considered to be a “forgotten generation” of Germans who experienced the war as small children, about whom claims are made that they are still collectively traumatized even nowadays, and so on and so forth.

Given this recent boom, it may not be surprising that “generation” has also been (re-)introduced to Cultural Studies, Sociology or Political Science as a hermeneutical concept. In line with this academic application, the term’s common sense meaning of “individuals who were born at about the same period of time” has changed. “Generation” has become a symbolic concept suggesting that people of the same age share a similar social experience and, moreover, a “collective memory”. Although the discourse on generation suggests an immediate common-sense understanding of what is meant by it, its subject-matter actually remains unclear.

In particular when it comes to historical periodisation, the generation term proves to be rather arbitrary, and closely connected to issues that each author
wants to bring to the fore in public discourse. Politically and theoretically, the term is highly blurred by its very seemingly self-evident nature. Of course, the term necessarily lacks an exact definition since every historical periodisation is always overdetermined by the speaker’s perspective, his or her social background, daily experience etc.. In the light of the general difficulty of periodising historical experiences, epochs or ages, the claim of a certain generational perspective is symptomatically problematic: it is never clear who is part of which generation.

Paradoxically, the pop-cultural and academic rise of the “generation” term might be best understood through the fact that there is no proper definition of its subject. Everyone who feels addressed can be part of it. Even in academia, the notion of generation is often used to label certain social groups and their supposedly pre-determined views, values and life-styles rather than to mark a parameter of age or generational relationship (father–mother/son–daughter etc.). And even though one cannot deny the importance of certain historical experiences based on significant historical events like the end of World War II, the fall of the Berlin Wall, 9/11 etc., the supposed analytical benefits of the concept “generation” in many cases remain diffuse.

“Post-ideological”? The Ideology of the “Generation” Concept

Given this environment described above, I am interested in the political shift of perspective that is implied when one talks about his or her own (political, social or whatever) experience in terms of a collective singular such as “generation”. Instead of asking the theoretical question as to what might be gained from such a notion – which is, apart from the mentioned limitations, a lot– the question posed here is instead: what is theoretically excluded when we take part in “talking ‘bout my generation”?

Hence, the crucial line of my argument addresses the ideological impact of the introduction of “generation” into the field of politics. If we remember good old leftist concepts like race, class, and gender which were traditionally relied on to explain one’s “objective” socio-economic position within society, it becomes clearer what the notion of generation stands for today. With the decline of the terminology of critical thought and its analytical tools, we have been witnessing the rise of the nebulous and underdetermined notion of generation.

The lack of a theoretical approach to socio-economical subjectivity leaves a vacuum which can be filled by other allegedly “post-ideological” concepts. Here of course, “generation” comes into play providing a more undetermined or “post-ideological” narrative to grasp the postmodern Lebenswelt (literally lifeworld) rather than supposedly “outdated” social parameters like class, gender and race. However, according to Slavoj Žižek, this very claim of post-
ideology is itself far from being post-ideological: it is in fact postmodern ideology par excellence.¹

The “generation” term mixes biographical aspects of individual experience with a symbolic, political level of “collective memory” as well as “collective identity” and thereby functions as a kind of ideological “transmission-belt” to problematic collective concepts such as nation, culture, religion and so on. At first glance, this ideological mishmash establishes a supposedly “post-ideological” collective. On a second glance, however, the term “generation” thereby functions as an exemplary case of “mythologizing” (Roland Barthes).² In this process it ultimately turns political questions based on concepts, ideas, ideologies etc. into pseudo-natural/culturalistic narratives.

The Idea of a “Third Generation” in a German-Israeli Context

In the context of German-Israeli relationships, after we had a “Second Generation” (the children of Nazi perpetrators and Shoah survivors), it has now become fashionable to talk about a “Third Generation”. Also in this case, “talking ‘bout my (third) generation” implies a naturalisation/culturalisation of political standpoints as well as experiences, and vice versa mythologizes contingent, biographical circumstances. To make this point clear, we might take a brief look at the post-war history of the generation discourse in mainstream politics. Remember, for instance, the former German chancellor Helmut Kohl who in 1984 claimed the Gnade der späten Geburt (in a paraphrase: “the blessing of a more recent birth”) in front of the Israeli parliament. Here we have a telling example of the conservative, old style use of the “generation” idea. Concerning Helmut Kohl, the conservative application of the generation term can be retrospectively described as a yearning hardly masked for a “normality” of German nationalism to be acknowledged by the rest of the world. And this line of argument has – with some variations – become the hegemonic narrative in German politics since then. In 1998, the Schröder government claimed to be a “Generation Berlin”, socialized after the National Socialist period and therefore ready to rule a so-called “mature nation”.

