The Schumacher Institute

Protest, Climate Fiction and Intergenerational Strife

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Collective rebellion against the existing system and establishment has been a youthful rite of passage for many generations through time, particularly where their coming-of-age has occurred in a period of turbulence and change. Of recent generations, the '*Baby Boomers*' (or *boomers*; those born between 1946-1964 [1]) are perhaps the most mythologised in having been forthright and vocal in protesting and generally making their feelings known about the big issues of their era, such as civil rights and the Vietnam War in the US, and political tensions and authoritarian rule in the wider world. However, for all of the social upheaval of that time (which culminated in the late 1960s), the broader context of that era was that of the so-called '*Trente Glorieuses*'. This describes the thirty or so years following World War II which were characterised (in the western nations, at least) by strong economic growth, expanding social, economic and educational opportunities, improving social contracts, new technologies, optimism about the future, and the global effects of pollution and depletion having not yet started to bite. Put differently, much of the world was improving (for the many, not just an elite) in ways matched by few other moments in history.

In contrast, more recent generations have experienced broadly equivalent social upheavals but with a background of the world experiencing accumulating global crises and challenges, as they have matured into adulthood. The '*Millennial*' Generation (born 1981-1996) had to contend with the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) and its aftermath of austerity and growing inequality as they entered the workforce, and '*Generation Z*' (born 1997-2012) have faced the Covid-19 pandemic and widespread inflation in their formative years. But it is the current youngest cohorts ('*Generations Alpha*', and presumably in time, '*Beta*') that will likely emerge as future adults into a world mostly characterised by accelerating instability and uncertainty. Challenges they will have to contend with in their early adulthood onwards will likely include:

[1] The birth date ranges for the different generations are not universally agreed, so all the stated ranges should be taken as approximations only.

a rapidly destabilising climatic system which may cross tipping points (resulting in e.g., threats to the global food system); growing constraints to key resources (e.g., driving ongoing inflation); accumulating pollutants (e.g., increasingly impacting human fertility); a fragmenting geo-political order (e.g., precipitating widening conflicts); the burgeoning and unpredictable impact of AI; and the interaction of all of these trends (i.e., the '*polycrisis*').

These younger generations (i.e., approximately *Gen Z* onwards) have therefore seen fewer economic and societal benefits whilst also looking down the barrel of a much more unstable and dangerous future. With the accessibility of information in our hyper-connected world they will likely become increasingly aware of this in coming years. It is therefore important to consider how their futures may shape up in light of this predicament, bequeathed to them by preceding generations [2]; fiction may the source which can provide us with some scenarios and hints about how this could play out in future. Fiction about the climate crisis has emerged as a distinct genre (climate fiction, or '*cli-fi*') in recent years, making appearances in film, books, TV and other media from around the early 2000s onwards (the major 2004 Hollywood film '*The Day After Tomorrow*' seemed to mark the transition of the subject from dry scientific matter to the cultural mainstream). These stories have formed their own mini-ecosystem, but generally (given the nature of the subject) have had a dystopic and darker tone, though the extent to which they have mixed in hope, drama, redemption etc. has varied greatly.

One fairly obscure work must surely take the mantle of painting the starkest and frankly most terrifying vision of future societies severely disrupted by climate change, and the dynamics between the different generations resulting from this, particularly in term of perceptions of victims and perpetrators. This work is '*The Precedent*', which was published [3] as a short story in 2015 by the Australian sci-fi author Sean McMullen. The story describes an imagined world

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[2] The *boomer* generation has had a lot of blame directed at them for the state of the world in recent years, but it should be noted that every generation builds on the inheritance bequeathed by its predecessors. To identify those truly to 'blame' for the current global predicament you could rewind to any arbitrary point in history (maybe all the way back to the first hominids that started to control fire). The boomers arguably lucked out in terms of the moment in time they lived their youth, but that is not the same as being fully responsible for what followed.

[3] Published originally in the short story collection '*Loosed Upon the World*'. Sean McMullen cites documentaries about climate change, the medieval witch trials and the film *The Seventh Seal* as the inspiration for the story.

of 2035 [4] in which Earth System tipping points have rapidly and dramatically driven the world into a severely climate-ravaged state. The pre-existing geo-political order has been swept away by a period of drastic instability, social upheaval and economic collapse, and the remaining population has since fallen into extreme and authoritarian forms of organisation; however, the basis of this authoritarian rule is unlike any seen before in history. In short, the younger generations (defined as anyone born during or after the year 2000; defined as 'victims') have taken full control of all aspects of society, with a central political aim being the delivery of justice in the form of brutal retribution to all members of the older generations (the 'tippers'; anyone born before 2000).

