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Provincialising Mannheim: what do youth in Benin and Austria have in common?

Generational conflicts are increasingly addressed in media and in academic debate. Against this backdrop Karl Mannheim's investigation of generational change can be brought back into focus. He argues that every generation is a potential for change, but this often goes hand in hand with a conflict between generations. From a postcolonial lens we challenge this universal conceptualisation of generational conflict: drawn from case studies in Benin and Austria we show that Mannheim's argument has to be provincialised. Despite the different settings and methodological approaches, our results are similar: while young people perceive themselves as distinct from the older generation, and despite the rhetoric of rupture, no conflict can be observed in the concrete behaviour of the actors. Despite these similarities, it is important to witness the particular contexts, with specific, generational locations and specific spatial and temporal conditions. Only taking this into account, can it be said why, in what form, and in which contexts young people contribute to social change through the way they interact with other generations. Therefore, we want to question Mannheim's assumption of a generational conflict and highlight the need to provincialise it as an engine of change.

Keywords: generation, youth, deprovincialising, Benin, Austria

Introduction

Looking at the specific social temporality of sequencing generations and their overlapping lifetimes, early-20th-century German sociologist Karl Mannheim developed a theory of social change that challenged the idea of change or modernisation as a linear process.[1] He anchored this universal in the human life course that, proceeding from birth to death, generates for each human a specific temporality distinct from that of other humans. However, age cohorts growing up at the same time, and thus with some similar experiences, share what he calls the "generational location", namely similar historical and societal experiences as well as the consciousness of an age cohort growing up in a particular time. Based on the shared experiences and the related similarities in values, Mannheim calls the age cohorts a *generation.* In consequence, at any historical moment, different generations are sharing the societal space, which live, in the words of Mannheim, "actually in a qualitatively completely different inner time (translated from German)"[2] (Mannheim 1964 [1928]: 517).

The very fact of living jointly but in an "qualitatively completely different inner time" generates tensions in the production of knowledge which Mannheim, seen as one of the founding intellectuals of a sociology of knowledge[3], sees – and not the generations per se – as responsible for the production of the new. Here, the phase of youth is key, because youth's "fresh contact"[4] in societal constellations and the related building of new knowledge distances them from previous generations and their related options of (political, artistic or economic) action. The formative experiences during the time of youth are highlighted as the key period in which social generations are formed (Mannheim 1964 [1928]: 530ff. see also Pilcher 1994). Thus, the specific experience of every new generation has the potential to create something new, but also to build conflict with the adjacent generation. In consequence, societal transformation follows the rhythm of successive generations, for which Mannheim does not have a biological or numeric understanding as was discussed in his time[5] but which relates the emergence of a generation to changing societal formations.

1 This publication is a reworked version of a German contribution to a Festschrift for Dieter Neubert (see Bogner et al. 2020). It greatly profited from ongoing discussion with Tabea Häberlein, Lena Kroeker, Henning Melber, Dieter Neubert and Julia Pauli, whom we thank for this.

2 In German: "Eigentlich in einer qualitativ völlig verschiedenen inneren Zeit"

3 For sociology of knowledge see Mannheim and Kettler (2003).

4 Concerning Mannheim's idea of "fresh contact" as critical for an understanding of the relevance of youth see also Cole and Durham (2007: 18f.).

5 He distinguished his understanding of generations from that of Compte, who calculated a time span of 30 years for each generation (see Mannheim 1964 [1928]: 511).

This relationality with the duration of a specific generation implies that youth is only one potential factor for triggering change. This approach enables Mannheim to link the rhythm of individuals' life courses with specific experiences in historical time and thus with collective experiences, which he distinguishes from possible collective experiences of class building.[6] Mannheim's concept of generations offers a flexible and simple instrument that can help in understanding the significance of age – and youth, in particular – in societal processes (see Jaeger 1977; Jureit and Wildt 2005; Zinnecker 2003). In sociology Mannheim offers the most systematic and comprehensive treatment of generations as a sociological phenomenon. His theory of generations has been widely used to explain social transformation in Europe and America. However, as Pilcher (1994) already argued 30 years ago, and as we would still argue today, the relevance of Mannheim's theory of generations and societal change has not yet been fully acknowledged in the Anglophone scientific community and, we would add, even less so in the knowledge production on and with the Global South.[7]

Interdisciplinary postcolonial theory, among other fields, has asked to what extent basic sociological concepts, such as *generation,* can be regarded as analytical categories detached from specific places and times. One might also ask whether efforts to develop conceptual instruments, meant as independent of time and space, project constellations and epistemologies developed in the Global North to the Global South without fully reflecting possible differences. Postcolonial scholars have questioned the universalist claims present in the sociological concepts that dominated social sciences in their formative period: "A paradigm shift will be necessary to decolonize and strip universal sociology of its overarching Euro-centric concepts, principles and paradigms. The expected outcome is Afrocentric sociology. […] It will achieve the decolonization of sociology and the enthronement of 'true federalist' sociology, sociology that is situation-sensitive and context-determined" (Nwabuenze 2019: 19f.). This postcolonial critique means that theories, methodologies, epistemologies and concepts can no longer be universalised without undergoing a critical examination of any Eurocentric content and implicit hierarchisation (Boatcă and Costa 2010; Ghambra and de Sousa Santos 2017; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018). Placing concepts in a specific time and place is referred to as provincialisation (Chakrabarty 1992). Through this concept, Chakrabarty addresses the process through which European social

6 Social historian Tamara Hareven (1995) has called this the intertwining of individual time, family time and social time.

