Global Generations and the Trap of Methodological Nationalism
For a Cosmopolitan Turn in the Sociology of Youth and Generation

Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim

Is there such a thing as ‘global generations’? What does ‘global generation’ mean? Can we, as we did so far, still understand the concept of generation in a national frame of reference? Or do we need a cosmopolitan outlook to understand the generational dynamics that exacerbate inter-generational tensions within nations and intra-generational affinities and conflicts between nations? For example, globalized ‘Consumer Generations’ comprise very different fractions; not only those who buy and live with consumer brands and images, but also those who are unable to buy and live with these symbols, but risk their lives to become migrants to the consumer paradises of the Western World or Dubai. Our thesis is: A cosmopolitan sociology is required in order to understand the situations, impacts, divisions, contradictions, and desires of the global generations. A cosmopolitan sociology means a sociology that gets rid off ‘methodological nationalism’ and takes globality and (human) social life on planet Earth seriously. A cosmopolitan sociology differs from a universalistic one by starting, not from anything supposedly general, but from global variability, global interconnectedness, and global intercommunication. It means treating the global generations not as a single, universal generation with common symbols and a unique consciousness. Rather, it conceptualizes and analyses a multiplicity of global generations that appear as a set of intertwined transnational generational constellations.

Introduction

Chernobyl and 9/11, environmental crisis and terrorist attacks, Amnesty International and Coca Cola: such keywords indicate what today is taken for granted in the sphere of experience and activities of the rising generation. This sphere of experience can no longer be understood as a nationally bounded unit, but is determined by global dynamics. It encompasses events and images which shake the world, as well as global promotions, values, networks, global longings, trademarks, symbols, which spread in the most diverse ways—through production and markets, through media and advertizing, migration, and tourism.
The social sciences, however, are still more or less in thrall to ‘methodological nationalism’, unable to see border crossing interactions, interconnectedness and intercommunication (Beck, 2006, ch. 1; Beck and Sznайдer, 2006). In a world which is ever more strongly shaped by globalizing tendencies, this view of things is inevitably becoming anachronistic—in particular when it comes to understanding the younger generation, its situation, orientations, ways of behaving. It is precisely here—this is our central argument—that a cosmopolitan perspective becomes necessary, which privileges the simultaneity and the mutual interaction of national and international, local and global determinations, influences and developments.

This paradigm shift from a nation state frame to a cosmopolitan one—which has still to be developed methodologically—is necessary, in order to satisfy sociology’s scholarly claim to engage with reality. Because social reality today is increasingly the reality of globalized modernity, characterized by the globalized freedom of movement of capital, the spread of communications and transport technologies, the establishment of global civil society movements, the emergence of global terrorist networks, etc. In the sum of these developments—and not least through the shock of global risks and crises which are now becoming visible (Beck, 2008)—a profound break has occurred, one that also marks the relationship between the generations: the core of the self-conception of First Modernity has been affected, its fundamental premises of border, security, and rationality have become questionable. Consequently, according to our thesis, the idea of generations isolated within national boundaries is historically out of date. What we need, is a concept of ‘global generations’ (Edmunds and Turner, 2005).

In order to come closer to this aim, it is useful to distinguish between two levels: first the level of the social scientific observer, who researches generations in a global frame of reference (observer perspective); second the level of the active subjects, the members of the global generations, who see themselves in a global frame of reference (actor’s perspective). Our present text is one written from the social scientific observer perspective, basically containing a methodological message—that what in a national context appears as a nationally determined break between generations, can only be properly deciphered in a cosmopolitan perspective. But that does not mean, that a self-conscious ‘global generation’ exists as yet, developing a cross-border view of life and of itself, with its own symbolism and language, goals, and forms of activity. Certainly there are already a number of signs pointing in this direction, for instance the formulation ‘think global, act local’—which first became a slogan for ecology and peace groups, but has now spread into the terror networks; or the rapid spread of the internet, which for the up and coming generation is increasingly becoming the reference frame of its perception of the world. Nevertheless, this further question—as to a self-consciously political global generation, as to its dreams and spheres of activity—must remain, for the present at least, open. This is also sensible, first of all because globalization does not at all mean that in the younger generation a worldwide convergence of social situations is taking place—from Dubai to Duisburg, from Bahia to Bremen. On the contrary: the inequality of life chances is all too conspicuous, and that is precisely what produces a particular tension and explosive force: the sphere of experience of the ‘global generations’ may be globalized—but it is simultaneously characterized by sharp dividing lines and conflicts. There is above all the economic gap which separates inhabitants of the First World from the rest, the gap in material resources, positions, and opportunities of access, which is also evident in the race for the icons of global consumption. Nike trainers, for example: everyone wants them, but only the youth of the affluent nations and strata can actually buy them; the others can only afford the cheap copies—and often not even that. In addition, further exacerbating the polarization, there is the difference in cultural frames. Because global experiences and images are constantly combining with local traditions, historical experiences, models, the same events and phenomena are differently perceived, categorized, valued, depending on position and culture within world society. Take, for example, the pictures of the young Palestinians, who blow up themselves and others: to some these are pictures of liberation fighters and heroes. If one takes both things together—globalization on the one hand, inequality on the other—then the central questions may be formulated like this: to what extent can we discern today the emergence of transnational generations on a global scale; what are the different fractions appearing within the ‘global generation’; and how does one fraction of the ‘global generation’ relate to each of the others?

