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Baby boomers have blighted their children's prospects

By Mark Mazower

Heirs of the Golden Age run the show, while the young face dismal futures, says Mark Mazower

Throughout the developed world, record levels of youth unemployment are spreading feelings of hopelessness across an entire generation. Yet what is striking is that policy makers hardly seem to care.

It is only part of the answer to observe that not everyone is suffering equally: for much of wealthy northern Europe, for instance, it hardly registers. And although it is true that in some of the badly affected countries the figures have been pretty high for several decades now, the crisis has made them much worse. The real problem is not economic; it is political. An epoch of some two centuries is ending, and the young are the main losers.

The rise of modern states coincided with a valorisation of youth. Napoleon marked the change. After him, age came to be associated with the *ancien regime*, youth with the hope of something better. Scarcely out of university, the great Polish poet, Adam Mickiewicz, wrote his "Ode to Youth" in 1820, perhaps the best-known expression of this attitude. Founded a decade later, Giuseppe Mazzini's Young Italy generated endless spin-offs – there was a Young Germany and a Young Poland, not to mention Young Ottomans and later Young Turks. A radical umbrella group, Young Europe, briefly brought many of them together, turning the name of the continent into the emblem of a fairer, more peaceful and more brotherly age ahead. The contrast is striking with what Europe has now come to stand for – a vision dreamt up by old men, now out of touch and increasingly out of mind.

In the 19th century such groups spoke about the future but seemed a long way from being able to shape it as their successors did in the century that followed. Communism spawned a new superpower, the Soviet Union, a state dedicated to creating a new man cast in the image of athletic fitness and health. The Communist party called upon a new generation, untainted by past loyalties, to build what the Soviets called "really existing socialism". Purges weeded out the old, providing opportunities for the young. As Leni Riefenstahl's films testify, the far right had an equally obsessive fixation on youth. Schoolchildren were mobilised for the party; dictators such as Mussolini were always ripping open their shirts to demonstrate their virility.

Written off by their critics as gerontocracies, the interwar democracies started to see their young people as a national resource as well. Looking back from the perspective of the 2008 financial crisis – with its paltry regulatory or legislative response – one is struck by how far western societies moved after the 1929 Wall Street crash. They did not change course immediately, but over a period of two decades they brought in welfare policies – in health, public housing and industrial relations – that transformed generational prospects.

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From the 1940s onwards, they focused more and more on the young. The new generation had shown itself to be indispensable in the most important way of all: modern warfare was inconceivable without armies of the young. Two world wars and the sacrifice of millions of youths cemented a new kind of social guarantee across the developed world. From the 1950s the young came to possess life chances – through schooling, expanded access to university and the demand created by near full employment – that had been enjoyed by no previous generation. That this era coincided with America's rise to global supremacy was no coincidence, for this was a superpower that flaunted its youth, a country where Eisenhower's years of experience were no virtue, and JFK's youth one of his greatest assets.

Today things look different. Heirs of the Golden Age still run the show, and septuagenarian rock stars hog the limelight. Meanwhile the young face dismal employment prospects, insecurity if they do land a job, and soaring bills for their housing and education. Their plight is an extraordinary generational triumph for their parents' cohort. In the US, escalating college tuition fees have prompted little protest. Occupy Wall Street was supposed to spur a larger social revolt on the debt question but it failed. In countries on the front line

of the eurozone crisis, a doomed generation – facing something in the region of 65 per cent youth unemployment – backs neither the existing parties nor any of the radical alternatives, seeing in all of them, indeed in politics itself, the expressions of the era that got them into this mess.

Understandable as this attitude might be, it is also self-defeating. For until the grievances of the young can assume a political expression more threatening to the established order, the sad truth is that nothing much will change. Modern warfare requires few soldiers. There is no ideology of youth any more, and it is not just the unemployed under-25s who have lost faith in the future. From the point of view of the modern state and its politicians, who needs the young?

The writer is professor of history at Columbia University and author of 'Governing the World: The History of an Idea'

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