7 Cole and Durham's (2007) introduction to their edited volume is among the few exceptions that explicitly work with some of Mannheim's thoughts. However only a very few contributions in their book refer to him as well. As examples of work on youth in the global south referring to Mannheim see Alber et al. (2008); Cole and Durham (2007); Ullmann (2017).

sciences developed their hegemony. Sociological theorising must be understood against the backdrop of its historical development and context. In effect, Europe, or the Global North, can be understood as just one specific province among many others. In line with this, any concept developed in the Global North should be critically examined and explored whether it could be applied to the Global South (for example, see Daniel and Neubert 2019 on 'civil society' and Neubert 2022 on 'middle class'). Accordingly, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018: 4) also calls for overcoming Euro-American dominance and establishing epistemic freedom: "Epistemic freedom is fundamentally about the right to think, theorize, interpret the world, develop one's own methodologies and write from where one is located and unencumbered by Eurocentrism."

While Mannheim's concept of generation is meant precisely to situate the thoughts and experiences of specific historical cohorts in their historical time and space, distant from that of adjacent generations (Mannheim 1964 [1928]; 1984), the concept of historical generations in itself is meant by Mannheim as grounded in the human universals of birth, life and death, and as such are independent of place and time. However, we would claim the possibility or necessity of provincialising as we doubt it is so easy to generalise the generational conflicts and tensions which he claims to be the motor of change.

In the following, we will present empirical examples from two field sites from Cotonou (Benin) and Vienna (Austria) that focus on generational experiences and actions. Analysing the specific quality of inter-generational relations, we reflect on the idea of generational conflict as a possible engine of social change. In both cases, we observe rapid societal change, and at the same time intense interactions between adjacent generations; however, these are not manifested in conflict. Our case studies are quite distinct, not only because they are grounded in different methodological approaches, but also because the intergenerational encounters are situated in different fields. The case study from Vienna focuses on political action in the frame of the Fridays for Future (FFF) movement; the case study from Cotonou deals with marriage negotiations and practices. Furthermore, one is situated in the so-called Global North and the other in the Global South.[8] But despite these differences, in both cases intergenerational relations are crucial for negotiating change. Bringing these cases together, we do not aim to compare

8 It is important to keep in mind that the terms are more complex than they appear. We may find the Global North in the geographical area of the South, and vice versa (Burawoy 2015). We do not want to hide the fact that the Global South and North are different in themselves, and neither a geographical nor a socio-economic description is sufficient. We are witnessing also a globally interwoven history (see Kloß 2017; Schneider 2017). However, we refer to the notion Global North and Global South in order to highlight hierarchies and differences in knowledge production in line with decolonial thought, which is difficult to consider without using these terms.

them, rather, we analyse each case on its own but still can detect any similarities in the intergenerational negotiations of change. Given our different disciplinary approaches, the cases also differ methodologically, as will be shown. We should also add that both studies were realised independently from each other and were never meant to be brought into a systematic comparison. Rather, discussing them together is the outcome of conversations between the authors in which we identified Mannheim's notion of generations as a fruitful meeting point. Last but not least, by bringing both our materials into dialogue we aim to overcome the separation between youth studies in the Global North and those in the Global South that others have already criticised (Cooper et al. 2019).

A discussion of the concept of generation will be followed by presentations of our cases. Finally, taking these into consideration, we will discuss how they might help to provincialise Karl Mannheim's concept of generations with the aim of decolonising the universal hegemony of Western concepts.

The concept of generation

Generation has become an important concept in discourses on social change in the Global North. In both everyday conversation and the media, youth movements and related generational tensions are seen as an important political and social force. With the contemporary politicised FFF generation, agency and engagement have again been ascribed to young people. This makes it all the more urgent to reconsider the issue of generational relations.

At the beginning of the 20th century, and against the backdrop of industrialisation as well as rapid and partially violent processes of social change, Karl Mannheim developed his famous essay "The Problem of Generations". The structural changes included not only a reorganisation of the economy, but also of the family, housing, urbanisation and cultural productions of literature and art, which he took as important examples for his reflections. The concept of generations is closely tied to explaining European modernity and at the same time to the emergence of the concept of adolescence as a separate period of development (Jureit and Wildt 2005: 7). Mannheim's central argument is that people of roughly the same age who have lived through the same historical events, especially during adolescence, can be described as sharing a specific 'generational location'. Shared experiences might create generational cohesion, while smaller generational units are formed by those who also share similar worldviews. Mannheim uses the concept of generational cohesion to express the notion that individuals of roughly the same age who live in the same social and political context will tend to develop similar ways of behaving, feeling and thinking, and thus form a cohort. Different generational units – for instance with opposing political ideologies – can

develop in the same generational location, although generational cohesion binds them together. Members of a generational unit share the same location and can develop a common consciousness. Generational cohesion is likely to be strongest in times of crisis.

