Identity Formation in a Fatherless Generation

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Generation X, the cohort born between 1964 and 1978, often confronts the clinician with new dilemmas, which the author presents in a detailed case study of his work with Ben, a young man who exemplifies many traits of this generation. The author argues that it is not fruitful to classify Gen-Xers’ modes of experience as expressing some early type of pathology; rather, they reflect the social and cultural experience of Generation X. This is characterized by a shift from vertical to horizontal orientation: The connection to the past has less psychic reality for the members of this cohort. Instead they live in a cultural universe defined by the media, the new economy, and the refusal to accept the differences between high and low culture. The impact of this cultural discontinuity on the process of identity formation for Gen-Xers is examined.

This article is part of a more extended attempt to examine the impact of the momentous social changes that have swept through the Western world in the past decades on the individual psyche. The psychoanalytic consulting room may provide one additional prism through which the implications of the global village can be explored. Conversely, it is probably useful to connect the minutiae of interactions in the consulting room with the larger picture: Psychoanalysis, after all, does not function in a social vacuum.

In the present article I wish to examine one particular aspect of these momentous changes: the immense impact of the new economy on cultural standards. I provide a brief sketch of some of the most salient social changes during the past two decades and offer a hypothesis of how these changes have influenced the psychic structure, personal identities, and self-images of those who came of age during the 1980s and 1990s.

The patient, whom I call Ben, exemplifies a constellation that I believe to be rather prevalent. His parents were part of a social and moral order based on clear hierarchies: People with academic degrees and respectable professions were more valuable and more entitled to respect than those who did not have such a background. Professions that required high standards of ethical integrity provided social status that was often not commensurate with the financial income provided. I argue that Ben’s problem was a
function of the clash between the social and cultural standards of his parents and those of his own generation.

This article also reflects a personal process I am undergoing. My own cultural universe is defined in more conservative terms. I grew up in a culture that emphasized continuity, the hierarchy of high culture versus low culture. My training was based on immersion in complex texts and contexts and on studying intellectual developments ranging over centuries, and sometimes millennia. For a long time, it was clear to me that there was a canon of works that provided the purest exemplification of the human spirit as its best.

In my experience, the encounter with Generation X (for sociological definitions, see Thau & Heflin, 1997), particularly its younger members, forces me to struggle with many of the assumptions about what constitutes a valuable life. My conclusions, of necessity, are tentative. I primarily argue that processes of identity formation of GenXers are profoundly shaped by the lack of cultural continuity between them and their parents.

Some Characteristics of Generation X: The Impact of the New Economy

It is almost a platitude to say that historical time has sped up. Within the space of one generation we have witnessed the radical change of the global political and social order. Social and political theorists (Friedman, 1999; Frum, 2000; Fukuyama, 1999; Huntington, 1999) are still trying to figure out what the new global order is, while a whole generation is being shaped by this new reality.

The Reagan–Thatcher era of the 1980s created a climate epitomized by movies like Wall Street and novels like American Psycho. Deregulation of the financial sector created a dizzying new economic reality. Individuals could buy and sell huge corporations using novel financial instruments and reap billions (Ehrlich & Rehfeld, 1989). Twenty-five-year-old financial whiz kids commanded salaries measured in seven digits at Wall Street and The City in London, just because of their ability to detect minute fluctuations in the market and capitalize on them in split-second decisions.

The news of the 1980s was generated by the great financial manipulators. Investment banking was where the action was. It turned out that the huge organizations that had provided the 1950s and 1960s with their economic and social hierarchies and the infrastructures—the corporations that seemed to become as much a frame of reference as nation–states—were vulnerable to the manipulation of small numbers of individuals who could buy these organizations, tear them apart, sell their assets, merge them with others, and scale them down at will.

The geniuses of the age were people like Michael Milken, whose pushing of the junk-bond market created the possibility for gifted and gutsy speculators to tackle the largest companies in leveraged buyouts. Milken got to the point where his very signature as underwriter of a bond issue was worth $2.5 million.

Of course there were backlashes: Those excluded from the vertiginous ascent to wealth of the financial wizards felt deep satisfaction when Milken and others like Ivan Boesky went to prison. Movies like Wall Street (Stone, 1987) extolled the virtues of decent, hardworking folks (exemplified by Martin Sheen’s character) and vilified the amoral belief in greed and power of the new players on the financial market (exemplified by Michael Douglas’s character).

But the new social reality was a fact: You could be a millionaire by age 25 if you had
the knack of making the right split-second decisions about buying or selling hundreds of millions of dollars of stocks and bonds at the right moment. You could have a $2 million penthouse outfitted by the latest rage of designers if you worked in a legal firm specializing in mergers and acquisitions.

Anyone who stuck to the idea of having a job in a large corporation, climbing up the corporate ladder gradually, hadn’t understood the rules of the new game. You had to be on the list of headhunters who would rush you from one job to the next at least once a year. This sped up the ascent through the various income brackets. Those who stuck to outdated notions of loyalty to a company were likely to end up on the sidelines. Companies were not benevolent mothers who nursed you and your family from cradle to grave; they were commodities to be bought, sold, merged, and stripped of their assets. The question was whether you were going to be among the predators or among the passive victims that were eaten up.

The 1980s created the new category of the yuppie—a category charged with ambivalence. On the one hand, the term was generally used with some disdain: Yuppies were supposed to be self-centered to the point of emotional autism. Instead of caring about rebellion against the system and striving for social justice, as their baby boomer predecessors had done in the 1960s and early 1970s, they cared about Porsches, Rolexes, Armani suits, and expense accounts.