Below we shall investigate more closely this global space of experience and expectation with its paradoxes and contradictions. This cannot be done comprehensively here, but only in the form of a consciously exemplary approach: we shall present three transnational generational constellations, representing different sections of the conflict dynamic of world society. Behind that there lies a systematic methodological step.
We do not deal, as was usual until now, with a single ‘generation’, inevitably understood as existing within the boundaries of the nation state. Instead, we extend the horizon of investigation beyond the nation state frame by sketching several ‘transnational generational constellations’, specifically linking the inequality of world society situations with the generation theme. Our aim, in looking at each of these generational constellations is a modest one: to make visible in outline, how conditions of cultural, social, economic globalization are translated into the simultaneously localized and transnational spheres of experience and expectation of younger generations; how, mediated by various instances, new situations, new demands, ties, threats, hopes and also new fears, values, conflicts, forms of protest are produced.

**Expectations of Equality and Migration Dreams**

Until now the perception of social inequality has often been curiously narrow, limited by the frame of reference of methodological nationalism. That is to say, social inequality is only considered a problem internally, in the interior of the nation state and the national society (Beck, 2005). To the extent that poverty, hunger, oppression take place somewhere ‘outside’, beyond the borders of one’s own country, they do not become a public scandal. Admittedly pictures of starving children in Africa appear in the media again and again, and in the short term produce an outcry—but this is essentially a humanitarian reflex, containing next to no political legitimation pressure, hardly translated into sustained political actions. And a similar basic attitude also prevails in academically established sociology. There the topic of global inequalities is hardly registered at all, still less investigated more closely, because it lies outside the borders of the nation state and so outside the professional angle of vision.

That at least is how it has been until now. With a generational change, however—this is what we want to show below—a change is under way, the nation state legitimation of global inequality is beginning to crumble. This could be put down to the continuing deepening and sharpening of the division between haves and have-nots on a world scale; but whether such a deepening is indeed taking place is a matter of scholarly controversy. From our point of view on the other hand it is significant that a development towards *more equality* is making headway, at least at the level of norms. The stimuli for that are to be found, as far as we can see, at four levels. Their combined effect is that *principles* and *expectations* of equality are spreading worldwide.

- **Post-colonial discourse of equality**: in the era of colonial rule the inferiority of the Others/the ‘natives’/the ‘savages’ seemed a more or less natural given (hence the difficult task, ‘the white man’s burden’ of teaching the Others a minimum of civilization and reason). The post-colonial discourse has divested such assumptions of any legitimation.
- **The nation state dualism of human rights and civil rights** has been broken down: a guarantee of human rights has now been normatively prescribed at ever more levels—e.g. in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in the EU Treaties and the constitutions of many nation states. Such guarantees make it increasingly difficult to distinguish between citizens and non-citizens, nationals and non-nationals and to grant certain rights only to some and not to others.
- **Spread of transnational ways of life**: as recent migration research has frequently pointed out, there are today more and more groups, who do not live in one country or another, but in several at the same time. These persons have a bridge function. By building up transnational networks, organizations, institutions, by regularly visiting relatives in the old country, they create numerous links between country of origin and receiving society—and simultaneously contribute to the export of Western ways of life, norms, demands: ‘The West and the rest’ encounter one another.
- **Thanks to the new communications media and transport technologies** distances begin to shrink, not in the strictly quantitative sense, but in their social significance: even over great distances there are ever more lines of communication and forms of meeting. Geographical distance need no longer mean social distance.

Consequently, according to our thesis, there begins a spreading of norms and expectations of equality, which has far-reaching consequences. The inequality between the haves and the have-nots, between First World and the remaining world is no longer accepted as fate, but emphatically called into question, even if only one-sidedly: by the people ‘outside’. It is the Others, the excluded, the inhabitants of distant lands and continents who are beginning to rebel against the legitimation of social inequality which has been taken
for granted until now—through hopes and dreams of migration, which they are translating into practical activity.