Today, a multitude of approaches to the problem of generations exists in various disciplines and links it with concepts like identity, collectivity, actions, economic situatedness, experiences, politicisation, and communication (see Jureit 2006; Jureit and Wildt 2005). Special attention is paid to adolescence as a phase between childhood and adulthood that has since the first half of the 20th century been associated with a radically changed social and cultural scene. Mannheim's concept also continues to be further developed, as can be seen, for instance, in an interdisciplinary volume edited by Harald Künemund and Marc Szyldik (2009). Alongside Mannheim's concept of historical or social generations[9], they point to the importance of generations within families (2009: 9), which we will refer to here as kinship generations (see Alber and Häberlein 2010). However, David Kertzer (1983: 126) has convincingly criticised this linkage, arguing in favour of a clear and sharp distinction between cohorts and kinship generations.

By focusing on shared experiences and the way young people seek to distinguish themselves from the previous generation, Mannheim's definition of generation as cohorts differs, of course, from that of kinship generations. In line with Kertzer (1983: 134), who explicitly points out that reflections on generational conflicts, especially, often do confound kinship generations and cohorts, we agree that a clear definition should be used in order to distinguish societal conflicts from family conflicts. However, we also acknowledge – and our examples prove – that generational conflicts in the sense of Mannheim, are not only often expressed in narratives of inter-familial conflicts but are also often experienced specifically as conflicts between parents and children. The case studies we discuss in this article focus on possible entanglements but also detachments between both. They demonstrate that Mannheim's socially or historically constructed generational tensions might be negotiated but sometimes also mitigated through interactions between parents and their children. This proves Rosenthal's (1997; 2000) assumption that generational experiences are often regarded as individual experience and that the experiences of historical generations are translated into those of kinship generations.

Occasionally, Mannheim's understanding of youth as makers of social change has been translated into the Global South. For instance, Alcinda Honwana and Filip

9 Künemund and Szyldik speak of 'social generation', while Mannheim used the term 'historical generation'.

de Boeck (2005) argue that adolescents in Africa could be understood as "Makers and Breakers" of social formations. Even if young people are deeply influenced by the social conditions in which they live, they are still credited with more creative drive and creative power than people in other phases of the life cycle.

In contrast, around the new millennium, literature on the Global North is mostly dominated by the narrative of disenchantment with respect to the concept of generations and hope is no longer placed in young people as makers of the future or a politically active force (Zinnecker 2003: 50ff.), leading to the argument that the political engagement of youth is decreasing (Furlong 2013).[10] However, it should also be acknowledged that the demographic situation also influences the role of youth. In Austria, the average age is now 44.4 and it is increasing (Laenderdaten n.d.), placing it among the countries with the oldest populations in the world, those where less than 20 percent of the people are younger than 20 – the "youth" (Statista 2023). In contrast, African children and adolescents constitute the majority of the continent's population (Honwana and de Boeck 2005: 1). In Benin, the average age is only 18.3 (Laenderdaten n.d.) and 53 percent of the population are still under 20. What youth means in concrete social and historical contexts, and what creative opportunities young people have, obviously depends not only on the social circumstances, but also on demographic factors.

In the following, we will discuss how relations between historical generations are experienced and negotiated in intrafamilial relationships. In the examples presented here, the actors define themselves as young. In both our case studies, the young people distinguish themselves as a collective from an older age group. How can we describe the realities of life for these young people?

Le chemin royal – generational relations among young members of the middle class in Cotonou

"*Pour notre génération, on a pris le chemin royal*"[11], declared Aliou, a young member of the new middle classes in Benin[12], in summer 2018, when speaking about his marriage a year ago to Rehanna, a young woman from his home region. Both had grown up in Cotonou, the economic and political centre in Southern Benin. Their parents are from the North of Benin, but had set up big households in

10 Even recent literature on youth in the Global South has become critical with regard to aspirations and hopes (Durham/Solvay 2017; Häberlein/Maurus 2020; Stambach/Hall 2017).

11 English: In my generation we took the royal road.

12 In the past decade, studies on the so-called new middle classes in Africa have complemented, and in certain respects corrected, the hitherto dominant economic studies. For good overviews of the literature, see Scharrer et al. (2018); Neubert (2019).

Cotonou. Although born into peasant families, they had succeeded in education and so had been successfully integrated into the national formal labour market. The fact that both became high-ranking officials in the civil service and belong to the country's elite distinguishes them from their siblings, some of whom are still farmers, some illiterate. The life trajectories of Aliou and Rehanna are in great contrast to the experiences of their parents. Both grew up in urban households, and, like their siblings, were educated in private schools, followed by periods of study abroad. Socialised with computers and mobile phones, without any financial constraints, they shared from their childhood the consumption standards and lifestyles of upper middle-class families which in many ways connects to a global youth culture. Part of this is that they met and decided to marry of their own accord, rather than marrying spouses chosen by their parents. For themselves and their children, they aspire not only to achieve financial independence, but also independence in respect of occupational choice and other important decisions in life. And finally, the aspirations of people in this generational location include setting up their own independent household, constructing their own house on purchased land without interference from other family members.

It was during Erdmute Alber's four-month anthropological fieldwork on middle class households formed by people from North Benin in the large cities in Southern Benin that she met several young couples like Aliou and Rehanna, in 2016 and 2017.[13] She did standardised questionnaires in 80 households through which she found that many of these households are quite wealthy, given the fact that only those educational migrants from Northern Benin who had successfully integrated into the labour markets remained in cities like Cotonou. Many others returned to the North, and it is this migration pattern that created dense networks of professionals between the home region in Northern Benin and the economic and political centres in the south. In addition to the standardised questionnaires, she did dense participant observations in some households like that of Aliou and Rehanna, whom she frequently visited in the following years, so that as well as assisting at their wedding ceremony, she could also talk with her research partners and friends later, and see how the family life of these couples developed over time.

