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REFLECTION ON THE GENERATION DIVIDE THROUGH THE PRISM OF SOCIAL FIELDS THEORY

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ABSTRACT

This paper reflects on the generational divide in contemporary society, observed through the prism of Social fields theory, developed by Pierre Bourdieu and especially the expanded version introduced by Jens Beckert. It discusses how different generations navigate social structures, cultural norms, and technological advancements. By analyzing key concepts such as habitus, capital, and field, the paper highlights a possible approach to observe how and why generations perceive economic opportunities, technological innovations, and social change. Opportunities and challenges vary through time and influence on observable characteristics of a particular generation. The implications of these generational differences could be profound for social cohesion, intergenerational dialogue, intergenerational agreements and collaborative problem-solving of future challenges. Recommendations are also presented to improve intergenerational cooperation, particularly in economic and technological fields.

KEYWORDS

generation divide, social fields theory, social cohesion, capital, intergenerational dialogue, technological innovation

INTRODUCTION

As generations form times, times shape generations. Various variables, including the general level of technological advancement, political situation and availability of food shape general conditions where generations are being built and formed. Kondratieff's long waves (Kolar, 2020) in economic life could bring us insights and understanding of different generations through time (Figure 1).

The generational divide, that are characterized by differences in values, attitudes, and behaviours among age cohorts, has emerged as a central topic in contemporary social science. Rapid technological developments, shifts in economic landscapes, and evolving cultural norms have deepened this divide. These factors have not only created tensions between generations but have also presented unique opportunities for collaboration. Understanding and managing these differences is critical in today's increasingly interconnected and digitalized world.

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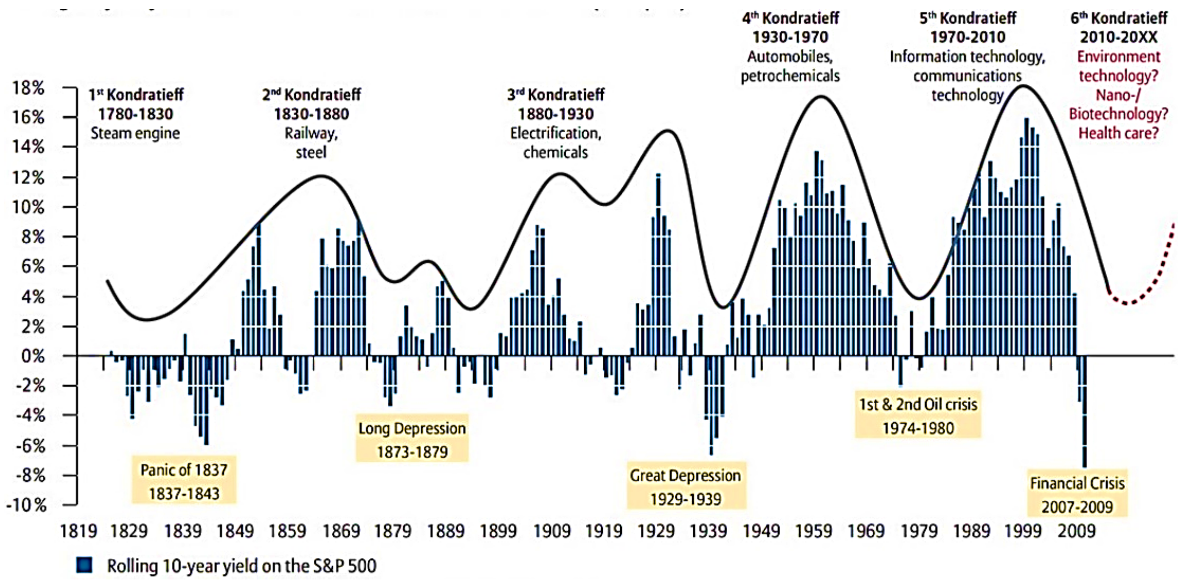

Figure 1. Kondratieff waves representations with S&P 500 10-year yields
Source: Kolar, Besednjak Valic, 2021

The so-called Cycle of influence between Technology and society is presented in Figure 2.

