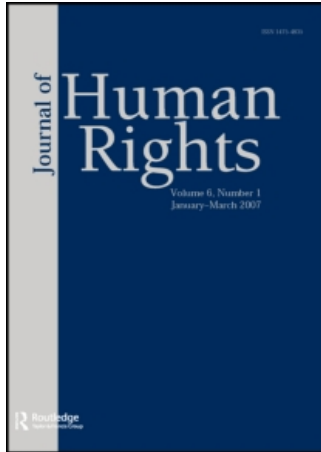


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Lost childhood, lost generations: the intergenerational transmission of trauma

JEFFREY PRAGER

Introduction: generational identity

‘Doubtless Greek myth-makers and modern psychoanalysts touched an eternal verity when they documented the troubles which beset the relations of fathers and sons’, writes Carl Schorske (1978: 111), the great historian of Oedipal tensions in Freud’s Vienna. Schorske offers an analysis of how the struggle between children and their parents redounded on political and cultural life in early twentieth-century Austria. He documents the extraordinary innovations in Austrian high culture at the turn of the century – including Freud’s discovery of Oedipal conflict as at the center of all social existence – and demonstrates how the themes embodied in these new forms of cultural expression reveal the profound rupture that had occurred in bourgeois Viennese society during the latter part of the nineteenth century. Schorske’s deep reading of these cultural materials documents the shattering rejection of one set of beliefs and commitments and the assertion of a diametrically opposed alternative; it was an expression of a younger generation self-consciously rejecting the world of their fathers. In this argument, Schorske brilliantly connects cultural change to generational identity, tacking back and forth between political and social developments and collective identity.

Schorske’s demonstration of the interaction between psychological experience and the social context producing it encourages consideration of trauma’s impact from one particular aspect. How does the experience of humanly created trauma – such as war, genocide, forced migrations, ethnic conflict, slavery, etc. – suffered by individuals in one generation affect their relations with their children – the next generation, and how might one assess its resulting impact on social and cultural change? The transmission of traumatic experience from one generation to the next and how parents’ trauma contributes to their children’s generational identity are topics that require a blurring of conventional disciplinary boundaries. They call for the moving together into a single discourse of the psychoanalytic with the sociological. What follows is a consideration of the social problem of the inheritance across generations of traumatic experience, through the development of a ‘complementary articulation’ of the problem from these distinct vantage points (Smelser and Wallerstein 1969).

Sociology, of course, studies various collectivities and their relation to one another. As will be described, the generational collectivity and the problem of identity, as sociological problems, are relevant to understanding traumas’ cross-generational endurance. In recent years, in fact, sociologists have identified human frailty as a significant, though overlooked, domain of sociological attention (Turner 1998, 2001). In so doing, the assertion is being made that there are certain social problems that are universal in character, like

consequences of human vulnerability, that require sociological inquiry and that begin, first, with an anthropology of *human* nature. Beginning with the problem of human vulnerability as a natural feature of all persons, sociology is being asked to consider the ways in which various social collectivities seek, in various ways, to respond to universal characteristics of the human being, to protect against human weaknesses. This approach challenges the prevailing sociological orthodoxy that emphasizes the relativistic and particularistic character of social *groupings* and which explains variations in institutional forms as derivative from these differences. Sociology, now armed with a conception of the nature of human beings and the various species-specific harms it can suffer, becomes the study and evaluation, across time and space, of varieties of human responsiveness to natural vulnerabilities, like ‘aging, disability and dependency’ (Turner 2001: 28) and the study of the impulse toward (and resistances against) extraordinary measures, like human rights protections, in response to various kinds of assaults on the person that are social, not ‘natural,’ in origin. In this way, human frailty and the study of the enduring social consequences of trauma converge in a common, and novel, sociological approach. The relatively recent florescence of public arenas of remembering, reconciliation and reparation – emerging across societies and in various political cultural contexts – like the developing institutions of human rights law across legal cultures, describes distinctive institutional responses to the human difficulty of finding closure from prior periods of traumatic disruption.

