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Author(s): Hans Jaeger

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GENERATIONS IN HISTORY: REFLECTIONS ON A CONTROVERSIAL CONCEPT*

HANS JAEGER

I. PRELIMINARY REMARKS

From a biological-genealogical perspective, the history of mankind appears as a steady continuous flow of thousands of millions of individual lives upon which no collective periodization can be imposed. In contrast, the history of the social production of man characteristically moves in stages, that is, distinctive periods of time. The conceptual model of historical generations leads to the meeting point of these two very different phenomena.

The discussion which follows deals first of all with the origin and the development of the concept of historical generations. Second, it presents a critical evaluation of its important variations; and finally it examines the question of its practical use for historians. It will show that some historians have—unrealistically—hoped to use the concept of generations as the basis of a completely new understanding of the laws of historical development. In the end, these hopes have resulted only in an evasion of concrete treatment; the resulting historical works dissolve in banalities, tautologies, and unsubstantial speculations. However, it will also demonstrate that the idea of historical generations can easily survive a scaling down to a reasonable examination as measured by reality; and that in this reduced form it can be useful for the understanding of several sociohistorical developments.

As a by-product of this investigation, it will show that basically only two pairs of alternative questions have been raised in previous, often misleading, discussions of the idea of historical generations:

1. Assuming that generational phenomena of any type can be established in history: Are they primary (that is, biologically caused) manifestations, and consequently do they occur in regular intervals? Or are they secondary manifestations based on definite external events and facts, which therefore would have to occur at completely irregular intervals?
2. Can one treat generations in history as universals, that is, as common entities which shape an epoch and a society? Or can the concept only be used

* Translation of "Generationen in der Geschichte: Überlegungen zu einer umstrittenen Konzeption," originally published in *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 3 (1977), 429–452.

meaningfully to identify a partial relationship, namely of the epochal commonality within delineated social groups?

The combination of these two alternative pairs results in four possible types, and therefore a simple schematic approach which allows a convenient typology for a seemingly enormous multitude of opinions and arguments.

II. HISTORY OF THE CONCEPTION

The concept “generation” is used in very different ways. The naive and original meaning of generation is without doubt a biological-genealogical one. It indicates that descendants of a common ancestor take on average about thirty years to marry and have children. This is not only the natural conception today; it is also the conception of the classical tradition, as, for example, of the Old Testament and of Greek poetry and historiography.¹ The historical notion of generation—which is the only one of concern here—originates out of the biological-genealogical concept with an additional assumption, namely that there exists a connection between the continuing process of the succession between fathers and sons and the discontinuous process of social and cultural changes.

The classical writing of history—as far as is known today—did not deal with this additional assumption, although historians of antiquity must have been aware of contrasts based on discontinuity during a time of rapid political and cultural change.² One could assume that the fragmentary survival of information explains the lack of examples. However, it is more likely that Greek and Roman historians simply could not see a topic that was worth pursuing.

A strong interest in the succession of generations as it might be relevant for social and cultural-historical phenomena manifested itself only at the beginning of the nineteenth century—possibly because it was a time of accelerating historical change. Goethe wrote in the preface to *Dichtung und Wahrheit* (1811): “Anybody born only a decade earlier or later might have become a completely different person as far as his own education and sphere of action are concerned.” In a lecture in 1812 Friedrich Schlegel distinguished among three literary generations in eighteenth-century Germany: Bodmer’s and Lessing’s generation, Goethe’s generation, and that of Schiller.³ In his history of Roman and Germanic people (1824), Ranke referred to historical generations as “rows of shining figures who themselves are closely related and in whose antithesis the development of the world continues to progress.”⁴ Since about 1835, Charles-

1. See E. Drerup, *Das Generationsproblem in der griechischen Antike* [1933] (Paderborn, 1968), 9f. The author is grateful to Professor Fritz Redlich, Cambridge, MA, for numerous suggestions which were incorporated into this article.

2. T. Litt, *Das Verhältnis der Generationen ehemals und heute* (Wiesbaden, 1947), 12f.; Drerup, 9–25.

3. F. Schlegel, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der alten und neuen Literatur* (Vienna, 1812).

4. F. Kummer, *Deutsche Literaturgeschichte des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts, dargestellt nach Generationen* (Dresden, 1922), I, 2.

Augustin Sainte-Beuve's literary criticism classified authors according to their year of birth as an explanation for their varying life histories.⁵

Auguste Comte between 1830 and 1840 was the first to begin a scientific study of generations in history. Comte examined systematically the succession of generations as the moving force in historical progress.⁶ He believed that the tempo of this progress is determined by the tempo of generational change. Social progress exists only, according to Comte, insofar as it is based on death, as the eternal renewer of human society. John Stuart Mill somewhat later expressed very similar ideas.

Along with the formation of social classes, gradation into age groups became more and more apparent as a consequence of the rapid industrialization of Western Europe after 1850. The first monographs on the topic of generations in history appeared; and they received recognition. Justin Dromel and Giuseppe Ferrari composed voluminous, pretentious explications,⁷ filled with good observations, such as the effects of increasing expectations for the standard of living on the structure of the family; or they wrote about the importance of age for various occupations. However, it is astonishing that both authors tried in a speculative manner to project the biological generations' interval of thirty (or fifteen) years onto the passage of historical events. They assumed that there exists, as it were, an arithmetic bridge which links the biological-genealogical rhythm of individual lives with the chronology of collective history. Their hypothesis lent to future discussions about historical generations an often hazardous and mystical quality. Since their adherents insist on a biologically determined rhythm which cannot be explained through external, experimental factors, this approach will be referred to here as the "pulse-rate hypothesis."

Gustav Rümelin at Tübingen shortly after the treatises by Dromel and Ferrari took a much more factual approach to the problem of historical generations⁸ in connection with a statistical study of the median age difference between fathers and sons in different countries. Rümelin explained the possibility of social and cultural change, much like Comte, through increments of small differences of opinion which continue to exist between competing generations. However, he rejected the idea—to be deduced from the above—of a regular recurrence of intervals between distinct types of historical events.

