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Talkin' 'Bout My (Neoliberal) Generation: Three Theses

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TALKIN' 'BOUT MY (NEOLIBERAL) GENERATION: three theses

by John Buschman

Librarianship is awash in the “discovery” of generations: Boomers (of course),

Millennials, Gamers, GenX, GenY, NextGen, Echo Boomers, C Generation, ‘Net Gen, the Generation Born With the Chip, the TiVo Generation, Baby Bust Generation, N-Gen, Screenagers, Nexters, Gadget Generation, and MySpace Generation are just some of the monikers.¹ It is not worth parsing these here as if they were real categories other than to say that some signify groups that are older (Boomers), some younger (Gamers), a lot in-between, and most are ill-defined, overlap, or contradictory. These generational monikers are, for the most part, marketing devices rooted in segmenting the population into self-identifying with a common “community” of “needs” - then the products “necessary” to satisfy those “needs” are appropriately target-marketed.²

As usual, the American Library Association (ALA) has jumped on this bandwagon with full force. We have been treated to Lowell Catlett’s “entertaining” (he tells us he doesn’t need computer-projected graphics since, with his animated “style” he is “his own hyper-linked PowerPoint”) observations in the 2005 ALA President’s Program that libraries needed to learn from Starbucks: “as people get wealthier, they have the attitude of give me what I want, when, where, and how I want it” (but without depending too much on taxes) representing the “re-engaged” Baby Boomer generation.³ That 2005 conference also featured panels and presentations on mixed generations, generational management issues and work behaviors (at least three - one from a consultant clearly promoting her services), “Y-Libraries” for the Y-generation, and changing technologies/services/designs in light of changing demographics.⁴ The 2006 conference featured topics such as aging Baby Boomers, recruiting and retaining new generations, and the question of “if you build libraries will millennials come?”⁵

However, it is the particularly lemming-like Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) division that leads the way here. The 2005 ALA conference saw a really snappy title for the ACRL President’s Program (“Time for a Reality Check: Academic Librarians in a TiVo- lutionary Age”), followed by a panel at 2006 Midwinter on the learning

styles of the “Net Generation,” a précis on “today’s students” in the ACRL “toolkit” publication on the “power of personal persuasion,” and about eleven papers or panels specifically referencing generational “insights” in the upcoming (as of this writing) 2007 National Conference. When one throws in papers referencing new generation-laden products like wikis, “Library2,” social networking, etc. - all meant to “create a sense of the new, foster a buzz [and indicate] new forms of collective intelligence” - that number of papers at the ACRL conference doubles.⁶ Finally, a state ACRL chapter - in conjunction with an Ivy League university library - is sponsoring a symposium based around the ubiquitous Beloit College “Mindset list” in light of the purported new learning styles engendered by new technologies like those mentioned in addition to podcasting, blogs, PDA’s, etc. etc. etc. It is worth mentioning that the logo for the symposium is a collage of about 200 logos of corporations offering these services.⁷

However ill-defined, much is claimed in the name of these generational differences. Younger people/students are “focused on happenings elsewhere;”⁸ are “practical, immediate ... problem solvers” via trial-and error, are “relevancy-oriented,” have shorter attention spans, and enjoy risk;⁹ they work more collaboratively;¹⁰ they are competitive, resilient, confident, sociable, and analytical - “seeing problems in a deeper, strategic perspective;”¹¹ they multitask, are “nomadic” (through mobile technologies), have principles and are direct communicators;¹² and are “digital learners”¹³ – all while being profoundly influenced as learners by the postmodern conditions of consumerism, superficiality, and knowledge fragmentation.¹⁴ Baby Boomers on the other hand will not retire per se, but remain engaged;¹⁵ are divide themselves by the 1960s and the disco years;¹⁶ are themselves Gamers,¹⁷ bloggers, networkers, iPod-ers, and wikki-ists;¹⁸ and they are materialistic, independent, and idealistic ¹⁹ – all at the same time too.