Understood in this sense the active ‘global generation’ is definitely not the Western, but the non-Western generation, rising up against inequality across nation state borders, putting down a claim on equality. ‘I want in’ is the watchword of this worldwide generation standing at the gates of the Western societies and vigorously rattling the bars. In the next section we want to show more concretely how this development is getting under way and how as a result in many parts of the world the life plan of the up-and-coming generation is undergoing profound change.

Cultural Globalization

Films and TV, video and internet: in the last few decades and even more so the last few years what is on offer from the mass media has increased many times over and has become ever more accessible. The media convey information, true or otherwise. They tell stories, again true or otherwise. In every case they transport messages, temptations, promises, which are a substantial stimulus to people’s imagination. This relationship has been noted, in particular, by the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai, who has studied the effects of the mass media. Today, writes Appadurai, the sphere of influence of such media is enormous: it spreads across every country and continent; and it no longer reaches only the metropoles and cities, but increasingly also the remotest villages, whether in India or eastern Anatolia. The images conveyed are not always true to reality, but full of fictions and myths. But whether realistic or not, what counts is something else, and Appadurai makes very clear what that is: such images influence the life projects of ever more people in ever more places in the world. ‘Everywhere in the world more and more people look at their own lives through the optic of possible ways of life presented by the mass media in every conceivable way. That means: today imagination has become a social practice; in countless variants it is the engine for the shaping of the social life of many people in many different societies’ (Appadurai, 1998, p. 22). Instead of simply putting up with their own lives as fate, ever more people are beginning to imagine other worlds and to compare them with their own. In this way the life of even quite ordinary people is no longer determined by their immediate surroundings, but increasingly by world society realities and possibilities . . . , ‘which the media (directly or indirectly) suggest as realisable’ (Appadurai, 1998, p. 24).

In addition there are the flows of worldwide tourism, which to some extent create a similar effect (Lash and Urry, 2007). Because what the locals see, are endless numbers of tourists, spending their weeks doing nothing, able to afford long-haul journeys, hotel rooms, restaurants, to say nothing of rental cars and excursions, massages and diving courses, souvenirs, and other purchases. What fabulous wealth! What a beautiful life!

The Standards are Changing

Such are the images, misunderstandings, myths, which the media and tourism communicate. The remotest regions on earth are penetrated by possibilities of comparison and desires, of which their inhabitants once had not even the faintest idea. The question which then inevitably arises, under the new conditions of a networked world, is obvious: why should I be poor and oppressed, starve and labour without hope—when elsewhere there are people who have plenty to eat, own a house and a car, can go to the doctor when they are ill? Why should I suffer here? Why not try to get there?

Migration, therefore. That is the dream which today drives, moves many people—especially the younger ones—in many countries of the world. Vita, for instance, 21 years old and a waitress in Turki, a poor, rural area in Latvia (Bilefsky, 2005). Vita wants to go to Ireland, where her sister is already living, where it is possible to find well-paid work. Then at last, she hopes, she will be able to buy a car and a television, a computer and new clothes. Her desires can be summed up in a simple sentence, which she puts like this: ‘I would like to have a normal life’. Where does what Vita calls normal come from? Hardly from Turki: many of the small wooden houses there do not even have electricity yet, people still read by candle light. Evidently, Vita’s standards and models come from somewhere else. A new order becomes discernible in them—no longer the order of homeland and place of origin, but the (imagined) order of the longed-for larger world.

In many lands many people, especially the younger ones, set out for the sake of these new standards. They leave home to go to Ireland, California, Hongkong and earn money there. Like Vita, they look for work in the affluent regions of the world, in order to make their dream of a better future come true.

But ever since poverty and unemployment have also begun to grow in the First World, many countries now admit hardly any labour migrants: ‘Fortress Europe’ or ‘Fortress First World’ is surrounding itself with ever higher walls. Nevertheless many in the poorer regions of the world refuse to give up. Instead they look for other
ways, other routes, for the remaining loopholes. Word has quickly spread, that the new immigration laws still leave one door open, thanks to measures to protect the family. Family reunion is the magic formula: it allows those resident in a country in the First World to fetch close family members from the homeland.

Marriage as Entry Ticket

These close family members are defined as parents, children—and spouses. That explains why in economically disadvantaged countries today a new dream is spreading: the dream of a marriage, which permits entry to one of the affluent countries. Someone from the West! Someone who can take me with them! That is the ideal candidate in the impoverished regions of the world, from India to the Philippines, from Brazil to Russia. The more migration becomes a life project, and the more other migration routes are closed, the more does marriage become a desired goal, a hope (Beck-Gernsheim, 2006).