Wilhelm Dilthey, a contemporary of Rümelin, first showed an interest in the phenomenon of generations in history in an essay written in 1866 and in his inaugural lecture in Basel in 1867.⁹ Dilthey's primary concern was the investiga-

5. H. Peyre, *Les Générations littéraires* (Paris, 1948), 54–58.

6. A. Comte, *Cours de philosophie positive* (Paris, 1849), IV, 635–641.

7. J. Dromel, *La Loi des révolutions. Les générations, les nationalités, les dynasties, les religions* (Paris, 1862); G. Ferrari, *Teoria dei periodi politici* (Milan, 1874).

8. G. Rümelin, "Über den Begriff und die Dauer einer Generation," in Rümelin, *Reden und Aufsätze* (Tübingen, 1875), I, 285–304.

9. W. Dilthey, *Novalis* [1866], reprinted in *Das Erlebnis und die Dichtung* (Stuttgart, 1957), especially page 171; and "Die dichterische und philosophische Bewegung in Deutschland 1770–1800," *Gesammelte Schriften* (Leipzig, 1924), V, 12–27.

tion of the origins of the homogeneity of intellectual traditions. In his study of German romanticism, he discovered that many of its most important representatives were born in adjoining years (for example, Schlegel in 1767, Schleiermacher in 1768, Hölderlin in 1770, Novalis and Tieck in 1773). This observation led him to hypothesize that the absorption of formative impressions during adolescence tends to transmit for life to a great number of individuals of the same age a fund of relatively homogeneous philosophical, social, and cultural guidelines.¹⁰ That is, Dilthey believed that formative impressions which people receive during a rather short period of time in adolescence, can hardly be thrown off later on through strong impressions of an opposite nature. With this assumption, Dilthey formulated an alternative to the “pulse-rate hypothesis.” This alternative hypothesis can also be found, although stated less suggestively, in some of the works of the earlier authors of the nineteenth century.¹¹ It first gained real importance in the discussions of the twentieth century, which for the first time were based on precise psychological and sociological knowledge. In what follows this alternative will be called the “imprint hypothesis.” Its adherents believe that historical generations are secondary phenomena, brought about through the development of history as a whole. They therefore reject the assumption of a uniform or in any other way lawlike rhythm of generations.

Dilthey characteristically in his study of historical generations limited his analysis to precisely defined groups. He did not assume that he could generalize from the apparent uniformity of certain age groups to a society as a whole. The themes which he chose—the styles and schools of thought of poets, artists, and philosophers—are examples of this careful approach and moreover indicate an inner connection between the “imprint hypothesis” and claims for a partial explanation as raised by the pair of alternative questions at the beginning of this discussion. In the meantime, the historian Ottokar Lorenz (referring to Ranke) popularized towards the end of the nineteenth century in Germany¹² the ambitious pulse-rate hypothesis. Lorenz, a genealogist, is known to have said that those who do not thoroughly grasp the Gotha Calendar do not know anything at all about modern history.¹³ He attempted in a painstaking manner to use biological intervals of generations to determine periods within historical

10. Dilthey, “Über das Studium der Geschichte der Wissenschaften vom Menschen, der Gesellschaft und dem Staat” in Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften* (1875), V, 37. The classic quotation reads: “Those who receive the same impressions during their formative years form a generation. In this sense, a generation consists of a close circle of individuals who make up a holistic unit through their dependence upon the same historical events and changes which they experienced during their formative years in spite of other differences.”

11. For example, Sainte-Beuve mentions around 1840 that many literary people, at the age of twenty, become “prisoners” of the prevailing ideas of their time and that they remain prisoners for the rest of their lives. See Peyre, 54ff.

12. O. Lorenz, *Die Geschichtswissenschaft in Hauptrichtungen und Aufgaben*. Part 2; L. v. Ranke, *Die Generationenlehre und der Geschichtsunterricht* (Berlin, 1891).

13. Ranke, 189. One can assume that the dynastic-genealogical thinking had an influence on the development of most pulse-rate theories.

processes. He divided each century into exactly three generations; and every three centuries made up the next higher unit of measurement. These numerological schemes as keys to history must appear completely arbitrary today. Amazingly, similar numerological speculations have persisted after Lorenz and seem even today to have a few followers.

The twentieth century has two periods of intensive study of historical generations: the years between 1920 and 1933 and the period after the Second World War. During the first period, German contributions dominate in terms of numbers and importance. The second period shows a broad spectrum of international research, during which American studies, mostly social scientifically oriented, gain prominence. With this development, the interest shifts clearly from a theoretical and holistic treatment of the topic to an intensive empirical one, looking at distinct periods in time and at concrete generational phenomena.

A regular flow of relevant publications began in 1920 with the voluminous dissertation by François Mentré, which tried to use successive generations in a family as a paradigm to explain the succession of cultural traditions in society.¹⁴ Works by the philosopher of culture Jose Ortega y Gasset, by the art historian Wilhelm Pinder, the sociologist Karl Mannheim, the historian of music Alfred Lorenz (a son of Ottokar Lorenz), by the historian Hans v. Müller, the student of romance languages Eduard Wechssler, the literary historians Friedrich Kummer, Richard Alewyn, and Julius Petersen, by the classicist Engelbert Drerup, and the biologist Walter Scheidt,¹⁵ to mention only the most important followed in quick succession.

Despite their heterogeneous disciplinary origins, these authors can be fitted into our 2×2 table. Ortega, Pinder, Lorenz, Müller, and, with certain qualifications, also Mentré and Drerup presuppose the existence of a rhythm of historical generations with an interval resembling a pulse rate governed by some kind of law. On the other hand, Mannheim, Wechssler, Petersen, and (with certain qualifications) Kummer deny the existence of such regularity. As far as the second alternative is concerned, few of the authors (especially Ortega and, with qualifications, Drerup; also some of the older ones like Dromel, Ferrari, and Ottokar Lorenz) are of the opinion that “universal” generational phenomena