The 1990s, after a brief recession, saw the crumbling of the political order of post–World War II. Political certainties like the cold war that maintained the power balance of the world vanished literally within 1 year, leaving after them a reality that experts and politicians alike are still trying to decode (Fukuyama, 1999; Huntington, 1999).

At the same time, the new information technologies created a world radically different from what humanity has ever known. The metaphor of the global village has become a concrete, lived reality. Software projects are run 24 hours around the clock by teams living in opposed time zones. Corporations have become truly global, because there is no need to have management, production, and marketing in the same areas (Friedman, 1999).

The financial success stories of the 1980s were dwarfed by what the 1990s brought. A single man, Bill Gates, amassed a fortune exceeding the gross domestic product of many countries. Entrepreneurs in their 20s came up with ideas that within 3 years created fortunes measured in hundreds of millions of dollars. For the first time the flow of capital was truly democratized: You no longer needed social connections to get access to great amounts of money that would allow you to make even greater amounts later on.

One of the most tangible pressures created by the new economy is a tightening of the 30s. If you haven’t landed a job in one of the fast-track areas and placed yourself in the “promising upstart category” by 30, you are likely to be left out. If you have not placed yourself in the niche that caters to the new economy, you will end up just doing the little, boring stuff that is left to those without the knack for fitting themselves into the high-speed train to early riches.

This has also reversed hierarchies that seemed immutable for a long time. Careers in once respected professions like medicine are becoming unattractive: Why waste your time in acquiring a profession where you start making money at an age where others already have their first $10 million invested in mutual funds and venture capital? In fact, many medical doctors turn their careers around by quitting medical practice and joining startups in the exploding biotech market, or develop software products for the profession they thought they would themselves practice.

Generation Xers, particularly the gifted ones, enjoy a freedom unknown to earlier generations of the 20th century. For them it is a matter of course that gender and sexual
orientation are constructions, and that each individual can create the particular configuration (I am using this term from computer lingo on purpose) that suits her or him.

The professional possibilities open to them are more varied than those of any other society we have ever known. They feel that there is very little wisdom of earlier generations that they can use to navigate their way in a world that simply outpaces that wisdom. The openness of their lived reality is achieved at a price: The complexity of their path toward an established identity is greater than it was in more strictly structured societies.

In other words, many members of Generation X do not see the prospect of maturing into a profession and gradually attaining social status and a sense of achievement as an alluring possibility. The meritocratic democratization of the accessibility of capital has created the opposite effect (Holtz, 1995; Thau & Heflin, 1997). One of the most fascinating implications of the new economy is that many of the new functions are, as yet, not even defined as professions by the established academic orders—new roles and professions arise that do not even have a name. We will see some of the implications of this process in the case presentation.

Nobrow Culture

Another factor that shaped the new generation’s mental images is the radical subversion of the dichotomy between high culture and popular culture that has been a matter of course for previous generations. The humanistic tradition that emerged in the Renaissance created the conception of a cultural canon that had to be mastered in order to create truly cultivated minds (Bloom, 1987). The canon in question changed over time, but the idea that there are masterpieces of (presumably Western) literature, philosophy, plastic arts, and music that define true culture remained relatively unquestioned well into the 1960s.

It was taken for granted that there is a profound qualitative difference between deep, real, high culture and shallow culture that only has entertainment value. The emergence of electronic mass media and the entertainment industry only deepened this conviction: Cultural commentators from T. S. Eliot to Allan Bloom felt that high culture had to fortify its trenches in order to preserve the heritage that defined what the West stood for.

The turnaround of the 1960s and 1970s has been discussed in hundreds of books. Andy Warhol’s dictum “art is what you can get away with” marked the beginning of an era that undermined distinctions that had been taken for granted (Kimball, 2000).

The 1980s and 1990s brought the reshuffling of categories to new heights. The diminishing willingness of states to finance high culture made it necessary to package culture in marketable ways. A telling example is the show that united the three most famous tenors of the 1970s and 1980s, Luciano Pavarotti, Placido Domingo, and José Carreras, into a unit called “The Three Tenors.” A potpourri of operatic arias, popular tunes, and operettas was interspersed with moments in which all three tenors screamed high C’s into microphones that fed sound systems blasting to huge audiences. Those of us who had experienced opera as high culture could only react with shock to the resulting hodgepodge.

John Seabrook (2000) has dubbed the culture that has emerged from the abolition of the distinction between highbrow and lowbrow culture nobrow. Seabrook’s main argument is that the culture of marketing has permeated the production of culture to the point where distinctions of quality have become submerged completely to the marketability of cultural products.

The frame of reference of Generation X and Y seems to be much more horizontal than
vertical. Books have been around for millennia, and the cultural foundation of earlier
generations was codified in them. The medium that is most characteristic for Generations
X and Y is the Internet, which, as a global phenomenon, is hardly a decade old. Hence
they feel much more defined by their relations with their contemporaries and less so by
their dependence on the past (Holtz, 1995).

They are creating a cultural space that is deeply detached from earlier cultural forms.
They have developed a language that is hardly intelligible to those foreign to the scene of
rave parties, the cultural space of chill-out rooms, after parties, and the like. Their con-
sistent use of grass, Ecstasy, and other drugs has evolved into a subculture hardly acces-
sible to earlier generations that still experienced drug use as an emancipatory act of
subversive nature.

During the same time period, academia went through a similar upheaval: The canon
of Western culture was attacked as nothing but a reflection of Western, phallocentric
imperialism. The canon was, so it was said, just a collection of dead White males. Courses
on cultures that had been excluded from the canon began to be seen as no less valuable
than those that taught the purportedly immutable canon of Great Books.