The tippers are so-called because they are squarely blamed for driving the occurrence of climate tipping points which have led to the devastation of the world. The story is written from the perspective of an elderly tipper (born in 1955, called Jason) as he is transported under duress along with many of his contemporaries to a remote location to be put through the 'audit'. This is described as an ongoing, systematic worldwide process for identifying and assessing each tipper's 'climate crimes' (ranging from having owned gas guzzling SUVs, to having gone on extravagant holidays; these are labelled using stark, quasi-criminal terms such as 'squandering' and 'greed') which they perpetrated in their earlier lives, via kangaroo-type courts which assign them suitable punishments. These vary from hard labour supporting the machinations of the global audit, to execution in various, highly symbolic fashions, to exile into disused mines burying the bodies of the executed (which removes their carbon from the atmosphere, thereby repaying their 'debt'). The audit is specifically designed to find each and every tipper guilty, so it is really a pre-determined witch hunt on an industrial scale.

What makes Jason stand out from his contemporaries is his former profession as a climate scientist, which contrasts with the other tippers, many whom gleefully discuss and recite their 'climate crimes' as a gallows-type celebration of their lost world, knowing that they're doomed either way. Jason's age and generation unavoidably consigns him to the audit, but he decides to cite his beneficent historical actions under questioning by the tribunal of accusers, to challenge his audit in an attempt to beat the process and be exonerated. Without spoiling the

[4] This was 20 years ahead at the time of writing, but now in 2024 this date is becoming uncomfortably close.

twist of the story, it suffices to say that this backfires and though he does avoid a direct punishment, he ends up being inadvertently responsible for the process becoming even more brutally successful and efficient. In short, the retribution of the wronged generations against those perceived as most directly responsible is shown to be driven by a remorseless, existential sense of injustice and anger that proves to be unstoppable.

A chilling story indeed, but surely it is just fiction, and rather pessimistic, sensationalist and extreme fiction at that. *Or is it?* Even if younger generations were to become restive in future to even a fraction of the extent of the scenario described in *The Precedent*, it would be disastrous. Therefore, appraising contemporary events with this in mind may be an important exercise. The first thing to consider is how protest and other forms of civil disobedience have manifested in recent years. Going back more than a decade to the early 2010s, the *Occupy* movement emerged following the GFC; this attempted to register frustration with the establishment, and disrupt the influence of the economic 1% who had done so much to precipitate the GFC. Around the same time, the *Arab Spring* started as a conjoined series of anti-government protests across the Arab world, protesting widespread corruption, oppression, and economic stagnation. Later that decade and into the 2020s, direct action protest groups such as *Extinction Rebellion* and *Just Stop Oil* (protesting against political inaction in the face of climate change) and *Black Lives Matter* (protesting against structural racism and injustice) have emerged as well, and well as other more targeted protests in response to specific events (e.g., recent conflict in the Middle East).

These protests over the last decade or so have to a large extent been intergenerational, attracting support from different parts of society. One movement has however emerged predominantly from the actions of the younger generations alone, namely the *Skolstrejk för klimatet* (school strike for climate) actions initiated and led (in the initial stages at least) by Greta Thunberg. The school strike movement is still ongoing in 2024 (under the follow-on *Fridays for Future* banner) but is less active than it once was; given that this is one of the main youth-driven and -centric movements to have emerged so far it could be said that the younger generations have so far been fairly phlegmatic about their situation.

Despite these protests not having sought to confront or disrupt governments, corporations or other aspects of society in a really direct or sustained way, it is the particular character of the school strikes which could itself be quite significant (with *The Precedent* in mind). This is because these protests represented a withdrawal from, or even rejection of, the standard order of things as dictated by the establishment (i.e., the primary vehicle of the older generations). The motivation and logic often cited by the youthful participants (beyond highlighting the general urgency of the climate crisis) was that there was no point or sense attending school and getting an education if organised societies had no future, and the skills that they were being taught would in the long term prove futile and useless.

In addition to these protests, there are other emergent trends of note amongst the members of *Gen Z* which could be of significance in terms of how they've responded so far to their predicament. This includes a widely observed lower proclivity for hedonism (e.g., alcohol consumption); although plenty of young people may still engage in this behaviour, as a cohort it been shown to be consistently lower than for preceding generations at that stage of life. This is likely to be driven by a range of factors, but theories cited include a widespread anxiety and risk aversion due to the social landscape they inhabit, with a litany of growing financial and societal concerns (e.g., the cost of higher education meaning they have to take their studies much more seriously), along with being the first 'digital native' generation, having grown up with the relentless pressure of online life.