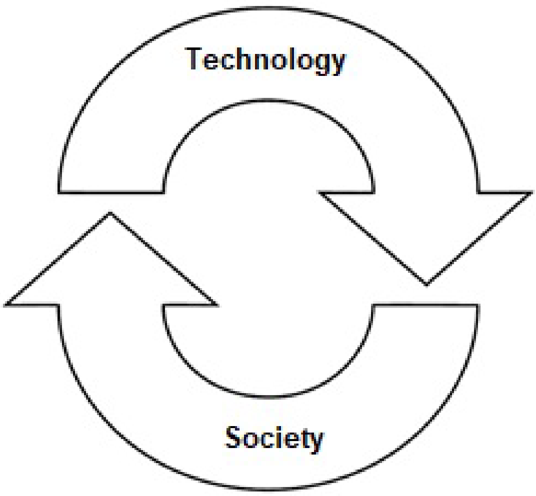

Figure 2. The cycle of influence between Technology and society
Source: Vannoy, 2010

Generational conflict, which also originates in differences in cognitive frames adopted by a particular generation, is often framed as a clash between tradition and modernity and manifests across multiple domains—politics, workplaces, social interactions, and technological adoption. For example, younger generations are often seen as more progressive in their views on social issues, while older generations may hold more traditional perspectives shaped by past experiences. Such divisions are intensified in settings where rapid technological change disrupts established practices and introduces new forms of value/capital, which can be unfamiliar to older generations. A great example can be social networks or digitalisation in general, which is much easier and thus faster adopted by younger generations. Meanwhile, older generations struggle with coping even with an idea,

Social fields theory, developed by Pierre Bourdieu, offers a comprehensive framework to analyze these intergenerational dynamics. Bourdieu's key concepts–habitus, capital, and field–help explain how individuals and groups operate within social structures and how they accumulate and deploy various forms of capital to navigate fields of power. Habitus refers to the deeply ingrained dispositions formed by an individual's upbringing, while capital includes social, cultural, economic, and symbolic resources that influence how effectively one can compete within a given field. The field itself is a social space where struggles for these resources occur, and within these fields, the generational divide becomes most visible.

Jens Beckert further expanded Bourdieu's framework by focusing on how fields – particularly economic ones—are shaped not only by material forces but by collective expectations, social narratives, and what he terms "fictional expectations" (Beckert, 2010). Beckert's insights are particularly relevant in understanding how different generations perceive economic risks and opportunities, especially in the context of rapid technological advancement and global economic shifts.

This paper explores the generational divide through the theoretical lens of social fields theory, particularly emphasising economic and technological fields. By understanding the distinct ways different generations approach social and economic opportunities, we can better address the challenges and opportunities presented by generational differences. Moreover, this analysis underscores the importance of fostering intergenerational dialogue and cooperation, which are essential for maintaining social cohesion in an era of increasing complexity and uncertainty.

THE GENERATION DIVIDE AND ITS CHARACTERISTICS

Generational differences, often called the "generation gap," have been extensively studied in sociological, psychological, and economic literature. Each generational cohort is shaped by the historical, social, and economic conditions that dominate during their formative years. Scholars typically identify four key generational groups in contemporary society: Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z (Howe, Strauss, 2000) – Figure 3.

Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964) came of age during a period of post-World War II economic expansion, leading to the development of values centred on hard work, stability, and loyalty to institutions. Their worldview was largely shaped by the Cold War, civil rights movements, and the rise of consumer culture, which fostered an emphasis on material security and long-term planning. In contrast, Generation X (born between 1965 and 1980) matured during a time of economic uncertainty and increasing globalization, leading them to prioritize individualism, adaptability, and self-reliance.

Millennials (born between 1981 and 1996) and Generation Z (born after 1997) were raised in a period of fast technological innovation, marked by the rise of the internet, social media, and the gig economy. As a result, these younger generations tend to place a higher value on flexibility, innovation, and social responsibility. They are more likely to embrace technology and view it as a tool for social change, whereas older generations may approach technological advancements with scepticism or caution. These distinctions between generations manifest across multiple social fields, influencing everything from political views to workplace dynamics and economic behaviour.