The interpretation of these changes splits commentators into two bitterly opposed
that the edifice of Western culture is falling apart. Others like Paglia (1989) see the
dissolution of the canon as a blessing. Finally there are those like Martha Nussbaum
(1997), a renowned philosopher as well as legal and classical scholar, who try to find
middle ground in the war between those who decry and those who celebrate nobrow
culture.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this article, I have trouble making up my mind.
Emotionally I often vacillate between a sense of loss and the exhilaration of watching the
emergence of something completely new (Beaudoin, 1998). Yet as a clinician I am faced
with the task of understanding members of Generation X who have grown into nobrow
culture. And, as it turns out, it takes some effort to be able to understand them in their own
terms—and thus to be helpful.

Ben: “I Have No Foundation”

The young man in my office was edgy, nervous, and fidgety. “I don’t believe in shrinks.
I really don’t. But if you helped X (a friend of his who had been in therapy with me),
maybe you can help me. I don’t think, though, at all that my problem is psychological. My
problem is real, man. Just fucking real. I have only one problem: I have no academic
background. I have no basis whatsoever for what I do. Okay. I’m this big success story;
but it’s going to break down sometime! I’m a fake, and one day they’ll know it.”

The story was as follows. At age 21, Ben had joined a startup company that developed
computer games. He was surrounded by engineers, people with MBAs, people with
degrees in art and graphic design. “You understand? They all know something. They have
an education. And they know what they know. Here I come in, knowing nothing, sitting
in those meetings, and suddenly I begin to pour out ideas that combine everything with
everything, come up with ideas for new products, and they invest 100,000 bucks in a pilot
after a few minutes of discussion!”

Ben was now 27 years old. The startup had become a well-known company that made
loads of money. “And I’m the number three of the fucking place. This is ridiculous. I’m
called creative director. They had to come up with some bloody name for something that
doesn’t exist. Well, Doctor, what are you gonna do about that?” I am on a first-name basis with my patients (as is usual in Israel), and Ben usually called me by my first name. Whenever he called me “Doctor” I felt simultaneously amused and annoyed. Ben used this term to express something that combined a challenge, an implicit devaluation of who I was and what I did, and a sly curiosity about how I was going to handle the situation.

For the first half year or so, the sessions were not easy for me at all. Ben had several rather off-putting habits. He constantly wriggled around in the chair, moved up and down, went into prolonged sessions of scratching his hair violently and compulsively, then played around with the armrest of his chair. His tension, irritation, subliminal rage, and physical discomfort were contagious: I would sometimes feel like climbing up the wall. It is not easy to handle those situations: Telling a patient that his physical presence is irritating and off-putting may be experienced as a rejection and make further work impossible. It would take me quite some time to figure out how to handle all this.

As usual I gradually tried to get a sense of Ben’s biography. Ben was the first-born son of a father who was a respected academic. “He’s this really respected man. Everybody wants his advice. He’s an excellent, methodic teacher. Does his research very thoroughly. And he never made any money. Just the bloody salary from the university.”

“Oops,” I thought, “there we go: the father who is a modest academic, thorough, well read, making no money. And there goes Ben, 27 years old, already making a pile of money, stock options waiting that will turn him into a millionaire soon. That’s a reasonable ground for developing a sense of guilt. In addition it could explain why he feels a fake without foundations.”

I tried, time and again, to get Ben to talk about his past. “Doctor, leave me alone, will you? I couldn’t care less about your theories that childhood makes people this way or that way. My parents were really okay; warm, supportive. Okay, I couldn’t talk about my sex life. But it wasn’t so bad. They knew I fucked around a lot, and they weren’t thrilled, but they were fine. You’re barking up the wrong tree, Doctor, and you’re not helping me a bit.”

I grew desperate. Somehow I couldn’t get a handle on this case. Whatever I tried didn’t work. Sometimes I thought that Ben was subtly devaluing me as a representative of high culture. If he felt so worthless compared with people like his father, this might be a way of venting his rage. His derogatory use of “Doctor,” his constant reminders that he was investing time and money but didn’t get anything in return, was a marvelous way to finish a business that had been bugging him throughout life.

I tried to work with Ben on this issue. It was about as helpful as sugar pills. I had to admit, we were stuck.

Then there came the day on which I had a sore throat. I kept some lozenges on the table that I took every now and then to stop my cough. Ben, as usual, fidgeting around in his chair and scratching his head, suddenly moved over, took one of the lozenges, saying, “You certainly don’t mind,” and stuffed it into his mouth.

I felt paralyzed. Saying no would have made me look stingy. Expressing my anger was not good therapeutic etiquette. Ben continued to drone on about how horrible it was to be a success story without foundations. How frightening it was to be all over the papers as one of the Wunderkinder of Israeli high-tech industry knowing that he was a fake. And I sat in my chair, paralyzed and completely livid.

At some point I decided that if I wasn’t going to talk with Ben about this, I was either going to be completely inefficient, because I couldn’t get my mind off it, or I would, at some point, act out my anger—which wasn’t going to make me any more efficient.
So I said, “Ben, let’s talk about the lozenge.” He, with his usual mischievous smile: “Yes, what about it?”