The so-called shifting demographics of librarianship has contributed to the generational-buzz, generating its own cottage industry with insights that “we are what we watch” and how we watch it on television – which is indicative of generational communication shifts in the field.²⁰ Millennial/Gen X librarians are entrepreneurial, “globally concerned, diverse, cyberliterate, media savvy, and environmentally conscious [and] multitaskers;” who want immediate feedback since they were “raised with instant access to information.”²¹ These same librarians “expect to control what, when, and how they learn,”²² and they seek “nurturing” work environments, “fairness” and “challenges.”²³ NextGen librarians “have more options open to them,” “integrate technology into their lives,” and have a different take on the work/life balance.²⁴ Almost all of this is derived directly from business research concerned with recruiting and training the next generation of workers and corporate leaders – and being able to manage them effectively in the mean time.²⁵

What almost all of this literature does is reify marketing categories – but it is simply not enough to point that out and simply dismiss the tsunami of output

on the matter as more marketing flapdoodle and bamboozlement. Rather, it is the argument here that this “analytical” trend represents three aspects of neoliberalism working its way into and intertwining with librarianship. Before turning to these three theses on generationalism (as I will call it), a précis on neoliberalism drawn from the critical educationist Michael Apple is in order. Apple’s analysis of neoliberal reforms in education is especially powerful and germane since he cuts through much of the macroeconomic cant concerning the benefits of markets to the economy and the public, and focuses on what he calls the “gritty materialities” of the ideological import of such “reforms” for the interrelated issues of education in democracy, the public (as in actual people), and social/economic justice.²⁶

Neoliberalism: an Outline (with an emphasis on public institutions)

As Apple appropriates and applies them, the tenets of neoliberalism (minus the public relations machinery normally in attendance) are as follows:

- Unlike classical liberalism which sought to free the individual from the reach of the state, neoliberalism represents a “positive conception of the state’s role in creating the appropriate market by providing the conditions, laws and institutions necessary for its operation.”²⁷
- That neoliberal conception of the state is still a “weak” one. That is, it is a bedrock principle that “what is private is necessarily good, and what is public is necessarily bad.” Therefore, “public institutions ... are ‘black holes’ into which money is poured ... which do not provide anywhere near adequate results.”²⁸
- The neoliberal “solution” is the market: the “one form of rationality that is more powerful than any other.” With this comes the “ethos” of efficiency, cost-benefit analyses, maximizing one’s personal benefits, and the “empirical claim that this is [the definition of] how all rational actors behave.”²⁹
- The neoliberal approach joined with the “conservative restoration” which seeks to re-impose “standards” and “values.” Though the alliance is often contradictory with its own tensions (the media market for titillation often collides with moral issues, for instance), the two sides “oddly reinforce each other” resulting in the hegemonic umbrella under which most public policies have been framed and discussed for some time. From both perspectives, “the society is falling apart”: public institutions are incapable of responding to the cultural imperatives of restoring intellectual and social order or the “responsiveness” and “freedom” demanded by market reforms.³⁰

For Apple, the economic and social results which flow from neoliberalism as they percolate through public institutions are stark:

- Students (and arguably library patrons) are “human capital [who] must be given the requisite skills and dispositions to compete efficiently and effectively. [A]ny money spent...that is not directly

related to these economic goals is suspect [and a] waste [of] resources that should go into private enterprise.”³¹

- Beyond ubiquitous expansion of the model of the market into public institutions, overall neoliberal social policy envisions a “drastic reduction of government responsibility for social needs; the reinforcement of intensely competitive structures of mobility..; the lowering of ... expectations for economic security; the ‘disciplining’ of culture and the body; and the popularization of...a form of social-Darwinist thinking.”³²
- This form of “conservative modernization” of the economy must itself be depoliticized, marketed, and sold as “natural and neutral and governed by effort and merit” – and hence more democratic. “Consumer choice” thereby becomes the very essence of democracy, signifying a “transformation of what counts as a good society and a responsible citizen.”³³
- Finally, this “seemingly contradictory discourse” encompassing family values and cultural ideals, an idealized past, profit, discipline, and “competition, markets, and choice on one hand and accountability, performance objectives, standards, national testing ... on the other [has] created such a din that it is hard to hear anything else.”³⁴

