Taking Time Seriously and the Value of Generational Analysis in IR

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TIM LUECKE, AUG 9 2016

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As the very existence of this volume demonstrates, scholars of International Relations (IR) are increasingly paying attention to the importance of time and how time affects processes and outcomes in international politics. In this chapter, I will not make the case for why we should incorporate time into our analysis, but assume that we can take it for granted that it is an endeavour worthwhile pursuing. Once we assume that there is a case for taking time seriously, two questions pose themselves. First, how do we actually take time and the temporality of international politics more explicitly into account, and incorporate time into our existing theoretical frameworks? Second, what are the epistemological implications of incorporating time into the ontology of our theoretical frameworks and how do we address them in our research.[1] Pointing out that taking temporality seriously requires us to rethink our epistemological commitments is one thing, showing how to actually incorporate those epistemological implications is another.

In the pages below, I will argue that one particularly promising way to incorporate the temporal dimension of international politics into our theoretical apparatuses is to adopt a generational method of analysis. The 'generation' in essence constitutes a temporal unit of analysis, which locates individuals and collectives in the process of time. A generational method therefore allows us to study how groups that are located at different positions in time interact and consequently affect political outcomes.

My answer to the second question is that adopting a generational method and taking the temporality of political ideas and practice more seriously implies that we, students and scholars of international politics, cannot claim to occupy a timeless position from which to evaluate international relations and foreign policy. Taking time seriously implies that the knowledge we produce as a discipline is always time-dependent, since we always interpret the world from the temporal position of our own generation. This implies the possibility that the validity and 'truth' of our research varies historically. One could consequently question whether our research and the knowledge we produce can therefore be judged and evaluated in an objective fashion. This threat of relativism, however, can be countered by making the observer's position, i.e. our own position, in time explicit and by incorporating it directly into our own research. I show that generational analysis helps us to take a first step in addressing the epistemological implications of taking time seriously by allowing us to study our own perspective in the temporal process via an analysis of our own generation and how it relates to the people whose actions and ideas we study.

In order to illustrate how to apply generational analysis and how to address the epistemological consequences outlined above, I will discuss my own research on the role of the WWII Generation in post-war Germany. I have only recently begun this project, which builds on my dissertation, and the pages to follow will consequently help me to think through some of the issues that I will have to address in this project. You should therefore consider this an initial

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'think piece' which contains a lot of ideas that will need to be developed much more carefully in the future. At the same time, however, I hope that drawing on my own work will not only show the complexities of dealing with time in our research, but also provide a somewhat concrete example of how one can possibly address these complexities.

Temporality and Generations

Time is, alongside space, one of the most fundamental conditions of our existence. We are temporal beings in so far as we are born, age, and die, and we experience the social world around us as a constant stream of events that signify the passage of time. In order to understand how temporality affects outcomes in international politics, we therefore ideally possess theoretical frameworks that are dynamic, by which I mean that they are capable of incorporating changes and processes that occur over time. Most theories in IR, however, are static and a-temporal, in so far as they focus on the structure of incentives, the international system at any given point in time, etc.[2] In my own work, I have tried to demonstrate that generational analysis provides one powerful complement to our theoretical toolbox that enables us to take the temporal nature of international politics and foreign policy into account more explicitly.

In this section I will explain how the concept of generations and generational analysis provide one particularly fruitful way to take the temporality of our 'objects of study,' and therefore the temporality of foreign policy and international politics, more seriously. By 'temporality' I mean the experience of time (McIntosh 2015: fn 2), and we experience time through the passage of events, our actions in the present, and our expectations for the future. The analytical value of the concept of 'generations' is that it locates individuals and groups at the intersection of two of the most fundamental temporal dimensions, collective and individual time. Collective time refers to events which are experienced by society as a whole. Elections, national sports tournaments, or, most extremely, war, are just some examples of such collective events. *How* we experience these events and therefore our time, however, also depends on the particular life stage we occupy, or on our individual time. Events experienced during childhood will have a different effect on someone than events experienced as an adult. Most generation scholars agree that the age of youth plays an especially important stage in life given that this is the time when most individuals develop and solidify their basic political orientations and worldviews.[3]