But Sociology, even with regard to vulnerability, has been remarkably silent in describing the inner experience of the individual, or the ways in which social location shapes the self and self-experience. It has not offered much by way of understanding what traumatic disruption might mean experientially for those individuals who suffer it. Psychoanalysis, in contrast, while potentially illuminating on the question of the phenomenon of, say, pseudo-adulthood, or the false self (Winnicott 1960), i.e. defensive protections against harm, has had remarkably little to say about the social conditions that might promote the experience, and that might include a whole group of affected population. Humanly created trauma describes not only those individuals who, because of disruption, lose the capacity for joy and spontaneity and their ability to interact with others, constricted and inhibited in their experience of the world. It also might well be extended to describe the experience of a whole generation, in which individuals collectively share a similar psychology. Trauma implies the distortion of time in the developmental process (Caruth), and sociology from the collective/institutional side and psychoanalysis from the experiential side both contribute to our understanding of the phenomenon. The process through which the fantasy life of the child replicates the parents’ traumatic reality will be explored below through both vantage points: a social situation in which the children psychologically identify more powerfully with their parents’ harrowing past than with their own separate and distinctive present. What is lost, in a word, is an identity that demarcates the children’s experience from their parents: what is produced, in the same instance, is lost childhoods and lost generations.

* * *

Karl Mannheim remains the great sociologist of generations, who suggests that a society without generational strain, certainly in the modern world, is an anomalous one and absent one of the principal sources of social dynamism and innovation. In ‘The problem of generations’ (1928), Mannheim describes how a generation occupies a particular social location, not unlike a social class, through which social experience is refracted and made meaningful. Yet, unlike a class, the distinguishing feature of a generation is that it comes to

share a common perspective as a result of living through a set of experiences *in time*. Mannheim's great contribution to sociological thought is his observation that the social world is demarcated not only by spatial coordinates as in class position or social standing, for example, but by temporal ones as well. The dynamism within society is a product, Mannheim insists, of groups formed as a result of different relations to one another as a result of both spatial and temporal location. The presence of distinct generations ensures that society comprises a 'stratified consciousness' that serves as a frame to experience which contains and constricts possible actions by each generation but at the same time promotes or impels certain modes of behavior, feeling and thought that challenge, or clash, with other generational units. Earlier generations, participating in a different universe of experiences, exhibit a separate orientation, or subjective centers of vital perception. Generations, therefore, are predisposed toward a unique mode of thought and, as Mannheim (1928: 291) writes, 'a characteristic type of historically relevant action'.

Generational groupings, despite their distinctiveness, do not exist in isolation from one another but are fundamentally relational in nature. First, Mannheim emphasizes the dialogue that naturally exists between generations via various social institutions, an interaction in which each seeks to influence and respond to one another, each necessarily impinging on the other's consciousness. Employing the teacher–student relationship as a metaphor of the relation between generations, Mannheim (1928: 301) argues that neither the student nor the teacher confronts 'consciousness in general'. The two confront one another as distinctive 'subjective centers of vital orientation' challenging each other's particular form of consciousness. In discussion, each is influenced by the other: 'the pupil educates his teacher too'. Each comes to be defined and articulated partly in reference to the others. As time passes, new generational constellations and new centers of subjectivity emerge but not without defining themselves, in part, in relation to their predecessors.

Further, Mannheim describes this distinctive set of orientations as a new generation style or a new generation *entelechy*. Typically, the orientation is shaped preponderantly by early impressions shared by the generational grouping, by the collectivity's common 'dependence on the same great events and transformations that appeared in their age of maximum receptivity' (Dilthey 1924: 37, cited in Schorske 1978: 121) and forged into a natural view of the world. In the United States, for example, the 1930s Depression helped frame for one generation what the Second World War did for another and the Vietnam War for still a third. Indeed, one might understand the anti-war politics of the 1960s to be about the clash of one generation, formed around the Second World War and its predominant motif that much can be lost from a politics of appeasement, with another generation in formation, too young to have internalized that lesson, convinced instead of the virtues of 'making love, not war'. This generational style can either emerge unconsciously out of an age-grouping's intuitive awareness of itself or more self-consciously as, for example, in an organized youth movement. But an *entelechy*, or a style, Mannheim claims, is fundamentally relational in the sense that it defines itself distinctively from a more inclusive social style of the time. 'These *entelechies*', Mannheim (1928: 315) writes, 'cannot be grasped in and for themselves: they must be viewed within the wider framework of the trend *entelechies*'.