While only a sketch, the power of Apple’s analysis of neoliberalism applied to public institutions and the purposes of education is apparent – as is its ready applicability to libraries and librarianship. He goes on to review and analyze much research on market models applied to education, the de-historicizing of the past in the conservative restoration of educational “values,” etc. – all via the lens of his critique of neoliberalism. While all of that is beyond the scope of this article, Apple’s work is instructive on the means to and efficacy of applying a larger theoretical-critical construct to the realities on the ground, and therefore worth examining further to expand the scope of critical-progressive librarianship. For our purposes here, he leads us to the three theses on neoliberal generationalism in librarianship: generations are primarily defined by what they consume (i.e. as a market) – primarily in terms of technology; claims are made on the basis of generational affinity with technology which go to the level of human cognition – thereby attaining a neutral, “natural” inevitability; finally, these “analyses” represent not new insights or novel or critical interpretations, but “customized” theory attuned to changes in the economy.

The remainder of the paper will explore these.

Thesis I: Generations as Consumer Cohorts and Markets

This is clearly a theme librarianship has lifted whole from the business and marketing literature. It is unsurprising to find economic categories like housing, income, labor force, and spending as prominent defining statistical characteristics in a book on, for instance, the millennials,³⁵ and higher education has been seemingly transfixed by the Beloit College

Mindset list which “defines” incoming classes for many administrators: the class of 2005 has always seen IBM Selectrics as antiques, a mouse is not a rodent, they were born the same year as the PC and Mac, no Boeing 727’s have been built since they were born, and lasers have always been marketed as toys; the class of 2007 has always had a PIN number, has always been able to make phone calls from planes, always had parents with SUVs, and “Ctrl + Alt + Del is as basic as ABC;” the class of 2010 grew up in “big box” stores like Walmart, they have never experienced having a sale “rung up” a sale on a cash register, they’re wireless, they’ve outgrown faxing, bar codes are everywhere, and “being techno-savvy has always been inversely proportional to age,” etc., etc., etc.³⁶

Librarianship too is defining its generations of patrons via the technologies they consume and use: video games,³⁷ ATMs,³⁸ cable television, iPods/MP3s, PDAs, Wi-Fi, camera phones, IM, streaming media, webcams, blogs,³⁹ “techtainment,”⁴⁰ RSS feeds, podcasting, wikis, social networks, RFID,⁴¹ Web 2.0,⁴² DVD’s, audiobooks, SMS,⁴³ and of course the ubiquitous Internet, WWW, Google, etc. Generationalism within librarianship revolves around “growing up around technology,” MTV, and the internet (for various cohorts),⁴⁴ TiVo,⁴⁵ Gen X wants “competency with new technology” in their leaders,⁴⁶ and younger librarians are gamers, social networkers, producers of online A-V content, have iPods and digital photo collections available on the web, are bloggers and wiki-ists.⁴⁷ That technology is ubiquitous in the society, economy, and within librarianship is a banal truth, but it should not inure us to the revealing observation of just how thoroughly articulated technology is when we talk about our patrons and our profession. The category of iPod purchasers has become, for instance, reified into a definition of people and a marker of their defining social characteristics in our field.

All of which is to say that such definitions define librarianship as small segments of a neoliberalized market. Librarianship’s literature is clear here: we need to “compete” in a culture saturated with technology, and the only way to fight fire is with fire. We “must” offer not only information via the technological “flavors” favored at the moment, but we “must” also market the technologies themselves as a way to stay relevant and “capture” our “share” of the “market.”⁴⁸ Indeed, there is a cottage industry of writing within the field which urges the aping of a variety of corporate-marketing models,⁴⁹ culminating in classic neoliberal speculations in the literature: “What if Wal-Mart ran a library?” (“There would be fewer libraries, but they would be much, much larger.” “As the Borg say, resistance is futile.” “Higher education will probably have more to do with JavaScript than with ivy-covered halls.”⁵⁰); and the “strange bedfellows” of libraries and theme parks (Both “are under pressure to reinvent themselves. The impetus ... is coming from ... evolving technology..., changing economic realities and newly emerging cultural patterns.”⁵¹). Generationalism – defining librarian age-cohorts and library patrons by the technologies they consume – plays into the neoliberal hegemony of defining everything by markets, consumer choices, and a ruthlessly pragmatic ethic of resource investment.