I: “Wouldn’t you want to think about what happened?” I hated myself. I sounded exactly like the stereotype of a shrink, I was so bloody stilted! No wonder: I really felt like hitting him and kicking him out of my office. The lozenge was just the proverbial drop that made the barrel spill over. For half a year I had felt that he was going to damage the armchair he was sitting on. For half a year I had to clean off the dandruff that he left on the chair with his eternal head scratching. For half a year he would intrude into my space physically by sliding down in his chair and stretching his legs in a way that made sure we were going to get in each other’s way.

“Oh, I see. Now we are going to talk about our relationship. That’s one of the things you shrinks really love to do, don’t you? Well, about the lozenge. They were on the table; I asked you whether I could have one, then I took one, and put it into my mouth. I felt like having one. I also have a bit of a sore throat, so they come in really handy. That’s all there is. What is your analysis, Doctor?”

I still tried not to go through the roof and ended up saying something appropriate to kindergarten level. “You didn’t ask me whether you could have a lozenge; you told me that I didn’t mind and took one.” He smiled at me, and his facial expression was something like “Yup, Doctor; so your wisdom boils down to the depth of whether I asked for the lozenge or not. . . .”

And finally the handle blew off: “Look, Ben,” I said, “the lozenge is really the tip of the iceberg. I’ve been sitting with you in this room for more than half a year, really making an effort to be helpful. What I get in return is disdain, devaluation, and all kinds of little infringement on my physical and mental territory. I have tried to find out with you why you are so fidgety and restless; I have tried to indicate to you that your physical behavior is something worth understanding.”

“Your reaction was mostly this grin of ‘Oh, do cut the shrink bullshit, will you?’ So now I will oblige you and cut the shrink bullshit, and just tell you what I feel. It’s a fucking nightmare to sit with you. Your behavior makes me feel incredibly uncomfortable. You have no sense of propriety, no respect for my physical and mental boundaries. I have no intention of cleaning your dandruff off my leather chairs. I don’t care whether you think that I’m a bourgeois shmuck who cares about nothing but his nice furniture. From now on I expect you to behave like mensch. Just the basics, okay? Like respecting that you are a guest in my consulting room. Like stopping your bloody tendency to insinuate constantly that what I do for a living is a stupid charade. You’re here to get help. So if you want any help, you better start behaving in a way that makes help possible—and some basic politeness hasn’t harmed anybody, either!”

He looked flabbergasted but regained his usual composure (or discomposure) rather quickly, and said with mock empathy, “You must really be suffering!”

I retorted, in the same tone of anger, “Don’t give me your arrogant smile again. I have no intention of putting up with it. Yup, I am not enjoying myself. I also feel like shit for the way I’m blowing off steam, but I guess you’ve been working rather hard to get me to this moment!”

Now, really taken aback, he looked like a child who had just received a huge morality talk from his father. I said, “Look, Ben, I’m sorry that it had to come out this way, but maybe now you’ll find it less ridiculous to think with me about why you make it impossible to be in the same room with you. I mean, it’s absurd: You suffer, you need help, and you really do everything to make it impossible to help you.”

My blowup did get to Ben. It began to cross his mind that I was not some impersonal,
untouchable authority protected by the knowledge from the book-lined walls around his armchair. But he was, for all intents and purposes, still rather desperate: He still felt a cheat, a fraud, and devoid of foundations. He was still enormously restless.

But now we actually began to talk. It wasn’t just Ben who had changed. I had changed, too. I had come to accept that my relatively laid-back style of work, my attempts to induce an analytic process of self-reflection, affective crystallization, intersubjective elucidation, and historical reconstruction simply weren’t helpful to Ben.

So what did he need? Often he needed advice or at least active help in thinking through his next steps. Like most high-tech startups, the company he worked with was quite a mess. Mark, the founder and CEO, was a man with good hunches, uncanny intuition where the market was going, and a knack for negotiating deals. But he had neither the inclination to invest time in developing the company’s organizational structure nor the talent needed to do so.

Mark’s management skills were minimal; he made up for this by creating strong emotional ties with his employees and manipulating them with the act of “How can you do this to me after all I’ve done for you?” Ben was particularly vulnerable to this type of manipulation. He felt that he had been given his position without having earned it. After all, he had no foundations.

One of the interesting, and weird, aspects of Ben’s situation was that after 3 years in the company he had no written contract. He was being paid nicely, but none of his rights, including the all-important stock options, had been formalized by contract. This greatly contributed to Ben’s sense of insecurity: Didn’t this mean that his position, his income, and his earnings depended on the love, or liking, and the whims of one man, who could withdraw them at any time? And didn’t this mean that maybe he didn’t get a contract precisely because he really wasn’t there by merit?

First I tried to work with him on why he wouldn’t press the issue of a contract. At some point (“Doctor, why don’t you stop the shrinking; what do you think I should do?”) I simply began to act as a consultant. Result: “Doctor, you’ve never been as useful as today!”

Ben had trouble with his girlfriend, too. He didn’t feel like sleeping with her that often, whereas he was crazily attracted to other women and on the way to falling in love with one of the many media stars he kept meeting at parties. Again my attempts to deal with this analytically were of no use. At some point, very much by the way, I told Ben one of the basic truths (one might say truisms) of existential philosophy. “You know, it’s one of the persistent illusions in life that we can get all the goodies; but it turns out that choices always cost a price. And there is no such thing as not choosing.” Ben was flabbergasted. The idea of paying prices was completely alien to the “I want it, I want it all, and I want it now!” culture he lived in.