In sum, the generational unit, while a particularized expression of experience reflecting its own unique relation to the passing of time, is also defined particularly in relation to the whole. There is inevitably tension and strain between generations that encapsulate different lived lives over time and between the particular generational voice and the larger social trends but, significantly, there exists recognition between the units. Indeed, the tension and strain between generations – the simultaneity of recognition and difference – defines an

animating resource for social change and innovation, an edgy but healthy encounter of a society with itself.

Trauma and its transmission

What, then, of a collectivity that has endured trauma? How does the relationship between generations become altered when the life experience of one generation is dominated by a discontinuity in life so dramatic and profound that it overwhelms all other experience? What is its impact on the capacity of the next generation and subsequent generations to define themselves simultaneously in relation to their parents but also distinctively and creatively to their own? What, then, are the consequences of traumatic ruptures for the social dynamism of a group, people or nation? A survivor of the European Holocaust perhaps captures best the potential stultifying impact of trauma on a collectivity when she (cited in Bar-On 1989: 5) expresses this concern: 'Hitler is dead. Still, he may yet achieve his goal of destroying us if we internalize the hate, mistrust, and pain, all the inhumanity that we were exposed to for so many years. . . . I am afraid we might have come out of it lacking the human capacities we had before – to hope, to trust, and love. Have we acquired the wisdom to prevent such a terrible outcome?'

In *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), Freud addresses this collective problem by offering a conception of the relation between trauma and its enduring influence on individual character. Character deformation, if you will, becomes the vehicle, he argues, through which traumatic experiences establish themselves in the ongoing history of a family, group, nation or people. Freud suggests that overwhelming experience is 'taken up into what passes as normal ego and as permanent trends within it' and, in this manner, passes trauma from one generation to the next. In this way, trauma expresses itself as time standing still. The Jewish murder of their leader, Moses, was a traumatic reliving of the earlier murder of the primal father. Traumatic guilt – for a time buried except through the character formation of one generation after the next – finds expression in an unconscious reenactment of the past in the present.

Spurred by the looming world war and his own impending exile, Freud sought to understand the phenomenon of anti-Semitism, and the Jewish contribution to it, through this idea of collective trauma that, for all intents and purposes, was unaltered through the generations. What was striking to Freud was that while this conflict between Jew and Gentile was expressing itself in its latest manifestation, i.e. German Nazism, it possessed a frozen-in-time, repetitive formation that was ages old. Trauma, as a wound that never heals, succeeds in transforming the subsequent world into its own image, secure in its capacity to re-create the experience for time immemorial. It succeeds in passing the experience from one generation to the next. The present is lived *as if* it were the past. The result is that the next generation is deprived of its sense of social location and its capacity to creatively define itself autonomously from the former. Here, we see the convergence of Freud with Mannheim: when time becomes distorted as a result of overwhelming events, the natural distance between generations, demarcated by the passing of time and changing experience, becomes obscured. Trauma thus deprives the collectivity a critical resource of social and cultural renewal.