With the introduction of the notion of a “Third generation” to this field, however, we enter a different political discourse: rather than promoting an apologetic approach with regards to German history, the “Third Generation” discourse maintains a distance to revanchist or overtly nationalist positions. Moreover, the appeal of the “Third Generation” term can be read as a symptom for a postmodern re-defining of the political in terms of vague

concepts like culture, biography and Gemeinschaft (community). Here the term functions as a surrogate for collective identity based on an alleged “post-national” concept like generational experience. And indeed, at first sight the basic assumption of this discourse seems quite plausible: once the Holocaust and its living memories fade away as ever more witnesses – victims as well as perpetrators – die off, the grandchildren might talk more freely about the past without feelings of resentment or guilt.

But if we look more closely at the feelings of “guilt” and “resentment”, we quickly detect a certain phenomenon of transference from collective identity (nationhood) to generational experience i.e. belonging to the first or third generation in post-war Germany. In the case of the German discourse on the Holocaust, the individual feelings of “guilt” or “resentment” have always already been part of a (German post-war) collective identity. Introducing the concept of generation to this discourse, the construction of a collective identity – which in the case of nationhood already requires criticising – is transformed into a misleadingly self-evident matter of birth date. The crucial point here is not the denial of any historical differences between a generation born around 1920 and 1970; the ideological “twist” is caused by a transference from an ideological concept (nationhood as collective identity) to a contingent biographical incident. Therefore, “talking ’bout my generation” in this political arena is never “innocent”, since the impact of this talk is overdetermined by a short-circuit of subjective identity and collective nationhood.

Although things become complex here, we should not rely on the post-modern reflex of hastily denouncing nationhood, collectivity etc. as merely “constructed”. Of course, “German-ness” is an ideological construct – but a construction that supports the material gravity of the German national state. The political expression of this materiality can be seen in the “special relationship” between Germany and Israel as nation states, based upon an ethico-political agreement on “historical responsibility”. Everyone shares this responsibility as a German citizen as soon as he or she acquires a German passport. But if we bear in mind the emergence of political subjectivity – the very act of criticising one’s own collective identity by deconstructing it and/or search for a more universalist identity – then the ultimately contingent fact of citizenship has to be transcended and not be reproduced on a cultural or ideological level. In contrast, the concept of generation maintains a concept of collective identity as a de-politicizing surrogate for nationhood.

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TALKING ‘BOUT MY (THIRD) GENERATION

What is at Stake, or let’s talk about real Politics

What is at stake here is the opening of the field of real politics or mésentente, as Jacques Rancière puts it,4 understood as the act of becoming a political subject through political disagreement. However, this field of radical politics either becomes closed off, or re-integrated into mainstream politics by the discourse of “generation”.

On the flipside of the self-evident and unavoidable belonging to a generation lies the unquestioned belief that generation provides a quasi-neutral standpoint of biographical age cleaned of all social, national or religious traces. On the contrary, the common-sense understanding of generation – no matter whether it is labelled as “Third Generation” or “Generation X” – derives from the very attributes which are believed to be excluded from the term i.e. race, gender, social background, political attitudes, class etc. For example, the so-called Generation 89, a German reference to the post-Cold-War generation, was coined in contrast to Generation 68. Of course, the bottom line of both terms does not only refer to objective historical or subjective biographical circumstances but to political standpoints: whereas Generation 68 is considered to be a critical, left-minded group of white European or North American intellectuals or culturally progressive middle classes, Generation 89 paints the picture of a “post-ideological”, economically effective and efficient, new, German middle class that calls for economic reforms in order to get rid of the old, social-democratic welfare-state. Although both images are highly political, the idea of generation helps to transfer these political questions to the blurred field of culture.