Time and again we returned to his sense of being a fraud. Sometimes I would talk sociology with him. “There is no name for what you do, because what you do has come into existence only in the last years. And in the total mess of your company, there are no clearly defined roles, anyway.” Ben was the idea factory, project coordinator, consultant-for-all-times-and-topics. Surprisingly he was known as “the company’s valium.” Yes, the very same Ben who drove me crazy with his restlessness turned out to thrive under pressure. When everything was falling apart, he was the man everybody turned to. He stabilized situations and gave everybody (including his boss) clear-cut instructions on what to do and say. His cool authority made everybody feel safe. He would make decisions, and large sums were invested along the lines of ideas that just seemed to pop up in his mind.
We spoke of the structure of his talents. He had an uncanny sense for visual concepts, the knack for sensing what was going to be “in” with Generation Y (the main clientele for the company’s products), an intuitive grasp of how to organize teams around tasks that were only vaguely defined, and the innate authority of those endowed with leadership qualities. He was the quintessential hotshot of the new economy.

“But I don’t have a degree! In anything whatsoever! I’ve never studied computers! Look at all these books here! Shouldn’t I at least read classical philosophy? I need some grounding!” he would lament.

I laughed: “I’ve read all this classical philosophy. And a lot of stuff about organizational theory, macroeconomics, evolutionary theory, formal logic, and what have you. And believe me, I would feel completely lost in any of the situations you are describing to me.”

Time and again I tried to link his sense of rottenness, lack of substance, and fraudulence to his upbringing. I compared Ben’s lifestyle with his father’s frugality. I tried to point out to him how difficult it was for him to accept that at age 27 he was making several times the amount his father was making at the end of a distinguished academic career. I tried to get him to connect to the sense of rottenness he had probably felt when comparing his flamboyant sex life with his parents’ monogamous devotion to each other. In brief, I tried everything a decent shrink is supposed to do in order to feel that he has earned his monthly check.

I never got as much as an acknowledgment of the usefulness of my ideas. Mind you, it would have been easy to accept if Ben had been stupid. But he was brilliant. He just didn’t seem to care. He had no curiosity whatsoever about the workings of his mind. What mattered to him were the asides I threw in; little pieces of wisdom of Life 101; observations about the difference between his generation and his parents’; repeated discussions of how it could be that he was good at something no one could define.

Most of all, the tone of our conversations had changed. I had come to genuinely like Ben, even though there was almost no session in which I did not feel exasperated. Only now, instead of “processing my countertransference” I told him that he was straining my nerves, or that his jumpiness was driving me crazy. “Sorry, Doctor, that’s the client you have,” was mostly the answer—but he also became more considerate.

Then came the point when his company was setting up a joint venture with a Silicon Valley high-tech firm that possessed exactly the technology needed for the last idea Ben had come up with. His girlfriend was willing to come along. We discussed the pros and cons for a couple of sessions. The main conclusion was that it would do him some good to be off the Tel Aviv party scene and to spend half a year in the Bay Area, where his girlfriend would paint and he would work his ass off integrating his crazy ideas with the technology of their new partners.

In the last session before he left for California he told me, “It’s weird, but I’ll miss you. Here I am having fought with you for one and a half years, driving you crazy and telling you that none of this is of any help, and now I’ll miss you. Life’s like a video-clip run backwards: It doesn’t make any sense.”

Mentoring Psychic Growth of Generation Xers

Ben’s treatment was, in its own way, helpful. He left it less anxious, less confused, and with more belief in himself than he had entered it. It turns out that his relationship with his girlfriend has remained stable. He came to appreciate her more deeply and felt fewer qualms about renouncing the pleasures of casual sex.
After about a year, Ben came back to Tel Aviv and founded his own startup company. Once in a while he would come in for a session when things were getting out of hand. He continues to be very successful and to come up with new ideas every few months. He still has no academic foundation, but it seems to me that he is more comfortable with being who he is nowadays.

I have since been in contact with Ben once in a while. He would seek my advice for handling complex human situations in his new startup company. When I saw him function in his work environment, I came to know an aspect of his personality that I had only had glimpses of during the treatment. Ben was warm and supportive toward his employees. I had a chance to talk to several of them, and they all perceived him as tremendously competent and creative, but also fair and emotionally nurturing. It seems that Ben has evolved distinct paternal qualities that enable him to be both a role model and a mentor for his employees.

Certainly, Ben is not the embodiment of serenity, and he probably will never be. He will probably remain a party animal and enjoy his celebrity status for a long time to come. Part of what makes him successful in his business is that he is, by nature, restless, that his mind and body need constant movement (which made spending time with him in the consulting room, where you are supposed to sit still, a daunting task).

Psychoanalytically speaking, his treatment was, to say the least, incomplete. Even though he “got” my interpretations that connected his family history with his sense of emptiness and lack of foundation, the insights didn’t really matter to him. My attempts at elucidating the transference didn’t have any impact either.

None of my work with Ben had any of the richly layered, multifaceted, meditative quality that characterizes more strictly analytic work (including my own). We never achieved the atmosphere of timelessness in which past and present become metaphorical embodiments of each other, in which meanings coalesce, crystallize, fall apart, and transform themselves. Neither did we do much work on the transferential enactments in the treatment.

In other words, Freud would have called this transference cure. Nevertheless I believe that this therapeutic process can be psychoanalytically elucidated.

If I had to put the character of my work with Ben in the simplest of terms, I would say the following. Ben saw in me everything that he wasn’t: I am an academic, with a profession that has been in existence for a century. The very fact of sitting with me in the same room brought up all his rage, fear, insecurity, and need for rebellion that he had never expressed toward his father.

His subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) devaluation, his little intrusions into my personal space made it very difficult for me to sit with him in the same room. At some point I came to dislike him rather intensely. In addition, I didn’t have a clue how to help him.