In one of the most powerful treatments of the European Holocaust's extended impact, Art Spiegelman, a child of a Holocaust survivor, produced a two-volume cartoon entitled *Maus, A Survivor's Tale* (1991), illustrating this power of trauma to collapse time. The book chronicles the author's own troubled relationship with his father, a man clearly transformed

by his experience in the concentration camps and by his own survival while his first wife and son perished. Spiegelman, while born after the Holocaust, as he makes clear in the book, never escaped the Holocaust's presence, carried forward in time by his father. Indeed, in the very last frame of the book, Spiegelman (1991: 136) portrays his dying father, lying on his bed, expressing the desire to remember his past no more. 'I'm tired from talking, Richieu', the father says, 'and it's enough stories for me'. The reader knows that Richieu is not the name of the in-the-present son but rather the father's dead one who perished in the concentration camps. In this single poignant frame, Spiegelman reveals his belief that his father always experienced him through the prism of his dead brother. It might well be that the author became conscious of this truth only at the end of writing the book. Here is a moving expression of trauma's endurance: an experience so overwhelming for the father that the new son was never free of his father's past. But this final frame reveals too a second truth: *Maus* exposed the neurotic source of the author's own compulsive need to comprehend the experiences of his father; to devote his life to writing the book: Art Spiegelman has never been free of his father's projection of Richieu on to him, never free of a traumatic history that preceded his birth. His lost childhood expresses for a generation a collective incapacity to escape the long shadow of the Holocaust, where time, even across generations, folds in around the traumatic moment.

Spiegelman's book captures creatively what has now been extensively documented in the empirical literature of the children of Holocaust survivors, based on extensive interviews and assessments. Studies indicate (see, for example, Bergmann and Jucovy 1982, Herzog 1982, Auerhahn and Laub 1998, Felsen 1998) that as a consequence of their parents' experience children differentiate less completely from their parents, see themselves as protectors of their parents rather than vice versa, and tend to inhibit their own impulse to establish independence and autonomy. Identity development, in short, became severely hindered because these children have not been able to experience themselves as persons occupying a particular discrete location in time and space. Nanette Auerhahn and Dori Laub (1998: 22), for example, in summarizing extensive research on Holocaust survivors and their children write, 'We have found that knowledge of psychic trauma weaves through the memories of several generations, making those who know it as secret bearers. Furthermore, we have found that massive trauma has an amorphous presence not defined by place or time and lacking a beginning, middle, or end, and that it shapes the internal representation of reality of several generations, becoming an unconscious organizing principle passed on by parents and internalized by their children.' They describe (1998: 38) how children of survivors develop a sense that their parents often experience their activities of separation, differentiation and individualization as a reactivation of the original trauma. Such responses by their parents support their own identification with their parents' victimizers. Their own feelings and needs, it came to be felt, are murdering their parents. Those who have studied the children and the grandchildren of the 'disappeared', victims of the dictatorships in the Southern Cone of Latin America, have found a similar process in which traumatic experience becomes transmitted across generations (Becker and Diaz 1998), in which the children and their children had a tendency to experience the suffering as if it were their own.

Robert Pynoos's (1993, unpublished) clinical and experimental research both corroborates and specifies the way in which traumatic experience becomes transmitted intergenerationally. Reminding us that Freud (1926, cited in Pynoos, unpublished: 2) himself defined trauma as the convergence of 'external and internal, real and instinctual', Pynoos describes how the traumatic moment yields thoughts and actions that continually re-create in mind the experience of danger and helplessness. Such experiences result in altered

schematizations of 'safety, security, risk, injury, loss, protection and intervention'. 'Traumatic expectations and thoughts', he writes (unpublished: 8), 'are reflected in beliefs that express catastrophic expectations regarding the future, the safety and security of interpersonal life and the ability to trust in others, and the reliance on a just and protective social contract, including the behavior of agents of social institutions'. These expectations become transmitted to the next generation 'verbally, through unusual anxious behavior, and by means of imposed behavioral avoidance that limits developmental opportunities'. The internalization of these expectations suffused with the trauma differs by age of the affected children but one result, Pynoos finds, is a greater difficulty on the part of the children to self-confidently establish an assertive stance or independence, to feel secure in challenging or taking on the world free of parental protection. Dedicating oneself to the protection of one's parents, as reflected, for example, in the proclamation 'Never Again', becomes, in fact, an organizing principle, a recipe for life.