Such a marriage can be aimed for in various ways, depending on local and personal circumstances. In many tourist areas of the world there are young women and also young men getting into the expanding business of sex tourism and tourist romances—not only in order simply to earn money, but also often in the hope of finding the right partner for a longer term relationship—and the hoped-for entry ticket. Some also try their luck via personal ads, international marriage bureaux or through the internet. But anyone wanting to marry has a much better chance, if some of his or her relatives are already resident in the First World. In that case they can bring family networks into play and appeal to family loyalty, in order to find a marriage partner among cousins and other relatives already there. Take Pakistan, for example: ‘Young men pin their hopes of social advancement on going to England by marrying a relative there’ (Shaw, 2001, p. 279). And young men—and women—in other countries also have similar hopes, from Turkey to Morocco.

But whatever the particular strategies look like, ultimately it always comes down to one thing, that is, to find a better future in the promised land somewhere else. The migration project is on the rise worldwide, and is the hope of countless young men and women in the poorer countries. There a generation is growing up, whose life plans no longer stop at the borders of their own country, but reach out across the globe. To sum up: to understand what motivations are becoming normality in the younger generation in the Second and Third Worlds today, it is necessary to understand the power of the images, messages, standards coming out of the First World. They invariably contain—directly or indirectly—the invitation, the temptation to go out and risk departing from the homeland.

Transnational Homelands

So in future the migration flows will probably increase. And already today there are more and more people, for whom migration is part of their immediate family and personal history. Even in Germany which for so long insisted on the formula ‘We are not a country of immigration’, even here almost one-third of children and young people now come from a family with an immigrant background (Schäfers and Scherr, 2005, p. 34). The proportion is rising, the group very diverse. It includes the offspring of naturalized Turks, Russian–German re-settlers, Afghan refugees as well as children of German–Italian or German–Iranian marriages.

The question arises, as to how the identity of such young people takes shape, in whom two social groups, two cultures are combined. There is a long tradition of questions of this kind, in everyday life, in literature, in scholarship. In sociology, an essay by Robert Park has come to be seen as a landmark, published in 1928 and quoted ever since. Its subject—and the term has become classic—is ‘Marginal Man’, people on the edge of society, the outsider. Not any and every kind of outsider, however, but in particular that type which develops as a result of migrations, often also coming from a bi-cultural family. In Park, this outsider status becomes an inner condition, turns into a special character determined by the nature of the border-transcending origin and situation. Among the characteristics of the ‘marginal man’ are ‘mental instability, inner uncertainty, restlessness, and a state of general discontent’ (Park, 1928, p. 893).

The Classic Image: The Tragedy of the Outsider

Park’s reflections initiated a whole tradition. It was only a couple of years before a book by his colleague Everett V. Stonequist appeared which takes up Park’s ideas and expands them. What was already present in Park is now emphasized even more strongly and described in numerous variations: restlessness, inner nervousness, lack of balance, all these becomes essential traits of the ‘marginal man’, clinging to him like an inescapable fate. Under favourable conditions this may express itself only as a quiet, indefinable feeling of alienation, as ‘inner loneliness, deriving from the precarious social position’. But under other
circumstances the result may be serious conflicts, ‘so burdensome, that they rob the individual of all inner stability’. Here then begins a development which leads to inner dissolution, eventually to ‘dissipation, crime, suicide, or psychosis’ (Stonequist, 1961, p. 148).

The ideas formulated by Park and Stonequist link up with a body of thought which was popular at the time and lend it scholarly authority. Ideas of a similar kind are still around today, they are part of the ‘common sense’ knowledge of the majority society. In Germany they have had a considerable effect on discussion of the topic ‘labour migration and its consequences’.

In the 1970s, ever more labour migrants became permanent residents in Germany, fetched their families, had children here, and in the years that followed a debate developed on the ‘poor immigrant child’. Whether it was a question of health, of accommodation, of family, of school, children of immigrant families were surrounded and marked out by problems. They were without a homeland, without a language, without inner stability, in short caught in a hopeless situation. That was the common theme of countless publications which addressed the topic, and the extent to which they were fixated on this one viewpoint is often already evident from their titles: there is ‘Childhood in Cultural Conflict’ (‘Kindheit im Kulturkonflikt’—Berkenkopf, 1984) or ‘Young Foreigners in Conflict’ (‘Junge Ausländer im Konflikt’—Bielefeld et al., 1982) and ‘School Problems of Guest Worker Children’ (‘Schulprobleme von Gastarbeiterkindern’—Harant, 1987), ‘Socio-cultural Problems of Young Turkish Women’ (‘Soziokulturelle Probleme junger Türkinnen’—Weische-Alexa, 1982), or ‘Integration Problems of Foreign Youth’ (‘Integrationsprobleme ausländischer Jugendlicher’—Stratmann, 1981).