Despite verbally distancing themselves from some of their parents' ideas, Aliou and Rehanna, as well as many others, largely met their parents' expectations in respect of marriage choice, especially in terms of the wider family: their families are from the same region of origin, namely the Borgu department in Northern

13 Ethnographic fieldwork in Benin relevant for this study was realised within the framework of the research project "Middle Classes on the Rise" at the Bayreuth Academy of Advanced African Studies, financed by the German Ministry of Education and Research.

Benin, they share the same faith and speak the same local language, and they are in similar financial circumstances.

In addition, Aliou and Rehanna had complied with the wishes of their parents and waited several years before marrying. They would have liked to marry earlier, in order to be more independent but Rehanna's father had insisted they wait.

The patience demanded by this chemin royal had paid off. Aliou explained that complying with the norms of the previous generation had been the only way the young couple could show respect towards their parents. Being involved in the marriage arrangements, both parents accepted responsibility for the young couple. As a result, says Aliou, both he and his wife can always ask their parents for help at any time in the future. He explains that if parents are not involved – meaning if no respect is shown for their generational norms, or, as one could say, their generational location – couples are on their own from the beginning, and cannot expect help with solving their financial problems, making decisions, or coping with challenges. Parents would always be able to argue that since they were not consulted in respect of the marriage, they are not responsible and are free from the intergenerational obligations. And indeed, it is observable how much both parents are engaged for the young family. For example, Rehanna's mother often takes care of their two small children. She cared for both sons during their first year, when they were still too small to go to a child care institution. Only with that assistance could Rehanna manage to continue her career as a medical doctor.

Aliou's account of his own chemin royal, essentially meaning full involvement of the parents in the long marriage process, reflects an ideal in respect of intergenerational relations that is widespread among young members of the urban middle class. This can be described as the care to not challenge parental responsibilities and support.

Like many other young people of their generation, Aliou and Rehanna are careful to make sure that not only their parents but also other members of their extended families are involved in important life events, not only marriage, but also birth, parenthood, or funerals, for instance. This involvement provides continuity in intergenerational relations, and corresponds to the idea that marriage is more than the joining of two individuals, but rather creates a bond between two kin groups. It was the parents who fixed the lists of invited guests for the marriage reception, and the mothers who were deeply involved in deciding on the dresses, for instance.

The norm which requires that marriage, and to some extent responsibility for children, be treated as a matter that concerns the wider kin group is ritually observed in the context of middle-class weddings and baptisms, in addition to

other norms locally associated with the Global North. These Global North norms include the notion, expressed during baptism, that a child belongs to its parents, or at weddings that the couple make their marriage vows as individuals. In contrast, the performance of marriage as a matter concerning wider kin groups includes various forms of exchange of material goods, known as the bride price, and to which much value is attached, regardless of how rich or poor the families may be. Besides many gift exchange rituals at the occasion of a wedding, which have been described in detail elsewhere (Alber 2020), involvement of the parents and the avoidance of any sign of generational conflicts or rifts is manifested in many everyday actions, such as the great respect shown towards in-laws, not only during the period of betrothal, but also after the wedding.

This even happened in cases such as the marriage of Ousmane and Sakina in 2019, when an intergenerational conflict seemed to be threatening. They also both belong to the new middle classes. He has studied abroad; she is a teacher. As they had been born in the rural areas, both had lived, while attending secondary school and university, in the households of urban relatives, whom we will refer to here as their foster parents,. The marriage negotiations were carried on by these urban foster parents. In addition, the inclusion of the foster parents in the marriage arrangements was ritually cemented: they played important roles in the civil marriage due to the fact that Sakina's foster father was the registrar and Ousmane's foster father was a witness. However, the real marriage ceremony, after the civil marriage, took place in the rural household of Ousmane's birth parents. Ousmane's urban foster parents had made no financial commitments in respect of the wedding, and had only conducted negotiations over the bride price on behalf of Ousmane. As, in his eyes, they had not acted as parents of the bridegroom should do, he did not visit their household after the civil marriage in order to greet them there, but went directly to the village. In the eyes of the foster parents, this was seen as a disrespect and interpreted as an insult.

From a generational perspective both these cases give evidence of the desire of young members of the middle class to involve their parents in decisions at important turning points in their lives, and thus to avoid intergenerational conflicts. This does not mean that the parents make the decisions when it comes to choosing an occupation or a spouse, but that the young people make sure to involve them in such decisions in some way and assure their support. Often, these young couples even behave as if the parents had chosen the marriage partner. Even Ousmane, who had apparently committed a breach of the norm, underlined the value of showing respect for one's parents in the marriage process; this applies especially where there is disagreement over lifestyles. In his case, the misunderstanding or conflict was related to the question of who should play the parent role in the marriage process, and not to any basic questioning of the need to show respect towards the parents. As Ousmane saw it, his foster parents did not

play the role of parents because they did not take on any financial responsibility. This example also shows that assuring conflict-free intergenerational relations within the family – what Aliou referred to as the *chemin royal* – consists essentially of the mutual acceptance of responsibility and relations of exchange, and thus lies in the hands of both sides, the parents and their sons and daughters. Neglecting, or refusing, to meet one's exchange obligations is interpreted by both sides as a rupture that strains the intergenerational relations.