14. F. Mentré, *Les Générations sociales* (Paris, 1920).

15. J. Ortega y Gasset, *El tema de nuestro tiempo* (Madrid, 1923); W. Pinder, *Das Problem der Generationen in der Kunstgeschichte Europas* [1926, 1928] (Munich, 1961); K. Mannheim, “Das Problem der Generationen,” *Kölner Vierteljahreshefte für Soziologie* 7 (1928), 157–180, 309–330 (reprinted in Mannheim, *Wissenssoziologie: Auswahl aus dem Werk* (Neuwied, 1970), 509–565; A. Lorenz, *Abendländische Musikgeschichte im Rhythmus der Generationen* (Berlin, 1928); H. v. Müller, *Zehn Generationen deutscher Dichter und Denker* (Berlin, 1928); E. Wechssler, *Die Generation als Jugendreihe und ihr Kampf um die Denkform* (Leipzig, 1930); F. Kummer, *Deutsche Literaturgeschichte des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts, dargestellt nach Generationen* (Dresden, 1922), 2 vols. [A one-volume edition appeared in 1909]; R. Alewyn, “Das Generationsproblem in der Geschichte” in *Zeitschrift für deutsche Bildung* (1929); J. Petersen, *Die literarischen Generationen* (Berlin, 1930); Drerup; W. Scheidt, *Lebensgesetze der Kultur. Biologische Betrachtungen zum Problem der Generationen in der Geistesgeschichte* (Berlin, 1929).

which span the entire period in question, could exist. The opposite “partial” assumption, which goes back to Ranke (who might have defined generations in history as nothing more than groups of “shining figures”) is expressed in some studies through their choice of themes. Pinder examines generations only as they appear in the history of art. Kummer, Petersen, and, in a more general way, Dilthey, confine their analysis to literary generations.

Pinder’s and Wechsler’s analyses, in particular, show clearly that the interpretation of historical generations as necessarily limited phenomena is closely related to the imprint hypothesis. A uniform generational development during the adolescent period can never include all strata and classes of society. Rather, one has to start with the assumption that individuals in different strata who have different interests react differently to the same impulse.

At this point, the ideas of Karl Mannheim become relevant. He was the first among the above mentioned authors to attempt a systematic, comprehensive treatment of the state of research using social scientific methods as they had developed during the twentieth century. Above all, the most important thing to note in his analysis is the contrasting of generation and class as respectively (so to speak) horizontal and vertical segments of society in historical perspective. Moreover, Mannheim tried to refine the imprint hypothesis by making the following assumption: Already in early adolescence—in any case, earlier in life than the authors before him thought¹⁶—a certain fund of a characteristic content of feelings “simply filters through the milieu effect”; and then, during a second phase, reflexive problem-solving begins. In this way, a natural view of the world develops as a group of experiences acquired during adolescence, which serves as a guideline for later experiences.¹⁷

For Mannheim, the distinction among three concepts is very important. These concepts are supposed to designate increasingly intensive relationships between individuals and certain age groups. They are: generational stratum, generational context, and generational unity. In defining these concepts he writes: “We will only talk about generational context when real social and intellectual contents create a link between individuals in the same generational stratum.” And furthermore: “those groups who, within the same generational context, experience events in different ways, form in each case different generational units.”¹⁸

If Mannheim’s explication of the general problem, even though it did not go beyond a provisional sketch with a few historical examples, marks a high point, it also shows the low level of theoretical discussions up to this point. After 1933, nothing changes in Germany in this respect. It is characteristic of the new

16. An exception is the remark by Nietzsche in *Ecce Homo* (1888) that he who was a child in the swamp of the 1850s must necessarily have become a pessimist about everything associated with the notion “German.”

17. Mannheim, *Problem*, 538; similarly E. Spranger, *Psychologie des Jugendalters* (Leipzig, 1925), 145.

18. Mannheim, *Problem*, 543.

intellectual climate that even a man like Eduard Wechssler, who had presented in an earlier book a multitude of intelligent observations about generations in German and French intellectual history, now let himself get caught in the ethnic-racist mode of thought.¹⁹

After 1945, the study of generational disruptions, caused and intensified by two World Wars, dominated at first in Germany as it did in other countries. The best known contributions to this topic are those by Theodor Litt, Rudolf Spranger, and Helmut Schelsky.²⁰ Schelsky described the adolescent generation of the first decade of post-war Germany as a "silent generation"²¹ of individuals who were cautious, conforming, and concerned with the commonplaces of life. At the same time, David Riesman's important study of the changing American personality²² gained international prominence. Riesman's assumption of a change from an inner-directed to an outer-directed personality in industrial societies of this century contains many elements of a generational approach to history.

In Germany, the student uprisings of the late 1960s show without doubt that the younger generation carries a new imprint and that Schelsky's observations no longer apply. Historians have tried since to study the international phenomenon of student uprisings in the context of a generational conflict.²³ Sociologists and psychologists have attempted, sometimes in the tradition of Herbert Marcuse, to investigate the more immediate social psychological causes.²⁴

In the United States, where generational conflicts have been in general less apparent than in Europe in the most recent past, a great number of studies since the 1960s deal with the phenomenon of the formative adolescent years of age groups; for example, with the question of change or stability of the political opinions of age cohorts²⁵ and similar empirical problems of the social sciences.

19. E. Wechssler, *Jugendreihen des deutschen Menschen 1733–1933* (Leipzig, 1934).

20. Litt; E. Spranger, "Fünf Jugendgenerationen 1900–1949" in Spranger, *Pädagogische Perspektiven* (Heidelberg, 1955), 25–27; H. Schelsky, *Die skeptische Generation: Eine Soziologie der deutschen Jugend* (Düsseldorf, 1957). An insignificant compilation of quotations is F. Kehrer's *Der Wandel der Generationen* (Stuttgart, 1959). Noteworthy examples outside Germany are P. L. Entralgo, *Las generaciones en la historia* (Madrid, 1945) and the literary study by H. Peyre cited in footnote 5.

21. Schelsky, 487.

22. D. Riesman, et al., *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), transl. as *Die einsame Masse* (Darmstadt, 1958).

23. See L. B. Feuer, *The Conflict of Generations: The Character and Significance of Student Movements* (New York, 1969).

24. Some examples: *Jugend in der modernen Gesellschaft*, ed. L. v. Friedeburg (Cologne, 1965); H. Dubs, et al., *Der Konflikt der Generationen: Fünf akademische Vorträge* (Basel, 1966); *Konflikt der Generationen*, ed. Institut für Psychotherapie und Tiefenpsychologie Stuttgart (Stuttgart, 1966); M. Riedel, *Wandel des Generationenproblems in der modernen Gesellschaft* (Düsseldorf, 1969); F. Neidhardt, "Die junge Generation" in *Deutsche Gesellschaft im Wandel*, ed. M. Bolte (Opladen, 1970), II, 85–186; G. Mendel, *Generationskrise: Eine soziopschoanalytische Studie* (Frankfurt, 1972).