New Crisis Reports

Today, a couple of decades later, such diagnoses are still widespread, indeed have even achieved a certain topicality in the light of subsequent developments. For example, the reports of educational statistics, persistently showing the same basic pattern—young people from immigrant families as the losers in the German educational system, over-represented in elementary schools and special schools, under-represented in schools taking students up to the leaving certificate (Abitur). It is undoubtedly true, that such reports indicate defects and extremely problematic social developments. The question is, however, whether they serve as proof of a tragic cultural conflict, the unavoidable fate of all young people with an immigrant background.

Such an interpretation, plausible as it appears at first sight, loses a great deal of its empirical underpinning, if one looks at the statistics more closely. First of all, the education statistics are only of limited use because they classify solely according to the criterion ‘native/foreign’: what the official statistics record in the category ‘foreign youth’ are by no means all young people with an immigrant background, but—due to selection effects of various kinds—primarily the problem groups (Salentin and Wilkening, 2003; Beck-Gernsheim, 2004, p. 114). Not taken into consideration, above all, are the consequences of naturalization, particularly since the reform of nationality law in 1999: ‘As a result the showing of foreigners is distorted, because naturalisation selectively removes successful individuals from the account’ (Salentin and Wilkening, 2003, p. 295).

Furthermore, if the category ‘foreign youth’ is broken down according to nationalities, there are some surprises in store. Then one discovers groups which do not fit the negative picture of educational failure at all: young people from Iranian, Russian, Ukrainian families who achieve better educational results than Germans (Farrokhzad, 2003; Halbhuber, 2005, p. 70; Riebsamen, 2006)—which means the migration experience as such cannot be the decisive factor influencing failure in the school system. That is also the conclusion of a current social science study, which is proposing ways of recasting the official statistics. By undertaking a multi-level analysis of educational statistics, the authors are able show what does count: whether there is an immigrant background or not, it is the educational standard of the parents that is crucial (Kristen and Granato, 2005). If the parents have higher educational qualifications, then from an early age they transmit to their children the skills for ‘learning to learn’, such as discipline, curiosity, persistence—which, as may easily be assumed, increase the chances of children performing well in the education system. That also explains why in comparisons between German and foreign (‘foreign?’) pupils the latter regularly come off worse: because in the parental generation the Germans usually have significantly better school leaving qualifications. Because the foreign population group consists primarily of guest workers and their children and grandchildren; and decades ago when the German economy was recruiting workers for factory and assembly line, it was not high school graduates who came, but rather those who had only gone to the village school for a couple of years. But if it is the poor educational
qualifications in the parental generation which largely explain the figures in the educational statistics—then these educational statistics hardly serve as proof of a tragic cultural conflict.

**Positive Alternatives: On Every Stool**

But if the crisis news reports are of no use for generalizations, what then? Then we can discover the beginnings of a surprising shift. The picture of the poor disoriented foreign child is no longer being left unchallenged, doubt is being cast on the familiar tragic clichés, and for the first time they are being pushed aside—in literature, in scholarship, in the media—by alternative images. There is no longer so much talk of a life between cultures, but instead of a life with several cultures; and this life no longer appears as a deviation, disturbance, unusual exception, but as something altogether normal, even as a possible opportunity.

Take for example the social scientist Berrin Özlem Otyamaz, born in Turkey, living in Germany. Otyamaz interviewed young women of Turkish immigrant backgrounds and made a book out of her interviews, its title is ‘On Every Stool’ (Auf allen Stühlen). That already contains the message, which deliberately avoids the lachrymose tone of German immigration debates, the laments about the poor immigrant woman and/or the poor immigrant child. Otyamaz writes: the young women from immigrant families do not sit ‘around doing nothing and remaining victims, until someone generously helps them out of their situation. They’re fighting for their place in this society and have long ago created their own life plans… They are the living proof, that life in and with different cultures is possible, enriching, indeed desirable. They’ve not fallen between stools, but are sitting on every stool’ (Otyamaz, 1995, p. 131).

Are these no more than exceptions, individual cases, unrepresentative and so carrying no weight? That would be the obvious objection, but it is only partly valid. Because in the second generation of immigrants an internal differentiation and polarization of situations has long ago established itself, and even among the children of the guest workers—the majority society has until now taken far too little notice of this—there is a growing group of young men and women, who are performing well in the German educational system and becoming success in German society. Partly because old prejudices and habits of thinking persist, partly because the official statistics only convey incomplete data, partly, also, because politics is largely concerned with the problem areas of society—for these and similar reasons the discussion of the second generation concentrates almost entirely on ‘problem cases’ and ‘failures’, those who do not make it at school, those who are in some way negatively conspicuous. Those, ultimately, who confirm once again the cliche of the unfortunate immigrant child.