Interviews conducted by Erdmute Alber with young members of the middle class, and her participation in wedding festivities, confirm that this pattern exists beyond the two cases described here, and especially when the parents have a different lifestyle from their children, or are in a very different financial situation.

In life course rituals, intergenerational relations are performed as relations of exchange. The parent generation is expected to lead these processes, and to assume financial and normative responsibility. Children are entitled to marry but the ritual organisation of their marriage lies in their parents' hands. On marrying, young people enter a stage in which they begin to take on economic and ritual responsibility for others. Young people today strive to maintain this practice, even though their parents are often unable to take on the normal responsibilities as a result of changes in living conditions. It is not uncommon today for young men who have obtained a university degree to pay the bride price themselves, but to let their parents hand it over to the bride's family. Regardless of who provides the money, everyone agrees that this is a matter between the parents. The same applies to the choice of a partner: even when the young people chose their marriage partners on their own – as is almost always the case in middle-class milieus – they leave the official courtship procedures to their parents. This practice is not questioned at all, any more than the norm that children must provide for their aged parents.

The tendency to preserve intergenerational continuity is also shown in that children do not find it easy to openly oppose the wishes of their parents, even when they live in very different circumstances, as in the case of upwardly mobile members of the middle class. However, while people like to underline how early they had to stand on their own feet and make important decisions themselves, they avoid describing this as a rupture or conflict.

Behind the striving for tension-free relations between the generations is the desire to not endanger mutual support obligations. In this, the case of the young members of the middle class in Benin differs fundamentally from that of youth in Austria, as will be shown. In a situation where social positioning is highly volatile, even children from wealthy middle-class families need the security of being able to depend on their parents, because even top educational qualifications are no guarantee of well-paid employment. And parents need to be able to count on the

support of their children when they are old. National social security systems still cover only a fraction of the population and very few people benefit from them. Most people, including those who have paid employment, are thus dependent on their kin networks and especially on the customary intergenerational support obligations. No one wants to risk losing the benefits of these arrangements.

Unlike the case from Austria presented in the next section, young members of the middle class in Cotonou have no common political issue comparable to the fight for climate justice that reflects tension between the generations and is discursively negotiated in a political movement. And yet a close analysis of intergenerational relations in the context of marriage processes reveals a whole range of social and political issues that create a divide between the generations. The main issue here is the positioning of young people as part of a global youth culture, as expressed for instance in terms of music or styles of dress, but also in respect of love and marriage, or the role of young women within the family. In many respects, an apparently private matter such as marriage also has a political dimension, not least because it creates alliances between families, and affects political positions at the regional level, which in turn are important on the national level.

Fridays for Future in Vienna as a transgenerational collective

When the global youth movement Fridays for Future (FFF) emerged in August 2018 following the protest by the Swedish activist Greta Thunberg, who was then 16 years old, the print media associated the emergence of the movement with a historical intergenerational conflict. It was said that the movement revealed a deep rift between the older and politically active generation and the younger generation that is not yet entitled to vote. For the Global Earth Strike in September 2019, four million people were mobilised in 163 countries. This clearly shows the global dimension of a politicised youth culture that invites comparison with the 1968 protest movement (Rucht 2019). With FFF we are witnessing a well-educated, middle-class youth engaged in the global FFF movement. The quantitative survey conducted by Antje Daniel in Vienna shows that 65 percent of those who took part in the Global Climate Strike in September 2019 were younger than 25 (Daniel and Deutschmann 2020).[14]

14 This case study from Vienna (Austria) investigates generational relations in the context of FFF demonstrations using both a quantitative survey and qualitative interviews. The research has been conducted by the Forschungswerkstatt Protest, a research hub at the Department of Development Studies at the University of Vienna (see https://ie.univie.ac.at/forschung/forschungswerkstatt-protest/). In this article, only selected data from the 2019 survey will be presented. These data are complemented by fifty-eight interviews with protesters, politicians, scholars and civil society. We thank the Arbeiterkammer Wien for their financial assistance.

This age group sees itself as a generation that shares an interest in fighting for climate justice. FFF activists demand that commitments made under the Paris Climate Agreement in 2015 be met, and urge decision-makers to enforce climate policies that will ensure social and ecological justice in the future. This global culture of youth protests is also characterised by networking, discussing ecological problems via social media, a shared sense of the need for national and international political reorientation towards climate justice policies, and an increasing willingness to adopt to a sustainable lifestyle. Socialisation and also formal education regarding environmental and climate concerns have contributed significantly to this rapid worldwide mobilisation and to the formation of a youth culture (Daniel and Deutschmann 2022). Despite a generally more secure economic position than their counterparts in Benin, these young people also see themselves as part of a global youth culture. In their demands, FFF youth distant themselves from older (political) generations. For instance, with statements such as "I want you to panic," the dramatic appeal of the movement's icon Greta Thunberg (Schneider 2019), addresses ageing political leaders who have failed to establish sustainable environmental and climate policies. This choice of words and Greta Thunberg's general accusation that the older political generation has put the future of the present and coming generations at risk by its failure to act on climate change seems to indicate generational conflict. The journalist Bernd Ulrich argues that the media referred to a generational conflict only after politicians (as representatives of the older generation) had reacted defensively to the demands of the young FFF activists (*Die Zeit* 15.03.2019). Even the journalist Simon Hurtz warns that the political demands of the young generation should be taken seriously in order to avoid a generational conflict (*Süddeutsche Zeitung* 28.03.2019). This hypothesis of a generational conflict is supported by the fact that adults have frequently regarded young people as being unpolitical (see Furlong 2013), while the FFF activists reject this idea and argue that they share a desire to fight for climate justice.