The generation then signifies the intersection between individual life stage and collective events. As such, it constitutes a unit of analysis that locates people in the process of time, similarly to how the concept of 'class' locates people in the existing social structure. However, in contrast to analytical concepts, such as social class, the state, or the international system, all of which capture a particular aspect of social reality at any given *point* in time, the concept of generations constitutes a temporal unit of analysis which captures the different experiences of groups of people located at different intersections of individual and collective time. This implies that different generations live, quite literally, in different times because 1) they experienced a particular set of events during a different life stage than their predecessors or successors, or because 2) they experienced different sets of events during the same life stage. Importantly, this means that different generations share a different worldview and attach different meanings to the ideas that they inherit from preceding generations. 'Democracy' does mean something different to me than it did to my grandparents. Generational analysis allows us to study the interaction of differently positioned generations and how those interactions affect political outcomes.

In contrast to a linear conception of time, where time moves forward as a singular stream of events, a generational perspective implies a conception of time which is comprised of multiple temporal experiences, or generations, which co-exist simultaneously while still living in different 'times'.

The potential range of applications of generational analysis to the study of foreign policy and international relations is enormous, given that most of the processes we study take place, by definition, over the course of time. Instead of going through a list of applications of a generational approach,[4] I will focus on the concept of political generations and use my own work as an example to illustrate how to actually apply generational analysis. This will also set up my argument that adopting a generational approach, and more generally taking temporality seriously, has important implications for how we study international politics and for the status of knowledge that we produce in the discipline.

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Political Generations

In my work I have drawn on the concept of generations in order to develop a theory of political generations and to show that political generations have the potential to explain periods of change and stability in foreign policy and international politics. I define political generations as cohorts in their youth who, in response to a series of events that seem to challenge the existing social and political order, develop a sense of generational consciousness and belonging. [5] As a result, they develop distinct, historically specific, sets of political worldviews and act in the world on the basis of shared background beliefs that make political practice and discourse possible in the first place. The fact that generational experiences are shared by entire cohorts, however, does not imply that the members of a generation agree on how to respond to the challenges facing their society. Quite the contrary, members of one and the same generation might disagree heavily how to address those challenges. What makes a generation a political generation is that its members have to deal with the same set of historical circumstances at a similar stage in their life cycles. The members of political generations identify with one another through the challenges that formative events pose, but they often disagree heavily on how to respond to those challenges.

Political generations can be more 'radical' or 'traditional', depending on whether their members perceive the old generation in power to respond to the challenge facing society successfully or not. If elites, and therefore the old generation, are perceived as failing to address the challenge, members of the newly emerging generation will attempt to change the existing political culture. The Sixties Generation is maybe the most famous example of such a radical political generation. However, as the fate of the Sixties Generation has shown, attempts by the young generation to change the established order are often doomed to failure. The reason for this is that power is largely concentrated in the hands of the older generation, which will often attempt to resist the challenges of the young generation. However, even if political generations fail to bring about change at the time of their 'birth', their members eventually age and start to replace the older generation from positions of power. One of the most interesting and potentially valuable insights of a theory of political generations is therefore that the initial cause of change, a series of formative events, and its effect do not follow immediately upon each other, but only occur with a time lag of roughly 15-25 years.[6] A generational approach is therefore able to provide new answers to old questions, especially when it comes to investigating the long term effects domestically and internationally of events such as World War I and II, Vietnam, the attacks on September 11, 2001, the Arab Spring, or the economic crisis that started in 2008.