The anthropologist Regina Römhold paints a significantly different picture. She interviewed young people in the Gallus quarter of Frankfurt-am-Main, an area with a high proportion of immigrants. The majority of the young people, as Römhold sees them, are not rootless, homeless, unstable. On the contrary, many establish roots of their own. While old homelands and countries disappear as the result of migration and globalization, new ones simultaneously come into existence, argues Römhold: ‘Homelands, however, which are part of another logic. Cultural practice in immigrant societies shows, that people have several homelands, can develop and live several cultural and social commitments, so that the creatively subvert national and ethnic patterns of categorisation, designing their world across nation state borders’ (Römhold, 2003, p. 42). In this design, Römhold continues, the place or region where one lives assumes a particularly large emotional significance. Whether Berlin or Frankfurt, Stuttgart or Nürnberg, here is the centre of their life for many in the second and third generation. They feel themselves to be Nürnberg Greeks or Berlin Turks, or as the Green politician Cem Özdemir once put it: ‘I am an Anatolian Swabian’ (Özdemir, 2000, p. 37).

Such ways of life, however, are very ‘foreign’ to the German majority society. The identity of most adults is still defined in monocultural and mononational terms, the latter still determine horizon, standards, expectations—and do so for large areas of scholarship as well. That does not make the task of research any easier. If the diagnosis proposed here is correct, then social scientists have to learn to be open to the transnational ties, homelands, identities which are increasingly becoming normal in the rising generation. If this does not happen then generational and youth research will be incapable of understanding its object: the lived reality of the global generation.

**Globalization and Growing Insecurity**

Globalization, understood economically, does not only mean economic exchange and opening up of markets but, linked to that, also more competition, faster pace, greater pressure to innovate; and, as a consequence of global pressures to adapt, also more privatization and
deregulation, more cuts in social rights and guarantees of protection. The tremendous change which has taken place in this respect within a relatively short space of time becomes especially clear if a comparison is made with the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s: seen from today they appear as an epoch of harmony, of sustained stability. Certainly at that time wage levels were low, prosperity relatively modest. But on the other hand, fixed employment contracts and working hours were the norm in Central Europe, many employees remained in the same town, even in the same factory all their lives. In the years of the long boom there was a considerable labour shortage; and when unemployment did slowly increase, it still remained comparatively low.

Anyone who was young then and left school with an adequate report, had a good chance of quickly finding a job and also of keeping it, and this for a wage which permitted not an opulent, but certainly a reasonable life. Anyone who was willing to work and was fairly healthy, did not have to worry about his further employment prospects. He could expect social and material security—if, as already said, at a relatively modest level.

Those days are gone. ‘Help, my workplace is going abroad’ is a sentence that characterizes the age of globalization. In many western countries unemployment has risen sharply. And many of those who have a job today, do not know if they will still have it tomorrow. The postulates which ever more powerfully determine the world of work are flexibilization and deregulation. Anyone wanting to make a start in professional life, is frequently only offered traineeships (in plain words: one has to work regular hours for little money). Even at the next stage permanent jobs are increasingly rare, instead there are short term contracts; so no long term security, only a cheque for this week and next. And this development will hardly become less marked in future, quite the reverse: ‘Overall, the traditional form of work, based on full-time employment, clear-cut occupational assignments, and a career pattern over the lifecycle is being slowly but surely eroded away’ (Castells, 1996, p. 268).

And even if one is lucky enough eventually to find a job, then place of work and hours worked demand constant efforts to adjust. Instead of continuity a readiness for repeated changes of employment is required. In an ever larger number of professional fields geographical mobility is an everyday demand (traineeship abroad, business trip to another town). And once one contract has come to an end, then another has to be found. In ever more professions it is also necessary to be flexible with one’s time. It is impossible to establish a stable rhythm, one has to adapt to changing expectations (evening course or weekend seminar, night shift or weekend duty). Anyone who cannot or would not keep up, does not have much of a chance in the job market.

This structural transformation of the world of work with its severe consequences for individual biographies is confirmed by many individual studies. It is especially pronounced, according to a paper by Angela McRobbie (2005), in the various branches of the culture industry. After the elimination of permanent posts a very peculiar world has taken shape here, where ambitious dreams are translated into poorly paid work contracts. In the graphic arts and in design, in museums, in the media, in these and similar fields young men and women congregate, who—after they have completed long and demanding training courses—now want to apply their imagination and their skills; and who for the privilege of being allowed to work in their chosen field do not ask questions about hours never mind old age security. A world of creative one-man businesses, therefore, carrying on highly motivated self-exploitation.