Thesis II: Generationalism Posits Changes in Human Cognition

Closely tied to the issue of technology and its consumption is the simultaneously sweeping and blithe observation that the new modes and formats of information are changing the way the generations learn – and comparisons between them are therefore incommensurate.⁵² Again, librarianship's literature is full of such claims:

- “Gamers are digital learners [and] game design...provides a prototype for ways to make the library and its resources more visible and intuitive to users. [L]ibrarians recognize the value of using multimedia technology in reaching the inquisitive minds of visually oriented students.”⁵³
- “[I]n heavily relying upon television, the Internet, videos/DVDs, and other primarily visual sources of information, students may simply be using the modes of information seeking that are the most... effective for their particular learning styles.”⁵⁴
- “Conversation theory” posits that people learn through conversation – “not a totally alien concept in libraries.” “Participatory” (i.e. social) networks “present library decision makers with the opportunities and challenges...to not only fit tools such as Blogs and Wikis into their offerings..., but also to show how a...conversational approach to libraries...can help...better integrate current and future functions.”⁵⁵
- Today's students are dramatically different⁵⁶ and “will profoundly impact both library service and the culture within the profession” and as a consequence of their interaction with technology throughout their lives, they “have high-level questioning and thinking skills and lower-level prima facie knowledge” and they may learn more through mind-mapping/visualizing research and information.⁵⁷

Of course, a good deal of this is again derivative of broader speculations. Larry Cuban helpfully traces the promises, the claims for learning, the enormous investments and dubious research surrounding the introduction into classrooms of film, radio, instructional television, and computers from 1920 to the 1980s, each time accompanied by enormous publicity in its favor.⁵⁸ Interestingly, the pattern Cuban identifies continues on in the current push for electronic books for students. While the effectiveness of the dedicated electronic book as a tool for either educational or recreational purposes is still debatable..., development...is on-going and...devices currently on the market have not yet exploited electronic or digital technologies to their potential... Young people are champions at exploiting available technologies, re-creating language and modes of communication [and] their skills at creating texts or at ‘reading’ the visual cues in the media with which they surround themselves are obvious.⁵⁹

The introduction of computers to children (both at home and in educational settings) was argued to “bring about new forms of learning which transcend the limitations of older linear methods” and was accompanied

by a “generational rhetoric... powerfully reflected in advertising for computers.”⁶⁰ Cognitive claims are now made concerning information and communication technologies and “new” or “multiple” literacies, and “hypercomplexity as an epistemic shift from ‘theocentrism’ to ‘anthropocentrism,’ to ‘polycentrism.’”⁶¹ Perhaps most absurdly, the iPod evokes sweeping claims like “playlist is character,” and that it offers “an entire way of viewing the world” and the ability “to transform civilization, and with it human nature.”⁶²

However, the actual effects of various visual and interactive media on learning and cognition is decidedly unproven. While Buckingham is defensive concerning studies of children and new media – he contends that too many are driven by the “the search for evidence of negative effects” – he concedes in the end that “we know very little about how children perceive, interpret and use new media,” and his review of the literature on educational efficacy and technology notes that its promise “has been largely unfulfilled.” Like the current study on e-books quoted above, Buckingham calls for further research⁶³ to puzzle out this anomaly: visual, networked, and communication technologies surely must promote learning, at a higher level as is so often claimed – a call to disprove the negative. But another recent review of the literature finds “little support for the superiority of illustrated text over plain text,” only “the smallest improvements and sometimes negative effects in learning” concerning the use of images, the inefficacy of movement in illustrations and the distractions inherent in multimedia, and a lack of efficacy of diagrams and animated graphics separated from texts. The bottom line is that “virtual reality experiences are not easily translated into learning” and there are recurrent unanswered questions “on how multimedia helps learning.”⁶⁴ All of this is radically unsurprising given that we have yet to fully parse the 500 year old technologically-enabled shift from orality to print literacy, nor the incommensurate nature of viewing literacy as a social vs. individual development, nor the bleed-through between orality and literacy – and vice versa.⁶⁵ In light of this – and what research has not learned after enormous investments concerning the positive (or even measurable) effects of media on learning and cognition – broad claims in this area ring hollow, or seem even silly.