25. The research by W. M. Evan is pioneering: "Cohort Analysis of Survey Data: A Procedure for Studying Long-term Opinion Change," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 23 (1959), 63–72.

In a recently published article by Alan B. Spitzer,²⁶ in which he summarizes current American research, the analysis of historical generations is confined to phenomena of short duration, especially to social change, as the only productive method of investigation. This article shows that the idea of historical generations is no longer thought to have the same explanatory power it did several decades ago.

An exception to this rule are the works by the Spanish philosopher-historian and student of Ortega, Julian Marías. He began in the tradition of Ortega—whose ideas were never summarized anywhere systematically—with the notion of a rhythm of generations in intellectual history which passes through centuries with a typical fifteen-year interval.²⁷ Marías differentiates his approach from all the others, which he considers insufficient to develop a kind of universal mechanism of generational succession.²⁸ Even though Marías managed to publicize his thesis to a certain extent,²⁹ he is outside the main trend of modern research of historical generations. That trend is cautiously empirical, with very moderate theoretical expectations.

If we look back once more at the pairs of alternatives sketched at the beginning, we find that the question about the degree of universality of generational phenomena (a question which runs through the history of generational studies) is answered today in a rather cautious manner. Further, in a pronouncedly social-historical and sociological climate there is a stronger interest in the study of discontinuities in age groups and age cohorts than in the search for uniformity. The pulse-rate hypothesis which assumes a rhythm of historical generations hardly receives any attention anymore. In contrast, the imprint hypothesis is today as prevalent as it was during the days of Dilthey and Mannheim. Their work serves as a foundation for many studies in the sociology of adolescence and the behavior of age cohorts.

III. CRITIQUE OF THE VARIOUS APPROACHES

Our critique of the various approaches to the study of generations in history is based on the model developed in the introduction. A considerable simplification occurs because the two respective “more modest” hypotheses (secondary/partial) and the two “immodest” ones (primary/universal) tend to fuse in practice, so as to result in a single contrast between the adherents of the pulse-rate hypothesis, who search for the regularities of the universal rhythm of generations, and the adherents of the imprint hypothesis, who search for the

26. A. B. Spitzer, “The Historical Problem of Generations,” *American Historical Review* 78 (1973), 1353–1385.

27. See J. Ortega y Gasset, “Die Idee der Generationen” in *Das Wesen geschichtlicher Krisen* (Stuttgart, 1951), 34.

28. J. Marías, *El método histórico de las generaciones* (Madrid, 1961), transl. as *Generations: A Historical Method* (University, AL, 1970).

29. Marías recapitulated Ortega’s theory in the following article: “Generations. I: The Concept” in *IESS*, VI, 88–92.

(mostly social-historical and sociological) causal factors of generational differences.³⁰

First, the theories based on the pulse-rate hypothesis will be critically examined as theories which start with the assumption of a rhythm of historical generations. Examples are the theories by Dromel, Ferrari, Lorenz, Pinder, Ortega, and Marías. The most important and fundamental objection against the pulse-rate hypothesis is as follows: There is no conceivable means of transmitting the succession of generations in individual families as determined by a characteristic interval into the historical process as a whole. Unlike that in the family, the succession of births within larger collectives is seen as a continuous flow without any rhythm or gradation. This basic objection against the continuity of births has been voiced repeatedly as a criticism of the pulse-rate hypothesis, by among others, Johan Huizinga, Benedetto Croce, Ignaz Jastrow, and Ernst Troeltsch.³¹ These objections did not discourage the adherents of the hypothesis. Rather, the latter make it clear that their empirical research proves the existence of a steady rhythm of historical generations or one that varies according to certain laws. Or they let it be known—for example, Lorenz and Marías³²—that they fail to understand why the transmitting of the structure of individual human life into the history of mankind could cause a problem.

The generational theory of Wilhelm Pinder is characteristic of such an approach which denies the question of causality. Pinder uses the concept “entelechy” in his analysis of the history of art. The concept originated with Aristotle, was used by Goethe, and was picked up again by the biologist Hans Driesch at the beginning of the twentieth century. For Pinder, “entelechy” denotes an intellectual formative tendency characteristic of a certain period of time, which cannot be derived from “some milieu” and which cannot be explained causally in any way.³³ According to Pinder, a kind of historical procession of clearly distinguishable entelechies has the effect that at least for the European history of art the “fact of regular groupings of important dates of birth” has to be acknowledged.³⁴ Pinder finds it remarkable that Bach, Handel, and

30. Other differentiations are possible, but do not add very much: for example, the distinction between a more biological and a more sociological orientation, or that between positivist-progressive and “historical” orientations. With respect to such alternatives, almost all theories can be described as mixed. They assume a more intensive psychological imprint during adolescence and are based on biological considerations which by themselves, that is, without consideration of the concrete social context of this imprint, are at best able to explain a Kaspar Hauser. As for contrasting positivist-progressive and historical-generational theories, their combination seems to be most important. Any consideration of a longer period of time with a multitude of successive generations cannot help but arrive at a trendlike, long-term change of social conditions from a positivist-progressive perspective. In contrast, this kind of result will be less important for the study of shorter periods of time looking at individual generations separately. Instead, the method of approach which is predominant in this case can be called “historical.”

31. See Marías, 130–132, 163; Lorenz; Ranke, 174.

32. Ranke, 175. Lorenz writes that it is not good “to complicate a situation which is already difficult through general logical questions concerning epistemology.”

33. Pinder, 23.

34. *Ibid.*, 44.

Scarlatti were born in the same year (all in 1685), Rameau in 1683, Berkeley and Watteau in 1684, Cosmas Damian Asam in 1686, and Balthasar Neumann in 1687. He believes that he can combine these people into “a group with explicitly metaphysical experiences.” As a second example, he takes notice of the concentration of births in the “dramatists’ year” 1813 — Verdi, Wagner, Hebbel, Georg Büchner, and Otto Ludwig.³⁵

One could dismiss these kinds of speculations as excursions into the thorny fields of statistics by someone who knew only the humanities. However, Pinder’s book — in spite of sharp and convincing criticism by historians³⁶ — was a sensation, which showed a readiness at the time to replace an inconvenient anatomy of history with its “physiognomy,”³⁷ and to sacrifice the patience required for reflection about complicated factual events for the impatience of first impressions.