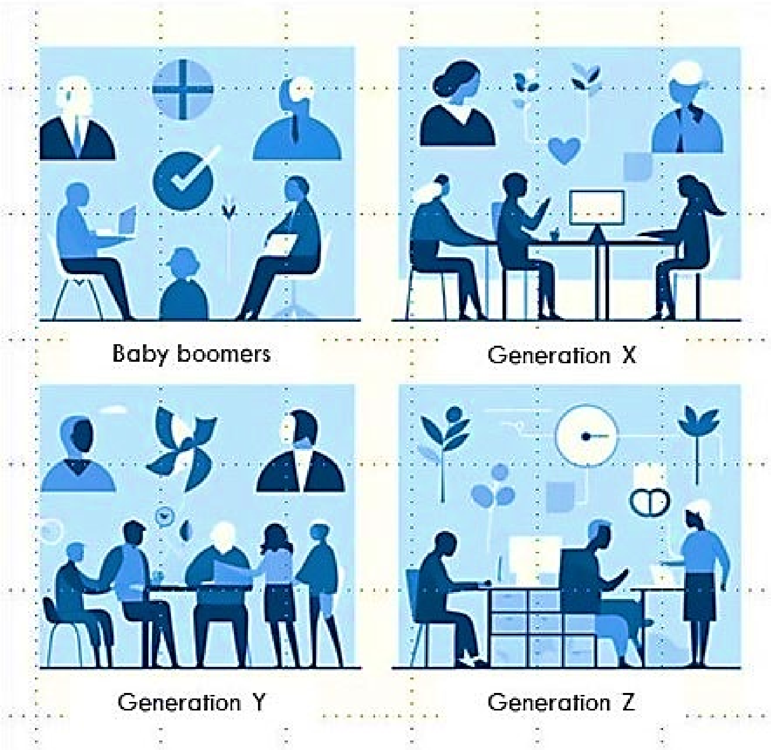

Figure 3. Four generations in the work environment
Source: Author

SOCIAL FIELDS THEORY BY BOURDIEU

Pierre Bourdieu's social fields theory provides a powerful framework for understanding the mechanisms that drive the generational divide. Bourdieu argued that societies consist of various fields, each with its own set of rules, norms, and forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Individuals or groups struggle within these fields to accumulate the types of capital most valued in that context. These forms of capital include:

- **Economic Capital**: Financial resources that can be used to secure power and influence.
- **Cultural Capital**: Educational qualifications, knowledge, and cultural competencies.
- **Social Capital**: Networks of relationships that provide support and access to resources.
- **Symbolic Capital**: Prestige, honour, or recognition that confers authority or legitimacy.

Habitus, which refers to the disposition individuals develop through socialization, shapes how they engage with and navigate these fields. Generational habitus reflects the historical and cultural conditions in which different age cohorts were raised. For instance, older generations may rely more on traditional forms of social and cultural capital, while younger generations leverage their digital fluency as a form of economic and cultural capital in increasingly tech-centric fields.

Bourdieu's concept of field highlights the competitive nature of social spaces where individuals and groups vie for dominance. The generational divide becomes most evident in such contexts, as each cohort brings different forms of capital and habitus into the field, leading to both conflict and collaboration.

EXPANDED SOCIAL FIELDS THEORY BY BECKERT

Jens Beckert's contribution to social fields theory, particularly his concept of "fictional expectations," provides an additional layer of understanding of how fields evolve (Beckert, 2010). Beckert emphasizes that economic behaviour is not driven purely by rational calculations but is heavily influenced by collective imaginaries of the future. These expectations, often shaped by generational experiences, influence how individuals and groups perceive risk, opportunity, and the trajectory of social change.

As shown in Figure 3, these three fields, institutions, social networks and Cognitive frame, are interconnected, and each field influences the other two and vice versa. Checking Institutions makes values socially relevant and influences the structure of social networks. Due to accelerating technical development, especially in the 20th century, institutions clearly had a hard time following their role in this model and influencing the structure of social networks, and we are witnessing the decline of various institutions. With dynamic social networks, the influence of social networks to establish collective power to shape institutions was also speeded up. With differently structured social networks, their influence on cognitive frames changed also, and since social networks shape and diffuse cognitive frames, they also changed.

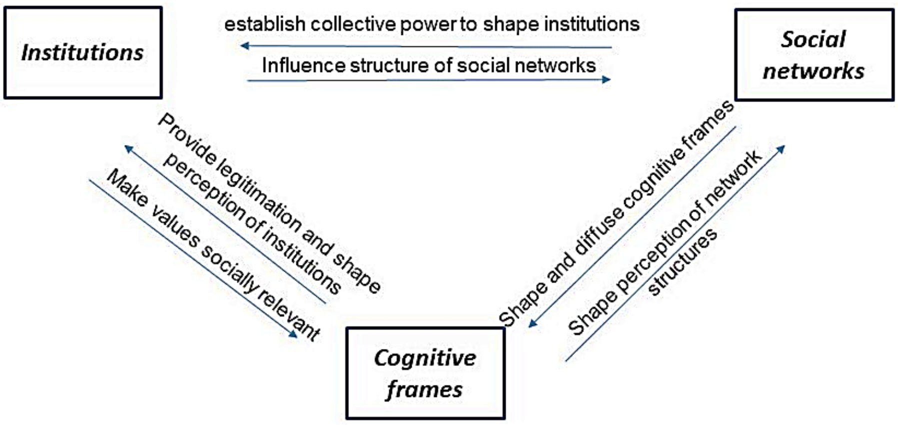

Figure 4. The reciprocal influence of the three social forces in market fields
Source: Beckert, 2010

For example, Millennials and Generation Z, having come of age during periods of rapid technological innovation, tend to have more optimistic views of the future, seeing opportunities in the gig economy, digital entrepreneurship, and new forms of economic exchange (e.g., cryptocurrencies and social media monetization). In contrast, older generations may approach these same trends cautiously, shaped by experiences of economic crises or the challenges of adapting to technological disruptions.