The assumption that this is a generational conflict is based on the perception of a changed generational cohesion centred on the feeling of being endangered and the shared knowledge on climate change: In Vienna, the specific generational location is based on experiences connected with climate change. While their parents benefited from economic growth after World War II and grew up in an affluent society, the dominant concern of youth in Austria today is the threat of planetary extinction and they experience various insecurities. The FFF activists highlight in the interviews that their generation is growing up with the knowledge of environmental destruction which they gained at school or in family and has experienced the consequences of climate change such as record temperatures. In addition, youth have experienced many insecurities and meaningful

transformations, such as the negative impact of the financial crisis of 2008, rising authoritarianism, and the serious political challenges of migration. FFF youth complain about the experience of multiple crisis and develop a dystopian future perspective. Young people are aware of a sense of threat, but this does not lead to despair; rather, it results in demands for political accountability (Bohl and Daniel 2020; Daniel et al. 2020). Young activists define themselves as belonging to the same generation and share a sense of threat. They increasingly see themselves as responsible for contributing to a future that is worth living for. This political engagement distances them from their parents whom they accuse not been politically active enough, even if they share a sustainable lifestyle. Thus, FFF activists connect lifestyle and age and this is often attributed solely to the fact that the climate change is becoming increasingly tangible and increasingly dramatic. Participants of the Global Climate Strike confirm that they suffer from a feeling of being threatened. A school pupil who took part in the strike in 2019 argues as follows:

> We see that the rainforests are being cut down, the air is getting more and more polluted, biodiversity is declining. But people can't survive without nature, we're a part of nature. Yes, I fear the world won't exist much longer, it feels like a threat.[15]

People who share this generational location not only define themselves as young people whose life courses are seriously affected by the climate crisis, but also consciously distance themselves from the older historical generation. A female student describes this as follows: "I have the feeling young people have realised that we have a problem […] we are growing up with it […] And there are a lot of older people who don't see it as a big problem; who aren't aware of it."

From a changing generational location, groups of politically active young people with a new sense of generational cohesion have emerged who engage in climate activism as a way of asserting their right to a future that is worth living for: not only being of the same age, but also their political striving for climate justice constitutes a common bond. However, fighting for climate justice does not necessarily lead to a generational conflict, as has often been postulated. Whether and to what extent there is conflict between the generations does not depend on generational cohesion so much as on lifestyle, as one student explained. The focus here is on the relation between the young people and their parents as a kinship category (and not a political generation). An activists explains: "It pains me when I see how lazy they (parents) are. My Mum drives everywhere by car. […] They don't seem to have any motivation to change their lifestyle. So it's up to

15 All interviews are translated from German.

the young ones now." Thus, the FFF activists make a connection between lifestyle and age. In these statements, it is argued that age is the determining factor in respect of lifestyle and awareness of environmental and climate issues.

If there is a conflict or rift between the kinship generations of parents and children, this is often attributed only to the fact that the climate change is becoming increasingly tangible and increasingly dramatic. One schoolgirl argues as follows: "Each young generation has its own interests and worries, and they are not the same as those of the older generation, I think that's normal. But I wouldn't call it a generational conflict."

Thus, there is no evidence here of a conflict between the young activists and the parents' generation. This is shown, firstly, by the fact that the young people give unawareness of the problem as the reason why their parents fail to act (1). Secondly, the young activists are often supported by older people, even beyond the generation of their parents (2). Thirdly, the young Greta Thunberg is recognised by many adults as a leading figure in the environment movement (3).

Firstly, the young activists frequently justify the attitude of their parents by commenting that climate change has become such a serious problem only in recent years, and in the past it was not so threatening. One schoolgirl argues that: "My Mum's generation definitely [had] different worries [...] from ours, like the Cold War and the war in Vietnam. Protecting the environment was an issue, but it wasn't as pressing as it is today." A number of people emphasise that the differences between parents and children are not as great as is often suggested, because both generations take part in the protests. The quantitative data collected in respect of the Global Earth Strike on 27 September 2019 in Vienna also reflect common interests: 76.6 percent of the protesters say that their parents are very interested in the issue of climate change, so that climate change can be regarded as a common interest with their parents. Further, 88 percent of the participants answer that they agree with their parents concerning the reasons for the climate crisis, and 82.1 percent concerning who can provide solutions. The data show that the issue of environmental and climate change is discussed in the families and that the FFF activists have the support of their parents. As a result, 62.7 percent of the protest participants answer 'fully' or 'to a large extent' to the question whether they feel that their parents take their fears and worries in respect of the climate change crisis seriously. The majority of the protest participants feel that they are taken seriously by their parents, that they can discuss climate change issues with them, that they have overlapping interests, and that accordingly the young people rarely criticise their parents. The parent generation's positive reaction to the FFF movement is appreciated by the young activists: "Yeah, that the grown-ups really listen ... I think it's brilliant." However, parents' sharing the

interests of their children does not necessarily mean that they become politically active themselves, beyond joining the current protests: according to young people who participated in the protest in September 2019, 54.4 percent of their parents do 'not' or 'never' do anything to combat climate change. We can conclude that the relation between kinship generations is perceived as an explicable, and thus excusable, expression of different biographical experiences, rather than as a conflict. Even the political dimension of relations between the generations does not lead to conflict, because alliances between the young people and older generations, in both the kinship and the historical sense of generation, emerge in respect of the issue of climate justice.