While Pinder limits his research to the realm of European art history, Ortega and Mariás go even further in their attempt to reconstruct for the entire European cultural and social history of modern times a kind of universal pulse rate. An uninterrupted sequence of fifteen-year intervals with Descartes’s thirtieth birthday (1626) as the focal date can allegedly be documented up to the present with the help of “crucial” birth dates.³⁸ The grotesque ineptness of this thesis prohibits any closer scrutiny. The argument by Mariás that date zones (*zonas de fechas*) of exactly this length could be documented in which the important birth dates are allegedly embedded, shows only that those who search with enough endurance for analogies in historical tables will always come up with something. And Ortega, who would like in his theory to link society as a whole through a network of social norms to the string of pearls of the great achievements in intellectual history,³⁹ does not go beyond plausible rhetoric.⁴⁰ Mariás’s attempt, which goes back to Dromel’s theory fifty years earlier, is another aberration. He tries to derive the pulse rate of history from fifteen-year intervals of individual lives, which are thought to present periods of varying social importance. Even if one could assume that such stages in life exist, there is no imaginable mechanism which could group them and transpose them into a rhythm of collective events.

A comparison of Pinder’s with Ortega’s and Mariás’s pulse-rate theory shows clearly that the latter’s claim (as regards the second pair of alternatives of universal and partial phenomena of generations) is more immodest. For Ortega and Mariás, historical generations are valid only when seen in terms of

35. *Ibid.*, 24.

36. K. Eberlein delivers a devastating attack in his review, “Das Problem der Generationen,” *Historische Zeitschrift* 137 (1928), 257–266. Eberlein dismisses as trivial Pinder’s idea of the “non-simultaneity of the simultaneous.”

37. Pinder considers himself as part of a generation of physiognomists and characterologists (for example, Klages, Spengler, Edgar Dacqué); see Pinder, 19.

38. Ortega, 14f., 18, 34; Mariás, 158ff.

39. Ortega, 81f., 94.

40. See F. Redlich, “Generations: A Critique and Reconstruction,” *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis* 7 (1976), 243–271.

universal events. Marías claims that any study of literary, artistic, or political generations is a simplification of reality and therefore condemned as sterile. Generations always have to be studied as holistic social events of “dynamic interrelations between masses and minorities.”⁴¹

Compared with the rhetorical bravura of this claim, the concrete results based on the theory of the universal pulse rate of history are, of course, very modest. With a few exceptions, the same goes for the partial pulse-rate theories. Since they generally gather data without any knowledge of statistical principles, the authors are often least likely to notice to what extent the jungle of names and numbers which they present lacks any convincing organization according to generations. These observations can be made not only about Pinder and Lorenz, but also about Kummeler and Wechsler, who do not insist on a uniform rhythm of generations.

While the works by Pinder and Ortega mark the end of historical-metaphysical reflections about generations, the short treatise by Mannheim which he wrote in 1928 signals the beginning of a more sophisticated, social scientific interpretation. As did Dilthey before him, Mannheim begins with the assumption of a formative period during adolescence which is the basis for the formation of new generations. He thus describes historical generations as secondary phenomena which can be derived from certain concrete configurations in time. An analysis of Mannheim's essay clearly shows that the decisive theoretical contrasts in the discussion about generations are not to be found between those who either believe in or who deny a “rhythm,” but between those who attempt to derive the appearance of generations from distinct historical events of a social or political nature, and those who (like Pinder) assert that such a derivation is not possible.

It is necessary to discuss Mannheim's treatise here in detail, because in it he mixes sober, realistic, and speculative trains of thought. He occasionally makes contradictory statements which show that even the imprint hypothesis cannot always explain the origin of concrete, historical, generational phenomena.

Mannheim rejects the assumption of a continuous generational rhythm with regular time intervals as nonscientific.⁴² On the other hand, he speaks about a “continuity” during generational changes. He does not refer to a finely graded continuum of many individual dates of birth, but to the link between a number of age cohorts into aggregates of people (*Menschenklumpen*).⁴³ How such aggregates of age cohorts develop is not sufficiently explained; Mannheim only states that “basic intentions and formative tendencies which constitute the unity of a generation” are created by relatively small “closed groups” and that they can succeed only to the extent to which they are an adequate expression of their own social stratum.⁴⁴

41. Marías, 27, 67, 96ff., 164ff.

42. Mannheim, *Problem*, 521.

43. *Ibid.*, 540f.

44. *Ibid.*, 548.

This conscious turn to a class approach in the study of historical generations gets Mannheim into trouble when he attempts to go beyond the realm of conceptual definitions to test his theory in practice. One of the main reasons for this difficulty is the remnants in his social scientific analysis of an unwieldy conceptualization. Thus, he talks—like Pinder—about “generational entelechies,” which are supposed to grow out of “the potentiality which is dormant in the stratum of a generation.” He believes that the social strata of generations show a biological rhythm. However, such a biological rhythm does not have to correspond to a similar “rhythm of wills,” since the “seeds of generational entelechies could cover each other”⁴⁵ if the speed of social change is too great.

The analysis becomes more complicated, since Mannheim deals not only with generational entelechies, but also with “currents of entelechies.” He defines the latter as tendencies which are effective over a long period of time so as to change the intellectual climate of an epoch. He believes that currents of entelechies preceded generational entelechies, that the latter can develop only within the former, and that different intellectual climates can come into collision. Mannheim’s introduction of the concept of entelechy seems to contribute as little as that of Pinder to a more detailed understanding of historical processes based on facts.

Another statement by Mannheim is problematic because it has not been proven: he maintains that the succession of generations leads to a “dialectic” of the historical process, because each new generation has to come to terms with opposing ideas from which follows a “displacement from the focal experience.”⁴⁶ One could agree with this idea if Mannheim were to qualify his statement by defining such reorientation not as a necessary concomitant of generational successions, but as irregular, “externally” caused events. But he does not make the latter qualification. His explication of his understanding of historical generations therefore remains burdened with an unexplained residue in spite of his sense for details and conscious references to the respective concrete historical events.