The power of collective remembering and the restoration of independent time

Two psychoanalysts, collaborating together in postwar France, offer an interesting framework both to comprehend the world of collective trauma and its generational transmission as well as to provide a conceptual framework to consider the reparative processes required for traumatic disruption to find closure in the social world. Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok concern themselves with the possibility for reestablishing a sense of self distinct from one's parents, and, by extension, with the possibility for the creation of a generational identity that is distinct from its predecessor, no longer existing only in the shadow of its object. Their work, in the end, does not hold to the immutability of trauma but concerns itself rather with the capacities of individuals and collectivities to overcome their past.

Abraham and Torok describe a dialectical relationship between two psychological phenomena: introjection and incorporation. Introjection is the always developing process of self-fashioning – the psychic equivalent of growth – in which the individual acquires elements of the external world and assimilates them on behalf of his or her own emerging desires and feelings. It is part of a lifelong process of individuals engaging the world on their own behalf. 'Introjection is the process of psychic nourishment, growth, and assimilation, encompassing our capacity to create through work, play, fantasy, thought, imagination and language; . . . it is the psychic process that allows human beings to continue to live harmoniously in spite of instability, devastation, war, and upheaval' (Rand 1994: 14). Language is the first model of introjection, an acquired capacity in infancy, they write, 'to fill the emptiness of the mouth with words'. Through language, we enter the world of others, the community of others, similarly engaged in filling the emptiness. 'Since language acts and makes up for absence by representing, by giving figurative shape to presence, it can only be comprehended or shared in a "community of empty mouths"' (Abraham and Torok 1994: 128).

Abraham and Torok transform Freud's conception of the sublimation of Oedipal desire in which an individual's engagement with the external world is understood as a kind of secondary compromise formation – a substitute expression of both libidinal and aggressive energies – into something far more positive and harmonious. They describe as a primary 'instinct' the capacity of individuals to acquire and assimilate the world on their own behalf. Rather than being understood as principally objects of desire and/or fear, parents are seen rather as facilitators of their child's increasing engagement in his or her world. As 'mediators

of their children's process of self-creating, or introjection' they help promote their children's capacity to know their own desires and to acquire and assimilate the world, first through the word and, later, through their entry into the community of others. Here, they evoke Winnicott's account of the important role that the mother plays in the child's acquired capacity to be alone: without a facilitating environment of others, the possibility of aloneness (or of independence or autonomy) is never possible. Abraham and Torok emphasize the critical learning role that parents play in their children's psychic development. It is a role that encourages and enables the structuring of external experience to calibrate with inner need and desire. It is also a role that ensures the child's world not be identical to the parent's but one that expresses a new encounter between self and an ever-changing external community. Introjection, by its very nature, ensures independence between the generations as it establishes self-fashioning that depends on the articulation of inner desire with an outer world always different, always changing in time, always providing unique vehicles for self-expression.

But trauma, Abraham and Torok argue, interferes with the spontaneous work of introjection. When traumatic moments intervene, the facilitative environment provided by the parents toward their children is thwarted. The disarray in the parents' own state of desire – introjection frustrated – passes itself on to the children, now encountering caregivers distracted by their need to protect their secret. Inassimilable life experiences serve as obstructions to introjection: the unmetabolized trauma, preserved in the form of a family secret, incomplete mourning for a lost object, the creation of an alien identity, or a secret that 'entombs' an unspeakable but consummated desire, each stand opposed to the possibility of a natural process of self-discovery and self-fashioning.

Trauma thus is defined in relation to the fate of introjection. If introjection is about the capacity to transform needs and desires into words, to enter the 'community of empty mouths', trauma, by contrast, is about the inability to say certain words, or to formulate certain sentences. When words cannot be found to stand in for the person that is missing and unavailable to provide protection, it means 'the abrupt loss of a narcissistically indispensable object of love'. Trauma means the disappearance of the person who ought to have facilitated the finding of words. In one sense, this is the fantasy of helplessness that Pynoos and others have described. But Abraham and Torok emphasize, too, the compensatory fantasy of merger with the protective object that the traumatic experience has, in reality, obliterated but who cannot be sufficiently mourned.