Secondly, by now, several adult groups have been formed to show their solidarity with the original FFF movement, including Parents for Future, Teachers for Future, Scientists for Future, Workers for Future and Religions for Future. The notion of a historical generational rupture is contradicted by the growing number of these civil society groups and their presence at Global Strikes. The fact that the strikes and demands of the FFF activists are supported by a growing civil society climate alliance is evidence of transgenerational mobilisation for climate justice, which is perceived as a collective problem.

Thirdly, Greta Thunberg is regarded as a key figure in the environment movement. Her provocative speeches on the international stage are variously described as courageous, provocative, necessary, or even as martyrdom. While many protest participants try to resist any reduction of the environment movement to the young Greta Thunberg, the fact that she is recognised as a leading figure by adults shows that this is not a generational conflict (on perceptions of Greta Thunberg, see Daniel and Graf 2020).

Thus, the supposed generational conflict seems to be a fault line constructed by the media. If there is a historical rift in respect of climate justice, it is between the FFF activists and older political decision-makers who do not recognise the urgency of climate or environmental issues. The generation gap is used in the media and by politicians as an effective means of denying the legitimacy of the FFF movement, since the activists can be presented as rebellious adolescents. But a continuity can be observed that goes beyond age, both within families and among environmental activists. However, this is to overlook the real fault lines in the FFF movement, which mark the limits of the movement's ability to mobilise support: most of the activists are middle-class, which leads critics to characterise FFF as being remote from social realities. This indeed reveals the limits of a politically active youth that has not managed to mobilise members of the lower social classes or young people from immigrant families to any significant degree.

In Vienna, in contrast to Benin, middle-class adolescents generally share the same lifestyle with their parents.

Perspectives on generational conflict

Although these two case studies may appear to be methodologically different, and different in terms of content, from a generational perspective they share a surprising number of common points: both focus on youth of the (global) middle classes: within their national contexts but also globally interlinked, these have had an above-average education, belong to an urban youth culture, and owe their status and career advancement to their own efforts in combination with that of their parents. In both case studies, generational location can be said to be based on similar socio-economic positionings which result in shared transgenerational values. In Cotonou, these values are reflected in lifestyle, and in ideas concerning the role of parents as supporters and leaders in life course matters such as marriage. In Vienna, this generational location is based on experiences connected with climate change and the resulting political views and activities. In both cases, the generational location of the young people contrasts with that of their parents.

The young members of the middle class in Cotonou differ from the generation of their parents mainly in terms of their better education and related opportunities for economic independence in an urban context, which results in different consumption habits. They aspire to a modern life based on affluence. Although the generations have different ideas of what constitutes a good life, youth attach importance to a stable relationship with their parents. Thus, they show respect towards their parents and accept them to perform authority and lead in life course events, even if these are in contradiction with the idea of becoming independent from their parents. These generational relations are characterised by a manoeuvring between separation and integration, in which the dominant element is the narrative of *keeping everyone in the boat* for purposes of social and financial security in possible crises. This does not depend on intergenerational communication between the parents and the children as much as on shared everyday practices. The most important aim of the young people is to achieve success so that their parents will be persuaded to accept their lifestyle.

In Vienna, by contrast, the middle-class adolescents widely share the same lifestyle with their parents. As a result, solidarity between the parents and their children is not only demanded but also practised in the political protests of the FFF movement. Climate and environmental issues play an important role in the relationship between both, despite their very different (and differently thematised) generational locations: while their parents benefited from economic growth after World War II, and grew up in an affluent society, the dominant concern of youth in Vienna today is the threat of planetary extinction. While the young activists have grown up with the narrative and experience of crisis, their parents are also feeling its effects. This narrative implies a rejection of modernity in the sense

of consumption of resources by an affluent society: many of youth define the ecological as a product of modernity. The sense of threat affects parents and youth equally, so that they cannot regard each other as a refuge or a form of security; but while the reaction of the young people is to urge politicians to act, and they see themselves as part of a global youth protest culture, the older generation is not necessarily politically active.

In Cotonou, parents and youth do not feel threatened by planetary extinction; the generations are bound together by the mutual need for security. As this cannot be adequately met by state security systems or economic developments, maintaining kinship networks is imperative. Just as social advancement is possible through education and successful integration in the labour market, there is always a risk of losing one's social status due to unemployment, illness, or financial setbacks. For this reason it is important not to breach the kinship norms imposed by kinship obligations, and to avoid deep rifts, which exist in many families nevertheless in one way or another.