A seemingly insuperable problem for any historical analysis of generations is the lack of consensus over the concept of age cohorts, over and above the notion that the respective individual groups have something in common. Lucien Febvre has concluded that the practical application of the generational concept to entire age cohorts necessarily leads to so many differentiations of a social, religious, and political nature that the entire scheme becomes useless.⁴⁷ Mannheim attempts to counteract such criticism through his three-stage construction of generational strata, generational context, and generational unity. The generational context is for Mannheim primarily a temporal unit, and therefore does not have to result in a concrete grouping, such as an organization. On the other hand, he assumes that an initially merely temporal context tends

45. *Ibid.*, 550ff.

46. *Ibid.*, 537.

47. Spitzer, 1356.

to lead to a certain uniformity of behavior. That is, Mannheim sees generational contexts as special types of social strata and thereby treats them on the same level as class membership.⁴⁸

Even if one accepts the analogy, not much has been accomplished to solve the practical problem of analyzing social history according to generations. An examination of concrete historical material from both viewpoints, generation and class, can be compared to an attempt to study at the same time the path of longitudinal and diagonal threads of a rather messily produced fabric. A generation can be envisioned as made up of threads which appear at some point in history and cease to exist at a later point in time. Class, on the other hand, is a social context which exists across generations, and which is not determined by age, but rather by the material relationships of individuals. We therefore have to deal with a coordinating system with two axes, in which the social historical location of each individual can be determined through information both about his age and his class membership.

Such a two-fold scheme has the disadvantage that the cross-classification of people into simple age groupings and their respective class memberships creates a great number of possible combinations. A detailed classification tends to result in numerically small types of combinations, that is, in the examination of small portions of the material to be covered. On the other hand, a classification with few categories, that is, with large generational and class intervals, can lead to large, imprecise groupings which do not tell us very much.

A further difficulty presents itself: There is no universal law which governs the relationship between generation and class membership. Three types of relationships can be envisioned: the two, generation and class membership, reinforce each other; they have a weakening effect upon each other; and, finally, there is no relationship between the two.

Mannheim has been no more successful in solving such problems than have been more recent adherents of the imprint hypothesis. Today, the predominant opinion is that Mannheim's imprint hypothesis cannot claim universal validity.⁴⁹ On the other hand, nobody would deny that there exist formative years during adolescence. Without such an assumption, all modern research about age cohorts would be unfounded. The very inclusion of sociological and social-historical thoughts has shown through Mannheim that an historical generation (if understood in terms of universal age groups) can only be a problematic community, but not a problem-solving community. The ideological split among the young generation, which the First World War brought about, and the gross political contrasts within the same generation during the Weimar period are probably the best examples in our century that a massive uniform imprint during adolescence does not have to lead to the establishment of a generational community.

The country in which research about the behavior of age cohorts has made

48. Mannheim, *Problem*, 524–528.

49. Spitzer, 1382.

the greatest progress, namely the United States, is—unfortunately for our research—also the country in which fewer historical upheavals have taken place during this century than in Europe. The European countries have experienced two World Wars with greater intensity during that same time period; some of them have undergone important political and social structural changes. In this respect, the American research results (which contradict each other frequently and which do not permit a uniform judgment about the permanency of historically formative years during adolescence)⁵⁰ are possibly limited by the choice of a research period which does not yield productive results.

The adherents of the imprint hypothesis correctly look at historical generations as secondary phenomena whose origins have to be explained through causal factors. The causes are different types of events. According to Mannheim, the wars of independence toward the end of the Napoleonic era had the effect in Germany of developing a simple generational context into a generational unity. The generation of “48” has later been discussed, with the same justification as the generation of the “founders” or that of the “Langemarck,” that is, the generation of young war volunteers who went to their death in 1914 with the enthusiasm of a national solidarity surpassing all class distinctions.

However, when engaging in global analysis one must not forget that a more thorough empirical treatment of the age groups will always show prevailing or, in a more narrow sense, “representative” moods and tendencies accompanied by a rather disorganized complexity of contradictions and contrasts. In order to explain the contradictory tendencies within a generational context, a supplementary sociological, social-historical examination is needed. That is, only in connection with an analysis of classes or social strata can a study of history in terms of generations lead to results. To summarize the critique of the two main variations of the generational theory, we conclude that those theories which project interval and rhythm of the biological-genealogical succession of generations onto history, are of no explanatory value.⁵¹ In contrast, the assumption that noteworthy historical events and developments tend to lead to specific formative experiences during adolescence and that they, in turn, lead to generational contexts and generational communities according to Mannheim’s definition, can be viewed as a solid and productive hypothesis.

IV. PRACTICAL APPLICATION

If one looks at the existing literature of historical generations in a classificatory manner, it becomes apparent that certain thematic areas are clearly in the foreground. Most of the titles can be ordered into the following scheme:

50. *Ibid.*, 1370–1383, with numerous examples.

51. One could assume that during the eighteenth and in previous centuries, pulse-rate moments are carried into a holistic picture of history through a rhythm of successions to the throne in the history of dynasties. However, upon closer inspection, these considerations also turn out to be useless.

1. examinations of a "general" nature with the goal of investigating the generational structure of a historical process;
2. long-term periodizing examinations of the development of certain intellectual disciplines, especially the history of literature and of fine arts;
3. examinations of the age distribution of concrete groups, associations, schools, movements;
4. examinations of salient historical epochs and their representatives as well as changes and breaks between them.

The most important examinations of a general nature about historical generations have already been mentioned. To the extent to which they insist on successive periods of generations as part of the historical process, they have been negatively evaluated.

A number of examples seem to show that an isolated study of individual disciplines from the viewpoint of generations promises to be more successful than those treating the complexity of entire age groupings. The larger and the more ambitious the network of historical theories of generations, the smaller is the chance to come up with convincing results. Mannheim points out that a new generational consciousness does not have the same possibilities to penetrate quickly all spheres of the intellectual realm. For example, in the natural sciences it cannot be documented easily. More generally, he distinguishes between a changeable "cultural sphere" and a less changeable "sphere of civilization." With the "development of entelechies," Mannheim attributes to literature above all a seismographic function. To justify his opinion, he writes that only the "literary strata, which in our society are relatively independent, have the possibility to waver, to join one intellectual trend and then another."⁵² Mannheim obviously sees in the articulation of literature the surface of a social process characterized by contrast and conflict which is carried out and becomes resolved between less articulated "wills."