Finally, the strange urge to point out one’s “Third Generational Background” when it comes to Holocaust education, inner German-Jewish relations or the Middle East conflict, might be understood as the weakness or even lack of a truly political standpoint. Again, I am not arguing against the notion of “passively” belonging to a particular generational group that is defined by certain historical or biographical parameters. Nor am I denying the “active” relevance of historical experience conferred by generational belonging. What I am criticising concerns the political gesture of taking flight to a highly vague category when talking about issues that matter: the National Socialist past and the German present, the Middle Eastern conflict, anti-Semitism, questions of (post-/anti-) Zionism, and nationalism. Ultimately, the term “generation” should be understood as part of a general, postmodern tendency that turns political questions into cultural questions thereby avoiding political debate.

The End of History, or: is there a real Meaning in the Term “Generation”?  

Consequently, although there are profound reasons for sociologists, psychologists and other researchers focussing on Holocaust Studies so as to apply the term “generation” to their theoretical designs, in the political arena the use of the notion generation should certainly be rejected. Ultimately, the effect of an ongoing discourse of “talking ‘bout my generation” contributes to an ideological procedure already at work in postmodern thought: redefining the political into a falsely natural set of factors i.e. culture, biography and collectiveness.

In contrast to this, an alternative concept of “generation” may also be possible, and it is one which I am sketching in conclusion. If the generation term were used to highlight the historical experience of certain events in history of major importance, a notion comparable to Kant’s notion of a Geschichtszeichen (“a Sign of History”), a more “universalist” meaning could be attained. Whereas the generation term as criticised above always focuses on the “particular” or subjective side of history, a “universalist” meaning of generation could account for the impact of objective, socio-political relations crystallised in certain historical events, as for example the fall of the Berlin Wall which marks the end of the Cold War era. Instead of collectivizing, and as a result homogenizing people’s individual experiences into an ideological concept, a universalist meaning of generation could focus instead on the irreducible conjunction of the active process of making history and suffering from it. Here we should revisit the “modern” or capitalist experience par excellence: the dialectic of being history’s active subject and – at the same time – feeling impotently subjected to objectified historical

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5 Geschichtszeichen relates to Kant’s work Der Streit der Fakultäten (1794). With reference to the French Revolution, Kant introduces the notion of a “Sign of History” to mark or indicate a certain historical progress (Fortschreiten zum Besseren) of humanity as a whole which cannot be grasped on the level of the singularity of individuals or individual experiences. For Kant, this universal Fortschreiten or progression of humanity is to be addressed in terms of a roughly indicating (hindeutendes) sign of history expressing a certain historical tendency. Kant’s crucial point resides in the irreducible conjunction of history as an inter-subjective or universal process and an ethical/political progress within society. As a result, in German the notion of Fortschritt has a double meaning implying a mere process within time as well as an ethical/political progress. As Walter Benjamin argued in his thesis “On the Concept of History”, this (Kantian) claim of history as an ethical/political progress cannot be taken for granted and thereby objectified, since the historian himself is always already involved in a political struggle for the “true image” of the past. Consequently, Benjamin developed a different concept of history that is not based upon progress and the progression of “empty and homogenous time”(See: Benjamin, Walter: Selected Writings, Vol. 4 1938-1940, Cambridge, USA, London, 2003).
processes (e.g. social relations, historical transformations). So we could gain
an understanding of the ambivalent nature of history in its objective impact
i.e. objective historical processes like the end of the Cold War or the rise of
global capitalism, and its subjective meaning i.e. historical or generational
experiences which are always already inscribed in the symbolic field of
culture.

In stark contrast to this proposed historico-political understanding of the
term “generation”, we are witnessing the decline of history as an
epistemological approach. Ironically, with the rise of global capitalism the
idea of history as a “universal history” has perversely come true in the
capitalist world market. Hence, the outdated, historicist concept of history as a
collective singular has now turned into the real (hi)story of a global capitalism
acting like a universal matrix of history. Even more ironically, at the very
moment of history becoming real Weltgeschichte (world history), Francis
Fukuyama (1992) called for an “End of History”: this opened up the
postmodernist horizon for a plurality of histories, collective narratives, and of
course generational stories. Once the concept of history is dropped, then the
notion of generation seems to be one of its successors. In the meantime,
history is being written.

Sami Khatib, born 1976 in Hamburg to a German mother and a Palestinian
father; living as a freelance writer, lecturer and political activist in Berlin;
currently writing his PhD on Walter Benjamin’s messianic Marxism.