The Traineeship Generation and the Experience of Precariousness

This structural transformation, which affects the world of work as a whole, hits younger workers in a particularly drastic way. While older employees, if they are lucky, still have a certain degree of security through standard negotiated wages and protection against dismissal, the position for younger employees has worsened dramatically. They have to find their way in a market which is completely exposed to free competition. The ‘traineeship generation’: in Germany this catchphrase, in which the insecurity of their situation is summed up in two words, has become the trademark of the young and educated. In France ‘précarité’ has become the current term, likewise meaning the new insecurity; and in spring, protesting against ‘précarité’, hundreds of thousands of young people went onto the streets, called for strikes, put the French government under pressure.

The geographical reach of this structural transformation is confirmed by a large comparative study with the symptomatic title ‘Globalization, Uncertainty and Youth in Society’ (Blossfeld et al., 2006). Included are young men and women in 12 OECD countries, from Hungary to Canada, from Germany to Mexico, broken down into different age cohorts, and according to education and/or training background and qualifications. The empirical findings presented in detailed
calculations and many tables confirm the general common trajectory, the insecurity increasing everywhere. Beyond that three more precise differentiations are discernible.

First, it really is the younger generation which is most affected. ‘Youth, who have less labor market experience and who are not yet shielded by internal labor markets, are more greatly exposed to the forces of globalisation, which makes them the “losers” of globalisation’ (Mills et al., 2006, p. 423). Second, all young people are affected, but not all young people equally. It is those at the lower end of the social and employment hierarchy who are exposed to the greatest risks: ‘It was the manual, un- and semi-skilled workers that were the most impacted by the recent changes . . . Youth in lower occupational classes showed a higher risk of being employed in temporary contracts, becoming or remaining unemployed, remaining entrapped in insecure positions, or having no pension benefits’ (Mills et al., 2006, p. 426). Third and finally, differing country profiles were also evident, the result of different welfare state regulations and socio-cultural norms. ‘In Italy and Spain, youth with lower levels of education were actually more likely to find a first job. In these employment systems highly educated youth need to get a high-quality job match when entering the labor market. If they obtain a job below their qualification level, it is much more difficult to get back on track. This is in stark contrast from the “stop-gap” circuit that youth from open employment systems undergo, where lower-level jobs have comparatively less of a “scarring” effect on their long-term careers’ (Mills et al., 2006, p. 426).

Two conclusions may be drawn from these and similar findings. First, that the increasing insecurity, which is becoming the basic experience of the younger generation, is not a local, regional or national phenomenon. Rather, this insecurity is turning into a key experience transcending borders, a common one, one we can sum up in the words: *united in decline*.

Beyond that there is a paradoxical, explosive simultaneity to be discovered here. While in the First World, and especially for younger people there, the risks, the insecurities of life are growing, the countries that constitute it remain the dream destination for many of the young in the poor regions of the globe. Consequently the existential fears of the former are going to encounter the hopes for the future of the latter. On the one side a ‘generation less’ (which measured by preceding decades, has to accept material losses); on the other a ‘generation more’ (which, motivated by images of an affluent West, wants to share in that wealth); and both, and this is the crucial point, part of ‘the global generation’. What is already becoming visible today, will in future perhaps emerge more dramatically: the outlines of a new global redistribution struggle. One side on the defensive, trying to hold onto the remnants of affluence with laws and frontier barriers; the others setting out, charging against these same frontiers with all their strength, driven by the hope of a better life. The result: a conflict-laden interaction: one fraction of the ‘global generation’ against the other.

### Summary and Outlook

Today, at the beginning of the 21st century we can observe the emergence of new ‘global generations’—that is the basic thesis of our contribution. Anyone with a good knowledge of history will regard the emphasis on the new with a degree of scepticism, perhaps even mention features which suggest a historical continuity. Was the political dynamic at the end of the 19th and start of the 20th centuries—one may ask—not already essentially characterized by a ‘new internationalism’ of political generations, represented by the Socialist International or a variety of peace movements which made the worldwide achievement of universalist principles their central demand? Was it not already the resistance to German Fascism which, more than anything else, contributed to the growth of a political ‘generation Europe’? And is not the generation of 1968 the key example of a global generation, because its political actions ignored national boundaries and gave a significant impetus to cosmopolitan thinking? In short, what is new here and now? Why and on what basis can one talk of the appearance of a ‘global generation’?

Such questions are no doubt justified. Yet against that a number of features can also be mentioned, which clearly distinguish the movement of 1968 of the 20th century from the ‘global generations’ at the beginning of the 21st century. In 1968, it was an essentially politically constituted generation and adherence to it was defined by active participation in protests. At the start of the 21st century, in contrast, it is *cosmopolitan experiences and events*—like those mentioned at the beginning of this article—which have become the key to the space of expectation of the up and coming generation. Put very simply: then there was collective action, today there is individualist reaction. Then there were the critics of consumer society and the culture industry; today’s generation are in a sense the children of the latter. They no longer relate the promises of global consumer society to the
possibilities their own country offers—but derive from them the impetus to pull down the barriers separating the First World from the rest. This ‘global generation’ is at heart unpolitical, because it breaks down into different fractions in a conflictual relationship with each other.