That the pictures of generations in the fine arts and in music do not seem to appear with the same precision as they do in literature may be explained by the fact that language responds more easily and naturally to concrete historical changes than do other artistic expressions. And in such changes should be found the basic factors which form generations. These considerations by Mannheim strengthen the thesis that there is no intrinsic regularity of the historical process, but that the respective forces which develop generations (the entelechies) originate from new concrete events.⁵³ And this lack of regularity exists in spite of analogies and relations between the epochs of intellectual

52. Mannheim, *Problem*, 561, 564.

53. For example, according to Mannheim, the Restoration and political weaknesses in Germany at the beginning of the nineteenth century favored the development of a romantic-conservative emotional outlook among the young. Literature expresses this most clearly. Since the 1830s, during a period of industrialization and political revolutions, "liberal-rational entelechies" were favored. Once again, literature expressed this new orientation uniformly when it became noticeable in society as a whole.

history—such as between the period of the Enlightenment and positivism on the one hand, and between the romanticism of the nineteenth century and more recent romantic trends of the twentieth century on the other. A case in point in the most recent German history of literature is a distinct separation of generations caused by the Second World War between those authors—as, for example, Wolfgang Borchert—whose writings are still influenced by the immediate experience of the war (Heinrich Böll speaks of “rubble literature”),⁵⁴ and a later cohort of literary people born after 1925 including Ingeborg Bachmann, Siegfried Lenz, Martin Walser, Günter Grass, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, and Uwe Johnson who develop a more generalizing-reflective and at the same time esthetically more demanding style,⁵⁵ as is suggested by the new security of life circumstances.

The study of concrete groups, organizations, schools, and movements constitutes the most promising approach to the research about historical generations. An examination which starts with the vast historical reality of a group and then investigates its age structure uses an approach opposite to that which starts with the age structure of a group and only then looks for factual connections or correspondences. A general analysis of age cohorts leads frequently to contradictory results. American studies have not even been able to prove the popular thesis that the older the person, the more conservative he tends to be.⁵⁶ The special investigation of groups related through common goals and ideals (for example, poetic romanticism, the youth movement, trends in the arts during the twentieth century) can easily prove the importance of communities of age groupings within the respective groups. Eduard Spranger did this in rudimentary form for the German student movement during the twentieth century.⁵⁷ Fritz Redlich did it more carefully for the literary expressionists and their publishers.⁵⁸

Redlich's central finding states that the protagonists of literary expressionism without exception were born during the interval between the late 1870s and the early 1890s. Among the authors are Gottfried Benn, Franz Kafka, Alfred Döblin, Leonhard Frank, Franz Stadler, and Frank Wedekind. But—and this is the more interesting development from an economic and social-historical perspective—the publishers of these authors also belonged to a new generation. An example is Herwarth Walden, who published the *Sturm*, and Franz Pfemfert, the publisher of *Aktion*. The historical phenomenon of expressionism achieves through such complementary observations a more complete contour which goes beyond the more narrow realm of the production of art. But even

54. R. Schulmeister and Wolfgang Borchert in *Deutsche Literatur seit 1945*, ed. D. Weber (Stuttgart, 1968), 241, 248, 254ff.

55. Weber, “Vorwort” in *Ibid.*, 6.

56. Examples by Spitzer, 1372–1383.

57. Spranger, 26ff., especially 33f.

58. F. Redlich, “German Literary Expressionism and Its Publishers,” *Harvard Library Bulletin* 8 (April, 1969), 143–169.

the examination of uniformly labelled groups or styles of expression often calls for differentiations which counteract or tend to destroy the commonality of the old. Julius Petersen pointed out with the help of good examples the effect of regional factors in the German history of literature of the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries.⁵⁹ Mannheim especially emphasized in his essay the youth movement as an example of consciously experienced generational commonality. On the other hand, he noted the number of contradictions in the latter — above all, those of a social and political nature. One might therefore say that there exists a uniform generational context in the sense of a shared problem community, but not a generational unity whose members could offer uniform solutions to these problems.⁶⁰

The First World War had an especially disintegrating effect for twentieth-century Germany. The “bündische” postwar period of the youth movement is as much an example of these circumstances as is the disintegration of literary expressionism. A political sect split off from the latter in the form of *Aktivismus*. However, it soon became apparent that the “activists” did not have a unifying political program either. This movement had so little self-confidence as a generational community that its members, who were almost all thirty years old or older, put their hopes in the twenty-year-old age cohort.⁶¹

However — in spite of the necessity of such distinctions — the German social and cultural history of the twentieth century furnishes numerous examples of generational phenomena. Historical causes are often to be sought in wars and upheavals, but also sometimes — and the same is true for several intellectual and artistic trends of prewar, Wilhelmine times — in a gradual uprising of the young against a thoughtless and self-satisfied materialism produced by a combination of prosperity and outward peace.

Two examples of generational phenomena outside Germany which cover the same time period should be mentioned here: The Spanish “generation of 1898,” a mostly literary movement of those who were born between 1865 and 1880 (Unamuno, Baroja, R. Dario), who joined after the Spanish defeat against the United States in vehement criticism of the political and social structure of the country;⁶² and the American “Progressive Movement,” a reform movement around the turn of the century whose leaders were recruited from a generation of thirty- to fifty-year-old people, no longer formed by the experience of the Civil War.⁶³

The example of the Progressive Movement brings up the question whether beyond delimited social groups entire epochs and societies can carry the imprint of individual generations. First of all, let us remember that there are

59. Petersen, 34.

60. Mannheim, *Problem*, 563.

61. For example, H. Mann, K. Hiller, K. Pinthus, L. Rubiner, A. Wolfenstein; see *Der Aktivismus*, ed. W. Rothe (Munich, 1969), 7.

62. P. L. Entralgo, *La generación del noventa y ocho* (Madrid, 1945).

63. E. Angermann, *Die Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika* (Munich, 1969), 13.

always a great number of age groups who live side by side and who make up society as a whole. A more precise question therefore would be whether one of these age groups could have a greater effect on the intellectual climate of the respective epoch than any of the others. On the other hand, the more uniform the imprint of a great number of age groups during a rather extended period of time, the less important is the problem of a dominating age group. We want to give an example from Wilhelmine Germany between 1914 and 1918 to illustrate the above considerations.