After the blowup we began to have a more authentic dialogue. I came to appreciate and like him, and I became emotionally significant for him. I accepted him for what he was, admired his abilities, and celebrated his successes. This in turn helped him to become more accepting of himself and to come to terms with the fact that even though his abilities and talents had no formal definition in the more classical culture to which both his father and myself belonged, they were nevertheless very real.

I believe that what made the treatment useful for him was that after a long time during which we had trouble with each other, we found ways to relate to each other meaningfully. Possibly the crucial point was that he received recognition of the value of his talents from
a “Herr Doktor” (who, incidentally, does not have the faintest understanding of what Ben produces).

My understanding of Ben’s problems gradually shifted, once the dialogue acquired a warmer, more personal quality. I began to think of Ben as caught in an insoluble conundrum. He had grown up in a family shaped by the values of the founding generation of Israel.

His father was a respected academic whose integrity was acknowledged throughout the country, who was asked to sit on committees touching on the most delicate issues of Israeli society. More than anything, his father stood for a combination of dedication to society and clear political beliefs rooted in a long-term historical view of Jewish history. He also represented a cultural view based on clear distinctions and hierarchies: Beethoven belonged to a different category than the Beatles, Goethe could not be compared to Bob Dylan; house, dance, and techno were not music at all but part of a mind-numbing drug culture.

Ben himself had grown into the world of MTV, a world ruled by twenty-somethings in which marketing and culture were inevitably intertwined. The aesthetics of the video-clip had formed the standard of his generation, and he lived in a world where rating was everything.

In his father’s world and terms, Ben indeed had no foundation; he had no right to authority, because he had neither the formal credentials nor the cultural differentiation that defined legitimate authority. The culture his father represented doesn’t even have names for the new professions.

In the world of nobrow, Ben was a star. His talents are very real, and so is his creativity. When he said his activities didn’t even have a name, he pointed to an objective cultural reality; the culture of information technology is generating roles, activities, and professions that have never existed before. His lack of inhibition in combining disparate aesthetic and cultural elements into new structures (which constitutes original sin in the canonic conception of culture) was at the center of his creativity.

For Ben, I represented the more traditional cultural heritage of his father. My explicit legitimating of who he was and of his abilities calmed his obsessive doubts that he was a fraud, a worthless impostor, and that nothing about him was real and valuable. In terms of the cultural categories of his parents’ generation, he had, as he said, no basis.

Ben loved and respected his father. Yet he could never gain his father’s recognition of his talents and achievement. To the extent I could gain an understanding of the dynamics between them, I got the feeling that Ben’s father loved his son from afar. Ben’s personality, the world within which he lived, and the work he did was completely foreign to Ben’s father. He never voiced any overt disapproval or disdain for his son and the cultural world he lived in. But he seems to have felt remote, and possibly intimidated by it.

Ben had to forgo not only paternal guidance (with this, I believe, he managed rather well) but paternal recognition. His unrequited yearning for paternal recognition colored his self-experience deeply. In addition, his father’s remoteness had deprived him of the possibility of direct confrontation. His frustration and anger at his father’s lack of responsiveness never found any direct expression. Ben felt his father’s helplessness and bewilderment, and in order to protect him and to maintain his idealization of him, he avoided confrontation and relinquished emotional contact.

In the therapeutic relationship Ben could first of all express the rage, disappointment, and anger at his father’s generation (to which I did not belong in age, but did culturally). By attacking and denigrating me continually he could express much of the pain that he had accumulated in the years of noncommunication with his father. Ben finally received what
he had been yearning for: emotional investment and recognition by a paternal figure. Ben, in his own, aggressive way, managed to get me involved. After putting me off balance, he finally received the paternal recognition and emotional contact he had been yearning for.

Between Canonic Culture and Nobrow

Some theorists have argued that the pathologies of the late 1980s and 1990s reflect deep developmental disturbances. First among them is Janine Chassegue (1984), who sees postmodern culture with its nivelization of difference as pathological per se. For her there is a clear-cut difference between actual aesthetic value as defined by a classical canon and pseudo-art that is based on no real criteria of quality. The lack of differentiation between the truly valuable and the shallow (in Chassegue’s view) pop culture is an indication of the denial between the generations and the sexes, and thus essentially perverse.

Similarly Julia Kristeva (1993) sees postmodern culture as psychically impoverished and impoverishing. She argues that it lacks the deep narrativization that provides individuals with the means to symbolize their psychic experience. She agrees with Janine Chassegue in seeing the typical psychopathology as perverse rather than neurotic.

I would like to offer an alternative hypothesis that is kindred to the position of some contemporary authors (Chodorow, 1994; Mitchell, 1993). The point is not that psychoanalysis widened its scope or that “deeper” pathologies have become more frequent. Even though there certainly are biologically determined constraints of the mind currently investigated in disciplines like evolutionary psychology and the neurosciences (e.g., Damasio, 2003), psychic structure is in many ways a function of social structure.

Freud’s writings abound with references to social class. He assumed that neurosis was often the price paid by the demands imposed on those who wanted to belong to the middle classes. In one of his more surprising parables he argued that the daughter of the good family is likely to develop a neurosis along with the chastity imposed on her, whereas the servant girl will stay healthy, albeit losing both her chastity and virginity. (It is not quite clear whose fate Freud considers preferable.)

Post–World War II generations grew up in very different circumstances: The baby boomers created the social climate of the 1960s and 1970s. They fought established social and cultural hierarchies and began to create the much more fluid mode of thinking and living that made issues of identity and self-esteem more central than conflict around sexuality and aggression.