We have here sketched out three generational constellations, each of which reflect specific sections of world risk society and correspondingly contradictory experiences and positions. Common to them is a methodological point: they all no longer understand generation solely within the frame of the nation state and its premises. They initiate—to put it at its most ambitious—a cosmopolitan turn and perspective in generational sociology. In order to carry this approach further, at least three steps are necessary:

1. **Critique of methodological nationalism**: whatever does not have its causes in the internal space of the nation state and is not limited to it can also not be described and explained solely by looking at this nation state. That means, however, that youth and generation sociology research which explains the situation of the up and coming generation in Germany primarily with reference to German pre-war and post-war history, the German school system, etc., is becoming, given the social reality, increasingly anachronistic. Whereas First Modernity was built up on the fundamental premises of the nation state, of the state as a separate unit, today Germany or Poland or indeed Europe no longer exist as walled-off societies. Anyone who does not see the multitude of interconnections produced by production and consumption, internet and TV, tourism and advertising, lacks an all-important key to grasping the hopes and dreams, the fears and disappointments, the actions and reactions of the ‘global generation’. It is as if one were to consult only a map of Upper Bavaria to find out how to get from Rosenheim to Singapore.

2. In the ‘global generation’ various transnational fractions are interlinked, globalized ‘patchwork generations’, the ‘mosaic pieces’ of which simply cannot be fitted together to make a unified picture. More pointedly, it is just this non-unity which permits the unity in diversity of the generational constellations to emerge—at the centre, on the periphery and in the opposition and interaction between them. It is the mononational, monocultural gaze, which fails to recognize that the activism of the global generation arises less in the centre than in the peripheral zones, in the regions of world risk society condemned to hopelessness. The protest of the ‘migration generation’ is directed not so much against the established authorities of their own society of origin—but rather against the international order of inequality and its guardians. The ‘attack on fortress Europe’ is able to adopt as its own the human right to mobility, which the West likes to proclaim; but then of course it collides with the fears of the European ‘insecure generation’, which is beginning to protest against short-term work contracts and falling incomes.

At the same time transnational identities are developing across the transnational fragmentations of the global generation, linking different lines of origin and homelands, undermining by their very terminology—Nürnberg Greeks, Berlin Turks, and so on—the usual classification patterns and categories. In the media as in political debates the old simple images still dominate, at root always dominated by a pair of opposites—us here, them over there. As long as the images limp along behind reality to this extent, then false signals will be given and there will be serious consequences for practical activities, for the education system, politics, the law, etc. If, in the face of mounting reports about violence in schools the Bavarian Prime Minister announces that persistently offending pupils should be ‘sent back home’—then one can only respond by asking, which home is that? Not a few of the young generation with an immigrant background were born and grew up here, some have a German passport; many do not speak German well, but do not speak another language any better; their parents, brothers and sisters, friends and neighbours live here; they often know the country of origin of their parents only from brief visits. So where are they supposed to be sent? The public debates are caught up in fictions and antitheses, which have long ago been overtaken by the pace of change.

3. A youth and generational sociology, which does justice even only approximately to the lived reality of the global generation requires a ‘methodological cosmopolitanism’ (Beck, 2006; Beck and Sznaider, 2006). It must at least be able to answer the key question: what is going to replace the nation state unit of investigation known as ‘generation’? In this contribution, in order to make a start, we have substituted the image of various ‘transnational generational constellations’ for the nation state defined concept of ‘generation’. In doing so we merely sketched their reciprocal but tense relationship; the question, how a global generation emerges, has hardly been touched on. But this much should by now have become clear: the critique of methodological nationalism involves much more than just a problem of empirical data, which are largely collected and analysed on a nation state basis and compared internationally. Much more profoundly it is about how the core sociological concept of
generation (like the concepts of social inequality, the state, the family, the household, justice, neighbourhood, etc.) can be liberated from the mental horizon of methodological nationalism and opened up to the fundamental transformations of globalized Second Modernity. Where this does not happen, the lived reality of the rising generations will remain terra incognita—no matter how much data the social researchers gather.

Notes

1. This remains true as long as nation-state thinking dominates and co-operation between states remains weak (Beck, 2005).
2. The only exception is Ireland, which is just going through an economic boom phase.

References


Authors’ Addresses

Prof. Dr. Ulrich Beck, Institut für Soziologie, Konradstrasse 6, 80801 München, Germany. Email: u.beck@lmu.de

Prof. Dr. Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, Kochstraße 4, 91054 Erlangen, Germany. Email: beck-gernsheim@soziol.phil.uni-erlangen.de