Viewed from the standpoint of Apple’s critique of neoliberalism however, the claims have a more subtle purpose. To adapt Tom Mann, the question is: isn’t all this simply the process of learning “evolving” into other forms, and inevitable? He replies that the problem with this line of reasoning is its concealed proposition that...“evolution” [means] biological evolution. The latter is indeed entirely a natural process, as in the unpacking of the information within a DNA code. Such a natural process cannot possibly be “wrong” -- and therefore, it follows, no one can rationally argue against it. The tacit...is a rhetorical sleight-of-hand trick: the unargued assumption that the matter is one of value-neutral biological evolution reframes the discussion in two important ways. It neatly takes the whole matter...out of the realm of...judgment, insight and choice among alternative possible

outcomes of different societal value; and it shoe-horns the notion of inevitability into the...vision of the cyberprophets...⁶⁶

It is here we re-encounter neoliberal logic in librarianship: if “new solutions have been designed to meet the demands of today’s users, who increasingly expect comprehensiveness and speed but also simplicity and elegance,”⁶⁷ then we “must” be obliged to meet that “market” “demand” and institutionally acquire those products. The same goes for students in libraries who don’t read, approach learning from a consumeristic vantage (superficially at that), and take information in meaningless, contextless fragments.⁶⁸ Librarians must “adapt or die” to capture these eyeballs and ears (a marketing phrase meant to signify the porous boundaries between media and the methods appeal to short attention spans). Therefore, libraries “must,” for instance, acquire audio book content to play on iPods, since that is where the “market” is or “customers” are. Generationalism posits whole new forms of cognition via the differing technologies generations consume, and is underwritten by this “evolutionary” argument and assumption. It furthers the neoliberal agenda of thrusting the market model onto libraries, further turns patrons into “customers,” and by the inevitability of its false evolutionary metaphor makes the library a promoter and customer of products designed to “meet” these new “evolutionary” “needs” of radically “new” types of learning and learners.

Thesis III: Generationalism Represents Neoliberal “Customized Theory”

David Harvey has captured the nature of the neoliberal postmodern economy. There has been, he argues, an “intense phase of time-space compression” with dramatic impact on “political-economic practices [and] cultural and social life.” This happened via the drive to displace rigid Fordist production processes and move toward “flexible accumulation,” meaning flexible labor and labor markets, flexible patterns of consumption, new sectors of production (like financial services) and “greatly intensified rates of commercial, technological, and organizational innovation.” This was achieved by new organizational forms (just-in-time service/product delivery) and new technologies of production (robotics, communication satellites, etc.). Culturally, “accelerating turnover time in production entails parallel accelerations in exchange and consumption” – of which two are particularly notable. First, “the mobilization of fashion in mass... markets...accelerate[d] consumption...across a wide swath of life-styles and recreational activities.” In other words, fashion – broadly conceived – was no longer an elite affair, but rather a mass phenomenon (think of it as SpongeBob SquarePants being replaced by Aqua Teen Hunger Strike Force). Second was the “shift away from the consumption of goods [to] services – not only personal, business, educational, and health services, but also...entertainments, spectacles, happenings, and distractions.” What is being “consumed” is extremely ephemeral – leading to “accentuate[d] volatility...of fashions, products, production...labour processes, ideas, and ideologies [and an emphasis on] the virtues of instantaneity...and of

disposability.”⁶⁹ In other words, Harvey is describing the larger neoliberal labor and consumption market that public institutions are being directed to emulate, serve, and further its incursions into social and cultural life.