In 1914, we find in Germany a society which bears the imprint of the Wilhelmine empire—with very few exceptions among older people. A widespread economic and social expansion, an authoritarian state and the education of subjects, a display of power with respect to foreign policy—these factors influenced the mentality of thirty- or forty-year-old age groups by making them more indifferent. The Wilhelmine lifestyle had left such a deep imprint on the German people because of its long duration. It could be found among squires, entrepreneurs, government employees, and workers—not among all with the same intensity, but among most contemporaries in some, possibly diluted, specific form. Only if one assesses this powerful imprint correctly can one understand the patriotic consensus of 1914. The same roots can also explain the half-hearted attempt at a revolt in 1918–1919. The military defeat and human misery among millions were not able to erase the prewar feeling of abundance. Four years of war did not suffice to undo psychologically four decades of peace and complacency. Only a very small minority in Germany had any idea of the meaning of a revolution; and even most Social Democrats did not feel quite at ease with a complete break with the past. But only such a break can lead to reform. That generational contrasts did not appear radicalized in the psyches of 1918 is probably owing to the fact that they were covered by other, sharper contrasts of a social and political nature. Generational contrasts are not—like class contrasts—expressions of a deep-reaching cleavage in society. The former is probably more a difference in opinion on the basis of the existing circumstances which carries the seed of compromise. This interpretation is supported by the fact that generational contrasts can be of any kind and that they are most likely to find expression in areas of little social consequence, as in fashion or the arts.

Generational analysis which is linked to a strata or class approach can give additional insight into the understanding of historical epochs and transitions between them. Examples that come to mind are the rise of imperialism, the transitions from romanticism to positivism,⁶⁴ or that from positivism to the new romanticism of the beginning of the twentieth century as it is expressed by the youth movement. But above all, the most recent German history, with

64. Nietzsche saw the scientific positivism of the nineteenth century as “disappointed romanticism”; see K. Löwith, *Nietzsches Philosophie der ewigen Wiederkehr des Gleichen* (Stuttgart, 1956), 31. One should assume accordingly that Nietzsche would have called the youth movement “disappointed positivism” if he had lived to experience it.

its three upheavals in 1918, 1933, and 1945, should be an inexhaustible source of data for the analysis of generations in the study of social history.

We have to start with the assumption that the class membership of an individual dominates in relation to generational membership and that generational affiliation tends to play a supplementary role. This important point is often overlooked in theoretical discussions,⁶⁵ even though historical, generational analysis is regularly applied successfully to homogeneous groups. A clarification of the application of the two concepts is also important, because it avoids the danger of playing off one approach against the other for “ideological” reasons. And it refutes the belief that an historical analysis of generations has to be without exception antimaterialist, antimarxist, or antisociological.

V. SUMMARY

A systematic dissection of the historical process into time intervals does not constitute an adequate means to arrive at historical periods. However, if one renounces the ambitious goal to derive a universal, historical rhythm from a biological, generational succession, an examination of limited phenomena from a generational perspective will frequently turn out to be productive. One will find that new developments in intellectual history and in the history of art tend to be represented by new age cohorts. The relevant literature of memoirs shows how conscious those immediately involved are of their generational community.⁶⁶ In political as well as in economic and social history, generational examples are often less easily recognizable.⁶⁷ Pronounced generational breaks which may affect an entire society apparently occur only after decisive historical events, such as wars, revolutions, and economic crises of great proportions. In the changing historical climate of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, generations are therefore phenomena that can be more easily grasped than in earlier epochs. But even for this latest period, a generation is most easily recognized where it is clearly (theoretically or artistically) articulated—that is, as an intellectual generation.⁶⁸

Such an approach is to a certain degree in contradiction with the method of statistical analysis of social historical data which today is more and more prevalent. These data are demographic and economic. However, the study of minori-

65. An exception is the contribution by M. Rintala, “Generations II: Political Generations” in *IESS*, VI, 92–95. Riedel (*Wandel*, 23) points out that the modern concept of generations and class society developed at the same time.

66. Good examples to illustrate this point are H. Mann, *Ein Zeitalter wird besichtigt* (1946); C. Zuckmayer, *Als wär's ein Stück von mir* (1966), and K. Hiller, *Leben gegen die Zeit* (1969).

67. Tentative examples in economic history are F. Redlich, “Der Unternehmer als ‘dämonische’ Figur” in Redlich, *Der Unternehmer: Wirtschafts- und sozialgeschichtliche Studien* (Göttingen, 1964), 47–51; H. Jaeger, *Big Business and New Deal: Die kritische Reaktion der amerikanischen Geschäftswelt auf die Roosevelt'schen Reformen in den Jahren 1933–1939* (Stuttgart, 1974), 166f.

68. One could draw conclusions about its social representativeness from the commercial success of publications and reproductions in the field of literature, music, and the fine arts; also, and most of all, from the number of editions of books and records.

ties as they gain recognition and their analysis “from top to bottom,” is a subject matter and a method which is more likely to lead to results in the study of historical generations.

The voluminous literature about generational phenomena which is published today tends to confine historical examinations to the most recent past. It starts with the assumption that industrialization led to far-reaching changes in the structure of the family and society as a whole.⁶⁹ These changes, in turn, spurred as well by biological acceleration, led to the appearance of a younger generation “liberated” from the bonds of the extended family. This younger generation is indifferent to age and tends more and more toward a society without a male as the head of household.⁷⁰ Historians must be wary of such dramatic exclusion from developmental processes over long periods of time. On the other hand, they cannot turn their backs on the fruitfulness of a sociological perspective, if it can be proven that generational phenomena have acquired a new quality in the industrialized societies of the twentieth century for which historical descriptions are no longer appropriate, but which can only be described by sciences dealing with the present.

69. K. Hausen, “Familie als Gegenstand historischer Sozialwissenschaft” in *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 1 (1975), 177ff.

70. See Riesman, 79; Mendel, 134–136; Riedel, 34; W. Hochheimer, “Zur Rolle von Autorität und Sexualität im Generationskonflikt” in *Institut für Psychotherapie, Konflikt*, 153; P. Kielholz, “Psychiatrische Aspekte des Generationsproblems” in Dubs, *et al.*, 43–52; A. Portmann, “Die Entwicklungsbeschleunigung der Jugend als biologisches soziales Problem” in *Konflikt*, 69–94; A. Mitscherlich, *Auf dem Weg zur vaterlosen Gesellschaft* (Munich, 1973), 183f., 201f., 337ff.