Whereas generational change that brings to power a radical generation is likely to result in changes in political culture and political practice, the coming to power of traditional generations is marked by stability. Traditional political generations emerge when cohorts in their youth perceive the response of the old generation to challenges facing the political order as successful. Instead of trying to radically change the existing political order, traditional generations therefore adopt the political culture of the old generation, even though they might adjust it to new circumstances.

Political generations therefore constitute one potentially powerful mechanism to adjust political culture, and by extension ideas and beliefs about foreign policy and international politics, to an ever changing world. Based on this argument, I suggest that radical and traditional political generations alternate across time, thereby giving rise to cycles of change and stability in foreign policy and international politics.[7] In my dissertation, I subject this theory of political generations and generational change to an initial plausibility probe through an examination of U.S. foreign policy and the emergence of the West in the 20th century. While not conclusive, the results show that the timing of generational changes matches the timing of periods of change and stability in U.S. foreign policy and international politics.

Epistemological Implications

The argument that I have tried to make so far is that generational analysis can provide us with access to the temporality of the people whose ideas and practices we study in the context of foreign policy and international politics. However, adopting a generational perspective and thereby incorporating temporality into the ontology of our theoretical frameworks also has important epistemological implications, or put differently, implications for how we can know, understand, and consequently study the world. Namely, if different generations experience the world differently and therefore interpret the world differently, then we, as researchers, cannot occupy a 'timeless' position from which

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to study those generations, since we ourselves occupy a particular generational location in the process of time. This implies that the knowledge that the discipline of IR, and all social science for that matter, produces cannot be a-temporal and 'objective', but is always temporal itself, time-bound, and contextual.[8] The contribution of a generational approach to the study of foreign policy and IR, however, rests in not only alerting us to the epistemological implications of taking time seriously, but primarily in providing a first step in addressing these implications in our research.

Let me briefly illustrate through my own current research how this problem manifests itself in research practice and how generational analysis provides a solution to said problem. About a year ago I began working on a new research project, which investigates the role of the WWII Generation, those who experienced the Second World War during their formative years of youth, in post-war Germany. I am German myself and the question that made me study IR and enter academia was 'how is it possible that a country, such as Germany, starts two world wars, brings incredible destruction to the world, and then changes into one of the most stable, economically successful, and peaceful nations on earth?' Obviously there already exists a wide range of answers to this question, provided by realist, liberal, or constructivist theories. However, most of these answer focus on external factors, such as the occupying forces, the balance of power, etc. Yet, few accounts in IR that I am aware of have examined the role of Germans and especially of those Germans who had fought during the war.[9]

However, there is also a more personal motivation to pursue this project. My grandfather, Paul Lücke, had been minister of housing and for a brief period minister of the interior for the Conservative Democratic Union (CDU) during the post-war years in Germany. He died before I was born and since we had never spoken much about him in my family, I had planned to write a biography for some years already. Paul Lücke was born in 1914 and had fought as a soldier of the Wehrmacht during the entire course of the war from 1939 and 1945. Despite his participation in the war, he had never joined the Nazi party and actively opposed the Nazis during his youth on the basis of his Christian-Conservative values. Those values also informed his latter public housing policies and his efforts to house the millions of refugees that were returning to Germany after the war. His biography therefore provides a perfect starting point and analytical foil to examine the contribution of members of the WWII Generation who were not convinced Nazis and who contributed significantly to the successful reconstruction and re-integration of Western Germany. For that reason, I decided to channel both these motivations into a single project.