As the late Stephen Mitchell (1993, chap. 1) argued, the needs of baby boomers were different from those of earlier generations. They did not primarily suffer from repressions but from a difficulty in fully living their subjectivity. Their conception of authority is different, and inevitably, so are their needs and desires. Their post-1960s conception of authority does not allow for analysts who bring established knowledge of human nature out of a position of neutrality into the analytic interaction. Furthermore, analysts like Mitchell (1993, chap. 2), themselves baby boomers, were not willing to take such a position of unassailable authority and knowledge.

Mitchell (1993) was one of the first authors explicitly to argue against the view that patients could simply be located on a neatly ordered developmental scheme of pathologies. Instead he understood that psychoanalysis was not a discipline that provided timeless knowledge of human nature; rather it reacted to a changing human reality of Western societies.

Generation X and Generation Y are growing up in a very different social and psychic
reality even from that of the baby boomers. Images from the media and peer group influence are a powerful influence in their development. The nuclear families they grow up in are invested with less authority. Their passage into adulthood coincides with the genesis of a culture that was of their own making.

The structure of their psyche is, inevitably, different from structures that evolved in earlier generations of the 20th century. Unlike Freud’s generation they do not think and feel in hierarchical terms. The baby boomers rebelled against hierarchies: During the 1960s and 1970s a generation of adolescents and young adults attacked the categories that had characterized their parent’s world. They fought for sexual freedom; they attacked the right of universities to form a curriculum on the basis of canonical culture.

This is reflected in the writings of theorists who articulated the ideology of the 1960s revolution. Philosophers like Foucault and Derrida kept attacking the most basic beliefs of Western culture, from logocentrism to the belief in suprahistorical reason. But they, as well as fellow deconstructionists from Deleuze to Feyerabend, were steeped in the culture they rebelled against. Reading Derrida and Deleuze gives the distinct impression of writers who deconstruct texts that they deeply loved. They tried to show that enlightenment ideals were based on illusory assumptions. But they revered the great enlightenment thinkers from Locke to Kant whom they deconstructed.

Hence, whether in highbrow or popular culture, in social liberation movements as well as academic discussion, there was continuity with the canon of the West. As in the struggle of adolescence and postadolescence for individuation, the fight against the earlier generation is carried out on the background of a deep attachment to this generation. Baby boomers had emotional contact with the target of their attacks; the authorities they were dismantling had a strong reality for them.

Generations X and Y live in a different world. They have grown into a freedom they did not have to fight for. Unlike the baby boom generation, they do not define themselves as rebels. For many of them the Western canon is something that they know of but that has very little emotional reality for them; they neither accept nor fight it. The world of nobrow is precisely defined by its nonrelationship to the Western canon. It is not iconoclastic, because there are no idols, ideals, and works that need to be attacked.

The 1960s and 1970s, when baby boomers came of age, were still characterized by great ideological discussions. Grand intellectual questions still commanded interest for adolescents and young adults. The lectures of Theodor W. Adorno, one of the leading theorists of the Frankfurt school, still attracted huge audiences at the Goethe University of Frankfurt. Michel Foucault’s lectures at the College de France and at the University of California, Berkeley, were grand events, and people fought for seats to attend them.

Generations X and Y have grown into the postideological age of the Thatcher–Reagan era. The struggle of ideologies is a thing of the past. Daniel Bell’s thesis that the end of ideologies had come has become a lived reality. Grand intellectual questions seem to be of little interest; pragmatic considerations are more prominent for Gen-Xers. Therefore Generation X does not attack previous generations for their authoritarianism, but for their unquestioned assumption that older generations can expect to be financed by the young (Thau & Heflin, 1997). Whereas baby boomers still viewed drug use as a political act of emancipation, Gen-Xers consider it as a way of having a great weekend.

It is easy to simply disqualify Generation X as egocentric, devoid of values, and/or squeamish and whiny—and all of these things have been said about them (cf. Holtz, 1995; Thau & Heflin, 1997). None of what I am writing is meant to add to this condemnatory choir. The social and cultural developments I described at the beginning of this article have been driven by large historical and technological forces. Generation X could not
choose its cultural environment any more than earlier generations could. That they have
grown into an environment in which the Western canon is not even something worth
fighting against is not of this generation’s making.

On Forming an Identity in Nobrow Culture

Erik Erikson (1950, 1968) invested a life’s work in elucidating the processes of identity
formation. In his view there are distinct developmental stages that human beings in all
societies go through; identity formation is the process that begins with the adolescent’s
differentiation from his family. As opposed to the child, who defines his or her identity
primarily through belonging to a particular family, the adolescent begins to seek a sense
of who she is that is independent from, and often opposed to, the family’s identity and
values.

After the stage of adolescent rebellion, the process of identity formation moves fur-
ther. Identity is beginning to be defined by finding a place in the wider fabric of society.
This involves the acquisition of a role in the workplace and what Erikson (1950) calls a
sense of generativity. Generativity for Erikson involves both the sense of having some-
thing to give and the ability to create a family.

Erikson’s (1950, 1968) descriptions were certainly highly adequate for the period in
which he wrote. America of the 1950s was a society that was mostly structured around
very clearly defined values and social roles. It was, for example, a central fixture of the
life expectations of young Americans to found families.

In the world of nobrow the very infrastructure of social roles and hierarchies that
defines Eriksonian processes of identity formation has changed dramatically. The cultural
changes that I described above make it very unclear how young adults can move into
social roles that they know from their parents’ generation.