In both cases, social change is perceived as the expression of changed generational location, but attitudes to it differ. In Cotonou, youth hope for future affluence in a global youth culture, strengthened by the fear of losing one's social status. The young people are happy to leave the lifestyles of their parents' generation behind them. In Vienna, the processes which led to affluence for the older generation are being increasingly subjected to criticism. The two cases thus reveal divergent visions of the future, and different attitudes to change. While the FFF activists demand a fundamental societal change, in Cotonou youth hope for affluence and welfare security. Regardless of their different aspirations and practices in connection with social changes, youth in both Vienna and Cotonou see themselves in the same way as an age group that is distinct from the older kinship and political generation.

Despite the differences and potential tension between the generations described in both cases, the idea that social change is driven by generational tensions does not hold. While in both cases, the younger generation sees itself as differing from the older generation, this cannot be considered as part of, or the cause of, a conflict or rupture. On the contrary, efforts are made to ensure continuity.

Our findings lead us to conclude that while different generational locations often serve as the engine for social change, the potential for change is not necessarily related to conflict. In Cotonou not only the children but also the parents of Rehanna and Aliou were willing to integrate elements their children desired into the wedding festivities, for instance in the choice of music, dance performances, or global middle-class ideas of what constitutes a proper wedding,

such as exchanging rings or cutting the wedding cake. In Vienna, the founding of *Parents for Future* has already been mentioned as such an element of bridging the generations. Consequently, the concept of generations can serve to document experiences of change, without necessarily explaining them in terms of a conflict.

Mannheim's analysis of social change must be questioned not only in respect of generational conflict: youth and social change are certainly not mutually dependent categories, as Mannheim seems to imply. A young generation can be unpolitical and prefer a continuity of lifestyle. Our case studies confirm that social change is closely associated with the younger generation, but they also indicate that social transformation processes cannot be equated with political participation – as argued frequently and implicitly by Mannheim. The example from Cotonou shows that change also takes place on the socio-cultural level, and then has repercussions in the political sphere.

Conclusion: provincialising Mannheim

With two case studies applying Mannheim's terminology into contrasting contexts, we investigated the role of intergenerational relations in the dynamics of social change from a critical postcolonial perspective. In both settings, and despite the completely differing context, we see parallels: youth do perceive themselves as distinct from the older generation but we observed no conflict in concrete behaviour in either case, despite the rhetoric of rupture. Instead, youth and parents alike made efforts to maintain intergenerational continuity. In both examples, we see that social change is conceived and lived as an integral element in the succession of generations (Cole 2004 draws a similar conclusion from her research on Madagascar).

Our cases confirm the importance of taking the specific context into account, along with its specific generational locations and spatial and temporal conditions. Only against this backdrop can it be argued why, in what form, and in which contexts young people contribute to social change through the way they interact with other generations.

We concede that the importance attributed by Mannheim to the temporality of life-course processes – birth, childhood, adolescence and adulthood – in explaining social change can be found everywhere, especially if one does not assume that social transformations are exclusively brought about by youth in all social contexts (see Rosenthal 2000. 165). We also accept that certain configurations are possible in the formation of generational units: the FFF movement is a good example here. And certainly generations are a valuable analytical category for explaining how adolescents form their identity and define themselves in distinction to older people.

While the concept of generation certainly has analytical potential, it is important to consider critically how far it is useful in explaining how individuals appropriate their experiences biographically, and interpret them socially, in interacting with and relating to others. Such appropriations reveal different interpretation and action patterns. We therefore argue for replacing a structurally defined concept of generation with an interactional one that proceeds from the self-ascriptions of ways of relatedness between young people and members of other generations (see Rosenthal 1997; 2000).

There is a need to provincialise the idea of generational conflict as an engine of change. Mannheim's concept of generation is based on his perception of World War I and is thus grounded in a particular temporal and spatial location. If this is not taken into account when transferring it to other spatial and temporal contexts, one runs the risk of applying it in a stereotypical and arbitrary manner. For this purpose, we need to discuss the concept and the parts that are to be provincialised, based on research in the Global South. The critical reflection of these concepts will contribute to decolonisation and to overcoming Euro-American hierarchies in knowledge production. We need to situate our sociological concepts in new temporal and spatial locations depending on the context of each study and also to reconsider the role played by privilege in knowledge production and extend and revise existing concepts in a context-specific and sensitive way that challenges their universality.

Nevertheless, our examples show how fruitful it can be to perceive and analyse transformation – whether in the seemingly political or the seemingly private sphere – from a generational perspective. Künemund and Szyldik (2009), and Alber (2009), have identified three different concepts of generation which effectively complement Mannheim's perspective, especially since Mannheim himself raised the question of how historical generations relate to kinship generations. Our examples show that one of these concepts is frequently read and interpreted in terms of the other. The young people in Cotonou and Vienna effectively remove the frequently postulated border between the political and private spheres, which not only allows us to compare what appear to be very different case studies, but also reveals the interrelatedness of political and kinship processes (Thelen and Alber 2017). An interesting question is whether it would be possible to develop a concept of generation that includes the possibility of ruptures. In our examples the conflict potential between kinship generations is consciously reduced. Even though Greta Thunberg rhetorically puts the blame on the parent generation, she expressly excludes her family, and addresses her demands mainly to politicians as a social generation.

However, this does not seem to be generalisable. Using the existing concepts to critically examine new social formations in different parts of the world is a constant challenge. But it is possible to contribute to their provincialisation and thus to a clearer understanding of society. Established distinctions, like kinship versus political, private versus public, or young versus old, must constantly be questioned in order to investigate the interrelatedness of social lines of distinction from an intersectional and provincialising position.

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