However, in the context of discussing this project with colleagues, friends, and a very observant archivist at the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, I was asked repeatedly whether the relationship to my grandfather would not affect my interpretation of history and make it impossible to remain objective and unbiased. I was obviously aware of the issue already and knew that I had to address the question. However, I also quickly noticed that I needed to address not only the question of my personal relationship to my grandfather, but my relationship to his generation as a whole. The WWII Generation obviously has a particular public image in Germany, given that many of its members were implicated in the Nazi regime, the Holocaust, and other mass atrocities. Moreover, this public image of the WWII generation in Germany has clearly been shaped by the public discourse of another political generation, the Sixties Generation, or the '68er Generation' (Generation of 1968), as it is best known in Germany. The Generation of 1968 emerged, just like in the United States, in large part as a response to the war in Vietnam, racial unrest, the perception that liberal Western countries were supporting repressive regimes in Third World countries, but also in response to the fact that many former Nazis or Nazi supporters were still occupying positions of public power in Western Germany. Unquestionably, the Generation of 1968 and the fact that it contributed significantly to an actual engagement with the past and the crimes that were committed by those who started and fought in the Second World War has been a positive influence and a significant reason for the political and cultural change that has made Germany the country that it is today.

At the same time, the public discourses and images of the WWII Generation that the Sixties Generation created in Germany, and which still dominate the political discourse today, have also resulted in the fact that the contribution of members of the WWII Generation who were not Nazis has often been ignored or 'forgotten'. Now, I myself was raised and socialised by members of the Generation of 1968. Not only my parents, but my teachers, high school teachers, and many adult role models during my youth belonged to the Sixties Generation. As a result, my political worldview and also my perspective on the WWII Generation are already shaped and biased by the interpretations of the

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Generation of 1968. The complicated relationship between the WWII Generation, the Generation of 1968, and my own generation therefore already makes it difficult to see how an 'objective history' of the WWII Generation is possible, and it shows that taking temporality seriously does come at the cost of increasing complexity and intricate epistemological problems.

How should one deal with the problem that there seems to be no timeless, and therefore no objective, position from which to evaluate the contributions of the WWII Generation in Germany? I think that the only defensible course of action is to confront this problem head on and to explicitly address and incorporate the temporal nature of my position and consequently of the results that I generate into the analysis. Put differently, we should not merely accept, but embrace the fact that we evaluate the past and try to predict the future from a particular perspective in time which will inevitably affect the results of our research. Generational analysis provides a clear answer to the question of how to uncover this position in time; namely, by studying our own generation and the particular worldview and formative challenges that characterise it. In the case of my research project, which tries to examine the role of the WWII Generation in Germany, I will therefore not only examine the political orientations of the WWII Generation, but also those of the Generation of 1968, and of my own generation. More importantly, I will need to disentangle the complicated ways with which these three generations relate to one another.

The Threat of Relativism

Taking time seriously, for example by studying generations from one's own generational location, means to accept that there is no 'objective' or 'timeless' position from which to study social life. Even though this is a discussion that I can clearly not engage in much detail here, the lack of a timeless position runs contrary to the tenets of positivism, which still dominates the field of IR and it raises the question of the status of knowledge thus generated.

Indeed, it is no coincidence that the author of the most seminal essay on generations, Karl Mannheim, was first and foremost famous for his attempts to develop a sociology of knowledge, which he understood to consist of a 'theory of the social or existential conditioning of knowledge by location in a socio-historical structure' (Pilcher 1994:482). Much of Mannheim's work rested on a critique of the Enlightenment idea that reason or truth are temporally static. Instead, he argued that reason is historically dynamic (Hekman 1986: 54), or put differently, the criteria for evaluating good arguments and by extension good research vary across time. This is much in line with the thought of the philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn (1996), who argued that science progresses not in linear fashion but in paradigm shifts which (coincidence?) are caused by generational changes.

The critique that Mannheim encountered, and which bedevils any attempt at a sociology of knowledge more generally, is that his arguments ended up in relativism, the idea that there is no way at all to differentiate between 'good' and 'bad' reasons, research, or 'truths'. If reason varies historically and if there are therefore no objective criteria with which to evaluate knowledge, isn't all knowledge and therefore also all IR research entirely up to our, or in this case my own, subjective standards?