Introjection is replaced by the fantasy of incorporation, the lost object now taken in wholesale into the psychic life of those who encounter silence. Trauma distorts desire. Incorporation becomes an effort, through magical means, to regain a connection with the object that has, in fact, failed to fulfill its function: facilitating the introjection of desire. Incorporation might be more familiarly understood as a process of identification, in which through the fantasy the object is no longer separate from the subject but has been taken in whole cloth by the subject. The subject takes it upon itself to house the object's secret. 'It is therefore the object's secret that needs to be kept, his shame covered up. . . . The fantasy of incorporation reveals a utopian wish that the memory of the affliction had never existed or, on a deeper level, that the affliction had nothing to inflict' (1994: 131, 134).

As Abraham and Torok emphasize, incorporation cannot be more strongly opposed to the aim of introjection. When an individual enters and speaks among a community of others, object dependence gives way to autonomy and independence. Introjection promotes the creation of a new voice, uttering new words, fulfilling unique desire. The incorporation of a lost object, in contrast, reinforces the imagined ties to the object as well as dependency on it. 'Like a commemorative monument', they write, 'the incorporated object betokens

the place, the date, and the circumstances in which desires were banished from introjection: they stand like tombs in the life of the ego' (1994: 114).

But the secret, the tomb or the crypt that Abraham and Torok so vividly describe constitutes a foreign body, an alien object. As bearers of the secret, children protect their connection to their traumatized parents and preserve their dependence upon them. In contrast with Freud who, in *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), for example, can find no vehicle by which to alter trauma's everlasting impact on the life of a people, no collective recourse to reverse the repetition compulsion, Abraham and Torok imply another possibility. The secret, to be sure, is a toxic force; yet it remains outside the kernel of the self; it ensures dependence but it need not distort character. With appropriate conditions, when the secret comes to be revealed, it can be exorcised or eliminated from the inner world, allowing introjection to resume its natural course.

There is an intriguing body of research about the children of Holocaust survivors in Israel that, I believe, speaks to certain hopeful possibilities, reinforcing the conceptualization of trauma as offered by Abraham and Torok. It appears that the descendants of Holocaust survivors in Israel have been more successful in establishing independent lives as compared with similar populations among Jews either in European countries, in the United States, or in Latin America. There is less evidence of psychopathology among the survivors' children and a greater capacity for differentiation between the generations (Solomon 1998: 79). Israel, of course, is a nation whose existence, in large measure, is defined as a response to the Holocaust, and innumerable public and private acts express the inextricable connection between the nation and the trauma. It might be said that the nation has taken the traumatic secret and assertively sought to expose it, and as a result to overcome it. In this sense, there is far less need for any individual to hold the secret privately, to internalize it, to fear the autonomy and independence that comes from no longer being the secret's bearer.

This finding underscores the importance of our taking into account the interpenetration of the collectivity for individual psychology and the role of cultural mediation in psychic health, of pushing the traditional boundaries of psychoanalysis beyond the intrapsychic. Nations worldwide currently are encountering the difficult, painstaking work of establishing legal, juridical venues by which to consider and to hold accountable those, in the past, who inflicted trauma on their citizenry. We are living through an age of collective remembering in which political agents are gingerly attempting to find a way of undoing the secrets without irreparably opening old wounds. This is no easy process and, to be fair, considerable effort is also being expended to forget and to protect the traumatic past from full-scale exposure. From Chile to the Republic of South Africa, from Yugoslavia to Indonesia, these debates about remembering are now central to the politics of developing nations (see, for example, De Brito *et al.* 2001). The debate in many of these nations has focused on the delicate political balance between remembering, and thereby creating a healthy distance between the present and the past, and forgetting, thereby not bringing to center stage the bitter divisions and experiences that divide the nation. Much of this debate has centered on the political costs incurred when the secret is uncovered. When, through public rites of remembering and accountability, traumatic secrets are allowed to see the light of day conditions are established, it might be said, to recover childhoods for the children and to enable subsequent generations to claim the world as their own.

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