Alexander Mitscherlich’s (1967) prediction that Western society was moving in the
direction of becoming a fatherless society has become strangely true. The enormous
difficulty Generation Xers have using their parents as role models has been amply docu-
mented (Ellis, 1991; Holtz, 1995). Fatherlessness is not just an issue of the failings of
individual fathers to provide role models for their children. It reaches much deeper; the
very role of fatherhood is cast into doubt.

There are strong indications that in the large cities of the West, young adults are not
clear at all whether they will ever want to found a family. Singlehood (cf. Strenger, 2003)
is becoming a viable lifestyle option. Many Gen-Xers seem not to feel the desire or value
of raising the next generation. I wonder whether, on a deeper level, this is connected to
their sense of detachment from the past. If there is no tradition that is to be handed down
and no cultural continuity with the past, why raise a new generation? Many of the more
gifted Gen-Xers feel that they do not primarily belong to any particular ethnic, cultural,
or national entity. They feel part of the amorphous population of the global village. Their
estrangement from previous generations and Western culture is partially a function of this
detachment. No cultural tradition or work is canonic: What matters is what can be
marketed.

Conversely, their parents feel out of their depth. Many of them feel that their cultural
heritage is becoming irrelevant for their children. Some of them fight to pass it on. Many
feel that in doing so they become pathetic impediments to their children and simply give
up on the possibility of truly assuming parental authority (Omer, 1999).

Ben’s biography provides an interesting exemplification for this process. His father
was a man of remarkable achievement and personal integrity; he exemplified the values that had carried the state of Israel through its phase of consolidation. He was devoted as a parent and tried to provide his children with emotional, material, and educational sustenance. Yet he felt completely out of his depth when faced with certain aspects of his son’s mental makeup. Being a tolerant and liberal man, he did not want to impose his values and lifestyle on his son. But as he was not able to understand his son’s world, he seems to have become emotionally more withdrawn.

I have come to view Ben’s statement that he did not feel the right to be angry at his father as sincere. Ben knew that his father had not withdrawn emotionally out of a lack of interest, love, or commitment to his role as father, but out of genuine despair at being unable to fulfill his role constructively without imposing something that was foreign to his son’s mental makeup and cultural universe. In order to make this hypothesis more plausible, I want to refer briefly to a well-publicized example central to Israeli culture of the 1990s.

The Israeli artist who represented Generation Xers’ disenchantment with the Zionist ethos of the previous generation most clearly is Aviv Geffen. During the 1990s Geffen, who is heterosexual and during the heydays of his career had a long-term relationship with a girlfriend, used to appear with makeup that had a distinctly gender-crossing effect, thus showing his disdain for the Israeli image of masculinity. He had also refused to serve in the Israel Defense Forces. In one of his most famous songs he would scream time and again, “We are a fucked generation!” The precise connotation of the Hebrew term mezuyan is a combination of two semantic implications: The first is of having been fucked in the sense of having been harmed and taken for a ride. The second connotation is that of being worthless and harmed, that is, fucked up.

Aviv Geffen’s concerts would draw huge audiences who knew the lyrics of his songs by heart. And whenever he returned to his song’s punch line, “We are a fucked generation,” they would scream this angry combination of accusation of their parental generation and despair at their own confusion together with him.

Aviv Geffen’s father, Jonathan Geffen, is a well-known writer, playwright, and journalist who has a close relationship with his son and has supported him throughout his career. And Aviv himself has well stayed clear of the trappings of the career of a rock star. Outside his concerts he was relatively reclusive, tried to avoid excessive attention, and always differentiated between his persona and his right to a quiet private life.

Yet the despair he expressed was genuinely felt and reflected his generation’s general experience. The essence of this despair seems to be that Generation X truly feels that they have no tradition to rely on. The fatherlessness of Generation X is less a matter of individual paternal failures than a much deeper, cultural process.

Fatherhood, as Lacan (1977) has emphasized, is much more than a biological function. It is also the signifier of the cultural order per se. Lacan’s writings abound with reference to classical Western culture, from Plato to Freud. His underlying assumption is that there is indeed a cultural nexus that Western individuals are born into, and that this nexus reverberates in the unconscious of every member of this culture, whether she knows it or not.

The question is whether this indeed holds true nowadays. Is the Western canon from Antigone and Aristotle’s Nichomachean Ethics indeed constitutive of the minds of Generation X? The hypothesis that I am putting forward for consideration is that we seem to be witnessing a partial disintegration of this cultural order. The symbolic order that Lacan believed to be constitutive of human existence may be undergoing changes so drastic as to become qualitatively different.
This means that Generation Xers need to form their identities with far less guidance from earlier generations and with less reliance on cultural continuity. Even the emotional closeness that is created by the act of rebellion is denied to them. They cannot hate their parents for imposing authority on them, and they cannot differentiate themselves through the rebellion that characterized the baby boomers. Their acquisition of identity involves the creation of modes of life that are defined in terms of roles and social functions that have not previously existed.

When Ben complained that he had no basis, he may have expressed more than an individual predicament. What is easily interpreted as individual psychopathology may be the reflection of a cultural and social upheaval that Francis Fukuyama (1999), for good reasons, has called “the Great Disruption.” My experience in working with gifted Gen-Xers (which, of course, can have only illustrative value, as it is not statistically relevant) corroborates this (e.g., Strenger, 2003). The process of evolving a sense of self seems to be much more experimental and open-ended than it was even in the previous generations. Ben’s qualms in acquiring a stable sense of self exemplify how difficult identity formation for Generation X is.

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