In turn, generationalism in librarianship represents what Sheldon Wolin calls “customized theory.” To adapt his argument for our purposes here, theory has generally been attuned to critique, reflection, and deliberation – which is now “out of synch with the temporalities, rhythms, and pace governing economy and culture...dictated by innovation, change, [fashion] and replacement through obsolescence.” This in turn has produced “pervasive temporal disjunction.” So far, Wolin seems only to be tracking Harvey’s broader argument, but he makes a crucial point: these developments have had a parallel track in theory: “‘customized theory’ – ‘custom’ not as in ‘tradition’ but as in ‘customer.’...Theory has thus exchanged the tempos of deliberation and contemplation for the temporal rhythms of contemporary culture and economy.”⁷⁰ In other words, the purpose of theory has become to generate justification and sell an “explanation” for whatever is dominant in the (primarily consumer) culture at the moment – and it is specifically no longer concerned with fundamental critique. Generationalism in librarianship is the fashionable customized theory of the moment, tied as it is to justifying segmentation of people and the resultant marketing and consumption of the newest and most desirable technologies which carry with them sweeping (yet insupportable) intellectual and cognitive (advertising) claims which act as “imperatives” for the operations, services, and content of public institutions like libraries. These theoretical claims will be quickly and easily discarded when customized theorists move on to the next fashion to take hold in the consumer culture – willfully (almost forcibly?) ignoring those who point to the gaps between reality and the objects of their previous theoretical enthusiasms not unlike those technological enthusiasts noted earlier.⁷¹ As Wolin notes, “the last thing [customized] theorists need is the goal of cumulative knowledge [and] the ideal of a synoptic theory.”⁷² Generationalism is the customized theory of the moment to justify neoliberal management tactics in librarianship – to be displaced like theories of TQM, libraries-as-Barnes&Nobles, and “paperless” libraries before it.

Conclusion

Are there no differences between the perspectives of cohorts of people born at different times and their different perspectives on political, economic, historical and cultural events? That is most certainly not the argument of this paper, or its real focus. Generational differences are not the point. Whatever differences that do (or don’t) exist can not be meaningfully explained by pointing to iPods, Wikis, Cadillac’s rebranding scheme, etc., etc. and all the hollow “cognitive” claims made in the name of these products to sell them. They are merely the current incarnation of the techniques and ideology of flexible accumulation, and generationalism is the current customized theory a la mode to explain (that is, market) them.

Librarianship is in full swing in those efforts. And, like all other cultural epiphenomena, they (the products and the theories) will go out of fashion or they will be redesigned to capture the iridescent sheen of desirability in the age of lifestyle marketing. (A facile take on gaming is next up in line in librarianship's aping of the fashions of the moment.) They do not herald epoch-marking shifts in human cognition between age cohorts separated by five to fifty years. The lie is put to many of these claims when one simply looks at the data: older age groups are the majority of users of some social networks and they are the majority of unique website users.⁷³ However, these services must appear to be the province of the young in order to maintain their cachet. (Even the issue of librarian generational turnover in the wave of retirements is more complicated than portrayed when the data is examined more carefully. For instance the data is based on what people report as their profession – which is off by half, and replacement librarians are often not young MLS graduates but older mid-career or second-career females.⁷⁴)

Apple's critique of neoliberalism explains much more than flip generalizations about generations and available technological products. The real differences in perspective among generations will ultimately boil down to the political and economic, and they will take time to be revealed. Who will be around to face the consequences of the post-9/11 decisions made by the Bush Administration? Who will reap the results of decades of neoliberal policies in public investments? Who will have to live in a culture where all efforts have been made to turn social, political, familial, and community institutions toward furthering neoliberal policy visions? Who will have to live under the false politics of a hollowed-out public sphere? In the meantime, it seems that all the generations prefer to focus on celebrity girls-gone-wild right now, but the realities of global warming, energy supplies, and the roots of terrorism will insert themselves – and those are products of neoliberal ideologies and the postmodern economy they serve. A profession like librarianship should not be in the fashion business – generational or otherwise. An educated profession such as ours should approach such claims more skeptically, and our flagship professional organization should show some intellectual leadership in such matters – for once.

Endnotes

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