My answer to this question is a cautious and preliminary 'no'. Yes, knowledge from a particular generational location or temporal perspective is not 'objective knowledge', understood as knowledge from some ultimate timeless Archimedean viewpoint. Yet, it is neither merely subjective. Instead knowledge, and therefore the research we produce, is intersubjective in so far as it rests on standards of evaluating reasons that are shared in the community that is 'IR'. More generally, the knowledge and practices we produce and engage in can be evaluated by members of our generation, who share the same temporal location and therefore similar standards of evaluation. In addition, once we make our own generation location explicit, our research can be assessed by older or younger generations, since they will be able to locate themselves vis-à-vis our generation in the historical process and thereby be able to understand the particular context in which our research was generated.

Conclusion

As I already stated up front, this is only a very first cut at the question of how to address the epistemological implications of taking time seriously. This question requires a much more in-depth discussion and a careful

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engagement with the relevant literature in social theory, sociology of knowledge, and obviously IR. My primary goal in the pages above was to take a first initial stab at thinking through the consequences of taking temporality seriously and to use my own work as an example for how one can potentially deal with those issues. I hope that I have been able to show that generational analysis is one promising way to incorporate the temporality of international politics into our theoretical frameworks. However, adopting the notion that generational membership shapes the way we perceive, interpret, and act in the world implies that we ourselves, the knowledge we produce, the practices we engage in, are shaped by our generation, which is the location we occupy in the temporal process. I think that this requires us to explicitly incorporate our own temporal location into our research and accept the fact that our results are judged by community standards that are upheld and changed by generations of IR scholars and students. This argument therefore comes to similar conclusions to those of Friedrich Kratochwil, who argued that history understood as memory 'is always viewed from a particular *vantage point of the present'* (Kratochwil 2006: 21). Kratochwil arrives at this conclusion through a discussion of the role of history and the ability of the discipline to generate practical, rather than merely theoretical, knowledge. The fact that we seem to arrive at similar conclusions, however, suggests that if we want to take time seriously in IR research we will actually need to think through the epistemological implications and complications that are entailed in making such an analytical shift. In my opinion it will certainly be worth the costs. Yet, developing these ideas further will require a collective effort. I therefore hope that the next generation of IR students and scholars will take up the challenge.

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Notes

[1] Loosely defined, while 'ontology' is concerned with what the world is 'made of', 'epistemology' is concerned with how we know that world.

[2] See, for example, McIntosh (2015).

[3] On the relevance of the age period of youth and for good general introductions to the concept of generations and its explanatory contribution see, for example, Eisenstadt 2003 (1956); Edmunds and Turner (2002, 2005; Fogt (1982); and Mannheim 1997 (1952). For a discussion of the concept of generations and its application to foreign policy analysis and the study of IR, see Jervis (1976) and Steele and Acuff (2012).

[4] See Steele and Acuff (2012) for an excellent showcase of the potential breadth of applications of generational analysis. Also, for a much more modest attempt, see Luecke (2013b).

[5] Note that only events which 'seem to challenge the established political' qualify as events capable of resulting in new political generations. For example, while the war in Korea was not perceived as challenging the political order of the U.S. at the time, the war in Vietnam certainly was perceived as such a challenge by both the political right and left. In the end, whether or not a particular series of events results in the emergence of a new political generation is an empirical question.

[6] If we define the age of 'youth' as roughly the age of 18-25 and consider that most people in positions of power are at least 35 years of age or older, we can project that generational change will begin about 15-25 years after the generation experiences its formative events. In general, the boundaries of political generations are always slightly fuzzy since even individuals who do not fall exactly into the age bracket defined as formative might identify with the formative experiences of a generation. However, most concepts we employ in IR, such as the state or culture, have fuzzy boundaries that are difficult to define with precision, which does not stop us from drawing on them in our research.

[7] For a more detailed discussion see Luecke (2013a).

[8] I am certainly not the first one to make this claim. See especially Kratochwil (2006).

[9] Jackson (2006) is a notable exception.

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