Another phenomenon recognised in the *Gen Z* cohort is widespread elevated stress and rapid burnout in the workplace, which has resulted in very different attitudes amongst these workers to their early careers. This is likely underpinned by increasingly precarious employment conditions in many parts of the world, along with rising costs of living, and a transition from education to jobs during the disruption of the Covid-19 pandemic. This has made *Gen Z* employees on the whole much more fluid in their commitments to jobs (with frequent moves between jobs becoming the norm) and being more demanding of employers in terms of 'what's in it for them'.

For the younger cohorts behind *Gen Z*, it is the impact of Covid-19 on their education and wider lives that has dominated (though wars and inflation have been a background to their

world too), and this appears to have generated some concerning phenomena in many parts of the world. Mental health problems (mainly anxiety and depression) amongst children and youth worldwide had been rising before the Covid-19 pandemic but this took a sharp upturn during and after that seismic event. This appears to have translated into phenomena such as increased frequency of absence from school in many countries, and rising levels of challenging behaviour such as interpersonal violence.

Despite the relative stoicism and calmness of the younger generations to date, the phenomena described above, from school strike protests to burnout and withdrawal from employment, may imply that there may be a dawning and embedding collective awareness that they are inheriting a future of instability and unpredictability, and that what previous generations had ahead of them (i.e., prospects of a predictable job market, social mobility and a stable political situation) will be far less available to them. In *The Precedent*, some of the events that precipitated the collapse of the capitalist economic order as climate chaos spread are briefly described, including 'victim riots' and a social movement called the 'lateralists'. In the latter case, this was a simple detachment and withdrawal from the economic system based on generation of financialised wealth, which goes viral thanks to the internet and in doing so generates a complete collapse of the economy which governments are powerless to stop.

The real-world tendencies for younger generations to become disillusioned with, and withdraw (at least in part) from, key aspects of current societies (i.e., education, employment) could be interpreted as having loose parallels with this fictionalised scenario. This is of course not the same as suggesting that these real-world trends could develop into anything like the extreme final outcome described in *The Precedent*. What it does however indicate is that younger generations may well have started to show some signs of distress at their predicament; they have shown their feelings through some understated but stoic protests to date, but this calmness may not continue to be the case as we move into the future. Global demographic growth in the last few decades has resulted in younger people (i.e., those under 30) comprising between a third and half the global population (with a concentration in developing regions of the world) so any collective trends emerging from these large, diverse and highly connected generations will be increasingly influential in future.

It is possible, or even likely, that as global conditions deteriorate in years to come, many lines of division and conflict will form in human societies over dominance, resources, territory, and other facets of survival. These could potentially emerge between many different 'us and them' groupings including rich and poor, castes and classes, different blocks of nations and regions, the global north and south, and also between generations. Generational strife would however be unique; this is because the steady growth and improvement of the world over time, with people working to benefit their descendants, has become a cultural cornerstone, or even fundamental assumption, of modern life. The current situation may be first stages of this arrangement finally starting to deteriorate or reverse, so perhaps it is not such a leap of the imagination to surmise that disillusionment and hopelessness felt by younger people at this situation could morph into anger and rebelliousness, and in time, a directional sense of blame.

Effective leadership in coming years is therefore going to be crucial. This should likely not be the responsibility of any one generation; instead, recognition of the common fears and needs of people of all ages should mean an equal seat at the table for all generations. Throughout history 'elders' have taken positions of responsibility due to their life experience and wisdom, but that assumed at least a relatively predictable future. The predicament of our world, so unlike that of any other moments in history, calls for a different model, with contributions from everyone to shape resilience and equity. Even if that is a tall order, good starting points might be ceasing the current pervasive demonisation of younger generations (i.e., via use of divisive and unhelpful culture war terms in media, politics etc. like 'snowflakes' and 'wokerati'), and acknowledgement of the particular disadvantages they face.

The way the future will play out cannot of course be known or predicted, but there is a growing base of evidence that the future will be characterised by severe challenges. Whether these conditions lead inevitably to grim dystopias like that described in *The Precedent*, or to a more benign future is up to us, here and now. This is because actions taken now will have a huge bearing on the decades to come, so leadership in terms of mitigating division between generations, and working to help the younger generations cope with the future that's been handed to them, will be key to deciding that.