Beckert's framework helps explain why generational perspectives on economic opportunities and risks diverge so sharply. The "fictional expectations" held by different generations influence their strategies for navigating social and economic fields, contributing to both intergenerational conflict and the potential for collaboration.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Economic and technological fields are among the most exemplary arenas where the generational divide plays out. Baby Boomers and Generation X, shaped by relatively stable post-war economies, often emphasize security, long-term planning, and traditional forms of capital accumulation (such as homeownership and pension plans). These generations tend to view economic success as a linear progression achieved through stable employment and prudent financial management.

In contrast, Millennials and Generation Z have faced a more precarious economic environment, marked by the global financial crisis, stagnant wages, and the rise of the gig economy. As a result, these younger generations prioritize flexibility, adaptability, and using digital platforms to create new forms of economic capital. They are more likely to engage in non-traditional career paths, such as freelance work, digital entrepreneurship, and remote employment, which older generations may view as unstable or risky.

Technological fluency is a key form of capital distinguishing younger generations from their older counterparts. Millennials and Generation Z have grown up with digital technologies, making them more adept at using tools like social media, online networks, and collaborative platforms to build social and economic capital. For these generations, digital capital is a tool for economic gain and a means of social engagement and activism. As technological changes are further accelerating, we might expect these effects to follow a rapid pace also.

Conversely, Baby Boomers and Generation X may struggle to adapt to the fast-changing environment of technological change, often relying on more established forms of social and cultural capital. This disparity in digital capital can lead to conflicts in professional settings, where younger workers may be seen as more innovative, while older workers may possess institutional knowledge and experience that is undervalued in tech-driven environments, but the value of this knowledge and experience may vary a lot among different generations.

Technological disruption has exacerbated generational tensions, particularly in the workplace. As younger generations leverage their digital fluency to navigate increasingly tech-centric fields, older generations may feel alienated or threatened by the speed of change. This can lead to misunderstandings, miscommunication, and, in some cases, outright conflict. For example, younger employees may push for adopting new digital tools or remote work policies, while older employees may resist these changes, preferring more traditional work structures and communication methods.

However, technological disruption also offers opportunities for intergenerational collaboration, but should not be taken for granted. Younger workers can share their digital expertise with older colleagues while benefiting from the institutional knowledge and long-term perspectives that older workers bring. Organizations that actively promote intergenerational knowledge-sharing are more likely to foster innovation, creativity, and resilience in the face of rapid change.

CONCLUSION

This extended theoretical exploration of the generational divide through the lens of social fields theory underscores the complexity of intergenerational dynamics in contemporary society. Differences between generations are not merely a matter of age but are deeply embedded in the social structures and fields where individuals and groups compete for capital. More accurately, they compete for different forms of capital.

By understanding these differences, we can better address the challenges posed by generational conflict and, therefore, harness the potential for intergenerational collaboration and also attract and employ younger colleagues.

The generational divide manifests in distinct ways across social, economic, and technological fields. While older generations may rely on traditional forms of capital and long-term strategies, younger generations leverage digital capital and prioritize flexibility in navigating increasingly complex and dynamic fields. Recognizing these dynamics is essential for fostering effective intergenerational dialogue and cooperation.

Recommendations for improving intergenerational cooperation are:

1. Encourage environments where knowledge-sharing between generations is institutionalized.
2. Develop mentorship programs that allow older workers to pass on institutional knowledge while learning from younger colleagues' digital expertise.
3. Foster a culture of flexibility and adaptability in organizations, recognizing that different generations bring unique strengths to the table.

Further theoretical research could explore how globalization, migration, and technological innovation intersect with generational dynamics. Additionally, examining the long-term effects of major global events (e.g., pandemics, economic crises, international conflicts or natural disasters) on intergenerational perspectives of risk and opportunity could provide valuable insights into the evolving nature of the generational divide.

Another trajectory of research on this topic may follow the colourful environment of the Danube region countries or wider, seeking to understand trends and situations.

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